Richard Taruskin has taken to repeating himself. A little over three decades ago, he used the occasion of a review of Allen Forte’s book *The Harmonic Organization of “The Rite of Spring”* to express “strong doubts” about the author’s “method” (set-class analysis) and to advocate “a properly historical orientation.” He seemed to leave room for dialogue, however:

> The octotonic [sic] scale may prove a welcome meeting point between Forte and more historically inclined analysts, since it is one of the ‘modes of limited transposition’ that so interested Rimsky-Korsakov during the period of Stravinsky’s tutelage, and it is also one of the ‘main harmonies’ Forte has tabulated (i.e., set 8-28) in *The Rite of Spring*.2

Set-class 8-28 (the octatonic scale) became the focus of a subsequent article, “Chernomor to Kashchei: Harmonic Sorcery; or Stravinsky’s ‘Angle,’”3 in which Taruskin traced the scale’s origins back through Rimsky-Korsakov to Liszt and Schubert.4 He praised Arthur Berger and Pieter van den Toorn for their pioneering inductive or “inferential” work on Stravinsky,5 and claimed to provide the missing historical evidence to ‘confirm’ their findings. He did not dwell on why we needed such confirmation, or how—or indeed whether—such confirmation changed the ways musicians heard or listened to Stravinsky’s octatonic music for the purposes of analysis. Nor was it acknowledged that the distinction between “historians” and “analysts” was undermined by the undeniable fact that there was already plenty of “music history” (as distinct from “music history”) in Berger’s and van den Toorn’s articles.

In a 1987 “Letter to the Editor” of the journal *Music Analysis*, Taruskin stepped up his critique of Forte’s methods and reasserted the priority of his brand of historically based analytical inquiry. Such inquiry would seek corroboration from letters, sketches, and contemporaneous theories.5 This time, Forte responded to Taruskin’s criticisms, and he did so at some length. Among other things, he rejected not history but “extreme historicism,” espoused the virtues of sharper music–analytical tools, provided alternative explanations to certain passages analyzed by Taruskin, and charged him with misrepresentation and a fondness for non sequiturs.6

I wish to thank Christopher Matthay and Roman Ivanovitch for helpful comments on a draft of this essay.

1 Taruskin (1979, 118, 126).
2 Ibid. (129, Note 11).
3 See Taruskin (1985).
4 See Berger (1968); and van den Toorn (1975) and (1977).
5 See Taruskin (1986).
6 See Forte (1986).

In his 1997 book *Defining Russia Musically*, Taruskin included a previously published essay, “Stravinsky and the Subhuman,” in which he sought to demolish the myth of the *Rite* as absolute music, as “the music itself,” by once again doing battle with various music theorists.7 The offending category was “formalism,” the desirable one “contextualization,” and Taruskin offered a comprehensive critique of the former as manifest in the reception history of Stravinsky’s masterpiece. He once again expressed hopes that “the boundaries between ‘history’ and ‘theory’ . . . and between ‘the extramusical’ and ‘the music itself’”8 would eventually blur and dissolve.

Finally, in 2010, Taruskin wrote an article for *The New York Times* entitled “Just How Russian Was Stravinsky?”9 By now one could predict the content from the title alone. He continued to emphasize Stravinsky’s Russianness as indexed by the octatonic scale. Fashionable invocations of “postracialism” and “postnationalism” at the outset aside, Taruskin seemed to say that Stravinsky could never transcend his Russianness, no matter what he or anyone else said. As before, “Mr. Berger” and “Mr. van den Toorn” were praised for their research on what was rapidly coming to approximate the status of a sort of DNA of Russianness, the octatonic scale. According to Taruskin, the scale “provided tangible evidence of the continuity that underlay Stravinsky’s many stylistic metamorphoses, something previously sensed and declared, but only as enthusiastic propaganda, not as the fruit of technical analysis.” Again, Taruskin’s habit of stopping along the way to pontificate about history and analysis was ubiquitous.

