

**IN THE EAR OF THE BEHOLDER:  
LISTENING TO BEETHOVEN WITH 18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY EARS**

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## ***Introduction***

It was clear to me, that sound I had heard... had been no accident.  
 Here again was the very voice of God. I was staring through the  
 cage of those meticulous ink strokes – at an absolute beauty!  
 ~ *Salieri*<sup>1</sup>

Every other year, conductors from all over the world meet for a long weekend in Oxford, England to attend the International Conducting Studies Conference. Hosted each even-numbered summer by the Oxford Conducting Institute, this gathering of choral and instrumental conductors, from both academic and purely professional/performance backgrounds, present and debate all manner of new research related directly to conducting via musicology, history, interpretation, musical leadership, theory, and practice. While there are a countless multitude of conducting masterclasses each year offering instruction, and the experience of practical application of physical conducting technique, the bi-annual Oxford International Conducting Studies Institute (“OCIICSI”) is the only conference of which I am aware wherein written scholarly research and study is the focus of the gathering. Their stated goal is to bring together the diverse perspectives from both scholars and practitioners on all matters relating to the field including those of philosophy, sociology, psychology, and history.

At the inaugural OCIICSI conference in June of 2016, I had the pleasure of presenting my research on twentieth-century performance practice, specifically related to the degree of adherence to metronome indications by composer/conductors over the last century. At first blush, a conference like this may seem frivolous to the uninitiated. And for some of the more than fifty attendees, perhaps it was enough to hobnob with colleagues, retiring each night to drink and chat into the wee hours in any number of pubs established centuries before the founding of my own country. However, those like myself knew better. The study of conducting,

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<sup>1</sup> Miloš Forman, director. *Amadeus*. Warner Home Video, 2014.

and orchestral scores in particular, is at times a herculean task. Conducting is a pursuit which paradoxically deepens further beyond reach with each stride made towards understanding. Ask any serious practitioners of the art about their method of score study and you will doubtless get a vastly different perspective from each. Likewise, if the more Machiavellian among us should wish to entice two conductors into debate (or even to come to blows), one need only raise the subject of Beethoven and metronome markings. Then, just sit back with your pint and watch the show. My point here is simply to assert that orchestral score study is the ultimate musicological rabbit hole. As a young, novice conductor, I didn't understand why a learned and experienced conductor like Leonard Bernstein would begin anew with a clean score any time he returned after a time to conducted one of Brahms' symphonies (for example). Now however, after over twenty years of conducting and nearing the end of several years' worth of doctoral work, I certainly do understand. We conductors truly stand on the shoulders of giants. Peering into the pages of any of the masterpieces of Beethoven, Brahms, or Mahler, it is at times as if we are peering into a beautiful abyss, but an abyss nonetheless.

Studying any great score is a pursuit without end due to the very nature of art and the abstraction of meaning. Symbolism and metaphor are at the very heart of every form of artistic expression. It is through the abstraction of particular elements of human experience that we come to perceive expression as *artful*, be it sculpture, painting, writing, or music. Further, every effort to discern symbolism and metaphor in music requires prior knowledge of a given composer's musical idiom and that of the listener during the time in which he composed. *Topic theory* is, in part, a study of musical idioms in context. An understanding and awareness of *topic theory*, as it pertains to the musical *Zeitgeist* of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, can have meaningful and revelatory implications for the interpretation and realization of

orchestral scores for composers of this era and can yield profound new insights into works of the orchestral canon. This essay will endeavor to shed light on three such works, namely Beethoven's middle three symphonies (Opuses 60, 67, and 68) by way of cataloging and discussing various *topoi* within them.

***Exposition: Topic theory***

To state that the study of *topic theory* is a concept which is all but unknown to conductors, in general, would be an understatement. I have attended multiple conferences and masterclasses in Russia, England, and United States hosted by the auspices of the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, the Eastman School of Music, Peter the Great Academy (St. Petersburg, Russia), the Pierre Monteux School for Conductors, the Conductors Guild (USA), and lastly the aforementioned Oxford Int'l Conducting Studies Conference. Never has the subject of *topic theory* or *topoi* been discussed or presented on.

