

The Topic of Piano Performance

Leonard Ratner's book *Classic Music: Expression, Form and Style* pioneered the notion of topics as "subject for musical discourse" (Ratner 1980: 9) and, with their appearance, a particular theory of musical meaning was able to gain traction. Thus later writers such as Raymond Monelle (2000, 2006) and Robert Hatten (1994, 2004) took this theory down a semiotic path, the former expanding Ratner's Classical focus to include the Romantic period. In this he has been accompanied by Kofi Agawu (2009) and Janice Dickensheets (2012). Monelle also briefly touched on topics in 20th- and 21st-century music and there has been a small body of writing on the subject of 20th-century composers' topical use by, amongst others, Walter Frisch (2008) and Johanna Frymoyer (2017).

Nevertheless, the focal period for the majority of publications on the subject has remained the 18th century and, significantly, the very substantial *Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory* (2014) hardly explores any repertoires outside those of the Classical period. Furthermore, topic-related performance is only considered in passing - there are just three chapters, largely concerned with the interpretation of Mozart's music. It is therefore the aim of this paper further to extend the study of topicality by assessing how performance can interact with its perceived presence in music other than that of the Classical period.

For the pianist, an appreciation of topicality has the capacity to affect interpretative decisions, especially if the topic is not named in a work's title (e.g. 'Minuet in G') but is discovered within the setting of a parent work such as a ballade or a fantasy. For example, the identification of a nocturne topic in a Chopin ballade or a march topic in a Schumann fantasy piece provides interpretative insights which can be projected in performance.

The Topic of Piano Performance thus explores the interface between topic and interpretation as it applies to 19th- and 20th-century piano music, and concludes by proposing a model to illustrate how topics as interpretative informants might operate alongside others such as musical structure or scored directives. The presentation also features illustrative performances by the presenter of music by Chopin and John Ireland.



Julian Hellaby
Coventry University, Coventry, UK
julianhellaby@aol.com

Julian Hellaby PhD, MMus, BMus, LRAM, ARAM studied piano with the distinguished pianist Denis Matthews and later at London's Royal Academy of Music. He has performed as solo pianist, concerto soloist, accompanist and chamber musician in continental Europe, the Middle East, South Africa and throughout the UK, including recitals in the Wigmore Hall and Purcell Room. More recent two-piano work with pianist Peter Noke has featured performances across the UK, and in Hong Kong and China.

Julian has taught academic music at Coventry University and London College of Music and is also an ABRSM examiner, moderator and public presenter. He has released several CDs for the ASC and MSV labels, and his book *Reading Musical Interpretation* was published by Ashgate in 2009. His second book, *The Mid-Twentieth-Century Concert Pianist: An English Experience*, was published by Routledge in 2018. He has also written a number of journal articles on piano-related subjects.