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**A Glimpse of Heaven. Complex Emotions in the
First Movement of Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 31, op. 110**

As students and practitioners of music, we routinely take for granted the ability of music to express and elicit emotion; however, we are only beginning to understand the compositional and cognitive processes that allow for the communication of emotional states through music. While straightforward emotions like happiness, sadness, and agitation are easily depicted, cognitively complex emotions – for example, resignation, transcendence, or triumph – are more difficult to express musically. This raises several questions: to what degree can complex emotions be reliably “written into” seemingly absolute music? What musical signals do composers use to communicate specific emotions, and how do our minds pick up on them? More specifically, what musical devices can a composer call upon to express a given complex emotion? And what mechanisms underlie our perceptions, as listeners, of such complex emotions in music?

To address these questions fully, we must draw upon theories of emotional expression that lie outside the confines of music theory; including but not limited to cognitive psychology, linguistics, semiotics, neurobiology, and philosophy. I will synthesize several of these approaches in an analysis of the first movement of Ludwig van Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 31, op. 110 (1821). My analysis aims to demonstrate how, in this movement, Beethoven evokes a succession of emotional states – from tenderness and serenity to radiant joy – and organizes them into an expressive trajectory that portrays a perceived agent's journey towards musical and spiritual transcendence. Additionally, my reading will serve as a blueprint from which to posit the expression of cognitively complex emotions in other works of “absolute music”.

Firstly, what is a “cognitively complex emotion”? For the purposes of this discussion, a complex emotion is defined as a multifaceted one that goes beyond or encompasses more than one of the simple emotions of happiness, sadness, or anger. Examples of cognitively complex emotions include hope, resignation, pride, triumph, *Schadenfreude*, wistfulness, and the bittersweet. It will also be useful to define some terms, borrowed from Robert Hatten, which I will employ throughout this discussion. Aesthetically Warranted Emotions (AWE) are defined as listener-perceived emotions that are motivated by features present in the music, such as dynamic profile, articulation, contour, register, or other indicators. Additionally, a Composed Expressive Trajectory (CET)¹ refers to the ordered

1 For a more nuanced discussion of AWEs and CETs, see Robert S. Hatten: Aesthetically Warranted Emotion and Composed Expressive Trajectories in Music, in: *Musical Analysis* 29 (2011), pp. 83–101.

presentation, development, and interaction of expressive states within a piece as conceived by the composer. We will also engage with Hatten's ideas of virtual agency, in which an entity, even a protagonist, is perceived as acting upon or being acted upon by the musical landscape;² and of *markedness*, which refers to a musical gesture that diverges from its surroundings and takes on special meaning. With these concepts in mind, I will now turn to Beethoven's sonata.

As the opening thematic material unfolds, Beethoven already provides plentiful evidence of the work's expressive content. The initial tempo marking ("cantabile", or in a singing style) and expressive instructions, like "con amabilità", translatable as "amiably" or "in a lovable manner", are the most immediately apparent indicators of the mood intended by the composer; however, several other musical parameters of expressive significance are suggested here too. First the choice of key signature: various late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century writers described the tonality of A-flat major as: "[suggestive of] splendid majesty" (Kellner, 1787; Heinse, 1795); "gentle ... affable" (Vogler, 1812); "ethereal ... tender" (Hoffmann, 1814); "the most lovely of the tribe ... gentle, soft, delicate ... for the expression of the most refined sentiments" (Gardiner, 1817); "deep, intimate feeling ... sympathy" (Müller, 1830); "... [expressing] a presentiment of the life hereafter or of a higher happiness" (Hand, 1837).³ Thus Beethoven can convey quite a bit of information about the piece's aesthetically warranted emotional palette before the music even begins.

