

The Theoretical Groundwork for Film Tonality

We are about to embark on a new and unconventional approach to film music. Before we launch into the details of this approach, let's step down the aisle and take our seats for a couple of films already in progress, where we will trace the paths of two protagonists who have very little in common with one another:

The first is Anne Elliot, the downtrodden heroine of *Persuasion*, a 1995 film adaptation of the eponymous Jane Austen novel. Societal conventions and familial pressures have relentlessly silenced Anne until she has forgotten that she even has a voice. Having been coerced into rejecting the man she loves, she settles into a subdued shell of her former self, and the years teach her to silently accept her unhappiness. When fate brings Captain Wentworth back into her life (miraculously still single), Anne is too enervated to overcome the inertia of her resignation and respond to his renewed interest. But his proximity reawakens her confidence, and by the end she finally makes the bold (and culturally shocking) move to defy her friends and family and seize her own happiness.

The second protagonist is the eponymous hero of *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, a 2009 stop-animation film featuring a cast of animals and three evil farmers. Mr. Fox has far too much confidence and audacious energy. His reckless actions cause him to endanger the safety of his community and lose the respect of his family, so he must wage war against the farmers to save his friends and redeem himself. This requires Mr. Fox to slow down, think carefully, and act prudently—basically suppress all his instincts and start behaving like an adult. He struggles against this at first, but eventually he matures and manages to unite the animals in a victorious battle against the farmers.

So why are we putting a zany animal caper and a British period drama side by side? The motivation for this unlikely pairing lies in the auditory realm: in each case,

the tonal layout of the soundtrack (the overarching arrangement of keys) reflects the dramatic circumstances of the protagonist. The soundtrack for *Persuasion* features a large number of classical piano works, as is common in Jane Austen adaptations. But what is unusual here is that not a single one of these works (by Bach and Chopin) is presented in its original key: every one of them has been transposed to new keys. Starting at the beginning of the film, each musical composition is systematically lowered a half step below its original key. Then, at a certain point in the film, the music is transposed a whole step *above* its original key. Through the first three-quarters of the film the pieces lowered in pitch correspond with Anne's depressive state. When Anne finally rises up to reclaim control of her life, the key of the music likewise rises upward. Thus the soundtrack depicts Anne's character arc *tonally* by reflecting the stages of her life journey (in even finer detail, as we discover in chapter 2). The overall tonal trajectory of the film, too, begins in A major and ends in B major, delineating Anne's narrative trajectory by means of "directional tonality."

Such directional tonality is also at play in *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, but in the opposite direction. Unlike sluggish Anne, rambunctious Mr. Fox must grow more subdued in order to become the best version of himself (he must settle down in order to grow up). Thus the soundtrack in this film features a *downward* shift—beginning in E major and ending in D major. The trajectory for the "happy endings" in these two films move in opposite directions, and so, too, do the tonal trajectories of their soundtracks. On the one hand, Mr. Fox begins his journey from a state of manic hyperactivity and must calm down in order to attain happiness. Anne, on the other hand, begins from utter calm and lethargy, and she must grow more animated and proactive in order to achieve her happy ending. Thus, the tonal direction for Mr. Fox is to settle down and for Anne to rise up (a whole step). We might disregard such tonal configurations as mere coincidence were it not for the conspicuous transposition of preexisting music, which is almost certainly deliberate. Transposition on the local level and directional tonality on the global level turn out to be rather common, and we will see the same devices in such films as *Emma* (1996) and *The Graduate* (1967) when we explore this technique in greater depth in chapter 2.

These analytical snapshots suggest that key can be an important consideration in film, so that raises the question of why key is ignored as a significant parameter in film music analysis. After all, key is one of the basic building blocks of music and a central property of a work's musical identity, and analytical attention is routinely given to key in most other genres of music. (We say "Beethoven's Fifth Symphony in C Minor," not "Beethoven's Fifth Symphony in Four Movements and Thirty-four Minutes" or "Beethoven's Fifth Symphony with the Very Iconic Motive.")¹ So *why not film*? The answer to that question is rooted in certain theoretical notions formed in the context of classical music, which initially posed some ideological hurdles in

1. Thank you to Scott Murphy for this droll idea.

the very different context of the film soundtrack—for an overview of this history, see my earlier work (Motazedian 2016: 2–25). But by now, well into the twenty-first century, we are certainly ready to adapt and broaden our ideas about how large-scale tonality can function in new settings. So let's explore the five main theoretical issues that will pave the path for our pursuit of film tonality.

