

MODALITY AS A TOPOS OF MUSICAL NARRATIVITY

MODALITA JAKO TOPOS HUDEBNÍ NARATIVITY

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ABSTRACT

Phenomenological richness of various modality types in music creates a semantic (symbolic) tensions that can lead us to interpret dimensions of musical culture. These assumptions implicate different semantic fields of meaning in the sense of folk music, sacred music and various renaissance of modal thinking at the 20th and 21th centuries (“new modality”). We can say that modality is an important element of musical narrativity, where the term topos is used to describe processes of semiosis.

Key words: modality, topos, narrativity, semiosis, paradigm

ABSTRAKT

Jevová bohatost rozmanitých druhů modalit vytváří sémantické (symbolické) napětí, které nás může přivést k interpretacím dimenzí hudební kultury. Tyto předpoklady ústí do existence různých sémantických polí významu ve smyslu lidové hudby, sakrální hudby a rozmanitých renezancí modálního myšlení 20. a 21. století („nová modalita“). Lze říci, že modalita je důležitý prvek hudební narativity, kde je termín topos použitý k popisu procesů semiózy.

Klíčová slova: modalita, topos, narativita, semióza, paradigma

INTRODUCTION

In my essay, I perceive modality as the structural and semantic quality of music. The fundamental question is whether modality can be interpreted as a topos in the theory of musical narratology; whether modality semantically reflects not only the musical structure but also to the broad cultural, historical and social realities. My text will concern the following: the musical topoi, definition of the modality, relation of modality as a paradigm to the historical awareness of music as well as connection of modality and the topoi in the narrativity in music.

TOPOS

The idea of musical topos (Greek *topos*, plural *topoi* means the place, commonplace; the English term is musical topos, theory of musical topoi – topics) stems from the effort of the theory of music to find basic structural units of semantic nature in the music. These musical semantic units, which carry a specific cultural importance, refer to various music genres, styles and social functions of music. These musical units are identifiable in music as stabilized figures, procedures in the melody, rhythm and metre, but also in other components of music. The musical topoi are

interconnected with cultural units of the given historical era and refer to the specific emotions, gestures and images. The reception of the topoi is culturally conditioned. It means that the meanings of the musical topoi are conventionally known to the listeners of the given time and culture and they act as orientation moments in the compositions. In the musical structure, the musical topoi are most frequently organized on the basis of binary oppositions, but the organization of musical syntax also differs depending on the particular style of music. The musical topoi fall into the area of musical semiotics and also the so-called narratologic musicology. In fact, the musical topoi are organized inside the dynamic musical structures in various hierarchical relations according to a musically distinctive logic, narrative scripts and sequences. As semantic units, the musical topoi belong to narrativity in music, which Márta Grabócz defines as "the way in which the signifieds are organised within a musical form." (Grabócz, 2013, p. 200)

Today, we can find musical topoi in the classic work by Leonard Ratner *Classic Music* (Ratner, 1980) where he examines them on the example of classical music of the 2nd half of the 18th century. The idea of musical topoi was then intensively developed by other authors on the examples of classical music (Allanbrook, 1983; Agawu, 1991; Hatten, 1994; Monelle, 2000). We can also find musical topoi in the 19th-century music (Agawu 2009; Monelle, 2006) and also in the 20th-century music, it means that the musical topoi share certain culturally universal and continual features (Grabócz, 2009; Grabócz, 2013; Almén, 2008; Tarasti, 1994; see also Mirka, 2014).

First, I will introduce the basic Ratner definition: "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 18th 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 flavour. They are designated here as *topics*—subjects for musical discourse." (Ratner 1980, p. 9). The musical topoi include categories of contemporary dances and styles.

