

Teaching Narrative with Coleridge-Taylor's "Ballade"

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1 Introduction

I am all too often struck by the conceptual gulf between our undergraduate core theory classes and upper-level analytical coursework. In the case of the undergraduate core we typically privilege curricula and assessments oversaturated with right-or-wrong exercises—something either is a Neapolitan, or it is not; or something either is an authentic cadence, or it is not—and all too often we overlook opportunities for interpretive analysis until our students reach upper-level electives.

This can occasionally be so extreme that students find themselves simply ill-equipped for interpretive analysis in the higher levels. This can result in a host of issues, from the relatively benign mindset that a complete analysis is a simple listing of all Roman numerals in a work (a so-called Roman-numeral “analysis,” whatever that means), or in an approach that leads to such far-fetched and overly detailed narratives as to approach the comical.

As an antidote to this issue, I now seek to incorporate narrative and interpretive exercises from the very beginning of my own undergraduate classes. And there is one particular piece that has been especially successful and especially appreciated in my courses. In this paper, I present opportunities for engaging students with such narrative interpretations in Samuel Coleridge-Taylor's A-minor “Ballade” for orchestra, Op. 33, of 1898. ► What is especially powerful about this work is that one can approach narrative from at least three different viewpoints: tonal, rhetorical, and formal. In so doing, one can incorporate this work into a spiral-learning perspective, beginning in the earliest portion of the curriculum and returning to the piece again and again to delve ever deeper into the work.

1.1 A Brief Disclaimer

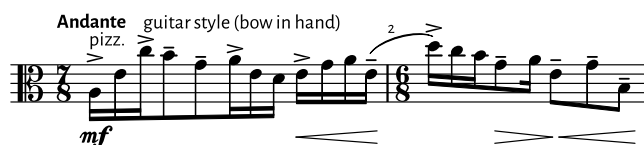
► But, before we get to the topic proper, a quick disclaimer: ► Coleridge-Taylor, despite paternal ancestry in Sierra Leone, was born in *London* in 1875, and thus obviously was not African-American. But in speaking with the organizers of this conference, we felt that Coleridge-Taylor's impact on American music—and thus on *African-American* music—was and is so great that telling his story is a necessary part of telling the story of African-American music more generally. We therefore felt that his inclusion in this conference was both historically minded and musically appropriate.

2 On Narrative Generally

► In my own teaching and advising, I come across two broad narrative types: those that are process-based and those that are not.

2.1 Two Process-Based Examples

► Consider, for example, the opening of Jessie Montgomery's ► *Strum*, which lays out a clear process-based narrative in the opening thirty-three measures. As shown in Example 1, Montgomery begins with a completely diatonic collection without F. Here is the Calypso Quartet, with the composer herself on viola. ►



EXAMPLE 1: Montgomery: *Strum*, mm. 1–2

Montgomery then slowly adds pitch content—and literal color to this white-note collection—through the circle of fifths. Beginning with the addition of F in m. 6, she adds B \flat in m. 10, E \flat in m. 16, and so on until finally she completes the aggregate with G \flat in m. 33.

► Or consider ► *Tracing Mississippi*, a flute concerto by Chickasaw citizen—and distinguished CIM alum—Jerod Impichchaachaah'a Tate. As you can see in the left-hand side of Example 2, Tate begins the work with a slow unfolding of a descending (0257) tetrachord. This tetrachord controls the process of the introduction of this piece: as one example among

many, note that the excerpt proper includes stacks of these (0257) tetrachords that themselves arpeggiate overlapping descending tetrachords of the very same set class. Here is the San Francisco Symphony with Edwin Outwater conducting. ►



EXAMPLE 2: Tate: *Tracing Mississippi*, I. Talooa (Song), mm. 32–33 compared with generative (0257) cell

► I believe that these are—or at least can be—narrative readings, but they are narrative readings of a very different type. Due to their procedural nature, they are ultimately a binary issue: the beginning of the process sets clear parameters, and either the process reaches completion within these parameters, or it does not. As such, such process-based narratives ultimately create the same type of right-or-wrong intellectual exercise all too common in the undergraduate core.

