Paradigms, Prototypes, and Other Analytical Adventures: A Review of Kofi Agawu's *Music as Discourse*


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For over two decades Kofi Agawu has been a balancing voice in the world of music scholarship, bridging gaps between theory, musicology, ethnomusicology, and semiotics, encouraging us to acknowledge the strengths and limitations of our analytical methodologies, and challenging us to engage with music's meaning and at the same time remain faithful to its material nature. *Music as Discourse*, his remarkable new book, continues that pursuit of analytical flexibility and honesty. It is an inspiring work that offers an impassioned defense of the analytical enterprise and a reminder of how playful and rewarding music analysis can be if we see that its aim is not to draw hard-and-fast conclusions but to explore the complex inner workings of musical language.

"This book is an exercise in music analysis," Agawu states in the very first sentence. "I do not claim to offer a new theory of meaning; rather, drawing on a handful of existing analytical theories and adding some new insights of my own, I seek to illuminate core aspects of a group of well-known early twentieth-century compositions chosen from the vast repertoires produced in nineteenth- and early-twentieth century Western Europe" (3). That the book de-emphasizes theory building in favor of close reading is not a shortcoming but a strength, for in lieu of heavy disquisitions on musical signification, it offers concrete demonstrations of what makes these works irreducibly meaningful and how we might plumb their meanings even further. *Music as Discourse* falls in line with recent studies of musical meaning, including Cook (1996 and 2001), Hatten (1994 and 2004), Klein (2005), and Almén and Pearsall (2006), but its aims are even more practical: to diagnose the state of music analysis and offer some helpful remedies, to appeal not only to professional

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1 For a perceptive discussion of Almén and Pearsall, see Vera Micnic's review, published in the last issue of this journal (15/2008).
card-carrying theorists but also to advanced undergraduates and beginning graduate students; and to encourage scholars and students to regard music as a discourse, a language that they can play with as creatively and imaginatively as performers and composers do.

What, then, does Agawu mean by discourse? Like his seminal *Playing with Signs* (1991), this book is grounded in semiotics, so it naturally draws on contemporary linguistic notions of discourse. But novice semioticians fear not: this is a largely jargon-free book, written not for a coterie of experts but for any intelligent and curious musician who cares about the art form and wants to understand it better. Concepts are always explained clearly, with an eye for real-world application—and “discourse” is a case in point. In the introduction Agawu lays out the three senses in which he uses the term. The first is the most common-sensical: regarding music as a discourse means viewing it as a “sequence of events” that unfolds in a more or less orderly fashion and makes a “meaningful impression on the listener” (7). The goal of analysis, then, is to explore how that meaningful impression is made—how a work’s events are related to one another and what kind of story they tell (or what kind of story we construe from them).

A second and related sense of discourse is rather more technical: “[just as linguists distinguish levels of analysis, taking the sentence as the unit for linguistic analysis, and a succession of sentences as the domain for discourse analysis, so can we think about music in terms of a succession of ‘sentences,’ themselves accretions of those smaller meaningful utterances we called events]” (7). Music is thus a discourse in that, like verbal language, it is made up of smaller “utterances” that are hierarchically organized into larger wholes. This comment would seem uncontroversial enough, but behind it lies a conception of musical form fundamentally opposed to the conception promulgated by the *Formenlehre* tradition and many recent theories of form, most notably Caplin (2000) and Hepokoski and Darcy (2006). In viewing music as a discourse in this second sense, Agawu means to turn our attention away from the formal categories into which we consign works (sonata form, rondo form, ternary form, period, sentence, and so on) and toward the events that comprise them. Our fixation on these categories has in his mind blinded us to the tendencies of the musical material itself and to the moment-by-moment experience of listening to music. This critique of traditional formal analysis is something of a manifesto in the book, and a topic to which we shall return below.

