Reading Rudolph Reti:
Toward a New Understanding of *The Thematic Process in Music*

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Many others will have to wait for the thanks they are so incredibly due, but I would be remiss if I failed to acknowledge Noya at any possible opportunity. Her continued dedication, patience, and love are truly remarkable. I can, however, only acknowledge her as I could never adequately thank her.
Rudolph Reti is a “foot-notorious” figure among musicologists and theorists today. Given the author’s relative obscurity, *The Thematic Process in Music* continues to be cited with uncommon regularity sixty-five years after its initial publication. The vast majority of these references find his theory of thematic process completely untenable, even ridiculous, making Reti a favorite straw man, ready to be knocked down repeatedly in service to a variety of diverse, at times conflicting, hypotheses. Still, one gets the sense that many of those doing the knocking have a certain amount of sympathy for Reti, that they tacitly acknowledge his position as a cheap foil to their theoretical propositions, and that they were initially drawn to consider Reti’s work by something more genuine that lies within.

The chief aim of the present study is not to demonstrate the rectitude of Reti’s theory of thematic process or to champion his analytical findings. Rather, its purpose is to begin the process of uncovering the source of Reti’s firm conviction in the thematic process and to
demonstrate how he perceived it operating in music. In other words, this essay will lay the
foundation for understanding what it is that keeps drawing scholars to consider Reti’s work
despite the fact that it has been so successfully challenged by numerous commentators since *The
Thematic Process in Music* first appeared.

Using certain holes in our knowledge of Reti’s biography as a base, some common
threads in the reception of his work will be briefly surveyed and challenged. This is followed by
an examination of the results of Reti’s analyses and how he graphically represents them, raising
further questions about his analytical method and its relation to these veins of criticism. Finally,
a new understanding of Reti’s actual method will be suggested through the application of
elementary principles of Alfred North Whitehead’s speculative cosmology, his work clearly
having held a demonstrable position of importance for Reti. This new understanding will be
applied to an analysis begun by Reti of Brahms’ Second Symphony.
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Introduction

Rudolph Reti is a “foot-notorious” figure among musicologists and theorists today. In the words of Walter Frisch, Reti’s “notorious … analyses have drawn fire from numerous commentators.”\(^1\) Given this history of reception and the author’s relative obscurity, *The Thematic Process in Music* continues to be cited with uncommon regularity in scholarly works sixty-five years after its initial publication. The vast majority of these references find Reti’s work completely untenable, even ridiculous, but something continues to draw Peter Kivy, Kofi Agawu, Nicholas Cook, Allen Cadwallader, and others to consider it. The chief aim of the present study is not to demonstrate the rectitude of Reti’s theory of thematic process or to champion his analytical findings. Rather, my purpose is to discover the source of Reti’s firm conviction in the thematic process and to demonstrate how he perceived it operating in music.

The following essay is comprised of four parts, beginning with an exposition of Reti’s biography. While there are currently more details lacking than known, a clear picture of Reti’s life, and particularly his early years, is of critical importance if the principal task at hand is indeed to grasp the thematic process as Reti understood and presented it. After a brief survey of the available biographical information and an assessment of the work yet to be done in constructing a fuller picture of his life, I will move to an examination of the reception of Reti’s work before turning back to offer a brief introduction to the results of his analysis. While this approach may seem somewhat backward, it is my hope that familiarity with the common objections to Reti’s theory will enhance the efficiency of my examination of his work, including the frequently overlooked details. My stated intention to examine Reti’s results here as opposed to his analytical method should be noted, for this differentiation is central to the progression of my investigation.

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In the preliminary consideration of Reti’s method that then follows, I hope to adequately demonstrate how little understanding there seems to have been among scholars in terms of both his process and general conception, shedding light on where some of Reti’s critics have gone wrong in their readings of The Thematic Process. I will conclude by examining how ongoing analysis of this information might clarify our picture of music theory as a discipline in the United States since the mid-twentieth century, and by suggesting some of the other potential historical insights that may be found through considering Reti on his own terms. But before we can get there, we must start with a look at Rudolph Reti himself.

Reti’s Biography

If we consider what we know about Rudolph Reti’s life in terms of a complete biography, the present information could be at best described as a problematic outline. Grove Music Online and the Oxford Dictionary of Music provide the absolute basics of Reti’s life, but in so doing, they open the door to a substantial amount of mystery. Reti was born in Užice in the Kingdom of Serbia on 27 November 1885, one day before that country was defeated in the two-week Serbo-Bulgarian War. Placing our subject in such proper geographical and historical contexts immediately raises important questions.

Already strained relations between Austria-Hungary and Serbia, a former imperial province, reached a new low in 1903 with Peter Karađorđe’s ascension to the throne and the accompanying solidification of national ties to Russia. Austria-Hungary’s annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina on 6 October 1908 signaled the effective end of diplomatic relations between the European superpower and Serbia.² We know that Reti was a student in Vienna, and is it quite safe to assume that he was well established in this capacity some time before his 1911 premiere of Schoenberg’s Drei Klavierstücke, op. 11. According to the Oxford entry, Reti studied piano and music theory at the “Vienna Academy of

Music.” One assumes this is a reference to the Akademie für Musik und darstellende Kunst, which only took its name on 1 January 1909. The institution previously operated as the Konservatorium der Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde and continues today as the Universität für Musik und darstellende Kunst Wien. If we take the Oxford entry at its word, then, we must assume that Reti studied there after 1909, in other words, at or sometime after the age of twenty-four, a rather late start by any standard. Assuming this is, however, the case, and that Reti’s studies coincided with his arrival in Vienna, the mystery becomes all the more complicated given the political climate leading up to and after 1908, as described in brief above. Simply put, how Reti got to Vienna, why he went, and when are all unanswered questions.

According to the entry in Grove, Reti went on to further studies in “musicology at the university.”

Again, one must assume that Musikwissenschaft is meant here and that the institution in question is Universität Wien, which, having opened its doors in 1365, was certainly in existence during Reti’s entire period of residence in Vienna. Furthermore, it is certainly possible that Reti specifically studied Musikwissenschaft at the university: the Institut für Musikwissenschaft der Universität Wien—as important and influential in its own time as it has been to the history of music scholarship—was founded by Guido Adler in 1898. Still, until solid documentary evidence can be found and examined, some doubt must remain as to whether a Serbian Jew would be among the earliest students of this visionary program. One need only compare the early trajectory of Heinrich Schenker’s life in Vienna less than two decades earlier, if the timeline derived above is indeed correct, for a sense of the importance of this line of inquiry.

As I have suggested, it must also be remembered that, even though they appear in Grove and Oxford, these “facts” of Reti’s early life are completely unsubstantiated. Like the more accepted encyclopedic sources, the unclaimed Wikipedia page on Reti provides additional questionable

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5 Institut für Musikwissenschaft, accessed 19 October 2015, https://musikwissenschaft.univie.ac.at/institut/.
information while remaining free from cumbersome citation. For example, the author claims that Reti was a student of Eduard Steuermann and that he premiered Schoenberg’s *Sechs kleine Klavierstücke*, op. 19, in addition to the op. 11. For what it is worth in this largely speculative biographical overview, both pieces were composed in 1911.

Unlike the contributors to *Grove* and *Oxford*, the Wikipedia author is at least astute enough to recognize that Reti dropped the acute accent from the “e” in his surname. My examination of the published scores and unpublished manuscripts from the Rudolph Reti papers, placed by his widow in the University of Georgia Libraries, shows that he abandoned the accent upon immigrating to the United States. His early compositions, published in Vienna by Universal-Edition, invariably include the accent; manuscripts written after he arrived in the United States just as invariably do not. Only at some point well after Reti’s death, it seems, did his widow reinstate the device in her own name, as well as in that of her late husband. To be sure, there are other, more impactful unsubstantiated claims about Reti’s early life floating about. For example, in *Repetition in Music: Theoretical and Metatheoretical Perspectives*, English musicologist Adam Ockelford makes the seemingly singular claim that Reti was actually a pupil of Schoenberg. No evidence of such a relationship is currently known to exist.

Nevertheless, as his premiere of one or more works by Schoenberg implies, Reti must have kept rather busy during his days in Vienna. One imagines that he maintained a full schedule of concertizing, composing, and writing. He also initiated the Salzburg Music Festival in 1922, and subsequently, was one of the founders of the International Society for Contemporary Music. As for the inclusion of time spent writing in the list above, Reti was a known music critic in Vienna, and another inconsistency between secondary sources leads us to the next important area of mystery in his biography.