*Topic theory* is a young field of study, relatively speaking. The primary music history text used in most American conservatories, the *History of Western Music* (Burkholder, Grout, and Palisca) only began including a section on *topic theory* as of the 2006 edition<sup>2</sup>. The musicologist Leonard Ratner is generally considered to be the grandfather of this branch of musicology. Dr. Ratner was Professor of Musicology at Stanford University for nearly four decades. His seminal work on the subject, published in 1980, was *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style*. In it, he lists and describes the primary pillars of characteristic *topoi* prevalent

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<sup>2</sup> Danuta Mirka and Agawu V. Kofi. *Communication in Eighteenth-Century Music*. Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 2

in compositions of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, including those of Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven<sup>3</sup>.

From its contacts with worship, poetry, drama, entertainment, dance, ceremony, the military, the hunt, and the life of the lower classes, music in the early eighteenth century developed a thesaurus of *characteristic figures*, which formed a rich legacy for classic composers. Some of these figures were associated with various feelings and affections; others had a picturesque flavor. They are designated here as *topics* – subjects for musical discourse.

Ratner's work inspired a new generation of musicologist/disciples who have continued his work and written copious volumes about *topic theory* over the last two decades. The primary musicologists active in this research of late are Kofi Agawu (Princeton University), Raymond Monelle (University of Edinburgh), Danuta Mirka (University of Southampton), and Robert Hatten (University of Texas at Austin).

Of the individual topics, or *topoi*, listed by Ratner, those most prominent in the middle three symphonies of Beethoven would be: military, pastoral (high and low), and the hunt.

### *Military*

The musical gestures indicative of the military topic tend to be French in origin, including that of fanfares or bugle calls (i.e. trumpets, and figures with rising triadic arpeggiation in particular) marches and march rhythms, as well as the usage of Turkish/Janissary instruments (military bands including winds and percussion)<sup>4,5</sup>. Also among the musical gestures which I would assert could be included in the *military* topic (particularly in Beethoven's music) would be

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<sup>3</sup> Leonard G. Ratner. *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style*. Schirmer Books, 1980, p. 9

<sup>4</sup> Raymond Monelle and Robert S. Hatten. *The Sense of Music: Semiotic Essays*. Princeton University Press, 2018, p. 33-35

<sup>5</sup> Raymond Monelle. *The Musical Topic: Hunt, Military and Pastoral*. Indiana University Press, 2006, pp. 115-118

the appearance of fugue, sometimes suggestive of scenes of battle or struggle (also see Hunt, below). This topic, and its associated musical gestures, feature prominently in what is often referred to as Beethoven's "Heroic Period", the most oft-cited works of which are his Symphonies No. 3 in *Eb* maj, Opus 55, "Eroica" (1803) and No. 5 in *c* minor, Opus 67 (1807-8).

### *Pastoral*

The *Pastoral* topic can further be categorized into that of "Low" and "High" culture. The Low Pastoral topical gestures will typically be associated with rustic outdoor dances or scenes associated with the lower classes or country folk. Whereas High Pastoral musical gestures will be those associated with that of upper classes, more refined dance types, and/or more 'morally elevated' themes<sup>6</sup>.

An expression of the Enlightenment ideal of the glorification of nature, music of this topic will typically be in compound meter such as 12/8 (Baroque and Classical eras) and then more commonly 6/8 time (late Classical and Romantic). This is asserted by Monelle to be derived from music of the Italian *Pifferari* – Abruzzi shepherds who would "descend into Rome during Christmastime" to perform music for money<sup>7</sup>. Compound meters such as 12/8 and 6/8 are also frequently used to depict *water* or *wind* in music. Further indicative of pastoral music would be the use of drones or extended pedal tones, suggesting instruments like the musette (commonly used by the *pifferari*) or bagpipe. Lastly, other instrument types commonly referred to musically (metaphorically) might be alphorns, post horns, and shepherds pipes, the calls of which might further be alluded to through effects like repetition or echo.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp. 196-198, 227-228

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 229-230

### *The Hunt*

“Military and hunt music was familiar throughout the eighteenth century... the hunt was a favorite diversion of the nobility; horn signals echoed and re-echoed throughout the countryside.”<sup>8</sup> These words, from Ratner, begin his lengthy discussion of the Hunt as a predominant topic in music of the Classic and Romantic eras. The hunt topic shares musical characteristics associated with both the Military and Pastoral topics, and can easily be mistaken for such. Hunt gestures include a multitude of possible references to hunting horn calls (not dissimilar to Military topoi), as well as rhythmic and melodic gestures indicative of the gait of horses: the trot, the canter, and most especially the gallop. As with Pastoral topoi, these rhythms are typically in triple meter or a compound meter (6/8). Also in common with the Pastoral topoi, echo effects were common to Hunt topical gestures<sup>9</sup>. Lastly, fugue (from the Latin *fugere* “to flee” and *fugare* “to chase”) may also be used to refer to the exhilaration of Hunting.