The opening gestures contribute further to the work's expressive vocabulary while also revealing its motivic building blocks. The initial tonic chord is expanded by a voice exchange between scale degrees $\hat{1}$ and $\hat{3}$ outlining a motivically significant third relationship; the gesture's inherent contrary motions, which persist throughout the movement, imparts a sense of fluidity and forward momentum that comes to play a pivotal role in the piece's musical portrayal of ascension and transcendence. Rhythmically, the entire four-bar passage is reminiscent of a *sarabande*, which, as Robert Hatten and Jenefer Robinson have pointed out, is topically suggestive of musical profundity and dignity.⁴

- 2 A more detailed discussion of the various types of agency can be found in Robert S. Hatten: *Musical Agency as Implied by Gesture and Emotion. Its Consequences for Listeners' Experiencing of Musical Emotion*, in: *Semiotics 2009. "The Semiotics of Time"*. Proceedings of the 34th Annual Meeting of the Semiotic Society of America, ed. by Karen Haworth, Leonard Sbrocchi and Jason Hogue, Toronto 2010, pp. 162–169.
- 3 The preceding descriptions are quoted in Rita Steblin: *A History of Key Characteristics in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries*, 2nd ed., Rochester 2002, pp. 276–278. Additionally, Steblin notes Beethoven's careful consideration of keys and their characteristics on pp. 140–143.
- 4 Jenefer Robinson/Robert S. Hatten: *Emotions in Music*, in: *Music Theory Spectrum* 34 (2012), pp. 71–106, here p. 90.

By measure 3, the tonic triad has already been outlined; however, Beethoven's soprano line continues upward, reaching $\wedge 6$ over a portato articulation at the end of the bar before falling back to $\wedge 5$ in bar 4. Both the articulation of $\wedge 6$ and the portato are of expressive significance here. The addition of $\wedge 6$ to the passage's melodic vocabulary imparts a pentatonic flavour, which in turn connotes a pastoral topic with implications of innocence, serenity, and connection to the earth;⁵ the portato is itself an inherently "tactile" gesture, and its gentle prodding mirrors that of a person consoling, comforting, or encouraging another via sympathetic touch.⁶ The fourth measure, which stands on the dominant, expands and ornaments the soprano line in the manner of an operatic aria; additionally, Beethoven reinvoles $\wedge 6$ via a pair of thirds on the final beat of that bar. The motivic and expressive content of this single measure is remarkably rich, given that it not only reinforces the importance of thirds in the piece (via the 32nd-note turn and the double grace-note figure leading up to F), but also introduces the notion of a virtual *agent* serving as the vocalist (which I will subsequently address with female pronouns for convenience, perhaps also owing to the high "vocal" register) within the passage, whose approach to, and fall from $\wedge 6$ suggests that she may be yearning to reach beyond, or transcend, the hexachord that has just been laid out.

The songlike second phrase of the primary theme area (P2), spanning measures 5–12, justifies the introduction of the *arioso* gestures in the previous measure and confirms the identity of the "singing" agent. At first glance, the phrase appears to consist of nothing more than a straightforward, tuneful aria; however, this small passage opens up a network of complex emotional and cognitive associations that enable us to understand the work's expressive trajectory more clearly. As Isabelle Peretz has discussed in her essay "Towards a Neurobiology of Music and Emotion", the invocation of a singing style or *arioso* topic (suggested in this passage by its prominent, lyrical melodic line and unobtrusive chordal accompaniment) causes us not only to infer the presence of the aforementioned "singing agent", but also to process the melody's contour, dynamics, articulation, and tempo through the same cognitive pathways that govern the processing of spoken vocal utterances.⁷ Thus, we cognitively map the melody's musical parameters onto conventional

- 5 For an extensive discussion on the pastoral genre, see Robert S. Hatten: *Interpreting Musical Gestures, Topics, and Tropes*, Bloomington 2004, pp. 53–67.
- 6 The notion of musical gestures gaining meaning by mirroring human gestures is congruent with both Peter Kivy's "doggy theory" as discussed in Jenefer Robinson: *Deeper than Reason. Emotion and its Role in Literature, Music, and Art*, Oxford 2005, pp. 300 ff., and Suzanne Langer's notion of non-discursive symbolism, also discussed *ibid.*, pp. 298–300.
- 7 Isabelle Peretz: *Towards a Neurobiology of Musical Emotions*, in: *Handbook of Music and Emotion. Theory, Research, Applications*, ed. by Patrik N. Juslin and John A. Sloboda, New York 2010, pp. 99–119, here pp. 114–119.