Unfortunately, the very claim that the octatonic scale is *the* source of a deep level of stylistic continuity in Stravinsky remains unconvincing to some. Critics say, first, that there are few wholly octatonic passages in Stravinsky (compared to what else there is) and therefore that octatonic usage is not comprehensive enough to support the claims made for it; second, that many so-called octatonic passages can be explained in reference to other scales or other constructs; and, third, that the crucial “real-life” disposition of the octatonic (i.e., as embedded in a rhythmic–metric or phrase–structural configuration) seems not to be a significant factor for Taruskin. Several scholars have weighed in on these issues but, as far as I know, no consensus has been reached.10

“Catching Up with Rimsky-Korsakov” is in some ways an elaboration of “Just How Russian Was Stravinsky?,” but it also

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2 Ibid. (388).
3 Taruskin (2010).
4 See, for example, Straus (1984); Whittall (1989); and Tymoczko (2002).
incorporates material from earlier publications. Again, Taruskin uses some of the same quotations he has used before and makes essentially the same arguments, albeit at a more leisurely pace. Although Rimsky-Korsakov's name appears in the title, the article is primarily about controversies surrounding the octatonic scale. Stravinsky. Taruskin continues to be up to what he now seems to see as a concerted effort to deny that the true and proven historical origins of the octatonic scale in early Stravinsky stem specifically from Rimsky-Korsakov's teaching, writing, and composing. Ignoring this specific origin, he imagines, is part of a larger conspiracy held by music theorists to deny history, to refuse context, to sanitize the music, and to adhere to their beloved formalistic approaches. Taruskin conjures up an army of “music theorists mobilized in resistance to the historical contextualization of Stravinsky's achievement.”

Yet it is not the fact of the scale's origins that is in dispute; rather, it is the significance of that fact for listening, understanding, and analysis that remains insufficiently explained.

When a scholar repeats himself, and does so loudly and unapologetically, we are entitled to ask why. Perhaps he is insufficiently aware of the large and devoted readership that he commands. Perhaps he is on a mission to correct a profound misimpression, to try once more to kill a many-headed hydra that will simply not die. Perhaps, convinced that his way is the right one, Taruskin hopes to persuade a few more skeptics through re-assertion—and what better place to make that attempt than in the heart of the theory community itself, the pages of its flagship journal, Music Theory Spectrum. It is also possible that Taruskin is suffering from memory loss, that he is not aware of just how often he has made these arguments (about history versus theory). Perhaps it has not occurred to him that he is being ignored precisely because the arguments about the relative priorities of “history” and “theory” are porous, that the act of hearing precedent, for example—as in hearing Stravinsky's octatonicism mediated (always? sometimes?) by Rimsky-Korsakov—is deeply problematic, and that the opportunistic framing of this as some sort of moral or ethical issue misses the point entirely. Perhaps it has not occurred to him that unless the aesthetic and perceptual issues raised by the deployment and consumption of the octatonic are given a more rigorous underpinning (where, for example, is engagement with music psychologist Carol Krumhansl's empirical attempt to ascertain the scale's audibility?12), and unless this is done by example and within a comparative framework, some critics will remain unmove.

Some of these factors might not be germane. I bring them up in the spirit of what Taruskin advocates as “normal scholarly procedure,” according to which we are obliged to interrogate and contextualize “all testimony” and to pay “due attention to interests and motives.” The genre of “Memoir” for which that procedure was recommended is of course different in some respects from a scholarly article, but in so far as both make use of language and rhetoric to try and persuade readers about a particular viewpoint, the gap between them might be small. “Catching Up with Rimsky-Korsakov” certainly betrays a host of “interests and motives,” and it could serve as a fruitful site for interrogating the author’s methods and assumptions.

Taruskin’s first problem, it seems, is with one aspect of the work of Allen Forte, one of music theory’s influential architects. There is no m icing of words here:

I found myself so disgusted on reading Forte’s book-length treatment of Le Sacre that I took it as a mission to discredit his approach, which as I saw it was an elaborate ploy to forestall informative investigation and perpetuate the absurdum of creationism.13

Evidently, the views of this self-identified “confirmed evolutionist” have evolved since he reviewed the book in 1979. Then, Taruskin wrote that “Allen Forte’s signal contribution to music theory has been to devise the first rigorous and systematic analytical approach to that no man’s land of early twentieth-century music that lies between functional tonality, on the one hand, and serialism, on the other” (emphasis added). Forte’s The Structure of Atonal Music was “seminal” and “a supremely ambitious undertaking.” Indeed, Taruskin found Forte’s follow-up article on Schoenberg “wonderfully illuminating.”14 And although he expressed “doubts” about the Rite book, he thought it showed Forte’s system to be “a powerful tool.” Thirty years on, he reports only a feeling of “disgust” on reading the same volume.

