

## **Pianists' Interpretive Insights: Exploring Hunt, Military, and Pastoral Motifs through Monelle's Topic Theory**

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### **Abstract**

Topic theory in musicology examines how musical elements and structures convey emotions or topics in music. Despite its potential to provide a framework for understanding musical expression, topic theory has rarely been applied to piano pedagogy. This study aimed to explore participants' perceptions of Raymond Monelle's topic theory, specifically the hunt, military, and pastoral topics, in piano interpretation and teaching. Participants included six music lecturers from Chinese universities and nine university music students from Bulgaria, China, France, Germany, and the United States. Data was collected through a listening survey and semi-structured interviews and analysed using thematic analysis. The listening survey used excerpts from Dussek's *La Chasse, C.146*, Beethoven's *Piano Sonata in A Major, Op. 101, Second Movement*, and Liszt's *Années de Pèlerinage, Première année - Suisse, No. 3, Pastorale*. The results showed that more than half of the participants matched the selected topics with the musical excerpts, with some confusion between the hunt and military topics. All participants agreed that topic theory enriches the interpretation of piano pieces and provides a complementary method in piano pedagogy. Two main themes emerged regarding the application of topic theory in piano interpretation: enhanced expression and imagination. Participants also believed that topic theory could serve as an analytical framework for interpreting musical works and increase the musical knowledge of both teachers and students.

*Keywords:* interpretation, pianist, Raymond Monelle, teaching, topic theory

## Introduction

Piano interpretation is a deep understanding and an emotional expression of a composer's musical language, and it is closely related to piano teaching. In his 2008 article, Carruthers wrote, "How is interpretation taught and learned? ... Despite that performance and musicology became comfortable bedfellows in the historical performance movement of the last century, the study of how interpretation is taught and learned is still in its infancy" (p. 21). The challenge of interpretation is addressed subjectively and objectively, with most teachers working along a continuum, shifting back and forth between the two. There is also a neutral viewpoint that interpreters must immerse themselves in the music score and explore its unique meanings, while still respecting it (Carruthers, 2008; Silverman, 2007). Topic theory is a method of interpreting music that balances subjectivity and objectivity by connecting the structural elements of the music to external historical and cultural contexts.

In the 1980s, topic theory emerged as semiotics evolved from a specialised discipline into a comprehensive theory, aiming to redefine how we understand knowledge (Mirka, 2014a). This newly established theory drew from modernist and postmodernist musicology and piqued the interest of scholars and enthusiasts. Topic theory asserts that a significant portion of music's value lies in something outside of it, thereby making it relatively more tangible.

Numerous studies support the efficacy of topic theory in analysing music. For instance, Li (2009) examined how Schumann's *Waldszenen* employed musical topics—fantasy, pastoral, and hunt—linking them to corresponding Romantic literary genres to demonstrate the continuity of narrative strategies in his late works. Fenby-Hulse (2019) analysed the use of musical topics in Gluck's *Iphigénie en Aulide*, such as military and pastoral, as categorised by Monelle (2006). Furthermore, Boisjoli (2018) studied the pastoral topic in works by Haydn and Mozart: in Haydn's string quartets, topic theory was used to explore emotional depth and the "Man of Feeling" archetype, whereas in Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro*, the aria "Porgi amor" was examined for its sentimental style and pastoral elements. Narum (2013) analysed Schoenberg's compositions using topic theory; the analysis highlighted the connections between this music and its historical and cultural contexts, while also providing insights into questions of musical meaning.

In recent decades, hermeneutics, semiotics, and topic theory have broadened analytical perspectives, yet their insights are seldom applied to performance. Performers often rely on intuition and instinct rather than analytical thought in their interpretations, and many audiences find these renderings thrilling (Hellaby, 2023). Understanding a musical piece can enhance a performance and offer students a more individualised and engaging approach to playing. By incorporating the artist's perceptive interpretations and expressive methods into instructional sessions, educators can foster not just technical skills but also a heightened awareness of musical comprehension and expression. Some Western theorists have already addressed instances in which topic theory can be used in piano teaching to provide a viable interpretive fulcrum for piano performers and educators. For example, Schrempel (2010) suggested that musical topics can be applied in piano teaching

using several topics as associative clues to offer interpretive guidance, connecting emotional expression with musical structure.

This article examines the three musical topics—hunt, military, and pastoral—that Monelle discusses in his 2006 book *The Musical Topic*, which focused on their structural characteristics and historical contexts. It also investigates how the study's participants—teachers and students of piano—perceive the application of topic theory to three musical passages.

## Literature Review

### Topic Theory

Topic theory, a significant framework in musicology, was prominent from 1959, when musicologist Deryck Cooke (1959) wrote *The Language of Music*, until 2000. Scholars like Ratner (1980), Allanbrook (1983), Agawu (1991), Hatten (1994), and Monelle (2006), have placed topic theory at the core of their research, using it to analyse works by Western composers. In 2014, Oxford University Press published *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*, which provides a comprehensive overview, although its primary focus is 18th-century music. In recent years, some theorists have begun to analyse and study 20th-century musical works using topic theory (Donaldson, 2021; Hellaby, 2020; Repka, 2023; Royse, 2021; Schumann, 2021), including applications in cinema and video game soundtracks (Atkinson, 2019).