patterns of vocal prosody, interpreting it as we would a spoken phrase delivered in the same manner. As a result, the soprano's wide ambitus (C₅ to F₆), moderate tempo, "soft" articulation, balanced dynamic contour, and almost exclusively diatonic harmonic language convey a state of high valence and moderate arousal (just as spoken language delivered in this tone would be perceived), indicative of such emotional states as contentment, tenderness, serenity, and gentle radiance.⁸ Against this expressive background, several specific features of the phrase emerge. One is the register of the melody: its tessitura is far higher than most soprano arias, so that this "song" transcends the normal limitations of the human voice, thus reinforcing the idea of transcendence that will prove central to my analysis of the movement's expressive trajectory. The reactivation of $\wedge 6$ in bars 9–10 (not only in the melody, but also in the bass) combines the notion of (attempted) transcendence of the tonic triad with a recollection of the opening phrase, again reaching F via a portato gesture, then falling to E-flat in bar 11 to prepare for an elided cadence in A-flat. As we can see, Beethoven provides a wealth of information about the expressive trajectory in the twelve short measures of this sonata movement's primary theme area.

As the exposition proceeds, it diverges in several ways from the harmonic and formal conventions popularly associated with the Classic-era sonata form, yet these divergences are far from arbitrary; in fact, they play a pivotal role in advancing the work's *Composed Expressive Trajectory*. (The following discussion centers on measures 15–28.) The sonata exposition's transition material, characterized by the fluttering 32nd-note arpeggiations that grow out of the elided authentic cadence in bar 12 (sometimes labeled "angel wings", perhaps after the 19th-century critic E. T. A. Hoffmann),⁹ gives way to a new thematic idea in measure 20 (S1), which unfolds in the uppermost register of Beethoven's piano and gives the impression of floating above the pastoral landscape depicted in the opening. At this point, however, the dominant key of E-flat has not yet been definitively articulated with a half or full cadence, as would be expected at the start of the secondary theme area. William Caplin thus describes this new theme as having a *continuing* function within the exposition, rather than the *initiating* function that would normally be assigned to it.¹⁰ As a consequence, the expected harmonic arrival on E-flat is deferred, remaining a goal to be achieved, and the forward momentum of the passage is maintained. It is not until

8 The correlation between low complexity on the musical surface and average dynamism was found by Imberty to result in the perception of positive emotions (1979); this study is discussed in Alf Gabrielson/Erik Lindström: *The Role of Structure in the Musical Expression of Emotions*, in: *Handbook of Music and Emotion*, pp. 367–400, here p. 372.

9 See Steblin: *A History of Key Characteristics*, p. 147.

10 William E. Caplin/Nathan John Martin: *The "Continuous Exposition" and the Concept of Subordinate Theme*, in: *Musical Analysis* (online) (2015), <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/musa.12060/abstract> (2 December 2016).

measure 28, eight bars after the introduction of *SI*, that the bass finally tumbles down to a root-position E-flat harmony, marking the affirmation of the new tonal area that should have been articulated in bar 20. As Eugene Narmour's idea of "cognitive exhilaration" suggests,¹¹ this delayed gratification intensifies the already positive emotional palette that would ordinarily be associated with the fulfillment of our harmonic expectation here. This achievement is further emphasized by another event that occurs nearly simultaneously in the soprano: its arrival on a high B-flat, the culmination of an accelerated upward drive that began in earnest in bar 24. The resultant outward "wedge" motion of the bass and soprano augments what Elizabeth Margulis calls the *expectancy tension*¹² already planted in our minds by the deferral of the definitive E-flat harmony. Consequently, the arrival of the dominant is experienced by the agent (and perhaps by us) as more than a mere satisfaction of expectations – an exaltation and triumph over the harmonic obstacles of the previous eight measures. This triumph can be understood as a cognitively complex emotion that arises out of the succession of harmonic deferrals leading up to the dominant arrival.

