

The Pitch-Class Motive in Tonal Analysis: Some Historical and Critical Observations

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Abstract

The term *pitch-class motive* is a convenient designation for a motive in tonal music that turns on a particular pitch-class in the tonic key—usually a chromaticized scale degree such as b6/#5, #4, or b7 in major; or b2 in minor. The American theorist Steven Laitz, in his 1992 dissertation, finds precedents of the idea, though not the term itself, in the theoretical work of Schenker, Schoenberg, and Rudolph Reti, and he applies it analytically to Schubert *Lieder*. The present essay builds on Laitz's work by suggesting that many scholars of tonal music—both music theorists and musicologists--have used the concept of the motivic pitch-class in recent years, and that current usages, at least in Anglo-American scholarship, are traceable back to the work of Donald Francis Tovey (rather than Reti), Schenker, and Schoenberg. It traces these three lines of influence up to the present day, and compares them in three analytical examples: Beethoven's String Quartet in F Minor, Op. 95; Chopin's Mazurka in A-Flat Major, Op. 17, No. 3; and the first movement of Beethoven's Third Symphony.