

# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

## See also from Grove Music Online

John Field

Vincenzo Bellini

## ALTERED CONSCIOUSNESS

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 2 The Music Trance

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

The effect of these modulations on the music's temporality, that is the audience's experience of time, is comparable to the effect of an operatic scene in which static "aria time" supervenes on the action-time of recitative. To evoke such an introspective effect in instrumental music is precisely the act whereby instrumental music becomes romantic. It was the effect against which Goethe—romanticism's most formidable opponent, sometimes misread as a romantic himself because he described what he opposed so compellingly—issued his dire warning in *Faust* (1808).

**ex. 2-3 Use of flat submediant in Václav Jan Tomášek, *Dithyramb*, Op. 65, no. 2, mm. 36-58**

Faust will lose his soul to the devil Mephistopheles, the latter warns, as soon as he calls out to the passing moment, “Stop, stay awhile, thou art so fair!” (“Weile doch, du bist so schön”). That moment, the moment in which *ethos* (responsible action) is sacrificed to *pathos* (passive experience, surrender to feeling), will be the moment of damnation. That is the moment romanticism celebrates. Small wonder then that romantics were so often called *poètes maudits* (accursed poets, poets of the damned). Goethe's famous last words were “Mehr Licht!” ([Give me] more light!). Romantics, as Liszt has already told us with reference to Field, were the poets of the night.

In his fourth “night piece” or Nocturne (1817), Field uses mediant and submediants alike to work his dark magic. The music is cast, like that of Tomášek's Eclogues and Dithyrambs (indeed, like most character pieces), in a simple there-and-back ternary form—albeit one somewhat disguised, in keeping with Liszt's comments on Field's sublime “formlessness,” by the avoidance of sectional repeats and by the constant forward motion of the left-hand accompaniment. The chief articulator of form here is the harmonic trajectory, an old concept marked with new expressive associations.

The music almost palpably slips into reverie in the middle section (Ex. 2-4a), where the harmony shifts from the A major of the outer sections into C major, and when C major gives way to its parallel minor. And when after that C minor gives way to a circle of fifths that plunges flatward as far as its Neapolitan region (D  $\flat$  major in m. 36), we can feel the deepening of the music trance (call it the composer's, the performer's, our own as we wish; distinctions become blurred with the quickening of subjectivity).

We have had occasion once before to speak of a music trance, when examining the aria “Casta diva” from Bellini’s *Norma* (Ex. 1-10), the archetypical bel canto aria. And indeed, comparing Field’s melodic line and flowingly arpeggiated accompaniment with Bellini’s will show the source of the pianist’s inspiration: not Bellini himself, who in 1817 had not yet begun to compose, but the operatic style on which Bellini himself drew—as much a performing as a composing style. Where Tomášek had taken the scherzo (or minuet) and trio as his formal template, Field took the da capo aria. The consequent evocation of the human voice served him the way it had served Beethoven, as a means of communicating his musical message that much more sincerely and urgently. The composed mimicry of spontaneous embellishment (which, as Liszt informs us, Field freely varied in true bel canto style when performing his nocturnes) was one of the features of the domestic-romantic idiom that listeners prized most of all, because it added to the music another dimension of seemingly free impulse, at once bountiful and unconstrained. It imparted to the musical experience yet another dimension of subjective truth (the only kind of truth there was).

The image displays a musical score for a piano piece, likely a nocturne, spanning measures 24 to 37. The score is written for piano and features a melodic line in the right hand and an arpeggiated accompaniment in the left hand. The key signature is G major, and the time signature is 3/4. The score includes several dynamic markings: 'rit.' (ritardando) at measure 24, 'dim.' (diminuendo) at measures 24, 28, 31, and 35, 'piangendo' (pianissimo) at measure 25, 'poco f' (poco forte) at measure 28, and 'crescendo' at measures 36 and 37. The key signature changes to D-flat major at measure 36. The score is presented in a standard musical notation format with a grand staff (treble and bass clefs).

**ex. 2-4a John Field, Nocturne no. 4 in A major, mm. 24-37**

The connection between trances or reveries and artistic response was much enhanced in early nineteenth-century thinking by the increasing interest just then (and the concomitant increase in understanding) of mesmerism, a practice of therapeutic trance-induction pioneered by the Austrian physician Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815), an acquaintance of the Mozarts. It was rechristened “neurohypnotism” (from “nervous sleep”), later shortened to hypnotism, around 1840 by James Braid (1795–1860), a Scottish surgeon. Mesmer thought that the hypnotic trance was produced by the influence of an invisible magnetic fluid that passed from the soul of the doctor to that of the patient. That is why he called it “animal magnetism,” or soul-magnetism. Braid thought it was the product of eye fatigue, transmitted from the eye to the cerebral cortex in the brain, to which the eye is connected, where conscious thought processes take place. By paralyzing the functions of the cerebral cortex, Braid thought, the unconscious mind was brought in contact with external reality and could be subjected to conscious control.

What all early researchers into hypnotism believed was that it proved the existence of a level of reality that transcended the world of the senses. That level was where the true self lay. An entranced subject was more truly him- or herself than a person in the normal waking state. Any stimulus that could produce a trance phenomenon actually produced a state traditionally associated with poetic or artistic inspiration, in which—to quote Mesmer's contemporary, the Swiss esthetic theorist Johann Georg Sulzer—one “turns all one's attention to that which goes on in one's soul, forgetting the outer circumstances that surround one.”<sup>9</sup> The trance state was thus associated with the state of “inwardness” so prized by the romantics, and even with a state of inspiration.

One of the prime stimuli that could produce these effects, it was long recognized, was music. Mesmer himself used the unearthly sound of music played on the armonica (or “glass harmonica”), already mentioned in the previous chapter in connection with Lucia di Lammermoor's mad scene, as an aid to trance induction. In many late eighteenth-century “magic operas” and early romantic operas beginning with Mozart's *Magic Flute* (1791), the armonica was used to accompany scenes of spell-casting or entrancement. The armonica parts in operas still in repertory—perhaps the most recent one being Glinka's *Ruslan and Lyudmila* (1842)—are usually played today on celesta or glockenspiel.

So the idea of music as trance-induction, and of trance-induction as a means of “taking possession of one's inwardness” and therefore a high romantic art ideal, has (or had at first) a more concrete and literal aspect than might seem to be the case. There was a genuine aura of what romantics called “natural supernaturalism”—natural access to transcendent experience—in the romantic idea, eloquently expressed by the philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder in 1799, that “in the mirror of tones the human heart learns to know itself.”<sup>10</sup>

To return to Field's Nocturne, the harmonic “far-out point” (FOP), D ♭, is enharmonically reconfigured as C ♯ by way of retransition (Ex. 2-4b). The means of accomplishing this involves another mediant relationship: the augmented sixth chord on the last beat of measure 42, which immediately identifies its bass note, D, as the sixth degree of an as yet unstated (and, as it turns out, never stated) tonic (F ♯), of which the C ♯-major triad that lasts six bars in figuration is the dominant. Its status as sudden flat submediant is what gives the chord its powerful charge. A large chapter in the history of nineteenth-century harmony would recount the ways in which, over the course of the century, composers learned how to deploy and control the chord of the augmented sixth, and exploit that transcendent, hypnotic charge.

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## Notes:

(9) Johann Georg Sulzer, *Allgemeine Theorie der schönen Künste* (2nd ed., Leipzig, 1792); quoted in M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 89.



(10) Johann Gottfried Herder, *Phantasien über die Kunst* (1799), quoted in Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, p. 93.

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