The remainder of the exposition, which concludes in bar 38, further develops the emotional trajectory of our agent's journey by alluding to both standard topical gestures and motivic signifiers from within the piece. Immediately following the aforementioned arrival of E-flat major in root position in measure 28, Beethoven refers back to the idea of contrary motion first presented in the opening theme; however, in this passage (*S2*) he has included a static tenor line to which the bass moves in sometimes-dissonant oblique motion. This oblique motion and resulting 2-3 suspensions allude to a "learned" musical topic, in this case evoking stoic/heroic sentiments (via the unwavering tenor line), inner determination (of the musical protagonist, who continues to strive towards greater heights), and affirmation (of the new key area). Since this passage is also motivically linked to *PI*, via the outer-voice contrary motions, it also invokes the pastoral atmosphere of the latter; the result of this conceptual blending is a trope, which allows for the emergence of a new, more complex emotion: that of the agent's inner, spiritual triumph that transcends the physiological and cognitive satisfaction of having arrived at the E-flat root-position chord.

11 Eugene Narmour: *The Analysis and Cognition of Basic Melodic Structures. The Implication-Realization Model*, Chicago 1990, p. 121.

12 "Expectancy tension", in Margulis' usage, refers to the heightened alertness, almost an anxiety, that one feels when an expected outcome is withheld or deferred. For a more detailed discussion, see David Huron/Elizabeth Margulis: *Musical Expectancy and Thrills*, in: *Handbook of Music and Emotion*, pp. 575–604, here pp. 587–589. I should also note that I am expanding on Margulis's theory a bit here, given that she applies it strictly to the perception of melodic strands.

Although the definitive establishment of E-flat is certainly a pivotal point in the secondary theme area, perhaps the most striking moment in the exposition occurs on the downbeat of measure 31, when the soprano eclipses its earlier B-flat and soars to a high C – ^6 in the new key of E-flat – supported by a II6/5 in the baritone register. Given that the previous B-flat had been framed as a point of arrival in the soprano voice, the fact that it is surpassed so soon is unexpected; furthermore, the II6/5 is accented with a *sforzando* and set off by a dotted eighth-note rest (Caplin/Martin analyze this as the deferral of a cadence).¹³ The effect of this gesture is one of surprise and amazement, which may manifest itself through what Huron refers to as a *frisson*, or “thrills and chills” elicited by contextually poignant, or marked, musical moments.¹⁴ The presence of the local ^6 in the soprano also links this moment to the primary theme area, during which the agent’s soprano voice consistently reached beyond or transcended the tonic triad by articulating ^6. After this predominant gesture, the soprano falls dramatically, as if back to earth; the dominant then sounds in a reverently reflective chorale texture. The expected authentic cadence is deferred in bar 32, and the agent seems to recall its sudden descent from the heights, as the soprano voice tumbles nearly two octaves down the chromatic scale. Following another attempt, the cadence is finally achieved in bar 34. This ushers in the closing theme, with alto-voice 4-3 suspensions connoting a spiritually intimate, religious topic – perhaps evoking the agent’s meditation or reflection upon the progress of this journey.

The development section, which spans a mere 16 measures (40–55), opens with the more melancholy state of f minor, the agent quietly reflecting upon the events of the exposition, and searching for a way to re-enter the heavenly realm. The thematic material, based on P1 with the *arioso* P2 theme accompaniment, initially attempts to establish f minor; however, it soon begins sinking through a descending-third sequence of keys (first to d-flat and then b-flat minor), as if slipping away from the heavens while searching for a key center on which to anchor itself. The left hand echoes this sentiment of searching with a contrapuntal, *ricercar*-like, running 16ths accompaniment (measures 44–55) that at the same time recalls the learned topic invoked in the second theme. In measure 55 the agent finds a way out of this melancholic state which is “scooped up”, via an active dominant harmony and rhythmic acceleration, into the more pastoral, comforting tonic of A-flat.