### ***Development: Topoi as Rhetoric and Reference***

Topical gestures in the middle three symphonies of Beethoven are often less overt, and easily missed if one chooses to listen to these works as absolute music, devoid of extra-musical references. Agawu asserts this stating, “In middle-period Beethoven, topics recede into the background even as forces of expression generated by organic impulses and a more explicit subjectivism take over.”<sup>10</sup> However, there are nevertheless a multitude of musical gestures of melody, rhythm, and effect in all three of his middle symphonies. Here follows a few of the more intriguing examples.

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<sup>8</sup> Ratner, 1980, p. 18

<sup>9</sup> Monelle, 2006, p. 57

<sup>10</sup> Danuta Mirka and Kofi V. Agawu. *Communication in Eighteenth-Century Music*. Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 249

[Example 1] Symphony No. 4, movement 1, m. 141: in this example we find a very sudden change in dynamic, instrumentation, and texture. This moment is approached by full orchestra at a *forte* dynamic, and then suddenly we hear clarinet and bassoon solos marked “*p dolce*”, and in echo of one another. These eight measures are absolutely indicative of the *pastoral* topic.



Example 1 – Pastoral

[Ex. 2] This second example from one page later in the same movement (m. 177-184) is indicative of the hunt topic. The rapid syncopation of the melodic line in the violins is pulling the listener forward, almost in a lurch. One is reminded of Beethoven’s infamous statement, “I like to unhorse good riders.” Likewise, the rhythm of the violas is indicative of a horse at full gallop, the fastest gait.



Tr.  
Tp.  
Bassi  
sempre *f*  
sempre *f*  
sempre *f*  
sempre *f*

Ex. 2 – Hunt

[Ex. 3a] With example 3a below we move to the final moments of movement two of the same symphony, measures 93-94. The rolling motive in the strings, rippling back and forth across sections, and fading away as it's marked “sempre perdendo” is absolutely reminiscent of water, perhaps drifting off towards a horizon. This, I believe, Ratner would consider to be a subtle example of the pastoral.

sempre perdendo.  
sempre perdendo.  
sempre perdendo.  
sempre perdendo.  
sempre perdendo.

Ex. 3a – Pastoral

[Ex. 3b] Following only a few measures after the above example, we come to measures 98-99. Here in the coda we hear a horn with an arpeggiated call rising in isolation, and then echoed repeatedly across the orchestra. This is markedly reminiscent of an alphorn call echoing in the distance, and certainly that of the pastoral topic.

Ex. 3b – Pastoral (High)

[Ex. 4] Next, as we move to Symphony No. 5 in c minor, we come to a sudden outburst at *fortissimo* in measures 148-151 in the second movement. Approached by steady *forte* in octaves from the horns, this moment for full orchestra is unquestionably indicative of a grand fanfare, and certainly of the military topic.

The image shows a page of musical notation for a piece titled "Ex. 4 - Military". The score is written for multiple instruments, likely a woodwind and brass section, as indicated by the various clefs and staves. The key signature is D major, marked with a large "D" at the beginning of the first system. The music is characterized by a strong, rhythmic pulse, with frequent use of fortissimo (ff) and forte (f) dynamics. The notation includes a variety of note values, rests, and articulation marks, such as slurs and accents. The overall style is that of a 19th-century military march or fanfare.

Ex. 4 – Military

[Ex. 5] Lastly, we look at two moments from Beethoven’s Symphony No. 6 in Fmaj, the eponymous “Pastoral” symphony. However, what we find here in measures 151-155 of the first movement is not a reference to the pastoral topic, but rather that of the hunt. This crescendo begins here and continues for 25 measures over an unending rhythmic gesture very indicative of a chase on horseback.

The image shows a musical score for five staves. The top staff is marked with a 'D' and a circled '2'. The instruction 'cresc. poco a poco' is written above the first staff and below the second, third, fourth, and fifth staves. The music consists of rhythmic patterns, including eighth and sixteenth notes, with some triplets in the third and fourth staves.

