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**Topoi and Narratives in Classical Instrumental Music:
Ideen and *il filo* in Mozart's *Clavier Sonata KV 311/284c***

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Abstract. The article deals with the thematicism and thematic work in the first movement of Mozart's *Piano Sonata KV 311/284c* (1777). The analysis of thematical process in this instrumental composition is examined under the angle of correlation between the contemporary and historical approaches: 1. the correspondence of the music theory concepts that were part of the lexicon of Wolfgang Amadeus and Leopold Mozarts (*Ideen, il filo*), with a complex of musical-analytical terms of our time, formed both in line with the historically informed theory, and in the context of the general theory of musical composition and form; 2. the comparison of research methods of the musical-thematic plan in the English-language and Russian musicology of the last half century.

Sonata KV311/284c does not pertain to the number of Mozart's compositions that have already been studied earlier from the point of view of the theory of topoi, which makes its analysis of additional interest. The article defines the topoi in the first *Allegro*, demonstrates their distribution in the sonata form, traces the logic of motivic and thematic transformations. The similarity of the "plotline", which is formed from the relationship of the elements of the musical text (tonal, harmonic, melodic, textural, dynamic, etc.), began to be examined in musicology during the last third of the 20th and the early 21st centuries through the prism of the concept of narrative analysis. Such a plotline in Mozart's sonata unfolds on two levels. The first is the typical for the sonata form "deducibility" of all themes from the main theme, that is, a certain "obligatory tonefabula" of the sonata composition (a term by Rostislav Berberov). The second level is the presence of an individual "intonation fabula" (a term by Inna Barsova), which is realized through the correlation of motives. In this plot, the archetypal narrative of comedy described by Almén (Byron Almén, 2003, 2008) gets its original embodiment.

Thus, when considering the works of Mozart, both narratological analysis and the identification of a "common" classical musical language have significant prospects. At the same time, the relationship between the concepts that have been brought into scholarly use in our time and the concepts that have come from the 18th century is by no means unambiguous. The modern terms

“narrative” and “topos” primarily define typological models, while the terms taken from the personal communication of Wolfgang and Leopold Mozarts fix individual of such models specific compositions.

Keywords: piano sonatas by W. A. Mozart, Sonata KV 311/284c, musical narrative, musical topoi of the 18th century

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Международный отдел

Original article

Топосы и нарратив в классической инструментальной музыке: *Ideen* и *il filo* в клавирной сонате В. А. Моцарта KV311/284c

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Аннотация. Статья посвящена рассмотрению тематизма и тематического развития в первой части сонаты В. А. Моцарта KV 311/284c (1777) – корреляции современного и исторического подходов к анализу тематических процессов в инструментальной композиции: 1) соотношение музыкально-теоретических понятий, входивших в лексикон Вольфганга Амадея и Леопольда Моцартов (*Ideen*, *il filo*), с комплексом музыкально-аналитических терминов нашего времени, сформированных как в русле исторически информированной теории, так и в контексте общей теории музыкальной композиции и формы; 2) сопоставление методов исследования музыкально-тематического плана в англо-американском и российском музыковедении последнего полувека.

Соната KV311/284c не входит в число моцартовских сочинений, которые были изучены с точки зрения теории топосов, что делает её актуальной для анализа. В статье определены топосы в первом *Allegro*, показано их распределение в сонатной форме, прослежена логика мотивно-тематических преобразований. В музыкознании последней трети XX–XXI веков подобие «сюжета», складывающегося из соотношения элементов музыкального текста (тональных, гармонических, мелодических, фактурных, динамических и пр.), начало рассматриваться с привлечением концепции нарративного анализа. Такой сюжет в сонате Моцарта развёртывается на двух уровнях. Первый – это типичная для сонатной формы «выводимость» всех тем из главной темы, то есть некая «облигантичная тонфабула» сонатной композиции (Ростислав Берберов). Второй уровень – наличие индивидуальной интонационной фабулы (Инна Барсова), реализующейся на уровне соотношения мотивов. В этой фабуле реализуется архитипический нарратив комедии, описанный Байроном Алменом.