The agent’s emotional journey continues into the sonata recapitulation: for the opening, the *arioso* P2 is transformed into a sweeping chorus over the glittering “angel

¹³ Caplin/Martin: The “Continuous Exposition”.

¹⁴ See David Huron: *Sweet Anticipation. Music and the Psychology of Expectation*, Cambridge 2006; as well as Huron/Margulis: *Musical Expectancy and Thrills*, pp. 575–604.

wings” first heard in the transition area. The agent soon returns to this *arioso* with its original accompaniment in the subdominant of D-flat major; however, this reprise is soon transformed. The *arioso* begins in bar 63 as a literal transposition of $\mathfrak{p}2$, but in measure 67 the passage is suddenly recast in the parallel minor (notated for practical reasons as c# minor), perhaps revealing a touch of sadness as the persona indulges in a nostalgic reminiscence. This minor-mode inflection soon gives way to a more wondrous tonal transformation, the shift to radiant E major (a notational substitute for F-flat, or flat VI) achieved in measure 70. This arrival is marked by the sparkling “angel wings” that ushered in both the transition and recapitulation of the exposition; additionally, the key of E major refers indirectly to the exposition, expanding upon the motivic $\wedge 6$ in the form of a major-mode tonicization. Our agent continues to bask, seemingly awestruck (given the hushed *piano* dynamic marking), in the glow of E major as the transitional material gives way to $\mathfrak{s}1$.

Although a normative sonata form would now proceed with the recapitulation of $\mathfrak{s}1$ in the tonic; in this case, $\mathfrak{s}1$ begins on the subdominant of E major, as if the agent might be feeling reluctant to abandon the heavenly realms opened up by the tonicization of that key. On the last beat of measure 77 the music slips chromatically downwards before slowly regaining its footing on the downbeat of bar 78, before finally climbing up to a restatement of $\mathfrak{s}1$ in the “correct” key of A-flat. (This climb is assisted by the same comforting, empathetic portato articulation that appeared in $\mathfrak{p}1$.) This curious episode seems to convey a reluctance to reenter earthly dwellings after having been treated to a glimpse of the heavens and the realm of the transcendent.

Throughout the recapitulation, our agent continues to chase after the fully transcendent state that has seemingly remained just beyond her grasp, as demonstrated by the persistent “reaching over” the tonic triad to $\wedge 6$ and the failure to ascend through the full octave to A-flat. It is only in the coda that this milestone comes within reach. The coda opens with a recollection of the closing theme in bars 97–100, which is followed by a four-voice chorale passage that settles on the dominant. This short chorale carries with it a host of important topical associations that inform my reading of the subsequent musical events. The hymn-like texture invokes the church and religious topics, and by extension, profundity, and antiquity. These associations are reinforced by the unusual progression in bar 104, in which minor VI proceeds directly to V, as it might in a more modal musical language. The chorale texture then gives way to the “angel wings” passage, which initially proceeds much as it did in the exposition; that is until bar 109, when the harmonic rhythm quickens and the upper register gains greater momentum, soaring from $\wedge 3$ to $\wedge 5$ and reaching $\wedge 6$ by bar 110. It is in bar 110 that our agent achieves what she was seemingly unable to accomplish throughout the piece: finally transcending $\wedge 6$ and ascending through the full octave. This moment marks the final realization of the impli-

cation, in Narmour's terms,¹⁵ that is set up by a scalar ascent to $\wedge 6$; Margulis would refer to this as the resolution of melodic expectancy tension¹⁶ (as well as denial tension) built up by the agent's continual failure to advance beyond $\wedge 6$. Once the agent reaches this long-term goal, the music relaxes, quietly reflecting on the closing theme, p1 and the "angel wings" before concluding serenely on an uplifting, open-ended tonic triad, gently transporting us back to the Arcadian landscape from which our journey began.

