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Volume 2.4:

Kofi Agawu\*

Analyzing music under the new musicological regime

KEYWORDS: Analysis, music theory, Adorno, new musicology

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[1] Analysis has always played a role in musicology. "The analytical process," writes Arnold Whittall, and echoing a generation of structuralists, "is two-fold: to identify the various materials of a composition, and to define the ways in which they function." [\[1\]](#) Thus defined, analysis is indispensable to a discipline that takes the musical object as its point of departure. Not all branches of musicology demand a vigorous deployment of analytical techniques. And this is in part because not all branches of musicology are directly concerned with the experience of music. Attending to the archive (not canon) of musical works is, however, impossible without analytical mediation, itself propped up by an explicit or--more likely--implicit theory.

[2] Analysis plays an even more central role in the discipline of Music Theory. Traditionally defined, theory undertakes to codify "the various materials of a composition" and to exemplify their functioning in a range of works; it insists that its methods meet explicitly stated criteria of coherence; and it often proclaims aesthetic preferences, though not always directly. In a little-known essay published posthumously, Adorno reflects upon the potential of music analysis. Reading notation, for example, requires "an analytical act"; analysis is "the prerequisite for an adequate performance", and aesthetic theories on music are "inconceivable without analysis." Perhaps most important of all, analysis "has to do with the *surplus* [das Mehr] in art," this surplus being the "truth content" of a work in so far as it goes beyond the mere facts. "No analysis," Adorno writes, "is of any value if it does not terminate in the truth content of the work, and this, for its part, is mediated through the work's *technical structure*". [\[2\]](#)

[3] Not all areas of theory need analysis, but by and large the majority of scholars who regard themselves as 'theorists' or 'analysts' or 'practicing analysts' are often engaged in a more or less systematic inquiry into the structure of 'the music itself.' Analysis allows practitioners to come to grips with "the detail of a musical whole." [\[3\]](#) Its rewards, like those of musical performance,

stem from a hands-on experience. Although it makes claims about knowledge (here the differences between analysis and theory are noteworthy), an analysis does not merely produce a detached set of results available in verbal form. This is neither to mystify the analytical process nor to claim for it transcendent status; it is rather to remind us of the easily forgotten fact that there are different kinds of musical knowledge, and that these are constituted in a complex variety of ways.

[4] Analysis, finally, is a relatively young discipline. According to Ian Bent, analysis "as a pursuit in its own right, came to be established only in the late 19th century." [4] Although codified analytical methods date back at least to the eighteenth century, and although the refinement and formalization of techniques in our own century have depended directly on those earlier developments, it is perhaps more than merely coincidental that not until the 1980s did the first comprehensive guides to analytical techniques in English appear: Ian Bent's Grove spin off, *Analysis* (1980/1987); Nicholas Cook's *A Guide to Musical Analysis* (1987); and Jonathan Dunsby and Arnold Whittall's *Music Analysis in Theory and Practice* (1988). Intended in part to meet a pedagogical need, these books take full advantage of the specialized studies of previous decades in order to consolidate analytical knowledge. The stage was now set, it seemed, for exploring the range of applicability of various techniques, for interrogating their foundations, and for assessing their limitations.

[5] Before this intra-disciplinary self-examination could play itself out, however, the young discipline of analysis came under attack. In "How We Got Into Analysis and How to Get Out" published in 1980, Joseph Kerman asked theorists some tough questions, and then proceeded to elevate his own brand of criticism to a position of privilege among the competing discourses about music. [5] Although he recognized criticism's debt to analysis, Kerman nevertheless placed a higher premium on a research enterprise that did not terminate either in the gathering of facts or in the establishment of a work's internal relationships. His book of five years later, *Contemplating Music*, enabled a crystallization of the offending categories as 'positivism' and 'formalism'. [6] Although these terms carry considerable semantic and ideological baggage, their complex histories were subsequently suppressed in the drive to inform about the limitations of theory-based analysis. The charge of formalism was made because analysts inquired only into the connections between patterns within a piece; they did not deal with matters of affect and expression, with the 'meaning' of music, with its cultural context. This unfortunate misrepresentation of a hitherto complex theoretical enterprise made possible the prescription of an instant cure. To escape the dilemmas of formalism, you must attach the patterns you have observed to something else: a plot, a program, an emotional scenario, a context, an agenda, a fantasy, or a narrative. You must, in other words, problematize the gap between the musical and the extra-musical. The findings of formalist analysis are like a severed phallus; ideally, they should be re-attached. [7]

