Position Paper #1: Music and Structuralism

While Ferdinand de Saussure may have gleaned structuralism from language, the incredible number of structuralism’s ‘rules” screamed that it also applied to the musical world. Our examples are similar in the *sense* that they both pertain to auditory perception. Structuralism focuses specifically upon the structure of a system, not necessarily the unique combinations or possibilities that it allows. Included in both language and music are “wholeness, transformation, and self-regulation.” One can appreciate music entirely on its own, it evolves and changes across time, and several “rules” exist that allow for nearly limitless substitution and rearrangement. In this way music, like language, has earned the right to be insufficiently and mundanely analyzed from a structural standpoint. However, when one applies very simple structure and rules to the musical realm, he or she becomes capable of producing pieces that will *always* sound mellifluous.

Every piece of music that has ever been written, from the great symphonies of genius composers to the measliest of guitar songs spewed by angsty teeangers, exists in a certain key. A “key” in music refers to a specific set of notes that follows the first (or “tonic”) note of the scale. For example, the key of C contains no sharps or flats, while the key of F# contains only sharps and flats. Fear not, for there is an easy way to visualize this concept- the key of C includes all of the white notes on a piano, while the key of F# contains every black note on a piano. A few years ago a musical friend of mine claimed that he was about to blow my mind and “whip up something that sounds pretty damn good” using only black keys. I scoffed, as I was of little faith. To my amazement, he accomplished this by repeatedly and rhythmically pressing a single bass note, which was a black key, and simply hopping around on the higher black keys. The fact of the matter is that, with just the slightest bit of structure, any and all of the black keys will *always* sound melodious with any and all of the others. The simple limitation which notes are “allowed” when in a key could easily be likened to the limitation of the English sentence. Only certain types of words or notes will “make sense” together. Playing a note that doesn’t belong in the piece will sound harsh and dissonant, which is why messing up at piano recital in first grade is so traumatizing. In the same way, I consciously chose not to begin this sentence with the word “defenestration,” despite how much I enjoy it’s meaning. It simply would not have made sense.

While examining music with a structural perspective may yield several similarities, few differences do occur. For example, on page 63 when discussing the linear nature of a sign, Saussure discusses how accenting a syllable implies a different meaning while still being, in essence, the exact same phonational act. As a result of this, the difference is only able to gauged in contrast to the syllables and words that surround the accented bit. Adding an accent of any degree to a note or chord will still produce the same pitch, but the feeling behind an entire piece can shift when you accent even a *single* note.