The Character of the Keys in the Music of the Classical and Romantic Period

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**Abstract:** To discuss the character of keys in tonal music is a task between speculation and science based on facts. The purpose of this essay is to identify empirical facts on which individual traits of a given key are based. At the same time, I was keen on leaving room for the imagination, which plays an essential role in this context. On the one hand, it was my aim to conduct research which yields concrete results; on the other, I wanted to maintain an open-minded approach so as not to lose or narrow down the great range of feelings associated with individual keys.

I also discuss a number of varying and contradictory approaches to the subject. In addition, I have included some thoughts on the much-disputed interconnectedness of key and colour.

I examined a limited number of examples - by Joseph Haydn, Franz Schubert, Robert Schumann and others - because I was primarily interested in pointing out relatable reasons for a given key’s perceived character and not necessarily in comparing a maximum number of compositions.

**Keywords:** Science versus speculation, keys and colours

This topic is rather speculative and there are many different opinions and approaches on and to it, some of which I would like to mention at the beginning of this essay.

Christian Friedrich Daniel Schubart (1739-1791) wrote on the subject in his book *Ideen zu einer Ästhetik der Tonkunst* (Ideas on an aesthetic in the art of music). In the chapter “Vom musikalischen Ausdruck” (“On musical expression”) he assigned specific characteristics to every key, all of which are extraordinarily poetic. For example, he described the E-minor tonality with this in mind:

“A naive, female, and innocent declaration of love, a lament without complaining; a sigh, accompanied by but a few tears; this key expresses an intimate hope of purest blessedness resolving in C-major. It being of one colour only by nature, it may be compared with a girl dressed in white,
wearing a pink ribbon on her bosom. With an unspeakable gracefulness, one returns from this key to the keynote of C-major, where heart and ear find the most complete of satisfactions.”

As we will see later, Robert Schumann also references this description. However, it is very important to note that Schubart did not give us any reasons why he associated these particular sentiments with a given key. He only mentions the following rule: “Every key is either coloured or uncoloured. Innocence and naivety will be expressed by uncoloured keys, gentle and melancholy feelings by flat keys, impetuous and powerful emotions by sharp keys.”

Sometimes, the way a keyboard is tuned is given as a reason for a specific sentiment expressed by a certain key. Johann Philipp Kirnberger (1721-1783), for example discussed this issue in his book Die Kunst des reinen Satzes in der Musik (The art of pure composition in music). He subdivided the major and the minor keys into three classes. According to the quality, the purity, of the thirds, he sorts a key into the first, second or third class. C-major with a natural third (386 cents) and also a pure fifth count among the purest keys. On the other hand, A-flat major is a fierce and sharp key. The reason lies in the tuning, done by Kirnberger himself, of the major third - the so-called Pythagorean third (408 cents, an interval that generates a markedly sharp sound).

Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg strongly rejects the idea of a specific character for a given key. He wrote about the subject in his book Versuch über die musikalische Temperatur (Essay on Musical Temperament). There is not enough space to discuss all of the arguments in his critical analysis of Kirnberger’s opinion in this paper. He claims, for example, that there is no point in applying the concept of a specific character for a certain key because the singers and the instrumentalists in an ensemble are not normally using exactly the same tuning. Therefore, the composer does not create the character of a piece through a chosen key, but by other means. Marpurg wonders whether, by changing the key, a gavotte will be transformed into a minuet or a passepied into a march. Of course, he refutes this conclusion, stating that tuning does not influence harmony, melody, or time. He wrote “Concerning the expression of a certain character, the choice of a key out of the twelve hard or the twelve soft keys is of no significance, they may or may not be tempered.” He maintained that each “Kyrie eleison” would have to be in the same key for them to evoke a shared sentiment.