Monelle developed his ideas on topics to a culmination in *The Musical Topic* (2006) and explored the military, hunt, and pastoral motifs, each with elaborately detailed historical, cultural, and musical references. In terms of hunting, like the orchestral version, solo hunt music features triadic horn fanfares, horn motion, repeated notes, 6/8 metres, and a heroic character. Monelle (2006) considers the earlier calls to be the main source of the hunting topic, writing, "Manifestations of the hunting topic, as it appears in instrumental music, are usually much simpler, more wedded to the third-register triadic shapes of the older fanfares" (p. 57). The military topic has two main elements: the trumpet call and the march. The trumpet motives are characteristic rhythmic patterns, triadic melodies, and repeated notes common to military music (Monelle, 2006; Ratner, 1980). Marches are characterised by "moderately quick duple metre, dotted rhythms," and a "bold manner [that] quickened the spirit" (Ratner, 1980, p. 16). The signifier–signified of the typical pastoral topic includes "flute and oboe timbres, the metre of the *siciliana*, and bagpipe drones," while the signified encompasses "courtly shepherdesses, sunlit tranquility, peaceful landscapes, amorous play, and the lyric spirit, not to mention Christmas and the Christian heaven" (Monelle, 2006, p. 5).

Monelle (2006) used Saussure's (1916) signifier–signified concept but regarded the relationship as a meaningful cultural unit rather than a closed system (Haringer, 2010). The current study builds on Monelle's categorisation to analyse and interpret piano works. In his writings, Monelle explores in detail the literary origins of topics such as "hunt," "military," and "pastoral" in response to arguments that musical topics lack a historical foundation (Donaldson, 2021).

## Music Interpretation

Writers and theorists have always been interested in how musical compositions are interpreted and the expressiveness of performance. Analysing and interpreting music involves drawing from various music-related fields. There are two contrasting approaches to musical performance currently in vogue: formalist and open (or subjective) views, with neutral perspectives falling somewhere in between. Formalists prioritise strict adherence to the score's notation—they aim to let "the score speak for itself" (Silverman, 2007, p. 102). Traditionally, formalists have viewed the musical text as having a fixed meaning and that interpreters and teachers should reveal, rather than allowing for subjective interpretations. In this view, the performer should maintain concentration and avoid "emot[ing]" or "simulat[ing] experiences she does not have" (Davies, 2004, p. 2).

In contrast, an open or subjective viewpoint holds that writers, teachers, and performers have the power to interpret and express musical scores based on their understanding and perception. When discussing literature, Rosenblatt (1968) highlighted the significance of readers, stating that each one contributes personality characteristics, memories of past experiences, current interests and worries, a specific mood at the time, and a particular physical situation to the work. Similarly, from this viewpoint, the listener and performer, along with the sounds themselves, play a role in creating a musical sense. However, as Silverman (2007) wrote, "Interpreters must live through the score to find their own unique meaning, but they should, simultaneously, respect the score" (p. 114).

Topic theory bridges subjective and objective perspectives. The topical figure mediates between syntactic and semantic analyses, facilitating a holistic interpretation of the topical sign (Rumph, 2014). Monelle (2006) noted that "the topic is most fully at work when it forms a pointer to the semantics of an instrumental piece without words or title" (p. 166). *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory* also demonstrated the effectiveness of topic theory as an analytical and explanatory tool by providing several examples of its application to musical works (Mirka, 2014a). Based on the theoretical support in previous research, this study used topic theory to analyse and interpret piano works to demonstrate its possibilities and effectiveness as a method of musical interpretation.

## Teaching of Interpretation

A musical work combines many diverse elements, each of which plays an interdependent role as an interpretative determinant. These are far from purely musical. Historical, philosophical, moral, and ethical factors are at play in any piece of music. As Carruthers notes, "these factors, whether embedded in the musical work itself or imposed upon it, implicitly but rarely explicitly inform studio teaching...The studio teacher guides the student through a labyrinth of what must, could, and should be" (2008, p. 22). The interdependent relationships of diverse elements raise important questions about pedagogical approaches to interpretation, including the specific content and methods that should be taught in the classroom. However, piano courses provide limited guidance on interpretive techniques. When

students act autonomously in making interpretational decisions, it fosters deeper dialogue with the teacher and increases the potential for a fusion of horizons, whereas a lack of autonomy leads to continued dependence on the teacher for answers (Holmgren, 2020).