Agawu’s third sense of “discourse” refers to the discourse of music scholarship—the terms we use, the stances we take, the assumptions (sometimes acknowledged, sometimes not) that we bring to the task of talking and writing about music. A useful way to understand the overall aim of his project is to consider what scholarly discourses it challenges. One of them is the discourse of strict theory-based
analysis, which has tended to sideline issues of musical meaning and signification. Another, however, is the very discourse that got us thinking about musical meaning in the first place: the discourse of the (now-not-so) “new musicology” that urged scholars to heed music’s social, cultural, and political meanings rather than the intrinsic relationships that could be easily encapsulated in formal diagrams, row matrices, or Schenkerian graphs. The most impressive aspect of Agawu’s book is its ability to effect a rapprochement between these two camps. As he sees it, music analysis, even when it uses the most technical vocabulary and tools, can engage with musical meaning, and “anti-formalists” who assume that talking in detail about how music works is anathema to considering what music means fail to understand that one is not possible without the other: “However elusive they may be, music’s meanings are unlikely to be accessible to those who refuse to engage with the musical code or those who deal only with the most general and superficial aspects of that code” (6). Accordingly, Agawu’s book offers tools that allow listeners unencumbered access to the musical code—and to the meanings animated by it—with as little analytical baggage as possible.

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The first half of the book, dubbed “Theory,” lays out these tools one by one. After a brief excursion into the relations between music and language (Chapter 1), in Chapters 2 and 3 Agawu presents six “criteria for analysis”—basically, a set of parameters to explore in order to refresh our analytical thinking: 1) topics; 2) beginnings, middles, and endings; 3) high points; 4) periodicity; 5) three modes of enunciation: speech mode, song mode, and dance mode; and 6) narrative. There is not space here to cover each of the six criteria in detail, so let me focus on two that seem most promising and one that I believe is in need of clarification.

Beginnings, Middles, and Endings

Anyone who has encountered a narrative of any kind, be it literary, cinematic, dramatic, or musical, will intuitively grasp what Aristotle noted over 2,300 years ago: “A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end.” But too often, Agawu argues, the musical techniques that signal beginning, middle, and end are ignored, either because they seem too obvious to merit analytical scrutiny or because they are in reality enormously complex, cutting across different musical domains. Drawing upon his earlier work on the topic (1991, 51–79), Agawu explores these techniques and shows how they can be used at various points in a piece. The merit of this approach is that it stresses the difference between the location of musical event and its function. Not all beginnings, for example, sound like beginnings. Think of Haydn’s
String Quartet in G major, op. 33, no. 5, which begins with a V–I closing gesture, or Chopin’s G-minor Ballade, op. 23, which seems to begin in medias res, with an A-flat major chord in first inversion that can only retrospectively be understood as a Neapolitan sixth in G minor. Tracking these beginning, middle, and ending gestures, no matter where they occur, provides a more fluid view of musical structure, and encourages us to gauge a work’s progress not only by the succession of its discrete sections (A, B, A′, etc.) but also by the inner tendencies of its musical material.

Modes of Enunciation: Speech Mode, Song Mode, Dance Mode

Like the rubric of beginnings, middles, and endings, Agawu’s three modes of enunciation seem so self-evident that it is a wonder that no one has spelled them out so clearly before—at least in the context of instrumental music: as Agawu notes, distinctions between aria and recitative in vocal genres are common, but his aim is to extrapolate from those distinctions different modes of utterance in instrumental music. Here is how he defines the three modes: “In speech mode, the instrument speaks, as if in recitative. The manner of articulation is syllabic, and resulting periodicities are often asymmetrical..... Song mode is less syllabic and more melismatic. Periodicity is based on a cyclical regularity..... Song mode departs from the ‘telling’ characteristic of speech..... While the dance mode often includes song, its most marked feature is a sharply profiled rhythmic and metric sense..... This mode is... deeply invested in the conventional and the communal” (99). These categories may at first seem simple, even banal, but when put to analytical use they reveal some wonderful things. Agawu’s application of them to songs from Schumann’s Dichterliebe, for example (which amounts to no more than an aside), will make one want to rush to a score or a piano and hear these pieces anew and ponder why each song employs one mode or another—or two different modes in the same passage: Agawu returns briefly to the cycle in a section on “narrative” and offers a beautiful account of the final postlude’s shift from song mode to speech mode and back again (of which I extract only portions here): “[A] song—a certain song, we might say after the first few melodic notes—is recalled.... We expect resolution..., but... the poet goes into speech mode for 2 bars, as if commenting on the song.... [T]he pianist begins to reclaim the abandoned or interrupted song mode and to seek ultimate resolution.... [I]t is in this mode that the protagonist bids us farewell” (106).
Periodicity

