**Contemporary Music Studies**

A series of books edited by Nigel Osborne, University of Edinburgh, UK

**Volume 1**
Charles Koechlin (1867–1950) His Life and Works
*Robert Orledge*

**Volume 2**
Pierre Boulez – A World of Harmony
*Lev Koblyakov*

**Volume 3**
Bruno Maderna
*Raymond Fearn*

**Volume 4**
What's the Matter with Today's Experimental Music? Organized Sound Too Rarely Heard
*Leigh Landy*

**Volume 5**
Linguistics and Semiotics in Music
*Raymond Monelle*

*Additional volumes in preparation:*

Hanns Eisler
*David Blake*

Stefan Wolpe
*Austin Clarkson*

The Other Webern
*Christopher Hailey*

New Music Notation: A Handbook
*Rosemary Dunn*

Cage and the Human Tightrope
*David Revill*

Italian Opera Music Theatre Since 1945
*Raymond Fearn*

The Toneclock
*Peter Schat*

Edison Denisov
*Yuri Kholopov and Valeria Tsenova*

Soviet Film Music
A Historical Perspective
*Tatanya Yegorova*

Music, Myth and Nature
The Dolphins of Arion
*François-Bernard Mâche*

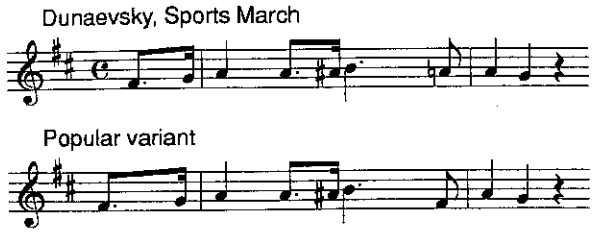
This book is part of a series. The publisher will accept continuation orders which may be cancelled at any time and which provide for automatic billing and shipping of each title in the series upon publication. Please write for details.

# Linguistics and Semiotics in Music

Raymond Monelle
*University of Edinburgh, UK*

harwood academic publishers
Switzerland • Australia • Belgium • France • Germany • Gt. Britain • India • Japan • Malaysia • Netherlands • Russia • Singapore • USA

Figure 9.7




The common people, remarks Zak, are 'romantic at heart and always eager to live'. However, nuances much more subtle than this may be expressed when an individual singer performs a familiar song.

### *9.4. Two Scottish singers*

9.4.1. The individual idioms of folk singers have been noted often by researchers. The concept of intonation is demonstrated vividly when the same song is sung by two singers with personal connections. Jeannie Robertson was a Scottish traveller or 'tinker', a member of a vagrant group who have preserved much of Scotland's ancient folksong. Her daughter, Lizzie Higgins, settled down in Aberdeen as a fish-filleter. The singing of both women has been recorded and carefully transcribed, and it shows that while Jeannie's style was comparatively direct, Lizzie, though she learnt all the material from her mother, sings in a more highly ornamented style. In Jeannie's singing you were more aware of the 'address of the form'.

> Jeannie conjures up a picture of the campfire with an audience, probably small but always responsive and inspiring the singer to sway them in the style that moves them most (Munro 1970, 178).

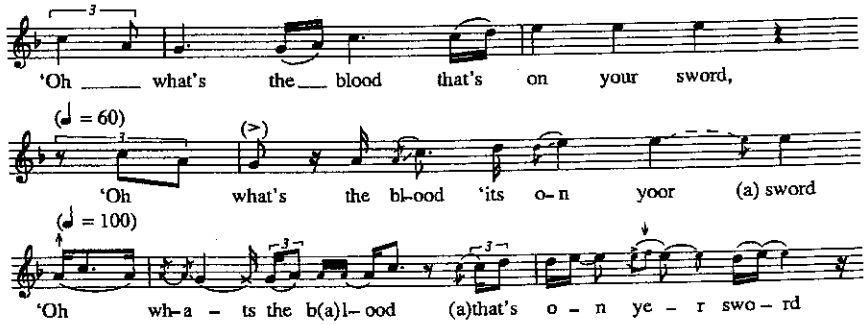
Lizzie's style is very different. The voice timbres are quite distinct: 'Lizzie's has a husky element to it, very expressive and attractive, with a strength and steadfastness which contains hardly a trace of vibrato.' Her more elaborate ornamentation shows the influence of bagpipe music, 'in particular the playing of her father, the piper Donald Higgins, to whom she has listened from her earliest years'. In addition, 'her comparative lack of dynamic variation and her freedom from vibrato may be attributable to the strong influence of pipe-music'.



