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Tonality: Semantic Aspect

ABSTRACT

The tonality is studied in the theory of music as a composition tool. Also, musicians and music thinkers are interested in semantic aspect of tonality. Still the theory of affects (J. Mattheson, J. Quantz) pointed to expressiveness of the most usable tonalities in composer practice. Subsequently the circle of semantic important tonalities (e.g., in music of romantics) extended; the synaestheticism was caught in expressiveness of the tonality — in N. Rimsky-Korsakov and A. Scriabin's color-light concepts. At present data of observations over semantics of the tonality within separate composer styles are available: F. Chopin, S. Rachmaninov, D. Shostakovich and other musicians. These data, however, have mainly empirical character, they emphasize the subjective origin of interpretations of tonalities.

In our paper we examine formation of meaning in a tonality: the subjectivity and objectivity of semantics and factors influencing it. On the basis of the conducted analysis it is becoming apparent that a metaphoricity of semantics of a tonality is ontological, natural, and by no means strictly subjective as it seems quite often. Objective bases of semantics are disclosed. It is corrected by a set of factors: features of a harmony, harmonic development and other components of musical texture. It has become obvious that the tonality is also influenced by composer style and by genre of the work. As such — subjective-objective — a phenomenon the tonality is used by the composer and perceived by the listener. Such comprehension of semantics of the tonality gives us an opportunity for further theoretical learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tonality is one of the key categories in music theory. Many aspects of tonality have been comprehensively studied. Principally, the researchers are striving to define an initial concept pertaining to the music of various historical periods, the essence of tonality, typology of tonalities, tonal drama and polytonality. The available scientific research represents tonality as a fundamental — at least, in the broad sense, in the classical music — compositional tool.

Another aspect of tonality — its *semantics* — does not escape the attention of musicians and music thinkers either. For instance, the theory of affects has defined the expressiveness of the tonalities most widely used in composing practice, thus summarising the practical knowledge. Tonalities were connected to specific affects — this aspect was reflected in the works of Mattheson, Quantz, and Marc-Antoine Charpentier. Later, the range of semantically significant tonalities was expanded — for example, in the romantic music —, the expression of tonality revealed its synesthetic qualities — in the colour and light concepts of Rimsky-Korsakov and Scriabin. By now, quite a few observations in the sphere of tonality semantics have been accumulated within the style of certain composers: Johann Sebastian Bach (Orlova 2005), Wolfgang Amadeus

Mozart (Chigareva 2000; Einstein 1977), Chopin (Asafiev 1970), Mikhail Glinka (Kazantseva 2005; Zhigacheva 2000), Pyotr Tchaikovsky (Kholopov 1973), Rachmaninov (Kazantseva 2005), Rimsky-Korsakov (Bozina 2013), Shostakovich (Fanning 2000), etc. Modern science brought a semantic aspect of polytonality into sharp focus (Paisov 1977).

In summary of the current tonality semantics studies, musicology is starting to embrace tonality semantics on the empirical level now — there is just no theory in this area of knowledge. The available information on tonality provides no substantial examination of its semantical aspect and thus cannot be considered satisfactory. That is why modern musicology is tasked with the further investigation of tonality's semantical potential.

2. MODERN OBSERVATIONS OVER THE SEMANTICS OF THE TONALITY

This task implies raising several scientific questions — I will address only some of them here.

If we see tonality as a medium of expression for a composer, it is reasonable to look at its semantics from an ontological standpoint and define how tonality-based semantics are created, and what is a tonality semantics spectrum.

Modern beliefs about semantic connotation majorly rely on the metaphoricity of the meanings, the reason of which is rightfully found in the mechanism of building associations. However, it would be too simple to explain such a complex and stable phenomenon with only a metaphorical transfer of meanings from the adjacent areas of activity to music. There is no doubt that achievements in the sphere of acoustics, psychology, physiology, culturology and semiotics may provide an invaluable contribution to the development of the above-mentioned matters.