[6] It was in this anti-formalist climate that the so-called 'new musicology' emerged. To say that they are united in their anti-formalist stance may not please the new musicologists, for an essential part of their strategy is to deny any stable, collective identity, to insist on the impossibility of anchoring the first signifying relationship. Such denial is understandable in light of the different initiatives that are gradually coalescing into a 'new musicology.' But could such denial also be a trick aimed at ensuring that new musicologists are always able to shift their identities in order to, as it were, remain on top?

[7] What, then, is the new musicology? In her 1994 presidential address to the American Musicological Society, Ellen Rosand took note of "new approaches to music, most of them developed in other fields." She writes, "Semiotics, response and reception theory, narratology, gender theory, cultural criticism--these are just some of the analytical approaches that have been newly brought to bear on the study of music. And the result is a conglomeration of critical activities commonly called the "new musicology." [8] The new musicology is, in short, eclectic and selectively pluralistic. [9]

[8] Rosand's "The Musicology of the Present," with its subtle suppression of any prophetic claims, and its even-handed review of current musicological activity, challenges but also reinforces the substance of an article published two years earlier under the unabashed title, "The Musicology of the Future." [10] Lawrence Kramer admits that "the new conceptual modes are too motley a grouping to

form a school, and too critical of grand syntheses to admit of one." He nevertheless offers the single most forthright statement about the new musicology that I have come across. Kramer's is not a casual invitation to interested music scholars to sample some new products. On the contrary, it is nothing less than a prophecy about the death of musicology. In order to survive, musicology must embrace a network of "postmodernist strategies of understanding". And despite his words to the contrary, Kramer's enumeration reads like a manifesto: "The theories that ground [postmodernist] strategies are radically anti-foundationalist, anti-essentialist, and anti-totalizing. They emphasize the constructedness, both linguistic and ideological, of all human identities and institutions. They insist on the relativity of all knowledge to the disciplines--not just the conceptual presuppositions but the material, discursive, and social practices--that produce and circulate knowledge. While often disagreeing with each other, poststructuralists, neopragmatists, feminists, psychoanalytic theorists, critical social theorists, multiculturalists and others have been changing the very framework within which disagreement can meaningfully occur." [11] To give up essentialist, foundationalist and totalizing discourses is to radically rethink the basic task of representation. A simple--though I hope not simplistic--account of Kramer's statement may be given as follows. We should now accept that there are no nuggets of identity, no positivisms, no irreducible essences. There are no invariant first principles, no God or universal reason, no single grand narratives by which human history can be conceptualized. Our epistemologies are constructed and situated. Everything is fragmented and discontinuous; all truths are partial and provisional. Nothing is ever objective, nothing is ever 'new,' and nothing can be taken for granted. This bold attempt to wipe the slate clean is, of course, salutary, a long overdue and a much-needed initiative to liberate musicology (and music theory) from their ostensible conservatism and complacency. If we read Kramer's statement as a call to action rather than as a summary of existing scholarship, if in other words we detach its political motivation from the cogency of its epistemology, then it is hard to imagine any worthwhile opposition to his vision of a new musicology.

[9] To the question, What has the new musicology achieved so far?, one answer may be that it has fostered what is often presented as a new way of construing cultural objects. Politically-motivated criticism is in; issues of race, gender construction and sexuality that impinge on the consumption of music are very much in. Non-canonical repertoires, especially of the popular variety, are in. The reception of music, understood not necessarily as an account of other listening subjects (with specific histories and geographies), but as an account developed around the individual subject, is in in a big way. One's insights need not meet the test of intersubjective corroboration; nor do they need to be propped up by what is often presented as an over-determined theory-based analysis. The fantasies set in motion by biography, be it that of composer, performer, or listening subject, need no longer be suppressed or even understated. And the language in which all of this is mediated is best if it highlights the performative element in writing--charged, colorful, sometimes obscure sometimes playful, but never clinical or 'scientific.'

