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Determining the boundaries of a motivic structure using the example of analyzing the initial motive of Tchaikovsky's Chanson Triste

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ABSTRACT

Music theory characterizes a motive as the piece's smallest structure, which has a certain volume, composition, and functions. According to the theoretical principles, a motive should have a single, powerful beat and a distinctive intonation symbol. As a result, a motive's volume is roughly one measure, and its strong beat corresponds with the motive's strong beat. Therefore, a motive is often referred to as a one-measure structure. Such a motive is considered to be the norm. However, in musical literature, many examples do not fit this standard. Among them are both motives that make up structures smaller than a measure (for example, frequently encountered iambic motives of two sounds), and motives that exceed one measure. The initial motive of Tchaikovsky's *Chanson Triste*, which is studied in this work, epitomizes them. In terms of its composition and volume, it is a non-normative motive. The article provides an analysis of the piece's initial to determine its volume. For this purpose, its metric, rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic structures are analyzed. Also, this motive is considered a thematic "grain" that gives semantic material for the dramatic development of the entire work. The article provides musical examples of motive formations not only from the specified piece but also from other works.

KEYWORDS

Motive, Chanson Triste, Tchaikovsky, musical analysis, volume of motive.

Introduction

The primary task in motive analysis is to determine the form of each motive. Since a motive is a structure, albeit the smallest in a work, it has a form that is determined based on its composition and volume, the correct understanding of which is one of the main criteria for the success of musical analysis. An incorrect determination of the motive's form and volume, either in the direction of its increase or in the direction of its reduction, can lay serious grounds for an incorrect interpretation of not only the motive, but also the entire work.

Musical theory has revealed some general norms of the motive's structure. However, since music is an art with a fairly large number of exceptions to the rules, which concerns, in particular, the motive as well, in musical literature there are examples of motives, including in very famous works, which partially or completely go beyond the motive accepted in theory as the norm. Hence, keeping in mind the dialectic of the normative and non-normative in music, each motive should be considered both from the position of its probable conformity to the norm, and taking into account its possible deviation from the standard parameters.

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Norms of motive

Concerning the definition of a motive and its norm, theorists have expressed different opinions, many of which do not coincide: “A motive is a rhythmic group of sounds united by one main accent, representing the smallest semantic unit” (Sposobin, Musical form, 1984, p. 66), “a motive is a short musical idea” (Drabkin, 2001, p. 227), “a motive is, first of all, the smallest musical-thematic cell, possessing, as a rule, one metrically strong beat and preserving the rhythmic basis upon repetition” (Arzamanov, 1963, p. 25), “the smallest unit of significant content and a certain expressive value” (Aranovsky, 1991, p. 46), “a motive is a sprout or shoot from which larger musical sequences grow” (Kholopova, 2010, p. 283).

If we try to formulate the basic formula of a motive from the statements above, it might be as follows: a motive is the smallest structural and semantic unit that has one main accent. This formulation highlights three main features of a motive: a) the presence of structure, b) the presence of semantics, and c) the presence of a main accent.

a) Structure: A motive must necessarily have a certain form and must be structurally outlined. That is, it must have an initial sound, an ending sound, and there may be some sound or sounds between them. If a motive consists of only two sounds, then they represent the boundaries of the motive and constitute its entire content. Such a motive, for example, is the initial motive of Brahms' *Second Cello Sonata*, consisting of two sounds. This is, so to speak, a minimal motive:

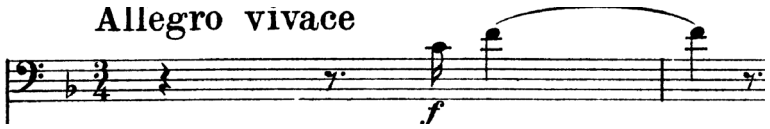


Figure 1 Brahms, *Cello Sonata F dur*, I, 1-2 mm. (Brahms, Sonata N2 for Cello and Piano, 1922)

b) Semantics: The motive must be semantically significant and represent the theme. The work should be recognizable by the motive and be aphoristic. Therefore, the composer puts the entire meaning of the work into several sounds of the motive, especially the initial one, which is only slightly supplemented in the process of development. An example of the highest degree of semanticity of the motive is the initial motive of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony:

