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Topics in Music – Definitions, History, and Meanings

Abstract

The aim of the paper is to present the concept of topics (Gr. *τοπικά*) in music, which entails a presentation of its uses in the history of culture and literary studies. Thanks to such a broad context, it will be possible to interpret this Greek term more fully as applied to musicology and to the analysis of selected examples of musical works. The article consists of three complementary parts. The first deals with the origins of the concept, derived from ancient rhetoric and discussed, among others, by Aristotle, Cicero, and Boethius. The second part of the article presents topics in the context of analyses by Ernst Robert Curtius, Janina Abramowska, and Jacek Jadacki in the field of literary studies. The last and most extensive part of this paper is dedicated to the place of topics in musicology on the example of several authors. I discuss writings on topic theory, which since the 1980s has mainly been developed by researchers from Anglo-Saxon countries.

Keywords

music and topics, theories of musical *topos*, content of a music work, musical semantics, topical music analysis

The fascinating journeys of *topoi* through different times and places prove their amazing vitality, but also reflect a great many artists' desire to contribute to the existing treasury of this ekphrasis. The astonishing metamorphoses of those mental and cultural emblems, frequently transforming in contrasting directions, add [...] to their perpetual relevance. They also provide our existence in the world and culture with stable points, intensifying our sense of what is constant and therefore soothing in this ever-changing melting pot.

Jolanta Szulakowska-Kulawik¹

The aim of the paper is to present the concept of topics (Gr. *τοπικά*) in music, which entails a presentation of its uses in the history of culture and literary studies. Thanks to such a broad context, it will be possible to interpret this Greek term more fully as applied to musicology and to the analysis of selected examples of musical works. The article consists of three complementary parts. The first deals with the origins of the concept, derived from ancient rhetoric and discussed, among others, by Aristotle, Cicero, and Boethius. The second part of the article presents topics in the context of analyses by Ernst Robert Curtius, Janina Abramowska, and Jacek Jadacki in the field of literary studies. The last and most extensive part of this paper is dedicated to the place of topics in musicology, among others, to publications in the field of topic theory, developed since the 1980s mainly by researchers from Anglo-Saxon countries.²

¹ J. Szulakowska-Kulawik, 'Antyczne dokonania enologiczne jako źródło inspiracji europejskiej kultury muzycznej', PhD dissertation (2015), 745–746.

² This paper is based on the first chapter of my MA thesis entitled 'Topika apokaliptyczna w twórczości Krzysztofa Pendereckiego' ['Apocalyptic Topics in the Works of Krzysztof Penderecki'], presented at the Institute of Culture and Religion Studies of the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw under the supervision of Professor Małgorzata Wrześniak, PhD, Habil., and defended on 15 July 2020.

Topics – Origins of the Term

The ancient Greek term *τοπικά* (Lat. *topica*) originally referred to strategies for skilful argumentation or to extending one's perspective so as to account for another point of view. It was also understood as a rhetorical *topos* or 'place' well-tested in dialectic debates. Aristotle's early treatise entitled *Topics* contains no explicit definition of that then important term. It was not strictly defined since the word had been in common use before the Stagirite took up this subject.³ It is only in his *Rhetoric* that Aristotle uses such terms as commonplace, cliché, or a common point of reference (Lat. *loci communes*). The philosopher divided *topoi* into several types, which together provide the foundation for logical arguments. These are: formal, specific, and general (common) *topoi*. The latter he described as 'general points of reference whose realisation allows the orator to speak in a credible manner in every specific case and without any greater difficulty'.⁴ Credibility was attained through reference to experience common to all humans, in combination with psychological knowledge as reflected in the *topoi*. The whole concept was thus based on the notion of the *topos*, well-established in rhetorical tradition. As a consequence of the lack of an explicit definition, in later times the semantic range of the term *topica* (Eng. topics) was extended so as to include metaphorical descriptions. Thus in Marcus Tullius Cicero's *Topica* we have *sedes argumentorum* (Latin for 'seat of arguments' or the location of correct arguments). Other authors who developed the theory of the *topos* included Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius, whose writings significantly influenced the perception of topic theory in the Middle Ages.⁵ Later tradition ex-

³ Cf. K. Leśniak, 'Wstęp', in: tr. K. Leśniak, *Arystoteles, Hermeneutyka. Topiki. O dowodach sofistycznych* (2013), 32–34.

