

The Schönberg Analytical Legacy

Rudolph Reti and Thematic Transformation

Schönberg's organicism

Rudolph Reti's music-analytical writing once served as an important model for Anglophone musical analysis of common-practice tonal music. Especially in England, Reti's *The Thematic Process in Music* found many advocates in the 1950s and 60s.¹ But in the years since (as we shall see below), Reti's work came to be viewed as mostly outmoded and obsolete – regarded perhaps as a relic of a bygone intellectual era, replaced by other more rigorous and systematic approaches. Considered in terms of the history of musical thought in the twentieth century, however, Reti's writing plays a crucial role in the development of what might be called the “aesthetics of organicism,” as well as in continuing the Schönberg analytical legacy. Elsewhere I have considered Schönberg's aesthetic engagement with organicism in music,² addressing developing variation, *Grundgestalt*, and the *musikalische Gedanke*, and Schönberg's many remarks about how, as he put it, “*I myself consider the totality of a piece as the idea: the idea which its creator wanted to present,*”³ or

Alas, it is one thing to envision in a creative instant of inspiration and it is another thing to materialize one's vision by painstakingly connecting details until they fuse into a kind of organism.

*And alas, suppose it becomes an organism, a homunculus or a robot, and possesses some of the spontaneity of a vision; it remains yet another thing to organize this form so that it becomes a comprehensible message “to whom it may concern.”*⁴

1 Rudolph Reti: *The Thematic Process in Music* (New York 1951).

2 John Covach: Schoenberg's (Analytical) Gaze: Musical Time, The Organic Ideal, and Analytical Perspectivism, in *Theory and Practice* 42 (2007), 141–159.

3 Arnold Schoenberg: *New Music, Outmoded Music, Style and Idea* (1946–1949) (ASSV 3.1.2.3.); published in *Style and Idea*. Edited by Dika Newlin (New York 1950), 31–51, here 49.

4 Arnold Schoenberg: *Composition with Twelve Tones* (1949) (ASSV 3.1.2.5.); published *ibidem*, 102–143, 103.

Of course, for Schönberg scholars and specialists much of this is very familiar; but it is important to examine in more depth *why* organicism mattered so much to Schönberg. His organic ideal is ultimately an aesthetic ideal – that is, a piece is best when its material unfolds organically and according to musical logic. Schönberg’s notion of organicism embraces both the *dynamic* metaphor – a piece unfolds in time, like a plant grows from a seed – and the *static* one – each part of a piece is marked by its belonging to that particular piece, like a limb belongs to a tree or an arm or leg to a body. Following Carl Dahlhaus’s writing, we may understand the musical idea to be that holding *simultaneously* in the mind’s eye (and ear) both the dynamic and static dimensions.⁵ The magic, one might say, is not only in the hearing, but also in the *thinking*. It is this more abstract dimension of the musical idea that makes it possible, in Schönberg’s view, for music to engage the spiritual – to touch, or perhaps only point to, something beyond our everyday experience. It is the possibility of this kind of aesthetic-spiritual experience that helps explain why the organicist ideal was so crucial to Schönberg.⁶ Even if the ideal is not quite realized completely in actual compositions, or only realized in some domains and not others, it is the *striving* that counts, and both the composer and listener strive to engage the organicism ideal.

The English-language reception of Schönberg’s ideas

How these ideas make their way into the scholarly discourse – the reception history of the kind of organicism we associate primarily with Schönberg – is worth exploring.⁷ While the reception of many aspects of Schönberg’s writing in English-language music theory can certainly be traced, one facet of that story is the reception of how his thematic/motivic analysis is cast according to the organic ideal. That is where Rudolph Reti’s writing enters the discussion.⁸ Reti and Schönberg were in contact as early as 1911: Reti premiered Schönberg’s Opus 11 and Opus 19 pieces, as well as performing in the 1918–19 season of the Society for Private Musical Performances (including works by Josef Matthias Hauer).⁹ Reti published an analysis of the Opus 11 pieces in 1911 and contributed a brief tribute in the 50th Birthday volume of *Musikblätter des Anbruch* in 1924.

5 Carl Dahlhaus: What Is “Developing Variation,” in idem: *Schoenberg and the New Music* (Cambridge, New York 1987), 128–133, 133.