“A period is a regulating framework for organizing musical content. Every large-scale musical utterance needs to be broken down into smaller chunks in order to assure communication and comprehensibility. Like sentences, phrases, or paragraphs in verbal composition, periods serve as midlevel building blocks, markers of a composition’s sense units” (75). Those accustomed to teaching and writing about phrase structure will naturally wonder if by “period” Agawu means “parallel period.” He does not. The “smaller chunks” that lend a work a feeling of direction and articulation are far less prescribable and definable than what we normally think of as periods. In fact, Agawu—not surprisingly—means to minimize the influence of these traditional phrase structures on our analytical endeavors, opting for a mode of listening that is less reliant on formal archetypes. No single determining factor, he implies, can tell us what the sense units in a particular passage are (not cadential placement, not melodic shape, not harmonic structure, not rhythmic profile); the decision must be based on context. As a result, his “periods” vary in size and type from piece to piece. Sometimes they are categorized mostly by their motivic content (as in his analysis of Brahms’s “Die Mainacht” [198–206]); sometimes they are harmonic cells defined by their harmonic-contrapuntal logic, which may conflict with phrase groupings (as in his analysis of Mozart’s K. 310, ii [175–178]); other times they appear to be sub-phrases that, when grouped together, coincide with normative phrase structures (as in his analysis of Corelli’s Church Sonata, op. 3, no. 1, “Grave” [136–144]).

I applaud this context-based approach since it short-circuits a potentially rigid and rule-based segmentation of a work. And it leads Agawu to some remarkably fresh insights about works we thought we knew well. (He shows, for example, how Schumann’s “Ich großes nicht” contains no fewer than four recompositions of the model harmonic progression presented in mm. 1–4. Anyone who has studied this piece will know that its second phrase varies the harmonies of its first phrase, but Agawu goes further and demonstrates that the song displays a logic that is as much circular as linear [85–87].) This sort of analytical flexibility can also, however, leave one feeling a bit unmoored. How exactly are we to discern whether the periods in a given work are commensurate with its phrase structure, or extend beyond cadential boundaries, or for that matter occur before them? Without a basis for judgment, plurality can potentially lead to confusion.

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2 Agawu discusses various “criteria for segmentation” (184–185, 254–256) but resists the urge to be too prescriptive, preferring to let the analyst be guided by the nature of the musical material. In practice, most of his segmentations are based upon harmonic criteria.
It can also lead to some puzzling assertions. In his analysis of Chopin’s Prelude in F-sharp major op. 28, no. 13, Agawu segments the first eight measures into two overlapping “units,” mm. 1–5 and 5–8, presumably because he wants to show that several of the movement’s units are based upon an archetypal “closed” progression (i.e., a progression that ends on the tonic triad) and, further, that with the exception of units that tonicize other chords (such as the second unit, which ends on a tonicized V chord), “all of the units in the prelude are closed”: “in colloquial terms, the same thing is said again and again” (183). But is this how we hear the opening eight measures? Wouldn’t a listener more likely segment the passage into two non-overlapping 4-measure units, mm. 1–4 and 5–8, each of which is left “open” on a dominant—or even three units, mm. 1–2, 3–4, and 5–8? This reading acknowledges that the opening eight measures are a sentence (and also the antecedent of a larger period). We can recognize that Chopin is using a standard form without thereby ignoring what makes the passage unique. Attending to the conventional, in other words, need not mean denying the particular, for it is the passage’s particulars that determine the dynamics of its form and allow us to grasp its overall shape: the more or less exact repetition of the basic idea, the faster harmonic rhythm and reach into a higher register in the continuation section, and the more linear melodic motion that leads to the half cadence, which sets up the following consequent phrase (mm. 13–20).3

