

On Narrativity in Music: Expressive Genres and Levels of Discourse in Beethoven

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Narrative literature assumes two fundamental notions, the tale and the teller. Music could be said to share these aspects, to the degree one may speak of a sequence of musical events as akin to a story, or plot, and the composer—or better, his persona (Cone 1974) as implied narrator. Closer correspondences may be seen in opera or song, where recitative or speech-like passages typically accompany the more literal narration of events. But in “absolute” music the analogy appears a little more tenuous, since often a sequence of emotional states, rather than referential events, appears to be primary.

Nevertheless, I find the analogy of narrativity in the “absolute” music of Beethoven to be helpful, and I will illustrate why with a brief survey of two areas corresponding to the tale and the teller, respectively. The first concerns what I call *expressive genres* that coordinate larger scale organization of the expressive “plot” of a movement. Since expressive genres are negotiated with formal schemes such as sonata, they can help explain events and formal departures that might appear incompletely motivated from a purely formalist perspective.

The second area I will survey involves what I consider *shifting* to a higher *level of discourse*, a technique that supports critical commentary, or response to its implications, on the music from within. Such shifts suggest a second persona, perhaps closer to the composer or in a Romantic-ironic relationship to the persona implied by the prevailing musical discourse. Shifting the level of discourse may not be enough to create literal narration, but it achieves one of the characteristic aims (or consequences) of narrative literature—that of putting a “spin” on the presentation of events.

Expressive Genres

The notion of paradigmatic plots for music has often been relegated to structural aspects of formal genres. Anthony Newcomb (1987) has construed Robert Schumann’s narrative strategies as a play upon the listener’s expectations in a given genre, often reversing those expectations and offering the listener an opportunity to work out a new form through the ongoing process of reinterpretation. He relates this play to similar experiments in form by Romantic writers such as Jean Paul and E. T. A. Hoffmann, whose experimental novels the literate Schumann knew and praised.

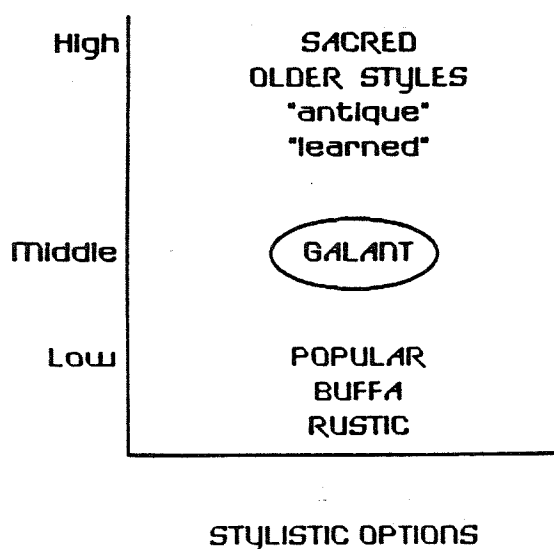
Although similar observations of mixed formal genre can be made for Beethoven (an interesting example is the slow movement of his Piano Sonata in E-flat, Op. 7, which recalls both part form and sonata), I will provide evidence for the existence of genres whose interpretation in given movements demands an *expressive* rather than strictly structural competency. Such “plots” as emerge from these genres may at times suggest a more dramatic than strictly narrative structure, but there is always an implied narrative element in that events unfold through the narrative filters of the composer’s persona(s).

Expressive genres imply changes of state (as in the tragic-to-triumphant genre of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony), or a dramatization of the inability to change state (as in the relentlessly tragic finales to the “Apassionata” and “Tempest” piano sonatas).

Expressive genres are often cued by topics, such as the tragic, the pastoral, and the heroic. These topics are themselves defined by certain structural oppositions.