⁴ H. Podbielski, 'Wstęp. Teoria wymowy przed Arystotelesem', in: tr. H. Podbielski, *Arystoteles, Retoryka. Retoryka dla Aleksandra. Poetyka* (2014), 37.

⁵ The logicians of the High Middle Ages, such as Abelard, Peter of Spain, Albertus Magnus, William Sherwood, and Lambert of Auxerre, interpreted the teaching about *loci* in the spirit of Boethius rather than Cicero or Aristotle, that is – as a method of guaranteeing the validity of an (especially hypothetical) argument, and not – of its discovering.' M. Ryszka-Kurczab, 'Historia i przemiany topoi jako bodziec do renesansowej reformy dialektyki', *Terminus*, 2 (2014), 144–145, 147; Cf. also P. Milcarek, 'Tam, gdzie rosną argumenty. Topiki w średniowiecznym programie edukacji szkolnej', in *Toposy (w) filozofii. Filozofia i jej miejsce w doświadczeniu kulturowym* (2018), 259.

ploited terms such as hoard, source, model, arsenal, and matrix. Apart from common *loci*, the Middle Ages also distinguished the so-called *idia topica* or special places, which provided the basis for ordering sets grouped by *loci* related to either theology or law.⁶

Renaissance humanists and Aristotelians not only opposed scholastic dialectics, but also contributed to a return to the Stagirite's original source reading of the notion of topics, while at the same time developing its applications.⁷ The transformation of the concept of *topoi*, which allowed scholars to transplant this term from rhetoric to culture studies, was made possible by Aristotle's notion of general *topoi*. From this perspective, topics as a discipline of thinking could become a point of reference for various exemplifications in the field of art, since, apart from its heuristic function, it also facilitates the search for appropriate themes.⁸ *Topoi* understood as *loci communes* or structural principles provided the foundation for the later use of topics in analyses of music works.

Topics in Literary Studies

The modern (that is, twentieth- and twenty-first century) concept of topics, introduced by the German philologist Ernst Robert Curtius, in the context of literary studies refers first and foremost to the theory of *topoi*. The term was popularised by Curtius' book *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter* (1948). The author thus justifies the use of the term 'topics' and 'topos' in the fourth part of his treatise, in a chapter dedicated to the systems of ancient rhetoric:

Now, there is a whole series of such arguments, which can be used on the most diverse occasions. They are intellectual themes, suitable for development and modification at the orator's pleasure. In Greek they are called *κοινὸί τόποι*; in Latin, *loci communes*; in earlier German, *Gemeinorter*. Lessing and Kant still use the word. About 1770, *Gemeinplatz* was formed after the English 'commonplace.' We cannot use the word, since it has lost its original application. We shall therefore retain the Greek *τόπος*. [...] In Antiquity collections

⁶ Cf. Leśniak, 'Wstęp', 34–35, 38.

⁷ Cf. Ryszka-Kurczab, 'Historia i przemiany topoi...', 148–149.

⁸ Cf. Podbielski, 'Wstęp. Teoria wymowy...', 37–38.

of such *topoi* were made. The science of *topoi* – called ‘topics’ – was set forth in separate treatises.⁹

Curtius thus returns to the Greek term. In the next paragraph he describes the later, common meaning of the term *topoi*, which in the late Antiquity began to function as clichés applied in all literary forms. Topics is the title and subject of part V of his book, but related themes recur throughout the publication. The author of *Europäische Literatur...* compares the function of topics to that of a granary or reference stock in which one can find thoughts characterised by the highest degree of generality and use them to make a speech or assemble a text. He justifies his adherence to the ancient concept of ‘topics’ by the fact that ‘[it] has stood the test for us as starting-point and heuristic principle.’¹⁰ In another section of his treatise, Curtius relates rhetoric to music, and to the musical equivalent of topics in the form of *ars inveniendi* (‘art of invention’). In this context, he refers to the *Inventions* of Johann Sebastian Bach, but he does not develop this theme.¹¹ Apparently, however, the German philologist identifies topics (in, among others, the works of Bach) with melodic and rhythmic motifs conceived as individual musical thoughts, suitable for use and transformation in many different musical contexts.