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Having established these criteria, Agawu heads in a slightly more theoretical direction in Chapter 4 (“Bridges to Free Composition”), developing an idea of models or “proto-structures” that relate to the complex sounding surface of a work. The affinities with Schenkerian theory are clear, and Agawu recognizes them (the title of his chapter is borrowed from a metaphor that Schenker uses in his counterpoint treatise to explain the relationship between strict counterpoint and free composition [1987, 175]). But Agawu’s proto-structures are not identical to Schenker’s contrapuntal backgrounds. First, and most importantly, Agawu is interested in how a given composition can be generated from a background rather than reduced to it. For Agawu, any approach that emphasizes reduction, as powerful as it may be, runs the risk of turning a work into a fixed object. Accordingly, he shifts the emphasis to an active, creative, improvisatory production of the work from a simple model. Alternates bridges are possible; an analyst can speculate about how a work might have been generated differently. The goal is flexibility, not unity. This is a refreshing change of perspective. Comparing Agawu’s models with their “enriched” versions in a score brings

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3 I borrow the terms “basic idea” and “continuation” from Caplin (2000).
the music to life; the notes cease to seem fixed on the page, waiting to be reduced away, but instead seem malleable, charged with possibility.

The second difference with respect to Schenkerian theory is that Agawu’s proto-structures retain a strong harmonic element; often they are presented as chorale-like progressions. This also seems to me a productive supplement to traditional Schenkerian analysis. As Agawu points out, it works well with repertoires that have a strong harmonic impetus. And, from a pedagogical standpoint, it would be useful to students who are well-versed in tonal harmony, even in model chorale progressions of the sort Agawu references, and thus able to make the leap to building their own bridges between simple progressions and complex musical surfaces. Agawu’s analysis of Bach’s famous C-major prelude (148–153), which imagines how Bach might have generated the piece from embellishments to four model harmonic progressions, is particularly effective in this regard. Anyone with even a modicum of keyboard skills will be able to play through Agawu’s models and their elaborated versions and gain a hands-on understanding of the prelude’s harmonic materials.

Chapter 5 presents a means of organizing the information gleaned from these sorts of generative analyses, which Agawu calls “paradigmatic analysis.” The word “paradigm,” borrowed from Saussure, refers to “a class of equivalent—and therefore interchangeable—objects.” A related term, “syntagm,” refers to “a chain, a succession of objects forming a linear sequence” (164). The difference is instructive. The units of a piece (like the harmonic progressions in Bach’s C-major prelude) obviously occur in a chronological order. In this sense they have a horizontal, or “syntagmic,” relationship to one another. But they also exhibit associations, no matter where they fall in the piece; some units are more alike than others. They can thus also have a vertical, or “paradigmatic,” relationship to one another. By numbering a work’s units and then organizing those units into a “paradigmatic display”—where rows show the longest chain of “new” units in a work and columns show units that are related to one another—an analyst can create a novel visual representation of a piece, which is then interpretable in a variety of ways. Due to space constraints, I cannot include one of Agawu’s full paradigmatic displays. But for the sake of demonstration, imagine, say, that a piece begins with a rounded binary form, ABA’, whose sections we will call unit 1, unit 2, and unit 3, respectively. Because unit 2 provides contrast with unit 1, and unit 3 is closely related to unit 1, our paradigmatic display of this small form would look like this:

1 2

3
One can easily imagine how complex a paradigmatic chart of a 200-measure piece could become—and Agawu’s charts for entire pieces are indeed an eyeful at first glance. But, as he notes, these charts are not necessarily meant to be grasped in one fell swoop. Nor do they represent the final goal of an analysis. They are only starting points that make possible any number of “analytical adventures,” as Agawu calls them (29, 178), and enable us to construct a work’s form from within rather than imposing it from without.