В статье сделан вывод, что значительные перспективы имеет как нарратологический анализ, так и выявление «общего» классического музыкального языка в произведениях Моцарта. В то же время соотношение между понятиями, вошедшими в научный арсенал



в наше время, и понятиями, пришедшими из XVIII века, отнюдь не однозначно. Современные термины «нарратив» и «топос» определяют прежде всего типологические модели, в то время как термины, взятые из личного общения Вольфганга и Леопольда Моцартов, фиксируют индивидуальные интерпретации в конкретных композициях.

Ключевые слова: сонаты В. А. Моцарта, соната KV 311/284с, музыкальный нарратив, музыкальные топосы XVIII века

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The topic of this article introduces four terms related, to various extents, to the field of musical thematicism and thematic development. *The first two* are concepts that have come into analytical use in the present era, during the last four decades. As it is well-known, the theory of topoi, i.e., the stable lexical units of the musical language, took shape in the 1980s. Its fundamental principles, based on the treatises of the second half of the 18th century and the early 19th century, were formulated by Leonard Ratner (1980) in his book *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style*¹ and further developed in the work of Wye Jamison Allanbrook (1983) on the rhythmic organization in Mozart's operas *Le nozze di Figaro* and *Don Giovanni*.² Kofi Agawu (1991) and William Caplin (2005) analyze the topoi of the language of classical music as signs in their connection with the logical functions of the musical form (beginning, continuation and ending).³ The study of the topoi in the music is presented in the works of musicologists from different countries who develop the ideas of Ratner in 2000–2010: in Raymond Monelle's book *The Musical Topic: Hunt, Military and Pastoral*, in works by Larissa Kirillina and by the authors of *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory* edited by Danuta Mirka.⁴ An overview of the research of the theory

of topos in musicology, the history of the term and its interpretations is presented in the article by Michał S. Sołtysik. [1] It is not surprising that the main material for analysis is formed by music by Classicist and Romanticist composers, since it is usually associated with typification – a phenomenon covering different aspects of musical composition, from texture and syntax to form. [2] The theory of topos is also used in analysis of music from the late 19th and the 20th century, which possesses points of contact with the classical-romantic tradition. [3; 4]

In American musicology, the theory of musical narrative began to be formed almost in parallel. One of the first articles on this topic by Anthony Newcomb about the narratological “strategies” of the late 18th century and their manifestation in Schumann's music was published at the end of 1987⁵, while the classic monograph by Byron Almén on the theory of musical narrative – in 2008⁶ (the new edition came out in 2017). He develops ideas about the levels of musical narrative, about the problem of irony in his article from 2020. [5] However, we must admit the fact that analysis of the event-content side of a musical work underwent a lengthy history in the 20th century. It must be reminded of the theory and practice of analyzing the intonation

plotline in the work by Inna Barsova on Mahler's symphonies (1975), or the theory of "tonefabula" by Rostislav Berberov (1986). The narratological approach of the early 21st century is specific precisely because it very often merges with the theory of topoi of (conventionally speaking) the music of the Classical-Romantic era. Thus, topoi are included in the development of the musical plotline and are coordinated with the functional logic of the musical form.

Two other concepts in the headline do not have any solid theoretical basis. Strictly speaking, it is difficult to even consider them as concepts. Rather, they are essentially a number of definitions, even metaphors, that Wolfgang and Leopold Mozarts made use of in their mutual correspondence, when it came to the merits and demerits of musical compositions. Two reasons prompted me to turn my attention to them. The first is the desire to correlate contemporary analytical practice with the theoretical concepts of the 18th century. This approach can hardly be considered as something original; rather, it has long become the norm. However, I believe it important to rely not only on dictionaries and treatises on musical composition of that time, but also on live professional communication, on the words, designations and concepts that were in use and were familiar to everybody, although they were not included in the academic vocabulary. In addition – and this can be considered the second reason – when it comes to the topic of the Classical musical language, it is Mozart's music that is nearly always in the spotlight. Examples of it are numerous: as a kind of a reference, I mention Ratner's analysis of the first movement of Mozart's *Prague Symphony* or the final section on topoi in the music scholar's book.⁷ The topoi of the Classical musical language are found in Mozart's