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8 Compositions from the Rudolph Reti papers in the University of Georgia Libraries, microfilm, New York Public Library.
10 The relationship between Schoenberg and Reti will be covered in slightly more detail below, but it is also the basis of a deeper future study by the author.
According to Reti’s own blurb on the dust jacket for *Tonality, Atonality, Pantonality: A Study of Some Trends in Twentieth Century Music*, and echoed on the anonymous Wikipedia page, Reti emigrated to the United States in 1939.\(^1\) The *Oxford* entry for Reti lists the year as 1938, and this same year is heavily implied by *Grove*, which has Reti working for the Vienna daily, *Das Echo*, as chief music critic from 1930 to 1938, after which we find him in the United States.\(^2\,^3\) Ian Bent also supports 1938 as the year of Reti’s immigration.\(^4\) The situation for Jews in Vienna steadily deteriorated through the interwar years, and it is almost unthinkable that Reti would have been able to retain a position as chief critic of *any* Vienna daily until 1938. There were very few ways around the increasingly state-sanctioned anti-Semitism in the late 1930s. As in Germany, these were essentially limited to living under a false identity, which Reti almost certainly did not do, or being married to a non-Jew with some political pull. As far as we know, Reti was unmarried until 1943, when, at the age of fifty-eight, he married the Canadian-born concert pianist Jean Sahlmark.\(^5\) Could Reti have been married in Vienna, before he immigrated to the United States? If not, how did he maintain his position until 1938? And if he was in Austria until 1939, how did he survive the months following the 13 March 1938 Anschluß, and how did he escape the country?\(^6\)

Given this set of possibilities and the dire circumstances in general, it is little wonder that Reti ceased composing for more than a decade after arriving in the United States. Once here, however, he did continue his critical work, writing regularly for the *Saturday Review* and *Musical Digest* and contributing to the *Music Review*. According to the Wikipedia entry, at some point Reti was awarded a teaching

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\(^3\) *Grove Music Online*, s.v. “Réti, Rudolph.”
fellowship at Yale. How this combination of activities translated into day-to-day life and economic viability has thus far been left unexplored.

Careful readers may have noted the absence of any mention of Reti as theorist up to this point. Unfortunately, we have scant evidence that Reti was involved in theoretical pursuits in his earlier years; we can only assume that music theory was an important part of his work throughout his life, and that his students and colleagues were the private beneficiaries of this activity. In fact, Reti’s address to the Greater New York Chapter of the American Musicological Society in which he outlined the concepts of *The Thematic Process in Music* at some point within the year before its 1951 publication appears to have been his first public outing as theorist. What is more, *The Thematic Process* was to be the only book-length work Reti published during his life. One other, the previously mentioned *Tonality, Atonality, Pantonality*, was left in a state of near completion and was ultimately published posthumously in 1958.

Rudolph Reti died in Montclair, New Jersey, on 7 February 1957, bringing what is, more or less, the totality of his biography as it currently exists to a close.

**Reti’s Reception**

By way of introducing some general observations about the reception of Reti’s work, I think it wise to point out that, despite his relative obscurity today, the evidence suggests that he was once a well-known figure in the world of music. Reti’s publication history alone demonstrates an ongoing demand for his work, but looking broadly at the response to his offerings, one has to wonder who or what was driving this demand. As the following survey will reveal, perhaps the better question is why people continued to read Reti at all.

Reaction to Reti’s theoretical work generally falls neatly into a few, sometimes overlapping categories. I will consider five of these in some detail. First, there are those who view Reti’s work as proceeding from, and derivative of, Arnold Schoenberg’s theoretical ideas, principally the *Grundgestalt* and/or developing variations. The common assessment of Reti’s work by this group could be paraphrased fairly as “Schoenberg taken one step too far.” According to Ian Bent, for example, Reti “pursued
Schoenberg’s insights [in *Fundamentals of Composition*] for analytical purposes…. [He] raised the notion of the single underlying motif to the status of background unity.”\(^\text{17}\) It becomes clear as Bent continues that he finds Réti unsuccessful in this endeavor. He also writes that “Réti started from the two-dimensional view of formal construction that was implied in Schoenberg’s *Fundamentals*: motivic expansion, and division and demarcation.”\(^\text{18}\) The directionality inherent in Bent’s comparison of Schoenberg and Réti is as palpable as it is historically impossible. To suggest that Réti was developing ideas that Schoenberg laid out in *Fundamentals of Composition* is to say that Réti composed *The Thematic Process*, first published in 1951, by building on a source published sixteen years later. Clearly this work could not have been of fundamental importance to Réti’s formulation of the thematic process. Somewhat bafflingly, Bent himself writes that Réti developed his analytical approach between 1944 and 1949.\(^\text{19}\) This is not to say that commonalities between the two approaches do not exist, but rather, to call into question the way Bent and others have placed one of these two simultaneously-gestating streams of thought into a position of direct debt to the other.

The association of Réti and Schoenberg can be seen as early as Vincent Persichetti’s 1951 review of *The Thematic Process*.\(^\text{20}\) The review is largely mixed; Persichetti echoes many of Réti’s concepts approvingly while still finding plenty in the book against which to rail. For example, he takes strong offense at the author’s use of language, at one point writing, “the pompous tone will be of considerable annoyance to the intelligent musician.”\(^\text{21}\)

Of more importance here, Persichetti, a Philadelphia-based composer, takes strongest issue with Réti’s understanding of modern composition. He writes,

> The author’s restricted knowledge and misconception of contemporary music becomes evident when Bartók’s Fourth String Quartet is superficially scanned…. On the page especially saved for acknowledgments credit is given to several people…. It is a pity that

\(^{17}\) Bent, *Analysis*, 55.  
\(^{18}\) Ibid., 60.  
\(^{19}\) Ibid.  
\(^{21}\) Ibid., 612.
one of this group, Norman Dello Joio, was apparently not drawn upon to help Reti understand the creative process of music of our time.  

This is particularly strong criticism to be leveled at a composer who, as we have seen, had been something of a moving force in contemporary European composition only two decades prior.

Reti’s claims of presenting a new sphere of theoretical inquiry seem to have particularly upset Persichetti, whose rhetoric recalls that Schoenberg was increasingly viewed in an antiquated light through the middle of the twentieth century. And if Persichetti is not referring to Schoenberg and his direct successors in the United States when he objects to Reti’s “certain absurd observations, namely that the ‘whole sphere of thematic connections and thematic technique has never been included in our theoretical system,’” to whom might he be referring? Persichetti’s equation of the two Viennese transplants is made more explicit at the end of the review, when he subtly but noticeably replaces Reti’s terminology with Schoenberg’s in making his final point: “Almost any competent student composer knows the thematic process forwards, backwards, inverted, and in retrograde-inversion.”

But as much as the Reti-Schoenberg connection is subtext in Persichetti’s review, the linking of the two takes center stage in Michael Schiano’s 1992 PhD dissertation, “Arnold Schoenberg’s Grundgestalt and its Influence.” Despite the unusual sympathy that Schiano brings to his assessment of Reti’s work, he clearly undermines the theorist’s autonomy of thought by exaggerating the direct link between Schoenberg and Reti, thereby revealing preconceptions in his own interpretation of Reti’s thematic process and transmitting them to the reader. Schiano titles the chapter in which he deals with Reti’s work, “Schoenberg’s Influence: the Grundgestalt Principle and Rudolph Réti,” and he opens it with the following quote from Style and Idea:

‘Whatever happens in a piece of music is nothing but the endless reshaping of a basic shape.’ Or, in other words, there is nothing in a piece of music but what comes from the

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22 Ibid., 613.
23 Ibid., 612.
24 Ibid., 613. Reti does not employ the term “retrograde inversion” and strongly favors noun forms for these concepts: a motivic cell is “an inversion” rather than “being inverted.”
26 Ibid., 195.
theme, springs from it and can be traced back to it; to put it still more severely, nothing but the theme itself. Or, all the shapes appearing in a piece of music are foreseen in the ‘theme.’  

Consider the relation of this statement to an oft-quoted passage from Reti’s introduction to The Thematic Process:

In addition to … thematic homogeneity between movements, our analysis will demonstrate another phenomenon … namely, the different themes of one movement—in fact all its groups and parts—are in the last analysis also but variations of one identical thought. The general view would hold almost the opposite. For instance, the first and second subjects of a sonata are usually considered as contrasting, certainly not as identical or even related, manifestations. In reality, however, they are contrasting on the surface but identical in substance. In fact, it is this being “different on the surface but alike in kernel” in which is centered the inner process of musical structure.  

That the two sentiments are certainly “alike in kernel” combined with Schoenberg’s historical priority (his quote originated in 1931) certainly lends credence to the idea of influence, but Schiano fails to point out that the Schoenberg excerpt was taken from a hand-written, eight-page response to Ernst Kurth’s book, Grundlagen des linearen Kontrapunkts. It was not a published piece, and therefore, the parallel as evidence of influence loses historical credibility.

Thus Schiano creates the frame within which he presents Reti’s work, and once established, this largely synthetic relationship continues to be an actuating factor throughout the chapter, one that Schiano continues to reinforce. He writes, for example, that the tradition of theoretical discourse that interprets and reinterprets the Grundgestalt principle, actually began … with the publication of Réti’s first book in 1951, the year of Schoenberg’s death. By the end of that decade, music analysis was feeling the influence of the Grundgestalt principle to an unprecedented degree largely through Réti’s work and through several English writers, most notably, Hans Keller, Deryck Cooke, and, beginning in earnest in the 1960’s, Alan Walker.

Elsewhere he writes, “The most important figure in any study of the influence of Schoenberg’s Grundgestalt principle is Rudolph Réti… Réti took the Grundgestalt principle and developed a
consistent, comprehensive theory of motivic structure.”

Despite Schiano’s adoption of the more diffused “Grundgestalt principle,” the directional trajectory of Schoenberg to Reti and beyond only gains definition as he progresses. Schiano finally ensconces his portrayal of an indebted Reti in a seemingly reproachful acknowledgment of the theorist’s own claim of independence:

Réti’s “thematic process” embodies an analytical strategy that appears to share much with Schoenberg’s Grundgestalt idea, although Réti fails to credit Schoenberg at all, an omission that has not gone unnoticed.

His place in the present study is based on the substance of his work and beliefs, and not on any admission on his part that he is a disciple of Schoenberg. In fact, he states that the originality of his own work precludes even a bibliography.

Schiano does provide interesting and valuable insights on the nature of motivic relations implied by Reti’s work, but as with Bent and Persichetti, the linking of Reti with Schoenberg tends to obscure Reti’s own claims about his theory of thematic process.