Within the Classical style composers had several stylistic options from which to choose (see Figure 1). These options had clear associations with levels of society (Ratner 1980, Allanbrook 1983). A composer could exploit high, middle, or low styles the way a speaker exploits what sociolinguists call “social register” in language. The high style would include any style having associations with the Church, and thus, because of the inherent conservatism of Church music, older styles in general would share in a kind of “venerable” or “authoritative” register (compare Ratner 1980, 23). Since Baroque or even Renaissance stylistic features might be invoked, this style would be highly marked with respect to the typical Classical style. The central and thus unmarked middle style I have simply labeled *galant*, understanding this historically broad term to embrace a wide range of dance types and the singing style. Generally, *galant* style was freer than the strict contrapuntal style, yet never extreme in its license (Sheldon 1989).

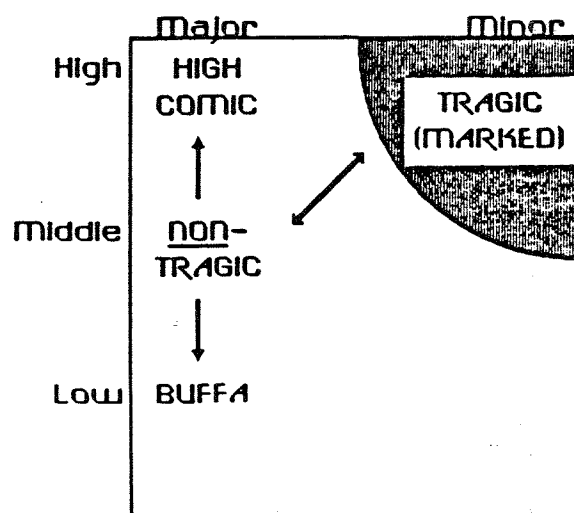
Figure 1.



A Classical composer could also exploit the low style by reference to various popular or rustic musical types, some of which would be marked when appearing in the context of a serious work. However, according to Charles Rosen (1972) the pacing of Classical style derived historically from the pacing of *opera buffa* as opposed to the more traditional set pieces of *opera seria*, and thus something of the rhythmic character of the low style was incorporated in the middle style.

Figure 2 illustrates the further articulation achieved when one cross-references high, middle, and low styles with mode.

Figure 2.



Those Classical works that, for various reasons, one would consider tragic are typically in minor mode and exemplify a higher style. They may also exhibit the learned style, as exemplified by fugue or imitative counterpoint. A good example is the fugal first movement, in C-sharp minor, of Beethoven's String Quartet, Op. 131 (see Example 1). Here the opening subject reveals in microcosm the essential processive structure of the tragic, with a positive ascent that is reversed on the fourth note. This is a reversal not only in terms of melodic direction but in terms of harmonic activity. It is only with

Example 1.

Nº 4. Adagio ma non troppo e molto espressivo.

Violino I.

Violino II.

Viola.

Violoncello.

the fourth note that minor mode is unequivocal, and the implied resolution of the B-sharp to C-sharp (as V-i) is undercut by the implied deceptive move (G-sharp—B-sharp to A—C-sharp, suggesting V-VI). The deceptive implication is realized more explicitly by Beethoven later in the movement. My interpretation of the syntactic features of the head motive supports a more simple iconic interpretation of the gesture: hopeful rise followed by tragic fall.

Returning to Figure 2, note that an opposition between tragic and nontragic is supported by the opposition between minor and major, but that the nontragic constitutes a much wider semantic field. This asymmetry is characteristic of marked-unmarked oppositions, whether in language or in music, and certainly minor mode is marked in this way from the late Baroque era through the Classical style and into the Romantic era. The importance of markedness for musical meaning (a topic I pursue further in a book in progress) is that marked musical structures have a narrower range of content. Their greater specificity with regard to meaning can provide a useful tool for interpretation, even when one finds it difficult to match verbal labels to that content. Historical evidence for this claim comes from the far greater attention minor mode works have received in terms of expressive interpretation by critics ranging from E. T. A. Hoffmann in Beethoven's day to Newman and Sullivan in the 1920s.

Figure 3 illustrates the extremes of tragic and *buffa* (comic) as marked with respect to the unmarked, central style of the *galant*. As is characteristic of marked terms, both tragic and *buffa* will have a more specific expressive sense than *galant*.