Another aspect some experts mention is the influence of the instruments on a specific character of a given key. For example, the notes played on the string instruments with the open chords have different sound colours than those played with the fingers of the

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1 Schubart und Mainka, Ideen zu einer Ästhetik der Tonkunst, 286. (Translation by the author).
2 Ibid., 284.
3 Marpurg, Versuch über die musikalische Temperatur, nebst einem Anhang über den Rameau- und Kirnbergerschen Grundbass, 196. (Translation by the author).
left hand. Among others, Richard Wagner held this opinion. In a letter to Theodor Uhlig from 31 May 1852, he wrote:

“If we cling to the ‘individuality’ of every key, we are indeed devoted to a chimaera which has turned into a God-like dogma of the past. But the notes and the keys only become characteristic (in performance) with the instruments and, ultimately, with the human voice and its words...therefore, understanding the tonality only in itself without the instrument is an uncritical half measure [...]”.

After this brief discussion of four different opinions on the subject, my scope is to discuss a song and a short essay by R. Schumann. I will prelude the paragraph with the following thoughts:

Speaking about a variety of characters related to specific keys of tonal music means we cannot conduct our investigations on the basis of the keys’ different structures; each has the same. Marpurg discussed this issue as well. He asserted that the modal keys, having different structures, carry varied characters for this reason.

Furthermore, the absolute pitch has no significance for the determination of a specific character of a given key. The standard pitch was not uniform in every case.

I think there are enough reasons to believe that a certain key has its individual character, but it is not easy to develop an empirical approach to this question. Even though Marpurg denies the existence of an individual meaning to every key, his reasoning is worth considering. Consequently, the aim of my investigation is to find a new empirical approach to determine why different characters emerge in the system of tonality itself.

I will now discuss a song by Schumann. It is titled “Kommen und Scheiden” (“Meeting and Parting”). The lyrics are by Nikolaus Lenau. It is the third song from the opus 90 cycle.

**Meeting and Parting**

Each time we met, the sight of her
Seemed as dear as the first green in the wood.

And what she said, pierced my heart
As sweetly as the spring’s first song.

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And when she waved to me in parting,
Youth’s last dream seemed to vanish.\(^5\)

In this poem, we find two opposite gestures. The first two stanzas constitute a unit and the third another. Initially, the girl brought sweetness into the heart of the lyrical “I” whenever she came to him. The lyrical ‘I’ finds himself in a sentiment of wishful and gentle uncertainty. Yet then, when she went away, waving at him, he felt as though his youth’s last dream vanished. These opposite gestures are also mirrored in the poem’s title.

Example 1

R. Schumann, “Kommen und Scheiden”, op. 90/3, bar 15 to 18.

The turnaround within the song takes place in the transition from bar 16 to 17.

It is precisely in the transition between these two bars that a very interesting thing happens - Schumann makes an enharmonic change from C-flat to B and from A-flat to G-sharp. The other two notes are changing their positions by one semitone per. It is obvious that Schumann makes an enharmonic change of the key itself. The piece begins in G-flat major (the “Meeting” part) and ends in F-sharp major (the “Parting” part). This means that we have exactly the same keys to play, but they are written with sharps instead of flats. It is impossible to hear a change of key, because the notes of the two tonalities are identical. Presumably, the composer wanted to indicate that the performers should sing and play them in a different way. I think there might also be a deeper reason for the change in accidentals.

It seems obvious that Schumann links the two contrary sentiments with the two keys. Prior to my elaboration on Schumann’s motivations, I would like to have a look into his short, yet remarkably interesting essay on the characters of the keys.

It begins with the following paragraph: “It has been spoken about in favour and against; the right opinion lies, as always, between the two positions.” He mentions and criticizes Carl Friedrich Zelter, a close friend of Goethe’s, who denies, like Marpurg, a specific character for every key. He then talks about Schubart, whom the composer criticizes as well. For example, Schubart compares the key of E-minor to a girl dressed in white wearing a pink ribbon on her bosom. Schumann admits to finding such descriptions poetic, but asserts they have nothing to do with the subject they describe or explain.

I would like to quote another passage from his essay:

“The process which lets the composer choose this or that for the expression of his sentiments is beyond description, as is the work as such for the creative genius himself, who, with his thoughts, simultaneously creates the form and the vessel in which they are firmly embedded. The composer (Schumann uses the much more poetic term ‘Pondicherry’, or ‘tone poet’) finds within himself what is appropriate, much like the true painter finds his colours.”