Armed with these tools, Agawu devotes the last third of his book (Part II, “Analyses”) to putting them into practice (although in-depth analyses of course appear throughout Part I). Most impressive is the inclusion of many sizable examples from the symphonic literature: Liszt’s tone poem Orpheus (Chapter 6), Brahms’s Symphony no. 1, ii (Chapter 7), Mahler’s Symphony no. 9, i (Chapter 8), and Stravinsky’s Symphonies of Wind Instruments (Chapter 9). The presence of Stravinsky in a book with the subtitle “Semiotic Adventures in Romantic Music” is bound to raise a few eyebrows (Bartok also makes a fleeting appearance [90–93]), but Agawu’s comparison of Stravinsky’s symphony with Beethoven’s String Quartet, op. 130, i (312–315) is perceptive and warranted. He notes that Stravinsky’s style is generally more “inorganic” and Beethoven’s more “organic” (which is fairly self-evident) and that one can register the difference by examining—paradigmatically—how they craft and distribute their musical building blocks (which is very illuminating). Agawu implies that he chose to focus the book (mainly) on Romantic music because this repertoire is particularly burdened by much of the a priori analytical machinery that he intends to push into the wings. But the success of his analysis of Stravinsky makes one wonder if a unit-based paradigmatic approach would work especially well with 20th- and 21st-century music, where building blocks are often more clearly delineated and old forms cease to have as much, if any, relevance (minimalist works would seem like instructive test cases in this regard, since they are easily segmented but their forms are more processual than architectonic).

Each analytical chapter proceeds similarly, beginning by discussing the basic units of each work in chronological order, then arranging those units “logically” into a paradigmatic chart (or charts), and finally interpreting the chart in an attempt to access the deeper meanings inherent in its formal processes. Throughout, Agawu’s insights are compelling, nuanced, and tied to aurally perceptible phenomena. In his analysis of Liszt’s Orpheus, for example, he argues that the piece is an “assembly of fragments” (since its units are more or less clearly demarcated) and thus predominantly “speech-like” or “narrative” in character (220), an impression borne out by the experience of listening to the piece, where one feels that the music is telling a story, even if that story is not directly relatable to an extra-musical plot. And he notes that one of the piece’s units, the memorable neighbor figure first heard in
mm. 38–41, appears far more than any other and that it has an “open, implicative quality” (222), unlike the main theme first heard in m. 15, which appears only half as much and is harmonically closed; this helps to explain why the piece sounds so mobile. Agawu’s analyses are full of these sorts of nod-inducing comments. Sometimes it is the paradigmatic charts that prompt a nod, capturing visually something that might have otherwise escaped our attention—as, for example, with Agawu’s chart of the units in Brahms’s Intermezzo in E minor, op. 119, no. 2 (238), which shows a massive column of numbers reading down from unit 1 (evidence of the sheer presence of the opening main idea throughout the piece) and occasional strands shooting off to the right (evidence that other ideas nonetheless intervene, but only briefly).

That said, these analyses do require some work. The schematic layout of each chapter—starting with a description of each unit, even if there are as many as fifty of them—may leave readers wanting to flip ahead several pages for the “payoff,” the analytical “findings.” And once Agawu has discussed and assembled the building blocks, turned them over and examined them from every angle, the observations he makes are often more provisional than conclusive, more open-ended than neatly packaged. But this is a part of his strategy, and it makes his analyses more, not less, satisfying, for they open up avenues of inquiry rather than close them down. Indeed, Agawu’s analyses seem doggedly designed not to “prove” anything at all—except, perhaps, that by dispensing with the notion that analysis is supposed to prove things we can recover some of the exploratory quality—and the fun—of doing it. Which is of course why he attempts to keep certain enshrined formal categories at bay: they provide us with too much extraneous information and detract us from the raw material that we are hearing and playing. If there is a main theme to the book, this is it, and Agawu returns to it again and again. Below I provide only three examples among many:

Without denying the historical significance of archetypes or outer forms (such as ABA’ schemata) or their practical value for teachers of courses in music appreciation, I will argue that, from a listener’s point of view, such forms are often overdetermined, inscribed too rigidly; as such they often block access to the rich experience of musical meaning. The complex and often contradictory tendencies of musical materials are undervalued when we consign them to boxes marked ‘first theme,’ ‘second theme,’ and ‘recapitulation.’ The ability to distribute the elements of a Brahms symphony into sonata form categories is an ability of doubtful utility or relevance, and it is a profound shame that musicology has devoted pages upon pages to erecting these schemes as important mediators of musical meaning. At best, they possess low-level value; at worst, they are distractions (8).
Even in the most regular contexts, there is often more to the sense of periodicity than what is conferred by grouping. The analytical emphasis, then, should not be on antecedents and consequents, well-defined or malformed sentences, or sonata formations and deformations... The emphasis, rather, should be on the sense behind the musical gestures, the tendency of the material to remain open or closed, or its predilection to refuse either tendency and remain suspended between them (77).