Ratner (who mentored Allanbrook) taught topic theory by analysing professional performers' recordings to identify musical topics. This teaching method acknowledges the inherently performative aspect of topics and highlights the potential reliance of musicological insights on implicit assumptions about performance (Agawu, 2008, as cited in Guymer, 2014). Although topic theory is only briefly mentioned in the abstracts of some articles and papers, many pedagogical approaches aimed at enhancing expressive skills recognise its importance. For instance, Monelle and other scholars' perspectives on topic theory are mentioned in introductions to the history of music notation and in discussions of how to recognise and use music symbols in piano teaching to help students interpret piano works more meaningfully (Schrempel, 2010).

Metaphors act as a bridge to learning, linking familiar concepts with the unknown or abstract and make new ideas more accessible (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999). There is a lack of research on the use of metaphors in teaching music in the real world. According to Schrempel, "expressivity can be taught, beginning with the identification of affective expressive cues in the music" (2010, p. 32), and several studies have shown that explicit instructions are beneficial for learning expressive skills (Juslin & Laukka, 2000; Juslin & Persson, 2002; Woody, 1999). In music pedagogy, metaphors are used more consciously and creatively after the technical learning of notation (e.g., fingering) has been mastered and when students are familiar enough with a piece to try to shape and refine their performance (Wolfe, 2019). There are many metaphorical associations in topic theory, such as the way 18th-century composers adopted conventional topics, which were then "captured" by their listeners; this recognition is reflected "perhaps in the listener's appreciation of the 'shape' thus realized in auditory perception" (Irving, 2014, p. 542). Allanbrook (2014) compared the disposition of topics to "flickering images of our own humanity" (p. 88).

However, while most recent research has explored topic theory on a theoretical level, empirical evidence of its application in music performance and pedagogy, particularly piano, is lacking. Therefore, this research aims to explore pianists' understanding and perceptions of topic theory by addressing the following question: How do the study's participants perceive the relevance of topic theory to piano interpretation and the teaching of interpretation based on the three selected musical passages?

## **Methodology**

### **Participants and Sampling Procedure**

To obtain results from diverse perspectives, this study involved six university piano lecturers and nine university piano major students. All procedures were conducted online via video conferencing. To ensure confidentiality, participants were assigned

codes. Lecturers were designated L1 to L6, and students S1 to S9, following the order of their interviews.

Participants were selected based on their expertise and experience in piano performance and pedagogy. The lecturers were professional pianists and university lecturers each with more than eight years of teaching experience, hailing from Guangxi Arts University, Zhoukou Normal University, Luoyang Normal University, Xinyang Normal University, and Anhui University. The students had undertaken piano studies for at least ten years, had performance experience, and were currently studying piano at music conservatories in Bulgaria, China, France, Germany, and the United States. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that participants met these criteria and could provide rich, relevant data.

This study was approved by the University of Malaya Research Ethics Committee (UMREC) on 19 January 2022, with Reference Number: UM.TNC2/UMREC\_1721.

## **Research Design**

The research design consisted of two phases: (1) a listening survey and (2) semi-structured interviews. In the first phase, participants were asked to listen to three piano passages and choose between three stylistic options during or after listening. The musical excerpts were provided without composition titles to avoid bias. The three pieces used were: Dussek's *La Chasse, C.146*; Beethoven's *Piano Sonata in A Major, Op. 101, Second Movement*; and Liszt's *Années de pèlerinage, Première année - Suisse, No. 3, Pastorale*.

After the listening survey, participants answered questions about their specific perceptions and opinions of the three pieces. In the second phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted to investigate their understanding and analysis of topic theory in relation to the musical passages.

## **Listening Materials**

To illustrate hunt, military, and pastoral topics, excerpts from the aforementioned pieces were selected for the listening survey. These excerpts, along with brief descriptions, are presented below.

*Hunt*

INTRODUCTION.  
Adagio.

La Chasse commence.

Figure 1. Dussek's *La Chasse*, C.146, Bars 1–21

*La Chasse* (Figure 1) by Jan Ladislav Dussek (1760–1812) is in F major and has a sonata form with a slow introduction in 6/8 time. Starting in the fourth beat of the second bar, it has a fanfare-like gesture with a dotted rhythmic pattern, alternating with the left and right hands. It serves as an introduction before the main part titled "La Chasse commence," which begins the triadic hunting calls in the F major chord.

**Military**

The musical score for the second movement of Beethoven's Piano Sonata in A Major, Op. 101, bars 1-12, is presented in three systems. The first system begins with a forte (f) dynamic in the right hand and a piano (p) dynamic in the left hand. The second system features a crescendo (cresc.) in the right hand and a piano (p) dynamic in the left hand. The third system includes a first ending (1.) and a second ending (2.), both marked piano (p). The score is in 4/4 time and features a 'Military' character.

Figure 2. Beethoven's *Piano Sonata in A Major, Op. 101, Second Movement, Bars 1–12*

The second movement of Ludwig van Beethoven's (1770–1827) *Piano Sonata in A Major, Op. 101*, is in F major with a 4/4 time, and a tempo marking of *Vivace alla Marcia* (Figure 2). This marking indicates that a passage should be played in a brisk, lively tempo, usually in 2/4 or 4/4 time, with the accent on the downbeat. The structure of this movement is a song form with a trio (A and B sections with a *da capo* A section). The main theme is characterised by dotted rhythmic patterns. The opening bar presents a thematic motif with a strong pulsating cadence and sharp changes in intensity. This motif, featuring dotted rhythms, continuously moves higher, starting from F major incorporating borrowed notes from F minor (passing through a secondary dominant seventh chord – A flat seventh chord) to reinforce the sound of trumpet calls.



