

1-1-2022

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Recommended Citation

Wentz, Allison (2022) "Review of Understanding Post-Tonal Music and The Art of Post-Tonal Analysis: Thirty-Three Graphic Music Analyses," *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy*. Vol. 36, Article 8.
Available at: <https://digitalcollections.lipscomb.edu/jmtp/vol36/iss1/8>

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Understanding Post-Tonal Music

Miguel A. Roig-Francolí

Second edition. New York: Routledge, 2021. 431 + xxiii. ISBN: 0367355353

The Art of Post-Tonal Analysis: Thirty-Three Graphic Music Analyses

Joseph N. Straus

New York: Oxford University Press, 2022. 227 + ix. ISBN: 0197543987

Reviewed by ALLISON WENTE¹



Introduction

It would be difficult to begin a text centered on post-tonal without first defining tonal. And so, Miguel A. Roig-Francolí's *Understanding Post-Tonal Music* begins with a brief definition of tonality. *Brief* is important, as tonal music is likely thoroughly and exhaustively covered for most music students over three to five semesters of music theory and aural skills courses. Often, students emerge from these courses with a deep allegiance to tonality as a system; after all, they have spent countless hours raising and resolving leading tones and dutifully following the rules only to learn how to skillfully and appropriately break them, as they progress from strict first-species counterpoint, to the murky depths of four-part harmony, and the ultimate freedom of colorful chromatic harmony. Once they master the last level of tonal analysis, from note to gesture to form, history comes along and emancipates the dissonance, fracturing the carefully structured system in which they have finally become comfortable.

By contrast, Joseph N. Straus's *The Art of Post-Tonal Analysis: Thirty-Three Graphic Music Analyses*, its name a nod to Heinrich Schenker's *Five Graphic Music Analyses*, begins with a quick preface and then gets right into the content, establishing the book's purpose from the outset. Rather than a progressive textbook to guide students through a particular analytical method, Straus's text is "not designed to be read through: there is no narrative arc (the organization is strictly chronological) and no graduation of difficulty. Rather, each analysis is designed to be self-contained" (Straus vii).

¹ I would like to thank Melissa Hoag, reviews editor for the *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy*, for soliciting this review.

In this review, I discuss Roig-Francolí's *Understanding Post-Tonal Music* and Joseph N. Straus's *The Art of Post-Tonal Analysis: Thirty-Three Graphic Music Analyses*. For each, I consider subject matter, audience, organization, accessibility, instructional usability, and musical examples as they relay priorities around intention and representation. Because the Roig-Francolí is meant to be a comprehensive standalone text while Straus's would supplement other materials, Roig-Francolí's text will occupy more text space in this review.

Subject Matter

Understanding Post-Tonal Music

Chronologically organized into fifteen chapters, *Understanding Post-Tonal Music* uses the metaphor of mosaic art wherein each piece comprises individual tiles, or compositional trends. Roig-Francolí first identifies some of the “tiles” of earlier decades of the twentieth century: “tonal music, post-tonal pitch-centered music, atonal music, serialism, and neoclassical music,” while some of the tiles for the later twentieth century include “serialism, aleatory composition, sound mass, collage and quotation, minimalism, and electronic computer music” (3). Roig-Francolí contrasts his mosaic view of twentieth-century music with the more common linear model, which would instead follow “a mainstream, dominant line . . . that implies other secondary or subordinate lines . . . and which results from a linear conception of music history” (4). Roig-Francolí describes twentieth century music history as “fragmented,” and deems the subjects covered in this text as the “most significant”: “post-tonal pitch centricity and composition with motivic and intervallic cells, neoclassicism, the theory and analysis of atonal music, serialism, aspects of time, rhythm, and meter, and some of the major developments in post-World War II composition, including aleatory music, sound masses, electronic music, borrowing from the past, neotonality, and minimalism” (4).