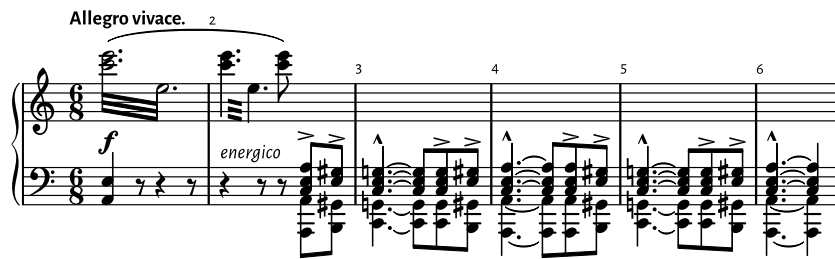
Thus my focus today is on the second narrative type: metaphorical interpretations of given works not based on any kind of algorithmic compositional process like the ones mentioned here. In my own teaching, I find that these latter narrative types need far more nurturing in our classrooms, and are thus our focus today in Coleridge-Taylor’s “Ballade.”

3 Local Tonal Narratives in the “Ballade”

► Such narrative mentoring can begin in the opening sessions of one’s music-theoretical coursework with a simple look at ► tonal expectation and voice-leading agency.

Within the clear global tonic of A minor, ► the “Ballade”’s tonal narrative is first suggested by the third measure, when an opening G♯ is frustrated down to G♮, resolving not to the expected A-minor tonic but settling instead into the chordal fifth of a C-major triad. Here is Example 3; the recording is Grant Llewellyn conducting the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, and all subsequent recordings today will come from this source. ► I have found that early discussions of such voice-leading agency pay dividends down the road; awareness of this leading tone’s implication and subsequent realization—or lack thereof—help lay the groundwork for future interpretive readings of cadential attenuations, mode mixture,

text–music relationships, and so on.



EXAMPLE 3: Coleridge-Taylor: *Ballade*, mm. 1–6

Furthermore, this $G\sharp$ – G motion, syntactically “incorrect” in the key of A minor, ► is later enharmonically reinterpreted as ► $A\flat$ – G , a common and “correct” voice-leading pattern in the key of C. ►



EXAMPLE 4: Coleridge-Taylor: *Ballade*, mm. 153–164

In this example, note the A in m. 157 that falls to $A\flat$ in m. 158 and G in m. 159; this pattern is of course immediately repeated beginning in m. 161. It is as if this opening pitch-class motive—that A – $G\sharp$ – G —is somehow foreign to, or perhaps misplaced in, the global tonic of A minor. But it cleanly assimilates itself into the secondary key of C major, now enharmonically respelled, as a powerful cadential gesture. Indeed, at the risk of getting ahead of ourselves, this is not just any powerful cadential gesture in Example 4, but in fact it’s the EEC, the essential closure that completes the tonal trajectory of the exposition.

► And speaking of closure, Coleridge-Taylor seems to play a clever game with his enharmonicism: when this pitch-class motive is written “correctly” (like $G\sharp$ – A , or $A\flat$ – G), it

signifies the closure of some unit, like the EEC closing out the exposition. But when this pitch-class motive is written “incorrectly” (like $G\sharp-G$ or $A\flat-A$), it signifies a beginning: as in the onset of the recapitulation, or the start of the work itself. And I should mention that this is Coleridge-Taylor’s own arrangement, and thus I think we are right to interpret some sort of enharmonic meaning.

There are larger questions at play here, of course: when is a frustrated leading tone no longer marked in this way, and in what genres can we assume total enharmonic equivalence? I would argue that these are also important discussions to facilitate even at these earliest stages as a means of grounding and framing one’s curriculum and how it may relate to other musics.

4 Rhetorical Narrative

► Zooming out now to larger formal units, we can address the rhetoric of phrase and form in at least two main sections of the work.