A second category of reaction to the thematic process is that it is “too psychological” or “too intuitive.” While these would represent individual and divergent ideas in a lengthier study, they can be easily combined for the purposes of this essay: the criticisms generally take the same form and, at the end of the day, are similarly questionable. Taking his cue from Nicholas Cook, Adam Ockelford writes that Reti’s work represents one of a group of “so-called ‘psychological approaches’” to music analysis and further describes Reti’s work as “hidden” and “subconscious.”

And in the only extant dissertation to focus solely on Reti, Donald Schwejda, writing to earn his PhD in Music Theory from Indiana University in 1967, uses the idea that intuition is not compatible with analysis as the cornerstone of his argument against Reti’s theory of thematic process.

The root of Peter Kivy’s recurring argument against Reti’s work can also be seen as an attack on musical intuition as the basis of analysis. He writes, “the method, if that is not paying it too high a compliment, of finding a theme by tinkering with the notes until you get it is a self-fulfilling one. It

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31 Ibid., 219.
32 Ibid., 223.
33 Ockelford, Repetition, 60, 135–136. See also Nicholas Cook, A Guide to Musical Analysis.
cannot fail to find what it is seeking because the only rule for tinkering is, ‘Tinker until you get what you have already decided must be there.’”\footnote{Peter Kivy, \textit{Philosophies of Arts: An Essay in Differences} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 191.}

In other words, Kivy charges that Reti has, on the basis of his intuitive perception, decided that a certain type of pervasive unity exists in a given musical work and that such unity is derived from the work’s primary thematic material. According to Kivy, Reti will then turn to the score and “tinker” with individual excerpts until he finds the unity he seeks, subtracting notes from the equation or changing his criteria for relation as required by his end goal.\footnote{See also Peter Kivy, \textit{Music Alone: Philosophical Reflections on the Purely Musical Experience} (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990), 127–145.} I will return this line of criticism and my labeling of it as “questionable” in due course, but for now, I will turn to a third line of criticism, one that extends from an aspect of Reti’s theory of thematic process that those approaching it for the first time often find particularly vexing.

Reti presents the thematic process as not only separate from “harmony, counterpoint, and certain schematic ideas of musical form,” but as basic to these more traditionally accepted theoretical constructs.\footnote{Reti, \textit{Thematic Process}, 3.} This list of theoretical concerns is Reti’s, so this category of response must contain a good deal of truth on some level. In fact, he expends much effort in explicating the role of the thematic process in shaping these other aspects of musical structure, attempting to make good on his previously-quoted assertion that “one movement—in fact all its groups and parts—are in the last analysis also but variations of one identical thought.”\footnote{Ibid., 4.}

For example, he writes of what we would casually refer to as form:

There are two form-building forces in music.

The one, the \textit{inner} force, comprises those thematic phenomena, the demonstration of which is the purpose of this study.

However, there is also a second form-building force in music, which models its \textit{outward} shape. It is the \textit{method of grouping}.

To group, to divide and demarcate the continuous course of a work or a movement into sections and parts is a natural means by which a musical composition assumes a comprehensible form.
To be sure, many people are aware only of this second form-building method. They conceive a work’s architecture only through its outer picture, as brought about by the proportioning and sectioning of its parts. However, the great composers invariably develop the true form of their creations—that “form” which at the same time is content and essence—also through inner structure, through the evolution and relationship of the thematic material.\(^{39}\)

Reti also includes a chapter titled, “Thematic Key Relations,” in which he works to solidify a concept that has peppered the book, namely, that large-scale harmonic structures are often derived from a piece’s thematic material.\(^{40}\)

There are two broad questions to be taken up here, aside from the veracity of Reti’s individual postulates. The first is whether this systematic exclusion is as accurate internally as Reti claims it to be externally. In other words, does Reti tacitly or subconsciously take these other musical constructs into account through his analytical approach, particularly through his reductive choices? The second is whether Reti’s claim of priority for the thematic process has merit. Neither will receive adequate answer in this essay, as both are deserving of much broader consideration than the limits of the current endeavor allow, but both questions are important to keep in mind through the following pages.

These questions have perhaps been most fully exposed by those most concerned with harmony: the Schenkerians. Allen Cadwallader, for example, gave pointed voice to this concern in his dissertation, “Multileveled Motivic Repetition in Selected Intermezzi for Piano of Johannes Brahms,” where he writes,

> What characterizes Reti’s approach is that he attempts to demonstrate how one theme is “transformed” into another. For this, he resorts to comparing shapes and contours which underlie themes and, in a sense, his method is reductive in nature…. The notion of “thematic contour” is the keystone of Reti’s theories. He demonstrates motivic unification by “exposing” a primary contour, and then shows how it is varied according to one of his categories of “inversion, reversion, and interversion”…. However … Reti’s reductions are not derived systematically from the domains of harmony and counterpoint.\(^{41}\)

Cadwallader’s Schenkerian study of Brahms is based on an article by Charles Burkhart, and the source of many of the former’s conclusions about Reti’s theory can be found therein. As in the Cadwallader, Joseph

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39 Ibid., 109.
40 Ibid., 219–230.
41 Allen Cadwallader, “Multileveled Motivic Repetition in Selected Intermezzi for Piano of Johannes Brahms” (PhD diss., Eastman School of Music; University of Rochester, 1982), 8.
Rufer and Reti are equated, though Burkhart apparently finds no need to label them as the key proponents of “unity theory.” Rufer and Reti are equated, though Burkhart apparently finds no need to label them as the key proponents of “unity theory.” rufer and reti are equated, though burkhart apparently finds no need to label them as the key proponents of “unity theory.” Rather, Burkhart contrasts the pair directly with Schenker: “they feel no need to support their claims with criteria of a systematic nature. In particular, they make no attempt to relate melodic phenomena to the domains of harmony and tonal structure.” As noted above, Reti does relate melodic phenomena to tonal structure, but he does so in a generative way that, as Burkhart suggests, seems rather opposed to Schenker’s conception of the motivic function.

Incidentally, questions of harmony are also raised by Alvin Bauman in his review of The Thematic Process for the Journal of the American Musicological Society. Bauman writes, “Dr. Reti’s is an a priori system; it does not recognize, encompass, or explain the functioning of such elements as harmony and voice-leading, but ignores them and their relationship to the thematic process.”

Stepping back to Cadwallader and Burkhart, perhaps the most interesting aspect of their reading of the disposition of harmony in the thematic process can be found in a point of disagreement. Burkhart allows that, like Schenker, Reti does “point to sub-surface configurations of notes”; he differs in “[claiming] that, by virtue of a vague resemblance in general shape, these configurations are organically related.” In other words, according to Burkhart, both Reti and Schenker proceed from a point of view that espouses music as consisting of structural levels, even if they do not share the same concept of the hierarchical ordering of those levels. Cadwallader, on the other hand, writes, “the basic difference

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42 Ibid., 7.
44 Bauman is an interesting figure in American music theory pedagogy. He had clear ties to the early New York-based Schenkerian school, and he acknowledges this in the preface to his 1947 book, Elementary Musicianship, with nods to William J. Mitchell and Felix Salzer. What is more, in Elementary Musicianship, published some thirty-one years before Carl Schachter’s decidedly Schenkerian harmony text, Bauman established the concept of proceeding from the fundamentals of hierarchical tonality in such a volume. Bauman’s work moves immediately from an introduction to the twelve chromatic pitches and their notation on the staff to an exposition of tonic-dominant tonality. He introduces scale degree identity and character in the second chapter (“section 2”), and from these two concepts, tonality and scale degree motion, fills in the “extension” of tonality from the tonic triad through the rest of the book. See Bauman, Musicianship, 6–9, 22, 31–33.
46 Burkhart, “Schenker’s ‘Motivic Parallelisms,’” 146.
between Schenker’s hidden repetitions and the concepts embodied in unity theory is that the latter does not recognize the existence of structural levels.”

Burkhart also inadvertently lends support to Reti’s theory of thematic process in his discussion of Schenker’s recognition of individual motivic structures. Because Schenker’s analyses presuppose a governing harmonic structure operating as a frame upon which lower structural levels are built, Burkhart (in the name of Schenker) accepts even a loose affiliation between the pitch content of a specific motive and its copies as harmonies shift: “individual notes of a motive may have a harmonic function in the copy different from that which they have in the pattern. Indeed, a parallelism is all the more interesting when this is the case.” If one needed allowance to question the conclusion of those critics who find fault in Reti’s identification of motivic cells as they constantly vary through the progression of a piece, Burkhart has provided it in widely accepted Schenkerian terms.

Criticism of this sort can be found in a review of The Thematic Process by Carroll C. Pratt and, interestingly, also in Schiano. Pratt notes disparity among the quality of Reti’s analyses, writing, “Many … are illuminating and thoroughly convincing…. Other analyses leave the reader with the feeling that a good idea has been stretched too far.” As his example of the latter, Pratt uses Reti’s identification of the first motivic cell of the theme of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony (see Examples 1 and 3a on pages 21 and 23). He writes,

Reti argues … that the main theme of the Adagio of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, the descending notes D, A, B-flat, F, E-flat, D, brings to mind the descending triad D, A, F, D, from the Allegro. It is very doubtful whether any listener, without a good deal of prompting and prodding, would ever hear a D-minor triad in the B-flat major of those first notes.