[10] Which brings us to the question of analysis. Since analysis is associated with formalism, and since the new musicology is, among other things, an anti-formalist movement, and since the discipline of theory is constituted in large measure by practicing analysts, it would seem that the aims of theory and the new musicology are fundamentally incompatible. Is there any way in which music theory can embrace the positive tenets of the new musicology and still give due attention to what Adorno called the 'technical structure' of musical works, not as an end but as a means to an end?

[11] It is not possible to answer this question within the scope of a brief essay, for there is such a wide variety of new musicological offerings that any attempt to establish its analytical program as a unified and coherent project is bound to be defeated even before it has begun. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that note-by-note analysis has so far not played a central role in the new musicology. To avoid analysis or close reading of scores altogether may be one way of escaping the dilemmas associated with analysis as a modernist pursuit. But my interest here is not in those publications that deliberately avoid analysis but in those that use analysis, however tangentially, to buttress their claims. Here, a curious picture emerges. Rather than develop new methods for analysis, methods that are free of conventional biases, new musicologists often fall back on conventional methods. The props of insight-formation are considered self-evident. Rarely are the perceptual and conceptual foundations of musical analysis openly confronted. It is hard to square

this particular manifestation of recitance among some new musicologists with the searching, non-nonsense spirit of post-modern inquiry. [\[12\]](#)

[12] One brief example may help to focus the issues. Susan McClary attempts to tease out "narrative agendas" in the first movement of Brahms's Third Symphony. [\[13\]](#) Her aim is not to provide a detailed analysis in the manner of an "austere" formalist (like Carl Dahlhaus) but to remind us that the conventions upon which Brahms depended were not free of social meaning. Tonality, for example, involves the channelling of desire, while sonata form is gendered in its thematic process. How are these (historically and socio-culturally) prior characterizations domesticated in the Brahms's movement? McClary offers not one but several competing narratives, narratives that do not invest heavily in the 'technical structure' (in Adorno's sense) of the movement. The first and most obvious is a gendered discourse: a heroic and obviously masculine first theme in the tonic, F major, is followed by a seductive and feminine second theme in the (unconventional) key of A major. In the development section, the second theme precedes the first, its character now changed from feminine to masculine; the first theme, which appears towards the close of the development, is now feminized. The recapitulation "goes through the paces of the exposition once again." In this first narrative, then, McClary is interested in the character of themes, privileging overarching characterizations over inherent contradictions among the constituent dimensional processes.

[13] The second narrative is oedipal. The relationship of alterity between first and second themes is now reread as "the archetypal struggle of the rebellious son against the conventional Law of the Father." A third narrative is a racial discourse arising from the seductive second theme, described by Hermann Kretzschmar as "Delilah." McClary takes this to be a sign of "Oriental exoticism," chides the doubting modern listener for forgetting that the theme "would have been conceived and perceived as 'Oriental' within the codes of that time," and implies that Brahms, like the hundreds of culprits assembled in Edward Said's book *Orientalism*, was an orientalist. (He was not the only one, of course; orientalism forms a kind of epistemological constant, perhaps even a cognitive constant in European constructions of subjectivity). [\[14\]](#) The fourth narrative concerns the interplay between a generalized set of norms and Brahms's specific practice. It turns out that the heroic first theme, alternatively described as masculine and as embodying the oedipal Father, is in fact "dissonant with respect to the conventions that sustain [the movement's] narrative procedures." In other words the masculine Father is atypical, an aberration. From this follows a fifth claim, namely that the "real dilemma" of the movement is "how to define closure in a piece in F major that insists on maintaining a defiant Ab for purposes of identity."