1. *What Does Film Tonality Entail?*

I have coined the term *film tonality* to refer to the large-scale arrangement of keys of all musical entities in a film soundtrack—including original scoring, preexisting music, and pitched sound effects and dialogue. There are existing terms for large-scale tonal organization, of course, but because film soundtracks have many unique considerations, it's useful to have a term specifically for this context. But let me begin by tying in and clarifying some of the relevant terminology. The term *tonal design* has long been used to refer to large-scale key organization in musical compositions. To differentiate between two possible modes of organization, David Beach (1993) draws a distinction between the terms *tonal structure* and *tonal design*. *Tonal structure* captures the hierarchical relationship of pitches within a single key (in a Schenkerian sense), while *tonal design* refers to a deployment of keys not necessarily governed by a global tonic and possibly influenced by extramusical factors. *Tonal structure* is best suited for monotonal, monopartite (single-movement) contexts; it is not optimized for dealing with directional tonality, double-tonic complexes, associative tonality, and other tonal practices of the late nineteenth century and beyond, nor does it account for tonal development across gaps such as breaks between movements. These factors make tonal structure a less appropriate model for explaining large-scale key relations across multipartite works. *Tonal design*, however, is analytically descriptive rather than prescriptive (in the sense of not presupposing a global tonic or functional harmony) and is therefore capable of depicting any manner of tonal deployment. The versatility of this approach makes tonal design a better tool for analyzing expansive, multifarious works like opera and film, which do not adhere to standard musical forms and do not necessarily conform to monotonicity.²

A few scholars in earlier decades considered the idea of large-scale tonality in film from a tonal structure approach, and understandably this ill-fitting Procrustean bed didn't produce compelling results in the context of film soundtracks.³ What we take away from these earlier inquiries is the importance of acknowledging that tonal organization in a film will behave differently than tonal organization in a Mozart piano sonata—just as Mozartian tonality behaves differently than

2. See Motazedian (2016: 4–10) for a synopsis of the debate over tonal design in opera.

3. See Motazedian (2016: 10–14) for an overview of Adorno and Eisler (1947 [2005]), Cochran (1990), Neumeier (1998), and Neumeier and Buhler (2001).

Mahlerian tonality. Tonal design in a film soundtrack is not bound by the type of harmonic logic (especially the assumption of functional monotonicity) we might encounter in classical repertoire. Indeed, even *within* classical repertoire there is no single harmonic logic that neatly codifies hundreds of years of Western music—so expecting a film soundtrack to exhibit tonal behavior akin to a sonata's seems wholly unreasonable. Fruitful analysis of film tonality thus requires a flexible perspective and openness to broader definitions of tonality.

Whereas tonal structure entails a *prescriptive* approach in which we look for what *should* be happening (i.e., how a single tonality organizes the music into a structure) and conform the work to the methodology, tonal design entails a *descriptive* approach in which we look at what *is* happening and adapt the methodology to the work. Through this approach, tonal idiosyncrasies provide a rich resource for dramatic interpretation, freeing the viewer-listener to follow their analytical instincts, inspired by the narrative context.⁴ With this approach in mind, let's consider an abstract example of how tonal structure and tonal design might function differently in the context of analyzing a film soundtrack: a film beginning in C major and ending in F# major would be deemed highly anomalous from a tonal structural standpoint, impelling us to interpret this harmonic anomaly as a dramatic anomaly. However, there could be a narratively cogent reason why the film begins in C major and ends in F# major—for example, these keys might be associatively paired with the characters who appear in the opening and closing scenes, respectively.

In such a context the design approach would allow C major to move to F# major without raising an analytical eyebrow, whereas the structure approach would spur the analyst to conjure an aberration in the narrative (because this harmonic motion would be seen as I-#IV, which is aberrant in a monotonal system). Imposing the structural value judgment of I-V-I onto a system that is not operating under the requirement of I-V-I is like using a German grammar book to grade an English paper: different system, different rules. There may be shared elements and origins and traceable influence, but the two systems nevertheless function in fundamentally distinct ways.