When we find ourselves using simple formal labels to represent complex formal processes, or winning arguments about whether this movement is a theme and variations, or a rondo, or in sonata form, we should keep in mind how much such labels hide and what violence they do to the phenomena we seek to characterize (275).

* But the question remains: Can we explore a work's relation to external formal conventions without losing sight of its internal tendencies? Can we keep our labels and our “outer forms” without forgetting the “sense behind the musical gestures”? In an effort to answer that question in the affirmative, and to take on Agawu’s view of form more directly, I will close by examining one of his analyses more closely—that of Schubert’s song “Im Dorfe.” First, though, a caveat: this is not one of the works that he discusses extensively in Part II of his book; his commentary on the song is relatively brief and, by his own admission, not meant to cover every aspect of the work. While I might have chosen a longer example, doing so in the context of this essay would have meant leaving many aspects of the work and the analysis of it unexplored. Furthermore, although his analysis of “Im Dorfe” is short, it raises questions that extend well beyond it and go to the heart of his overall analytical enterprise.

Agawu states that his aim is “to show how simple transformations of an ordinary progression confer a certain periodicity in the song” (82). That progression is presented in the first eight measures, a closed unit that begins and ends on the tonic: I–ii6/3–vi7/V–I6/4–V–I. (Readers will want to have a score to Schubert’s song handy as they read the following commentary.) This is Agawu’s “period 1,” which is followed by eight other periods of varying length: 2 (mm. 8–19), 3 (mm. 20–21), 4 (mm. 22–23), 5 (mm. 24–25), 6 (mm. 26–28), 7 (mm. 29–31), 8 (mm. 31–40), 9

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4 Agawu’s Example 3.2 (p. 83) lists period 5 as lasting from mm. 23–25, but this must be an error. In the text on the same page, he writes, “Next comes another 2-bar period (bars 24–25),” a
Having segmented the work into these basic sense units, he then shows how they can be ordered "conceptually" rather than chronologically, proceeding from the most normative expression of the basic progression to increasingly distant transformations of it (here he is of course using the paradigmatic approach that he will outline two chapters later, even if he does not produce a paradigmatic chart). Periods 2, 8, and 9 are thus viewed as "expansions" of period 1 and the other periods as "truncations" of it (periods 6 and 7) or expressions of it in a different key (periods 3, 4, and 5). The expansions are clear enough from listening to the song—A sounds like an expansion of the introduction, and A′ sounds like an expansion of A—although the relation of the other periods to the basic progression is more tenuous. The derivation of these middle periods aside, Agawu's analysis demonstrates convincingly that, when taken together, the introduction and the A and A′ sections exhibit a strong sense of circularity; they retrace the same harmonic ground but never in the same way twice. One finishes reading Agawu's analysis with a keen sense for how the song's harmonic progressions give it an ebb and flow. And, as with so many of Agawu's analyses, one feels as though one has fully entered the piece and worked with its materials, just as the composer has done.

But we miss out on one aspect of the song's meaning, I think, if we maintain too much distance from the formal conventions with which it participates. Specifically, we lose a sense of the song's artful manipulation of not just model harmonic progressions but model phrase structures. Agawu extends period 1 to m. 8, so that it encompasses the tonic triad sounded in mm. 7–8 (as he did in his analysis of Chopin's F-sharp major prelude), and he begins period 2 in the same measure. Yet it seems to me that a listener would more likely segment these measures according to their phrase rhythm—with the first "sense unit" ending in m. 6 with a half cadence, and the second beginning with the upbeat to m. 7. This may seem like a finer point, but the decision has ramifications for how we hear the A section of the song (mm. 7–18). For these measures do not just expand upon the harmonic progression of the introduction, they double the introduction's length, extending a 6-measure phrase into a 12-measure phrase. Making sense of this phrase-structural expansion entails more than counting measures; it demands the same sort of creative thinking exemplified by Agawu's analyses.