### Pastoral

The image shows a musical score for Franz Liszt's 'Pastorale' from 'Années de Pèlerinage, Première année - Suisse, No. 3'. The score is written for piano and is in E major and 12/8 time, marked 'Vivace'. It consists of two systems of music. The first system shows the right-hand melody starting with a 'pp' dynamic and the left-hand accompaniment starting with a 'una corda' instruction and a 'pp' dynamic. The second system continues the piece, with the left hand featuring a series of 'Ped.' markings. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, ties, and dynamic markings like 'pp' (pianissimo) and 'Ped.' (pedal).

Figure 3. Liszt's *Années de Pèlerinage, Première année - Suisse, No. 3, Pastorale*

Franz Liszt's (1811–1886) *Années de Pèlerinage, Première année - Suisse, No. 3, Pastorale* is in E major with a compound 12/8 metre and a *Vivace* tempo marking (Figure 3). The structure of this piece follows a binary form, comprising only 49 bars. The left-hand accompaniment immediately establishes the harmonic framework of sustained tonic (E) and dominant (B).

Liszt employed a folk song style for the right-hand melody. Folk songs, originating from working people in urban and rural areas and transmitted through oral tradition, became prominent in the 19th century as a signifier of the pastoral topic. This piece could be categorised as a "rustic" pastoral, which played a key role in melodies in the Romantic period (Monelle, 2006). The simplicity of the right hand, the balance and symmetry of phrasing, and the rhythmic character evoke folk song traditions. As Monelle noted (2006), "the quality of simplicity was from the very first associated with pastoral" (p. 220).

### Data Analysis

The listening survey was examined, and thematic analysis was conducted on the interview data. Significant components from the interview data were identified through thematic analysis. The data analysis followed the six-phase thematic analysis process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), which includes familiarisation, generating codes, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and creating the report.

## Findings

### Results of Listening Survey

A total of 14 participants completed the listening survey, with one participant submitting incomplete data. The histogram in Table 1 shows the percentage of participants who selected each topic for the three musical excerpts.

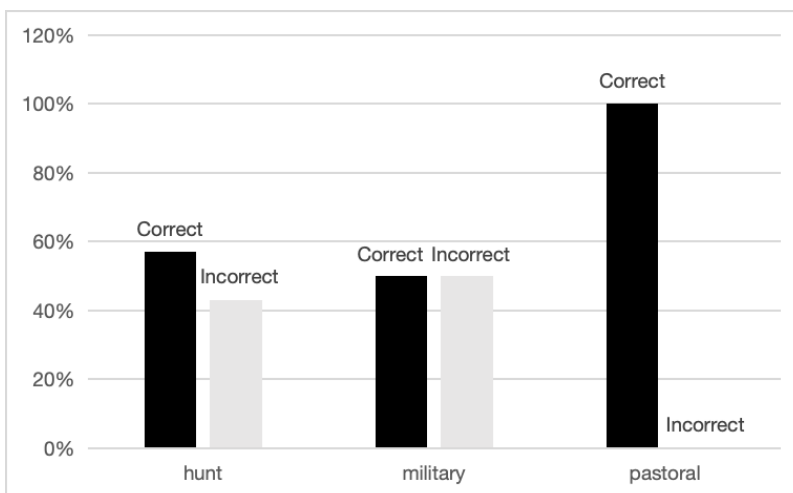
For the first excerpt, Dussek's *La Chasse*, 57% of participants correctly identified the hunt topic, while 43% chose the military topic. This suggests some ambiguity between the two, possibly due to similarities in their musical features, such as triadic melodies and dotted rhythms.

In the second excerpt, Beethoven's *Piano Sonata in A Major, Op. 101, Second Movement*, participants were evenly divided between the military and hunt topics, with 50% selecting each. This highlights the potential for confusion between these two topics, as they share some common musical elements.

For the third excerpt, Liszt's *Pastorale*, all participants correctly identified the pastoral topic. This unanimous response suggests that the musical features of the pastoral topic, such as the simple melody, compound metre, and drone-like bass, were more easily recognisable to the participants.

The results of the listening survey reveal that while the pastoral topic was readily identified by all participants, there was some confusion between the hunt and military topics. This may be attributed to the participants' familiarity with the musical features and cultural associations of each topic, as well as the potential for overlap in their musical characteristics. These findings underscore the importance of considering the cultural and historical contexts in which these topics were developed and how they may be perceived by contemporary listeners. The ambiguity between the hunt and military topics also highlights the need for further exploration of the nuances and distinctions between these topics in musical analysis and interpretation.