In her article ‘Topos i niektóre miejsca wspólne badań literackich’ [‘The *Topos* and Some *Loci Communes* of Literary Studies’], Janina Abramowska describes topics as a collection of *topoi* (and in particular as their internally organised sets), while in poetry topics manifests itself, in her view, by rhetorical treatment. By the process of motif topicalisation, this literary scholar from Poznań understands the stabilisation of one selected meaning with simultaneous omission of others, which only occur as variants or as potential senses. She opposes Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz’s proposal that the term be applied exclusively to the study of *topoi*, since such ambiguity is present in

⁹ E.R. Curtius, *European literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, tr. W.R. Trask (1963), 70, <https://archive.org/details/europeanliteratuocurt/page/70/mode/2up>, accessed 17 Apr. 2021.

¹⁰ Curtius, *European literature*, 82; cf. also J. Eichstaedt, ‘Od toposu poetyckiego do toposu kultury’, in *Toposy (w) filozofii...*, 39–40.

¹¹ Curtius, *European literature*, 78.

names of many other disciplines too, for instance in the word ‘history’.¹² Abramowska concludes that discussion of topics is part of the practice of interpretation, since the application of individual *topoi* by the author is to a certain degree an automatic process:

For this reason, ‘topical’ judgments ought to be approached with particular caution while defining the overall sense of the work, and even more so while attempting to reconstruct the author’s set of convictions. At the same time, though, we should examine the placement and frequency of the individual *topoi*, since some of them are key ones which reveal the essence or even the principle of the given writer’s worldview.¹³

The case is similar with music, where presenting the dominant topics allows researchers to reveal the composer’s key categories and views. Abramowska thus emphasises the need to apply a comparatist paradigm, not only while discussing art, but also with reference to philosophy, religion, and the history of ideas. In the field of culture studies, this translates into the claim that, since every community lives within a time-space that determines it, topics may prove to be the most readily describable aspects of such communities. They make up a universal repertoire of motifs in non-European cultures as well.¹⁴

Another author, Jacek Jadacki, defines the notion of topics as the sum total of all the *topoi* which ‘for a given group of people’ constitute ‘the model for an artefact’.¹⁵ These various communities may be classified according to various criteria as temporal (i.e. living in one selected period), ethnic (belonging to one nationality), territorial (living in one particular territory), economic (characterised by a similar

¹² Abramowska also comments that ‘The way we talk about topics is determined to some extent by how we talk about literature. [...] This system is literary in character, and eventually comes down to broadly conceived interpretable conventions. It consists of a number of subsystems, such as genre models, plot and composition schemes, styles and methods of poem construction, themes and motifs, as well as topics itself. This recurrent sphere is thus very wide, and, most importantly, varied.’ Cf. J. Abramowska, ‘Topos i niektóre miejsca wspólne badań literackich’, *Pamiętnik literacki*, 73 (1982), 11–12.

¹³ Abramowska, ‘Topos i niektóre miejsca...’, 21.

¹⁴ Abramowska, ‘Topos i niektóre miejsca...’, 22–23.

¹⁵ Cf. J. Jadacki, ‘Topos – archetyp – mit: analiza semantyczna’, in *Topos narodowy w muzyce polskiej pierwszej połowy XIX wieku*, International Art and Research Conference (2006), 78–79.

material status), professional (sharing the same occupation), and mixed (representing more than one model). Topical models can be well-established and recurrent within a given community (actual *topoi*) or postulated (normative *topoi*). In Jadacki's opinion, topics plays a major role in defining the identity of societies and their individual members. It may emerge as a result of migrations or be imposed (for instance as a consequence of cultural wars or military aggression).¹⁶

