

MUSICAL SYNTAX IN CONTEMPORARY RESEARCH STUDIES OF SERBIAN MUSICAL THEORETICIANS

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Danijela Zdravić Mihailović

University of Niš, Faculty of Arts in Niš, Serbia

Abstract. *The paper offers a review of the most significant papers dealing with the musical sentence, the underlying layers (fragmental structures) as well as with the supra-sentential level, i.e. the permeation of the characteristics of the musical sentence and the period. Relying on the consulted literature, the paper considers the attitudes of the musical theoreticians in the recent publications. Relying on comparative analysis with an emphasis on different approaches, the paper aims to highlight some opinions which can serve as a reliable foundation for the pedagogical practice in the teaching courses on musical forms. Different approaches and methodological steps in the analysis of musical syntax unequivocally indicate the complexity of the phenomenon of the musical sentence. This means that in the process of studying the musical form, it is important to offer different theoretical standpoints, as well as numerous examples from the literature. Such an approach definitely opens wider perspectives, not only for understanding the definitions of the musical sentence, but also for its appearance in a variety of styles and genres.*

Key words: *musical flow, syntax, musical sentence, fragmented structures, period*

1. INTRODUCTION

In linguistics, the science of language, syntax is a central discipline dealing with words and sentences, researching the ways of combining words into sentences, i.e. the ways of building sentences from words. Originating from the Greek word *śyntaxis*, it signifies order, stacking, sequencing, being at the same time a part of grammar dealing with the sentence and its constituent parts, i.e. words and forms (Vujaklija 1980, 847).

Musical syntax, as a segment of the study of the musical language, plays an important role in musical analysis, so it is a frequent subject of researchers' interest. Several publications focused on this issue and reviewed in this paper originated primarily as parts

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Corresponding author: Danijela Zdravić Mihailović

University of Niš, Faculty of Arts in Niš, Kneginje Ljubice 10, 18000 Niš, Serbia

E-mail: dzdravicmihailovic@yahoo.com

of the literature for teaching musical theory (music forms) taught in high schools and faculties of music (Popović 1998, Ristić 2009, Stambolić 2003, Zatkalik, Medić and Vlajić 2003, Zatkalik and Stambolić 2005, Zdravić Mihailović and Vasilakis 2017). Numerous individual papers also make significant professional contributions (Grujić 2015, Popović 1998, Sabo 2006, 2015, Stambolić 2004, Zatkalik 1999, 2004, Zdravić Mihailović 2014, 2015, 2017, 2020a 2020b).

2. MUSICAL PLAINS

The analysis of musical syntax is based on the approach to a musical piece that involves determination of stability and instability of its specific sections. Stability and instability, as well as their function and effect on the entire musical flow are determined on the basis of the characteristics of musical planes (thematic, tonal and structural).

Consideration of the **thematic aspect** of a sentence is based on an analytical insight into the motif-related contents.

In addition to identifying motifs and determining the types of motif work for understanding the thematic plan, it is also important to single out a larger segment – the theme. The terms motif and theme are often treated as synonyms in the literature, which is not entirely acceptable, and necessarily requires differentiation. Also, in order to understand the features of the thematic plan, it is sometimes necessary to introduce the notion of ‘thematic material’. This term is used when considering various musical content that is not necessarily part of the theme or motif, and belongs to the segment of musical flow that is the subject of analysis (fugurations, passages, layers of sound created by introducing new material or significant development of the familiar one, and so on) (Sabo 2012, 45).

The **tonal plan** implies the manifestation of all keys in the course of one composition, within which the basic key prevails by appearing more often, and is especially represented in major thematic and formal moments in the course of the presentation of the crucial thematic material, reprise, introductory and final sections. However, it should be emphasized here that key is “only one, especially and distinctly systematized type of tonality” (Despić 2002, 11) and that almost the entire corpus of European art music in the period from the 17th to the end of the 19th century and partially in the twentieth century up to this day rests on it. In the conditions of abandoning the tonally functional orientation in the vertical sense, gravitational processes leading to a certain tonal center come to the fore, so that determining the tonal center becomes a key pillar of tonal plan analysis (Sabo 2012, 46).