Of this same example, Schiano writes,

It appears that Réti has interpreted the theme as a descending D minor arpeggiation, which is absurd. He might better have said “the D minor triadic descent is hidden within the new tonic triadic descent in B♭ major,” which I would think is no less significant than

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48 Burkhart, “Schenker’s ‘Motivic Parallelisms,’” 149.
50 Ibid.
Réti’s account. The perception of this hidden triad, interwoven through the B♭ major theme, is made reasonable and, to me, convincing, by the motivic status attained by that descending triad by its repetition and emphasis throughout the two movements of the symphony. In other words, because the descending D minor triad dominates so much of the first two movements, one might be quite ready to hear a subtle reference to it at this point in the symphony. The three members of the D minor triad appear as an embellishment of the main B♭ chord, which is quite a contrast to their more familiar role in the piece as making up a tonic arpeggiation. One is hearing, then, a background progression where the motive (the descending arpeggiation of the D minor triad) has been transformed from a tonic arpeggiation to an embellishing structure.51

Schiano, therefore, clarifies that Reti is not suggesting that the descent from D to A to F to D is sounding the key of D minor, as Pratt seems to have understood it, but what does Schiano’s criticism of Reti on this point have to offer? How does it really differ from Reti’s own explanation of the example? I believe the answer is simply, “not much.” Concerning this example, Reti writes,

Proceeding to the … Adagio, we realize, incredible as it may seem considering the entirely different picture which this movement presents at first glance, that here again the similarity of the basic substance is not to be questioned. After two introductory bars the main theme of the Adagio enters….

Through this a particularly interesting situation arises. The Adagio theme is in B-flat. Yet the old motif from which it is derived, the D-minor triad of the Allegro theme, is not transposed according to the new key but sound through at original pitch. We hear a theme in B-flat with a D-minor triad, as it were, at its base. This method of transforming a shape from one theme to another which is in a different key, but at the same time letting it sound at original pitch, will in many of the later examples become apparent as one of the most effective means of structural transformation.

The same phenomenon is seen immediately in the continuation of the theme.52

There are times in which I believe we would do well to recall what we know of Reti’s biography and consider that English was not Reti’s first language, and perhaps not even his third, but I do not agree with Schiano that this is one of those instances. Reti is abundantly clear. Note his use of “as it were” in the penultimate paragraph quoted above: when attentively read, Reti clearly identifies that we are not dealing

with a D-minor sonority, but with the shape of a D-minor triad embedded in, and audible from, a new theme in a new key. Note that, in his sincere efforts at delivering a fair criticism of a perceived weakness, Schiano fails to offer Reti an acceptable alternative; he seems to base his objection on Reti’s use of “D-minor triad” while continuing to rely on the term himself. Note, too, that Reti is keenly aware of the underlying harmonies of both movements. Far from ignoring harmony, he has embraced it within the thematic process.

The fourth common criticism that I will touch upon is the idea that Reti’s thematic process is conceived of linearly when the actual compositional process is anything but. Once again, in the words of Ian Bent,

Réti’s view, overtly expressed in his writings, is of music as a linear compositional process: the composer starts not with a theoretical scheme but with a motif that has arisen in his mind, which he allows to grow by constant transformation…. Its growth is evolutionary…. It is a single process passing from beginning to end, almost like a chain except that some of the links overlap or occur side by side, and except also that certain large patterns recur.53

But Reti specifically cautions the reader against this notion in his introduction, writing:

The author is well aware that in the presentation of his subject he will find himself faced with some difficulties. One main difficulty lies in the fact that thematic structure … should be conceived as a whole. But in its demonstration one detail must be patiently presented after the other; an example introduced in the beginning can be fully understood only after many later ones have been examined; and these later ones cannot be anticipated because they require comparison with still others.54

In other words, for Reti, thematic relations saturate any given musical masterwork; thematic material is so all-encompassing of the structure of the music that it is impossible to say what came first or what the derivational hierarchies are. Put more simply, there is generally no recognizable Urthema from which to proceed. Reti presents his analyses chronologically through the finished piece, presumably because one must choose a starting point, and the top, left-hand corner works as well as, if not better than, any other. Logic would also suggest that this order should generally serve the purpose of Reti’s thematic analyses, for if the thematic process is tied to form building as Reti suggests, then the departure from and return to

53 Bent, Analysis, 85–87.
thematic “normalcy” would be part of this formal shaping. In other words, we should expect a thematically unified piece of music from the common practice period to be thematically comprehensible linearly through time, regardless of the nature of any other underlying structural frame.

The fifth and final category of criticism that I will mention here is that Reti’s thematic process is a “motivic theory.” Kivy evokes this idea when he refers to Reti as an “atomist.”55 And in relation to his own use of topoi in conducting thematic analyses, Robert Hatten writes, “the analysis of the thematic is taken beyond motivic minutiae (Rudolph Reti, 1951), or even the more substantial relationships favored by theories of the Grundgestalt or developing variation (Schoenberg, [1950] 1975).”56 Here, Hatten exemplifies the idea that Reti’s thematic process is nothing more than an overly indulgent observation of motives and, in so doing, simultaneously brings Schoenberg in for comparison.

Reti could scarcely be clearer on this point. Before he ever presents an analysis, Reti draws attention to the difference between the “thematic or ‘motivic’” in musical structure.57 He goes on to say that the various themes of a piece “are built according to one identical pattern.”58 As we will soon see, he is referring to a pattern of motivic cells into which a given theme can be segmented, a pattern that is generally maintained throughout according to Reti’s analyses. Therefore, as Reti writes,

We call motif any musical element, be it a melodic phrase or fragment or even only a rhythmical or dynamic feature which, by being constantly repeated and varied through a work or a section, assumes a role in the compositional design somewhat similar to that of a motif in the fine arts.

A theme, then, could be defined as a fuller group of “period” which acquires a “motivic” function in a composition’s course.59

Far from tracing the presence of a small group of notes that may constitute a variable Grundgestalt through an entire piece, Reti’s thematic process explicitly relies on the evolution of an entire phrase or period, as Reti indicates, a “motif” in the truest sense of the word. Surprisingly few scholars have

55 Kivy, Music Alone, 133.
57 Reti, Thematic Process, 3, and ibid., n. 1.
58 Ibid., 4.
59 Ibid., 11–12, n. 1.
demonstrated a clear understanding of this distinction, but it is worth noting that Ludwig Misch and Burkhart are among them.\textsuperscript{60}

Before I move on, a few words regarding certain compositional aspects of The Thematic Process might be helpful. The excerpt from the introduction previously quoted in relation to Reti’s concept of the linear in the thematic process also expresses one of the concepts most necessary for a fuller understanding of the book. Indeed, it is important enough to deserve repetition here, in this context:

The author is well aware that in the presentation of his subject he will find himself faced with some difficulties. One main difficulty lies in the fact that thematic structure … should be conceived as a whole. But in its demonstration one detail must be patiently presented after the other; an example introduced in the beginning can be fully understood only after many later ones have been examined; and these later ones cannot be anticipated because they require comparison with still others.\textsuperscript{61}

As this indicates, part of the difficulty in reading The Thematic Process is surely derived from the style Reti adopted in writing the book. But again, unlike Schiano, I do not believe the book’s ultimate form was the product of the author’s linguistic deficiencies. I will return to this below, but I believe that Reti’s writing style was a conscious choice. Bypassing that issue for the time being, the following is a quote from the introduction to a completely different book by a completely different author, but it neatly sums up the difficulties one finds in The Thematic Process:

[This] is an extremely difficult book. One source of the difficulty is certainly the subtle character of the [subject] there developed. But further difficulty, the straw-that-breaks-the-reader’s-back sort of difficulty, is occasioned by [the author’s] mode of exposition. As he states in the preface, “… the unity of treatment is to be looked for in the gradual development of the scheme, in meaning and in relevance, and not in the successive treatment of particular topics.” This statement is a warning to the reader that he will not find a linear development in [the book], a beginning, a middle, and an end. Rather, he will encounter a weblike development that presupposes the whole system at the very beginning and recurs again and again to individual topics with the aim that “in each recurrence, these topics throw some new light on the scheme, or receive some new elucidation.” The result is a book that … in opacity is monumental.\textsuperscript{62}


The parallels to Reti’s dual but more limited caution regarding his own work are readily apparent. I will come back to this excerpt in time, but for the time being, its central point provides a nice segue to the examination of Reti’s analytical results, as *The Thematic Process* begins with a detailed analysis of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony that does indeed presuppose the entirety of Reti’s analytical approach. But before I proceed, a return to Reti’s publication history and some of the added difficulty it presents is in order.

Of his three book-length works, *The Thematic Process in Music* is the only one that Reti published during his lifetime. We have already encountered his second book, *Tonality, Atonality, Pantonality: A Study in Some Trends in Twentieth Century Music*, which was published in 1958, the year after his death. The third volume, *Thematic Patterns in Sonatas of Beethoven*, followed some time later, in 1967, approximately ten years after Reti’s death. All three later appeared in second editions, reprints, and/or paperback editions. The point is this: while Reti surely began the process of preparing *Tonality, Atonality, Pantonality* for publication, there is no indication that he ever intended *Thematic Patterns*, edited for publication by Deryck Cooke under the watchful eye of copyright holder Jean Réti-Forbes, for release. Both volumes hold much that could be of potential benefit to understanding Reti’s thematic process, but without further research to confirm the provenance of the ideas presented therein and regardless of their intentions, we must view the role of Réti-Forbes and Cooke as assuming the greatest possible interference in *Thematic Patterns*. The same applies to the editorial process for *Tonality, Atonality, Pantonality*, if to a lesser degree. Therefore, at this time, *The Thematic Process in Music* must be given priority as the only authoritative source for Reti’s theoretical conception of music, his analytical method, and the relationship between the two. Given the similar lack of editorial transparency, I have also chosen to rely solely on the first edition of *The Thematic Process* for this study.