Taking into account my readings of the preceding score excerpts, we can now begin to construct composed expressive trajectory of this sonata movement. As we saw in the first two excerpts, the piece opens in a serene, pastoral landscape inhabited by an individual virtual agent or persona. This persona already strongly wishes to reach beyond her present environment to achieve spiritual transcendence and fulfillment; her persistent impetus to soar ever higher is harmonically reinforced by the consistent use of linear, contrary motions and deferred cadential gestures. The transitional "angel wings" arpeggiations (which, tellingly, also pervade the recapitulation) foreshadow the visions of heavenly glory that the agent will strive for as her journey unfolds. Her continuous ascent is further encouraged by Beethoven's blurring of structural boundaries around the second theme, which allows a sense of forward and upward momentum to be maintained in the music; furthermore, the unorthodox placement of thematic and harmonic arrivals elicits tensions of expectancy and denial in us, as both Beethoven's listeners and the agent's empathetic observers. The marked moments in measures 28 and 31 serve as small glimpses of the transcendent state toward which the persona strives, and after having witnessed these, she is left to meditate reverently on the wonders that await her in the recapitulation.

The opening of the recapitulation finds the agent being swept up into the angels' wings, with two more voices now joining in her aria. A transformation of the p1 theme ushers in a subdominant reprise of the aria proper, which in turn serves as a gateway to a still more radiant vision of the angels, appropriately cast in E major. Our awestruck agent revels in the glory of this vision for perhaps a little too long, for she begins traversing the s1 theme in E major before self-correcting in bars 77–78 and revisiting s1 in the normative A-flat. The coda provides a means by which the agent may embark on one last attempt to strive towards ultimate transcendence; indeed in measure 110 she miraculously soars above the ever-present $\wedge 6$ and articulates, for the first time, a full ascending octave line. Our agent has finally transcended the hexachord that had previously bound her to earth; now her journey is complete, reflected by the serene poetic closure of the movement's final imperfect authentic cadence.

15 The implication/realization theory is outlined in Narmour: *The Analysis and Cognition of Basic Melodic Structures*, pp. 3 ff.

16 Huron/Margulis: *Musical Expectancy and Thrills*, pp. 587–589.

I should nuance my reading by saying that, while Beethoven clearly maps out a composed expressive trajectory in his sonata movement (beginning with tender serenity and continuing with episodes of exaltation, reverence, triumph, and wonder, to name just a few), as a means of communicating emergent complex emotions (such as transcendence), we are of course not obligated, as listeners, to experience the same succession of emotions within ourselves or view the piece's agency in the same manner. In this piece, I find it most convenient to map the procession of emotional states, and therefore the resultant complex emotions, onto the virtual agent inferred by the *arioso* P2 theme. Consequently, we are invited to observe the virtual agent through our listening, and we may choose how much or how little to empathize with that character.

With this discussion, I hope to have provided a means by which analysts, performers, composers, teachers, and students can apply existing theories of emotional engagement with music to more readily access, decode and concretize complex emotional signals in a variety of repertoires. In turn, a deeper understanding of these signals will equip us to discuss emotional expression in music in clearer language, directly benefiting our endeavors in musical performance, pedagogy, and scholarship. Through my analysis of Beethoven's penultimate piano sonata, my aim was to demonstrate the potential of a piece of instrumental music to depict a vivid, multifaceted emotional trajectory, one in which we are indeed treated to a "glimpse of heaven".

