Edmund Gurney’s thought on form and expressive content in music  

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The subject of this study is the musical thought of Edmund Gurney (1847-1888), especially his ideas about form and expressive content in music. Edmund Gurney, an English thinker of the late nineteenth century, is widely known as one of the founders of the formalistic tendency in musical thinking, along with his contemporary, the Viennese aesthetician and critic Eduard Hanslick (1825-1904). However, there has hitherto been little detailed study of his musical thought. The purpose of this dissertation is to elucidate Gurney’s thought through close examination of The power of sound (1880), Gurney’s main work on music, in which he manifests his ideas about various issues related to this art.

To understand what lies at the core of Gurney’s musical formalist thought, we must first of all clarify his ideas about form in music. However, in his thought the idea of musical form is not an isolated concept but one deeply connected to another subject, i.e., the expressive content of music. Therefore, taking both form and expressive content as key concepts, a double-focused approach is required to fully grasp his formalism.

Although Gurney’s discussions concerning form and expressive content are found with special emphases here and there over many chapters of The power of sound, these arguments in his book are not organized in any systematic fashion. In the present study Gurney’s arguments concerning these subjects are reorganized systematically according to specific topics, and then analyzed to reveal the nature of Gurney’s formalistic musical thought.

The first two parts of this dissertation, regarding form and expressive content or musical expressivity respectively, present Gurney’s ideas on these issues in a systematically reorganized fashion according to specific topics related to each subject. In chapter 1 Gurney’s concepts of musical material and structural components, i.e., tone, scale systems, rhythm, melody, polyphony and harmony, are explicated. Among them, Gurney places a special emphasis on ‘melody’ as the most important element in music. In chapter 2 what Gurney thinks of ‘essential form’ is examined. Gurney claims that the ‘part’ has more importance in the structure of music than the ‘whole’. And, according to him, ‘melodic form’, a small-scale linear structure formed by close interdependence of elements, is the most essential structural element in music, hence he called it ‘essential form’. Furthermore, when this ‘melodic form’ is ideally united with ‘motion’, it represents the “Ideal Motion”, which is the concept that lies at the center of Gurney’s entire musical thought.
Gurney’s remarks on ‘Ideal Motion’, especially from the viewpoint of a listener’s perception of it, are examined in detail in chapter 3. And it reveals that ‘Ideal Motion’ functions in Gurney’s thought as the criterion by which melody is judged: it is the difference between ‘good melody’ and ‘trivial melody’, in his terms.

‘Forms’ consisting of sounds (or musical material) have, Gurney claims, a power to move listeners. The second part of the present paper are devoted to explicating this aspect of his thought. As a basis of the mechanism of musical expressivity, Gurney proposes a distinction between ‘impressiveness’ and ‘expressiveness’. He considers that the former is fundamental to the expressiveness of music, while the latter is accidental and always connected to some outside references or extra-musical concepts or events. For Gurney, it is only ‘impressiveness’ that can cause strong emotional excitement in a listener’s mind, as well as being the source of real musical beauty.

To conclude this dissertation, ‘Ideal Motion’, the key concept of Gurney’s musical thought, is re-examined, now in relation to what he regards as most important in musical expressivity, namely ‘impressiveness’, to clarify the nature of his musical formalism. Then, with comparisons to the theories of contemporary thinkers, such as Ernst Pauer (1826–1905), A. B. Marx (1795–1866), and Hanslick, as well as to a philosopher of musical aesthetics in our own time, Jerrold Levinson (1948–; particularly his ‘concatenation theory’), the historical significance of Gurney’s musical formalism and its influences are summarized.