Topic Theory in Musicology

For the purposes of this paper I will discuss, first and foremost, the various approaches to topic theory in writings on music and relate them to selected music works. There have been many descriptive definitions of what may constitute a *topos* in music. In a paper of 2015, Erkki Huovinen and Anna-Kaisa Kaila define a musical *topos* as a

[...] set of musical entities, as delimited and coherently furnished with meaning by consistent trends of shared extramusical associations in a significant majority of a given listener population.¹⁷

It is not my objective, however, to present selected concepts of topics in music and examples of their implementation in the output of various composers (this subject had already been taken up many times earlier¹⁸). Instead, I focus on the ways topics is understood in contemporary musicology. Importantly, in English-language literature the terms *topos*

¹⁶ Jadacki, 'Topos – archetyp – mit...?', 80.

¹⁷ E. Huovinen, A.-K. Kaila, 'The Semantics of Musical Topoi: An Empirical Approach', *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 2 (2015), 220.

¹⁸ Cf. M. Sołtysik, 'Musical topoi. The chosen perspectives of topos in music', *Edukacja Muzyczna*, 14 (2019), 215–228; W.E. Caplin, 'On the Relation of Musical Topoi to Formal Function', *Eighteenth-Century Music* 1 (2005), 113–124; J. Liddle, 'The Sublime as a Topos in Nineteenth-Century Piano Music', *Israel Studies in Musicology Online*, 14 (2017/2018), 37–64; B. Almen, 'Narrative and Topic', *Indiana Theory Review*, 25 (2004), 1–38; B. Almen, 'Narrative Archetypes: A Critique, Theory, and Method of Narrative Analysis', *Journal of Music Theory*, 1 (2003), 1–39; L. Szeker-Madden, 'Topos, Text, and the Parody Problem in Bach's *Mass in B minor*, BWV 232', *Canadian University Music Review / Revue de musique des universités canadiennes*, 15 (1995), 108–125; R.S. Edgecombe, 'Topoi and melodic morphology in the operas of Donizetti', *The Musical Times*, 1926 (2014), 67–80; J. Hunkemoller, 'Topoi in der Musik Béla Bartóks', *Studia Musicologica*, 3 (2013),

and topic (or *topoi* and topics in plural) are considered identical with each other. Elaine R. Sisman discusses this subject in her study of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *'Jupiter' Symphony*. Let me quote her comment on the key areas of meaning covered by these notions:

The question of what can be comprehended by what kind of listener raises a more specific correlation between rhetoric and music, and brings us back to the idea of topics. [...] But what aspect of rhetoric subsumes topics? Is a topic, or topos, part of rhetorical invention (*inventio*), which seeks commonplaces (*loci topici*) as subject matter, or part of arrangement (*dispositio*), which orders the arguments into a coherent whole? Or is it part of style (*elocutio*), which chooses appropriate figurative language to clothe the subject, or part of performance or delivery (*pronuntiatio*), in which gesture and tone convey meaning and carry persuasive power? In fact, the array of topics of the later eighteenth century participates in all of these areas.¹⁹

The US music historian not only points to the interchangeability of the terms 'topic' and 'topos', but also emphasises the anchoring of musical *topoi* in the ancient rhetorical tradition. Despite the lack of differentiation in her book, in my paper I have retained the distinction between the English words 'topic' and 'topic theory' (rather than 'theory of the *topos*') on the one hand and the idea of the *topos* on the other, since these two terms have different semantic range.

In the 'Introduction' to another major publication on this subject, *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*, its editor, the music theorist Danuta Mirka, discusses the relations between styles and genres, music and affects, topics and pictorialism, topics and (musical) rhetoric, as well as affects and topics within their semiotic range and status. She considers that last type of relation as the leading one in musical topic theory, whose emergence in the 1980s coincided with the rapid growth of semiotics.²⁰ As this research method was becoming progres-

289–299; J. Walczak, *Kiedy literatura staje się muzyką. Puszkiniowska klasyka w kompozycjach Piotra Czajkowskiego* (2015), 101–109.

¹⁹ E.R. Sisman, *Mozart: The 'Jupiter' Symphony No. 41 in C major, K. 551* (1993), 69; cf. also page 46 in the same source. I am grateful to Mr Kamil Watkowski of the Institute of Musicology, University of Warsaw for attracting my attention to this book.