Here is the first phrase of the ballad 'Edward' ('Son David'), first in the simplified form provided by Bronson (1959-1966), then as sung by Jeannie, then by Lizzie. Jeannie Robertson's version is from Gower and Porter (1970), Lizzie Higgins's from Munro (1970).

Asafiev would hear in the daughter's singing the settled worker, no longer vagrant; the child of two famous performers; the Aberdonian; as well as the different personal expression of the words of the song, just as we can derive much information about a speaker from the intonation of his speech.

Figure 9.8




### *9.5. Kojak and Abba*

9.5.1. The remarkable analyses of popular music by Philip Tagg are not expressed in the language of intonation theory, though the author admits that it 'easily lends itself to application in the realm of popular music since it embraces all levels of musical expression and perception from onomatopoeic programmatic signals to complex formal constructions without... placing them on either overt or occult scales of aesthetic value judgement' (Tagg 1979, 42). Tagg's work is similar in many respects to Zak's, however, and illustrates especially clearly the dependence of musical expression on the vocabulary of intonations stored within a cultural group. He admits that his ideas have 'much in common with the holistic character of Intonation theory'. Without saying so, he regards music as 'intoned idea', and devotes himself to discovering the meanings which have generated musical forms. Like Asafiev he refuses to link two musical features which, though formally the same, have different meanings: 'Just as no one would presume the same

morpheme to mean the same thing in two different languages..., it would be absurd to presume that a B flat 13 chord "means" the same in the language of nineteenth-century operetta and in bebop jazz' (1979, 75).

Traditional analysis, preoccupied with form, can contribute little on its own. 'Instead of opposing extrageneric... and congeneric... approaches' (the terms are Wilson Coker's; see above, p. 205) we should treat them as complementary; analysis must be 'based on a thorough study of the dialectical relations between the musical structure, its conception, production, transmission, and reception, and its social meaning, uses, and functions' (Tagg 1987, 285).

To this clearly intonational spirit Tagg joins an avowedly semiotic technique. He describes his field as the 'semiotics of popular music' (Tagg 1987) and identifies his method as 'hermeneutic-semiological' (Tagg 1982, 47). Above all, his metalanguage is largely drawn from linguistics, and he revives Charles Seeger's idea of the *museme*, the musical morpheme (see Chapter 3, above).

For this reason, Tagg is of especial importance in the field of music semiotics: otherwise, the whole tradition of intonation theory is only 'proto-semiotic'.

9.5.2. The *logical*, and thus abstract, basis of Seeger's museme is neither discussed nor acknowledged by Tagg, for the later writer's museme is clearly a carrier of semantic content. Nevertheless, he accepts Seeger's definition of the museme.

> A unit of three components - three tone beats - can constitute two progressions and meet the requirements for a complete, independent unit of music-logical form or mood in both direction and extension. Both variance and invariance can be exhibited in each of the four simple functions. It can be regarded as binary and holomorphic - a musical morpheme or museme (Seeger 1960, 239).

It will be recalled that Seeger considered two events necessary for a unit of musical signification; since two pitches (or rhythms, tempi and so on) are needed for a single event, the smallest number of units that can make up a museme is three (above, pp. 74-80).

Tagg adds that the progression from silence to sound at the beginning of a phrase may go towards a museme, so that the first two notes of a phrase may suffice. He replaces Seeger's various types of museme with three classes only: *melodic*, *accompanying*

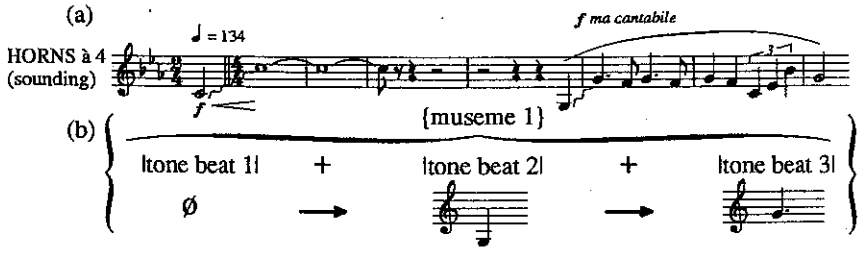


and *contrasting*. It is apparent that Tagg's segmentation is based on pertinence and meaning; Seeger's approach remained obscure, and it would be hard to apply his methods, except to music already fragmentary by nature. Tagg isolates and interprets musemes by a process called 'inter-objective comparison' (IOC), which means looking for similar patterns in other music of related traditions.