Inhalt

Vorwort 8

KEYNOTES

Markus Böggemann Kompositionslehre und Wissenspopularisierung.
Ausdifferenzierung und Verbreitungsformen musiktheoretischen
Wissens im 19. Jahrhundert 11

Thomas Christensen Monumentale Texte, verborgene Theorie 21

AUFSÄTZE

Torsten Mario Augenstein »Schockweise Quint- und Oktavparallelen«. Die
Generalbass-Aussetzungen der italienischen Duette und Trios von Johannes
Brahms für Friedrich Chrysanders Händel-Gesamtausgabe von 1870 und 1880 33

Wendelin Bitzan Die Initialkadenz als Eröffnungstopos im Klavierschaffen Franz
Liszts. Zum Fortwirken eines tradierten Generalbassmodells im 19. Jahrhundert 51

Jürgen Blume Die Fugenkonzeption des Theoretikers und
Komponisten Anton André 61

Leopold Brauneiss Conus' Theorie der Metrotektonik und
ihre Aneignung durch Skrjabin 82

Julian Caskel »Metrische Hasen« und »tonale Igel«. Zur Theorie des
Tutti-Schlusses am Beispiel von Haydns Londoner Sinfonien 91

Felix Diergarten Joachim Hoffmann.
Ein Kompositionslehrer in Schuberts Wien 103

Nicole E. DiPaolo A Glimpse of Heaven. Complex Emotions
in the First Movement of Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 31, op. 110 115

Martin Ebeling Konsonanztheorien des 19. Jahrhunderts 124

Stefan Eckert Vom Tonbild zum Tonstück.
Wilhelm Dyckerhoffs Compositions-Schule (1870–1876) 139

Florian Edler Carl Maria von Webers und Giacomo Meyerbeers
Rezeption der Choralatzlehre Georg Joseph Voglers 149

Thomas Fesefeldt Der Wiener Klaviertanz
bei Schubert und seinen Zeitgenossen 162

Ludwig Holtmeier	»Accord«, »disposition«, »face«, »Griff«, »Trias harmonica«. Überlegungen zum Akkordbegriff des 18. Jahrhunderts	171
Ariane Jeßulat	Intellectum tibi dabo. Zur Soziologie des Kontrapunkts	189
Martin Kapeller	Gleichzeitiges und Ungleichzeitiges. Was man von historischen Tondokumenten über Tempo rubato erfahren kann	201
Stephan Lewandowski	Franz Liszts späte Klavierwerke. Vorboten der Post-Tonalität	212
Nathalie Meidhof	Tradition und Revolution. Zur Beurteilung von Charles Simon Catels <i>Traité d'harmonie</i>	218
Johannes Menke	Das Projekt »Dreiklang«. Natur und Technik bei Logier, Weitzmann, Wagner und Liszt	228
Astrid Opitz	Altes in neuem Gewand. Zur Rolle des Generalbasses bei Robert Schumann	241
Birger Petersen	Rheinbergers Bassübungen für die Harmonielehre und die Partimento-Tradition im 19. Jahrhundert	252
Tihomir Popović	»A perfect knowledge of Oriental music«. Britische Autoren der Kolonialzeit über indische Musik und Musiktheorie	263
Christian Raff	»Veränderte Reprisen« in der Claviermusik der Wiener Klassiker?	272
Rob Schultz	Melodic Contour, Musical Diachrony and the Paradigmatic/Syntagmatic Divide in Frédéric Chopin's Waltz in B Minor	284
Markus Sotirianos	»Impressionismus« vor 1830? Bemerkungen zu Schuberts Lied <i>Die Stadt</i>	293
Kilian Sprau	Das Lied als Fragment. Zur Frage der Zyklizität in Liedkompositionen des 19. Jahrhunderts	302
Marco Targa	The Romantic Sonata Form in Theory and Practice	312
Clotilde Verwaerde	From Continuo Methods to Harmony Treatises. Reorientation of the Educational Goals in France (1700–1850)	322
Stephan Zirwes/Martin Skamletz	Beethoven als Schüler Albrechtsbergers. Zwischen Fugenübung und freier Komposition	334
Namen-, Werk- und Ortsregister		351
Die Autorinnen und Autoren der Beiträge		358

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