6 See idem: Schoenberg’s Aesthetic Theology, *ibidem*, 81–93.

7 For a fuller discussion of the reception history of Schönberg’s theoretical ideas in

Anglophone music theory, see John Covach: The Americanization of Arnold Schoenberg? Theory, Analysis, and Reception, in *Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft für Musiktheorie* 15/2 (2018), 155–175.

8 While there are brief entries on Reti’s life and career in many standard reference sources in both German and English, the *Lexikon verfolgter Musiker und Musikerinnen*

der NS-Zeit provides the most comprehensive entry: https://www.lexm.uni-hamburg.de/object/lexm_lexmperson_00003643 (accessed April 27, 2019).

9 Walter Szmolyan: Die Konzerte des Wiener Schönberg-Vereins, in *Österreichische Musikzeitschrift* 36/2 (February 1981), 82–104.

In the 1911 essay, Reti remarks that he had not yet had the pleasure of meeting Schönberg, but in private correspondence he suggests that he did meet with Schönberg in Berlin to earn the composer's permission to perform the November 1912 premiere of Opus 11.¹⁰ A 1911 letter from Schönberg to Reti in response to the Opus 11 essay invites Reti to visit.¹¹ Reti would later write that he enjoyed “a close personal relationship to Schönberg” during the years in which the twelve-tone method was being developed.¹² Whatever the nature of Reti's relationship with Schönberg might have been, it is certain that he was very close to Schönberg's student Egon Wellesz. The two had known each other since childhood, with Reti later performing Wellesz's music in 1919, and the two working together to form the Internationale Gesellschaft für Neue Musik in 1923.¹³ Reti would also likely have known Erwin Stein's essay, “Neue Formprinzipien,” which appeared in the same 1924 issue of *Musikblätter des Anbruch* as Reti's brief tribute and which presents Schönberg's ideas on motivic unity in detail.¹⁴

All this makes it seem logical to view Reti's principal work, *The Thematic Process in Music*, as part of what we might call the Schönberg analytical legacy. Reti, however, does not cite Schönberg or his ideas on music anywhere in this book, though Reti hardly cites any other author during the course of his discussions either.¹⁵ Still, Reti's ideas are in many places similar enough to those of Schönberg and others in the Schönberg circle (Josef Rufer, Alban Berg, Erwin Stein and others) that at least an intellectual connection can be made, even if one resists a biographical one.¹⁶ It is important to also point out that there are

10 See Rudolph Reti: Formale Erläuterungen zu Arnold Schönbergs Klavierstücken, in *Der Merker* 2/17 (June 1911), 715–729; and *Musikblätter des Anbruch* 6/7–8 (August–September 1924), 304. A letter from Reti to Eduard Buschbeck describing his meeting with Schoenberg can be found in *Arnold Schönberg. Gedenkausstellung 1974*. Edited by Ernst Hilmar (Wien 1974), 247–248.

11 Reti reproduces this 1911 letter from Schönberg (along with English translation) in which the composer invites Reti to visit in his *Tonality, Atonality, Pantonality* (London 1958), 48. Reti confirms that he premiered both Opus 11 and Opus 19 in footnote 2 on page 42 of this book.

12 Ibidem, 42.

13 See Rudolph Reti: Die Entstehung der IGNM, in *Österreichische Musikzeitschrift* 12/3 (March 1957), 113–117, which features an introduction by Wellesz that provides many biographical details of the relationship; and Rudolph Reti: Egon

Wellesz, Musician and Scholar, in *The Musical Quarterly* 4/21 (January 1956), 1–13, which constitutes Reti's tribute to Wellesz and is rich in biographical detail as well. See also Hartmut Krones: Rudolf Reti, Egon Wellesz und die Gründung der IGNM, in *Österreichische Musikzeitschrift* 37/11 (November 1982), 606–623; and Rudolph Reti: Wie die I.G.f.N.M. entstand, in *Anbruch* 14/5–6 (June 1932), 94–95.

14 Erwin Stein: Neue Formprinzipien, in *Musikblätter des Anbruch* 6/7–8 (August–September 1924), 286–303. Reti's one-paragraph tribute appears on page 304 of this issue. Reti cites Stein's article in *Tonality*, see fn. 11, 43, but that book appeared years after *The Thematic Process* (see fn. 1) and decades after *Neue Formprinzipien* was originally published.