Ex. 5 – Hunt

[Ex. 6] And here, again in Symphony No. 6, we move ahead to the beginning of movement two. I would argue, as I wager would Ratner or Monelle, that there is hardly any need for Beethoven to have entitled the movement, “Scene by a brook”, for the old style 12/8 meter and falling three-note motive across the strings is itself absolutely referencing a relaxed pastoral water scene.

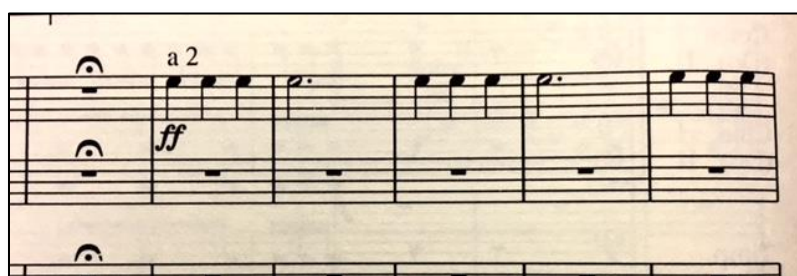
The image shows a musical score for the beginning of movement two in Symphony No. 6. The tempo is marked 'Andante molto moto' and the dynamics are 'p' (piano) and 'con sord.' (con sordina). The score includes parts for [basso], Violini I, Violini II, Viole, 2 Violoncelli soli, and Violoncelli (gli altri) e Bassi. The music is in 12/8 time and features a falling three-note motive across the strings. Handwritten notes in green ink say 'Tutti con sord.' next to the string parts.

Ex. 6 – Pastoral

***Recapitulation: Topoi as Quotation and Mimetic Device***

There are moments in symphonies when composers choose to go beyond mere referencing of musical, or indeed even extra-musical, elements and instead directly mimic or quote melodies, events, or sounds. There are countless examples of this in the orchestral canon. For example, the famous horn solo in the final movement of Brahms' first symphony is nearly a direct quote of the Swiss alphorn folk melody, "All is well in the valley."<sup>11</sup> Beethoven too chose to use quotation and mimesis topically in his middle three symphonies, and here I present a few compelling examples.

[Ex. 7] In Beethoven's Symphony No. 5, we find an unusual quotation in the third movement. Though this sudden interruption (measures 19-23 in the horns) is clearly another derivation of the opening motive from movement one, and from which Beethoven has constructed an entire symphony, this moment in the third movement also happens to be a direct quotation of a specific and contemporaneous bugle call used for light infantry in Napoleon's army, specifically the call directing the light infantry to "cease fire"<sup>12</sup> If this was not intended by Beethoven, it is indeed an incredibly striking coincidence.



Ex. 7 – Military

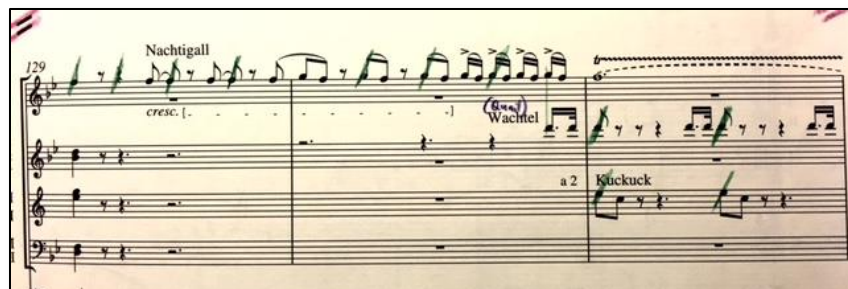
<sup>11</sup> "Swiss Alphorn Song: All Is Well in the Valley." Performance by Ben Jaber, *YouTube*, YouTube, 25 Aug. 2008, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ocslqBgb204](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ocslqBgb204).

<sup>12</sup> "Napoleonic Bugle Calls for Light Infantry." Performance by Bugle Mjr Birkett, *YouTube*, YouTube, 5 Aug. 2016, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=CIn-fvoCCCU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CIn-fvoCCCU). 03:18-03:25

[Ex. 8] Next, we return to the beginning of Beethoven's Symphony No. 6. Just as the symphony has begun, here we see in measure 29 a drone of a perfect fifth in the cellos (and this doubled in the horns) above which we hear a light, dance-like melody on the double-reed oboes. This, I believe inarguably, is a striking mimesis of a *pifferari*'s song for musette.

