

# The Concept of Unity in Musical Analysis: Some Ontological Issues

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## ABSTRACT

The concept of unity in musical analysis is both pervasive and problematic. In this paper I explore this concept, acknowledging both its potential utility and the serious criticisms leveled against its use. I take as my starting point an exchange initiated by the publication of an article by Robert P. Morgan entitled, “The Concept of Unity and Musical Analysis,” as well as the work of five scholars whose work Morgan discusses. From this exchange, as well as the larger discourse on musical unity, I make observations about aspects central to the concept. In particular, I explore three questions: Is unity a singular concept? What is the relationship between unity and its opposites? Is a search for unity inherent in musical analysis? Through this exploration, I provide several important ways in which the concept may be clarified for more effective analytical use.

## Keywords

Unity, analysis, musical analysis, coherence, disunity, organicism, organic unity

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The term “unity” is employed frequently in musical analysis. Consider the following example:

Two occurrences of V, conceivable as one basic manifestation, enclosed by three encompassing occurrences of I, comprise a fundamental unity of linked, overlapping events which span the Prelude [5].

And consider a second example:

But [the use of  $\hat{6}$  to introduce a line that descends from  $\hat{5}$ ] in various measures, at various octaves, and on various hierarchical levels does give a sense of continuity and unity to the passage [23].

In these two examples—of which numerous others may have been cited—unity in a composition is implied to be discernible, moreover desirable, and perhaps even essential. Indeed, the notion of unity, with its suggestion of some relationship between parts in service of a whole, has strong analytical appeal. But do we really understand what “unity” means in musical analysis?

In 2003, Robert P. Morgan published an article entitled, “The Concept of Unity and Musical Analysis” [29]. In this article, he discusses the work of five analysts whom he deems representative of an “anti-unitarian” movement—Kofi Agawu, Daniel Chua, Joseph Dubiel, Kevin Korsyn, and Jonathan Kramer; he summarizes this movement and seeks to refute some of the analysts’ claims. The five analysts, in turn, each responded to Morgan in subsequent articles [1]<sup>1</sup> [7] [12] [19] [21]. What becomes clear in this exchange—and indeed is suggested by several of the scholars—is that the concept of unity, if it is to be put to productive analytical use, is in dire need of clarification. To quote Chua, “The problem is not whether one defends or defies the notion of unity but whether anybody knows what unity is . . . there needs to be a critique of unity” [8].

This essay is an attempt to take some preliminary steps toward such a critique. In each of its three sections, I propose a question which I consider crucial for clarifying the concept of unity. The questions are the following: First, is unity a singular concept? Second, what is the relationship between unity and its opposites? Third, is musical analysis inherently a search for unity? In each section, I illustrate the importance of the question, make observations based on existing analytical literature, and then draw conclusions from these observations. My aim is thus not an account or a definition of unity, but rather the formulation of questions that aim to clarify the discourse concerning this concept. The issues which these questions raise I call ontological because they concern not merely the concept’s content, but its capacity and limits.

Before proceeding, two points bear clarification. First, this is not a historical study of the concept of unity in musical analysis. While such a study would be of great benefit, it is beyond the scope of

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<sup>1</sup> Agawu’s article [1], which appeared in the same issue of *Music Analysis* but apart from the other four, was presumably prompted by Morgan’s article, but obviously responds more directly to an article by Joseph Kerman published 20 years earlier [15]. See also [10].

this paper.<sup>2</sup> Second, I have no intention of taking sides on any debate regarding this topic, for or against unity or disunity. Rather, on one hand I grant the concept's strong analytical potential which its frequent use suggests; on the other hand, I acknowledge its problematic nature which its many criticisms suggest. My aim is thus to appropriate some of the criticisms of the concept for its re-evaluation, so that it may better realize its analytical potential.

## 2. THE MULTIPLE MEANINGS OF UNITY

The first question I propose is the following: "Is unity a singular concept?" In other words, to what degree does the term have multiple meanings and to what degree a common, single meaning?<sup>3</sup> This question has in fact been posed in various forms by multiple analysts, and calls into consideration the term's potential for multiplicity and the implications of such multiplicity.

To begin, I will briefly survey some of the uses of the term as employed in the analytical literature, presented in no particular order. My goal here is not an exhaustive taxonomy, but rather an illustration of some significant differences between these uses.