15 Reti discusses Schönberg and his music at some length in his later book, *Tonality*, see fn. 11, 33–55, displaying a close familiarity with academic writing on Schönberg and his music and citing

many sources, including *Style and Idea* (see fn. 3) and articles on twelve-tone music by Richard S. Hill and Ernst Krenek. Reti's remarks on Schönberg in *Tonality*, though mostly positive, are also critical at certain points, especially regarding the twelve-tone method.

16 For similar approaches to the Schönberg analytical legacy, see Norton Dudeque: *Music Theory and Analysis in the Writings of Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951)* (Burlington, Vermont 2005); and Andreas Jacob: *Grundbegriffe der Musiktheorie Arnold Schönbergs* (Hildesheim 2005). See also Felix Wörner: Thematicism: Geschichte eines analytischen Konzepts in der nordamerikanischen Musiktheorie, in *Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft für Musiktheorie* 6/1 (2009), 77–89. For an interpretation of Reti's writing in the context of previous German-language theory, see Rudolf Klein: Rudolf Retis Erkenntnisse der thematischen Prozesse in der Musik, in *Österreichische Musikzeitschrift* 36/9 (September 1981), 465–469.

some differences between Reti's and Schönberg's thinking – or perhaps more importantly, as we shall see, there are some very different emphases in Reti's writing.

Reti reception

If we can place Reti within, or in relation to, the Schönberg analytical legacy, we can then trace this legacy in the second half of the twentieth century, and in particular track its reception among English-language scholars. The broad outlines of this Anglophone reception include the publication of Schönberg's *Models for Beginners in Composition* in 1943 and *Style and Idea* in 1950, Reti's *The Thematic Process in Music* in 1951, Rufer's analysis of Beethoven in his 1954 book, Hans Keller's important chapter on Mozart's chamber music in 1956, and Alan Walker's 1962 book, *A Study in Musical Analysis*.¹⁷ Keller and Walker had far more impact in England than in the United States, and as musicologist Joseph Kerman saw it (writing some years later), thematicism “has pursued a circuitous route from Europe to America to Britain, and perhaps now back to America again.”¹⁸ Keller clearly acknowledged his debt to Reti already in the late 1950s:

*As I have said on many previous occasions, my own Functional Analysis owes a great deal to Rudolph Reti, to whom I shall remain grateful to the end of my days. He was one of the pioneers of the new age of genuinely musical analysis.*¹⁹

Kerman offers additional keen insight into the reception of this work within the discipline:

*But Germans and Americans, as well as Britons have been dismissive, not merely suspicious, of thematists who have reached as far and as greedily as Reti, Keller, and Walker. On the other hand, if thematicism is taken in a non-dogmatic spirit as one analytical technique among others, it can yield important results; and one can probably say that British analysts have capitalized on this more than Americans, many of whom have been prejudiced against thematicism as a result of their concentration on the rather different organic vision of Schenker.*²⁰

Reti's work also faced opposition among Anglophone scholars early on. Reviewing *The Thematic Process* for the *Journal of the American Musicological Society* in 1952, Alvin Bauman begins by proclaiming that “Pretension and overambition, twin gods, have committed another crime in the name of musical theory,” though

17 Arnold Schoenberg: *Models for Beginners in Composition* (New York 1943); idem: *Style and Idea*, see fn. 3; Rudolph Reti: *The Thematic Process*, see fn. 1; Josef Rufer: *Composition with twelve notes related only to one another* (New York 1954); Hans Keller: *The Chamber Music*, in *The Mozart Companion: A Symposium by Leading Mozart Scholars*.

Edited by H. C. Robbins Landon and Donald Mitchell (New York, London 1956), 90–137; and Alan Walker: *A Study in Musical Analysis* (London 1962).

18 Joseph Kerman: *Contemplating Music: Challenges to Musicology* (Cambridge/Massachusetts 1985), 75.

19 Hans Keller: Review of Rudolph Reti, *Tonality, Atonality, Pantonality: A Study of Some Trends in Twentieth-Century Music*, in *Tempo* 50 (Winter 1959), 31.