It is worth noting that previous scholarship has, as a rule, not made this distinction, and some of the issues in the general comprehension of Reti’s work are surely a product of this. Schiano and Bent, for

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example, rely on *Thematic Patterns* as much if not more than *The Thematic Process*. And where Schiano perceives the difference between the two books to be one of focus, taking the point of *The Thematic Process* to be the broader historical application of the material from *Thematic Patterns*, the difference is more appropriately seen as that of preliminary analytical work versus rounded theoretical exposition. Just as principles introduced in Schenker’s *Harmonielehre* must be handled with care when considering *Der freie Satz*, so too should *Thematic Patterns* be approached with caution when examining or employing Reti’s final presentation of his theory of thematic process.

**Reti’s Analytical Results**

The following discussion will provide readers unfamiliar with Reti’s theory of thematic process with an introduction to his analytical assertions, and to the graphic representation he typically employs to convey these findings; it will not, as the section heading may imply, give an account of the possible significance held therein. The content here is more synopsis than analysis. The examples in this section are reproduced directly from the first edition of *The Thematic Process in Music*.

The first analysis that Reti presents is of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, and it is expansive; he covers the entire symphony in a mere nineteen pages. As Ludwig Misch observed in his review of the book, “the first chapter is a musical example.” Already in opposition to the criticism that Reti works in an unnaturally linear fashion, he first presents the related nature of the principal subjects of each movement before turning around to show similar relations among secondary subjects. He writes,

> as a result of the symphony’s thematic analysis, a picture of the most manifold, most effective, and most logical architectural interconnections has unfolded itself.…

Specifically, a far-reaching analogy, in fact a full identity in pattern, was seen between the first themes of the four movements … and also between the second themes…. Since, in addition, the first and second Allegro themes themselves proved to be built from one common substance, it can be said in a wider sense that one thematic idea permeates the whole work.

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64 For an example of Schiano’s view of *The Thematic Process* as history text, see Schiano, “Arnold Schoenberg’s *Grundgestalt*,” 219.

65 Misch, review of *The Thematic Process*, 297–298. The translation is mine.
This last must not be misunderstood. A close analogy is seen only between the four first themes on the one side, and between the four second themes on the other. In this twofold symmetry the actual architectural idea of the symphony is centered.\textsuperscript{66}

That said, let us turn to Reti’s examples to see his analysis in action.

As he indicated, Reti begins with the first theme of the first movement, the Allegro ma non troppo; this is shown in Example 1.\textsuperscript{67} Here, Reti uses braces to indicate his division of the symphony’s first theme into “motivic elements” or cells. Reti’s Ex. 1b, the lower line, simply clarifies how these cells will appear through the remainder of the analysis, though as we will see, they will shed their rhythmic values as the analysis moves forward. As previously noted, Reti never explains his criteria for dividing the theme into motivic cells, certainly at the root of the perception that he relies on blind musical intuition in his analyses.

\textbf{Example 1.} Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, I. Allegro, mm. 17–27.

\begin{center}
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{example1.png}
\end{center}


\textsuperscript{67} As noted, the examples in this section are taken directly from the first edition of \textit{The Thematic Process in Music}. This may cause some slight confusion between Reti’s example numbering and mine. To help alleviate this, I will credit Reti each time I refer to one of his example numbers, and in so doing, I will maintain his use of the abbreviated “Ex.” For instance, I would refer to “Reti’s Ex. \textit{n}” in my “Example \textit{a}.”
Example 2a. Ninth Symphony, II. Scherzo, mm. 1–15.

Example 2b. Evolution of Cell III, Allegro to Scherzo.

Example 2c. Ninth Symphony, II. Scherzo, mm. 57–63.

Example 2a shows the theme of the second movement Scherzo above the motivic cells of the first movement’s opening theme. The correlations are obvious, except perhaps for segment III. For most commentators, this is where things begin to become problematic. Example 2b shows how Reti perceives the transformation and interpolation of cell III into the Scherzo theme. He writes, “Motif III has undergone the most visible change … assuming simultaneously the shape of a transposed motif II.
However, its appearance exactly between the two occurrences of motif II makes it certain that this E, F, G, is nevertheless meant as a corresponding substitute for motif III.”

Note the reductions indicated by small note heads. In this example, it is easy enough for us to understand the reductions in the two occurrences of cell II, the first and third measures, as reflective of passing tones. But without sufficient commentary from Reti, how might we rationalize his removal of the As from the Allegro’s cell III? While a systematic study of Reti’s reduction technique is necessary to draw any solid conclusions, it is evident that the harmonies implied by the unison melodic line support Reti’s reading, with the first A of cell III acting as a neighbor to the G, the root of the implied IV in D minor, and the E acting as the important note in the implied dominant that follows, serving ultimately as a passing note from the F in the first occurrence cell II to the D at the beginning of the second. Incidentally, this reading reflects Burkhart’s understanding of Reti’s theory as being reflective of, and operating on, multiple structural levels, for cell III and the second occurrence of cell II must be seen to accommodate harmonic prolongations.

Reti notes that cells I, II, and III maintain their original pitch level through their transformation into the principal Scherzo theme, a factor that holds great significance for Reti. He goes on to note that, as shown above in Example 2c, cell IV also appears at its original pitch level as Beethoven reiterates the Scherzo theme in a fugato.

Example 3a. Ninth Symphony, III. Adagio, mm. 3–5.

Moving on to the primary theme of the Adagio movement, Reti introduces the example that caused so much grief for both Pratt and Schiano. I will not rehash all the points made in the earlier discussion; I will only remind the reader that Reti’s commentary shows him to be acutely aware of the harmonic implications of his thematic interpretation of the opening of the Adagio theme. That said, when

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69 See n. 49, above.
Example 3a is compared to Example 2b, certain inconsistencies in Reti’s graphic representation seem to appear. Where his small note head reductions in the earlier example could be seen as aligned to surface harmonic phenomena, here, that is certainly not the case. What previously served as reductive notation apparently does not carry that significance at all here, but instead, merely serves to highlight the presence of the Allegro theme’s shape in the Adagio.

**Example 3b.** Ninth Symphony, III. Adagio, mm. 13–17.

Example 3b, above, demonstrates the affinity between the continuation of both themes. While it is obvious that the two excerpts share the same contour, this example is also worth further consideration, as Reti’s parallel begins from the second occurrence of cell II in the Allegro and with Beethoven’s second presentation of the corresponding phrase from the Adagio. Why has he chosen to omit material from each theme? There may be benefit in analyzing this passage again with a stricter application of Reti’s own cellular divisions.

Example 4a, below, takes us to the “Ode to Joy” theme of the Finale, and it is little surprise that this example has also been the source of much criticism. Here, the process of “thematic transformation” is complete. Of this example, Reti writes, “The kernel of it opening is again motif I from the Allegro, the

**Example 4a.** Ninth Symphony, IV. Allegro assai, mm. 93–104, 15\textsuperscript{th}.
Example 4b. Ninth Symphony, IV. Allegro assai, mm. 119–120.

His exposition of the relations between the primary themes complete, Reti goes on to demonstrate a similar course of development through the symphony’s secondary themes, writing, “the true picture, the full intensity of the symphony’s amazing architectural planning, will only reveal itself if we include these second themes as well in our examination.”\textsuperscript{72} However, with the products of Reti’s analysis and questions of his analytical method thoroughly introduced, it is perhaps better, as previously suggested, to save the continued review of that work for a more thorough investigation of the finer points of Reti’s

\textsuperscript{70} Reti, \textit{Thematic Process}, 16.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 16. Here, in a footnote, Reti expounds on the treatment of cell III, showing how his interpretation is born out in Beethoven’s sketches.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 17.
methodology. Suffice it to say here that Reti concludes that the thematic process as outlined above (and continued through his analysis of secondary thematic material) works together with large-scale motivic articulations, seemingly existing on different structural levels, of D and B♭. Along with the other areas of criticism that have been touched upon in this review of Reti’s analysis, it should be more than evident that Reti’s theory of thematic process is much more than one of “motivic minutiae.”

Still, in spite of the interesting facets of individual compositions that Reti draws out through his analyses, we have little reason to be anything but skeptical of Reti’s theory as an entity at this point. But there is a larger aspect of Reti’s work that has thus far gone unnoticed. Bringing this to light may help us locate some more general value in Reti’s work.

**Reti’s Method: A Key to Understanding the Thematic Process?**

As shown in the previous discussion of Beethoven’s Ninth, Reti remains remarkably silent on the workings of his analytical method throughout *The Thematic Process*. Nowhere, for example, does he inform the reader how he has arrived at motivic divisions of themes or his reductive decisions. It seems to satisfy Reti to point out similar contour or “obvious” connections. But as we have seen, statements of this type and his general lack of specificity have led to numerous charges of “tinkering,” the blind following of intuition, and ignorance of other important musical factors. Of course, this does not necessarily mean that Reti’s work is without a methodological basis as Kivy and others have asserted; it simply means that such a basis has not been understood or observed.

Reti includes two epigraphs in *The Thematic Process in Music*. The first comes from Schumann: “Only when the form is quite clear to you will the spirit become clear to you.” The second is a quote from Alfred North Whitehead, the noted English mathematician and philosopher: “In the organic theory a pattern need not endure in undifferentiated sameness…. A tune is such a pattern. Thus the endurance of a pattern means the reiteration of its succession of contrasts.”