Figure 3.

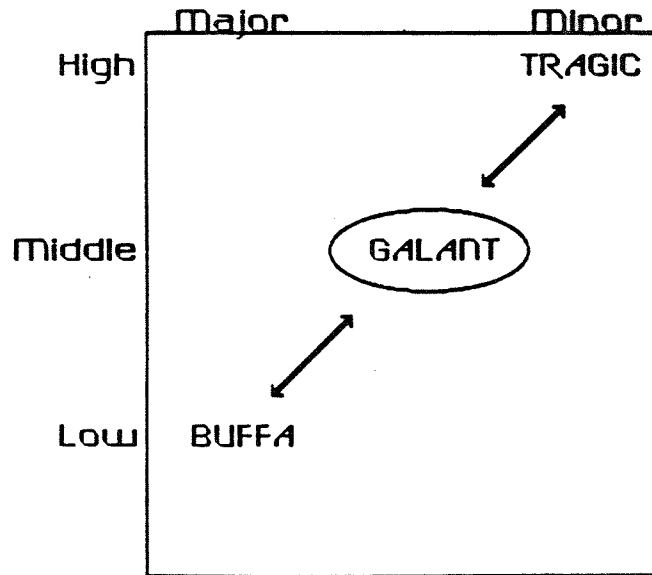
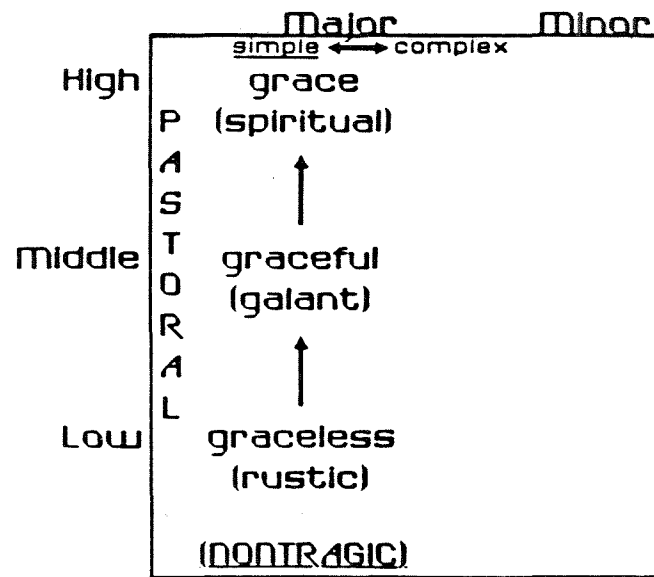


Figure 4 introduces another opposition, within the major mode, between simple and complex. This opposition may be manifested musically in several ways: consonant vs. dissonant, slow harmonic rhythm vs. fast, simple melody vs. florid melody, and so forth. Simple, major mode music tends in Beethoven to correlate with the pastoral, whether or not characteristic pastoral features are present. Of course, pastoral features such as pedal point, slow harmonic rhythm, and parallel thirds are themselves typical of simpler or more primitive music. Figure 4 also diagrams the changing status of the pastoral, or simple style, in Beethoven. As topical music, the pastoral is progressively elevated in value, first from “graceless rusticity” to a middle style emphasizing “graceful simplicity.” One historical support for the revaluation of the pastoral to the middle style is the early Classical move toward a simpler “singing style” as opposed to the overly ornamented and seemingly artificial Rococo style. One could also point to an earlier raising of the pastoral in the realms of literature and opera. Indeed, the pastoral as a literary topic has a long expressive history, stemming from both Greek and Hebrew traditions, as documented by Herman Jung (1980).

Figure 4.



The second elevation of the pastoral, which Beethoven develops in his late style, shifts the expressive sense from “graceful simplicity” to the serenity of “spiritual grace.” The potential religious or spiritual association at this stylistic level has its precedent in the earlier use of pastoral music for Nativity settings.

Figure 5.