Thus, experimental and statistical acoustic data prove the existence of quite evident formant constants in the colouring of the sound of a specific pitch, sounded by a specific instrument. When studying formant pitch characteristics — of piano, violin, oboe, and cello —, A. A. Volodin managed to discover the correlation between a tone's quality and pitch, and to make an important conclusion 'of the presence of objectively reasonable reasons why musicians attribute a special emotional tone to every pitch and are able to feel it even not having an absolute pitch' (Volodin 1970, 37). Consequently, it becomes possible to discover not only associative — rather subjective — component in tonality's semantics but also an acoustic one — which is quite stable and objective.

The association itself does not proceed so easily as they sometimes imagine. This seemingly personal act contains many objective 'universal' components. O. D. Volcheck

provides one of the existence proofs of constant ‘universal’ tonality senses. She discovered stable connections between tonalities and references to specific ‘environmental conditions’ based on the analysis of 400 songs and romances of Russian composers. The researcher detected the tonalities, which are the most suitable for reflecting ‘vast expanses’ (E-flat major), ‘bounded space’ (C major, B major), ‘water environment’ (E-flat major, D major, B minor), ‘sky’ (G major, E minor), etc. (see Ivanchenko 2001, 109). Hence, association as a meaning-making principle can be characterized not only by spontaneity and subjectivity of semantic connections but also by their quite consistent and objective character.

‘Language-speech’ dichotomy, developed by semiotics, also helps to understand the nature of meaning-making in tonality. Just like the other musical elements, tonalities ‘live’ in two paradigms. One paradigm is a ‘speech’ one, which defines an individual semantic fullness of the tonality, being programmed by a composer in certain musical composition and specifically a ‘speech’ statement. At the same time, tonality’s inclusion into the world of ‘language’ — which has been established by the efforts of many generations of musicians, who contributed to the global fund of musical elements with historically formed area of their potential meanings, fills the individual local semantics with the aggregates of the meanings that were developed and selected during the centuries-long practices. Individual ‘speech’ semantics that intensifies some components of a ‘language’ spectrum of meanings, naturally gains more depth and polysemy.

While studying the origins of certain tonality’s meanings, it is not possible to omit the intertextuality phenomenon, which defines the connectedness of fiction texts. In our case, we refer to semantic parallels and arches, based on tonal similarities of musical compositions. An obvious hint at Beethoven’s heroic style (the ‘Eroica’ Symphony) provides E-flat major tonality in *A Hero’s Life* symphonic poem by Richard Strauss, thus placing a composer’s creative autobiography, weaved with reminiscences of his earlier works, upon a pedestal. It becomes clear that composing creative work triggers the mechanism of associations, thanks to which juxtapositions of meanings occur.

The concept of the metaphoric origin of tonal semantics was also substantially complemented and transformed by Carl Gustav Jung, who stated that the culture is saturated with the meanings, namely archetypes that accumulate basic human values. Within the context of the issue in question, it defines the tonality’s role in the formation and the long-lasting existence of some fundamental archetypal meanings in music. One of such archetypes, namely a grievous loss, was noticed by Ivanko, who found out that among 108 compositions by foreign and domestic authors, written in *Stabat Mater* genre, flat tonalities were prioritised, specifically G minor (in 30 opuses), C minor (28), F minor (25), and D minor (9), while sharp tonalities had an exceptional nature — they were found in 3 opuses only (Ivanko 2006). C minor tonality became a symbolic one, typical for the solemn and tragic parting, cultivated by another genre, the funeral march — for instance, it may be found in funeral marches of the 3rd Symphony and Piano variations of Beethoven’s Op. 34, 2 parts of a Piano Quintet Op. 44 by Schumann, Prelude No. 20 by Chopin,

funeral march from the third act of *The Twilight of the Gods* by Wagner, romances *The Living Dead* and *The Coffin* by Alyabyev, etc.

It is important to realize that a tonality’s semantics is certainly adjusted by many factors. It depends on the context. Thus, it is a flexible notion. This defines the objective rule of its existence.

One should not ignore the fact that tonality manifests itself with various levels of definitiveness: it may be concisely represented with some typical mode and harmonic means, or, otherwise, it may be represented as a scarcely perceptible, subtle component. Sometimes it is more evident for an analyst’s ear rather than audible to a listener. Surely, when the tonality is ‘diffusive’, it is difficult to speak about its semantics. This causes the natural character of tonalities’ ambiguous semantic interpretations.