Table 1. Histogram of the comparison of listening data



## **Results of Semi-Structured Interviews**

In the semi-structured interviews, participants were asked to provide more detailed insights into their perceptions and understanding of these topics, as well as their thoughts on the application of topic theory in piano interpretation and teaching. The data were divided into two themes: topic theory in piano interpretation and topic theory in teaching piano interpretation.

### **Topic Theory in Piano Interpretation**

Two main themes emerged from the interviews regarding the application of topic theory in piano interpretation: expression and imagination.

#### ***Expression***

All participants agreed that topic theory could enhance the expressive qualities of piano performance. When discussing the expression of “pastoral” music, L1 suggested that one can probably “imagine a wide field that has many symbolic meanings, such as a more pleasant, slower pace of emotion” (personal communication, February 18, 2022).

S1 emphasised the importance of considering both the historical context and the composer's intentions when interpreting a piece, saying that understanding the specific events related to the piece’s creation can make the expression more concrete.

S5, S6, and S8 all believed that topic theory could help define the style of a piece, ensuring that the interpretation remains true to its character. S5 noted that the rhythmic characteristics were obvious in the military piece. There might be differences in each piece, but the general style will be the same. Thus, if performers understand the characteristics of this general style, they can better express this type of music.

On this point, L4 and L6 acknowledged that while individual performers have unique interpretive styles, topic theory can provide a framework to align interpretations with a specific style. L6 further explained that “though we engage in the same activity, our feelings may differ. So, the understanding and interpretation of musical topics such as hunting, military and pastoral can also vary according to one’s personal style” (personal communication, April 17, 2022). She further suggested that the stylistic similarities between the Classical and Romantic periods—often described as formulaic—make these topics particularly relevant for musical analysis.

Moreover, L3 expressed that interpreting a piece of music involves more than just personal feeling—it also requires a form of musical cognition, such as topic theory, which she considers beneficial as a supplementary tool for interpretation. To illustrate her point, she provided an example of a hunting scene: if a piece depicts such a scene, the performance should reflect a heroic spirit—rather than being soft—to accurately convey the meaning of the piece. Subsequently, she emphasised the importance of focusing on technique, as achieving the desired interpretation requires the integration of various technical elements.

### ***Imagination***

Participants also discussed how topic theory could stimulate the imagination and mental imagery associated with the musical meaning. They agreed that this method could provide a valuable framework for visualising scenes according to the topic.

S8 suggested that early musicians rarely gave their works titles and detailed textual references, and that it is necessary to have a general directional guide. A guide would prevent interpretations from veering off course. By establishing a clear interpretive model, musicians can process the work in a more personal and detailed manner.

L2 and L7 said that while each motive in the score should be interpreted with different, varied, or contrasting emotions, a systematic theory is needed to guide the interpretation of the meaning behind certain pieces. L5 noted that perhaps the teachers at the university where she works did not have much experience in performance and accumulated ways of processing the pieces and are thus limited in the imagination they can provide, which is also an important issue.

S4 and S6 believed that developing the imagination and association of the topic according to the guidance provided by topic theory would be much more effective than relying solely on subjective imagination or not engaging in any interpretive thinking at all.

In addition, S1 highlighted the potential for applying topic theory not only to piano works but also to chamber music and symphonies, as many works are related to these topics.

## **Topic Theory in Teaching Piano Interpretation**

### ***Interpretive Analysis***

When working on piano pieces, participants emphasised the importance of interpretive analysis alongside technical considerations and score reading. Interpretation is closely tied to the composer's expressive intentions for a particular musical work.

During the interviews, the majority of participants mentioned that some teachers do not pay enough attention to the inner meaning of music, such as theoretical aspects, and thus cannot adequately address students' questions. In particular, understanding of music interpretation is often not systematically taught. S5 said that in her experience, "teachers often ask students to follow terminology on the score, such as *forte* and *piano*, but students are unsure to what extent the intensity is appropriate" (personal communication, March 5, 2022). She mentioned that teachers would demonstrate a few times for their students to imitate, but often they did not proceed to systematically explain the reasoning behind using such intensity.

S1 expressed his confusion regarding the subjective nature of both a teacher's explanations and a student's ideas about the emotion of a piece, highlighting the need for a consensus between them. He also emphasised that a more refined interpretation, combined with technical proficiency, is attainable only

through a thorough understanding of the piece. He expressed the importance of learning more interpretive methods, such as a systematic approach like topic theory, and constantly trying to balance subjective and objective interpretations. Similarly, L4 noted that music is a relatively subjective art, and teachers often make suggestions based on their own understanding, even if they deviate from the overall style. She believed that topic theory could foster students' independence by equipping them with direction and a method to analyse and comprehend a piece before seeking adjustments from the teacher.

L2, S4, and S8 stressed the importance of a systematic approach to learning musical interpretation, similar to the one used for technique, to help performers more comprehensively understand the composer's intentions and interpret the work accordingly. They found topic theory to be worth learning about, as it allows performers to decide how they want to use it in the process of interpreting pieces.

