

Examiner's opinion on Master's thesis by Michael Andrew Burt

I was looking forward to this thesis, it is a topic very close to my heart. Moreover, I know Michael from my theory classes, which unfortunately were all online, but even so, he proved to be inquisitive and hardworking, open to the huge amount of information that had to be absorbed when entering the Master's programme at a European school.

However, when I received the thesis *Manufacturing Expectation and Predictability in Orchestral Music of the Past Eighty Years with Respect to My Own Compositional Practice*, the title already suggested that the author was not to be shackled by conventional boundaries. The text is written very freely, with a flourish, unfortunately too much.

The author's goal is not clearly stated in the introduction, rather it gradually emerges from the fragments, the clarity of the message is also disturbed by the unclear attitude, sometimes it is about analysis, sometimes about composition. In fact, only in the conclusion it is clearly formulated that the theme of the work is generative expectation, and the aim is to present a set of working tools for the composer that will enable him to master the listener's expectations.

I consider the main problem with the whole thesis to be that it is too broad in scope, leading to a superficial adoption of extricated statements that fit within the author's own thesis. The result is unconvincing generalizations, against which it is not difficult to find counterexamples (p. 12 "everywhere Schenkerian analysis is the basis" - it is not exactly the case in our country, p. 21 "Messiaen's love of symmetry" - he may as well be considered its disruptor). Michael has resolved the multiplicity of sources by selecting a few from which he draws all his theoretical support. The consequence is an excessive reliance on secondary literature (p. 22: interpretation of Generative tonal music theory is taken over without any further discussion), even though the primary literature is available in the HAMU library (Narmour, Lerdahl and Jackendoff, Schenker). I consider this to be a significant deficiency in a master's thesis. I would expect clarification of the discourses and the author's own position on the models cited.

The extension of the models adopted is also problematic - claims concerning perception cannot be made without a discussion of the conditions under which they apply. For example: later analyses often rely on cadences. Michael conceives of this concept very broadly, working with it in timbre music, but cites the establishment of tonal tonics as an illustration (p. 14).

The selected compositions also serve as material to demonstrate a particular expectation-generating device. This is a spectacular procedure, but also a tricky one. To reduce a composition - and two of the selected works are large-scale - to a single principle, moreover concerning its perception, is very bold. I find the verbal description unsatisfactory, lacking any reference diagrams of the entire form (and the author is no stranger to working with them, as can be seen from the Listening Guide chart on which he builds the description of his own composition).

I will comment in detail only on the chapter devoted to *Turangalîla*, which demonstrates the work with melody and repetition. Claims are made about expectations over the course of the whole piece and about compositional use of the themes (noteworthy is the contradictory

information on p. 21: “the whole 40 minute masterwork”, a few lines lower “over the course of an hour”, while the durata of the piece is 80 minutes). But only two themes are discussed out of the main four, one of which (the Statue Theme) is not in the final movement, while the argumentation focuses on the thematic synthesis in the final movement. Based on the provided facts, how can the claim of consistent theme work be made? If the reader of the thesis is to judge whether he or she agrees with the claims of built expectations, there is a lack of information about when, in what context, and how long the themes sound. Musical analysis is interpretation, and the author of the text cannot assume that every listener will evaluate situations in such a complex composition in the same way.

The formal design of the work is adequate, except for the Bibliography: the reference books should be in alphabetical order and the primary sources mentioned above should be included.

Much could be better in terms of language. The Czech reader will be struck immediately by the title “Abstraktní” above the abstract; it is probably an uncorrected automatic translation. The inaccuracy of “Turangalila” diacritics or lowercase in „hz“ are also disappointing. However, from an academic point of view, freedom in the use of terms is a more serious problem. A separate section 1.4 is devoted to the definition of key terms, but it is not clear whether these are own or adopted definitions (in which case references are missing). There are many places in the text where terms are used very loosely, e.g. p. 28: “spectralist's idea of polyphony” - is spectralist here as any composer working with timbre?

Selective work with information (cherry picking), fragmented argumentation and insufficient proofreading are signs of haste. The question arises as to how much the supervisor was consulted.

I understand the work primarily as a subjective report on four compositions described in terms of expectations. The generalizations about the means used are obviously very useful to the author, but I consider the set of working means presented to be a work in progress.

Topics for discussion

- is tone G sufficient to establish C as a tonic? describe the process (p. 14)
- is it possible to separate expectation mechanisms from their aesthetic values? (p.17)
- schematic aesthetics - does each individual have only one structure to follow?

I recommend the thesis to the defence and suggest evaluating it by mark C.

September 5, 2022

doc. MgA. Iva Oplištilová, PhD