Kofi Agawu (1991, p. 30) refers to the following list of topoi: *alla breve*, *alla zoppa*, *amoroso*, *aria*, *bourrée*, *brilliant style*, *cadenza*, *sensibility*, *fanfare*, *fantasy*, *French overture*, *gavotte*, *hunt style*, *learned style*, *Mannheim rocket*, *march*, *minuet*, *musette*, *ombra*, *opera buffa*, *pastoral*, *recitative*, *sarabande*, *sigh motif*, *singing style*, *Sturm und Drang* and *Turkish music*. We can see that some topoi are closely connected with the culture of musical classicism, but some appear also in newer styles of Romanticism and the 20th century.

The musical topoi semantically refer not only to the musical structure and its narrative procedures, but also to the cultural and social reality. This relation is manifested by the ability of a group of listeners (a social class with education and culture) to identify the musical topoi, assign them the conventionalized meanings and expressional associations. Originally, the theory of musical topoi served as a means of analysis of classical music; there was a presumption that the knowledge of the style and cultural associations in classical music was leading to its understanding. As Monelle

(2006, p. 4) points out: “It seems clear that an understanding of topics is necessary in interpreting classical music.” Another axiom is the assumption that each musical significance has its own extra-musical connotations. I quote Monelle again (2006, p. 9): “All musical signification is social and cultural, and no signification is “purely musical” or “purely linguistic” because topics are paradigms, signifying in relation to culture, not in relation to syntagmatics.” Musical topoi in the meaning of characteristic figures emerge at the moment of conventionalization of the cultural references to music. This fact complicates understanding the musical topoi. Actually, the understanding (identification, association) puts great demands on the listeners.

MODALITY

Now, I will put the musical topoi into context with musical modality: can the modality be considered a kind of musical topos? Traditionally, the topoi as musical figures are the matter of the melody, characteristic rhythms and meters or onomatopoeia. Similarly, the musical topoi are traditionally analysed in tonal music of the major-minor duality. However, the topos can also be modal: the modal topos is created by specific choice of tones as a material for the music composition or strong use of a characteristic modal interval. The tonal choice of a modal character in music is subsequently identified by the listener and associated within the specific social and cultural relations. The tonal material, much like the classic musical figures, is filled with historically and culturally specific meanings. Modality viewed through music history is connected with varied and very rich style connotations. Here, let us only briefly refer to the different and complex meanings of modality in medieval music, folk music or in the area of modern, “artificial” modality. The choice of the tonal material is a characteristic feature of music as regards culture and art genres, which differ in each historical society. As a topos, modality – a semantic unit – is the principal theme, which creates a rich semantic field.

Modality is a system of musical structure characterized by a choice of the tones. This choice is constant and includes the melodic as well as harmonic (chordal) components of the music. What matters in case of modality is only the choice of tonal material. When defining the modality, I rely on the definition of modality by the Czech musical theorist Vladimír Tichý (1983, p. 117): “Modality is organization of the tone pitches based on an a priori given set of tones (mode) – by an arbitrary use of tones in this set with regard to the stylistic norms of the given style.”¹

Modality can be theoretically and historically divided into three spheres (types) with different historical and cultural relations (according Martináková, 2000):

Modality of medieval and Renaissance music (with relation to the ancient modality)

Modality of ethnic musical expressions (folk music, non-European musical cultures)

¹ Original Czech text: “Modalita je způsob organizace tónových výšen na základě a priori dané množiny tónů (modu) – libovolným využíváním tónů této množiny s ohledem na stylové normy daného stylu.” (Tichý 1983, p. 117).

Modality based on newly created modes (modern modality, artificial modality)

