Applying the Metaphor of Motion to Phrase Analysis and Performance of Choral Music

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This paper addresses the role of the metaphor of motion as a conceptual aid to the analysis and performance of choral music. I discuss a few ways in which it can benefit the choral director, both in score preparation and in communicating sophisticated musical concepts with an amateur choir. In particular, I focus on the analysis of form, specifically the phrase structure of tonal music. To this end, I apply two types of analytical techniques from the tradition of *energetics*—tonal analysis as developed by Schenker (1979) and melodic analysis of Meyer (1956) and Narmour (1992)—and demonstrate their general application to score study. For the sake of clarity, this paper focuses on Mozart's choral-music gem, *Ave verum corpus*, although these ideas can be beneficially applied to more substantial works as well as those less overtly tonal.

Common to all energetic theories of music, such as Schenkerian theory, are at least three features. These include an ahistorical approach to the music that de-emphasizes style in favour of perceived musical universals and a conceptual-metaphoric understanding that the tones have a will of their own. Another crucial feature is the view that music *moves* and undergoes transformation through the dynamics of tension and release. This idea was clearly put forward in the work of Ernst Kurth in the early 1900s (Rothfarb, 2002). The notes on the score do not actually move up or down, rather they are just a series of different pitches. Metaphorically, however, we can imagine a musical line being traced, ascending and descending, through a sonic environment. Also of note, the physiology of singing conflates the musical metaphor and reality because the production of sound involves the motion of breath and the (so-called) "placement" of the voice in the body. As a singer, particularly in a choral community of voices, it is invaluable to merge the flow of sound as a physiological experience with that of both an engaging intellectual and spiritual experience. Musical motion is clearly evident in many domains, a fact that is not lost on choral directors and thoughtful musicians of all breeds. Terms such as "passing tone," "progression," and "voice exchange" and expressions such as "move the line," or "rising and falling" are all frequently employed in different musical contexts.[1]

In the all-important preparation of scores for rehearsal, we hopefully find ourselves learning about the work's melodic structure, counterpoint, distinguishing harmonies, rhythmic elements, and, of course, text for starters. Some conscientious directors will

also lay out a phrase analysis that identifies how many measures each phrase is (Decker & Herford, 1973). These formal analyses are extremely helpful, especially when they consider more than mere text delineation and melodic contour to determine phrase lengths.

Figure 1 shows a graphic formal analysis of *Ave verum corpus* to demonstrate an integrated approach to phrase analysis. Here, cadences are identified based on the relationship among key structures, melodic and harmonic closure, metric periodicity, and compositional rhetoric. Sections are labelled in primarily four-bar phrases–the common-practice norm–with letters representing distinctive melodic-harmonic design. Note that there are several motivic parallelisms between sections such that "a" is similar to "e" and so forth. The slurring captures the instrumental subphrase lead-in, phrase extensions, and sequential insertion, and clearly illuminates the Classical balance within the piece's phrase structure. Of interest here are the formal analogues to three form types (simple binary, rounded binary, and even sonata form) as indicated at the bottom of this figure. While the analytical apparatus here may seem overly detailed to some, the resulting analysis is nonetheless unambiguous and thorough. Most significantly, the principles here are readily applicable to lengthier and formally complicated compositions.

I believe that score study, such as this phrase analysis, is only partially complete if we stop at this point. Schenkerian theory gives us tools that allow us to recognize a hierarchical conception of musical line that affects our previous conception of the form. Applying the theory in a musically intuitive and logical way, we can hope to acquire a modified conception of the work that allows us to see it more dynamically.

As shown in the annotated score of *Ave verum corpus* below, the soprano line clearly presents the principal melody, beginning in the third measure. The instrumental introduction is far from superfluous, however. The first violin (or top voice in the keyboard accompaniment) clearly asserts an initial ascent from scale-degree 1 through 5. Aside from chordal skips, the line climbs up the scale. In this way, the first note that the sopranos sing has been set up organically through the motion of a rising line in both pitch and energetic intensity. Once achieving scale-degree 5, the sopranos run with it, as they embark upon a tonal journey that both moves actively through pitch space while simultaneously projecting their opening pitch as a primary headtone that provides a tonal anchor up until the end of the work. The other voices help to draw attention to the shape of the sopranos' line; the bass part serves primarily as harmonic support, the alto part simply follows the soprano in thirds, and the tenor part is notable in its tonal inertia on A.