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Segmentation that makes much more musical sense and reflects his segmentation of the corresponding 2-measure period 4 (mm. 22–23).

5 Periods 3 and 4 (mm. 20–21 and 22–23), for example, contain no predominant harmony, whereas the model progression does. And periods 6 and 7 (mm. 26–28 and 29–31) only amount to V–I progressions (in the case of period 6, over a tonic pedal), a gesture so generic that it is hard to imagine it as a radically truncated repetition of the particular progression in the opening of the song.
Example 1 attempts to capture something of the hypothetical process by which the phrase expansion occurs—by, in essence, building bridges from a normative phrase-structural model to the actual score, as Agawu has done with normative harmonic-contrapuntal models. Example 1a rewrites the A section in what we might call its most conventional form, “normalizing” it into an 8-measure phrase that differs from the first phrase precisely because it is (finally) closed, ending with two measures of tonic.

Example 1a, opening vocal phrase of “Im Dorfe,” normalized to 8 measures

Example 1b extends Example 1a by two measures, avoiding the cadence in m. 14 and continuing with a new melodic line on “und morgen früh ist alles zerrissen”:
Example 1b, opening vocal phrase of "Im Dorfe," expanded to 10 measures

Our hypothetical 8-measure phrase has now been transformed into a slightly less normative 10-measure phrase. Schubert's version, presented in Example 1c (next page), then expands this 10-measure phrase by two measures—not, however, by tacking these measures on at the end but by inserting them in the middle: mm. 11 and 16 elongate the 2-bar hypermeasures in mm. 9–10 and 14–15 by one hyperbeat, momentarily disturbing the underlying phrase rhythm.\(^6\)

In this reading, the A section emerges as unconventional—one might even say "malfomed"—from a phrase-structural point of view. The B section, by contrast, is remarkably well formed. It is (almost) a model 8-measure sentence. I say "almost" because although it begins clearly enough with a 2-measure basic idea (mm. 20–21) and an exact repetition of that basic idea (mm. 22–23), its continuation section sounds either truncated by one measure, if we hear it as concluding with the vocal

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\(^6\) Hypermetrically, m. 11 feels like the "extra" measure, though of course in comparison with the introduction's model harmonic progression it is m. 10 that extends the ii\(^{6}^/3\) harmony by one measure.
part in m. 26, or extended by one measure, if we hear it as continuing through m. 28. Either way, the B section is much more tightly knit than the A section, a fact that Agawu’s analysis, in its emphasis on harmonic structure over phrase structure, does not mention—and which his segmentation seems to contradict. But it seems to me that this point of comparison is at least as important to understanding the inner logic of the song as the notion that the periods in the B section are shorter than the periods in the A section, as Agawu notes. What his comment really points to is that the harmonies in the B section move faster; as the poet’s thoughts turn from night to day, from the world of dreams to what will happen the next morning when the dreams will dissipate, Schubert turns to a new, less lugubrious harmonic rhythm.

Example 1c, opening vocal phrase of “Im Dorfe,” Schubert’s 12-measure version
But he also turns to a clearer, more conventional form—and, as Arnold Feil has shown, to a more conventional Lied-like accompaniment (1996, 105, 109). The contrast is all the more striking because the A section itself is vaguely sentential, though not nearly as well-etched as the B section, and in dialogue with a normative phrase-structural background, though a distortion of it. B, in short, is the daylight version of A.