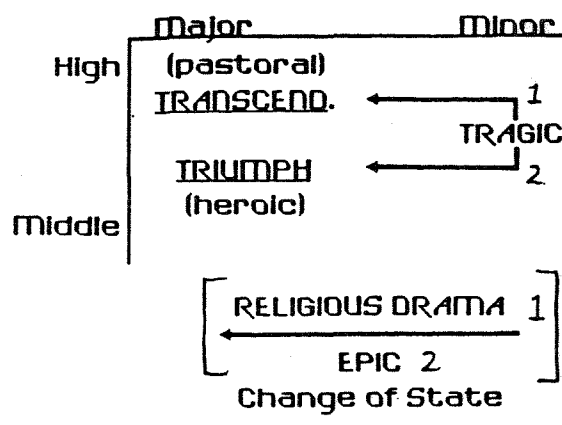


Figure 5 illustrates some expressive genres that involve a change of state from the conditions presented at their outset. Whereas a tragic movement could be relentlessly tragic in Beethoven, another generic option involves a move from tragic minor to “triumphant” or even “transcendent” major. These two generic variants (tragic-to-triumphant and tragic-to-transcendent) differ from each other only in terms of their stylistic register. The move from tragic to triumphant entails a triumph of the will—Promethean for Beethoven—that is heroic or even *epic* in its dimensions. The move from tragic to transcendent, on the other hand, calls to mind religious drama as a genre, and suggests a spiritual triumph achieved either through greater insight or the agency of an extrapersonal force. A prime example of the tragic-to-transcendent genre is the slow movement of the *Hammerklavier* Piano Sonata, Op. 106 (Hatten, 1991).

By way of contrast, the Piano Sonata, Op. 101, in A major, is clearly under the generic control of the pastoral, although it is not a “characteristic” pastoral sonata like the Piano Sonata, Op. 28. Instead, the pastoral topic is interpreted at a higher, more personal level. The first two bars of the main theme (Example 2) are emblematic of the pastoral. Pedal point, slow harmonic rhythm (merely expanding V7), parallel thirds, and a less intense climax (consonant appoggiatura in the melody, decorated suspension figure in the alto) are all characteristic pastoral features, and the major mode and 6/8 meter certainly support that interpretation. Furthermore, the tenor move from D-sharp to D-natural suggests an initial V7/IV in E major. When one understands (by m. 2) that E is dominant of A, A has already received a significant subdominant flavoring by means of this voice-leading. The subdominant, of course, is typically featured in pastoral pieces (compare the opening theme of the Piano Sonata, Op. 28, with its immediate V7/IV). Finally, even the rocking motion of the alto, and its subsequent syncopations, suggest something of the representation of water within a pastoral context (compare Beethoven’s use of the “barcarolle” topic for the main theme of the middle movement of the Piano Sonata, Op. 79).

Example 2.

L. van Beethoven, Op. 101.
1816, im Monat November.

Etwas lebhaft und mit der innigsten Empfindung.
Allegretto ma non troppo.

28.

The musical score for Example 2 is a piano piece by Ludwig van Beethoven, Op. 101, No. 16, from the month of November 1816. The tempo is marked 'Allegretto ma non troppo' with the instruction 'Etwas lebhaft und mit der innigsten Empfindung'. The score is in 3/4 time, G major, and consists of four systems of piano and bass staves. Measure numbers 28, 10, 15, and 20 are circled. Performance markings include 'poco ritard.', 'a tempo', 'cresc.', 'dim.', and 'p'.

Thus, every feature it is possible to analyze in the opening two bars either directly cues or indirectly contributes (major mode, compound meter) to an interpretation in pastoral terms. The often remarked concentration of Beethoven's late style may be seen here as resulting from his elegant and economical cueing of topic and expressive genre.

The remainder of Example 2 provides an illustration of the consistency with which Beethoven pursues the pastoral undercutting of climaxes (m. 9) and cadences (mm. 6 and 16). Undercutting a climax yields a less intense expressivity; undercutting a cadence promotes a greater sense of continuity. Even the stasis of mm. 12-13, "stuck" on a $V4/3$, tempers the otherwise too intense directionality of the bass line ascent in mm. 9-15.

