

A Theory of Virtual Agency for Western Music



**A Lecture by
Robert S. Hatten
The University of Texas at Austin**
Friday, January 13 • 4:15 p.m.

Room 419, Music Practice Building, MSU Campus

Free and open to the public.

“A Theory of Virtual Agency for Western Music”

A semiotic shift in listeners’ interpretation of music’s signification, from actual agents embodying music in performance to the virtuality of agency as embodied in the music itself, had profound consequences for the historical development of Western music. I propose four levels in listeners’ inferences of virtual agency, from (1) unspecified actants to (2) virtual human agents, (3) their ongoing actorial roles in dramatic trajectories, and (4) their transformation as parts of a larger, singular consciousness and subjectivity that is shared (and negotiated) by each individual listener. I will outline, from the perspective of virtual agency, the coherent interaction of musical forces, gestures, topics and tropes, form, embodiment, agential identity, and the continuity of discourse (agentially motivated counterpoint and melos), as leading to the expression (not merely representation) and ongoing development (not merely succession) of “feelingful thoughts.” My examples (from Beethoven and Chopin) will illustrate how composers of non-programmatic, purely instrumental Western tonal music devised various strategies to stage these levels of virtual agency, to achieve greater depths of musical expressive meaning.

Robert S. Hatten

Marlene and Morton Meyerson Professor in Music
University of Texas at Austin

Robert S. Hatten is the author of *Musical Meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, Correlation, and Interpretation* (1994; co-recipient of the Wallace Berry Publication Award from the Society for Music Theory in 1997) and *Interpreting Musical Gestures, Topics, and Tropes: Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert* (2004), both published by Indiana University Press, where he edits the book series “Musical Meaning and Interpretation.” He began his term as President-Elect of the Society for Music Theory in November 2016. Dr. Hatten is currently completing a book on virtual agency in music.