20 Joseph Kerman: *Contemplating Music*, see fn. 18, 78.

he later admits that “the real contribution of Dr. Reti’s book is to draw our attention to the need for analytic thinking on the thematic level. This it often does sharply and originally.”²¹ Reti’s enthusiastic tone could be an obstacle for some readers. Vincent Persichetti warns that “the pompous tone will be of considerable annoyance to the intelligent musician,” while also stressing that “the core of the book is genuine and worthy of careful consideration.”²² Nicholas Maw observes in an otherwise positive review that Reti’s writing style is “weighed down with ponderous utterance,” adding that this book “should be a bombshell, but remarkable patience is needed to set it off.”²³ Reti’s book also made an impression in German-language scholarship. An excerpt from the book was published in the *Österreichische Musikzeitschrift* in 1952, with discussion following in a later issue.²⁴

While Reti’s work was influential in the 1950s and 60s among Anglophone scholars, by the 1970s Reti’s approach to analysis had already become something of a hindrance to any theorist wanting to engage thematic or motivic development and analysis. In a chapter on what he calls “conformant relationships” in his 1973 book, *Explaining Music*, Leonard Meyer takes Reti to task for what Meyer views as a lack of systematic rigor:

*For if the value of a piece depends (as it does almost by definition) upon unity, and if unity in turn depends upon the ‘variation of one identical musical thought’ (TPiM, 4), then, if an acknowledged piece is being analyzed, the hypothesized thematic process must willy-nilly be uncovered. And Reti seems to feel that the more instances of thematic transformation, the better (more unified) the composition.*²⁵

In his important 1979 book, *Beyond Orpheus*, David Epstein offers both praise and criticism for Reti’s work:

Reti’s studies were among the first to appear concerning thematic shape and process. To them must go much of the credit for initially exploring a new terrain; to their failure, unfortunately, must also be attributed some of the skepticism that greets subsequent studies of thematic relevance.

Reti’s studies are characterized by a largely intuitive approach, and by an almost total absence of methodical proof. Thus while he has some valid insights, his presentation

21 Alvin Bauman: Review of Rudolph Reti, *The Thematic Process in Music*, in *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 5/2 (Summer 1952), 139–141.

22 Vincent Persichetti: Review of Rudolph Reti, *The Thematic Process in Music*, in *The Musical Quarterly* 37/4 (October 1951), 612–613.

23 Nicholas Maw, What Is Unity in Music?, in *The Musical Times* 102/1422 (August 1961), 492–493. Maw is reviewing the British edition of *The Thematic Process*.

24 Rudolph Reti: Die Thematische Auffassung, in *Österreichische Musikzeitschrift* 7/1 (January 1952), 12–14. This excerpt is drawn from the Introduction to *The Thematic Process*, see fn. 1, 3–7. Discussion continued with contributions from Walter Kolneder and Rudolf Klein as Zweimal “Thematische Auffassung,” in *Österreichische Musikzeitschrift* 7/4 (April 1952), 117–124. An excerpt from *Tonality* also appeared in German just after that book’s English publication as Rudolph Reti: Zwölfton-Dämmerung, in *Österreichische Musikzeitschrift* 14/11 (November 1959),

457–461. The German excerpt is drawn from Reti’s discussion of twelve-tone music on 47–54 of the English edition.

25 Leonard Meyer: *Explaining Music: Essays and Explorations* (Berkeley 1973), 64.

often marshals dubious evidence, with the effect of weakening the credibility of his contributions.²⁶

Walter Frisch, whose *Brahms and the Principle of Developing Variation* of 1984 made a strong contribution to bringing Schönberg's ideas about motivic development back into the American scholarly awareness, dismisses Reti in no uncertain terms:

*Most of the other analyses in the book are disappointingly shallow, however. Like Rufer, Réti superimposes the different themes of a work or movement, isolating pitches with little regard for rhythmic or harmonic context; he simply relegates to small print any notes that do not fit the shape he is trying to construe.*²⁷

Meyer, Epstein, and Frisch, however, mostly get the importance of Reti's work wrong: they do not approach it on its own terms, and as a consequence they end up dismissing Reti's analyses for not doing things that they were never designed to do while often missing the main points of emphasis and significance. As I will outline in more detail below, Reti's book is not primarily a book about analysis; it is, rather, a book about how analysis can be used in the service of an aesthetic deeply rooted in organicism. The question is not: Are these analyses correct? It is, rather: Could analyses like these demonstrate organic unity? Jonathan Dunsby and Arnold Whittall are much fairer to Reti when they write in 1988 as follows:

*Nevertheless the student must bear in mind how primitive Reti himself considered his work to be at the level of theory; how much he regarded it, not as willful in the interests of proving a point, but representative, as a sketch of the overwhelming evidence for why some future theory of thematic unity would be helpful.*²⁸

Nicholas Cook devotes significant attention to Reti's thought in his 1987 book, *A Guide to Musical Analysis*; and while Cook ends up finding many shortcomings in Reti's analyses, he is careful to understand Reti on his own terms.²⁹ Cook concludes that "*the whole tendency of motivic analysis is to suggest that the music is some kind of complicated cipher, and the way to break the code is to stare at the score for long enough. It does not encourage sensitive listening.*"³⁰ But he also adds that he does "*not mean to say that Reti did not have good musical insights about the way that pieces are experienced. And to be fair to Reti we have to remember that he was just about the first analyst in the English-speaking world seriously to tackle the problem of large-scale coherence in music.*"³¹ Also writing in the 1980s,

26 David Epstein: *Beyond Orpheus. Studies in Musical Structure* (Cambridge/Massachusetts 1979), 10.

27 Walter Frisch: *Brahms and the Principle of Developing Variation* (Berkeley, Los Angeles 1984), 22–23.

28 Jonathan Dunsby and Arnold Whittall: *Music Analysis in Theory and Practice* (London 1988), 91.

29 Nicholas Cook: *A Guide to Musical Analysis* (New York and London 1987), 89–115.

30 Ibidem, 114.

31 Ibidem. Cook goes on to remark that "*nowadays the shortcomings of Reti's method are very apparent.*"

Ian Bent sympathetically characterizes Reti's thinking, with an emphasis on organicism:

*To identify the pervasive, all-embracing idea is the first task of the analyst, but to account for the continuity of the foreground is the second. This involves not only explaining how each manifestation of the basic idea is derived from the original but also why that particular derivation occurs at that point. Analysis elucidates the functions of a piece as if it were a living organism.*³²

Reti's writing and analytical claims

Let us now turn to Reti's writing. The following discussion of Reti's work will be restricted to his first book, *The Thematic Process in Music*, first published in the United States in 1951 (the book was not published in a British edition until a decade later).³³ We will not consider Reti's other two books, both of which were published posthumously, nor his other writing. The first of these other books, *Tonality, Atonality, Pantonality*, was published in 1958 but left in a fairly advanced version upon his death in 1957.³⁴ The third book, *Thematic Patterns in Sonatas of Beethoven*, seems to have been left in a much less finished state; it was assembled and edited by Deryck Cooke and published in 1967 – a decade after Reti's passing.³⁵ It is worth noting that *The Thematic Process in Music* is a fairly lengthy book, running to 360 pages and almost 500 musical examples. In terms of an extended treatment of thematic and motivic analysis, it is a significant piece of writing and stands up securely on its own. Reti's central concern in *The Thematic Process* arises from a question that seems to have occupied him for most of his adult musical life. In the last chapter of the book, Reti relates a story from his student days:

As a young student of composition, [I] once caused an uproar in class by asking a question which, as the reader may remember, was raised earlier in this study: Why is it that we cannot produce a convincing musical composition by taking a group or a section from one work and linking it to another – even assuming an affinity of key, rhythm, tempo? I feel

32 Ian Bent: *Analysis* (New York, London 1987), 87. It is worth noting that Dunsby, Whittall, Cook, and Bent were based in the UK at the time these remarks were published, while Meyer, Epstein, and Frisch were based in the US.

33 For other detailed examinations of Reti's writing, see Donald Martin Schwejda: *An Investigation of the Analytical Technique Used by Rudolph Reti*, in *The Thematic Process in Music* (Ph.D. Diss. Indiana University 1967); and Eric Elder: *Reading Rudolph Reti: Toward a New Understanding*

of *The Thematic Process in Music* (M.A. Thesis Brandeis University 2016). For a detailed consideration of the writing of Reti, Keller, and Walker, see Stephen J. Davies: *A Discussion of the Theories of Musical Unity Proposed by Rudolph Reti, Hans Keller and Alan Walker* (M.A. Thesis Monash University 1973).