Semantics significantly correlates with a composer’s style. According to our experience — again, empirically —, we know that, let’s say, Bach’s C major differs greatly from the one that is present in the musical pieces of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Prokofiev. Edison Denisov told: ‘My D-dur is special. No one had a D-dur like mine’ (Neizvestniy Denisov 1997, 99). However, there are some questions that are waiting to be considered, such as: what are the reasons for formation of this or that semantics in a composer’s style; to which extent is it subject to evolution; how does it fit in the context of contemporaries’ music; to which extent does it preserve the predecessors’ gains and to which extent does it give rise to the followers.

Within the context of a composer’s style, it is important to know to which extent the tonality’s semantics is significant for the author. Besides the observations of the researchers, a lot of information can be gained from the statements of the composers themselves. Thus, Glinka allowed tonalities’ transposition in his romances when they were performed or published, and this could refer to the fact that when choosing a tonality — at least in the vocal music —, he was ruled by its convenience for the performer rather than its semantics. Alexander Skryabin rather subtly felt the expressive diversity of tonalities: ‘All music changes completely if we imagine that it [an etude] was composed in E-flat minor rather than in D-sharp minor’ (quoted after Teplov 1947, 135).

When studying a composer’s style, it may be interesting to consider a matter of priority — or, otherwise, avoiding by the musician — of some tonalities. For instance, the passion for tonalities with a great number of the key signatures, demonstrated by Mily Balakirev, Anton Rubinstein, Anatoly Lyadov is informative. However, this issue should be solved not only statistically, since the use of tonalities is conditioned by various reasons, some of which go beyond the author’s style. Considering general reasons, the priority of some tonalities should be understood as a trait, typical for a composer’s individual style. One should consider a critical demand for some expressive means, including tonalities/tonality helping to implement ranges of musical thoughts and images, which are important for the author. Widely used by the composer and related to the imaginative and semantic dominant of his/her creative work, this tonality can be considered an author’s tonality. D minor in Rachmaninov’s music and C-sharp minor in Sviridov’s music obtained such a meaning.

Tonalities can gain the status of a special style sign — a style of an epoch or a culture — not only in the oeuvre of some individual author but also within wider contexts. Tonality is loaded with such semantics in conditions of correlation with atonality, modality or other pitch systems, which are used by our contemporaries. Triad D major, which impressively ends *Stabat Mater* by Krzysztof Penderecki, has become the sign of classical art. An intense dialog of two ‘characters’, a tonality — represented by a triad G minor — with an atonality, unfolds in the first part of the Sonata for Violin by Denisov (Example 1).



Ex. 1. Denisov, Violin Sonate, first part.

Besides a style aspect, it is quite productive to study the genre aspect of tonality's semantics. It is known that in baroque tradition, the semantics of the tonality Denisov and not only tonality Denisov in many ways was influenced by words and was established in musical and literature genres, such as oratorios, masses, passion music, etc. The action of a rhetoric tradition was then extended to instrumental music. However, in this sphere, multiple genres exist together with their original semantic areas. When applied to such genre, a tonality is subject to a ‘genre content’ — the term offered by Arnold Sokhor. Thus, it turns out that even within the borders of one composer's style, for example, Chopin, the abovementioned C major has quite many interpretations in its chorale (in the middle part of the Nocturne C minor Op. 48 No. 1), mazurkas (Op. 7 No. 5; Op. 24 No. 2; Op. 33 No. 3; Op. 56 No. 2; Op. 67 No. 3; Op. 68 No. 1), Prelude Op. 28 No. 1, Etude Op. 10 No. 1. That is why not considering the proper content peculiarities of the genre and not studying the interaction of tonality and a genre.

3. CONCLUSION

Thus, today we may speak about an ontological and natural — which is far from subjective — metaphoric character of tonality's semantics — and yet other musical elements. This semantic has quite objective grounds. A composer programs and sets a specific artistically necessary metaphoricity.

Consequently, a brief review of the issue, connected with tonality's semantics, shows that the complex of the problems in this sphere is rather wide and is yet to be explored. The blind spots in this sphere of musicology are enormous, and the research perspectives are tremendous.

KEYWORDS

Tonality, Semantics, Metaphoricity, Composer Style, Language/Speech, Intertextuality, Archetype.

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