9.5.3. He analyses the theme from *Kojak* (a television series about an American detective). This is played by four horns in unison, accompanied by strings, synthesizer and electric bass. The initial gesture is a horn 'whoop', an upward octave portamento. The theme itself begins with a similar 'whoop' at a lower pitch (Figure 9.9a). Since this is the first motive in the theme, the two notes may count as a museme, the progression from silence to sound being its first element (Figure 9.9b).

(© 1973, 1975 by Duchess Music Corporation. All rights controlled and administered by MCA Music Publishing, a division of MCA Inc.)

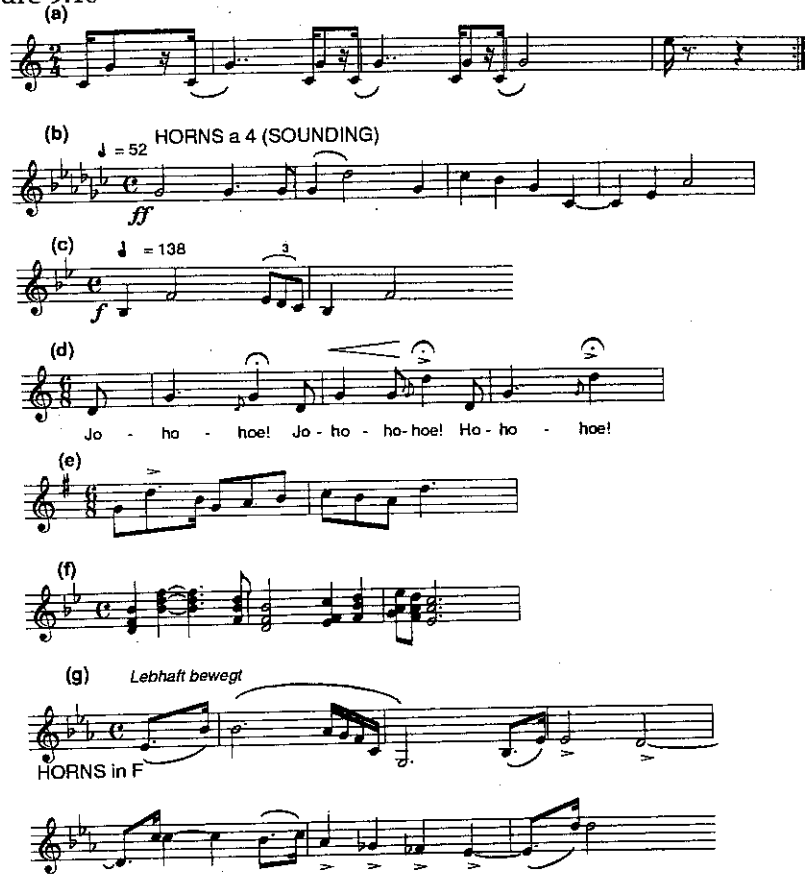
Figure 9.9




The timbre of the horn is the first aspect to be discussed. While brass instruments 'have traditionally been connected with male-dominated areas of activity, such as war, marching, parades... and their inherent affective sensations of bravery, danger, threat, energy and excitement', the horn has been 'less commonly used in military circumstances' and has been associated more specifically with 'hunting and postage' (Tagg 1979, 125). The horn's traditional connection is with 'men on horseback galloping through woods and fields, hard on the heels of hounds in pursuit of game... or riding "post-haste" along country lanes'. Horn calls thus evoke 'speed, excitement and energy'. Some of these old calls have been preserved; they often leap upwards to a strong beat in the manner of the *Kojak* tune, though not usually by so much as an octave; fifths are more common, as in the English post horn signal 'Clear the road' (Figure 9.10a).