The Art of Post-Tonal Analysis

As mentioned in the Introduction, Straus's *The Art of Post-Tonal Analysis* is not meant to be a standalone text, and its contents are chronological by date of composition. Each analysis may deal with aspects of “character, affect, text setting, rhythm, and form, [but] the primary focus of these analyses is pitch, including intervals, motives, collections, melody, harmony, and voice leading” (viii). That said, including the “post-tonal primer” at the back of the book does give insight into how Straus would progress through these analytical tools.

Straus’s “Post-Tonal Primer” outlines each of the following topics: pitch and pitch class, pitch and pitch-class intervals (ordered and unordered), pitch-class sets, transposition (T_n), inversion (I_n), inversion ($I_{\frac{x}{y}}$), inversional symmetry, set class, transpositional combination (TC), referential collections, triadic transformations, fuzzy transposition ($*T_n$) and inversion ($*I_n$), atonal voice leading, twelve-tone series and order operations, invariance, motives and intervallic cells (serial ordering), contour, and composing-out. For a graduate course where students are expected to have covered basic post-tonal theory in their undergraduate coursework, this primer is ideal.

Audience

Roig-Francolí describes his book as a “student-centered textbook on the analysis, theory, and composition of twentieth-century post-tonal music” (xii). The book is intended for one-semester undergraduate or general graduate courses on twentieth-century music. Because each chapter includes composition exercises, he states it may also function as a composition textbook (xii). The goal of this text is to “help the student become a better listener and hence a better performer, composer, or teacher of post-tonal music” (xiii).

Straus’s text is meant to supplement or augment a traditional post-tonal theory text. He writes, “This book is aimed at advanced undergraduates, graduate students, and music professionals.” He continues, “some basic grasp of post-tonal theory will be useful.” He includes a post-tonal primer at the back of the book to provide a “quick and dirty introduction to the relevant theoretical concepts” (Straus vii). Thus, the Roig-Francolí could function as a sort of one-and-done option for post-tonal theory courses; the Straus is not meant to function as a stand-alone text, at least not for introductory courses.

Organization

Understanding Post-Tonal Music includes a preface, introduction (which provides an overview of twentieth-century compositional styles), fifteen chapters of content, and an epilogue. The end of the book includes an appendix, bibliography, and musical example and subject indexes. Chapters range in length from eleven (chapter 6) to thirty-seven pages (chapters 3 and 10). The average (mean) chapter length is 25 pages.

The book is organized in a “roughly chronological plan, and within that, by general topics.” (xiii). The first eight chapters of the book cover music from before 1945. It begins with an overview of pitch centrality in chapters 1 and 2. These chapters also introduce pitch-class sets, which leads into a section on atonal music in chapters 3

and 4. The text moves to neoclassicism in chapter 5, followed by ultramodernism in chapter 6. Next is a formal study of twelve-tone music in chapters 7 and 8. Chapter 9 forms a bridge between pre- and post-war sections of the book and discusses serialism. All content after chapter 9 focuses on music composed after 1945. Chapter 10 discusses temporality, chapter 11 aleatory music, and chapter 12 electronic, computer, and spectral musics. Chapter 13 combines collage quotation and new approaches to harmony; chapter 14 engages minimalism. Finally, chapter 15 covers recent compositional trends, and while the chapter is titled “into the Twenty-First Century,” the examples discussed are from 1987, 1995, 1997, and 2000.²

The Art of Post-Tonal Analysis is organized chronologically and is not divided into sections or parts. It includes thirty-three analyses of works dating from 1909 to 2016. Analyses range in length from 3–12 pages. The book includes a companion website and analytical videos, which are extremely helpful. The videos include visual walk-throughs of each analysis, with voice overs that include performed musical snippets, as well as explanations of the analysis. I would absolutely use these videos in class or as a pedagogical aid as students work through analyses on their own.