HISTORICAL AWARENESS OF MUSIC

As regards music theory, the modality is relatively clear and researched. Hermeneutically, however, the interpretation of modality as a topos becomes complicated. The disclosure of a reference to the modal feature in music is our “historical awareness of music”. As regards the meaning of this term, I refer to Heinrich Bessler (1900–1969) and in particular to Zofia Lissa (1908–1980): “Historical awareness in music is an element of cultural heritage, that is a complex of learned, acquired and adopted patterns showing one’s readiness to behave in a definite way when coming into contact with certain phenomena.” (Lissa, 1973, p. 18) Modality is a historical phenomenon, which developed differently and complexly throughout the time and in various musical cultures. Modality de facto accompanies the entire European music history in various forms and its interpretation points to our sense of history – present – future. Our reflection on modality in the music demands considerable awareness of the existing development of music. Pre-understanding is thus an important moment in understanding the modality. Modality is a code of categorisation of particular musical cultures of the past and present as well as the different cultural spheres, which come into contact in today's globalized world. Historical awareness of music in relation to modality is, on the other hand, formed by our musical experience and reception of music. With further interpretation of the term “historical awareness of music” (see Lissa, 1973) I can point out that modality is determined by stylistic characteristic of music and different historical and cultural conditions. It can be clearly seen in the case of different ways of understanding historical music.

PARADIGM

Up to now, I have defined modality as a topos and part of historical awareness of music. However, modality is also a paradigm. Here, I refer to the meaning of the term paradigm as defined by Thomas Kuhn for a model of scientific thinking (Kuhn, 1962). The term of paradigm was applied to the area of music by the Czech musical theorist Jaroslav Volek (1923–1989). The antonym of paradigm is syntagm. These are Volek's input definitions: “A syntagma is a concrete form or structure, actually sounding either in our “real” or “inner” hearing, a concrete composed or improvised music. A paradigm is derived (“sedimented”) from a certain number of syntagmata and has the character of a disposition, of a possibility to be used in creating other “new” syntagmata. It is something given to the composer beforehand, a kind of “alphabet,” “dictionary,” or repertoire, and settled in his experience, memory, skill, etc.” (Volek 1988, p. 58) The paradigm and the syntagm roughly correspond to the linguistic pairs langue – parole. Modality is a style paradigm of the tonal material in music, which includes not only the choice of tones but also the characteristic intervals. Thus perceived modality is a continuing model of musical thinking, which is altered only over a certain (longer) time

period. A change of a new musical paradigm in the area of tonal material and organisation of the tone pitch proceeds on the basis of an existence of syntagma that disturb the existing dominant system. After stabilisation and a certain degree of convention, a considerable number of new syntagma in the musical interpretations become manifested by the arrival of a new complex system – a paradigm. Therefore, we talk about a modal paradigm of medieval and Renaissance music, paradigm of the major and minor tonal systems in the 17th – 19th centuries, a modal paradigm of new modality in the 20th century, modal manifestations of traditional non-European musical cultures, modality of folk music, etc. Although the modality was the historical model of musical thinking, since the Baroque period it has co-existed with different paradigms (tonality, seriality, atonality, etc.).

SEMANTIC TENSION

Modality as a paradigm has the ability to create semantic tension between different tonal systems such as tension between the traditional major-minor tonal systems, which is disturbed and semantically coloured by the modal expressions. In fact, both of these systems create different semantic fields with reference to different cultural historical spheres. The situation becomes even more complicated if we include seriality and its various forms and atonality into this thinking. These are semantically different paradigms, which in practice find interactions and penetrations in the horizontal and vertical sense. The semantic tension of modality as a paradigm and musical topoi is most evident in a symbiosis of different tonal systems within one piece of music. These tonal systems refer to different historical and cultural contexts. In music history, it mostly concerns compositions of musical neofolklorism in the 1st half of the 20th century by composers such as L. Janáček, B. Bartók, I. Stravinsky or K. Szymanowski where the mentioned interaction of various tonal paradigms often occurs. The neofolklorism is based on progressive restoration of modal music of the folklore heritage in a synthesis with modern means of expression. This new modality contains musical topoi not only of the modality, but also of extended tonality, chromatics and features of modern harmony.

END NOTES

Modality is a musical topos, an expressional unit of narrativity in music, which is based on the choice of tonal material. The tonal choice is a characteristic figure (procedure) of the music structures, which refer to the stylistic, cultural and social contents. Interpretation of these meanings of modality as a topos demands an informed listener (interpreter) able to understand the features of modality on the basis of developed historical awareness. The modality is a musical paradigm, which comprehensively interacts with other tonal systems of music on the synchronous and diachronic levels.

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