Under one meaning of the term, unity simply means "similarity": two or more elements are unified if they share similar features. Unity-seeking analysts are sometimes accused of employing this meaning, as its superficiality makes an easy target out of an analytical claim that invokes it.<sup>4</sup> It is nonetheless also used positively, for example in the writings of the Second Viennese School [39].

Another common usage of the term is synonymous with "coherence": under this meaning, unity refers to a logical connection between elements. This meaning is particularly prevalent in highly technical analysis aiming at objectivity, and indeed Robert Morgan offers a definition of the term along the lines of this meaning [29].

The term "unity" has also been used in organicist analysis to refer to the vital, necessary interconnectedness of the elements of a work.<sup>5</sup> Under this usage, one largely associated with nineteenth-century analytical attitudes, the term has almost spiritual or metaphysical connotations.

Taking another angle, unity has been described as a "feeling" or an aesthetic impression received by the listener [20]. This usage is therefore an *effect* created by the composition, linked closely to style or genre.<sup>6</sup> It addresses less the relations between elements and more the affective qualities of a piece.

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<sup>2</sup> Several such studies exist: see [16], [29], [34], and [36].

<sup>3</sup> Questions as to the precise definition of unity are common in the discourse: see [2], [12], and [20].

<sup>4</sup> Dubiel accuses Morgan of employing this notion of unity [12].

<sup>5</sup> The extreme to which this interconnectedness is taken can vary, but is most notoriously intense. For a summary of organicist musical analysis, see [34]—but see also [18]. For discussions of organic unity apart from music, see [14], [25], and [30].

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Chua's discussion of Beethoven's late style [8].

"Unity" has also been used to refer to continuity or predictability, such that a unified passage would fulfill the listener's expectations and a disunified one present surprises.<sup>7</sup> This meaning emphasizes the temporality of music and the listener's psychological involvement in the progression from one moment to another.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, "unity" has been used as an evaluative term: a unified work in this sense is one that has succeeded, that is well-constructed. This meaning usually takes another sense of unity for its criteria; Kerman [15] and Street [36], however, argue that the criteria are designed to validate works already deemed successful.<sup>9</sup>

To this short survey, many more notions of unity could surely be added. Moreover, these notions are obviously not fixed categories; they may readily blend into each other, and indeed analysts often interchange them freely, if problematically. This brief survey nevertheless sheds light on the question concerning unity's multiplicity.

To begin, it stands to reason that the expression, "the concept of unity," can be meaningful only when referring to the body of possible meanings of this term, which is indeed the sense in which I use the expression in this essay.

Secondly, this survey renders vivid the multiplicity of the concept of unity: clearly, what one analyst means by "unity" may differ considerably from what another means, and in significant ways: one meaning reflects a scientific attitude toward analysis; another reflects pseudo-metaphysical beliefs regarding the nature of a work; yet another describes one's personal, momentary response to a work. Debates like the one surrounding Morgan's article make clear that the multiplicity of the concept of unity is not yet fully appreciated.

The concept's plurality suggests that care be taken in its employment. The analyst may wish to avoid the term entirely, employing one of its more specific synonyms. If she still does employ the term, she will want to specify precisely the meaning she invokes, as well as the analytical implications of this invocation. Likewise the reader of an analysis should take care to properly delimit what meaning this analysis employs when such is not made explicit.

Further aspects and implications of this multiplicity will be discussed in the following sections.

## 3. THE COEXISTENCE OF UNITY AND DISUNITY

The second question I propose is the following: What is the relationship between unity and its opposites? In other words, to what extent can unity and disunity coexist, and what bearing does any such coexistence have on analytical claims?

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<sup>7</sup> This is a meaning Kramer uses frequently (see, for example, [20]), although Kramer's use of the term ranges considerably.

<sup>8</sup> For one of the earliest discussions of psychology and musical experience, see [27].

<sup>9</sup> Morgan uses this sense of the term (among others) in [29].

Among other matters, this question addresses the possibility that a claim for unity may somehow subsume one for disunity—or the reverse, of course. Frequently this subsumption consists of the synthesis of elements disunified on one level into a unity on another level.<sup>10</sup> For example, Robert Morgan, in the article I cited earlier [29], proposes to “dissolve” the analytical claims made by the five scholars by finding unity in the passages where they find disunity.

The notion of unity subsuming disunity is clearly problematic. It rests on two assumptions: first, that claims for unity and disunity cannot coexist; and second, that when both are possible, unity necessarily wins out—in short, that disunity may be explained away. But why should the possibility of an explanation for disunified elements automatically render this disunity irrelevant? Morgan, for example, offers no justification. The argument must be one of *saliency*, that for some reason unity is more relevant than disunity.