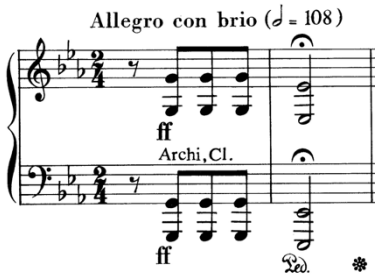


Figure 2 Beethoven, *Symphony N5*, I, 1-2 mm. (Beethoven L. v., 1991)

This motive has become not only a representative of the symphony, which we recognize by it, but also a musical symbol of “fate”. Significantly, such a powerful semantic implication can be contained in only four sounds.

c) Main accent: The presence of the main accent is one of the most basic factors in the formation of a motivic figure: “The presence of a central tone is a basic, necessary and one might say, sufficient feature of a motive” (Aranovsky, 1991, p. 112). It most often coincides with the metric strong beat. The determination of the position of the main metric accent and, accordingly, their classification is made based on the rules accepted in poetics. There are three basic metric types:

- The *iambic* (anacrusis) motive, consisting of a weak first beat and a strong second one:

Figure 3 Bach, *Cello Suite N1 G dur, Allemande*, 1-2 mm. (Bach, 1966)

- *Choreic* motive, consisting of a strong first beat and a weak second one:

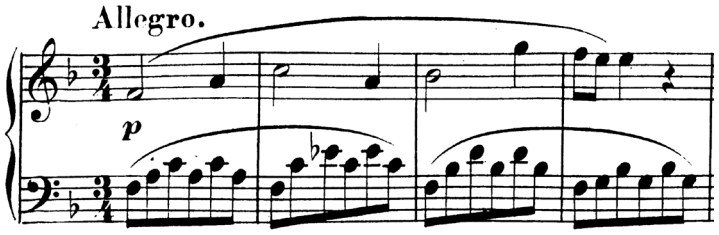


Figure 4 Mozart, *Sonata F dur*, KV 332, 1-4 mm. (Mozart W. , 1878)

- The *amphibrachic* motive, which combines the first two, consisting of a first weak beat, a second strong one and a third weak beat:

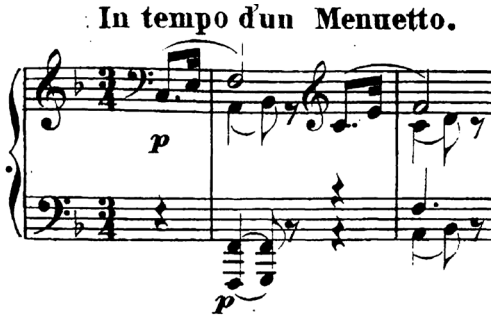


Figure 5 Beethoven, *Sonata N22*, I, 1-2 mm. (Beethoven L. v., Sonate N22, op. 54, 1862)

The meaning of the rule about one main part of the motive is that the motive, no matter how many sounds it consists of, must have no more and no less than one main accent. All other sounds are as if drawn to it and are in a subordinate position to it.

Briefly, these are the three basic rules for determining a motive, which must be used as a guide in identifying it. We will touch upon other distinctive features of a motive in the process of analyzing the piece.