34 Rudolph Reti: *Tonality*, see fn. 11.

35 Rudolph Reti: *Thematic Patterns in Sonatas of Beethoven*. Edited by Deryck Cooke (New York 1967). By limiting my discussion to *The Thematic Process*, I do not mean to

cast aspersions on the two later books. Indeed, aligning these other two volumes with *The Thematic Process* is a worthwhile topic for separate consideration. See also Rudolph Reti: *The Role of Duothematicism in the Evolution of Sonata Form*, in *The Music Review* 17/2 (1956), 110–119; also published as *Die Rolle der Duothematik in der Entwicklung der Sonatenform*, in *Österreichische Musikzeitschrift* 11/9 (September 1956), 306–316.

*as strongly as anyone that this cannot be done, but how is it to be explained in musical, structural terms?*³⁶

In terms of my remarks earlier about Schönberg and organicism, it is clear that Reti is here directly addressing the static aspect of the organic metaphor – that is, how each part of any given piece is convincing only in that particular piece. It is also clear that he firmly believes that such a swapping out of sections from other works is impossible – Reti stands firm on that point throughout the book. So, believing as he does that there is some special something that binds seemingly contrasting music together in a fundamental way, he sets out to discover what that is. In the fifth paragraph of the book, he begins spelling it out:

A great part of the phenomena to be demonstrated may appear even to the most learned musician surprisingly new. For instance, the forthcoming analysis proves through an abundance of examples that in the great works of musical literature the different movements of a composition are connected in thematic unity – a unity that is brought about not merely by a vague affinity of mood but by forming themes from one identical musical substance [...].

*In addition to this thematic homogeneity between movements, our analysis will demonstrate another phenomenon, perhaps on the surface less “sensational,” but which in a sense is no less striking; namely the different themes of one movement – in fact all its groups and parts – are in the last analysis also but variations of one identical thought.*³⁷

For Reti, there is on one hand the obvious fact that thematic material within and between movements is contrasting, but on the other the conviction that beneath the contrast resides a certain similarity, and it is that similarity that gives rise to unity. Reti divides his book into three large parts, each containing several chapters (see Figure 1), and in the first part, entitled “Thematic Homogeneity and Thematic Metamorphosis,” he sets out to demonstrate how seemingly different passages can be shown to share a limited amount of musical material. In one chapter, for instance, he provides an analysis of the themes in Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony*, and in another he argues that the pieces that make up Schumann’s *Kinderszenen* share such an underlying similarity that the work can almost be described as a theme and variations. He writes: “*This work is not a selection of independent pieces but a definite structural unit. In fact, in its architectural design it comes very close to a ‘theme and variations.’*”³⁸ The emphasis in this first part of the book, then, is on demonstrating that connections do in fact exist between themes that might be more typically viewed as contrasting, and Reti provides a fairly organized catalogue of the techniques that can be used to create this hidden unity amidst obvious contrast.

36 Rudolph Reti: *The Thematic Process*, see fn. 1, 348.

37 Ibidem, 4.

38 Ibidem, 31.

Introduction

The Thematic Concept: A Fundamental Element in the Understanding of Musical Art

Part One

Thematic Homogeneity and Thematic Metamorphosis

1. The Thematic Plan of the Ninth Symphony
2. Schumann's Kinderszenen: A "Theme with Variations"
3. Historic Origin: Imitation, Variation, Transformation
4. Various Categories of Transformation

Part Two

The Thematic Process and the Problem of Form in Music

5. Two Form-Building Forces in Music
6. Thematic Evolution and Thematic Resolution
7. Specific Types of Structural Consistency
8. Thematic Key Relationships

Part Three

Evaluation and Wider Outlook

9. Is the Thematic Process Conscious or Subconscious?
10. Root and Growth of the Thematic Principle
11. Bloom and Dissolution of the Thematic Principle
12. Some Final Considerations as to the Nature and Range of the Thematic Process

Figure 1: The organization of Reti's *The Thematic Process in Music*

If this first part of the book stresses the hidden unity of themes, the second part, entitled "The Thematic Process and the Problem of Form," engages the element of contrast. He begins this discussion as follows:

There are two form-building forces in music.

The one, the inner force, comprises those thematic phenomena, the demonstration of which is the purpose of this study.

However, there is also a second form-building force in music, which models its outward shape. It is the method of grouping.³⁹

³⁹ Rudolph Reti: *The Thematic Process*, see fn. 1, 109.