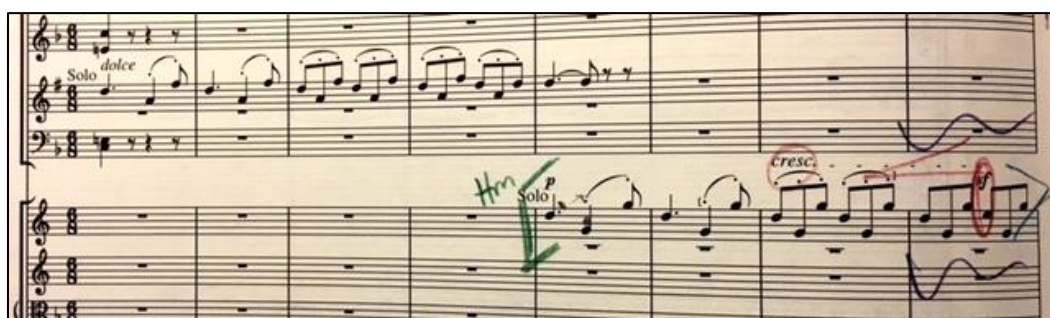
Ex. 8 – Pastoral (Low)

[Ex. 9] We come now to possibly the most self-evident example of mimesis in any of Beethoven's symphonies. Here we find Beethoven mimicking the birdsong of three specific species of birds (by name, as he's indicated directly in the score) in the space of three measures. This moment is from the end of the second movement of the "Pastoral" symphony, occurring between measures 129-131.



Ex. 9 – Pastoral

[Ex. 10] This final example is another case of quotation. At the very beginning of the final movement of the sixth symphony, as the great “storm” has finally subsided (an entire movement of mimesis just completed) we have come to Beethoven’s “Hirtengesang” (“Shepherd’s Song”). At this moment, Beethoven has chosen not to merely compose his own version of a Shepherd’s song, but rather to borrow from a Swiss alphorn tune from the city of Rigi<sup>13</sup>.



Ex. 10 – Pastoral

<sup>13</sup> Monelle, 2006, p. 102

### *Coda*

You're a man looking at the world through a keyhole, and you've spent your whole life trying to widen that keyhole – to see more, to know more. And now, on hearing that it **can** be widened, in ways you can't imagine, you reject the possibility.

~*The Ancient One*<sup>14</sup>

The study of and research into *topic theory* within the broader field of musicology is not without controversy. Musicologists Nicholas McKay<sup>15</sup> and Susan McClary<sup>16</sup> are among several staunch critics of this pursuit of research, both voicing skepticism for the value of *topic theory* and semiotics. This skeptical viewpoint is not at all unwarranted, as there are those among the topical theorist disciples of Ratner who approach the study with such zeal as to ascribe it, perhaps, more than it deserves with regards to its revelatory potential. The excellent scholar and musicologist Lewis Lockwood addresses this fervor thusly:

I have never been able to adjust my mind to this way of hearing, by “topics” and allusions, except in cases in which the allusions are obviously and specifically planted for programmatic purposes. This is sometimes the case in the music of Ives, but not the case in the late style of Beethoven. Susan McClary likewise finds, “formalist semiotics and the topics mania” frustrating.<sup>17</sup>

All of us lamentable conductors are rather like the character of Salieri in Miloš Forman's film *Amadeus*. We are all staring into something miraculous in masterful orchestral scores, and exceedingly few of us are able to comprehend all that we see. Thus, we approach each performance of a symphony anew, each time trying to tease out a greater understanding than before. *Topic theory* holds not more or less than other methods by which we examine and absorb

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<sup>14</sup> Scott Derrickson, director. *Doctor Strange*. Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment, 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Nicholas McKay. “On Topics Today”, *Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft für Musiktheorie*, 4/1-2, 2007. pp.159-183

<sup>16</sup> Susan McClary. Review of Raymond Monelle, *The Sense of Music: Semiotic Essays*. Notes 58/2, 2001. pp.326-329

<sup>17</sup> Mirka and Agawu, 2012, p. 253



music in its written representation. Harmonic analysis, formal analysis, performance practice, composer biographies – all of these approaches are but mere pieces of the grand puzzle of our ephemeral sonic art form which exists only in the moment of its performance. This essay has been an effort to assert the value of this particular pursuit of information (*topic theory*) as worthy of further consideration and study by conductors towards the preparation for performance of great works of the orchestral canon. *Topic theory* is no more the answer to any great musical mystery than countless other approaches to music study. It is, rather, another tool to help us widen that keyhole just a bit more.

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