oeuvres written in various genres, including church music. [6] At the same time, it seems like almost no one has ever attempted to correlate the composer's music and his words and ideas.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart used the words *Idea, Ideen*, as well as their synonym *Gedanke* ("thought") quite often. In his letter from Paris (May 14, 1778), writing about his lessons with the daughter of the Duc de Guînes and his attempts to teach her the basics of composition, he complained to his father that "she has no ideas", "if she acquires no thoughts or ideas, it is all in vain, for God knows I cannot give her any".⁸ Neither he nor Leopold ever mentioned the term "theme", a word which is so common today, but there is hardly any doubt that they meant this very concept.

It is more difficult to interpret the term *il filo* – "thread" in Italian. Writing about *il filo* to Wolfgang, his father opposed the compositions with a well-expressed "thread" to the too complex and intricate ones. Alfred Einstein apparently was the first to pay attention to this term: he suggested to interpret it as an organic development of ideas and thoughts arising from one another.⁹ Robert Gjerdingen in his famous book on music in the galant style mentioned two more German terms which Leopold Mozart used in letters and which the researcher considered to be synonyms of *il filo* – "der gute Satz" and "die Ordnung". He suggested to consider the first "the craft of musical composition, with all its rules and preferred procedures", and the second – "the serial disposition of musical material".¹⁰ Manfred Hermann Schmid considered *filo* as a principle of compositional technique in the first of Mozart's Prussian Quartets KV. 545, linking it in particular to the concept of modulation.¹¹

Among the surviving letters of Wolfgang, the concept of *il filo* is not encountered



anywhere, but, in fact, he wrote about the same thing as his father. Criticizing Abbot Vogler's Mass, he focused on the quality of the composition: "I suddenly hear an idea which is NOT BAD. Well, instead of remaining NOT BAD, no doubt it soon becomes good? Not at all! it becomes not only BAD, but VERY BAD, and this in two or three different ways: namely, scarcely has the thought arisen when something else interferes to destroy it; or he does not finish it naturally, so that it may remain good; or it is not introduced in the right place; or it is finally ruined by bad instrumentation" (letter dated November 20, 1777).¹² A month earlier, he reproached Friedrich Hartmann Graf, a German composer and flautist, for the unnatural harmonic wavering in his Concerto (letter dated October 14, 1777).¹³ If we generalize Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's assessments, it turns out that a good composition in his understanding requires a natural and meaningful arrangement of themes, logical harmonic connections and an appropriately chosen solution regarding orchestration.

Thus, the four concepts – topos and narrative on the one hand, and "idea" and "thread" on the other – form the related pairs grouping around the most important questions of constructing a musical composition, namely, what and how unfolds in it:

<i>what?</i>	<i>how?</i>
topoi / Ideen	narrative / il filo

Mozart sent the two aforementioned letters from Mannheim to Salzburg, where his father lived, in October and November 1777. It was around this time that the Sonata KV 311/284c was composed; this very sonata or, more precisely, its first movement, shall be our point of discussion.

It has been overlooked by researchers, in contrast to a number of other clavier sonatas by Mozart. There are several analytical studies dedicated to the Sonata KV 332 in F Major and a number of others.¹⁴

The main questions shall form the two abovementioned points: *what* and *how* builds this composition at the level of disposition and interaction, and how the thematic dramaturgy of the sonata resonates with the theoretical concepts mentioned above.

The Topoi and Ideen. The sonata form in the first movement of the *D major* Sonata belongs to the type of multi-theme sonata form: in addition to the primary theme groups, it has two themes in the subsidiary theme group (the exposition has the same thematic structure as the sonatas KV 333, 533 and 576). All material is based on the opposition of the two topoi exposed in the primary theme group:

a) 

b) 

The first motif, especially its opening chord, evokes associations with the bright *premier coup* of the orchestra [the orchestral *tutti*], while the second one suggests the style of the parts of lyric comedy heroines, such as Suzanne from *The Marriage of Figaro* [regarding her singing style]: their sensitivity and scherzo qualities are inextricably linked in their melodies.