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The four-bar phrase analysis in Figure 1 breaks down when one observes the melodic features present here. Within the opening period (eight bars consisting of two four-bar phrases), the descending fourth in the soprano's part melodic progression defies the stopping motion implied by the label Imperfect Authentic Cadence (IAC). After the melodic line reaches scale-degree 2, this note is prolonged by a rising and falling third (shown with slurs in the score). Ultimate completion in descent to tonic is evaded. If one believes that the four-bar grouping is formally significant, one must also accept that hierarchically it is far less structural than the next Half Cadence (HC) in measure 10. The text also supports this reading. A fuzzy view of cadence is difficult to convey in theoretical parlance, but is relatively easy to convey in rehearsal with reference to qualifiers like "less" and "more," and most importantly through conducting gestures.

The significance of hierarchical formal structure is evident when one considers the whole first half of the piece up to measure 19. The third and fourth phrases (labelled c and d in Figure 1) combine via phrase extension to provide another period. Modulating to A major, these phrases reassert the prominence of pitch-class A, now transforming it from scale-degree 5 to 1. In Schenkerian terms, the technique of motion from an inner voice (continuing the metaphor used pervasively by Schenker) allows ascending motion to counter musical gravity and regain first the A. It ascends again to the high D but subsequently returns to A at the end of this fourth phrase. Because of the stronger cadence here, Perfect Authentic Cadence (PAC) as opposed to IAC, these four phrases can now be considered as two periods combined into one section. This then leads us to view the HC as being ancillary to the PAC, thus affecting the degree to which conducting gestures should emphasize stopping motion. Significantly, in the second period, the A becomes locally stable, but at the deepest level it retains the status of the work's headtone, complete with its unaltered, yet temporarily subdued, desire to descend and achieve tonal closure on D. The cadences thus follow a weak-medium-weak-strong formal plan that, interestingly, approximates the beat structure of the work's common-time metre.

Within the second half, a few structural features allow us to rethink the rigidity of our phrase analysis. Phrases e and f (as indicated in Figure 1) embark upon a tonal diversion to the flat side: first to F major, then to D minor. Unlike phrases a and b in the first half, however, the melodic line in the soprano part is not in the midst of a fourth progression at the cadence in measure 25. Another difference with the first half is that the bass and tenor are more actively melodic, thus drawing attention to themselves. We can see that at measure 26, the tenor line is in the midst of an ascending line progressing

up from G through to E. Also distinct from the first half, the A in the soprano melody is not immediately regained. Instead, the sequence gradually rises up to the A on the text *in mortis*. This pitch relates less to the A in measure 22 than it does to the opening headtone because of the close tonal connection of D major in phrases a and g. As such, an interpretation of phrasing that emphasizes the repose of the half cadence in measure 29 is warranted here. There is not the same four-phrase grouping in the second half that existed in the first half. Rather, a performance would do well to achieve a close connection between the first and fourth periods, similar to that between the first and second periods, via dynamics, sound intensity, and other subtle factors like tempo to counter their temporal separation.

No sooner has the predominant melodic line regained scale-degree 5 in measure 34 does the line commence its descent to scale-degree 4. This descent is, however, obscured by the alto's registral transfer to the high D during a climactic moment before the inevitable descent to scale-degree 1. While much should be made of this exuberant moment, the G in measure 41 should sound like it is directly connected to the G in measure 37. Considering the nature of the repetition of the text also supports this reading. There is a danger in drawing this dramatic section out so much that it seems out of context of the rest of the piece. The conductor could point out to the amateur singer that Mozart's outburst in the repetition of the text "of the test of death" (*in mortis examine*) can sound especially poignant, but should also fit in with the imminent arrival of peace and (tonal) resolution that only *the end* can bring. It would be best if all the members of the choir understood consciously or intuitively the importance of completion in the fundamental melodic line drive from scale-degree 5 down to 1.