One thought in this excerpt is of particular significance. Schumann describes a process that allows him to make a choice of this key or that which cannot be explained. That means he does not have a specific sentiment in mind that he would like to express and that he then tries to match with a suitable key - he does not separate between these two things. They are born together in the process of creating a piece. The choice of the right key is not made by following a conscious recipe which predetermines the working process. (Marpurg claimed that if a specific character of every key existed, we would have an exact description of each so that the composer could choose the right key for his intended purpose. He added that he would be curious to read such a description). I think the term ‘inspiration’ is a fairly accurate description of what Schumann intended to convey.

In order to speak about the character of keys, not only do we have to collect a number of pieces written in the same key to determine whether or not there is a shared expression (comparing, for example, the third symphony and the fifth piano concerto by Beethoven and other pieces in the same key, we can draw the conclusion that E-flat major is a heroic key), but we should also look for the influences which led the

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composers to give this character or that to a specific key. After all, the E-flat major key does not have an inherent heroic sound, Beethoven ascribed this particular expression to it by writing his music according to a specific trope. If I transposed the third symphony to E-major, for example, the heroic character would be preserved. (Marpurg mentioned this fact as well: a gavotte would not obtain a different character merely through transposition).

Before going back to the song “Meeting and Parting”, I would like to mention one last thought by Schumann. At the end of his essay, he talks about the circle of fifths and its significance concerning the characters of keys. In this context he also defines C-major as a simple and encoloured key (in fact, he phrases it as C-major being “a key without make-up”). Hence, this is the key from where all other keys originate and, being encoloured, it has a neutral nature. This significance is not contingent on the absolute pitch, on the tuning of this key or on the instruments, but on its central position within the circle of fifths.

I believe that it is the intervallic relationship of the key of this Schumann song’s root note with the origin of the circle of fifths, with the tonic of C-major, that constitutes the character of the key we are discussing. At the beginning, there is the interval of the diminished fifth (C - G-flat) and in the second part, the tritone (C – F sharp). These two intervals have exactly the same size but a quite different -even opposite- expression. I would define the diminished fifth as a mild dissonance; the tritone, on the other hand, as a sharp interval. The diminished fifth is constituted by two minor thirds, which are imperfect consonances, but the tritone comprises three dissonant sounding whole tones. Resolving these two intervals, we will also get different voice leadings. The diminished fifth resolves into the major or minor third, therefore the two notes are going inwards; however, the tritone resolves into the major or minor sixth, which means the two tones are moving outwards. Each case involves a significantly different character of the two intervals, even though they have the same size.

In conclusion, I can identify a correlation between the described characters of the two intervals and the keys of the song. The first part, which is about Meeting, is friendly, hopeful, and promising warmth. What she says pierces the heart of the lyrical ‘I’. These gestures carry the same character as the voice leading of the resolution of the diminished fifth - the two notes are converging on each other, theirs is a centripetal energy. The atmosphere of these words has the tenderness of the diminished fifth. As we feel a degree of wishful uncertainty in the poem, we also feel it through the diminished fifth. In the second part, the girl is going away, waving to him, a gesture of rather painful significance for the lyrical ‘I’. And this pain correlates to the rather sharp tritone whose tones, becoming resolved, are going outward, pulled by a centrifugal force. In my opinion, the characters of the two intervals, which we can analyze in an empirical sense, can be applied to the intended expression of the two keys. By this I do not mean the sound of the corresponding keys per se, not having any relationship and carrying their specific character; their character is determined by their
position within the system of the circle of fifths. The note C is the centre of the system. All other notes arise from it.

And the various distances between the notes of the tonic of every key to the centre C are only one reason a very important one, in my point of view - for the emergence of a great variety of expressions, of feelings, and sentiments associated with a key.

In this spirit, I understand Marburg’s denial of a specific expression for every key - his investigations only consider the sounds themselves without taking their positions within the system into account. He, therefore, did not find an empirical approach to link a specific sentiment to a certain key. He argues entirely in the spirit of the French Enlightenment. On the other hand, we have the very poetic descriptions by Schubart, which Schumann considers too scholarly and small-minded, without actual relation to the respective keys. Each of these descriptions creates a world of its own without empirical justification.

The only key which Schumann characterised was C-major, which calls for a mention at this point.