As L6 mentioned, the melodies and harmonies of the Classical period have been summarised many times, like formulas. For example, if you hear a harmonic progression, you may be able to feel the style or even imagine the scene of that period. S9 described this as a way of learning by example, so that when one plays a piece in a similar style in the future, one will know how to interpret it correctly. Therefore, she considered this method of learning to be more of a musical mindset, a systematic way of thinking, rather than relying on subjective feelings. S3 provided an example from Liszt's *Mazeppa* to illustrate the importance of understanding the meaning of the work. She said that "[my piano] teacher emphasised using the fingering 2424 instead of 2413, as it better imitates the sound of a horse's [gallop]" (personal communication, March 3, 2022). Therefore, she believed that performers should possess a diverse range of interpretive and analytical skills to understand the score and to discern the composer's intentions.

L1 indicated that, through her teaching experience, she has found two extremes in current piano teaching methods. One is to restrict students from having interpretive ideas or ignore them altogether. The other is to become detached from the score and allow students' imaginations to run wild. She has also observed more teachers seeking a compromise and trying to find a balance between these two extremes. Because music is a highly intuitive subject and everyone's experiences differ, students and performers will have different instincts. L1 said that the most challenging aspect of teaching is how to effectively guide students while allowing them to develop their interpretations based on certain rules. She believed that topic theory might be a useful approach to achieving this balance.

### ***Musical Knowledge***

Musical knowledge encompasses the understanding and appreciation of musical concepts, elements, and practices, as well as the historical and cultural contexts in which different musical styles and traditions have developed. Participants commented on their perceptions of the current state of piano learning and teaching in tertiary education and their expectations for applying topic theory as a tool for interpreting musical works. They generally agreed that musical knowledge and thinking are not adequately emphasised in piano teaching.

L3 and L6 asserted that the curriculum arranged by music departments in most universities lacks variety. Although music theory and history courses are offered, they often receive insufficient attention. L3 expressed concern that this approach is not conducive to developing students' musical thinking and instead produces many "craftsmen" (personal communication, April 2, 2022). He suggested that incorporating topic theory, which includes both internal elements of music and broad cultural and social contexts, into music education could enhance students' understanding of music. He shared that topic theory could be used to tell the stories behind musical works; he also explained that royal hunts were primarily ceremonial in the past, and the theme of hunting in musical works depicting these rituals was more commonly used during the Classical period. Regarding the current state of teaching and learning in tertiary institutions, L2 and L5 both believed that students' general lack of musical thinking and knowledge could influence their aesthetic sensibilities. L5 said that some students' technical skills are quite good, but their musical aesthetics are poor. He remarked that using topic theory to improve students' understanding of pieces would be effective, especially for intermediate and advanced students in conservatories or universities. He specifically stated that because those students already have an established repertoire, explaining the extensive cultural implications of music topics may deepen their understanding of these works.

S1 reflected on his piano studies and noted how, over the years, he had gradually added subjective ideas into his interpretations. He noted the need for more musical knowledge and a willingness to understand and learn about topic theory. L1 expressed the desire for students to have greater musical knowledge, believing that this might promote their technical proficiency and their musical expressiveness. S8 also mentioned that "each musical motive and structure carries different emotions that need to be processed differently, making it necessary to explore the specific emotional implications of that" (personal communication, March 3, 2022).

L6 shared the perception that terminology in the score is often understood in very general ways, e.g., major means happy, and minor means sad. She further explained with examples: "The dotted rhythm can contain a lot of knowledge, and understanding why it's used in a particular piece is crucial because using any other rhythmic pattern could alter the meaning of the piece or make it seem less fitting" (personal communication, April 17, 2022). Consequently, she believed that comprehending the composer's intentions demands additional time and effort.

S2 and S7 expressed their expectation that the application of topic theory in piano performance would broaden performers' horizons, increase their musical knowledge, and expand their imagination. S7 believed that all levels of exploration were beneficial, regardless of whether the focus was on external or internal musical elements. We believe that both approaches are essential, as musical knowledge is diverse and infinite and necessitates ongoing exploration.

## Discussion

### Listening Survey

The responses obtained from the listening survey revealed that more than half of the participants correctly identified the topics in the musical excerpts. However, there was some confusion between the hunting and military styles. Monelle (2006) acknowledges moments when the line between hunter and soldier can blur but identifies several features that specifically mark a topic as "hunt" in character, such as the use of the horn, 6/8 metre, *bicinia* or *tricinia*, presence of an octave "whoop," and a lower register (p. 84). The participants' confusion may be attributed to their lack of familiarity with the historical and cultural context of the military and hunting scenes depicted in the music—these scenes, being distant from their everyday experiences, possibly hindered their understanding of the composer's intent.