²⁰ Cf. F. Koksalski, 'A Topical Approach to Contemporary European Art Music', in *Proceedings of the International Conference on Music Semiotics: In memory of Raymond Monelle* (2013), 268.

sively more common, topics (understood as sources of expression and meaning) were incorporated into semiotics. Studies on musical topics have therefore applied the terminology of modern semiotics, previously developed by such scholars as Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Sanders Peirce, Umberto Eco, and Roman Jakobson.²¹

Topic theory entered musicological discourse thanks to US musicologist Leonard Ratner, who in his *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style* (1980) defined topics as ‘subjects for musical discourse’ and divided them into styles and types. Turkish, hunt and military music are examples of styles, whereas marches, dances, etc., are types. Ratner furthermore presents the distribution of individual types in various compositions and the ways in which they are combined with styles, which turns them into topics. Topics are a treasury of knowledge about styles, a ‘thesaurus of characteristic figures’, a source of meanings and/or ways of communication. They are claimed to be shared by both music performers and recipients.²²

In our times, therefore, topic theory has become a way to access meaning and expression in many intersubjectively verifiable ways. Mirka believes it is this approach to topics that has decided about their extraordinary attractiveness. Topics have become part of the shared discourse of music theorists and musicologists.²³ The notion has been applied to a wide variety of music repertoire:

Topic theory was developed from Ratner’s seminal insight by Wye Allanbrook, Kofi Agawu, Robert Hatten, Raymond Monelle, and others, who explored its epistemological implications and furnished

²¹ D. Mirka, ‘Introduction’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory* (2014), 21, 24. Cf. also O.H. Salgar, ‘Musical Semiotics as a Tool for the Social Study of Music’, tr. B.M. Romero, *Ethnomusicology Translations*, 2 (2016), 1–33; N. McKay, ‘On topics today’, *Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft für Musiktheorie*, 1 (2007), 4–5.

²² E. Huovinen, A.-K. Kaila, ‘The Semantics of Musical Topoi...’, 219.

²³ Cf. R.L. Martin, ‘Musical “Topics” and Expression in Music’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 53 (1995/4), 417–424; Th. Johnson, ‘Tonality as Topic: Opening A World of Analysis for Early Twentieth-Century Modernist Music’, *A Journal of the Society for Music Theory*, 4 (2017), 1–26; M. Plesch, ‘Thematic Dossier Decentring Topic Theory: Musical Topics and Rhetorics of Identity in Latin American Art Music’, *Revista Portuguesa de Musicologia/Portuguese Journal of Musicology*, 1 (2017), 27–31; M. Lowe, ‘Teaching Topics with Haydn (alongside that Other Guy)’, *HAYDN: Online Journal of the Haydn Society of North America*, 2 (2016), 1–15; M. Holdsworth, *Sounds of Love and Death. Sonic Retellings of Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet* (2017), 7–8, 43.

tools for analysis, but in the process the concept of topics has lost its sharp profile.²⁴

Ratner's approach became the point of departure for later researchers writing about music, though his continuators in many cases significantly diverged from the direction he set for them. Kofi Agawu interpreted topics as musical signs which determine 'the union of a signifier and a verbally mediated signified.'²⁵ Raymond Monelle considered topics as 'a kind of musical term or word', but most of all as 'essentially a symbol, its iconic or indexical features governed by convention and thus by rule.'²⁶ The same author thus characterised that category in *The Musical Topic: Hunt, Military and Pastoral* (2006):

The topic is a musical convention whereby a certain stylistic habit refers to an aspect of the social and cultural world, independently of the actual context, and through that aspect to changing historical facts and finally to universals of human behavior and feeling. The topic is most fully at work when it forms a pointer to the semantic of an instrumental piece without words or title.²⁷

In his text *Reading Mozart's Music: Text and Topic, Syntax and Sense* Harold Powers refers to topics as 'terminological tags', whereas Stephen Rumph in *Mozart and Enlightenment Semiotics* defines them as 'lexical items'.²⁸ Michael Klein claims in the book *Intertextuality in Western Art Music* that 'topics invite connections among musical texts'. 'Any explicit or noncorrelative topics a composer utilizes may thus open the door for listeners to draw associations to otherwise unrelated musical works.'²⁹

US musicologist Robert S. Hatten defines topics (in *Musical Meaning in Beethoven* and *Interpreting Musical Gestures, Topics and Tropes*)

²⁴ Mirka, 'Introduction', in *The Oxford Handbook...*, 1–2.