Part I of *The Creation* by Joseph Haydn begins with “The Representation of Chaos”. The beginning of this piece is written in C-minor. At the end of it, the choir sings the Folkwang words: “Und der Geist Gottes schwebte auf der Fläche der Wasser; und Gott sprach: Es werde Licht, und es ward Licht.” (“And the Spirit of God moved on the face of the waters; and God said: Let there be light, and there was light.”). Upon the second word “light” appears the C-major chord, very deliberately chosen by Haydn in my opinion.

**Example 2**

There is an interesting relationship between Goethe’s 1810 *Theory of colours* and the description of C-major by Schumann. As I stated earlier, the composer described this key as “uncoloured”. Similarly, Goethe speaks about the colourlessness of light. We therefore can discover a wonderful relationship between Goethe’s characterisation of the light and Schumann’s of the C-major key and the transformation into music of the word “light” by J. Haydn. Consequently, I believe this key was understood to be a tonal representation of purity and clarity. It is not the sound of the full orchestra that expresses this feeling, but it is, in fact, the position of the note C within the circle of fifths that gives it this significance. The sun, the centre of the solar system, radiates pure light, while C-major has a similar function among the different keys.

Another famous example is the Prelude in C-major from J. S. Bach’s *The well-tempered Clavier I*. The first bar only consists of the broken C-major chord. The notes represent the first five notes of the series of overtones, if in a condensed form. According to the theory of Heinrich Schenker, only these three notes of the C-major scale originate from nature, while all the other notes (D, F, A, B) are a creation of the human mind. In this context, it seems fair to say that this piece starts with a motive representing the purity of nature. And this motive exclusively consists of broken chords. The composer never changes this (archaic) articulation throughout the prelude. Obviously, Bach deliberately chose this format to begin a work that goes through all the keys. In a certain sense, it may be considered a colourless piece, as if it were a seed for the entire cycle. Another characteristic feature is the piece solely consisting of figures typical for accompaniment: it is a piece without a proper melody. Last but not least - and this might be somewhat speculative - we may notice that Bach uses all the twelve notes in this prelude, and that is not the case for earlier versions of this piece. In this sense, it represents the seed for every piece that followed. Every root note of every key already appears in the first piece. Now, the subject of the last fugue in Si-minor consists of all the twelve notes. When it comes to this particular piece, we can be fairly confident that Bach intentionally used all the twelve notes as a symbol for every key. However, the prelude sounds very natural and somehow ‘archaic’, like a pure source. The fugue on the other hand, seems very artificial.

Now I would like to talk about another key, the A-flat major tonality to be precise. Franz Schubert wrote his song “Frühlingsglaube” in this key. It is based on a wonderful poem by Ludwig Uhland (1787 – 1862).

> Balmy breezes are awakened;  
> they stir and whisper day and night,  
> everywhere creative.  
> O fresh scents, O new sounds!  
> Now, poor heart, do not be afraid.  
> Now all must change.
The world grows fairer each day;
we cannot know what is still to come;
the flowering knows no end.
The deepest, most distant valley is in flower.
Now, poor heart, forget your torment.
Now all must change.⁵

At first sight, setting to music a poem which is conveying the impression of springtime using a tonality with flats might seem rather strange. Indeed, Felix Mendelssohn composed his own version in E-major. But we have to go beyond merely understanding the lyrics - we have to read and hear them in their original German.

Die linden Lüfte sind erwacht,
Sie säuseln und weben Tag und Nacht,
Sie schaffen an allen Enden.
O frischer Duft, o neuer Klang!
Nun, armes Herze, sei nicht bang!
Nun muss sich alles, alles wenden.

In the first two lines, the sound of the language itself is very tender. The adjective “linden” in particular has a very beautiful and soft sound to it. The words per se describe the tender feelings conveyed by the poem. The last line of the second stanza is interesting as well. We perceive melancholy through the choice of words. The poet does not say that everything will change, but that everything must change. It makes us doubt if we should have a positive attitude towards our future lives. F. Schubert appears to have read this poem very carefully, deciding to compose a song devoid of excitement and optimism. The mildness and uncertainty of this mood is reflected in the key he chose.