The **structural plan** is most often observed on the basis of defining the musical sentence (basic syntactic unit), supra-sentential structures (broader syntactic units – periods) and fragmentary structures. Interpretation of the structural plan of the musical flow as a whole or of its specific segments cannot be substantially explained without taking into account the features of the thematic and tonal plans. “Although all plans interact with each other, the structural plan has the most pronounced unifying properties of the musical flow, as a kind of ‘reinforcement’” (Sabo 2012, 47). Although there is relative agreement among theoreticians about the importance of all three planes in the analysis of musical flow, it is noticeable that similar agreement is lacking when it comes to musical sentences.

3. ABOUT A MUSICAL SENTENCE

In one of the most frequently used coursebooks on musical forms (Skovran & Peričić 1991, 38), a musical sentence is defined as a musical thought rounded up by a harmonic closure – cadence. Although generally accepted, this definition of the musical sentence has certain constraints. One of them is related to the concept and meaning of the cadence, so some theoreticians (Popović 1998) propose the term ‘boundary’ instead of cadence, because the term cadence stems from the classic tradition which mostly applies to tonal music, with the sequence of harmonic functions clearly determined. Being that the analysis of musical flow is not based only on the compositions of a single style, and that the role of harmony as a constructive factor keeps changing, we take a stand that musical analysis acquired a significant tool for analytical interpretation with the term ‘boundary’.

Anica Sabo (2012, 49) concludes that the boundary consists of two elements: the end signal (conclusion) and the start signal. They are equally important for the process of demarcation, but the degree of expressiveness and manner of their placement varies depending on very different circumstances (from the historical-stylistic context, through the genre determinant of the work to the author's personal musical language). Therefore, the boundary at the same time separates, but also connects individual parts in the musical flow, which means that “without boundaries, which segment the musical flow, form is practically impossible” (Popović 1998, 143). Also, without a more detailed consideration of the boundary, it is not possible to make a distinction (sometimes very subtle) between sentential and fragmentary structures, or to determine the existence of the whole of a higher order (a period of two or three sentences, double periods, etc.).

Abstracting the closure of a musical thought (cadence or boundary) Popović also assumes that musical sentence is the smallest integral part of the music flow. It is identified as the smallest because there is no other full or complete part that can be broken down without losing the purport specific for the properties of the entire musical flow (Popović 1998, 236). On the other hand, the smaller syntagmatic groups (fragments) are dependent entities prone to further continual regrouping throughout the musical flow, which causes permanent redistribution and change of their identity to a considerably greater extent than it is the case with the musical sentence/phrase. In the musical language, musical components and their elements (rhythm, melody, dynamics, texture, harmony, agogics) get their unique meaning by being mutually combined, exclusively within a limited domain. The most flexible and the most efficient limited domain (thanks to memory) is the musical sentence which manifests itself as the basic syntactic unit. This means that, differently from the fragment, the musical sentence sometimes exists as independent (typical form for folk songs), thus becoming a complete musical flow.

What is present in the considerations of most theoretical approaches to the musical sentence in the literature of Serbian authors is its consideration in the context of the thematic, tonal and structural plan. This means that, after presenting the properties and influences of each of them, their role in building the musical flow is clarified using the various examples from musical literature. However, it should be borne in mind that this approach has certain limitations that accompany each of the mentioned plans. For example, the features of the tonal plan can be considered in tonal music, i.e. in the works of Baroque, Classicism, Romanticism, partly Impressionism and the so-called neo-styles (Neo-Baroque, Neo-Classicism, Neo-Romanticism). Yet, in circumstances when there is no tonal basis in terms of a certain key, important analytical pillars lose their role. It is

similar when it comes to the influence of the thematic plan, because in conditions when music becomes athematic (e.g. serialism, dodecaphony and other forms of expression in contemporary music), the existence of the “thematic plan” should be understood strictly conditionally. All the mentioned circumstances show that a universal approach cannot be applied in analytical observations, inasmuch as it is possible in certain situations, but that one must equally strive to understand the pertaining context (time, style, author, etc.).