The exposition builds itself on the alternation of these topoi, which acquire various vivid nuances and group into two spheres:

	Measures	Topoi
Primary theme group	1–2	orchestral tutti
	3	singing style
	4–5	orchestral tutti
	6	singing style
Transition	7–10	singing style (opera buffa)
	11–16	brilliant style
Subsidiary theme group (theme 1)	17–23	singing style
Continuation	24–27	
Subsidiary theme group (theme 2)	28–35	singing style
	36–37	fanfare
Conclusive Section	38–39	singing style

The expositional thematic disposition of this kind has become widespread in works written in the sonata *allegro* form, possessing, as a rule, primary themes with contrasting motifs. In Mozart’s clavier sonatas, cantilena-style fragments often alternate with virtuoso fragments, one after the other (in Sonatas Nos. 1, 6, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17, 19). Their correlation with the sonata form structure has never been repeated, but the general principle is always explicit, even when an *allegro* begins with a melodiously quiet theme, such as in Sonata KV 333.¹⁵ In this respect, KV 311/284c fits into the topological picture typical of Mozart. Our conversation about the “commonly applied elements” in KV 311/284c would be incomplete without mentioning a number of melodic-harmonic models present in it, which Robert Gjerdingen called “galant schemata”.¹⁶ They have no

semantic meanings, but are closely related to the syntax of the musical form. In this Sonata, such schemes are concentrated in the theme of the primary theme group (*mi-fa-sol*, Prinner) and in the transition section (Monte, Meyer, Ponte).

To find out how the topological “map” of the KV 311/284 Sonata relates to its themes, ideas (Ideen) and thoughts (Gedanken), to use the composer’s own, is to answer the question of transforming the typical into the individual, into the original – precisely the quality that he valued himself. In the primary theme group, the two topoi – the virtuoso and the sensitive – are opposed to each other, but in a special way, not in the same way as in most themes of the kind. The 8-measure period is compressed to 7 bars due to the fact that the functions of bars 4 and 5 are combined:

$$1 - 2 - 3 - 4 \\ = 5 - 6 - 7 - 8$$

The overlapping of measures in a period, according to Riemann, lends a theme with two nearly identical sentences a charming asymmetry. But another important thing is that a certain duality arises in the juxtaposition of the topoi, the border between them becomes unsteady already at the very beginning. Indeed, from the perspective of the analysis of topoi, how must we interpret the figure at the beginning of the fourth bar – as the end of the lyrical arioso motif or as the beginning of the virtuoso motif? The ascending chromatic appoggiatura in the



melody (*eis-fis*) prompts us to consider this sound the end of the cantabile phrase. But in this case the orchestral *tutti* is deprived of its first loud chord, which is supposed to determine its character. None of the other sonatas by Mozart sonatas possess such an ambiguous, basically playful opposition of topoi in the theme. In other words, the typical rule is broken here, but at the same time it is turned into an impulse for a unique musical plot.

Narrative and il filo. The musical *syuzhet* unfolds in the sonata form on two levels. The first level is the relationship of themes: their interconnection, the derivativeness of all semantically significant material from the main theme of the primary theme group. There are few primary theme group elements which undergo further development. Their range according to their importance within the form is as follows: parallel thirds (a), grupetto (b), tetrachord (c), appoggiatura (d) and “tutti” chord (e).

a)

b)

c)

d)

e)

All these elements are processed in the other themes and transitional constructions with Mozart's inherent elegance and

ingenuity in the interpretation of the smallest details. They sound in different combinations, in direct movement and in reversion, in amplification and diminution, creating a thematically dense texture – with all its transparency and clarity. The techniques of *ars combinatoria*, which are used in abundance in almost any work by Mozart, are fully implemented here:

a+b

c+d

b+d

a+b+d

c+d

a+c



b+c



c+d

At this level, the thematic process in the classical sonata form can be defined as *opposition* and *interconnection*. To define this logic, Rostislav Berberov introduced the term “obligatory tonefabula”, that is, a type of process of forming thematic ideas and thematic development which is, in a certain way, initially established by the sonata form itself, which is obligatory for it. In other words, to one degree or another, it can be found in any classical sonata.