But what makes this key suitable for expressing such feelings? Even though objective reasons exist in the sound of the key itself, for example reflected in the instrumentation (the main notes of the scale could not be played on open strings) I will not dwell on this issue, not least because we are dealing with a piece for voice and piano.

Normally, we do not respond to a given pitch with a specific feeling. Notably colours have very different properties in this respect (there is not enough space here to discuss this subject in the context of the perfect pitch). However, intervals tend to evoke specific feelings. The tonic C is the centre of the tonal system which can be expressed on various pitches in terms of hertz. Hearing intervals evokes specific feelings. As in the Schumann song “Meeting and Parting”, we see that the interval between the centre of the system, the note C and the tonic of the discussed key, the note A-flat, namely the minor sixth, has a character similar to that of the song by Schubert itself. This interval

is an imperfect consonance and sounds somewhat wistful (there are similarities to the beginning of Richard Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*). It would not be difficult to find pieces whose character is incongruent with the character described above (there are more than enough that confirm it) because a composer may choose to follow the underlying rule - or ignore it.

We, therefore, do not have to search for a specific and individual character of every key because they do not inherently carry such distinctive features, but we have to ask why composers very often use specific and recurring keys to express similar feelings. J. Kirnberger disagrees here. He mentioned an example from Carl Heinrich Graun’s opera *Ifigenia in Aulide*. The chorus “Mora, mora, Ifigenia”, which was famous back in the day, is written in E-flat major. Because of the key, this music strikes horror even in the most fearless of listeners. The secret lies in the tuning (between E-flat and G there is a Pythagorean third, whose sound is very sharp as I discussed earlier; the semitones in this scale are also very small, their size is a mere 90 cents, and the sharp dissonances they produce have a frightening effect). According to Kirnberger, part of this effect would be lost if we had transposed this choir to C-major or G-major. Of course, in an equal temperature, such differences play no role. If we performed the Schubert song in G-major, for example, its character would not be lost - in fact, the first version of this song was written in B-flat major.

Another significant example in this key is the aria “Ave Maria” by Desdemona in the fourth act of the Giuseppe Verdi opera *Otello*. Otello’s wife has a clear conscience because she does not feel she did anything wrong, but she also knows that she will die. She prays for the sinners and the innocents and is ready to submit to her fate without anger. She is grieving deeply over her the things to come, but she does not feel a desire for revenge. Confident in God, she accepts her fate. I consider the A-flat key to be particularly suitable for this kind of expression.

Without comment, I will complete my exploration of A-flat major with two examples by Ludwig van Beethoven. The second movement of the sonata for piano, op. 13 in C-minor is in the same key; its character lets us feel the same sentiments described earlier. Likewise, the sonata for piano op. 110 is not a work expressing excitement and effusiveness, but one’s innermost and personal feelings.

**Some thoughts about the relationship between notes / keys and colours**

Some experts report to having perceptions of colour when they hear music, some of them specific to certain keys. Some composers are even known to have created systems of colours and notes. Alexander Skrjabin (1871 – 1915), for example, assigned a specific colour to every note: C = red, G = orange-pink, D = yellow, A = green, E = whitish-blue, Si = similar to E, F-sharp = blue, garish, D-flat = violet, A-flat = purple-violet, E-flat =
radial, with a metal sheen, Si-flat = the same as E-flat, F = red, dark. Josef Matthias Hauer (1883 – 1959) assigned a colour from Goethe’s Theory of Colours to every note. He wrote:

“In fact, the notes per se (as abstract points) cannot be compared with the colours, but the intervals of the sounds, the chords (notes as sounds with the chord of the harmonics) can.

Thus, we define the note C as the limiting point between green and yellow (the white colour) and, equally, between the other colours of the circle of fifths as nuances of: yellow – G – orange – D – vermilion red– A – carmine red – E – crimson– H – purple – F-sharp – blue- violet – D-flat – ultramarine blue– A-flat – turquoise – Mi-flat – blue-green– Si-flat – vermilion green – F – light-green. F-sharp (G-flat) thus forms the most intense contrast to the note C (actual black).”