²⁵ Mirka, *The Oxford Handbook...*, 52.

²⁶ Mirka, *The Oxford Handbook...*, 52; cf. K. Agawu, *Music as Discourse: Semiotic Adventures in Romantic Music* (2009); K. Agawu, *Playing with Signs: A Semiotic Interpretation of Classic Music* (1991), 17.

²⁷ R. Monelle, *The Musical Topic: Hunt, Military and Pastoral* (2006), 165–166.

²⁸ Cf. Mirka, 'Introduction', in *The Oxford Handbook...*, 52. Cf. also J. Hepokoski, 'Program music', in *Aesthetics of Music: Musicological Perspectives* (2014), 68–71; W.E. O'Hara, 'The Art of Recomposition: Creativity, Aesthetics, and Music Theory', PhD dissertation (2017), 292.

²⁹ Cf. J.L. Salamone, 'Misbehaving Minuets: A Preliminary Theory of Humor and Dance Form in Haydn's Opp. 76 and 77', PhD dissertation (2017), 82.

as elementary categories extracted from individual composers' works. On the basis of these categories, he distinguishes three styles rooted in classical poetics: high (proper to transcendent, heroic, tragic, and triumphant elements), middle (labelled *galant* and also associated with pastoral music), and low (expressed through comic and rustic or popular elements).³⁰ He also introduces another understanding of the term 'topics' as '[...] patches of music that trigger clear associations with styles, genre, and expressive meanings'.³¹

Polish literature of the subject likewise makes an attempt to adapt the concept of topics for the needs of music theory. In the paper 'Topos w muzyce – topos narodowy. Miejsca wspólne, przestrzenie i idee' ['The Topos in Music – The National Topos. Loci Communes, Spaces, and Ideas'], Katarzyna Szymańska-Stułka defines topics not just as a collection of *topoi*, but as the science of, and knowledge about them, which can constitute

a comprehensive repertoire or a set distinguished on the basis of a variety of criteria such as association with a rhetorical genre (praise, reprimand) or with a group of literary genres (erotic, funerary, revolutionary topics), its use in a specific location within the text (final and introductory topics), a shared representational basis (for instance, garden-related topics: the garden of the face, of the soul), a common source (ancient, biblical topics, etc.), or their coexistence in the works of one and the same composer.³²

Particularly suitable for music studies, claims Szymańska-Stułka, is an interpretation of topics as a space in which the various forms and

³⁰ Cf. M. Tomaszewski, 'Odczytywanie dzieła muzycznego. Od kategorii elementarnych do fundamentalnych i transcendentnych', *Teoria Muzyki*, 1 (2012), 9; R.S. Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures, Topics, and Tropes: Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert* (2004); R.S. Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, Correlation, and Interpretation* (2004).

³¹ R.S. Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures...*, 233–234. Cf. also L. Polony, 'Muzyka jako projekcja świata. Symbol w polu pojęć pokrewnych w myśleniu muzykologicznym', *Estetyka i Krytyka*, 1 (2011), 147. A similar interpretation of topics can be found in Paulo de Tarso Salles: 'Topics are style types that possess strong correlations or associations with expressive meaning: thus, they are natural candidates for tropological treatment'; cf. P. de Tarso Salles, 'Villa-Lobos and Nationality Representation by Means of Pictorialism: Some Thoughts on Amazonas', in *Proceedings of the International Conference...*, 344.