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idea into a position of prominence, and when used at the beginning of a book, this generally serves to establish the theme of the work. It also tends to demonstrate a certain affinity between the person quoted and the author.

In addition to the pride of place granted Whitehead by the epigraph, Reti reintroduces him at the end of The Thematic Process to strengthen the summation of his thesis and drive his point home. What is more, Reti also opens Tonality, Atonality, Pantonality with an invocation of Whitehead. The reference there is made all the more powerful by the gratuitous nature of its appearance. Reti writes,

> Around the turn of the century the physical sciences, as is generally known, underwent an extraordinary change. Alfred North Whitehead, for instance, speaks repeatedly of the tremendous impression this great and almost sudden change made on his mind and views. About 1880 the laws of physics, as they were known then, seemed to represent something like an eternal truth, definitely established for all time. What remained to be done, said Whitehead, seemed to be merely the co-ordinating of a few newly discovered phenomena with the basic Newtonian principles.\(^74\)

And so Reti continues for four pages without further reference to Whitehead, linking miscalculation in scientific progress with the misunderstanding of modern music. Whitehead’s name need not appear here at all, so why does Reti work to include it? Perhaps Reti wished to subtly alert his readers to the philosophical foundation of the material to follow.

To the best of my knowledge, no one has investigated—or even identified—the possible connection between Reti’s work and Whitehead. Schwejda makes no mention of Whitehead throughout the course of his entire dissertation, for example. Perhaps this should come as no surprise, for in his 1966 book, A Key to Whitehead’s Process and Reality, Vanderbilt University professor Donald W. Sherburne lamented the “disturbing fact that Whitehead is not to any great extent … being read by people in fields other than philosophy.”\(^75\) But Reti’s repeated invocation of the philosopher certainly establishes a pattern of attempted association.

And there are other connections. The extraneous but highly relevant book introduction I quoted earlier is an excerpt from the Sherburne volume, and the author he is quoting there is Whitehead himself.

\(^74\) Reti, Tonality, 1.
As has been well established, the title of Reti’s core work is *The Thematic Process in Music*; the central work among Whitehead’s many publications was the 1929 book, *Process and Reality*. In fact, Whitehead’s body of thought is commonly referred to in a general way as “process” philosophy.” Reti’s use of the word “process,” a term that seems to have found its first real application to music with his 1951 volume, is surely no accident. And as noted in our survey of Reti’s biography, *The Thematic Process* represented Reti’s first public steps into a new world for the composer and critic. Perhaps he saw certain parallels between his own progression and Whitehead’s move from the applied sciences to the realm of speculative philosophy. But who was Whitehead, what is process philosophy, and how does it connect to Reti’s thematic process?

Alfred North Whitehead was born on 15 February 1861 in Ramsgate, Kent, England. He made his first major achievements as a mathematician, including the 1913 publication of *Principia Mathematica* in conjunction with his student, Bertrand Russell. In this capacity, he was awarded the Order of Merit and made a Fellow of the Royal Society. But Whitehead perceived fundamental problems in the world of science, leading him to shift his focus from mathematics, through philosophy of science, to metaphysics. John Locke’s work was the principal influence informing Whitehead’s philosophical approach. As Whitehead writes in *Process and Reality*, “The writer who most fully anticipated the main positions of the philosophy of organism is John Locke in his Essay,” a reference to the famous treatise, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

Process philosophy, which Whitehead also refers to as the “ontology of becoming” or, as seen above, the “philosophy of organism” or “organic theory,” departs significantly from the classical Greek view of metaphysics. Rather than viewing change as an accidental occasion that does not affect the fundamental, eternal essence of any real object or form, Whitehead posits change as the very basis of reality. Though, of course, anticipated by Heraclitus, Whitehead’s marked contribution to philosophical discourse is found in this, in his description of what he calls “actual entities” or “actual occasions,” “the

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final real things of which the world is made up.”\textsuperscript{77} Where Aristotelian or Hegelian truth are concerned with substances as phenomena that are predetermined and clearly defined, Whitehead describes actual entities as coalescing “in becoming,” forming aggregates that make up “complexes of occasions of experience” known as “societies” or “nexūs.”\textsuperscript{78} Every real thing in existence undergoes a process of generation, fulfillment, and demise, though its connection to the universe through time is eternal.

Whitehead finds the basis of these fundamental constructs of the philosophy of organism in the order of nature that he perceives operating in the universe. In other words, Whitehead expands process philosophy into a complete cosmology, one well deserving of the title. Naturally, his approach is heavily informed by his background in the special sciences. He writes,

\begin{quote}
Every age manages to find modes of classification which seem fundamental starting points for the researches of the special sciences. Each succeeding age discovers that the primary classifications of its predecessors will not work. In this way a doubt is thrown upon all formulations of laws of Nature which assume these classifications as firm starting points. A problem arises. Philosophy is the search for its solution.\textsuperscript{79}
\end{quote}

This is particularly appropriate, for Whitehead largely developed his view of the universe from an ancient view of matter that lost currency late in the nineteenth century. He writes, “empty space was conceived as filled with ether. This ether was nothing else than the ordinary matter of the original common-sense notion.” I will return to this “common-sense notion” in a moment, but for now, Whitehead continues,

\begin{quote}
It had the properties of a jelly, with its continuity, its cohesion, its flexibility, and its inertia. The ordinary matter of common sense then merely represented certain exceptional entanglements in the ether—that is to say, knots in the ether. These entanglements, which are relatively infrequent throughout space, impose stresses and strains throughout the whole of the jelly-like ether. Also, the agitations of ordinary matter are transmitted through the ether as agitations of the stresses and strains. In this way an immense unification was effected of the various doctrines of light, heat, electricity, and energy, which now coalesced into the one science of the ether.\textsuperscript{80}
\end{quote}

In short, in this discarded theory that Whitehead correctly helped to revive, albeit with “energy, activity, and vibratory differentiations of space-time” replacing the jelly, there is no empty space. All space contains something, and each something has a far-reaching effect on all other somethings.

\textsuperscript{77} Whitehead, \textit{Process}, 18.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 20.
\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 11.
This is contrasted with the “common-sense notion” of the universe that Whitehead alludes to above, one that he asserts is unshakeable from the nature of human mentality despite the naïve conditions of its assumptions. According to Whitehead,

we can conceive of Nature as composed of permanent things—namely, bits of matter, moving about in space which is otherwise empty. This way of thinking about Nature has an obvious consonance with common-sense observation. There are chairs, tables, bits of rock, oceans, animal bodies, vegetable bodies, planets, and suns. The enduring self-identity of a house, of a farm, of an animal body, is a presupposition of social intercourse…. A bit of matter is thus conceived as a passive fact, an individual reality which is the same at an instant, or throughout a second, an hour, or a year…. The connection between such bits of matter consists purely of spatial relations. Thus, the importance of motion arises from its change of the sole mode of interconnection of material things.\textsuperscript{81}

This brings us to the first point of deeper connection between Whitehead and Reti. The universal nature espoused by Whitehead is, as Reti said of the thematic process in a piece of music, “conceived as a whole”; it cannot be adequately represented as a linear development or with simple geometry. On a microcosmic level, Whitehead’s broad cosmological view is an apt representation of how Reti interprets the musical masterwork, every aspect of which is effected and shaped by a process of change in constituent elements that seem at first distantly removed. This is the essence of Reti’s thematic process. As Whitehead puts it, in the “modern point of view…. Any local agitation shakes the whole universe. The distant effects are minute, but they are there.”\textsuperscript{82} This is contrasted with the middle-period common-sense notion of the universe: “The concept of matter presupposed simple location. Each bit of matter was self-contained, localized in a region with a passive, static network of spatial relations, entwined in a uniform relational system from infinity to infinity and from eternity to eternity.”\textsuperscript{83} Reti’s conception of the thematic process is clearly aligned with the former while the latter reverberates with those theories of motivic structure to which Hatten’s “motivic minutiae” appellation might be well applied, and thus, two of the streams of criticism examined earlier have been put into a different perspective.\textsuperscript{84}

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 2.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 12.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{84} This distinction should also shed light on scholarship that claims affinity to Reti’s work but proves to be, at most, tenuously related. See, for example, Reinhold Brinkmann, \textit{Late Idyll: The Second Symphony of Johannes Brahms},
Returning to Whitehead’s more basic model of the universe, we can expand this first connection for a better understanding of the concepts that Reti was likely trying to express in his thematic process. As noted, Whitehead describes all matter in his neo-ethereal construct as “actual entities” or “actual occasions” that coalesce “in becoming.” This process of concrescence for actual entities, which Whitehead also refers to as a “physical feeling,” is depicted in the diagram in Figure 1.  

**Figure 1.** Diagram of concrescence by Donald W. Sherburne.

![Diagram of concrescence](image)

Entity B has encountered Actual Entity A, which now exists in the immediate past of B, an essentially unreal state. Because of this condition, B has objectified the datum N in A through its subjective position, and hence, datum N from A is manifest as the objectified “prehension” X in B. To drastically oversimplify, B has evolved through contact with A. In this way, every real thing passes through its cycle of existence. According to Whitehead,

> The philosophy of organism is a cell-theory of actuality. The cell is exhibited as appropriating, for the foundation of its own existence, the various elements of the universe out of which it arises. Each process of appropriation of a particular element is termed a prehension. I have adopted the term ‘prehension’ to express the activity whereby an actual entity effects its own concretion of other things.”