Isaac Newton (1643 – 1727) assigned the notes of the Dorian scale or, rather, the space between two notes to the colours of his spectrum. He wrote:

“With the Center 0 and Radius 0D describe a Circle ADF, and distinguish its Circumference into seven Parts DE, EF, FG, GA, AB, BC, CD, proportional to the seven Musical Tones or Intervals of the eight Sounds, Sol, la, fa, sol la, fa, sol, contained in an eight, that is, proportional to the Number 1/9, 1/16, 1/10, 1/9, 1/10, 1/16, 1/9. Let the first Part DE present a red Colour, the second EF orange, the third FG yellow, the fourth GA green, the fifth AB blue, the sixth BC indigo, and the seventh CD violet. And conceive that these are all the Colours uncompounded Light gradually passing into another, as they do when made by Prisms; the Circumference DEFGABCD, representing the whole Series of Colours from one end of the Sun’s colour’d Image to the other, so that from D to E be all degrees of red, at E the mean Colour between red and orange, from E to F all degrees of orange, at F the mean between orange and yellow, from F to G all degrees of yellow, and so on.”

Johann Wolfgang Goethe, on the other hand, wrote very carefully on this subject in his already mentioned Theory of Colours, from which I will quote two paragraphs:

9 Sigfried Schibli, Alexander Skrjabin und seine Musik: Grenzüberschreitungen eines prometheischen Geistes (München, Zürich: Piper, 1983), 240. (Translation by the author).


11 Jörg Jewanski, Ist C = Rot? eine Kultur- und Wissenschaftsgeschichte zum Problem der wechselseitigen Beziehung zwischen Ton und Farbe von Aristoteles bis Goethe, Berliner Musik-Studien, Bd. 17 (Sinzig: Studio, 1999), 240.
“§ 747. Before we proceed to the moral associations of colour, and the aesthetic influence arising from them, we have here to say a few words on its relation to melody. That a certain relation exists between the two, has been always felt; this is proved by the frequent comparisons we meet with, sometimes as passing allusions, sometimes as circumstantial parallels. The error which writers have fallen into in trying to establish this analogy we would thus define: § 748 Colour and sound do not admit of being directly compared together in any way, but both are referable to a higher formulæ, both are derivable, although each for itself, from this higher law. They are like two rivers which have their source in one and the same mountain, but subsequently pursue their way under totally different conditions in two totally different regions, so that throughout the whole course of both no points can be compared. Both are general, elementary effects acting according to the general law of separation and tendency to union, of undulation and oscillation, yet acting in wholly different provinces, in different modes, on different elementary mediums, for different senses.”

I think that Goethe, a poet with unlimited power of imagination, enjoyed feeling a connection between colours and music. I would like to point to the beginning of his tragedy Faust I, “Prologue”, in heaven”: “The sun-orb sings, in emulation, / Mid brother-spheres, his ancient round: / His path predestined through Creation / He ends with step of thunder-sound.” However, as a scientist (he had a keen awareness of the difference between his work as a poet and that as a scientist), he must have felt obliged to do his work using rigorous empirical methods, which might be why he did not speculate on these connections. Unfortunately, the scope of this paper does not allow for a detailed comparative discussion of Goethe’s and Newton’s theories of colour.

Followers of Rudolf Steiner’s philosophy have written about the interconnectedness of star signs and the keys. Steiner’s “Anthroposophical Society” emerged from the “Theosophical Society”, co-founded by Helena Blavatsky (1831 – 1891). She, too, wrote about the relationship between colours and notes. In her book The Secret Doctrine she published the following classification: C = red, D = orange, E = yellow, F = green, G = blue, A = indigo, Si = violet. Skrjabin also subscribed to this doctrine and appears to have read – at least in part - Blavatsky’s book. It is probably no exaggeration to say that the music experts associated with the “Anthroposophical Society” believed to have found this higher formula of which Goethe spoke. Friedrich Oberkogler’s book,

