

SEARCHING FOR MEANING: MELODIC PATTERNS, COMBINATIONS, AND EMBELLISHMENTS

ABSTRACT

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I am interested in the search for musical patterns -- not so much because I want to find particular patterns, but because I want to understand musical meaning and I believe that musical meaning is something that listeners create when they relate musical patterns to one another, and when they relate musical patterns to other sorts of patterns.

I describe a theory of musical meaning that argues that experienced listeners of tonal music hear musical motion metaphorically, as purposeful action within a dynamic field of musical forces (musical gravity, magnetism, and inertia). That theory has been used to clarify issues in Schenkerian theory, to analyze music in many styles, to improve the training of musicians, to account for experimental results in melodic expectation, to explain striking regularities in published analyses of tonal music, and even to illuminate the phenomenon of "swing" in jazz.

The assumptions of that theory generate a small set of patterns and pattern combinations. This small set of patterns crops up over and over again in tonal music. Recognizing these patterns and their significance requires seeing how they are embellished in particular pieces. I illustrate these patterns, their combinations and embellishments, and something about their meaning by analyzing several folk songs, including "Ah, vous dirai-je, Maman" and Mozart's variations on it.

The ubiquity of this small set of patterns raises interesting questions about searching for musical patterns, about the role of computers in information retrieval vs their role in musical artificial intelligence, and about musical meaning. My presentation ends with a series of such questions.