2. *Must We Hear It for It to Be Valid?*

Long-range tonality—in music in general, not restricted to film music—has often been questioned on the basis of audibility: Must a listener *aurally* perceive tonal relationships for them to “matter?” Musicians have long debated this question without reaching a consensus. Allow me to adapt terminology from Carolyn

4. For excellent related discussions of “dramatic tonality” in opera, see Latham (2008), Brititzer-Stull (2006b), McCreless (1982), and Katz (1945). For an overview of tonal design in opera, see Motazedian (2016: 4–10).

Abbate's 2004 discussion of *gnostic* and *drastic* forms of perception to characterize the two sides of the argument, where *drastic* perception is sensory and immediate, and *gnostic* perception is intellectual and mediated. On the *drastic* end of the spectrum, some believe that key relations only matter if the keys are directly contiguous and perceived immediately and naturally (i.e., without *trying* to hear them). Others do not require keys to be immediately adjacent but still feel that key symbolism (such as associative tonality) is dependent upon aural perception—which essentially restricts it to those possessing absolute pitch.

Along those lines, some scholars contend that keys cannot carry associative meaning across works or repertoires (since the vast majority of listeners do not have the capacity to *hear* them). On the *gnostic* end of the spectrum, Nicholas Cook (1987) assigns the task of tonal perception to the mind rather than the ear. Based on his experiment (in which listeners report their perceived sense of coherence in works whose endings are recomposed to different keys), Cook asserts that “the tonal unity of a sonata is of a conceptual rather than perceptual nature, in contrast to the directly perceptible unity of a single phrase” (1987: 204).⁵ The conceptual nature of long-range tonality described by Cook can be discerned gnostically, even if it cannot be perceived drastically. Thus gnostic perception is a more useful tool for exploring tonal relations in the context of large-scale works.

A gnostic approach helps us address one of the main issues of tonal audibility: the discontinuous nature of the film soundtrack. The long expanses of non-musical sound occupied by dialogue and other sounds (let's call them “gaps”) that can separate music cues certainly do prevent us from being able to *hear* the connection of one key to another. But the lack of drastic perception does not invalidate the need for gnostic investigation. Requiring listener perception as a prerequisite is problematic in *any* repertoire: by this logic, only those possessing absolute pitch would find the key of C minor relevant to an analytical understanding of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony.⁶ As for the ability to hear tonal relations across gaps, are we meant to *hear* (on a drastic level) the systemic prolongation of D \flat over the course of the four-day gap between the closing D \flat of *Das Rheingold* and the closing D \flat of *Götterdämmerung* in the *Ring* cycle?⁷ And if we cannot hear it, does that nullify Wagner's conscientious tonal design? Composers such as Wagner and Shostakovich use key associations over the gap of different works (and across the

5. Robert Gjerdingen (1999: 164–166) poses a fair critique of Cook's scientific methodology in this experiment but says that he does still find Cook's conclusion to be “persuasive” (164).

6. Also, consider that even within the traditional analytical realm of classical music, many forms of analysis present information that is not drastically perceived by the listener. For instance, most listeners cannot *hear* the completion of rows in a twelve-tone composition, but they can understand them gnostically, with the aid of analysis.

7. Brititzer-Stull aptly questions “the perceptual limits of Schenkerian theory” by asking, “can we really hear prolongation over any span of time?” (2006b: 330).

gap of years), and while listeners cannot drastically hear these connections, we can gnostically understand them.⁸

Thus gaps do not present a barrier to long-range tonal analysis.⁹ In the context of film soundtracks, Scott Murphy even proposes that “with this approach to tonal unity, a musical score chopped up into cues (and other types of self-containers) that are further separated by considerable stretches of time becomes a strength instead of a weakness.”¹⁰ This is because each musical cue is usually short enough to remain monotonal (as compared to longer, continuous musical works in which modulations and tonicizations can make it difficult to define which key we are “in” at any given moment). And let us not forget that the visual structure of film is *also* inherently fragmentary, but film viewer-listeners have long been accustomed to “connect[ing] the dots” across disjunctions in filmic form (Rodman 2010: 168). We can apply this same logic to the *sonic* structure of film. Filmic narrative is likewise filled with gaps (we encounter flashbacks and flashforwards and ellipses without any sense of cognitive disjunction), and once we start analyzing, you will find that musical gaps can interact with the inherently disjointed structure of film in surprising meaningful ways.