Through similar processes, individual actual entities coalesce into larger bodies, the “societies” or “nexūs.” As indicated in Reti’s chosen epigraph, these societies function in patterned ways based on the

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86 Ibid., 8.
consistent interaction of participant actual entities, even while the individual actual entities are involved in their own continual evolution.

This is exactly how Reti depicts the thematic process: Motivic cell I on its own means nothing. Motivic cell I can take any shape it likes, but without its specific relation to motivic cell II, its evolution is meaningless. The aggregate theme, analogous to the nexus, continues to cohere as its motivic cells evolve. It reaches fulfillment, and it fades into the past while transferring its essence to any number of other theme societies existing across the ether of the musical composition.

I should now like to consider the correlations between Whitehead’s philosophical constructs and Reti’s thematic process discussed so far through application in an actual analysis. The Thematic Process contains the beginnings of an analysis of Brahms’ Second Symphony.\(^87\) Below, I will attempt to flesh out a Retian analysis of the exposition of the first movement, examining Brahms’ employment of sonata form therein in light of Whitehead’s actual entity/ether model, and appraising Reti’s efforts, where applicable, as I go.

**Table 1.** Brahms, Symphony No. 2 in D major, op. 73, I. Allegro non troppo. Formal outline.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>mm.</th>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Character/Identity</th>
<th>Key</th>
<th>Clear?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1–23</td>
<td>1st Subject(?)</td>
<td>Introductory</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19–43</td>
<td>Transition 1</td>
<td>Transitory</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44–65</td>
<td>“Intermediate” Subject(?)</td>
<td>“1. Subject”</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66–81</td>
<td>Transition 2</td>
<td>Transitory</td>
<td>III?</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>82–101</td>
<td>2. Subject(?) – 1</td>
<td>“2. Subject”</td>
<td>III</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>102–117</td>
<td>2. Subject(?) – 2</td>
<td>“2. Subject”</td>
<td>III</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>118–155</td>
<td>Transition 3</td>
<td>Closing</td>
<td>V/V</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>156–184</td>
<td>2. Subject(?) – 3</td>
<td>“2. Subject”/Closing(?)</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>185–301</td>
<td>Development</td>
<td>Developmental</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>302–323</td>
<td>1. + “Int.” Subject</td>
<td>“1. Subject”</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>319–349</td>
<td>Transition 1</td>
<td>Transitory</td>
<td>V?</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>350–369</td>
<td>2. Subject – 1</td>
<td>“2. Subject”</td>
<td>VI</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>370–385</td>
<td>2. Subject – 2</td>
<td>“2. Subject”</td>
<td>VI</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>386–423</td>
<td>Transition 3</td>
<td>Closing</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>424–446</td>
<td>2. Subject – 3</td>
<td>2. Subject/Transition(?)</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>446–523</td>
<td>Coda</td>
<td>Closing</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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As the formal outline in Table 1 shows, a traditional reading of the first movement of Brahms’ D Major Symphony presents several difficulties with regard to normal expectations for the elements commonly discussed as fundamental to the dramatic contrasts so definitive of sonata form. These questionable issues are addressed in the simplest way possible in the table in the hope that methodological biases and differences of approach will be muzzled.

The exposition contains three well-delineated thematic sections. With an ill-defined key and a general feeling of statis, the first is rather introductory in character. Oddly, the tonality gains definition in the transition to the second thematic area, a section possessing all the characteristics of a typical sonata form first subject. In the third thematic section, we find a theme typical of a second subject. However, rather than move to the dominant, Brahms goes to the weakly-defined mediant. After a varied repetition of this theme, new material arrives which seems to signal that the exposition is coming to a close. Instead, it leads to another iteration of the third theme, this time presented clearly in the dominant and leading directly to the end of the exposition.

In the recapitulation some of the irregularity is reconciled when Brahms overlays the first two thematic areas into one more definite, though busy, first subject. The key-defining transition from the exposition also fulfills its role more normally this time around, but what we may now properly recognize as the second subject arrives in the poorly-defined submediant rather than the mediant of the exposition. This is once again normalized in the third iteration of the subject.

In addition to large-scale harmonic relationship and localized thematic identity, architectural balance is an element generally included in discussions of sonata form. As Allan Forte and others have suggested, the whole should resemble something approaching either three-part symmetry or two-part balance. In the Brahms, the exposition is 369 measures long when repeated, the development is 119 measures, and the recapitulation with coda is 221 measures. In terms of sheer length, then, the structure of the movement clearly divides into two almost-equal parts. Internally, however, matters are much less

clear. How are we to perceive an exposition that seems to follow two 20-measure themes with a nominative second subject that weighs in at more than 100 bars? Can contrast even be adequately established with such disparity?

**Example 5a.** Brahms, Second Symphony, I. Allegro non troppo, mm. 1–5.

If Reti chose his epigraphs well, the importance of these observations and questions, which incidentally, are based on a linear understanding of the movement, should fade when we consider its form in terms of the thematic structure. Example 5a contains Reti’s division of the opening phrase and its motivic cells, reflecting Whitehead’s society of actual entities.\(^89\) I have clarified Reti’s division of Cell II in Example 5b and added what I call the “II complex.” The reason for this addition will become apparent momentarily. Reti’s depiction of the remainder of the first period is seen in Example 6a, which he says “represents a slightly varied reiteration of the last three bars from the preceding group.” However, when we take the II complex as an entity, as in Example 6b, the identity of this phrase comes into focus with the recognition of its constituent parts.

**Example 6a.** Second Symphony, mm. 6–9.

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\(^89\) See Reti, *Thematic Process*, 78.
Example 6b. Second Symphony, mm. 6–9, revised.

There are two additional items of note in Example 6b, the first of which is the questionable evolution of Cell I into Cell I-b. As seen in his analysis of Beethoven’s Ninth, much of Reti’s linking of seemingly disparate motivic cells is rooted in the cellular pattern that defines the theme. Here, the Cell II complex is aurally recognizable, its new shape being primarily the result of inverting the final interval from an ascending perfect fourth to a descending perfect fifth. We expect Cell I to come before Cell II, and therefore we can accept the equivalence of Cells I and I-b. But there is more to the relation between Cells I and I-b in the Brahms than expected orientation.

Example 7a: Second Symphony, mm. 1–9.

In Example 7a, Reti has divided the movement’s opening into two phrases. Note that, here, he has appended the Cell I in measure 5 to the phrase from Example 6a. Not only does this restore the previously missing occurrence of Cell I to the pattern, it also encourages us to understand Cell I-b as related to the initial inversion of Cell I in measure four, that is, Cell I-a. The only change necessary to make I-a equivalent to I-b is to invert the second interval. Instead of an ascending second followed by a descending second, we have an ascending second followed by an ascending second.
I have reconstructed Reti’s example in 7b, below, to show all of these relationships. Note my inclusion of the arrival as the simple Cell III. While in most instances, Cell III is represented by a single note, long or short, I feel that it is an important element in the shape of the theme.

**Example 7b.** Second Symphony, mm. 1–9, revised.

While it may seem that I have headed into the realm of “motivic minutiae,” this exercise fosters aural and intellectual identification of the theme and its evolutoinal possibilities. It also begins to demonstrate how the thematic pattern of motivic cells recurs in the constellation of occurrences that is the piece, corresponding to Whitehead’s interaction between nexūs and the simultaneous evolution of actual entities within. The usefulness of this will become evident as we consider Example 8, a clear demonstration of how a thematic pattern can be maintained and remain recognizable as its motivic cells

**Example 8.** Second Symphony, mm. 9–23.
undergo rather extreme development. In measures 14 and 15, Cell I is expanded by the symmetrical addition of a second to each end of its shape, and in 16 through 22, the II complex is extended through the filling in of its constituent intervals, and through the effective nullification of the opening descending minor third by a subsequent ascending major sixth.

**Example 9a.** “I complex”: I+I-a.

As we move into the first transitional section, I would like to introduce another new entity, namely, the I complex. Based on Cell I-b, Example 9a shows its derivation and how it strongly relates to both Cell I (as indicated by A. in the example) and I-a (B.). The I complex can be seen in operation in Example 9c, a clearly labeled reduction of Reti’s original illustration (Example 9b). Note the conspicuous lack of Cell II. This is nothing to worry about, as the excerpt follows a dozen measures in which a distinct manifestation of Cell II initiates the transition, thus maintaining the pattern as the musical nexus grows within the whole.
Example 9c. Second Symphony, mm. 32–44, reduction and analysis.

Example 10a. Second Symphony, mm. 44–51.

Example 10b. Second Symphony, comparison of first and “intermediate” subjects.

Examples 10a through 10c represent a clear misstep on Reti’s part. Here, he re-divides the theme in an attempt to demonstrate its affinity to what he identifies as the “intermediate theme” at measure 44, and then he repartitions that subject in an attempt to show its relation to the nominal second subject. Not only is the repartitioning contradictory to the perceived rudiments of Reti’s theory, but looking at...
Example 10c. Second Symphony, comparison of second and “intermediate” subjects.

![Musical notation]

Example 10d. Second Symphony, comparison of “intermediate” subject cells, mm. 44–52.

Example 10c, in his desire to claim an exact pitch relation between two subjects in their respective keys—as we have seen, a sort of Holy Grail occurrence in the thematic process—Reti has used the viola part instead of the cello, where the actual theme is stated. In contrast, Example 10d makes it clear that no new definition of cells is necessary to see the relation between this subject the previous one.