³² K. Szymańska-Stułka, 'Topos w muzyce – topos narodowy. Miejsca wspólne, przestrzenie i idee', in *Topos narodowy...*, 88.

means of artistic expression have been collected. In music, therefore, topics is the composer's tool and equipment. From the perspective of the post-Romantic notion of originality or the twentieth-century imperative of novelty, the impact of topics may be viewed as a limitation, which may discourage some composers from taking up themes long established in history and culture. On the other hand, one should point out such advantages of topics as the dominance of the impressive function and the role of the listener, willing to be moved and convinced.³³

The above-mentioned notion of topics as space corresponds to the ideas presented by Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht in his essay in music philosophy titled *Raum (Space)*. The German musicologist distinguishes between 'inner musical space' (*der musikalisch innere Raum*) necessary for a music work to manifest itself, and 'topical space' (*der topische Raum*) in which the music is played and heard. According to Eggebrecht, that latter category is external and accidental in relation to inner space, which is immanently contained in the essence of the given music work.³⁴

From among Polish researchers, I should also mention Grażyna Bobilewicz-Bryś, who writes about the revival of comparative studies relating music to other disciplines of art, painting and literature in particular. Such comparative analyses, she observes, are complemented with discussions of musical topics, which present music in its symbolic dimension, while musical instruments are viewed as symbols of artistic creation.³⁵

Małgorzata Gamrat, interestingly, stresses the fact that the same or similar meanings are identified using different terms, and illustrates

³³ K. Szymańska-Stułka, 'Topos w muzyce...', 88–89, 94–95. Abramowska comments: 'The desire to attract the mass audience, motivate it to specific action, or at least impact its sensitivity, motivates [composers] to take wider advantage of this common ground: established values, well-known symbols, and long-tested stereotypes.' Abramowska, 'Topos i niektóre miejsca...', 21.

³⁴ Edyta Orman presents this concept as follows: 'Sounds are heard in topical space, be it a concert hall or an open-air venue. Sounds cannot exist without that space, and this is what makes them external. Sounds also exist in space as time that is born, lasts, and passes away. As opposed to sound's topical nature, that temporal one is what makes sounds internal.' E. Orman, 'Kategoria *Stiftung von Zeit* w Eggebrechtowskiej koncepcji muzyki', in *Kultura i sztuka w ujęciu filozoficznym* (2017), 23–24.

³⁵ G. Bobilewicz-Bryś, 'Aleksander Skriabin w myśli estetycznej i twórczości symbolistów rosyjskich', *Slavia Orientalis*, 1 (1993), 29.

this phenomenon with the example of scholarly attempts to define relations between musical formulas and their culturally conditioned meanings:

What formalists (Asafiev, Jiraneck, Ujfalussy, Karbusicky) call ‘intonation’, American and British musicologists refer to as ‘topics’. Kofi Agawu, on the other hand, writes about *signes topiques* and *signes structurels*, while narratologists who derive their basic assumptions from the writings of Greimas use such terms as ‘semes’, ‘classesmes’, and ‘isotopies’.³⁶

Apart from numerous theoretical attempts to define the place of topics in music, some authors also use this category to analyse individual music works. In his discussion of the practical aspects of the study of topics (‘The Sense of Music: Raymond Monelle’s Legacy’), Mario Baroni pointed out that a given topic must first appear in an appropriately large set of music works, sufficient to analyse the connections between musical structures and their expressive contents:

In the practice of the study of ‘topics’, the association between musical structures and their expressive contents is considered scientifically correct only if it is historically documented by a great (or simply a sufficient) number of musical pieces: the scientific results or the study of a given topic can be validated by demonstrating that in a well defined musical style, for a particular musical genre and in a precise local area, an agreement did exist between composers and listeners, according to which the complex set of musical features could be interpreted to mean something (for example the image of the horse) shared by all those concerned.³⁷

Below I have summarised some such topical interpretations of individual works, focusing on research by Polish scholars.

Bogumiła Mika describes the topics of Secession style in the music of Gustav Mahler. On the basis of a semiotic analysis of his *Symphony No. 4* (1901), the researcher distinguishes three levels on which the relations between music and ‘Secession style’ in the visual arts can be

³⁶ M. Gamrat, ‘Od Kuhlaua do Dusapina, czyli muzyka, narracyjność i znaczenie według Márty Grabócz (Márta Grabócz, *Musique, narrativité, signification, préface de Charles Rosen*)’, L’Harmattan, Paris 2009), *Res Facta Nova*, 14 (2013), 274.