This cursory Schenkerian overview has suggested that an understanding of phrase structure is intimately connected with every musical domain. We have seen that form is ultimately best seen as one whole or gestalt, introduced by an initial melodic ascent, concluded by a melodic descent to tonic, and grouped into structurally hierarchic units in the middle. At different structural levels, the movement of the melodic line will encourage different readings that are not apparent at the outset of the detailed score study. It should be noted that the sustenance of scale-degree 5 throughout the work is a type of motion, actively postponing its tonally inherent tendency to fulfill gravitational expectation. These readings convey many subtle factors that affect performance, most of which can be expressed in metaphoric imagery that involve motion.

Sharing this kind of analysis with an amateur choir would be a largely futile activity, not only because the choristers' eyes will likely glaze over, but also because rehearsal time is precious. Rather, brief comments invoking metaphoric imagery such as "keep it

moving, but relax the intensity here," "sopranos, energize as you step down from *perforatum*," "tenors, keep climbing that mountain (25–7), no breaks, the rest of us are counting on you!" can be invaluable.

Figure 2 illustrates an interpretation of the relationship between director and choir with and without the use of the metaphor-based energetic analysis. Purposely employing the metaphor of motion results in better score preparation, more success in communicating ideas with the choir, and performances where the members of the choir are more actively involved with the music-making. Further, when metaphoric imagery of motion is reinforced with comparable conducting gestures, performances are possible that feature more subtle musical expression.

In creating a modified conception of the work, one can and should use as many analytical tools as feasible. Other analytical methods tap into the subjective, psychological nature of music. Theorists including Meyer (1956) and Narmour (1992) have linked emotion and meaning particularly for melodic analysis. Some of the concepts found in these approaches, such as gestalt, good continuation, and gap-fill, are also effective for understanding musical structure. The general principle of motion within space is especially applicable here in the metaphor to music relationship. That is, in the direct relationship between analysis and performance, it is more useful to know what to do with the lines in the phrase structure with regard to dynamics, rubato, timbral variation, and so forth than where the actual delineation of phrases are, which is a more abstract stage in the analytical process. Amateur musicians can also relate to these ideas, without the terminological baggage, because of the universal metalanguage of metaphor.

A clear example of gap-fill is evident within the first half of the piece. The soprano part's opening gesture opens up a space from the A up to the D and down to the F-sharp. This simple arpeggiation garners emotive meaning after the fact as the line first fills the space with a chromatically descending progression, on its way down past the F-sharp to the first appearance of the E. The melodic leaps in the second phrase tie in closer with the first phrase when we see the newly opened space between the E and A filled in with a G-sharp, and significantly, the high D (prematurely stated in measure 3) recaptured and filled in with a 4-3-2-1 descent back down to the newly anointed tonic A. Interestingly, the repeat of the high D at different times contributes to tension of the pitch wanting to go higher to find a new melodic apex. With what feels like great effort, the line pushes forward in the climactic section (measures 37–41), through a D-sharp passing tone, onto the new high point E. The next bar features a return to the high D.

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This foreshadows the primary melodic resolution to the lower D (above middle C) in the choir's final perfect authentic cadence.

Chromatic motion is important in moving a line forward. In the annotated score, asterisks show moments where pronounced chromaticism creates a heightened tendency to slide into a resolution. Note, for example, the E–E-sharp–F-sharp motion in the bass of measure 14, the D-flat–C motion in the tenor of measure 23, and the B-flat–A–G-sharp motion on *sanguine* in the bass in measures 28–29. These chromatic moments should be brought out to highlight the colour and increased tendency of these chromatic pitches for resolution. Doing so, particularly in this primarily diatonic context, highlights expressive moments in individual lines (that helps to make a choral section feel particularly special for a brief moment) and drives the overall forward momentum.

The principle of good continuation is evident in the descending melodic progressions made clear in the Schenkerian reading. Another clear example, readily perceived by amateur musicians, is the sequential patterning set up in the second phrase in the bass part, beginning in measure 11. The rise from A to B is balanced by the descending-fifth motion to E. Upon stating the F-sharp, a whole step higher, another descent by fifth to the B is presented. Mozart could have chosen a number of possible bass notes at this point that could agree with the harmonic expectation, but following good continuation, the B is most logical. The drive to cadence is emphasized by the rising line at this point up to the E, but again following the established pattern with the extra steps, the expected cadence to A not only provides tonal closure but also fulfills the inevitable conclusion of the established pattern. The bass section should be made aware of intervallic patterns such as this to help with their sense of musical direction as well as tuning, since the intervals are the same and merely transposed.