During the interviews, participants' perceptions of the style of the three excerpts were influenced by their music education, experience, *a priori* knowledge, and unconscious associations. Zhang (1986) wrote that Jung considered literary works to be autonomous complexes in which the creative process is not entirely controlled by the author's consciousness. Instead, it is often influenced by a collective psychological experience that lies at the bottom of the author's unconscious. As a result, certain musical gestures and textures naturally become common traditional conventions, shaped by these unconscious influences.

Furthermore, Jung's (1936) concept of the archetype is closely linked to the idea of the collective unconscious, which holds universal patterns of thought and behaviour. Archetypes are not directly perceived but manifest as primordial images, often appearing in mythological forms. They are activated in the unconscious through artistic expression, transforming into artistic images across different time periods (Zhang, 1986).

Fujak (2007) cited Susan Rawcliffe, an American ethno-music archaeologist specialising in prehistoric wind instruments from pre-Columbian America, who suggested that the triple mini ocarina was used in ancient times before hunts to drive away evil spirits from the prairie. This interpretation led Fujak to use the word *archetypal* to describe his own experience. Monelle (2006) also highlighted the power of musical topics when he wrote, "[They] are at their most powerful when the reflection of an item of contemporary life is least in evidence, and the musical gesture refers most directly, even unconsciously, to the mythic world of cultural signification" (p. 94).

The listening survey results and the subsequent discussion demonstrate the complex interplay between cultural context, musical features, and individual experiences in shaping the perception and interpretation of musical topics. While the pastoral topic was easily recognised by all participants, possibly due to its more distinct musical characteristics, the ambiguity between the hunt and military topics highlights the need for further exploration of their nuances and the role of cultural familiarity in their identification. Such an understanding can inform the application of topic theory in piano pedagogy and can aid teachers and students in navigating the cultural and historical dimensions of musical interpretation.

## **Topic Theory in Piano Interpretation**

This study found that the use of topic theory could help participants by improving expressiveness and providing more imaginative cues. The two are inseparable: a richer and more rational imagination of a piece, facilitated by topic theory, will lead to increased expressiveness. As Hellaby (2020) notes, musical imagery has long been a stimulus for performers, and it would be difficult for pianists to limit their imagination to only the pictorial implications of the music. Just as we interpret the meaning of a statement based on our inferences about its type in everyday interactions, genre creates a framework for expression and communication to occur in music (Guymier, 2014). Expressive qualities in music often mimic typical emotional expressions, evoking corresponding feelings in the listener and establishing appropriate affective associations (Margulis, 2014). This process is crucial for connecting the music and the listener.

During the interviews, participants said that they could make meaningful connections to the work within the structure of the score, guided by topic theory, and thus avoid excessive subjective imagery divorced from the context. As Allanbrook (2008) herself later pointed out, "failure to consult the historical context at worst falsifies analysis and at best leaves it unedifyingly incomplete" (p. 273). Furthermore, a composer is also required by the listener's interpretation to continuously offer hints to help the listener identify the tropological encounter and comprehend the implications (Hatten, 2014).

The meanings evoked by topic theory are often easily understood and are part of a common association. Scholars and performers can then talk about the expression of a particular piece of music without describing it in purely subjective or imaginative terms. They may "even gain a glimmer of historical insight in the process" (Hunter, 2014, p. 83). Caplin (2005) listed the topic as one of the "significant forces for musical expression" in music and cited Monelle's recent progress in the study of the topic as evidence (p. 125).

Providing more imaginative and interpretive cues for performers can significantly enhance their expression of a piece. Instrumental music, unlike vocal music, lacks the explicit guidance of lyrics. This lack requires a stronger reliance on musical elements and the performer's imagination to convey meaning. As Day-O'Connell (2014) states, "It takes much more art and a stronger imagination to bring this about without, rather than with, words" (p. 245). Thorough knowledge of the a piece's melody greatly facilitates the invention of melodies that have a definite expression of some sentiment or passion (Kirnberger, 1776).



The study's participants also indicated that their understanding of musical styles was deepened through topic theory. Although the figures and topics consciously used by 18th-century composers may lack immediate relevance to contemporary listeners because of the evolution and complexities of later musical works, they still resonate in some composers' creations. During that time, performers considered a deep understanding of these musical elements crucial for interpreting and presenting music in a stylistically appropriate manner. Grasping the cultural associations and meanings linked to these elements allowed performers to cultivate a nuanced comprehension of a piece's style and interpretive intent, thereby enhancing the expressive quality of their performance.

### **Topic Theory in Teaching Interpretation**

The interview results revealed that topic theory would contribute to piano teaching by providing a viable analytical approach to musical interpretation, as well as increasing and expanding the musical knowledge of teachers and students.

Karlsson and Juslin (2008) found that teaching mainly focused on technique and the written score, with lessons dominated by teacher-led discussions. Expression and emotion are mostly addressed implicitly, although some teachers used various strategies to enhance expressiveness. They wrote that despite differences in teaching styles, a common issue was the lack of clear goals, specific tasks, and systematic teaching methods.