According to features of the thematic plan, musical sentences can be classified as developmental, selective, developmental-selective and motif-indivisible (Popović 1998, Sabo 2020, Zatkalik, Medić, Vlajić 2003, Zatkalik & Stambolić, 2005, Zdravić Mihailović & Vasilakis 2017). Developmental sentences are the ones whose entire content emanates from a single motif, and whose musical flow is built upon the transformation of that motif. On the contrary, selective sentences contain various motif materials (instead of working with a single motif, they give priority to the exposure of several motifs). Developmental-selective sentences are of a greater scope and more complex structure. They contain different materials where some are subject to developmental processes, while motif-indivisible sentences retain an uninterrupted flow which does not allow their splitting into motifs (these are the sentences in which the content is given ‘in one breath’). So, the principle of “diversity unites” comes to the fore here. Any separation of motives in such concepts would be unnatural and in some way violent, because it would deviate from the very musical-aesthetic nature of the given formal whole. However, this does not mean that motives do not exist and that it is not possible to single them out, but only that such separation is not ‘supported’ by musical means.

In the handbook for the *Analysis of Simple Forms* (Zdravić Mihailović & Vasilakis 2017) the authors present a well-known definition of the musical sentence along with some other topical concepts and conclude that it is impossible to come up with a universal definition: “All proposed definitions can give a listener (analyst) a chance to get a higher quality insight into the characteristics of the musical sentence; however, the abundance of different compositions, as well as the very (artistic) nature of music, escape theoretical generalizations in much the same way” (Zdravić Mihailović & Vasilakis 2017, 18). Other theoreticians, too, discuss the issue of flexibility of the sentence emphasizing, among other things, the terminological problems (see: Sabo 2006) or the issue of context: “although the musical flow at certain points becomes independent and starts showing the features of the musical sentence, the issue of what comes next appears as an equally important and equal factor in the final defining of the entire content of the observed musical flow” (Zdravić Mihailović 2015, 44).

Another noteworthy work is the one of Zatkalik and Stambolić who propose a division of the sentence on the basis of the structural plan. Aside from the basic sentential formula $n+n+2n$ (statement – repetition – progression with a signal of closure), it also includes other structures such as $2n+n+n$ (reversed basic formula), $n+n+n$ (shortened basic formula), $n+n$ (two half sentences), or $n+n+n+n$ (four similar, most often two-bar segments).

Presentation of the structural plan of the sentence can be met with understanding, but can also cause aversion because of the numerical mould that formula implies by itself. For this reason, numerical relations should be understood only as approximate, because the mentioned formulas definitely cannot embrace all structural options for sentence construction, but they can be helpful to determine the starting point for the considerations within any of the offered models. The same authors emphasize that the sentence also implies movement toward a goal, i.e. musical event that most often appears as a set of specific pitches (cadence and the like), where it is important to notice that the movement

towards the set goal is such as to make the listener wait for that event, with awareness of the moment when the event will take place, so when it really happens, the listener has a feeling that the goal has been accomplished, i.e. that the musical flow has come to a point targeted from the very beginning.

In the book *Prolegomenon to the Theory of Musical Syntax* (Ristić 2009), the author clearly and systematically sets forth the concept of a standard musical sentence involving the following formula: $n+n+2n$. Such a formula applies to the sentences particularly frequent in the works of the Vienna classicists embodying the following process: half phrase + its repetition + four-bar development of the previous motifs that usually ends in a cadence (2+2+4). Setting up of the standard model (the norm) is explained by the need to present the complex material of the musical sentence in a relatively systematic way.

Further considerations of the musical sentence take place in the direction of expanding the concept of 'standard model' understanding the variability of the musical sentence and its correlation with the genre, medium, style, etc. The special value of this publication is a detailed analysis of carefully selected examples, which, in addition to the analysis of motives and work with motifs, also includes harmonic analysis. This makes all the important constituents of the musical sentence clear.

It is well known that the study of the phenomenon of musical sentences is always related to the (broader) context, and that it is not enough to observe it separately. However, it must be emphasized that most of the mentioned theoreticians offer a good systematization of the musical sentence which is applicable to all the levels of the study of music forms.