Example of motive analysis

Structure of motive and definition of its boundaries

In the classical theory of forms, the idea that a motive can be considered a construction equal to one measure has been repeatedly expressed. It was substantiated by the position that a motive is a structure with one strong beat and, accordingly, must fit into one bar. Indeed, one-measure motives are quite a common phenomenon in musical literature; one of them is the first measure of the main theme of Rachmaninoff's *Second Concerto*:

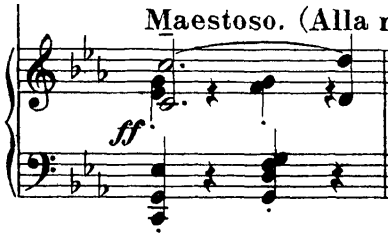


Figure 6 Rachmaninoff, *Second Piano Concerto,* I, 245 m. (Rachmaninoff, Second Concerto pour le Piano, op. 18, 1901)

There are a great many one-measure motives, but it is not possible to generalize them into a rule since there are also very many exceptions. “The fact that metric syntax exists cannot be doubted. But meter is a special grammatical system within the framework of the musical language of homophony. From the fact of its existence, it does not follow that there is no other system and that only from the point of view of meter can a phenomenon be explained, although connected with it, but possessing its own nature. We are talking, therefore, about the substitution of one system for a completely different one. Having equated a motive with a bar (H. Riemann), and a phrase with a two-bar (L. Busler), music theory presented the complex process of creating musical thematism as something very similar to a child’s game of cubes: 1 bar + 1 bar = 2 bars; 2 + 2 = 4, etc.” (Aranovsky, 1991, p. 7). Therefore, it can be said with confidence that: “motives cannot be measured by bars… motives can be simple and complex, they can cover parts of a bar, a whole bar, and even more” (Tyulin, 1969, p. 15).

As for motives shorter than a bar, they are much less common than single-measure ones. The fact is that very short motives greatly divide the texture, which is used by composers in rare cases, for example, where it is necessary to convey emotional tension and excitement:

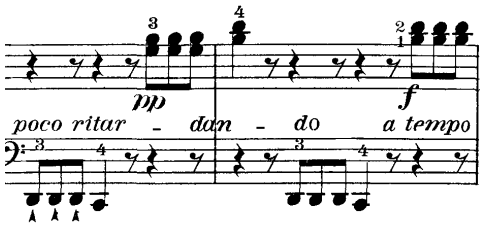


Figure 7 Beethoven, *Appasionata*, I, 13-14 mm. (Beethoven L. v., 1918)

Here Beethoven, with the help of short motives, creates the intermittent breathing of music, as an emotional impossibility of a calm narrative.

Conversely, larger motives (concerning the one-measure norm) create a longer breathing, the expression of a longer thought. This is the beginning of the first part of Mozart's *Violin Sonata* in e minor:

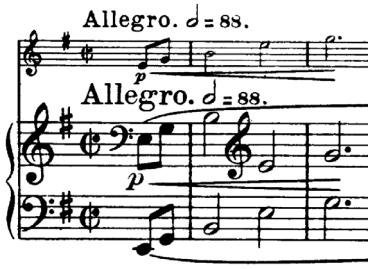


Figure 8 Mozart, *Sonata for violin and piano*, I, 1-2 mm. (Mozart, 1912, p. 44)

Here the motive is two-measure, it is equal to a regular phrase, and it is impossible to break it down into smaller structures, that is submotives. These long motives, flowing into one another, create a continuous presentation of the musical thought.

Another example of a theme, the main part of which has a two-motive structure – the beginning of Brahms's first *Cello Sonata*:

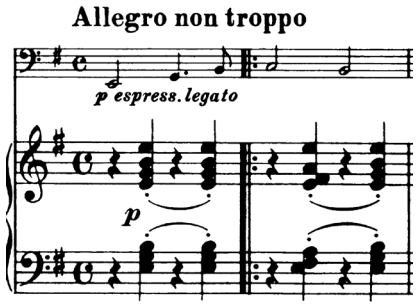


Figure 9 Brahms, *Cello Sonata N1*, I, 1-2 mm. (Brahms, 1926, p. 2)

In addition to the same tonality, these sonatas have many other similar features, one of which is a broad melodic breathing, carried out mainly with the help of large motives. One of such two-measure motives is the initial motive of Tchaikovsky's *Chanson Triste*, the question of the volume of which needs to be discussed in more detail.

