

# OBJECTIVISM AND STRUCTURE-BUILDING IN MUSICAL COMPREHENSION

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## Background

Many theories of musical perception and understanding rely on an objectivistic premise, according to which there is a class of "correct" structural interpretations for most musical stimuli. This assumption is often implicit in the methods used for the evaluation and presentation of the results.

## Aims

My aim is to point out some of the problems in the objectivist view, and to discuss one alternative approach as regards the relationship between the musical stimulus and its structural interpretations.

## Main Contribution

In analogy with Morton Ann Gernsbacher's account of language comprehension, both pitch perception and musical time perception may be understood as involving a process of mental structure-building. In this process, the listener attempts to interpret new stimuli in relation to the mental structures that he or she has built as a response to the previous stimuli. In music, these mental structures can be seen as

being inherently centric in nature (highlighting the role of perceptual centerpoints such as downbeats and tonal centers). Such an account may challenge some of the common objectivist presuppositions behind theories of musical perception. This is because many different structural interpretations of the same musical stimulus will become possible, but also strictly incompatible with each other. I will argue that the structure-building account is more "true to the facts" than the general objectivist position, and that the latter has gained its popularity mainly because it simplifies research methodology.

## Implications

The structure-building framework addresses the perceptual integration of musical stimuli on a local level, but it could also have (mainly negative) consequences for the perception of large-scale musical structures. It also appears that the account could serve as motivation for computer-aided studies of musical perception and cognition.