[14] This last claim may come as a surprise to some readers, for it opens up a line of inquiry that might have formed not the end but the beginning of a 'formalist' analysis. And it is here that the theorist may wonder whether it is possible to press the earlier narratives into the detail of the music? Can an analysis that is concerned not only with the A-Ab issue (which McClary says is the "real dilemma" of the movement) but with other semitonal relations, with third-related keys, with motivic expansion and contraction, and with the (sometimes enormous) trajectories built by Brahms's periodicity: can such an analysis provide the conditions of possibility for McClary's overarching characterizations? A theorist who argues that McClary's analysis lacks detail may well be making an irrelevant point. There is enough detail to support the specific characterizations that she wishes to make.

[15] And so we reach an impasse: theory-based analysis, which prides itself on leading the analyst to the 'truth content' of a work as mediated by its 'technical structure' (Adorno), which allows the musical mind to engage directly with the compositional elements themselves--such analysis seems to be of limited utility in a project that interprets music as social discourse. The truth seems to be that new musicologists have so far not found a use for the *surplus of detail* that theory-based analysis produces. It would be helpful if this surplus was acknowledged either as a presence or as a problem. To object that theory-based analysis is a self-fulfilling and self-referential exercise is to pretend that tautology and circularity are ever avoidable in the criticism of art--they are not. And the analyst's failure to reach for an extramusical label, her failure to provide a 'translation' of the analysis, as if that which goes unlabelled or untranslated necessarily lies outside the bounds of 'social discourse': these (and other) issues need to be aired.

[16] Referring generally to 'new musicologists' --as I have done in the foregoing paragraphs--and drawing conclusions about their approach to analysis produces a limited and perhaps ambiguous set of results. By the same token, however, the habit of some new musicologists of ritually denouncing 'formalist' analysis would gain greater credibility if the group of theorists, too, was understood not as a monolithic group espousing a single doctrine but as a highly diverse group motivated by a few shared concerns. We could go further. Within the discipline of theory, there exists a vast range of innovative inquiries that have been overlooked by new musicologists. Were it not for theorists' reticence about adopting new slogans, these initiatives would easily converge into a "New Theory." New musicologists' failure to acknowledge this work does not, of course, deny it a place in the discourses of the musical sciences. It only testifies to a willed amnesia on their part, a necessary strategy, perhaps, for redrawing the boundaries of the musical disciplines. [\[15\]](#)

[17] Allow me to mention, by way of conclusion, a few contributions that touch upon aspects of the new musicological agenda. In doing so, I am conscious of the scores of studies that will necessarily go unmentioned. (An attempt to include European precedents for these [mostly American] discourses alone would fill an entire paper). I am also conscious of the fact that some of my authors have moved on from the intellectual positions espoused in these papers. Nor do I mean to hold these up necessarily as the best or most influential or most representative work produced by music theorists recently. I mean simply to note their existence. Such an exercise will have achieved its aim if it encourages new musicologists to temper their proclamation of the novelty of their efforts with some acknowledgment of the traces that exist in some corners of American music theory. [\[16\]](#)

[18] Back in the 1970s, Thomas Clifton was busy developing ideas about the phenomenology of music, elaborating notions of play, and composing a poetics of musical silence. I haven't seen Clifton's name (or, for that matter, those of latter-day phenomenologists) in the new musicology's footnotes. [\[17\]](#) David Lewin, in his relentless and disciplined pursuit of the 'truth content' of musical works, has frequently developed hermeneutic readings from paths as diverse as those of a layered metrical and hyper-metrical coherence, or the paths of voices in adjacent chromatic collections. The resulting analyses, valued for their technical demonstration as well as for their aesthetic implications, can hardly be consigned to a class of formalist analyses. [\[18\]](#)