The motive we are considering is one of those ambiguous motives that interpretation requires an analysis of many factors, primarily its volume. Since the beginning of the motive is naturally limited to the beginning of the piece, it is necessary to determine only its ending:

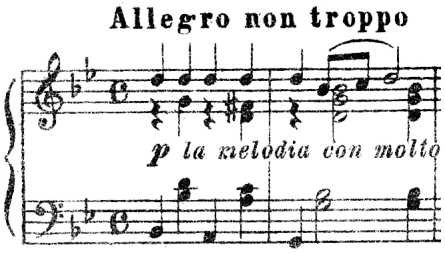
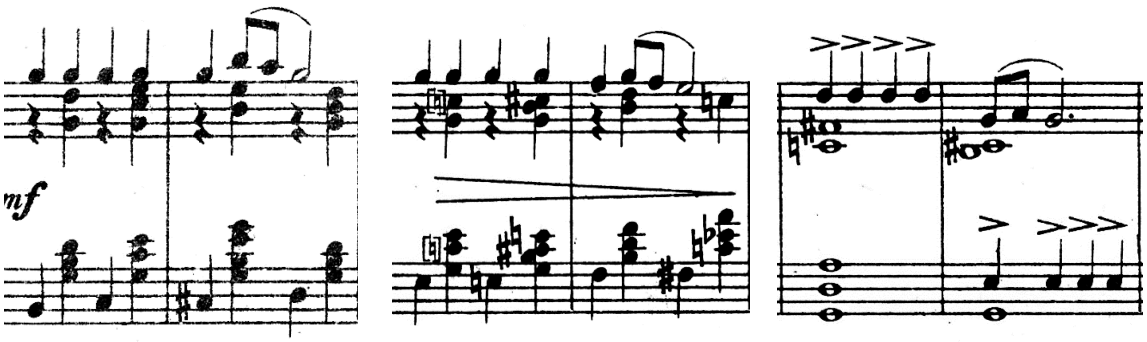


Figure 10 P. Tchaikovsky, *Chanson Triste*, 1-2 mm. (Tchaikovsky, 1948, p. 79)

At first glance, it seems that the theme here is based on a one-measure motivic structure. This impression is facilitated by the differences between the two bars – the ostinato in the first bar and the melodic figure in the second one, the gradual decrease in the bass in the first bar and the stop in the second one, the even movement of the quarter notes in the first bar and the syncopation in the second one. These elements that distinguish the bars from each other are very important, but many more factors speak in favor of a two-measure motivic structure, and they are of more decisive importance.

Repetition

One of the simplest ways to determine the volume of a motive is to find the same or similar motives in the text. In actuality, a motive's repetition serves as the primary sign that it has occurred as a complete structure inside the context in which it is repeated. In the piece under consideration, the initial motive is repeated many times (in 13–14, 55–56, 63–64 and other measures) and precisely as a two-measure structure:



Integrity

Another structural indicator of a motive is its integrity: "when the horizontal structure represents a complete form, and sometimes even exhausts the essence of the genre, we have grounds to speak of a musical statement" (Aranovsky, 1991, p. 15). A motive, as a statement, must have some semantic and structural integrity. This means that a motive is a single semantic whole, the units of which must be in a logical and thematic connection with each other. As a structure, it must have a certain form, which is usually called an intonation figure, the concept of which usually relates more to a melodic and rhythmic pattern.

Melody of the motive

The melodic line of the piece's first bar is monophonic; it consists of one d sound, repeated three times. Such a construction cannot be considered a motive because it contradicts one of the main rules of motivic structure, which states that: "The simplest kind of motive can be expressed by the formula a + b" (Veselovsky, 1989, p. 301). That is, a motive, even the simplest one, must contain at least two different units of information to present a minimal degree of communication about the character of a work or a separate part of it. As Saussure says, "the whole linguistic mechanism revolves around identity and difference" (Saussure, 1977, p. 141) where "difference creates distinctiveness, it also creates significance and unity" (Saussure, 1977, p. 154). There is no melodic difference here; therefore, there is no specific significance and, consequently, the motive cannot take place as a semantic unit. As is known, "… the repetition of the same element muffles its semantic significance" (Lotman, 1970, p. 111), and this contradicts the essence of the motive as one of the most significant structures of the work, containing the main thematic grain. Therefore, unremoved identity and the absence of difference among the elements of the first bar of the piece do not allow it to be interpreted as a motive.