We all change our minds about the things we read, of course, but not all of us have the privilege of doing so publicly and at such a high decibel level. I rather suspect that Professor Taruskin is deeply conflicted about music theory, and he has elided the important distinction between theory and analysis in some of his writings. For these and other reasons, I find myself in disagreement with just about everything he says in “Catching Up with Rimsky-Korsakov.” It is of course possible that I have misunderstood Professor Taruskin, in which case he will, I expect, extend his sympathies to me in due course. But I fear that his characterizations of “theory,” which in turn form the basis of his ongoing critique, are often partisan. We can avoid further confusion by broadening the scope of the term to better encompass what theorists do.

Taruskin sees himself as both analyst and historian: “[I] have had need of theory, have freely helped myself to it, and even contributed to it.”15 At the same time, he is deeply invested in certain kinds of historical, cultural, and hermeneutic approaches to music. This ability to travel, so to speak, between history and theory is not given to all, and we would have to conclude that there is something exemplary about it. But when Taruskin expresses “disgust” for The Harmonic Organization of “The Rite of Spring” and presumably its theoretical antecedent, The Structure of Atonal Music, one wonders if he is reading the books on their own terms. The Structure of Atonal Music is a work of theory, The Harmonic Organization

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11 Taruskin (2011, 177).
15 Taruskin (1997, 376).
of “The Rite of Spring” a work of theory-based analysis. If theory is “a social articulation of systematic knowledge organized in such a way that it is applicable to a wide variety of circumstances,” it will necessarily be formulated in general rather than particularized terms. These generalities entail abstractions, and the abstractions function as invitations of sorts. Having ascertained a given abstraction’s plausibility in a necessarily limited sphere, Forte assembled his theory for himself and others to work with. And this is just what has been happening in the nearly four decades since publication of The Structure of Atonal Music. The taxonomizing impulse that animated Forte’s pioneering book is rife not only in Neo-Riemannian theory and transformational theory, but in influential (or potentially influential) books by Robert Gjerdingen (detailing the workings of partimenti in eighteenth-century music), by James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy (showing available options for traversing sonata space), and by Dmitri Tymoczko (revealing the geometrical shapes indigenous to chords and their behavior)—indeed in practically all the major work that has been produced in the name of “music theory” in recent decades. A theory may yield good results in some applications, but not in others. I know of no music theory that yields uniformly good results in all instances of analytic application. Of course, we may disagree about what a good result is, but not, I hope, about the necessity of the category “good.”

Taruskin was apparently not impressed with the basic taxonomic task undertaken in The Structure of Atonal Music, but it seems absurd to claim that it (together, presumably, with the many projects it made possible) was part of some “elaborate ploy to forestall informative investigation.” The Structure of Atonal Music proved to be an influential treatise, and its premises were debated vigorously within the theory community. Attempts were made to apply the theory to other repertories, to modify or refine the theory, or to find alternatives to it. Forte’s work thus made possible a number of fruitful discussions. It is difficult to see in what sense the book “forestalled informative investigation.”

Moreover, there are ontological differences between what might be called music-theoretical facts and music-historical facts. It could be argued—with no intention to oversimplify the issues—that some of the musicologists’ “facts” assembled from documents written by others are constructions betraying multifarious motives and interests. Theoretical facts formulated within the ontological specifics of a musical language are not necessarily free of authorial interest but, to the extent that they compel attention to musical processes, they invite agreement or dissent within the framework of the sounding material free of its inorganic affiliations. The external fact of Stravinsky’s having gotten the octatonic scale from Rimsky-Korsakov may satisfy the constructor of genealogies, but until we have a firm grasp of how precedents can be domesticated as aural experience, it is not clear what one does with such a historical fact beyond acknowledging it. Imagine the tens of thousands of musicological facts unearthed by, say, Henry-Louis de La Grange in his mammoth, four-volume project on Mahler: how are they supposed to mediate hearing at certain times, in certain places, and under certain conditions? As contingencies multiply, origins begin to seem less singular and less determining, leaving those whose stock is invested in precedents, affiliations, and influences holding on to thin air.