³⁷ M. Baroni, ‘The Sense of Music: Raymond Monelle’s Legacy’, in: *Proceedings of the International Conference...*, 30.

studied. The first of these is the structure of the work, its elements along with the musical topics used by the composer; the second – principal aspects of musical form; the third – its cultural context.³⁸

Michał Sławecki discusses the topical character of music culture in the Western Church on the example of Marian Sawa's last composition, *Missa Claromontana* (2005). That character, he claims, has manifested itself over the ages in the tradition of building musical structures on the foundation of Gregorian chant.³⁹ Taylor Brook studies the topics of ascension in seven chamber music works by Brian Cherney. He emphasises that such analyses greatly enrich our understanding and experience of the music:

Cherney's music simultaneously balances symbolic topics with a sense of musical syntax that is complete in and of itself, but an understanding of these topics does enrich appreciation for the music.⁴⁰

Leszek Polony illustrates the topics of the mythical past with the examples of Franz Liszt's symphonic poem *Orpheus* (1854), the return of the chorale theme in César Franck's *Prelude, Chorale and Fugue* Op. 21 for piano (1884), and in the introduction to Bedřich Smetana's symphonic poem *Vyšehrad* (from the first part of the cycle *Má Vlast*, 1874–1879). The topics present in these works is connotated by the harp's (or harp-like) *arpeggios*, which represent a modern concept of how ancient instruments may have sounded.⁴¹

The relations between topics and music are thus complex. What they all have in common is the space in which symbolic sound structures

³⁸ B. Mika, 'Mahler, Secession Style and his *Symphony No 4*. Musical Topics Read Anew in the Light of Semiotics', in *Proceedings of the International Conference...*, 138.

³⁹ M. Sławecki, 'Topos romano-frankoński na przykładzie *Missa Claromontana* (2005) na chór, organy i kotły Mariana Sawy', *Pro Musica Sacra*, 15 (2017), 194.

⁴⁰ T. Brook, 'Ascending Music: Meaning and Expression in the Chamber Music of Brian Cherney', *Intersections*, 1 (2017), 96. Another paper worth mentioning in this context presents a mathematical analysis of Alexander Scriabin's *Étude* Op. 65 No. 4; cf. P. Bartlett, 'Triads and Topos Theory' (2007), 1–26, <http://www.math.uchicago.edu/~may/VIGRE/VIGRE2007/REUPapers/FINALFULL/Bartlett.pdf>, accessed 9 Dec. 2020.

⁴¹ Polony points out the development of musical theories of *topoi* in the writings of numerous musicologists working in the field of semiotics, such as the above-mentioned Monelle, Agawu, and Hatten. Cf. L. Polony, *Symbol i muzyka* (2011), 165, 181; L. Polony, *Przestrzeń i muzyka* (2007), 28.

can become associated with a linguistic-semantic code. This allows composers and music theorists constantly and creatively to replicate the *loci communes* codified in the collective memory. Topics in music can thus be analysed by classifying the individual *topoi* and their manifestations in musical figures. Unlike human speech, the language of *artis musica* is not syntactically codified,⁴² but characterised mainly by symbols equivocally indicating the direction in which our interpretations of structures presented in a given composition ought to proceed. If such structures are then associated with ‘paramusical’ elements such as inspirations from the visual arts or literary contents, this allows us to specify and constitute meaning in music thanks to the higher-level senses derived from an informed interpretation of the thus integrated codes. The topics of a music work may be revealed as a result of such a procedure.

Notably, the concept of topics has been appearing more frequently in musical studies published after the year 2000, which suggests that both the term itself and topic theory are likely to keep recurring in writings on music and will probably be successfully applied to the analyses of other composers’ output.

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⁴² Cf. K. Lipka, *Utopia urzeczywistniona. Metafizyczne podłoże treści dzieła muzycznego* (2009), 199–205 (in the chapter on musical ‘semantics’).

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