Unlike the first, the main melodic event occurs in the second measure in the form of the following intonation figure:

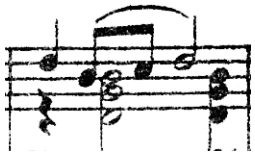


Figure 11 P. Tchaikovsky, *Chanson Triste*, 2 m. (Tchaikovsky, 1948, p. 79)

This figure not only constitutes the melodic culmination of the motive but is also one of the main dramatic elements of the entire piece, which makes up the texture of the work.

Harmony

The change of harmony in the first measure ($T—D_{34}$) provides enough data to identify g minor, which creates a confident modal feeling. However, the dominant function hanging in the air and not resolving it within the boundaries of the first bar creates an open-endedness of this passage, which can be direct evidence of its incompleteness, since the motive should end: "certainly with a chord sound, but not with a suspended chord or a passing sound, etc." (Sposobin, Musical form, 1984, p. 67). The resolution of the dominant occurs in the first beat of the second bar and is maintained until its end, which creates a fairly symmetrical harmonic formula T (three beats) - D (one beat) - T (four beats), where the main dramatic collision occurs at the boundary of the first and second bars. Here, there is an escalation of tension, resolution and, then a decline.

Motive metrics

The second bar's first beat also contains the lowest tone (G_2) of the motive, which shifts the metric center to it, and one of the postulates of the motive's metric theory states that there can only be one strong beat in motive: "motive is the smallest thematic unit, containing, as a rule,

one strong beat" (Kholopova, 2010, p. 311). Formally, this motive has two strong beats (the first beats of the bars), which contradicts this theory. However, the structure clearly shows the strengthening of the first beat of the second bar. Therefore, in this case, the first bar's first beat is weaker than the second bar's first beat, and, consequently, the motive is realized within two bars.

Caesura

Completeness of the structure requires its obligatory isolation from other structures and, therefore, its caesuring, which can be carried out by various means – melodic, rhythmic, harmonic, articulatory and others. This motive is detached from the next one by several different means in parallel. Firstly, it is the long-lasting sound of the motive. Very often, a long-lasting sound serves as a sign of the end of the structure. Just as it can be seen in the example of larger constructions of the work – periods and sentences, smaller parts – motives and phrases often show a tendency to end with a longer sound concerning others. In this case, it is a half note in the melody, creating the effect of a stop. Secondly, it is the harmonic function of T, on which there usually is some weakening of the dramatic development and, consequently, a decline and even a stop of the harmonic movement. This is indirectly confirmed by the stop of the bass movement on the sound of G_2. All these elements together contribute to the creation of a feeling of completion (rounding) of the construction, and, therefore, form a caesura before the next motive.

All the above factors contribute to the formation of the motive under study as a two-measure structure, which is also confirmed by some arguments from the field of semantics.

Semantics of motive

In vocal music, beginning with the Middle Ages, and possibly earlier, a semantic crystallization of intonation patterns occurred. Later, characteristic motives with certain figurative meanings appeared in instrumental works. Thus, researchers find in Bach motives of sighs, motives of melancholy, motives of laughter, etc. (Nosina, 2008, p. 15). In this way, the semantic concentration of motive was historically formed. During the period of Romanticism, which is sometimes called a "motivic era" (Kholopova, 2010, p. 311), the motive acquired even greater symbolic significance and matured to the level of a leitmotif. Tchaikovsky is one of those romantic composers whose thinking has a motivic basis. This means that for them, the motive is a thematic structural unit and has individuality. This is especially true for the initial motives, which manifest the theme of the work.