3. *How Can a Soundtrack Be a “Composition?”*

It is natural to wonder how a collection of cues in disparate musical styles and written by different composers can cohere together to form a unified “work.” Michel Chion provocatively asserted “there is no soundtrack,” meaning that audio elements are more strongly bonded to the image than they are to one another (1994: 40). But this notion has been challenged on a number of points. The term *mise-en-bande* (coined by Rick Altman, McGraw Jones, and Sonia Tatroe [2000] as a parallel to *mise-en-scène*) posits the soundtrack as a unified entity, just as multipartite and multilayered and “constructed” as its visual counterpart. James Buhler points out that the soundtrack, like the image track, derives its “power . . . not from some mystical unity but from the way *editing* (in particular) productively structures the tensions among the various components” (2001: 55–56).¹¹ Thus, even

8. For further discussion in favor of the gnostic appreciation of key relations, see McCreless (1996: 106–108).

9. If we *were* to consider gaps a deal-breaker, this would negate tonal relationships between movements of a multipartite work like a string quartet (especially since it is now common practice for performers to retune their instruments between movements, thereby severing the aural continuity of one movement’s ending key and the next movement’s starting key). Using multipartite works as an analogy, cues in a film can be treated like the movements of a multimovement work. (And the logic of key relations across movements is rarely one of a straightforward tonal structure in Beach’s sense of the term.)

10. Personal e-mail communication on 9 January 2015.

11. Buhler goes into even greater depth discussing Chion’s infamous dictum in his 2019 book (249–256).

though the dialogue, music, and sound effects are edited and spliced together, we can acknowledge the resulting end-unity of the soundtrack, the same way we accept the end-unity of the image track.

In recent years film music scholars have been making a concerted effort to knit together the customarily segregated components of the Hollywood soundtrack: for instance, David Neumeyer (2015) presents a model for analyzing the soundtrack as a whole, and Danijela Kulezic-Wilson (2016, 2017, and 2020) depicts the soundtrack as a “composition of speech, music, and sound effects” (2020: 17).¹² Tonal analysis of the soundtrack is another natural step in this modern trend of recognizing the soundtrack as a coherent *work*.

4. Who Is the “Composer” of a Soundtrack?

If we treat the soundtrack as a composition, who is its “composer”? Because so many people are involved in the production of a soundtrack, it is not possible to attribute every aspect of it to any one person. Is it rational to consider the creation of multiple artists as one unified work? Film scholarship settles this question with the notion of *auteurism*, which ascribes authorship of a film to the director, as the person whose artistic vision shapes the “contributions [of the entire team] into a whole” (Bordwell and Thompson 1997: 38). In the music realm, *lieder*, operas, and ballets present an obvious answer to the question of composite authorship, being works that require the collaboration of multiple artists. While these artforms require the cooperation of different *types* of artists (e.g., a composer and a poet), there are also many precedents for the *same* types of artist (e.g., two painters) collaborating to produce a single work. Beatles songs,¹³ Diabelli’s *Vaterländischer Künstlerverein* variations,¹⁴ and *pasticcio* operas¹⁵ are well-known examples of collaborative musical efforts. Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat famously collaborated on a series of paintings over several years, and Robert Rauschenberg and Jean Tinguely worked jointly to create sculpture. And the field of architecture

12. Neumeyer and Buhler similarly state that “if music is a structuring of sound in time, as many twentieth-century aestheticians have claimed, then conceptually the *mise-en-bande*, with its complex interplay of music, dialogue, ambient sound, effects, silences, and so forth, can be understood as a kind of musical ‘composition’” (Buhler in Neumeyer 2015: 100).

13. Contrary to the popular view that John wrote the words and Paul wrote the music, both artists have (on numerous occasions) averred that they collaborated more or less equally in all aspects of the composition.

14. Anton Diabelli invited fifty-one composers to contribute variations on his simple waltz theme, resulting in a theme and variations published in 1823–24.

15. This use of the term *pastiche* refers to a medley-type work compiled from different sources, not an imitative work in the style of another artist, work, or period.