[19] Charles J. Smith, writing about harmony, probably the least translatable of musical dimensions, and one that has (therefore) not featured prominently in recent readings of music as social text, encourages us to multiply our descriptions of chordal affiliation in order to embrace the challenge of multiple meaning without at the same time stooping to an all-pervasive relativism. Smith's is not merely a call; it includes a concrete demonstration, an exploration of limits, allowing the reader to assess the limitations of his claims. [\[19\]](#) Alan Street has continued to remind us of the foundational instability of our terms, the contingency of our analyses, and the fragility of our conceptual constructs. [\[20\]](#) In 1987 Robert Snarrenberg experimented with the Derridean notion of *différance* in an analysis of Brahms's Intermezzo, Op. 118 no. 2. Explicating notions of difference and deferring, Snarrenberg sought to mediate between a 'strong reading' of the Intermezzo following the methods of Ler Dahl and Jackendoff and Brahms's sly cadential practice. [\[21\]](#) Later in the same journal, Patrick McCreless gave serious attention to three of the five codes assembled by Roland Barthes's in *S/Z*, testing their musical applicability on the tonal grounds of the first movement of Beethoven's 'Ghost Trio.' [\[22\]](#) Readings like Snarrenberg's and McCreless' allow a more effective assessment of the usefulness of transferring literary-critical terms into music analysis.

[20] Even the so-called obsession with unity has been rethought in productive ways. Rick Cohn and Doug Dempster have explored the possibility of plural unities, a concept that may at first sight appear anathema to card-carrying theorists, who have often depended on an undivided first principle. In pursuing the possible 'divisions' of that first principle, Cohn and Dempster are responding to a quite specific challenge, and doing so constructively and from within the discipline. It is hard to finish their article and still maintain that theory is somehow laboring under the yoke of uninterrogated foundationalist premises. [\[23\]](#)

[21] In a challenging and controversial article, Richard Littlefield and David Neumeyer laid bare an aspect of Schenkerian ideology, arguing that mastery of narrative tropes by the analyst is what allows the analyzed work to be configured as an aesthetic object of high or low standing, and not

necessarily anything inherent in the work itself. [\[24\]](#) In different but complementary ways, Kevin Korsyn and Joseph Straus have appropriated Bloomian notions of anxiety of influence to explain striking recompositional points of contact between Brahms and Chopin (and Reger) and between the canonical early-twentieth century masters and their forbears. [\[25\]](#) In the area of musical semiotics, David Lidov, in a series of writings that deserves to be better known, has exemplified processes of meaning formation stemming from repetition, including the place of the body in the play of music's signifiers. Again, I am yet to see a reference to Lidov's provocative work in any of the new musicological writing. [\[26\]](#) Ongoing work on metaphor and on the discourses of music theory and analysis by, among others, Marion Guck and Fred Maus, continues to remind us of the constructedness of our pedagogical schemes, their situatedness, their gendered biases, and hence their limitations. [\[27\]](#) And Carl Schachter concluded a recent study of harmony and voice-leading in a Bach Prelude by attaching ideas of structure to ideas of theological symbolism. [\[28\]](#)

[22] This list could be greatly extended, of course, but not here. The evidence of these and numerous other studies ought to do three things: first, to remind us that some of the challenges posed by new musicologists have not gone unobserved in the theoretical literature; second, to help counter the gross and surprisingly popular criticism of music theory as a merely formalist enterprise and to enjoin new musicologists to approach the intellectual capital of music theory with a bit more discrimination; third, to demand of new musicologists a new and improved approach to analysis, one that escapes the dangers of present practices that they have identified. Theorists' commitment to analytical demonstration is sometimes facetiously dismissed as an outgrowth of a modernist impulse. And their acceptance of a burden of proof would seem to slow them down, throwing a 'conservative' veil over their activities. Why this should be a cause for concern is not clear. Academic discourse is surely not racing towards a single finishing line.

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Kofi Agawu  
Yale University  
Music Department  
P. O. Box 298310  
New Haven, CT 06520-8310  
kagawu@minerva.cis.yale.edu

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2. T. W. Adorno, "On the Problem of Musical Analysis," *Music Analysis* 1 (1982), pp. 169-187.

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3. Pieter van den Toorn, "A Response to Richard Taruskin's "A Myth of the Twentieth Century," *Music Theory Online* 1.5. See also his recent *Music, Politics and the Academy* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1995).

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4. Bent, *Analysis*, p. 6.

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5. Kerman, "How We Got into Analysis, and How to Get Out," *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1980), pp. 311-331.

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6. Kerman, *Contemplating Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985).

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7. One could interpret Timothy L. Jackson's "Aspects of Sexuality and Structure in the Later Symphonies of Tchaikovsky," *Music Analysis* 14 (1995), pp. 3-25 as an example of such re-attachment.