On the contrary, unity and disunity may and do coexist peacefully, and an analytical claim for unity need not contradict one for disunity. First of all, the multiplicity of meanings of “unity” clearly implies the possibility of this coexistence. In his analysis of the first movement of Beethoven’s String Quartet Op. 132, Daniel Chua argues for the disunity of the work, through which one witnesses the “destruction of aesthetic wholeness” [6]. Morgan, countering Chua’s claims, demonstrates how the movement displays a “tonal symmetry” and a logical formal plan [29]. In this case, different senses of “unity” are in play, and thus no contradiction obtains between these claims. Furthermore, under certain senses of the term, unity and disunity may even be said to interact, as Jonathan Kramer shows in his analysis of Nielsen’s Sixth Symphony [22].

The possibility of the coexistence of unity and disunity is also suggested by the role played by segmentation and the selection of parameters in an analytical claim. On one hand, it is clear that claims employing different segmentations of a passage will not contradict each other, since the arguments concern different elements. On the other hand, even when an identical segmentation is employed, different parameters—harmonic motion, motive, timbre, and so on<sup>11</sup>—may be invoked, in which case the arguments would again concern different elements. Thus when, for example, Kramer claims that “the textual unity [a passage from Mozart] contains . . . the realization of implied tonal return,” this claim must be fallacious: there is no reason that the unity of a given passage be exhausted by a single parameter [20]. On the contrary, the innumerable ways a piece may be segmented, as well as the innumerable parameters by which a segment may be examined, suggest that an analytical claim is always a *selection*

from multiple possibilities, and as such is both *partial* and *provisional* with respect to a given passage.

To summarize: the only circumstances by which two claims, one arguing for unity and the other for disunity, may be contradictory is if they invoke identical segmentation, identical parameters, and identical meanings of unity.

The coexistence of unity and disunity is not only possible, it is *necessary*. In order for a claim for unity to bear analytical significance, it must be *in spite of* a disunity of some type [36]. This idea is of course a long-standing one, articulated, for example, in the ancient doctrine of *discordia concors*, by which harmony is produced out of conflicting elements [35]. Indeed, to imagine a situation where a work’s elements only displayed unity would be just that—a philosophical exercise [25].

Finally, to return to the notion that a possible unity is more salient than a possible disunity: this pervasive notion is seriously suspect. As Alan Goldman demonstrates, aesthetic principles may not be derived from objective properties in art [13]. Unless some objective means of judging the saliency of musical elements was devised,<sup>12</sup> an analytical claim must make an additional argument for the saliency of the relationship it describes.

In summary, only under very specific circumstances may a claim for unity contradict one for disunity, or vice versa; instead, such claims readily coexist without contradiction, according to the various segmentations, parameters, and types of unity in play. Furthermore, a claim for unity or disunity must be considered both partial and provisional, neither exhaustive of nor essential to a given passage. Once these aspects of claims for unity or disunity are recognized, such claims may be put to more productive and precise analytical use.

#### 4. UNITY AND MUSICAL ANALYSIS

The third question which I propose is the following: Is musical analysis inherently a search for unity? This question calls into consideration the relationship between analysis and unity.

This question too is posed by many of the scholars who challenge unity in musical analysis [7] [19] [21]. To borrow Alan Street’s formulation, why should analysis retain its unswerving commitment to the cause of unity [36]? Some, such as Morgan, suggest that while analysis may seek to show many things, it may not show disunity; in his words, “once disunity is asserted, [scholars] have nothing more to say of an analytical nature” [29]. Other scholars, such as Kofi Agawu and Joseph Kerman, suggest that this alleged bias is merely reflective of ideology [3] [15]. So what precisely is the relationship between unity and analysis?

The meaning of this question depends at least in part upon what is meant by “unity.” For example, it would be absurd to suggest that analysis entails a search for unity in the sense of an aesthetic impression. However, that analysis entails a search for unity in the

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<sup>10</sup> The notion of “levels” of unity alludes to segmentation, which will be discussed below. A concrete example of the notion of levels may be observed in metric analysis, where analysts speak of levels with respect to hypermeter: see, for example, [24].

<sup>11</sup> Although “parameters” here may suggest chiefly aspects of the “musical surface,” such parameters may just as well include broader influences such as those suggested in, for example, semiological analysis.