While Reti is mostly concerned with exploring this inner force, his argument requires a clear acknowledgement of the outward shape, which he calls grouping while admitting that everyone else calls this “form.” He needs to engage the issue of form because Reti’s study is a study of *thematic* transformation. It is not a study of motivic transformation and development – motivic analysis is how he brings out the relationships between themes.⁴⁰ If the principal focus is on themes, the theorist needs to engage how it is that one knows what is a theme and what is not. As this second part of the book unfolds, Reti argues that there can be a formal design at work in the ways that themes are transformed, and that this formal design need not align with the form as it is usually conceived. There are thus often two formal designs in play; Reti writes as follows:

[...] *the true structural dynamism of a composition, its “form” in the fullest meaning of the term, can be conceived only by comprehending as a concerted stream both the groups and proportions of its outer shaping and the thematic evolution beneath.*⁴¹

The third and final part of *The Thematic Process* is entitled “Evaluation and Wider Outlook.” To begin this last stage of his argument Reti engages the question of whether the thematic process is conscious or subconscious.⁴² He argues that the processes of thematic transformation that he has been discussing are indeed conscious for the composer. He acknowledges that such processes may be subconscious for listeners, but he is convinced that the great composers were completely aware of much of what he is identifying. He writes:

*It would be alluring to believe that it is subconscious. Such an assumption would open wide avenues of further speculation, and the author must confess that at the beginning of his search he, too, was inclined in that direction. To be sure, even were we to accept the belief that this process was subconscious, this would in no way affect the value of the findings set out in our analysis. However, confronted with the abundant variety of different and irrefutable proofs, the author is now convinced beyond a doubt that it was, at least in the representative works of the great musical literature, essentially a conscious process.*⁴³

40 See also Rudolf Klein: Rudolph Retis Erkenntnisse, see fn. 16, 466.

41 Rudolph Reti: *The Thematic Process*, see fn. 1, 114.

42 See also Nicholas Cook: *A Guide to Musical Analysis*, see fn. 29, 113.

43 Rudolph Reti: *The Thematic Process*, see fn. 35, 233.

Reti and Goethean phenomenology

While what has been provided here is only a brief summary of the main claims of Reti's book, our discussion nonetheless suggests that there is more to *The Thematic Process* than usually makes it into accounts that trace the legacy of Schönbergian thematic and motivic analysis. In addition to the similarities with Schönberg's theories that have been identified thus far, Reti's method also resonates sympathetically with Schönberg's. Reti's interpretive approach, as Cook rightly suggests, is to study a piece until the unity reveals itself to the mind's eye (ear), and then try to express this unity in analysis. The notion of studying a variety of themes in a work until the common shape reveals itself strongly suggests the influence of Goethe's scientific writing. Of course, such a process could arise from any number of sources, but the fact that Goethe's scientific writing has been shown to play a role in the thinking of Schönberg, Hauer, Schenker, and Webern suggests that Goethe's phenomenology may have been a model for Reti (recall the *Urpflanze* debate with Schiller or Goethe's writing about it in *Italian Journey*).⁴⁴ It is also worth noting that *The Thematic Process* was written when Reti was in his sixties, thus after several decades of living with the music he is discussing. The hermeneutic circle comprised of the constant movement between part and whole, both within a piece and between pieces within the musical tradition that Reti worked in over many years, likely made this a book that he could not have written in the same way, or with the same richness, earlier in life.

What unity means for Reti and what it means for Schönberg

There are many passages in *The Thematic Process* that are almost paraphrases of familiar ones from the Schönberg essays. Consider this passage, for instance:

*Having worked our way through the various stages of this investigation, we may have become increasingly aware of the fascinating fact that music is created from sound as life is created from matter [...]. In an astoundingly analogous way one musical motif, one theme releases another as an expression of its own innermost idea, yet the latter is a being entirely different from the first. The theme lives through the motifs from which it is formed, the work through its themes; yet the theme and the highest unit, the work, are each entities in their own right, announcing their own message. And the act of creation is centered in this very process by which a musical idea emerges as a consequence of another, as a thing which is part of the given world, yet which has never existed before.*⁴⁵

44 See John Covach: Schoenberg's (Analytical) Gaze, see fn. 2, for a fuller summary of the relationship of Goethean science to Schoenberg's writing and music.