The second level of the musical “plotline” unravelling possesses a greater individuality in each specific case. It is primarily realized in not even how a theme is modified as a whole, but rather in how its individual elements (motifs, phrases) alter, acquiring semantic significance. Not in every composition and not in the case of every composer from the second half of the 18th century this ulterior level of thematic work is equally texturized. Mozart’s piano sonatas offer, perhaps, the largest number of such subjects, evoking associations with a wide range of phenomena, primarily with theater and opera.

The first movement of Sonata KV 311/284c is Mozart’s only sonata form with reversed recapitulation, which in itself leads to a new thematic disposition:

exposition	development	recapitulation
PT Tr. ST CS		ST PT CS

In addition, most of the themes change quite dramatically in the recapitulation. It seems that the key to interpreting these alterations might be the role played in the thematic process by the two phrases, which comprise the conclusive section. The first is a bravura interlude, or a fanfare; the second is a soft galant reverence. Both possess practically no individual characteristic features; they could be included in the lexicon of *topoi* as exemplary figures. At the same time, just as in the main theme of the primary theme group, the two figurative spheres collide here, and in a demonstrative, “end-to-end” manner, separated by a perfect authentic cadence:



The recapitulation repeats this episode, but replaces the perfect authentic cadence with a deceptive one:



In Mozart’s compositions, not a single significant thematic detail is accidental. This is exactly the case in this particular sonata, too. The alteration of the articulation marks, indicated by the composer himself, emphasizes the transformation that has taken place: two sharp chords, referring to the loud beginning of the tutti of the primary theme, are replaced by two soft arpeggios and a light staccato. The deceptive cadence inextricably links the two contrasting thematic spheres, the cadential galant phrase, which appeared to be just an addition, turned into the upshot of the thematic unravelling.



It is quite clear that such a change could have its reasons, and they should be searched for in the development. According to it, the typical galant cadence phrase first turns into a quivering *lamento*, and the motifs of the themes from the primary and the secondary theme groups are added to it:



And then it completely transforms into passionate exclamations, typical of the *Sturm und Drang* style.



We seem to be transported from the world of comic opera into the world of high tragedy, from the part of Zerlina to the part of Donna Anna. A cunning servant and a formidable avenger – the metamorphosis is as impressive as if it happened on the stage. It turns out to be so significant that in the middle of the development, Mozart even brings in a pause into the movement with two chord motifs:



Formally, they represent a transition from B-minor to G-major; in fact, these are figures of a question, an expectation, a kind of search for an ongoing path, which, after the passing storms, seems unclear. It is noteworthy that these two measures fall exactly in the center of the entire sonata form. There are 55 bars before it and another 55 after it:

55 2 55

Georgy Konyus, who developed the principles of metro-techtonic analysis of musical composition, called such a central fragment a “spire” in the architectonics of form. In this case, such a spire becomes not only the center of time-metric symmetry, but also a turning point in musical-thematic drama. After it, events begin to unfold in a different way than before.¹⁷ The eight-bar *Sturm und Drang* episode is symmetrically reflected in the unpretentious second subsidiary song theme, the *lamento* fragment that opened the development – in a virtuoso concerto link leading to recapitulation. The first theme of the subsidiary theme group section, which starts the reversed recapitulation, has been changed – its second sentence sounds in minor key, like a memory of a *lamento* in the development. In the main theme of the primary theme group, on the contrary, the role of a concerto-like, virtuoso topos is strengthened, and its duality, asserted in the exposition, is overcome. And, finally, the ultimate resolution of the peripeteias comes: the two topoi opposed at the beginning of the sonata harmoniously combine in the closing four-bar, which has already been discussed.