The horn leap of a fifth (tonic to dominant) is well-established in the literature. The television series *How the West was Won*, with its 'strong, fair-minded, fair-haired, outdoor pioneering hero' had a theme tune beginning with a rising fifth played by unison horns (Figure 9.10b). Mark Trail, 'preserver of wild-life, guardian of the forest', the hero of an advertising feature for Kellogg's Pep Breakfast, was introduced by a theme played on Wurlitzer organ (imitating horns) which incorporated the same interval (Figure 9.10c).

Figure 9.10




Heroes of classical music often express themselves in rising fifths: we list the horn-like call of the Flying Dutchman (Figure 9.10d), Siegfried's horn call (Figure 9.10e), and the theme of the hero

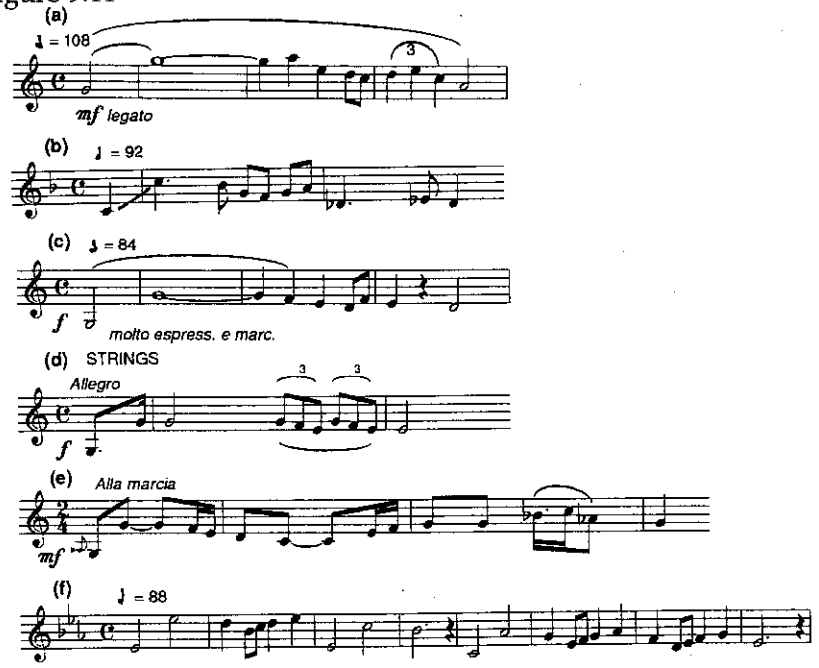


Siegfried (Figure 9.10f; the latter two from the *Ring*). Strauss depicts his 'hero's life' *(Ein Heldenleben)* with a selection of intervals: first the familiar fifth, than a fourth and two sevenths (Figure 9.10g).

The 'whoop' which rises an octave is just as common. The American radio series *Gunsmoke* features 'Mat Dillon, US Marshal - the first man they look for and the last one they [the baddies] want to meet'. The theme music is at Figure 9.11a. The 'Saint' - the 'Robin Hood of modern crime' and hero of a radio series - is also introduced by an octave leap on horn (Figure 9.11b).

Various heroes of the classical literature are characterized by octave leaps from dominant to dominant, the second note usually on the strong beat. We may cite Strauss's Don Juan whose theme is played on horns (Figure 9.11c), and Liszt's Tasso, with a similar figure on strings (Figure 9.11d). Sibelius's Kullervo (in the movement entitled 'Kullervo goes to battle') is characterized by a similar octave leap, though this time the lower note is on the strong beat (Figure 9.11e).

Figure 9.11




This list of 'reveille signals preparing the viewer and listener for heroic action' could be made very much longer. The common

elements seem to be (1) a call to action (to the hero), (2) a call to attention (to the listener), (3) male heroism, energy and excitement.

Related musical figures of this kind are called IOCM (inter-objective comparison material). They undoubtedly illustrate the 'vocabulary of intonations' envisaged by Asafiev. These are the short fragments which lie in the public consciousness as 'living intonations'. Both Tagg and Asafiev would maintain that the rising octaves in all these themes are essentially the same interval, while a rising octave in a different context may be quite a different interval because its signification is not the same. In Harold Arlen's 'Over the rainbow', for example (Figure 9.11f), the steady downward continuation 'seems to "negate" the lift upwards and outwards, gradually falling back to the initially low starting point on the tonic' (Tagg 1979, 131).