The meaning of the initial motive is that, the composer exposes the main intonation of the work in it, highlighting the thematic essence: "Already the first motive of the work clearly shows the character of the music, concentrates in itself that unique originality with which the entire artistic whole is endowed" (Kholopova, 2010, p. 311). This can be seen in the motive we are studying, which presents the theme of the work in micro-form.

On the other hand, the function of the motive is that its use, in whole or in part, underlies the thematic development of the work. The initial motive, in its original or modified form, can be found in different parts of the work, most often where dramatic development occurs. Moreover, the more the initial motive is modified, the greater the transformation of the work's texture. Motives undergo especially vivid transformations in the development of sonata form, where they go through the most intensive development.

Motive development can be accomplished by changing various elements of the motive. Harmony, metrics, texture, timbre, and many other components can change together or separately. Among them, there are more and less stable components. One of them is rhythm; it changes less often than the others: "the rhythmic structure turns out to be a simpler and more reliable means of stabilization and is therefore more often used as a representative of the motive as a 'character' of the musical action" (Aranovsky, 1991, p. 60). In the work we are studying, the

initial motive is repeated many times, usually with melodic, modal and harmonic changes, while maintaining a rhythmic formula that remains recognizable throughout the entire work. This is because rhythmic formulas are the most characteristic elements of the theme: "the rhythmic function performs symbolic functions, i.e., precisely those that require the greatest degree of generalization, reduction to a type, to a cliché" (ibid). This fully applies to the work under consideration. The rhythmic formula of the initial motive ♩ ♫ is found throughout the work in different melodic and modal variations, but the initial rhythmic figure remains unchanged and recognizable:

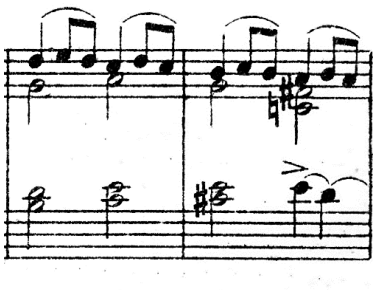


Figure 12 P. Tchaikovsky, *Chanson Triste*, 18-19 mm. (Tchaikovsky, 1948, p. 79)

In general, the thematic development of the piece is built on a many-times-repeated initial motive with an unchanging rhythmic formula (sometimes in abbreviated form). Even in the middle part of the piece, built on different thematic material, initial motives are encountered:

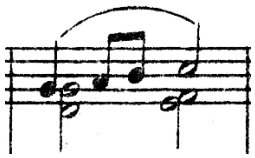


Figure 13 P. Tchaikovsky, *Chanson Triste*, 26 m. (Tchaikovsky, 1948, p. 79)

In the second theme of the middle section, this formula changes to ♫ ♩:

Figure 14 P. Tchaikovsky, *Chanson Triste*, 33 m. (Tchaikovsky, 1948, p. 79)

In the coda, the composer masterfully combines the first bar of the initial motive and the rhythmic inversion from the middle section, which gives the initial motive a slightly different emotional coloring:

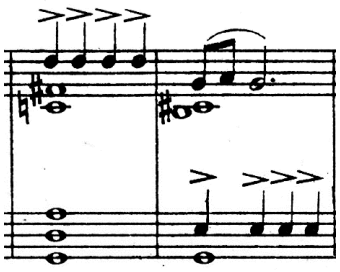


Figure 15 P. Tchaikovsky, *Chanson Triste*, 61-62 m. (Tchaikovsky, 1948, p. 79)

In addition, in the coda the composer creates a kind of *stretta*, when the first measure of the next motive is superimposed on the second measure of the previous one (63 m.), and then the

motive is reduced to one measure (65 and 66 mm.). And yet the last motive of the work (the last two measures) is a two-measure construction, which is a variant of the initial motive. Thus, Tchaikovsky shapes the dramaturgy of the piece:

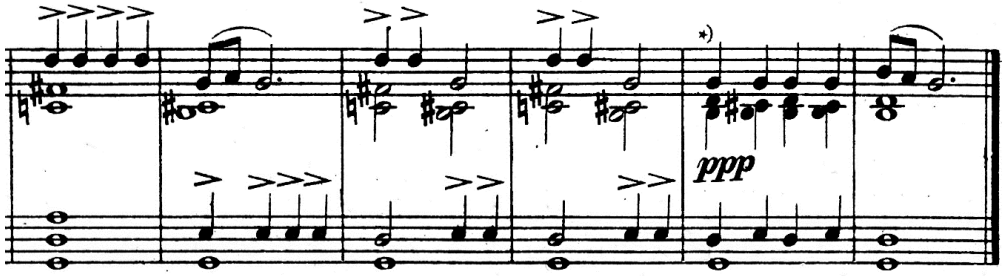


Figure 16 P. Tchaikovsky, *Chanson Triste*, (last 6 mm.) (Tchaikovsky, 1948, p. 79)

Conclusions

"A composer, having conceived a musical work and having the appropriate musical material at his disposal, first of all looks closely at what main and secondary formations can serve for this or that type of development" (Tyulin, 1969, p. 20). Particular attention is usually paid to the main (initial) motive of the work. The creator of *Chanson Triste* Tchaikovsky wrote in one of his letters (6th January 1875): "Even now, with some things I have to bite my nails, smoke an enormous quantity of cigarettes, pace around the room — before I can even conceive the main motive" (Tchaikovsky P. I., 1981, p. 388). Thus, the motive becomes the starting point for the composer in creating a work, the "thematic seed from which an accomplished musical theme and even an entire work grows" (Sposobin, Musical form, 1984, p. 66). The motive, which is of decisive importance for the composer in the process of creating a work, can also become the key to understanding it for the interpreter.

The initial stage of motive analysis involves establishing its vertical volume, that is, the points where it begins and ends. Music theory offers fairly clear standards for defining the boundaries of the construction, which must be known and taken into account when analyzing a piece: "As a microform based on *one* tone center; as the realization of *one* type of intonation movement within *one* timbre; as a micro-mode formed on the basis of highlighting *one* principle; as *one* rhythmic group, often relying on *one* rhythmic accent; finally, as *one* dynamic shade arising on *one* intonation microform – the normative motive manifests the principle of synchronous structural *one*-time occurrence, encompassing all tiers of its complex, synthetic form" (Aranovsky, 1991, p. 126). However, since music is an art that often goes beyond the framework of theoretical templates, it is necessary to take into account the possibility of non-normative constructions. Such options are very common: many motives do not fit the normative theoretical definition. In such cases, some other reference points are needed that can clarify the issue of motive boundaries. These may be semantic and structural aspects:

a completed intonation figure – a musical statement, thematically inherent to the work, conveying its main idea, emotion.

- structural integrity, in the sense of the fulfillment of the motive as a certain form, having its beginning and end, and sometimes a culmination point.
- the presence of a metric, melodic, rhythmic fundamental tone.
- repetition of the motive within certain and stable boundaries.
- separation of the motive from neighboring structures by various means of division, especially metro-rhythmic and melodic ones.

All these factors help in determining the composition of the motive and in identifying its boundaries. Usually, a certain parallelism of musical expressive means is found in the motive structure, when all the elements of the whole are in the same vector of movement and

development and do not contradict each other. Therefore, the motive should be considered as a combination of musical means, while considering the fact that it is not only a closed structure, but also a structural and semantic formation representing the idea and form of the entire work in its entirety.

Conflict of interest declaration

Conflict of interest

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Data availability statement

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Ethics approval and consent to participate

This paper, i.e., its subject, does not involve research on living beings and does not require ethics committee approval.

Use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools

AI tools were not used to generate or alter empirical data, produce analytical results, or shape the core findings and conclusions of the study.

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