► Consider Example 5. In this example, the mischievous A-minor section seems to just get stuck. Unable to reach any convincing cadence, it is left to merely repeat increasingly emphatic sub-phrasal gestures as a means of reaching whatever sort of completion it may attain. ►



EXAMPLE 5: Coleridge-Taylor: *Ballade*, mm. 19–29

These rhetorical flourishes get increasingly aggressive as the work continues. ► In Example 6, the music once again gets stuck beginning in m. 45. It attempts to break out of

this rut in m. 51, almost attempting to break the confines of the work's $\frac{6}{8}$ time signature in m. 54 before at last spiralling out of control with the descending gestures in mm. 55–58. ►

EXAMPLE 6: Coleridge-Taylor: *Ballade*, mm. 43–58

At this point, it is as if the music itself has to pause and regroup for its next attempt at a convincing cadential closure. Consider the opening two measures of Example 6 on the screen—and now compare them with the opening of ► Example 7. Since the music has consistently spiralled out of control thus far, perhaps a slower, more stately approach to this thematic zone could result in a more successful cadential gesture. But of course a clear cadence in A minor is denied as the music once again spirals out of control. ►

► In fact, this A-minor section is unable to EVER convincingly cadence in its own tonic; arguably the first credible cadence—even stumbled into as it is—is given in ► Example 8, appearing eighty-five measures (some 19% of the way) into the work and actually in the subdominant D. ►

59 *f* *a tempo* 60 *cresc. molto* 61 62

63 *ff* *Più mosso.* 64 65 66

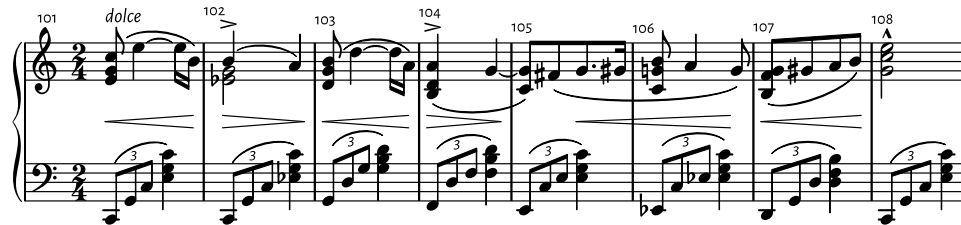
EXAMPLE 7: Coleridge-Taylor: *Ballade*, mm. 59–66

77 *f* 78 79 80 81

82 *dim.* 83 84 85 *mp* 86

EXAMPLE 8: Coleridge-Taylor: *Ballade*, mm. 77–86

► The C-major secondary zone, ► meanwhile, is exceptionally tight-knit, regularly and persuasively cadencing in its local tonic. Here is Example 9. ►



EXAMPLE 9: Coleridge-Taylor: *Ballade*, mm. 101–108

(This theme toes a pretty fine line of being a little bit saccharine, but it’s still fantastic.)

► The “Ballade” thus contrasts a tempestuous, brash, and unstable A-minor section with a rhetorically stable C-major section that borders on the overly sentimental. The dichotomy between these two main zones pervades the work and foreshadows our large-scale formal narrative.

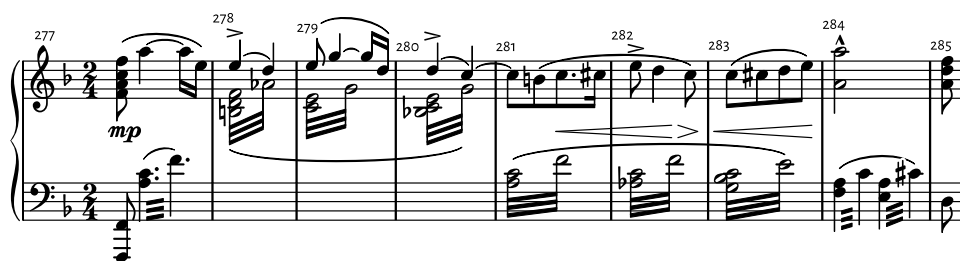
5 Formal Narrative

► With a glance towards the entire work, we notice a *Dutchman*-type exposition of an overly stormy P, in A minor, followed by a calmly lyrical S in C major. ► P then dominates the development, to the absolute exclusion of any and all S material.

But this large-scale formal narrative starts to become clear at the moment of recapitulation. What would, in a textbook form, be a double return of P material in the tonic key, is considerably weakened here. As seen in ► Example 10, the recapitulation begins instead with a subdued return of S in the global submediant of F major. (You will have noted by now my Sonata-Theory–based nomenclature, but in no way do I find this terminology necessary. Furthermore, I don’t take the time to discuss any potential rotational quirks or Type-2 aspects of this sonata, preferring instead to interpret this movement’s structure on its own terms.) Here is Example 10, the onset of the recapitulation. ►

(You also may have heard the common-tone augmented sixth that resolves into the opening F major of this example. Once again, “incorrect” voice leading of A \flat to A signifies a formal onset.)