Accessibility

Understanding Post-Tonal Music

Visually, *Understanding Post-Tonal Music* is well laid out. Black and grey boxes clearly label examples, and the music notation is large enough to read without strain. Primary headings are underlined, with bold and capitalized text, secondary subheadings are set aside and bold, and tertiary subheadings are capitalized but not set in bold text. Important vocabulary words are bolded in the text itself, such as “Ionian,” “Dorian,” “Phrygian,” “Lydian,” “Mixolydian,” “Aeolian,” and “Locrian,” in the primary section entitled “Diatonic Collections” (7). This makes it easy for students to scan and review the text after a closer reading or lecture.

Chapters may include a “note” set aside in a box within the text. This may add more information for review, such as in Chapter 8 where a “note” gives a review for how to determine the T_n or $T_n I$ operations, which is relevant to the subsequent section on “Inversionally Symmetrical Segments That Map onto Themselves” (187). Or, a “note” may include an extra analytical point, such as to mark the Golden Section on an A–A dyad in support of an analytical passage that privileges symmetry around A in Webern’s *Piano Variations* op. 27, II (197).

2 This is acknowledged in the Preface on page xiv.

Understanding Post-Tonal Music is not overly large or cumbersome, and the paperback cover makes it less heavy than many standard theory texts. In addition, as all exercises are worked into the text itself, there is no workbook to cart along with the text. There is, however, the *Anthology of Post-Tonal Music*, which is conveniently spiral bound, primed for students' analytical scribblings. The *Anthology* is larger and thinner than the text, and as is to be expected with most full-orchestral score renderings, the musical font is occasionally quite small. For example, the Introduction to Part I from Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* (1913) may be difficult for some students to read. Luciano Berio's Sinfonia, III ("In Ruhig Fliessender Bewegung"), mm. 1–96 (to Reh. E), example 31 in the *Anthology*, and Thomas Adés's *Asyla*, II, mm. 1–43, example 40 in the *Anthology*, are unfortunately very difficult to read.

There is an e-book version of the text available. If ordering directly from the publisher, the paperback and eBook are the same price, \$92.00, while a hardback is \$128.00. The *Anthology* is also available as an eBook for the same price as paperback (\$47.96); hardback is \$128.00.

The Art of Post-Tonal Analysis

Each analysis in *The Art of Post-Tonal Analysis* includes many musical examples. The book uses various colors to mark different features in the analysis, and each example is annotated to make the analyses easier to follow. The book also includes numerous visual depictions for analytical topics, such as circle diagrams to illustrate cycles of pitches and trichords in Béla Bartók's String Quartet No. 3, *Prima parte* (1927) (31, 32), or color-coded arches and carets to mark symmetrical melodic gestures in Milton Babbitt's "The Widow's Lament in Springtime" (1951) (56).

The book is thin and comfortable to hold. In addition, there are several blank spaces where a student can add notes or questions. There are no suggested exercises or assignments, which may be a hindrance to some teachers; however, it is not meant to function as a stand-alone text. In addition, the excellent online analyses make it easy to follow an example in the text.

To purchase directly from Oxford University publishing, the hardcover text is \$99 and the paperback \$39.95. There is an eBook version as well, which one must purchase from an alternative vendor. The Kindle version is \$29.49 on Amazon, and alternate versions of the eBook are similarly priced.

Instructional Usability

Understanding Post-Tonal Music

A strength of *Understanding Post-Tonal Music* and its anthology is that the textbook contains short examples that clearly illustrate concepts explained in the prose, while the *Anthology* contains full scores for more in-depth study. This gives the instructor flexibility to cater the text to their own teaching style, and to use the text either as a base for larger contextual study of the score or to stick to the essentials presented in the text. For instructors who do not specialize in twentieth-century music, relying on the text would suit well. Moreover, that the text incorporates assignments makes this an appealing option for theory departments within larger schools of music that may want to coordinate curriculum across sections, or in smaller schools where twentieth-century theory is one part of a larger sequence taught by one or two instructors.