Thus, a change in the correlation between the contrasting elements – a change that, according to Byron Almén, is the essence of the unfolding of the narrative – forms the individual plot of this sonata, its *il filo*. The archetypal narrative of comedy described by Almén¹⁸ obtains its original embodiment. A minor element, an uncomplicated cadential formula, undergoes a transformation that ultimately determines the entire unravelling of the musical plot. The comparison of instrumental compositions with operatic compositions, widespread in the music theory literature studying Mozart, in this case, induces us towards forming meaningful analogies. The Sonata, written

many years before Mozart's main operatic comic masterpieces, outlined the contours of the "world" in which everyone, including each assisting and minor character, plays an important role. In such a world order, Papageno's pursuit of happiness is as significant as Tamino's conquest, and the story of Cherubino is no less important than Figaro's intrigue.

Summarizing the abovementioned, I wish to note: both the narratological analysis and the identification of the "common elements" of the Classical musical language in Mozart's works possess significant

prospects. At the same time, the correlation between the concepts that have entered the scholarly use in our time and those that came from the 18th century is by no means straightforward. The contemporary terms "narrative" and "topos" define primarily typological patterns, while those drawn from the personal communication between Wolfgang Amadeus and Leopold Mozarts capture the individual interpretations in specific compositions. In other words, it is about the juxtaposition of rule and choice – apparently the most fruitful approach for interpreting the masterpieces of the past.

Notes

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⁴ Monelle R. *The Musical Topic: Hunt, Military and Pastoral*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006. 304 p.; Kirillina L. V. *Klassicheskiy stil' v muzyke XVIII – nachala XIX veka. Ch. III. Poetika i stilistika* [Classical Style in Music of the 18th – early 19th Centuries. Part III. Poetics and Stylistics]. Moscow: Kompozitor, 2007. 376 p. (In Russ.); *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*. Ed. by D. Mirka. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. 712 p.

⁵ Newcomb A. Schumann and Late Eighteenth-Century Narrative Strategies. *19th-Century Music*. 1987. Vol. 11, No. 2, pp. 164–174.

⁶ Almén B. *A Theory of Musical Narrative*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008. 248 p.

⁷ Ratner L. G. *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style*. NY: Schirmer Books, 1980. P. 27–28.

⁸ *Mozart: Briefe und Aufzeichnungen. Gesamtausgabe*. Hrsg. v. Bauer W. A., Deutsch O. E., Konrad U. Kassel: Bärenreiter-DTV. Bd. II. 2005. S. 357.

⁹ Einstein A. *Mozart: His Character, His Work*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1965, p. 129.

¹⁰ Gjerdingen R. O. *Music in the Galant Style*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 369.

¹¹ Schmid M. H. *Der "filo" bei Mozart. Zum Andante des ersten Preußischen Quartetts KV 575*. Mozart Studien 26. Wien, 2019, S. 353–363.

¹² *Mozart: Briefe und Aufzeichnungen*. Op. cit., S. 135.

¹³ *Ibid.*, S. 56.

¹⁴ Allanbrook W. J. *The Secular Commedia: Comic Mimesis in Late Eighteenth Century Music*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2014. 256 p.; Ratner L. G. Topical content in Mozart's keyboard sonatas. *Early Music*. 1991. Vol. XIX/4, pp. 615–619.



¹⁵ Such first movements were introduced into the clavier repertoire by Johann Christian Bach, they were called “singendes Allegro”. Mozart was very familiar with these sonatas and, as has already been noted many times, even relied on their thematicism as a springboard for his own melodic ideas.

¹⁶ Gjerdingen R. O. *Music in the Galant Style*. Op. cit., p. 399.

¹⁷ Konyus G. E. *Metrotektonicheskoye issledovaniye muzykal'noy formy* [Metrotectonic Study of Musical Form]. Moscow: Muzgiz, 1933. (In Russ.)

¹⁸ Almén B. Narrative Archetypes: a Critique, Theory, and Method of Narrative Analysis. *Journal of Music Theory*. 2003. No. 47, pp. 1–39.

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