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<sup>12</sup> Fred Lerdahl and Ray Jackendoff discuss the difficulty of such weighting in the context of determining grouping structure [24]. One can imagine the overwhelming complexity of extending such a difficulty to the problem of saliency generally.

sense of a working-together of elements to produce a certain effect—a sort of unity of purpose—seems perhaps less far-fetched. Indeed, a demonstration of disunity along the lines of the former meaning may well rely upon the unity of the latter.

Of course, an exploration of the relationship between unity and analysis also depends on what is meant by “analysis.” Although an adequate examination of this matter of course exceeds the scope of this paper,<sup>13</sup> I will nevertheless make several remarks.

To begin, several scholars have asserted that much musical analysis tends toward seeking unity [3] [16]. Some of the most familiar analytical systems—for example, Schenkerian analysis, pitch-class set theory, and transformational theory, to name a few—seem devised to demonstrate unities [36]. Indeed, could one conceive of showing disunity using these systems? If so, how would a simple *lack* of unity be differentiated from a positive claim for disunity? More broadly, could one conceive of a system which was devised to show disunity? And if such a system showed disunity consistently, what would prevent these disunities from displaying a sort of unity as a group?

My intention in posing these questions is, far from casting doubt on the possibility of analysis showing disunity, to explore this possibility. If anything, if analysis tends toward finding unity, this should be a challenge to analysts: this imbalance suggests, first of all, the presence of uncharted analytical territory awaiting exploration,<sup>14</sup> and second, the need to re-examine the foundations of existing analytical systems [17]. Moreover, many of the questions one could pose regarding disunity-seeking analysis could be equally posed regarding unity-seeking analysis: for example, what distinguishes an arbitrary discovery of unity from a significant one?<sup>15</sup>

Of course, analysis is by no means restricted to the use of analytical systems. The existence of analyses convincingly showing different forms of disunity is a clear indication that the relation of unity to musical analysis is not a monopoly [4] [11]. Furthermore, if analytical *systems* are unsuited to claims for disunity, other analytical *approaches* may be more amenable, as deconstructionist analysis has demonstrated [32] [33] [37]. Finally, there is no reason why analysis need demonstrate unity or disunity; it may be ambivalent to the dichotomy, a possibility Kerman suggests [15] [38].

In summary, the consideration of the relation of unity or disunity to analysis, while complex, poses numerous challenges to analysis: it questions the analyst's goals, assumptions, and ideology; it questions the alleged tendency of analyses and analytical systems toward seeking unity; and it suggests important areas for further analytical exploration.

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<sup>13</sup> For discussions of the goals and procedures of analysis, see [1], [15], [17], and [31].

<sup>14</sup> Among the many calls for such exploration, see [19]. For further discussion on exploration of unity and disunity beyond conventional musical analysis, see [26].

<sup>15</sup> Multiple scholars have detected an arbitrariness in claims for unity. See, for example, [36].

## 5. CONCLUSION

In closing, I have proposed in this paper three questions whose exploration I consider crucial to clarifying the analytical use of the concept of unity. These questions address the multiplicity of the concept, the coexistence of unity and disunity, and the relationship of unity to musical analysis. My aim in this discussion has been to argue for the importance of these questions as well as to explore their possible answers.

There are, of course, other questions which warrant exploration on this matter. For example, where does unity reside? Is it merely a product of our perception,<sup>16</sup> or is it somehow present in the “musical surface” of a work?<sup>17</sup> More concrete analytical possibilities also suggest themselves: how do the types of unity and disunity works exhibit, as well as their grounds, vary according to certain repertoires or composers' *œuvres*?<sup>18</sup> And above all, how is unity or disunity even produced in the first place? What are their possible conditions?

I hope in this exploration to have identified some key areas in which the term “unity” requires clarification if it is to be put to productive analytical use. In addition, I hope to have shown how the exploration of this matter is suggestive not only for analysis invoking unity or disunity but for the very practice of analysis.

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<sup>16</sup> Jonathan Kramer discusses this question [20]. The same two possibilities I suggest lead him to assert a distinction between “perceptual unity” and “textual unity.” Maus explores a related vein in describing three possible ways an experience of unity might be occasioned [26].

<sup>17</sup> Cohn and Dempster discuss an approach to this possibility [9].

<sup>18</sup> The possibilities of genre-specific unities is suggested by several authors [25] [27] [29].

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