4. FRAGMENTARY STRUCTURE. SPECIFIC SITUATIONS.

For reasons that are primarily methodological in nature, after establishing the principles on which the musical sentence is based, it is resorted to determining the characteristics below and above the sentence level.

A fragmentary structure, with its properties basically opposed to the sentence, is considered to be dependent and, to a certain extent, subordinated to the sentence, and it can endure only as an integral part of the musical flow. If motifs and musical syntagms do not make progression, but merely repeat or, if a group of motifs fails to get a convincing closure, the musical flow is observed as sequencing of fragments which do not get integrated into an independent rounded up whole such as the sentence (Zatkalik, Medić & Vlajić, 2003). Such structures are seen as unstable, with a tendency to become stable, i.e. sentences. This can be compared with the tendency of the dominant to get resolved to the tonic where one can notice the essential pattern of the musical flow: tension – resolution.

Fragmentation of the structure most often occurs as a consequence of frequent repetition of motifs or in the circumstances when a certain group of motifs does not get a constructive ending - cadence. This means that the musical segment, defined as fragmentary, has an exposition followed by the repetition of certain metric-formal units (often as a two-bar or four-bar structure, although one-bar and three-bar structures can be found as well, and less often five-bar and larger segments). Due to simple (literal or sequential) repetition, the musical flow is deprived of the moment of development, i.e. progression, which is necessary for the formation of a whole of a higher order, i.e. sentence. Then the exposed segments do not get integrated into a whole of a higher order, but remain separated from

each other due to the intermission (caesura) that is the result of repetition. So, the principle comes to its full expression here: literal or sequential repetition does not bring forth a whole of a higher order.

Sometimes development is achieved by repetition, so that the fragmentary structure can be very close to a sentence because a fragmentary section, just like a sentence, can begin with an exposition of motives, and continue with repetition. In that case, what differentiates the fragmentary passage from the sentence based on repetition refers mainly to the treatment of repetition and cadence. If the repetition of the motif is not carried out to a greater extent, and the musical flow has a cadence at the end, we can talk about a sentence. If repetition is the dominant compositional procedure with no cadence, or if that segment is separated from the next by some other means, then it is certainly a fragmentary section.

In tonal music, the harmonic component plays a very important role in the differentiation of sentence and fragmentary structure. However, in the music of the 20th and 21st century, when the harmonic means get significantly transformed, a number of questions arise related to the delimitation of these entities. Since the primary pillars of the musical flow, i.e. analytical arguments, have been significantly changed, the question that arises concerns the conditions in which the musical sentence i.e. the fragmentary structure is profiled. Such questions are a great challenge for the analytical interpretation of the music created in the mentioned period. Yet, it is not so uncommon for certain doubts to arise even in the analysis of examples of the musical heritage of Classicism or Romanticism too, so some considerations of musical syntax are aimed to shed light on some 'debatable' situations. Tatjana Ristić (2009, 152–156) highlights the so-called boundary cases with under- and supra-sentential levels and points out that the very boundary line between the fragmentary structure and its raising to a higher hierarchical level is the zone where the cases of structural organization relying on the 'standard' model are to be found, in terms of a clear analogy with the model's internal logic. The point here is the impairment or leaving out of certain constituents of the 'standard' model (statement, repetition, development, cadence), which brings the structure of the sentence close to fragmentary. Aside from the internal organization of the segments, some theoreticians point out that the harmonic component is a very significant factor of stability in the construction of the musical sentence. For example, Gordana Grujić (2014, 221), emphasizes that the sections which have not been sufficiently supported harmonically to be classified as a stable structure but at the same time cannot be seen as a regular way of presenting fragments, remain in the form of structures with both fragmentary and sentential elements.

5. SUPRA-SENTENTIAL LEVEL. PERMEATION OF FORMAL PATTERNS

In some examples from the literature, one can see the fragmentation of a higher level – a sentence string. It is a whole formed by two or more sentences, which is, due to its instability, sometimes identified in the literature as a fragmentary structure: "instead of 'solid' sentential or periodic wholes, 'loose' structures come to the fore – two-bar strings, sentence strings, etc." (Skovran & Peričić 1991, 65). What is actually meant here is higher-level fragmentation; these are sentences, stable and rounded, but at a higher level; in their 'stringing', they do not integrate into the periodic form, but remain somewhat

'disjointed'. Although it sounds paradoxical, it is still possible for stable structures (such as sentences) to be unstable under certain conditions.

