

The Technique of Content-Analysis:
Preliminary Observations

The goal of content-analysis must be to grasp the ruling idea or dominant "expressive" or "generic" logic that guides an entire movement (or sequence of movements). Content-analysis seeks to awaken a piece out of its "seclusion," its state of being taken-for-granted. Its principal method is that of asking questions of the piece--questions that bring each portion of the work to expressive life, that release the communicable content of a piece. The "skill" involved, of course, lies in knowing which questions are appropriate to ask (for a piece will generally also "answer" inappropriate questions--but usually with foolish or irrelevant answers). Acquiring this skill is a matter of historical knowledge and experience in the method of questioning.

STEP ONE: Know thoroughly the model (or genre) within which the composer is working. (That is, know the "default" gestures, the normative strategies for each portion of such a piece.) These include: expected rhythmic, melodic, or textural features; melodic types (or topoi) for each section; relative proportions; areas where "resolutions" or new "tonicizations" are expected; standard expectations about how "melodic," "rounded," or "complete" each section is supposed to be; and so on.

- a) Then consider the "world-view" of this model. What conception of the human being is implied by this model? (For instance, in the "sonata" model, the world-view is typically one of balance, symmetry, proportion, taste, "rational" resolutions of clearly stated tensions, and so on. This proceeds out the 18th-century "Enlightenment" model of the balanced human being.)

STEP TWO: Begin with a thorough (traditional) musical "analysis" of the piece. The particular "angle" of this analysis, however, will be to highlight differences from the model. What is idiosyncratic about the piece? Where are default gestures overridden? Are unusual keys visited anywhere? Are the themes complete or incomplete? Tonics asserted solidly? Modal changes (major-minor) in unexpected places? Proportions unusual? For concertos: is the cadenza in an odd place, suppressed, or altered in some way? Who did such things before this composer and this piece?

- a) NB: Creating any such "differences" (that is, producing an "individualized" work) involves the composer overriding the default gestures of the genre. Note at least the most significant of these differences.

- b) Similarly, note those portions of the piece that do not differ from the model. These, too, are compositional choices. Adhering to default or normative choices within a genre tends to affirm the "world-view" of the genre. The "normative" aspects can thus be "expressive" in a "generic" way (expressing what the genre "says" through the piece). The normative, "generic" expression can often have a rather large place within the composition.
- c) NB: Any given piece can be considered a "dialogue" between the "world-view" of the genre and the "individual view" of the specific piece. There is a dialectical tension here, between the model and its individual treatment.

STEP THREE: Compare with special care the appearances of any repeated sections. Is the repetition shortened? expanded? Are there interpolations? A breaking-off of the repetition? (Why here? What's the point of this compositional choice?) Are "symmetry and balance" given the privileged positions? Or are they overridden by "growth and change"? By how much? And how does this affect the piece as a whole?

STEP FOUR: Try to uncover a "chronological" or "temporal" pattern in the presentation of these differences. That is, as the piece unfolds, does the succession of differences chart out a coherent expressive (or "narrative") track? Where is the underlying coherence in the composer's selection of Differences A, B, C, D, E, and so on? How do they relate to one another? Do the differences early in the piece have consequences later?

- a) With regard to the pattern that you chart: generally considered, it should be one reasonably plausible within the composer's own time (i.e., it must be historically plausible). Sometimes historical or biographical knowledge is crucial here, along with your discoveries of plausibly "intentional" inner quotations, allusions, or topoi.
- b) Avoid ad hoc narratives that are not grounded in historical plausibility. Be cautious. Do not overreach.
- c) Avoid "narratives" that are unnecessarily specific (that is, overly "programmatic"/imagistic narratives that lack historical grounding). These usually sound naive and amateurish. Often underlying a particular "program" is a more "abstract" narrative of tensions, blockings, postponed resolutions, etc. Without clear reason we need not proceed beyond the abstract level. This level is always grounded in the musical analysis of the piece. Content-analysis works with, not against, musical analysis.