

# The Use of Sacred Topics in Anton Bruckner's Symphonies

**SURG** | Arts, Humanities, and Performance (AHP) | *Tags: Literary/Compositional Analysis; Theory*

*This cover page is meant to focus your reading of the sample proposal, summarizing important aspects of proposal writing that the author did well or could have improved. **Review the following sections before reading the sample.** The proposal is also annotated throughout to highlight key elements of the proposal's structure and content.*



Proposal Strengths	Areas for Improvement
The background section goes beyond summarizing past literature by interpreting what is known about the research topic and by giving specific examples of the concepts presented. These choices both help a reader follow the argument for why the project should be done.	There needs to be a more clear statement about what the output of this research will look like, and a description of the methods that will be used to interpret results. It is <b>not</b> sufficient to say only that the results "will be interpreted". "If, then" statements can be useful in showing how you would interpret your results, which should then be connected to your research aims/question.
The methods are justified explicitly by describing and justifying exactly what types of works will be reviewed and by describing and justifying what exactly how the process of reading will look. A reading list is included in the appendix showing the specific works.	While some aims/objectives are present, rephrasing to create or including an explicit research question would strengthen the proposal.



Other Key Features to Take Note Of
While it is common for some fields to use footnotes, we would suggest not using them in writing your proposal, and instead citing your references in the works cited after the 2 pages of proposal body.
Every project that involves the methodology of literature review should have a reading list of the selected readings. This list can be organized as this author did, chronologically, or it can be organized thematically, categorically, or in another way that helps a reader understand the project. These reading lists can also be annotated in a way that helps a reader understand what you plan to get out of each reading or subset of readings.

For my independent project in music theory, I propose to study how the 19th century composer Anton Bruckner evokes the sacred in his orchestral works and to what effect. To achieve this, I would analyze the scores of a number of his sacred motets and several of his symphonies. My aim is to view them through the lens of topic theory, a specific field of music theory. This research would allow me to, through the study of a single composer, begin to draw more general conclusions on topic theory in the 19th century, an area of research I plan to pursue further in my educational career.

Topic theory is a relatively new area of research and speculation. It was first introduced by Leonard Ratner in his book *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style*. Published in 1980, the work proposes the concept of topics as a framework for interpreting 18th century music. These topics are defined as “characteristic figures”, some of which were “associated with various feelings and affections” and others that “had a picturesque flavor”.<sup>1</sup> Composers could use different topics to evoke responses in their listeners. For example, the French overture, which “uses a slow and heavy march tempo with dotted rhythmic figures”, brought forth associations of ceremonial pomp.<sup>2</sup> By the end of the 18th century, mixing discrete topics was ubiquitous. Thus, in the *Prague Symphony* Mozart makes use of a variety of styles in quick succession, playing upon associations these topics had that his audience would have known.<sup>3</sup> Through this approach, another layer of interpretation becomes possible, as composers could convey complex meanings through their use of varied topics. Already by the end of the 18th century, the symphony was seen as the apex of instrumental music. Classical composers were able to use topics to expand “their listeners’ range of musical experiences and the possibility of shared interpretations”.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the interpretive benefit of a topical analysis of a work of music becomes clear: the study of topics is a tool through which a greater understanding of how 18th century audiences heard music can be formed.

The study of how topics relate to sacred music, though not fully cemented, has received some attention. More specifically, a set of topics termed learned topics have been identified that often signal the sacred. These learned topics are marked, among other elements, by complex counterpoint.<sup>5</sup> However, these topics have mainly been part of general topical analyses. **I plan to place greater emphasis on how bringing these sacred topics into a secular context alters the meaning and interpretation of secular music.** As a devout Catholic and as an organist, Bruckner lived his life with strong roots in the tradition of Catholic music and thus will be a particularly apt case to study. Part of the classical canon and an Austrian, Bruckner is also emblematic of the typical Germanic classical tradition. A topical analysis of his symphonies will help uncover how Bruckner uses sacred music in his symphonies, and thus can also provide clues on how sacred topics are used in the broader world of Western art music. Thus, it will add to the contexts in which Bruckner’s music can be studied, and it may highlight interactions between sacred and secular music in the 19th century.

Additionally, this project will work to adapt topic theory to the study of 19th century music. Most work done in the field of topic theory has focused on 18th century music. The *Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*, a recent volume working to codify the theory, expresses the hope “that further music theorists and historians will take up the gauntlet” and use topic theory in music after the 18th century.<sup>6</sup> Work has been done to show that 19th century works are still rich

<sup>1</sup> Leonard G. Ratner, *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1980), 9.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>4</sup> Elaine Sisman, “Symphonies and the Public Display of Topics,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*, ed. Danuta Mirka (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 115.

<sup>5</sup> Keith Chapin, “Learned Style and Learned Styles,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*, ed. Danuta Mirka (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 303-308.

<sup>6</sup> Danuta Mirka, “Introduction,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*, ed. Danuta Mirka (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 47.

Clear research/project statement occurs in 1<sup>st</sup> paragraph

Could include an explicit research question

Background goes beyond summarizing relevant literature. It sets up a justification for the specific

Example helps to situate a non-expert in what might be a tough concept/topic to understand

Identifies gap in knowledge

Identifies why gap should be filled.