On the other hand, the theorists' attention is drawn to some situations in the musical flow in which the distinctive properties of one or another formal model are not manifested, i.e. sentences that are divisible in such a way that they could be characterized as periods. In them, the first segment is insufficiently independent, i.e. "the developmental stages of such first sentence of the period are reduced, meaning that some of them are omitted and this is exactly where the variability of this type of musical sentences is reflected" (Ristić 2009, 157). The author gives an example of the second theme (section B₁) from the third movement of Beethoven's Sonata for piano, Op. 27, in which the first four-bar section is not independent enough to be seen as a musical sentence, while the next 19 bars can be characterized as the second sentence of the period. She, therefore, proposes a formulation "in character close to the sentence, but also to the periodic organization" (Ibid., 160). A similar dilemma characterizes the first theme (section A₂) of the third movement of Mozart's Sonata KV 332; hence the author concludes that the analytical interpretation depends on the musical plan which has been given priority.

In addition to the example of the genre of piano sonatas by Mozart and Beethoven, Haydn's music offers – even pronouncedly so – permeations of the mentioned formal models. It is known that the sonata cycle got crystallized in Haydn's works, as well as some other forms, above all the sonata form and rondo, but it can also be said that the process of forming certain musical forms entailed profiling of the musical sentence. It is in his works that one can find extremely specifically organized musical syntaxes. For example, the initial course of the Minuet from the Piano Sonata Hob. 5 is very provocative for analytical considerations. The permeation of the elements of the (large) sentence and the (open) period is reflected in the divisibility of the first section - the first four bars have a typical summation structure of 1 + 1 + 2 and the closure on a weakened tonic of the basic key. At the same time, the composer does not give a convincing cadence, but the closure is represented by the connection VII – T on the unstressed beat of the bar. The second segment begins with a subdominant function and brings contrast in the initial part of its course, while in the further course (in the second two-bar section) a similarity with the first part is established. The section ends with a semicadence on the dominant. The ending of the section on the dominant of the basic key is not rare in Haydn's early works, but in this specific example the provocative question is whether this is a single sentence or a whole of a higher order. If it is a whole of a higher order, should it be characterized as a string of sentences or as a period? Taking into account the fact that the first sentence of the period has a weakened cadence, and that it does not have to show a greater degree of independence, then the first segment (bars 1-4) can certainly be characterized as the first sentence of the period. The question is how to understand its relationship with the second sentence, i.e., the entire section. To remind ourselves, two sentences that have the inverse cadence relationship from the standard period (T–D) can be understood as an open period. If we take into account the fact that the period can also be formed by two sentences that are not thematically similar, then one gets the impression that it is quite acceptable to interpret this section as an open contrasting period.

The possible interpretation that we came to was the result of an expanded understanding of the period, but it is especially important to point out that in fact there is an overlap between the expanded understanding of the period and a whole of a higher order, which is described in domestic literature as a string of sentences. If the period occurs in its basic form (standard period), the difference between it and a string of sentences is obvious and quite clear.

However, the expanded understanding of the period, which implies neither similarity of sentences nor harmonic dependence, leads to the point where these two categories overlap, so that it cannot be reliably said whether it is one or another whole of a higher order. In fact, the interpretation of an example should be supported by concrete theoretical viewpoints. In any case, if the second segment were based on the repetition of the first, we would unequivocally conclude that this is an (open) period. However, as the context often determines the whole, it is necessary to consider in more detail what follows. Since development and cadence occur instead of repetition in the musical flow, it seems quite acceptable to interpret this section as one sentence. In this context, the first segment can be explained as a potential sentence, bearing in mind that "syntagms that show a greater degree of independence are called potential sentences" (Zatkalik, Medić and Vlajić 2003).