Example 10e shows how Cell I-d expands to falsely suggest the move to Cell II, and Example 10f shows how the cells begin to overlap before the transition to the second subject arrives. Note that this segment still maintains the thematic pattern: two units of Cell I, one occurrence of the II complex, and Cell III. Note, too, the increasing elision of cells through the transition, introducing and moving toward a quality that is fundamental to the formation of the second subject, as depicted in Example 11a. Here, we can see a fundamental shift that supports Reti’s initial division of the II complex into two discreet units. Namely, the thematic pattern
Example 10e. Second Symphony, progression of cells, intermediate subject, mm. 52–62.

Example 10f. Second Symphony, overlapping cells approaching transition, mm. 64–65.

Example 11a. Second Symphony, second subject, mm. 82–85.

Example 11b. Second Symphony, Cell II accompaniment to second subject, mm. 82–85.
sheds one of those units from the II complex. Any potential imbalance is corrected, however, by the II-based accompaniment shown in Example 11b.

Example 12. Second Symphony, theme in second subject transition, mm. 89–99.


Example 12 identifies the existence of the complete thematic pattern in the brief transition between the first two iterations of the second subject. The arrows indicate the primary pitches of II complex-e. Note how the phrasing supports the identity of the cell, including the enclosure of B in measure 95. Reti generally chooses to omit all phrase marks and all notes that he views as extraneous. As evidenced here, however, this information can often support a good reading of the thematic structure or point to a problematic one. Taking account of other musical elements can also help us move beyond motive toward a realization of how thematic development can influence other compositional factors. The final example, Example 13, contains an important occurrence of Cell II in measures 128 to 131, within the much longer transition between the second and third installments of the second subject.

The preceding analysis does not cover every variation of the theme in the exposition, but it does address most of them, and certainly most of those that play a prominent role. Total thematic identity has been stressed in terms of Whitehead’s concept of nexus while motivic units were examined as actual entities and, necessarily, in great detail. We are now well prepared for discussing the various functions of the theme as they function in the whole in a more impactful way.
Tables 2 through 5 lay out the evolution of Cells I and II identified in the foregoing analysis, including a detailed accounting of their basic intervallic content. Taking the information in these four tables together while keeping in mind the patterned makeup of every thematic utterance, it becomes clear that thematic evolution occurring as the product of the reshaping of motivic cells as actual entities (as opposed to that resulting from the expansion or contraction of the nexus itself, as when Cell II is transformed into an accompanimental figure) occurs almost exclusively within the subjects themselves.

**Table 2.** Cell I transformation in Brahms’ Second Symphony, I. Allegro non troppo, exposition.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Label</th>
<th>Section</th>
<th>m.</th>
<th>Content</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>1. subject</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>↓2 ↑2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I-a</td>
<td>1. subject</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>↑2 ↓2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I-b</td>
<td>1. subject</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>↑2 ↑2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I-c</td>
<td>1. subject</td>
<td>14–15</td>
<td>↓2 ↓2 ↑2 ↓2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I-d</td>
<td>Int. subject</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>↓2 ↑2 ↓3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I-e</td>
<td>Int. subject</td>
<td>58–60</td>
<td>↓2 ↓2 ↓4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I-f</td>
<td>2. subject</td>
<td>82–83</td>
<td>↓3 ↑2 ↑2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3.** “I complex” manifestations exposition.

<table>
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<th>Section</th>
<th>m.</th>
<th>Content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I-comp</td>
<td>1. transition</td>
<td>33–39</td>
<td>↑2 ↑2 ↓2 ↓2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I-comp-a</td>
<td>2. transition</td>
<td>77–82</td>
<td>See Ex. 8B</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 4.** Cell II transformations in exposition.

<table>
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<th>m.</th>
<th>Content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>1. subject</td>
<td>2–3</td>
<td>↑3 ↓8 ↑4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II-a</td>
<td>1. subject</td>
<td>2–3</td>
<td>↓8 ↑4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II-b</td>
<td>Int. subject</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>↑6 ↓8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II-c</td>
<td>2. subject</td>
<td>83–84</td>
<td>↓3 ↑3 ↑4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 5.** “II complex” transformations in exposition.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Label</th>
<th>Section</th>
<th>m.</th>
<th>Content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>II-comp</td>
<td>1. subject</td>
<td>2–3</td>
<td>↑3 ↓8 ↑4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II-comp-a</td>
<td>1. subject</td>
<td>7–8</td>
<td>↑3 ↓2 ↓5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II-comp-b</td>
<td>1. subject</td>
<td>16–22</td>
<td>↓3 ↑8 ↓5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II-comp-c</td>
<td>Int. subject</td>
<td>45–46</td>
<td>↓5 ↑8 ↑4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II-comp-d</td>
<td>Int. subject</td>
<td>61–62</td>
<td>↓4 ↓8 ↓3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II-comp-e</td>
<td>2. subject TRANS</td>
<td>93–97</td>
<td>↑3 ↓5 ↓4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Excluding the I complex construct, thematic occurrences in transition or closing passages are marked in that they only employ cell permutations that have already been thoroughly introduced. In this way, we can indeed see the formal structure of the movement being articulated through the thematic process.

A discussion of how the thematic process works through the rest of the movement will have to wait for an independent study of the work. Suffice it to say that in the development, Cells I and II compete for supremacy in alternating thematic patterns, taking on characteristic identities as tension peaks. And at the recapitulation, where one would imagine that the layering of the first and intermediate subjects would create some form of stress, all tension is released by the alignment of the individual subjects’ shared thematic pattern. Throughout the movement we can observe each motivic cell evolving independently as an actual entity while working in the nexus-like thematic pattern. The varied occurrences of the thematic nexus, in turn, send ripples through the ether-like construct of the work, shaping the next iteration of the pattern as they pass through time, and thereby, serving as actual agents of musical drama. This is in keeping with Reti’s suggestion that the theory of thematic process extends to the extramusical. He remarks, for example, that the Finale of Brahms’ Second is “indeed a synthesis of all the thematic impulses of the symphony. And in this synthesis [emphasis added] the contemplative rhythm of the preceding themes changes to a jubilant march—a jubilation which here too has a touch of the tragic.”

Reti’s interaction with Whitehead’s philosophy works on at least two levels: the systematic, whereby Whitehead’s cosmology is, to a greater or lesser degree, absorbed as the operative paradigm, and the theoretical, whereby Reti espouses Whitehead’s more general philosophical ideas, especially those related to speculative philosophy and creativity, as basis for his largely intuitive approach. I have approached the discovery of the former above. The tantalizing factors that challenge many of the criticisms of Reti’s work are found in the latter.

A chief innovation of Whitehead’s cosmology lies in the importance of the observer. Where the mainstream of philosophical thought, in league with the sciences, had pushed the observer from the

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90 Reti, Thematic Process, 164.
equation, the senses being correctly viewed as inherently flawed and human perception seen as irrelevant to the actual data that human perception harvests from the real world, Whitehead reinstates the observer with full force. Not only does he insist that our flawed sensory perception is inextricably linked with our attempts to understand the world, Whitehead actually insists that it is our perception of actual entities that gives meaning to those entities. He writes, “We habitually observe by the method of difference. Sometimes we see an elephant, and sometimes we do not. The result is that an elephant, when present, is noticed. Facility of observation depends on the fact that the object observed is important when present, and sometimes is absent.”\(^91\) Without perception, there is no reason to observe, and there is no reason to exist, neither for the subject nor the object.

In other words, for Whitehead, sensory perception leads more or less directly to reason, impetus for action, and this is carried through by imaginative creativity. He continues from the previous quote:

> The true method of discovery is like the flight of an aeroplane. It starts from the ground of particular observation; it makes a flight in the thin air of imaginative generalization; and it again lands for renewed observation rendered acute by rational interpretation. The reason for the success of this method of imaginative rationalization is that, when the method of difference fails, factors which are constantly present may yet be observed under the influence of imaginative thought. Such thought supplies the difference which the direct observation lacks. It can even play with inconsistency; and can thus throw light on the consistent, and persistent, elements in experience by comparison with what in imagination is inconsistent with them.\(^92\)

This imaginative generalization is the very intuition, the hidden method, that Reti so regularly stands accused of employing. Far from an accidental or idiotic failure to record his objective observations, Reti’s intuition is the very heart of his analytical approach. If we are to invoke Reti’s work, then we should at least be open to considering it within its own formative intellectual frame, and while we may not individually or collectively agree that intuition can form the basis of effective musical analysis, it is clearly an essential component of Reti’s approach.

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\(^92\) Ibid., 5.
Conclusion

Rudolph Reti’s theory of thematic process, though routinely dismissed, has continued to hold interest for music theorists and musicologists alike. Its hidden relation to the speculative philosophical cosmology of Alfred North Whitehead may be one of the reasons for this, as once uncovered, it points to a systematic methodological approach that is not otherwise apparent. In this essay, I have attempted to present Reti’s theory in this light, but there is obviously much work left to be done in establishing, fleshing out, and analyzing this fundamental relationship.

In closing, I would like to make explicit what I may have already implied: in dealing with Reti, I find that I must continually remind myself to suspend disbelief in my efforts to see the musical cosmos as Reti saw it. Of course, actually to do so is a decided impossibility, but in the best case scenario, the attempt may lead to new or renewed ways of comprehending how musical works function. It may also help us to better understand the philosophical basis of other theorists working in Reti’s Vienna and, particularly, to appreciate the diversity of what we commonly regard simply as “German organicism.” It may even shed light on how Viennese musical thought has been translated through the development of music theory as a discipline in the United States. At worst, we might better understand why a rejected theory continues to capture our attention.
References