Taruskin’s repeated claim that theorists as a collective have ignored or undervalued the origins of Stravinsky’s octatonicism in Rimsky-Korsakov thus begins to ring hollow when seen in the light of what I am suggesting is an ontological problem. And his attempt to frame the history-theory debate as a battle between “creationists” and “evolutionists” would be comical were it not made without irony. According to Taruskin, theorists are “creationists” who think that Stravinsky created the octatonic scale (just as God created the world). Creationists refuse the lessons of history, tradition, precedent, and influence. Taruskin, by contrast, is a “committed evolutionist” who has allowed himself to be instructed by history (including, presumably, the history he has had a hand in creating). He is certain that, Stravinsky’s own words to the contrary, the octatonic scale had a specific origin in a specific St. Petersburg practice, and that its subsequent sedimentation in Stravinsky cannot be explained any other way. Taruskin claims superior knowledge of Stravinsky’s music not through compositional engagement, performance, or even intense listening, but from the authority of documents. He portrays himself as one who is true to human history; the rest of us are merely operating under ideological influences.

Historical prejudice, Taruskin reckons, is better than theoretical prejudice, just as evolutionism is better than creationism. The bigger problem looming here stems from the plain fact that many musicians see no reason for automatically conferring priority on ostensible origins. For those who regard the musical language as a shared language, historical firsts (recorded in answers to questions such as “Who first used the whole-tone scale?” or “Who first wrote a five-bar phrase?”) are rarely useful keys to unlocking creativity. Indeed, there are numerous world traditions of communal composition in which the capitalist anxiety about who first used X or invented Y is deemed insignificant and confined to a corner inhabited by eccentrics. For those who take their cues from such communal practices, the pertinent question is not, “Where did Stravinsky find the octatonic scale?”, but rather, “What did he do with it once he got it?”, “How did he use it imaginatively?”, and “How did he breathe life into it?”. It is important to emphasize that this stance does not entail a denial of the specific origin that Taruskin is at pains to demonstrate; it only leads to its contextualization by people whose overriding interest is in the nature of musical creativity, not in the divisive history of ownership of musical procedures. Indeed, as a general rule—and musicological dogma to the contrary—establishing a precedent in the history of musical composition holds no a priori validity at all.

17 See Gjerdingen (2007); Hepokoski and Darcy (2006); and Tymoczko (2011).
There is, in any case, a basic question about the priority of the octatonic scale in early Stravinsky that I do not believe has been answered definitively, and that is whether the octatonic constitutes the best—most fruitful, most insightful, most revealing—framework for the undertaking of a comprehensive, syntactic analysis of Stravinsky’s “Russian” music. Thanks to Berger and van den Toorn, we were informed about its presence even before we read Taruskin’s many publications, but neither scholar placed the sorts of temporal constraints on the octatonic that would give it genuine partimento status.

Whereas Gjerdingen’s archetypes are typically shown in real time (within a phrase of music, as a cadential progression, or as part of an inaugural event), Berger’s, van den Toorn’s, and Taruskin’s octatonic is reduced to a state of synchronicity or presence. Granted, the rules for syntax may be different from those of the Classical Style, but without some sort of temporal projection or constraint, the constructive power of the octatonic remains to be demonstrated. As Arnold Whittall put it in a related discussion, “[W]hatever else demonstrations of octatonicism in Stravinsky’s music have done, they have so far led not to the definition of a consistent octatonic syntax—a fully worked-out explication of directed motion—but rather to demonstrations of consistent vocabulary.”

But even supposing that the octatonic did emerge from comparative analyses as the optimum framework for explaining Stravinsky’s Russian phase, what would this mean in terms of listener behavior? Consider a well-known example of octatonic referability, the so-called “Petrushka” chord. For some listeners, this sonority feels and sounds bi-triadic and remains irreducibly plural in a way that a major or minor triad, for example, does not. Indeed, Berger acknowledges “a certain compound nature of the configuration” as a result of the phenomenological persistence of its well-formed components. For better or worse, not all of us “think octatonic” when we hear the “Petrushka” chord. To say that we can “think octatonic” confers no more than possibility on the behavior—not pertinence, and certainly not exclusive apprehension. To say that we should makes no sense, given competing ways of taking in Stravinsky’s music and the absence of an independent syntax associated with octatonicism. But to say that we should not only “think octatonic,” but “think Rimsksy-Korsakov’s octatonicism” takes us into a different realm altogether, one of ideology.

