Catching Up with Rimsky-Korsakov

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**Abstract**

In 1963, the American composer Arthur Berger published an article called “Problems of Pitch Organization in Stravinsky,” which had a profound and immediate impact on the way Stravinsky's music was henceforth analyzed and understood by American and European musicians, and an eventual
influence that went much further. From an enigmatic melody in Stravinsky's choral ballet *Svadebka* (*Les Noces*) Berger deduced a scale of alternating whole steps and half steps, which, as he showed, also underlay much of the harmony not only in *Svadebka* but in other Stravinsky works as well, including the famous “Petrushka” chord on which theories of bitonality had previously rested. Because there were eight tones in the scale, Berger christened it the octatonic scale.

A major step toward its recognition, particularly in Stravinsky studies, was a remarkable series of articles and books, appearing between 1975 and 1987, by the Dutch-American theorist Pieter van den Toorn. It was van den Toorn who first asked a question that apparently never occurred to Berger: What was the scale's origin and how was it to be explained historically? By the time I encountered van den Toorn's publications, I had begun my research into Stravinsky's stylistic development and discovered the scale's previous history in Russia—something that was never a secret to Russian musicians, who knew it as the tone-semitone scale (*gamma ton-poluton*) or the Rimsky-Korsakov scale (*korsakovskaya gamma*), and also knew of its extensive use in the work of Stravinsky's teacher and practically all of Rimsky's pupils. The fact that Berger's and van den Toorn's analytical work and my historical work had converged on a single narrative seemed to me a marvelous development, in which the work of theorists and historians had shown themselves to be mutually validating.

To my great surprise, the music theory community did not seem to agree. In this essay I give a short account of that resistance, citing contributions by van den Toorn himself, Allen Forte, Kofi Agawu, Arnold Whittall, Dmitri Tymoczko, and others (finally even including Arthur Berger). I offer a critique of this resistance, and from that critique I propose a theory of theory—that is, a definition of the tasks of music analysis, which might in turn suggest criteria for its evaluation. I conclude by citing the work of some younger theorists, notably Robert Gjerdingen and Lawrence Zbikowski, whose work offers a way of transcending the unproductive resistance to the reconciliation of historical and inferential research.

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