45 Rudolph Reti: *The Thematic Process*, see fn. 35, 359.

One is tempted to add, recalling the Schönberg remarks cited above, “so that it becomes a comprehensible message ‘to whom it may concern.’”⁴⁶

While this discussion has focused on the similarities, there are also important differences between Reti and Schönberg. For instance, Reti’s writing mostly lacks reference to the spiritual dimension of music, except to say that such interpretations and meanings will differ from listener to listener. Unlike Schönberg, there is no mention of the Supreme Commander, Swedenborg’s heaven, nor Balzac’s *Séraphîta*.⁴⁷ For Reti, unity is important principally in understanding compositional artistry and mastery. Another, more technical difference has to do with the discussions of thematic and motivic development. Though Reti uses language that embraces the notion that material develops, he does not devote much consideration to the logic by which such development occurs. There is not the same emphasis on motivic consequences nor on the introduction of musical imbalance and then restoration of musical balance as can be found in much of Schönberg’s writing. From a Schönbergian perspective, one might argue that Reti identifies variations, transformations, recombinations, and many other such things, but he does not offer a rationale for why they should be seen to develop per se; it sometimes seems that for Reti these things constitute development simply because they happen in a certain succession. It is also important to bear in mind, as noted above, that Reti’s is a theory of thematic transformation, not of motivic transformation; Reti is thus primarily concerned with how unity is present behind multiple contrasting themes, not primarily with how a particular set of motives may generate all of the important material in a given piece.

Much of the criticism of Reti’s work has been that he simply gets the analysis wrong. For the purposes of tracing the Schönbergian analytical legacy, I am not much concerned with whether Reti’s analyses are “right” or “correct.” As stated above, the analyses are not the main point of this book. I can readily understand how, in a book that averages more than one musical example per page, one could get the idea that the analyses are the primary concern. Indeed, Reti frequently interrupts the flow of his arguments with analyses, making it seem like he is so excited about a particular instance that he cannot refrain from adding it to the mix. But Reti’s main point in *The Thematic Process* is to demonstrate that there is unity in diversity across this repertoire – that hidden just behind contrast is similarity. One might study a piece and find

46 Arnold Schoenberg: Composition with Twelve Tones, see fn. 4, 103.

47 It is worth noting that Schönberg’s references to Swedenborg, Balzac, and the Supreme Commander had their origins in a public lecture, not in an extended music-theoretical study. Ibidem, 113.

that the unity is different from the way Reti hears it, or one may agree with him but have a better way of showing it analytically. At a number of points in the book, Reti welcomes this. To complain that he gets a particular analysis wrong, executes it poorly, or is looking for the wrong motives is the result of a fundamental misunderstanding of the project. If one wants to take issue with *The Thematic Process*, then argue that the unity Reti is striving to uncover is not there, not always there, or maybe there but in a different way.⁴⁸ Or argue that unity is the wrong thing to be looking for.⁴⁹

Reti's argument is much more far-reaching than any single analysis he provides. In fact, the principal points he makes could still stand even if one considered every analysis in the book to be flawed; though as we have seen, many have found Reti's analyses to be insightful. In his 1961 review of the British edition of *The Thematic Process*, Alan Walker offers a sympathetic tribute to *The Thematic Process*, acknowledging its imperfections while nicely capturing Reti's accomplishment:

[...] *The Thematic Process remains a major musical achievement, one of the important musical landmarks in the autobiography of our time. Reti's thesis is bigger than his book, even. Perhaps his greatest achievement is that no one knew this better than Reti. He regarded his work as merely a preliminary survey. But it is, for me at any rate, a fundamental one.*⁵⁰

48 David Epstein: *Beyond Orpheus*, see fn. 26, ends up demonstrating unity in a different way, partly through combining Schönbergian and Schenkerian approaches.

49 See Alan Street: Superior Myths, Dogmatic Allegories. The Resistance to Musical Unity, in *Music Analysis* 8/1–2 (March–July 1989), 77–123 for a thoughtful consideration of musical unity. See also Robert Morgan: The Concept of Unity and Musical Analysis, in *Music Analysis* 22/1–2 (March–July 2003), 7–50.

50 Alan Walker: Review of Rudolph Reti, *The Thematic Process in Music*, in *Tempo* 59 (Autumn 1961), 34.