Identifies gap in knowledge

Footnotes take up a lot of space and are better put in a reference page.

in topics, as composers “imbued eighteenth-century topics with fresh significance”.<sup>7</sup> They also “evolved new topics”, particularly as their cultural environment shifted.<sup>8</sup> Julian Horton, in a chapter in *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*, discusses this shift, and undertakes a topical analysis of a portion of a Bruckner symphony. Horton focuses on how 19th century social and intellectual debates surrounding music lend context to Bruckner’s use of topics in the Seventh Symphony and the rhetorical impact of this method of listening.<sup>9</sup> He also briefly remarks that more could be drawn from “the sacred topic’s pivotal role in this narrative”.<sup>10</sup> It is this role that I plan to examine. I will draw from and expand upon Horton’s adaptation of topic theory to the 19th century. As part of this, I will be sure to recognize and view what Horton characterizes as “a kind of historicism that is alien to eighteenth-century music”, thus adding to the ongoing dialogue about how best to adapt topic theory to the different musical ethos of the 19th century.

For my research, I plan first to closely study Bruckner’s symphonic output. This consists of nine conventionally numbered symphonies as well as three other works that did not achieve equal status with these works for varying reasons. For simplicity’s sake, I will focus on the nine numbered works, as these are the most available and most frequently performed. I will also consider some of his sacred motets. I will both listen to these works and analyze the scores. This analysis will focus on identifying topics Bruckner uses within these works, and how these topics affect the general narrative of the works. I will also do a broad analysis on the harmonic aspects of the works.

Following this analytical work, I will view research on sacred music in the 19th century and on Bruckner’s relationship with this music. I will work to interpret what ideas Bruckner sought to convey with sacred topics, and how he might have viewed these topics. Additionally, I will look into how the symphony was viewed during this time. This will provide a framework to help assess the concepts present in Bruckner’s symphonies in the context of the 19th century. I will use these findings and the work done with the scores to develop interpretations of how Bruckner uses sacred topics in his symphonies and their effect on the meaning of the works.

Finally, I will interpret these findings in light of the broader study of topic theory, particularly in how I adapted this field for the 19th century. I will examine musical discourse in Bruckner’s day and view how his use of topics fit in to this broader discourse. This part of the research will consist in reading contemporary reactions to Bruckner’s music and in reading general philosophies on music from the time.

This research will occur the summer after I complete the second year of the Honors Introductory Music Theory course sequence. This sequence has equipped me with the analytical and interpretative skills to approach Bruckner’s symphonies from several angles. I have received an introduction to topic theory both in the theory coursework and through my own reading on the subject. Lectures in this class have covered the use of multiple topics in a single symphonic work and interpreting works through topical analysis. Following such coursework, I would be at a good point to use these skills for creative research. By focusing on the output of a single composer, and on a particular facet of this output, I will be able to learn how to adapt the general skills I have gained to a specific situation.

Ultimately, this research will allow me to gain further knowledge in topic theory, an area of the field I am extremely interested in and hope to do more research in in the future. This experience would both give me an opportunity to grow accustomed to the world of music research and allow me to prepare for graduate education in music theory.

Background leads to specific goals of 8 week project

Identifies why gap should be filled

Methods are defined and justified

There should be more information about what exactly this interpretation will entail. It is not clear what the output is or how the researcher will know they have addressed their research aims

<sup>7</sup> Julian Horton, “Listening to Topics in the Nineteenth Century,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*, ed. Danuta Mirka (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 644.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 644.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 656-660.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 660.

## **References**

- Horton, Julian. "Listening to Topics in the Nineteenth Century." in *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*, edited by Danuta Mirka, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Mirka, Danuta. "Introduction." in *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*, edited by Danuta Mirka, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Ratner, Leonard G. *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style*. New York: Schirmer Books, 1980.
- Sisman, Elaine. "Symphonies and the Public Display of Topics." in *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*, edited by Danuta Mirka, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

## **Analysis List**

- Bruckner, Anton. *Locus iste*
- Bruckner, Anton. *Os justi*
- Bruckner, Anton. *Symphony No. 1 in C minor*
- Bruckner, Anton. *Symphony No. 2 in C minor*
- Bruckner, Anton. *Symphony No. 3 in D minor*
- Bruckner, Anton. *Symphony No. 4 in E-flat major*
- Bruckner, Anton. *Symphony No. 5 in B-flat major*
- Bruckner, Anton. *Symphony No. 6 in A major*
- Bruckner, Anton. *Symphony No. 7 in E major*
- Bruckner, Anton. *Symphony No. 8 in C minor*
- Bruckner, Anton. *Symphony No. 9 in D minor*
- Bruckner, Anton. *Vexilla Regis*
- Bruckner, Anton. *Virga Jesse floruit*

## **Reading List**

- Agawu, V. Kofi. *Music as discourse: semiotic adventures in romantic music*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- "Anton Bruckner." *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular*, vol. 27, no. 520 (1886): 322-24. doi:10.2307/3365104.
- "Anton Bruckner." *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular*, vol. 37, no. 645 (1896): 742. <http://www.jstor.org.turing.library.northwestern.edu/stable/3367987>.
- The Cambridge Companion to Bruckner*, edited by John Williamson, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Hatten, Robert S. *Interpreting Musical Gestures, Topics, and Tropes*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004.
- Horton, Julian. *Bruckner's Symphonies*, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Hutchings, Arthur. *Church Music in the Nineteenth Century*, London: Herbert Jenkins, 1967. *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*, edited by Danuta Mirka, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Hutchings, Arthur. *Church Music in the Nineteenth Century*, London: Herbert Jenkins, 1967.
- Jackson, Timothy L. and Paul Hackshaw. *Bruckner studies*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*, edited by Danuta Mirka, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Ratner, Leonard G. *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style*. New York: Schirmer Books, 1980.