Consequently, it does not threaten Tagg's position to cite octave leaps which have nothing to do with heroism. These figures are merely illustrations of different paradigms; they are different musemes, which, though homophones of the 'heroic call to action', have quite separate meanings.

An examination of all the musemes in the melody and accompaniment of the 'A' section of the *Kojak* theme suggests that it portrays 'something individual and male... which may be characterized as strong, energetic, virile, heroic, calm, confident, martial... and which is both called and calls to attention and to action upwards and outwards. He is thrown into relief by, stands out against, is a dominant part of and moves in harmony with an environment which may be characterized as modern, full of general, constant, bustling, nervous, luminous, pleasant activity and excitement, nervous, unrestful, energetic and agitated but tinged with a pleasant shimmer in which the somewhat aggressive energy and modernity of a North American metropolis and its subculture may be distinguished as an important part' (Tagg 1979, 147).

9.5.4. Abba's hit recording 'Fernando' has alternating verses and choruses which are different in character. A musematic analysis will thus have to draw important syntagmatic conclusions; and indeed the syntagmatic level of analysis is important in other ways.

The song is apparently about a woman who has fought alongside her companion Fernando in a freedom fight in South America. In the verse she mentions 'drums and sounds of bugle

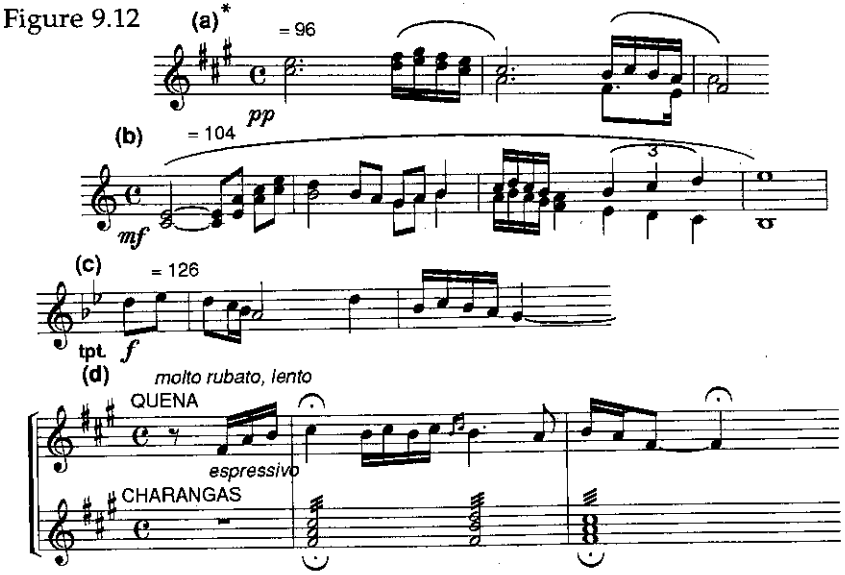


calls' and 'the roar of guns and cannons'; 'We were young and full of life and none of us prepared to die.' These ominous concrete references disappear in the chorus which has an atmosphere of pleasant nostalgia.

> There was something in the air that night, the stars were bright, Fernando.
> They were shining there for you and me, for liberty, Fernando.
> Though we never thought that we could lose, there's no regrets:
> If I had to do the same again, I would, my friend, Fernando.

The musical settings of verse and chorus are sharply distinguished. It will be noticed that the exact location of the war for liberty is left unstated, apart from the hispanic name 'Fernando' and a mention of the Rio Grande (which could mean Brazil, Argentina, Mexico or the USA). However, the piece begins with an introduction played by two descant recorders in thirds, with a very characteristic figure (Figure 9.12a).

Figure 9.12



The distinctly hispanic evocation of this motive ('museme 1a') may be demonstrated by citing various items of 'mood music' from the *Selected Sound Recorded Music Library Catalogue*, where the evocation of the music is clearly specified. For example, *Spanish Autumn*, a piece for recorder and alto flute, is meant to evoke 'Spain, South America, dancing, people' (Figure 9.12b). Another piece called *Cordigliera* (Figure 9.12c) depicts 'carnival, festivity in the valley' (the Italian spelling is presumably a mistake).