Therefore, in piano teaching, alongside technical skills, knowledge of music and cultural awareness are crucial—they enrich the learning experience and deepen students' understanding of musical compositions, ultimately enhancing their ability to express themselves in performance. Jin (2022) highlights the importance of understanding the musical context and learning to listen. Similarly, Mirka argues that "Ratner's topics constituted a source of meaning and means of communication in eighteenth-century music. Today, they allow one to gain access to its meaning and expression in a way that can be intersubjectively verified" (2014b, p. 2). However, Mirka (2014c) acknowledges that "topical identification is also a challenging analytical task that, at times, requires considerable theoretical knowledge" (p. 366).

The aim of Mirka's (2014a) *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory* is to resolve the challenges in "topical identification" to turn topic theory into an efficient tool for analysis and interpretation. Topic theory contains knowledge of the structure of the music and provides information about the cultural history external to the music, which can link musical structure and cultural contextualisation to broaden students' perspectives and understanding of a work. Using topic theory allows for a different way of approaching the music. By exploring the rhythmic potential of a piece and filtering it through an understanding of a particular topic, a more personal interpretation and expression is found in practice (Irving, 2014).

Furthermore, cultural and educational background can greatly influence an individual's musical aesthetics and preferences. Someone with a formal music education may have a deeper understanding of musical theory and the technical aspects of music performance, which can influence their musical preferences and

appreciation for certain forms of music (Dys et al., 2017). (Admittedly, more cultural knowledge and aesthetic sensitivity can determine how much of the meaning and beauty expressed in the music a listener perceives.) Therefore, the ability to recognise various elements within a piece of music is an essential quality that piano learners and performers should have. Just as rhetorical figures are intended to be identified, memorised, and ultimately applied in one's own speech, Ratner applied a similar approach when teaching a university course, which Agawu (2008) described as follows: "[He] would put on a recording of a Beethoven or a Mozart string quartet and then, as the music played, shout out the topics, stopping occasionally to ask if anyone knew what the topic was at a particular moment" (as cited in Beghin, 2014, p. 552). Teaching expression in single-affect pieces is relatively straightforward, whereas capturing the shifting moods in sonatas and other abstract pieces is more challenging. Many pieces are difficult for students to relate to emotionally because the titles are not very compelling. A more engaging performance may arise from students being better at identifying and expressing the embedded affective signs (Schrempel, 2010).

Although later modern music has become increasingly complex and may have lost the distinctive features of topics, most piano students primarily focus on the Classical and Romantic periods, which exhibit these features. Therefore, introducing topic theory in piano lessons can provide learners and performers with insight and guidance for interpreting these works.

### **Limitations and Suggestions for Future Study**

The limitations of this study include the small number of participants and the lack of detail in the interview questions. Moreover, it is inevitable for the collection process to encounter incomplete data. In the future, it would be worthwhile to study and integrate the different classifications and perspectives of more theorists on topic theory and to use the semiotic symbols in topic theory to analyse a wider range of musical works to open up the interpretive fields and dimensions of the compositions. By pursuing these and other lines of inquiry, future research can continue to explore the rich potential of topic theory as a tool for enhancing musical interpretation, expression, and pedagogy, ultimately contributing to a more meaningful and engaging musical experience for all.

### **Conclusion**

The use of musical topics in the 18th and 19th centuries played a significant role in musical expression and interpretation and contributed to the creation of cultural identity and emotional depth within various musical styles and genres. Topic theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the historical and cultural dimensions of musical works, offering rich imagery and symbols that can serve as a solid reference point for interpretation. Every composer lives within a certain social reality and cultural context, and these factors shape their ideas and creative concepts. Although the notes in a musical work are abstract symbols, their arrangement often evokes scenes, narratives, or imagery. This underlying structure provides the

foundation for the composer's expression and the listener's interpretation of the music.

Recognising and incorporating this information into our interpretation of a work is crucial, as they are the keys that the composers intentionally left for us. Rather than oversimplifying the music, this approach provides a grounding point for understanding and allows for a deeper and more meaningful interpretation. Therefore, it is worthwhile to grasp topic theory and apply it in subsequent performances and teaching to enhance the depth and richness of musical interpretation.

This study has demonstrated the potential benefits of incorporating topic theory into piano pedagogy, as it can foster a more comprehensive understanding of musical works, stimulate imagination, and provide a systematic framework for interpreting the expressive content of a composition. By equipping students with tools to analyse and interpret musical works through the lens of topic theory, teachers can help them develop a more nuanced and historically informed approach to performance. Moreover, the application of topic theory in piano teaching can contribute to the development of students' musical knowledge and thinking skills, broadening their understanding of the cultural and historical contexts in which musical works were created. This, in turn, can lead to more expressive and engaging performances, as students learn to connect the structural elements of the music to the broader world of human experience and emotion. In conclusion, topic theory offers a valuable and potentially transformative approach to piano interpretation and pedagogy and bridges the gap between musicological research and musical practice. By embracing this approach, pianists and educators can unlock new dimensions of meaning and expression in the music they play and teach, thus enriching the musical experience for performers and listeners alike.

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