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8. Ellen Rosand, "The Musicology of the Present," *American Musicological Society Newsletter* 25 (1995), pp. 10-15.

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9. For a comment on pluralism, see my "Music Analysis and the Politics of Methodological Pluralism," *Revista de Musicologia* 16 (1993), pp. 399-406.

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10. Lawrence Kramer, "The Musicology of the Future," *Repercussions* 1 (1992), pp. 5-18.

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11. Kramer, "The Musicology of the Future," p. 5. In his most recent book, *Classical Music and Postmodern knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), Kramer develops this vision further, stressing the need to reinject a human interest into music criticism and to recover a (lost) public discourse about music.

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12. It has always seemed odd to me that the on-going debates within theory and analysis, which in many ways capture the spirit of post-modern inquiry, have been marginalized in the characterization of theorists as 'formalists.' For one among many examples of theory's self-reflexivity, see the first section, "Metatheory and Methodology," in *Perspectives on Contemporary Music Theory*, ed. Benjamin Boretz and Edward T. Cone (New York: Norton, 1972). For an insightful and cogent account of the historical development of music theory in the United States, see Patrick McCreless, "Rethinking Contemporary Music Theory." In *State of the Art: Refiguring Music Studies in the 1980s*, edited by David Schwarz and Anahid Kassabian (University of Virginia Press, forthcoming).

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14. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978). On orientalism in music, see Ralph P. Locke, "Reflections on Orientalism in Opera and Musical Theater," *Opera Quarterly* 10 (1993-94), pp. 49-64. and "Constructing the Oriental 'Other,': Saint Saens's Samson et Dalila," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 3 (1991), pp. 261-302. The argument is, of course, easier to make with regard to opera than it is to

Instrumental music, McClary's subject.

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15. A startling omission from the new musicology's discursive practices is any sustained engagement with the intellectual heritage of the discipline of ethnomusicology. Practically all of the new musicology's favorite subjects--concerns with race, gender, sexuality, non-canonical repertoires, the nature of representation, etc--have not only been touched upon but in some cases theorized explicitly by ethnomusicologists. Surely this engagement is long overdue.

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16. I do not include here pockets of 'old' musicological research that deal directly or indirectly with the new musicology's concerns, but that, too, have been relegated to the margins.

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17. Thomas Clifton's major work *Music as Heard: A Study in Applied Phenomenology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), seeks to ground music theory in experience and to define and exemplify music analysis dynamically in terms of acts and actions rather than static objects.

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20. Alan Street, "Superior Myths, Dogmatic Allegories: The Resistance to Musical Unity," *Music Analysis* 8 (1989), pp. 77-123.

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21. Robert Snarrenberg, "The Play of *Differance*: Brahms's Intermezzo Op. 118, No. 2," *In Theory Only* 10 (1987), pp. 1-25. See also the response by Robert J. Samuels in *In Theory Only* 11 (1989), pp. 45-58.

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22. Patrick McCreless, "Roland Barthes's *S/Z* from a Musical Point of View," *In Theory Only* 10 (1988), pp. 1-30.

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23. Richard Cohn and Douglas Dempster, "Hierarchical Unity, Plural Unities: Toward a Reconciliation." In *Disciplining Music: Musicology and its Canons*, edited by Catherine Bergeron and Philip Bohlman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 156-81.

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25. Kevin Korsyn, "Towards a New Poetics of Musical Influence," *Music Analysis* 10 (1991), pp. 3-72; Joseph N. Straus, *Remaking the Past: Musical Modernism and the Influence of the Tonal Tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

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26. See David Lidov, *On Musical Phrase. Monographies de semiologie et d'analyses musicales*, no. 1, Groupe de recherches en semiologie musicale, Universite de Montreal and "Mind and Body in Music," *Semiotica* 66 (1987), pp. 69-97, among numerous publications.

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28. Carl Schachter, "The submerged Urlinie: The Prelude from Bach's Suite No. 4 for Violoncello Solo," *Current Musicology* 56 (1994), pp. 54-71.

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3/3/96