14 Schibli, Alexander Skrjabin, 240. (Translation by the author).
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titled *Tierkreis- und Planetenkräfte in der Musik: Vom Geistgehalt der Tonarten*. (The power of the Zodiac and the Planets in music: About the intellectual content of the keys) serves as a good example. In it, the author speaks about the keys and assigns a star sign to each of them. For example, the C-major and A-minor keys correspond to Aries, G-major and e-minor to Taurus, etc. For every key, he collected a wealth of examples of tonal music he thought could verify his theory. At first glance, there is an appearance of logic and coherence but, upon closer inspection, the content does not hold up to scrutiny. Fr. Oberkogler discussed Jago’s “Credo” from the beginning of the second act of Verdi’s *Otello* in the chapter about D-flat major and B-flat minor. According to the system he devised, these two keys are associated with Scorpio. But anybody capable of reading a score and of recognising a key knows that this particular piece is written in F-minor. Fr. Oberkogler wrote “This piece, which is notated in F-minor, yet begins and ends in D-flat major, the subdominant of A-flat major. It unrestrainedly flits about the dark flat tonalities like F-Minor, C-minor, B-flat minor etc.”

Akin to the adage that one swallow does not make a summer, we could state in this case that one or two D-flat major chords will not make it the tonality of a piece. The delusion presumably has to do with the star sign, because Scorpio seems a natural match with Jago’s emotions and it therefore seemed convenient to classify the key this piece was written in as one belonging to this sphere. I will not mention the various other mistakes in this book, but I would like to point out that Goethe, in all likelihood, would have rejected this kind of study for lack of empirical access to the subject in question (or for using what amounts to a pseudo-empirical access). First, Fr. Oberkogler took the system of the zodiac (which, like the keys, is based on the number twelve) and then he examined the keys and matched them with the star signs. This methodology stands in diametral opposition to Goethe’s thinking.

Since, according to the anthroposophical doctrine, every star sign corresponds with a specific colour, every key has its individual colour. The pairings are as follows: Aries – C major / A minor – red; Taurus – G major / E minor – orange; Gemini – D major / Si minor – yellow, etc.

Studying this kind of (spiritual) treatise, one thing becomes obvious: it creates the impression of reporting on the discovery of some secret and spiritual aspect of the subject in question (see also the paper’s title), but upon closer inspection, it is riddled with basic mistakes. It brings to mind this remark by Marpurg: “[…], and somebody wants to replace the lack of inspiration and progress by means of the characterization

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of the keys.” In this case, it means the author’s inability to methodically develop his subject, his failure to recognize the correct tonalities, might have made him reach for the stars. He did not find this higher formula of which Goethe spoke and he did not find the intellectual or spiritual meaning of the keys, either. His work is pure speculation.

It was not my intention to extensively deliberate on colours and their connection with music. It seems safe to conclude, however, that nobody has found this higher formula mentioned by Goethe. Any theory on the subject is based on analogy and has not emerged from one common source. The results are entirely subjective and not based on objective reasoning.

Even though it is difficult to find a specific and objective connection between colours and keys, it can prove useful to think about this subject. Schumann (see the citation above) compared the composer choosing a suitable key for his piece with the true painter finding the right colours for his work. I think that a specific key is comparable to a specific colour in as much as each shape can be realized by means of any colour, but a painter’s brush is also guided by the chosen colour itself. The same applies to the keys since each motive, each rhythmical shape, etc. can be realized in any key but the (true) composer is also more or less guided by the key he has chosen. Each composer has a personal relationship with specific keys, but there are also some commonalities. Therefore, there is no need to describe the characters of every single key - that would be an unartistic and very boring modus operandi - but we have to identify the conditions from which specific characters emerge.

Franz Schubert – Mignon’s last song

Pertaining to my discussion is another key, Si-major. F. Schubert composed the last song of “Lieder der Mignon” (“Mignon’s songs”) in this key. The song is based on Mignon’s last poem in Goethe’s novel Wilhelm Meister Lehrjahre (“Wilhelm Meister’s apprenticeship”). She recites these words before her death:

Thus, let me seem till thus I become.
Do not take off my white dress!
I shall swiftly leave the fair earth
for that dark dwelling place below.

There, for a brief silence, I shall rest;

17 Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg, Versuch über die musikalische Temperatur, nebst einem Anhang über den Rameau- und Kirnbergerschen Grundbass (Breslau: Johann Friedrich Korn, 1776), 194. (Translation by the author).
then my eyes shall open afresh.  
Then I shall leave behind this pure raiment, 
this girdle and this rosary.