The problem of hearing octatonicism along with the historical baggage it carries may be framed in terms of a distinction, introduced years ago by Nicholas Cook, between “musical listening” and “musicalological listening.” Although like any such binary it is bound to seem controversial (and vulnerable), the distinction nevertheless helps to sort out two common modes of listening. “Musical listening” is “listening to music for purposes of direct aesthetic gratification,” while “musicalological listening” is “listening to music whose purpose is the establishment of facts or the formulation of theories.” Again, these are not polar opposites, but the idea of “musicalological listening” captures familiar pedagogical practices in which students learn to recognize notes, intervals, or set-classes (including octatonic scales!). Musical listening is what we do ordinarily when we attend to the flow of a work; musicalological listening is heavily mediated, and has an agenda (or a series of agendas).

As always, we can amuse ourselves trying to complicate, “problematize,” or menace the distinction between musical listening and musicalological listening, but the impulse modeled by that distinction will not disappear readily. Theorists are forever inventing the figure of the listener (naïve listeners, informed listeners, trained listeners, experienced listeners, ordinary listeners, and so on) precisely because listening is complex, and there is no consensus on the relevance of the knowledge we produce about music to acts of listening. Nicholas Cook, Leonard Meyer, Benjamin Boretz, and Mark DeBells, among many others, have had things to say about listeners. Indeed, Carolyn Abbate, in a widely discussed recent essay, distinguished between the “drastic” and “gnostic” modes, borrowing from Vladimir Jankélévitch. Abbate’s “drastic” bears some affinity with Cook’s “musical listening” while her “gnostic” approximates “musicalological listening.” If listening for an interval, chord, or scale is already a form of “musicalological listening,” then surely listening for geo-cultural locations of octatonic practice by a specific teacher in a specific time period is musicalological listening to the nth degree.

When Taruskin appears scandalized by van den Toorn’s confession that his own “hearing and understanding” of Stravinsky’s octatonic routines “remain[ed] unaffected” by “disclosures” of the octatonic’s origins in Rimsksy-Korsakov, he displays the normative anxiety associated with proponents of musicalological listening. “How can you not hear it when I have told you that it is there?” the musicologist would seem to ask. Yet it is not a question of “knowledge better shed than sought,” as if knowledge of any sort can felicitously mediate what one hears. It is rather a matter of operable, relevant knowledge, knowledge the indigenous mode of which allows it to be absorbed aurally. While we might disagree as to what kinds of knowledge lend themselves to such absorption, most musicians draw the line somewhere. In other words, the very act of attending to a piece of music invariably involves certain exclusionary actions—some baggage is left at the door. Some of that baggage may include facts unearthed by the historian, or patterns and relations observed by the theorist, but there is no reason to throw a tantrum if your fact or pattern or relation is judged inadmissible on ontological grounds. Historical musicology may well have its uses, but the extent to which its findings inform engaged listening is not always self-evident.

19 Whittall (1989, 170). Among suggestive approaches to Stravinsky analysis, see Straus (1982); Hasty (1986); and Andriessen and Schönberger (1989). Tyneczko’s claim (2002) that Stravinsky’s music is fundamentally heterogenous and therefore needs to be approached with multiple tools, makes intuitive sense, but presents a considerable challenge to theorists who limit their search to a single key rather than an assortment of them.

20 Berger (1968, 135).


22 Ibid. (152).

23 See Cook (1990); Meyer (1973); Boretz (1970); and DeBells (1995).


Finally, the dichotomy between “theorists” and “historians,” on which rests much of Taruskin’s argument, but which he wishes to see dissolved, allows for a certain institutional or professional posturing, but it has always been problematic, if not false. No theory is produced in a historical vacuum; no theory lacks a historical dimension. It is true that a historical dimension may be merely implicit in a theory, but it is never absent. Similarly, historians who pay any attention at all to the history of (composition, performance, and reception) invariably rely on a set of theoretical constructs, be they specifically music-theoretical or otherwise. So the boundaries that Taruskin has been working hard to dissolve, and which some would still uphold for pragmatic reasons, are not as firm in practice as they would seem from debates of this sort. Perhaps he will take some comfort from this.

works cited


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