These examples have tempi much quicker than the introduction to 'Fernando', however. Another mood-music collection, produced in Italy by Campi, contains a piece called *Exotic Flute* ('impression... journey over exotic landscape' - see Figure 9.12d). This is not only slower but is pentatonic like the 'Fernando' figure. In addition the accompaniment takes the form of strummed chords on *charangas*, small South American guitars made from armadillo shell. The accompaniment in 'Fernando' includes strummed guitar chords. The solo part here (Figure 9.12d) is played on a *quena*, an Andean flute which is somewhat like a recorder in timbre. The instrumentation places this piece firmly in the Andes.

This recalls Simon and Garfunkel's cover version of Los Incas' 'El Condor pasa', which is slow and pentatonic and accompanied by charangas. The evocation of the 'Fernando' introduction becomes clear: 'exotic environment, probably Andean-Indian, with a rural view large enough to see and experience the passing of a condor overhead' (Tagg 1981, 6).

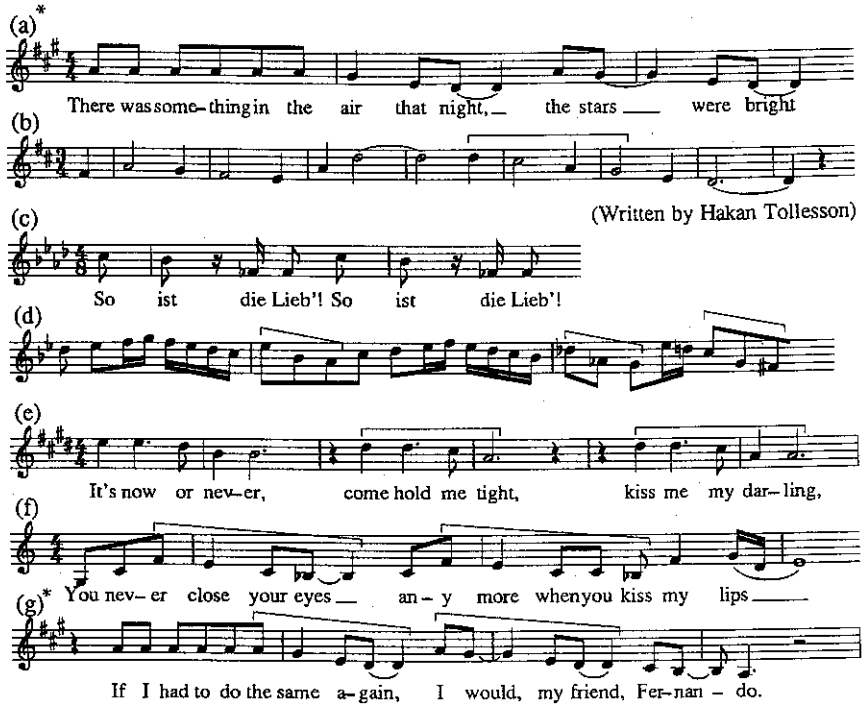
All of this provides a backdrop for the female vocalist, whose verse, with its irregular periodicity in the text, is delivered in a fervent quasi-recitative, a very unusual conception in popular music. However, she is placed centre front in the stereo panorama; 'any possible individuals... in the musical environment (e.g. the quenas) are positioned out in the panning periphery rather like the picturesque poverty of Indian peasants or slum-dwellers placed as suitable backcloth to the pretty European model posing in the latest poncho outfit, in front of an adobe shack on the front of a glossy magazine'. The open, melancholy, beautiful Andean environment is retained throughout the verse.

The chorus is heralded by a change of rhythmic character. In place of rubato, irregular periodicity, charangas and bells there are regular Afro-American rhythms in a soft-disco beat with a continuous bass on electric guitar. The melody of this section, however, is built around a museme that repeatedly spans a tritone



and thus takes up a position in the intonational vocabulary (Figure 9.13a).

Figure 9.13




*(Written by B. Anderson, B. Ulvaeus and S. Anderson.)

At first hearing, this motive might seem merely cadential; but the natural move to a cadence is avoided and the figure is repeated. Apparently, the tritone figure that moves to a cadence is a different museme. It is illustrated from the popular Swedish song 'Skepp son mötas i natten' (Figure 9.13b).