And those heavenly beings  
do not ask who is man or woman,  
and no garments, no folds  
enclose the transfigured body.

True, I lived free from care and toil,  
yet I knew much deep suffering.  
Too soon I grew old with grief;  
make me young again for ever!\(^{18}\)

Mignon is in the transition from life to death, she feels that her time has come. She speaks about her white dress that she wishes not to be taken from her and about her body, which will be transformed in that dark dwelling place. Her deep pain, the sorrow which made her age prematurely are over, which gives this poem an air of lightness.

Schubert set this poem to music in Si-major. It is a key which carries a certain lightness thanks to the position of the keynote within the C-major scale. Between the notes C and Si, there is the major seventh, which is dissonant. This interval will be resolved in an octave, and therefore the note Si, the leading note of the C-major scale, will come to rest just like Mignon finding her peace after a life full of deep suffering and grief.

Example 3


\(^{18}\) Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, “So lasst mich scheinen, Lied Der Mignon,” Oxford Lieder:  
Schubert composed this song in a manner that conveys a certain lightness. He chose a 3/4 time, but at the beginning we are almost tricked into thinking it might be a 6/8 time - the rhythmical structure is certainly ambiguous. The structure of the chords is written in the same way. In the first four bars, there is a pedal point on the dominant and the first chord is written in the second inversion (the root position of the tonic only appears in the fifth bar), so the harmonies are carrying a suspended sound. These features express a feeling of lightness, just like the key. But the key itself expresses this feeling more in an ephemeral sense, whereas the structure of the composition manifests itself in a more concrete fashion.

There are two other famous examples which support these observations. Isolde, the female protagonist of the Richard Wagner’s opera Tristan and Isolde, finds herself in a situation much like Mignon’s. R. Wagner expresses Isolde’s emotional and mental situation with flowery words. Like Mignon, she is in the transition from life to death. After Tristan’s death, she desires to be dissolved in the breath of the universe. That is precisely the energy we feel hearing the leading note Si of the C major scale. This sound wants to come to rest, to come to peace, resolving in the octave. One last time we can hear the famous beginning of Tristan and Isolde, but here, finally, this progression will be resolved into the Si major chord. We feel the same sense of fragility we perceive hearing the note Si as a leading note of C major.

Example 4

R. Wagner, Tristan und Isolde.

A very impressive scene, bound to get under anyone’s skin, is the second part of the third act of Alban Berg’s opera Wozzeck. At the end of this part, Wozzeck kills Marie, the mother of their child. During the entire scene, the note Si is persistently sounding, and in the change of scene, we only hear the bare note Si. It is obvious that Berg felt a relationship between this note and the psychological mood in this part of the opera. Like Mignon and Isolde, Marie is in the transition from life to death, even though hers is a violent death.

It was a deliberate decision to restrict myself to discussing three keys in this essay. My aim was not to describe the prevailing characterizations of every key, but to explore a
possible approach to this subject based on empiricism. As I stated in the beginning, this topic is rather speculative and while some of the factors defining the specific characterizations of keys are objective, others are highly subjective. In order to identify certain rules, I had to work from a hypothesis. Goethe said “Hypotheses are scaffolds assembled around a building in progress, taken down as soon as it is finished. They are indispensable for the working man; but he should not mistake the scaffolds for the building.”

I do hope that I managed to disassemble the scaffolding around my reasoning so as to provide a full view of the subject.

Reference List


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Staubli, The Character of the Keys…


**Biography: Raphael Staubli** is a professor of Classical Music Theory at the Lucerne School of Music, Switzerland. He studied the violin at Musikhochschule Zurich and composition at the Musikhochschule Stuttgart under Helmut Lachenmann. He also plays concerts, accompanying singers on the fortepiano. He published an essay on "Bruckner und der ‹liebe Gott›" (Bruckner and the dear God) and about Wagner’s sacred festival drama *Parsifal*. His interests also include the aesthetical philosophy of the Enlightenment (Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schiller) and their significance for musical analysis, particularly with regards to Heinrich Schenker’s method.