The analyses presented here merely scratch the surface of this miniature gem, but do introduce the possibilities that arise when combining formal description with transformational interpretation inherent with energetics. The metaphor of *motion* underpins the entire tradition of energetics as it expresses the dynamic psychic forces of tension and release that are inherently operating within the tones themselves. When applied to pre and post-tonal music, many of these ideas are applicable although tonal expectations will differ. The tones can behave differently. Further, in more overtly polyphonic music, the dynamics of phrase structure with elision can be exhilarating.

This paper referred to several musical elements within *Ave verum corpus* as being in motion; clearly the metaphor can be pervasive and even over-used. It is nonetheless an effective point-of-departure in both the director's analysis prior to rehearsal and in

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sharing one's conception of a work. A director can communicate theoretically complex concepts to mostly untrained singers in an amateur choir since theoretically untrained musicians can intuitively appreciate what motion is. Because the same basic metaphor is used, the director's sophisticated conception of the piece, as informed by score study, is now comparatively easy to translate. Ultimately, the director's success in communicating his or her conception of piece, including its phrase structure, will determine how successful an analysis will bloom into an effective performance. When considered with factors like style and performance practice, a collective understanding of the dynamics of musical motion can lead to a very *moving* performance.
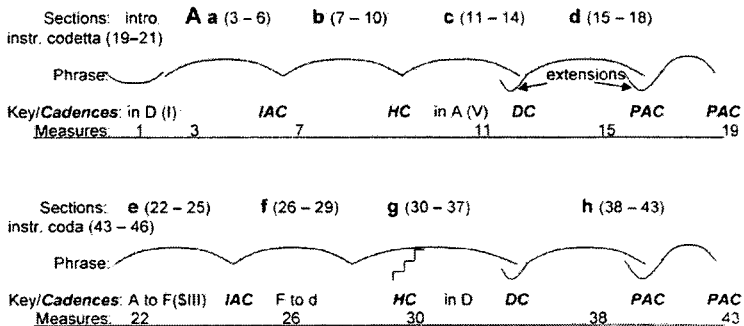
Figure 1: Form Diagram of Mozart's *Ave Verum Corpus*

Features

- Identical cadential design between halves
- Considerable use of standard four-bar phrases
- Symmetrical phrase structure in two halves, including phrase extensions
- Motivic parallelisms between sections (a ˜ e, etc.)
- Ascending sequence in section g

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Formal Analogues

- Phrase design in sentence structure in both halves (i.e. short+short+long phrase structure where the long part resolves the basic ideas of the short parts) Long phrase due to DC.
- Simple Binary (two halves)
- Rounded Binary (recognizing motivic relations and the return of tonic in g); Sections e and f are tonally distinct with use of modal mixture
- Sonata principle at work: Exposition: First Tonal Area (3–6), Transition (7–10), Second Tonal Area (11–14), Closing Section (15–19); Development and Retransition (22–29); "Recapitulation" (30–) with no modulation to V
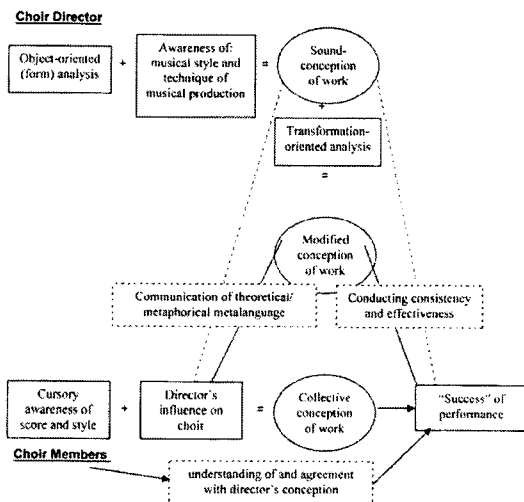
Figure 2: From Analysis to Performance in Amateur Choirs

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Ave verum corpus K. 618

Ave verum corpus, K618

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Score Analysis Example: *Ave verum corpus* K. 618-W.A. Mozart

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Endnote

1. An overview of the history of the relationship between metaphor and music is explored in Bonds, 1991.