Giving a label to the B section (sentence) thus need not be seen as a retreat from analytical inquiry but as a means of generating new questions—about the artful distortions of generic norms and the possible musico-poetic reasons for them, about the relationship between more conventional and less conventional passages within a work or even across different works. (Where else in his Lieder, for example, does Schubert use sentence structures, and why? Most in-depth examinations of phrase structure have dealt with instrumental music, but one cannot help but wonder what role text plays in prompting a composer to use one phrase structure, or one distortion of it, over another.) The same could be said of giving a name to the overall form (ternary). Schubert’s modifications in A’ are extensive enough, when compared with his and others’ typical ternary songs, to raise similar questions: why does he transform A’ so much? how do those transformations lend the form a more forward-directed “narrative” quality? I fully agree that an obsession with formal taxonomies deadens analysis and runs the risk of turning a work into an example of a phenomenon rather than a unique utterance in its own right. But formal archetypes need not be seen as “jelly molds” (131), patterns we cram pieces into no matter how much they resist (although this is of course a danger). They can be seen as flexible norms, general ideas of how song melodies and symphonic themes and first-movements and scherzi tend to go, which composers intuitively embrace or alter according to the situation at hand and sensitive listeners recognize and respond to. Being aware of those norms allows us to appreciate how a piece reflects a given style, relates to other pieces, and speaks in its own distinctive voice.

This view of form as a complex set of norms, rather than a fixed schemata, is one presented most recently, and most persuasively, by James Hepokoski and Warren Durck (2006). Their “Sonata Theory” aims to develop a set of tools that enables listeners to understand how individual sonata forms engage in a dialogue with a range of normative procedures. One of the premises behind their theory is that no work exists in isolation; a work accrues meaning based on its relation to other works and to a variety of generic conventions that a composer (wittingly or not) might stretch, deform, or override completely. Agawu does not explicitly take on Sonata Theory (although he implicitly targets it a number of times, such as when he urges us to shift our emphasis away from “sonata formations and deformations”). Yet as much as Sonata Theory’s convention-driven approach may seem to contrast with
Agawu's "studiedly naïve" approach, are their aims really so different? "[A]ny analysis that stops after the mere labeling is no analysis at all. Under no circumstances should an analysis seek to normalize unusual occurrences and anomalies: one should acquire a healthy distrust of all systems and catch-phrases that work in this direction": this comes not from Music as Discourse but from Elements of Sonata Theory (610), and it speaks to a mode of analysis that, for all its emphasis on norms, is no less interested in foregrounding a work's contradictions and in studying music not as an abstraction but as an aspect of lived experience. Were there space here, I would consider what light Hepokoski's and Darcy's writings on 19th-century sonata deformations might shed on the formal strategies of Liszt's Orpheus—which Agawu reads as exhibiting a logic wholly unrelated to sonata form. It may well be that any effort to squeeze the piece into a sonata-form mold is wrong-headed, especially in light of Liszt's disavowal of form for form's sake. But considering that the genre of the tone poem in many ways developed out of the sonata-form concert overture and that several of Liszt's tone poems bear a direct relation to sonata form, one wonders what could be learned by acknowledging that perhaps a residue of sonata-ness remains, and that Liszt may have distorted the form in particular ways for particular programmatic purposes. The results might end up being inconclusive or provisional, but the analytical adventure would be worth it.

This is of course Agawu's term—"analytical adventure." In the end, whether one agrees with every one of his positions or claims, one cannot help but be infected by the spirit of his endeavor. For what this book offers above all is the impetus to pursue analytical adventures of our own devising. One finishes Agawu's book with new methods to probe music's unfathomable meanings, new ways to refashion the tools we already know, a conviction that the real value of analysis lies in the doing of it rather than the "truths" it uncovers, and a desire to get down to work. I look forward to the future work that Agawu's book will inspire. Our discipline will be better for it.

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7 Agawu accuses Richard Kaplan (1984) of reducing the work to a formal archetype.
8 Hepokoski's concept of "tonal alienation" (1993, 94), or the "non-resolving recapitulation" (2001-02), in which the secondary theme does not resolve to the tonic in recapitulatory space, would seem particularly applicable to Orpheus, whose second main theme returns in its original key, E major, rather than in the tonic, C major. (Darcy [1997] describes this phenomenon, in the context of Bruckner's sonata deformations, as "the alienated secondary theme zone" [271].) Jackson's (1997) concept of the "tragic reversed recapitulation," in which the secondary theme returns before the primary theme and in a non-tonic key, might also prove illuminating—even though Orpheus's program does not have any tragic associations.
References