6. CONCLUSION

The previous observations clearly indicate that defining of the structural level can sometimes hinder the analysts' attempts to take a specific stand. However, aside from the fact that it should not be an end in itself, it can often provide significant information on a particular musical style. Hence, some theoreticians conclude that "the properties of musical syntax, together with other features, provide an opportunity to get familiar with individual compositional style, in this case with the musical sentence or periods in Haydn's works" (Zdravić Mihailović 2017, 169). Authors emphasize that understanding the language of music through the style analysis, and not only through the formulas ($n+n+2n$; $n+n$; $2n+n+n$ etc.) regardless of the stylistic affiliation, leads to a full analysis which should be the final goal of understanding of music. Also, in one of the previous studies it is emphasized that Haydn's works provide grounds for some "very unusual formal solutions that 'flirt' between the sentence and the period, two-part and three-part form of the song and the like" (Zdravić Mihailović 2014, 206).

Due to different manifestations of musical syntax, and different analytical approaches, certain situations open dilemmas when it comes to defining musical syntax. Yet, it is important to emphasize that the objective of the analytical technique is not mere 'measuring' and searching for pros and cons. "In the analytical interpretation, arguments should lead to an understanding of the structure itself, as well as of the wider context, i.e. the work within a greater whole" (Zdravić Mihailović 2020a, 283).

If one starts from the standard model of the musical sentence, it is possible to realize that it has its properties, but on the other side, the listener (analyst) expects that the logic of the musical sentence always manifests itself in that particular way. It turns out, however, that the analyses are usually unnecessarily burdened by facts that the musical flow does not always unfold in accordance with what is seen as "regular". In this context, it is important to point to the negative side of the methodological procedure based on the rule – exception principle. Moreover, observations from a wider, not merely syntactic perspective open some new perspectives regarding the regular and irregular concepts of a specific syntactic formula or a specific type of form: "(...) the issue of 'regularity' and 'irregularity' remains open, i.e. conditioned by the contexts of time and style" (Zdravić Mihailović 2020b, 106).

Studying the problems of terminological determination of the elements of the structural plan of the musical flow in more detail, Anica Sabo (2006, 77) concludes that the problem requires inclusion of the analysis of interpretation which is always an

important test of each asserted statement. Acceptance of analysis as a form of interpretation and establishing links with instrumental and vocal interpretation could be very important in the process of understanding different relations governing the structure of the musical sentence.

Different approaches and methodological steps in the analysis of musical syntax unambiguously point to the complexity of a concept such as the musical sentence. It follows that it is still impossible to give a fully rounded and generally acceptable definition of the musical sentence. It means that in studying musical forms it is important to offer different theoretical standpoints as well as numerous examples from the literature. Such an approach definitely opens wider perspectives, not only for understanding the definitions of the musical sentence, but also for its diversified manifestations in various styles and genres.

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MUZIČKA SINTAKSA U SAVREMENIM ISTRAŽIVANJIMA SRPSKIH MUZIČKIH TEORETIČARA

U radu se daje prikaz najznačajnijih radova posvećenih muzičkoj rečenici, ali i celinama ispod rečeničnog nivoa (fragmentarne strukture), kao i iznad rečeničnog nivoa, odnosno prožimanja karakteristika muzičke rečenice i perioda. Na osnovu konsultovane literature razmatraju se stavovi muzičkih teoretičara u publikacijama novijeg datuma. Cilj rada je da se uporednom analizom i isticanjem različitih pristupa ukaže na pojedina mišljenja koja mogu biti dobar oslonac za pedagošku praksu u nastavnim predmetima koji se zasnivaju na upoznavanju muzičke forme. Različiti pristupi i metodološki koraci u analizi muzičke sintakse nedvosmisleno ukazuju na kompleksnost pojave kakva je muzička rečenica. To znači da je u procesu izučavanja muzičke forme važno ponuditi upravo različita teorijska stanovišta, kao i brojne primere iz literature. Takav pristup definitivno otvara šire perspektive, ne samo za razumevanje definicija muzičke rečenice, već i za njenu pojavnost u raznovrsnoj stilsko-žanrovskoj pripadnosti.

Ključne reči: muzički tok, sintaksa, muzička rečenica, fragmentarna struktura, period