Motives which span tritones and which come at the beginnings of phrases, and moreover are repeated, have something to do with a yearning sadness. This is the sentiment expressed in Wolf's 'Nimmersatte Liebe' (Figure 9.13c). The tritones in the oboe obbligato the the tenor aria 'Ich will bei meinem Jesu wachten' in

the *St Matthew Passion* are similarly non-cadential, and are again expressive of a sad longing: 'I want to watch over my Jesus' (Figure 9.13d).

If Abba were thinking of a similar motive which is to be found in 'O Sole mio', they would probably have recalled the song in the sentimental contrafactum sung by Elvis Presley, 'It's now or never' (Figure 9.13e). Presley's sadness was caused by an imminent parting. The Righteous Brothers in 'You've lost that loving feeling' lament the departure of love itself. Their melodic figure is identical to that in 'Fernando' (Figure 9.13f).

It might be thought that the young woman in 'Fernando' was suffering a genuine sadness, perhaps for the loss of Fernando, perhaps for the unsuccessful rebellion and for the predicament of the people of Peru, Chile, Colombia or any other South American state. This interpretation is ruled out for syntagmatic reasons. It has been shown that the tritone figure carries no special burden of meaning when it is merely cadential. The initial emotional charge of this museme is dispelled, therefore, when the figure recurs at the end of the chorus and leads at once to a cadence (Figure 9.13g), as in 'Skepp son mötas i natten'. 'This means that, whereas the words say, "If I had to go back and fight for freedom in Latin America, I would", the music expresses the affective attitude "I may be longing for something here at home but I'm really quite content with things as they are"' (Tagg 1982, 60).

### *9.6. The piano music of Liszt*

9.6.1. Intonation theorists find plenty of connections between popular music and classical music. Both depend on intonations that are rooted in society. Classical composers, however, are able to sort them into types, and create for them a context and a possibility of development and change.

> According to the materialist tradition of music aesthetics, intonation is determined by the 'sonorous images' of music that characterize a given social setting, a human attitude or type of conduct or indeed a situation. Intonation indicates the musical formulae and the types of particular sonorities which transmit precise significations of social and human types...
>
> Composers of strong personality concentrate and condense the characteristic events of the musical consciousness of surrounding society into types, uniting them into different genres and structures for the purpose of an artistic creation. (Jozsef Ujfalussy, in *Zeneesztetika* ['Music aesthetics'] from *Bevezetes a marxista-leninista agazati esztetikaba* ['Introduction to Marxist-Leninist aesthetics'], Budapest, 1978, quoted in Grabócz, 1986, 28-29).



Neither Ujfalussy nor Asafiev meant to belittle the classical composer's important role in shaping a musical culture. But like the popular composer, he has to take his materials from the established intonations of society.

9.6.2. The Hungarian Marta Grabócz applies Ujfalussy's principles to the piano music of Liszt. She considers that the intonational 'types' that form Liszt's material were inherited largely from Beethoven and from Italian and French opera. They appear most obviously in his themes, announced at the beginning of each piece, and they fall into two groups, the pastoral and the heroic, the latter connected with the 'rescue' operas of the French Revolutionary period (Grabócz 1986, 28). Liszt remained for a long period the only member of the 'young Romantics' to perpetuate the revolutionary-humanistic intonations which had been first put into instrumental music by Beethoven. In the Hungarian composer, however, these social and public ideals are converted into individual and inward terms; they become (in the composer's words) the sentiments of 'an exceptional individual' (according to his essay on Berlioz's *Harold* Symphony, quoted by Grabócz, 1986, 31). Liszt's epic spirit centres on the solitary Romantic hero rather than the victorious group.

9.6.3 These intonational types are divided into twelve groups. Each group contains themes of much variety, and Grabócz goes to considerable lengths to describe the many ramifications. Brief examples will show the method and content of her study. The taxonomy is as follows:

> (i) Quick themes of an *appassionato* character. Although Liszt applies all kinds of novel keyboard techniques to these, they reveal their ancestry in Beethoven's movements of an agitated, *ostinato* cast. For example, the passage marked *presto agitato assai* in the *Sonata Après une lecture de Dante* (Figure 9.14) may be compared with the opening of the 'Waldstein' Sonata (the Liszt example furnished by Grabocz, the Beethoven comparison mine).
> (ii) Scherzo themes, much enriched by the virtuosic innovations which betoken Liszt's indebtedness to Paganini. The character is diatonic, in dance measures, with trills and