Helpfully, *Understanding Post-Tonal Music* includes exercises at the end of each chapter. Roig-Francolí explains:

Exercises are of three types: (1) theoretical, in which particular theoretical concepts or methods are practiced; (2) analytical, in which pieces or fragments of pieces are analyzed; and (3) compositional, in which suggestions and models for brief compositions are provided. Analytical exercises are of two types. Some exercises include a 'guided analysis' of pieces, with very specific and focused questions on particular aspects of the composition. Other exercises are more open and require a freer analysis of a piece, which the student will then articulate in the form of an essay or a brief paper (xiv).

Finally, in addition to text explanations, anthology examples, and exercises and assignments, each chapter includes topics for class discussion, suggested additional listening, and a summary of terms to review. The topics for class discussion and additional listening provide practical material for the instructor. Putting key terms together at the end of each chapter (and bolding those terms in the text itself) helps students review without searching through the book. Moreover, if a student gets to this point and fails to define or recognize one of these terms, it is a good indication to them that they need to go back and review.

The Art of Post-Tonal Analysis

This text is perfect for the seasoned twentieth-century music instructor who wants more control over a course's direction than a textbook model provides. Or, this book works well for upper-level graduate courses that delve deeper into the subject matter. As previously discussed, the online tools are excellent and would allow

students to dissect these examples outside of class. I would use this book in an upper-level undergraduate seminar on analysis. I would ask students to work in groups, read an assigned analysis, look up terms as they encounter them, and then teach it to their peers in a presentation. Students could incorporate analytical methods and historical information as it suits the given work.

Musical Examples, Intention and Representation, and Concluding Thoughts

Both of these textbooks begin with the music, not with the theory. The analytical methods addressed in each of these books are broad, and each text presents several ways to approach each given example. As Roig-Francolí writes, “analyses and discussions do not focus only or mainly on pitch organization but also on issues of meter, rhythm, and temporality (both throughout the book and, in particular, in Chapters 10 and 14), form, texture, relationships between text and music, and a variety of aesthetic issues that affect listeners and performers of post-tonal music” (xiii).

Understanding Post-Tonal Music defines its repertoire and limitations immediately. Roig-Francolí writes, “the title establishes a clear limit to the scope of the repertoire studied in this book: only post-tonal music is covered. Thus, while a lot of tonal music (that is, music based on functional harmonic tonality or on its extensions) was composed in the twentieth century (and is still being composed in the twenty-first century), twentieth-century tonal music is not studied here” (xiii). He continues, “The coverage of composers and repertoire in this book is as broad as allowed by the constraints of in-depth analysis of complete pieces or large fragments” (xiii). While the book does feature repertoire by four women composers, it does privilege the established canon of primarily white composers, even though several BIPOC composers have written in these styles.³ (Roig-Francolí does mention other diverse composers in the text, but for the purposes of this review I consider only those with musical examples.) Further, Roig-Francolí writes that “although all chapters should be considered important, the modular organization of the book allows instructors to skip some of the chapters with no detriment to the general progress of the course should a slower pedagogical pace be desired to ensure better assimilation by the students” (xv). Roig-Francolí lists the “essential” chapters as 1–4 and 7–8. The instructor should be aware that cutting the book down to these chapters limits the featured repertoire

³ For example, Adolphus Hailstork, Tania León, Dorothy Rudd Moore, Julia Perry, Howard Swanson, and George Walker all composed some atonal, serial, or minimalist music.

to only the music of white males.⁴

Future editions of *Understanding Post-Tonal Music* might feature more works by diverse composers. For now, it would be beneficial for instructors to expose students to more diverse repertoire in order to avoid an entire semester focused primarily on the music of one group, perhaps through the use of assignments or analyses that improve representation and are more inclusive of diverse populations. Straus's text, which clearly goes to great pains to include music by composers of a variety of positionalities, is meant to be used as a supplement, thus leaving room for instructors to include even more repertoire from marginalized populations as they see fit. Then, these texts can provide a valuable resource for instructors and students into the compositional styles of myriad groups of musicians during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

4 Featured examples in the chapters deemed "essential" are composed by Bartók, Dallapiccola, Debussy, Schoenberg, Stravinsky, and Webern.