Recalling the general instability of P in the exposition, perhaps S’s role in the recapitulation comes as no surprise. It is as if S has usurped P’s role in beginning the recapitulation, and the tonal weaknesses of the expositional P now result in an altogether new tonal area



EXAMPLE 10: Coleridge-Taylor: *Ballade*, mm. 277–285

for the recap. (But note, of course, the descending-fifth relationship between the two S statements: C major in the exposition, and F major in the recapitulation, a pattern we see all throughout the literature.)

► When P does at last return, it is in A minor, as we would expect. But as we see in ► Example 11, something else is notably present. Because this P statement is blatantly interrupted in m. 357 with the opening gambit of S. In other words, now that P has managed to finally reclaim the musical surface, it is only in an environment tinged with reminiscences of S material. Two thematic zones typically kept separate are now suddenly fused together. This is especially striking when we recall the development, a span of over one-hundred measures with precisely zero S material. ►

EXAMPLE 11: Coleridge-Taylor: *Ballade*, mm. 353–360

► One of my favorite things to do when discussing this piece is to ask my students their opinions of the ending. And I do this at the very beginning of our discussion so as not to taint their responses with anything I, or others, may have said in class. And invariably, I hear the same responses semester after semester: ► that the ending was surprising, that

it was earlier than they expected, and that it's—perhaps paradoxically—a perfect ending while also being somehow unfulfilling. ►

I think they're exactly right: this ending seems so fitting while also somehow lacking. All throughout this work we've seen P's inability to achieve stability through a clear cadential gesture in the global tonic. And we see now that P was destined for this failure all along: it's fitting because it's what we've come to expect from this P module, but we can't help but regret P's inability to overcome this weakness.

(And I'll remind us one final time that Coleridge-Taylor used correct pitch spellings at the conclusions of units, as you see in this example—the end of the piece—with clear uses of A \flat resolving to G and G \sharp resolving to A.)

6 Conclusion

► So what does this mean for our narrative? ► We saw in the opening measures of the work how ► enharmonicism and voice-leading agency foreshadowed future narrative turbulence in the “Ballade.” We noted a ► marked disparity in rhetorical character between the work's two main themes—a stormy primary thematic zone seemingly unable to find its own stable footing, and a lyrical secondary zone that is, if anything, too rhetorically stable—and these observations set the stage for an intricate ► sonata narrative, made perhaps most clear when S—in F major—begins the recapitulation. When P does at last return, it is with nagging S-based interruptions, highlighting the weakness of this P material first foreshadowed in the opening measures.

► So what is the story of this movement? ► Is it the tale of an S space and its ultimately failed attempt to subdue and calm an overly aggressive P zone? Is it a story ► of S successfully overtaking P, leaving P material to abruptly (and maybe even angrily) end the movement before it loses any more ground to S space? Or perhaps ► it's the story of the tenuous hold A minor has on the movement, with an opening P space that only ever truly cadences in D minor, a recapitulatory S in the submediant of F major, and an A-minor conclusion that arrives only all too early.

I would never suggest that any of these readings is superior to any other, and I know each one of you here could put forth a newer, more nuanced reading than any I have proposed today.

► But that, I would argue, is exactly the point: we train our students so well to operate within the confines of a standard right-or-wrong assessment. In my experience, so many

431 432 433 434 8 435

436 437 438 439 440

Più presto.

441 442 443

444 445 446

447 448 449 450

ff *accel.* *cresc.* *f* *ff*

EXAMPLE 12: Coleridge-Taylor: *Ballade*, mm. 431–450

students are simply uncomfortable with the idea that there could possibly be multiple correct interpretations (that is to say, “right answers”). I think it is our duty to help nurture a comfort with multiple readings so that they can take said readings into the practice room and continue honing their skills with them as performers and communicators. Instead of waiting until upper-level coursework to emphasize the interpretive nature of music analysis, I argue that we owe it to our students to foster this interpretive mindset from the very beginning of the undergraduate core. And it is with a work like Coleridge-Taylor’s “Ballade” that we can put forth several competing metaphorical readings—and return to them again and again throughout the curriculum—as a means of further developing our students’ creative strengths.