Example 3.



The use of a Mm7 sonority for stasis is thematically significant in m. 52 (Example 3), where its *subito piano* appearance helps defuse a tragic irruption of the pastoral surface occurring within the development section. The development cues a tragic turn in two ways: first by change of mode (to F-sharp minor), and then by thematic reversal in the bass in mm. 48-49, where A-sharp is pulled down to A-natural. This reversal of A-sharp to A-natural fulfills the tragic potential of its less intense appearance in the second theme (Example 2, m. 17). The reversal in the development triggers an extreme outburst that is not resolved, but uneasily undercut by the *subito piano* V6/5 (m. 52).

The coda (Example 4) recalls this tragic outburst by a feat of thematic integration. The original Mm7 sonority is intensified, transformed first to a dissonant minor ninth chord and then a diminished-seventh over pedal tonic (mm. 85-86). The ultimate resolution of these “storm clouds” (to borrow from a “characteristic” pastoral interpretation) is to the “light” of an arrival six-four in m. 90. Note the simultaneous resolution of the second theme’s chromatic reversal, transposed, in the bass line (F-sharp—F-natural—E). The cadential six-four has a rhetorical effect anticipating the “salvation six-four” in Liszt, and the thematic motivation

enhances its significance well beyond its purely formal cadential function.

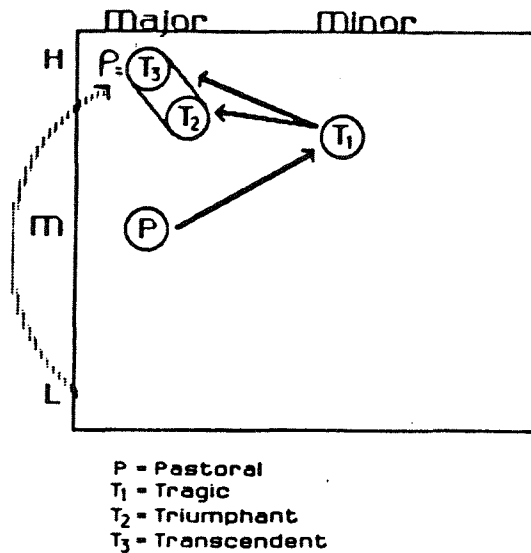
Example 4.



After a summation of the thematic conflict in mm. 92-94, the coda moves to a transcendent close in the extreme registers of the piano (mm. 100-102). Note the pastoral echoes in the bass syncopation and open fifth, mm. 101-102. Transcendence of register supports the elevation of pastoral to the high style, with its spiritual connotations.

The progress from pastoral through the threat of tragedy and back to pastoral affirmation is replicated at the level of the four-movement sonata as a whole (see Figure 6). A tragic third movement in A minor is truncated and leads to recall of the main theme from the first movement. This transition poetically establishes the reigning topic for the finale; but heroic, learned, and tragic topics find a place as well. I have dealt elsewhere with the productive musical metaphor created by the interaction of heroic, learned, and

Figure 6.



Op. 101, "Pastoral"

pastoral topics in the first eight bars of the Allegro Finale theme (Hatten, 1988, 1990). What is important here is that the pastoral can organize the expressive structure of a complete cycle, placing its stamp on the ultimate outcome. In the case of Op. 101, that outcome is clearly positive, with the triumphant affirmation of the heroic topic elevated to a transcendent plane by Beethoven's raising of the pastoral to a spiritual level.

Levels of Discourse

Sudden contrasts in Beethoven's music are not in themselves unusual. But how should one interpret extreme contrasts that occur past the point where they can be explained as thematic contrast? Example 5a shows the opening of the coda to the last movement of Beethoven's String Quartet, Op. 95 ("Serious"). Here, a completely unexpected *buffa* passage (mm. 133ff.) undercuts the tragic aspect of all four movements with a lightness that appears inexplicable. Nothing thematic in the movement could have led a listener to expect this unusual windup. Stylistically, one might argue that the

Examples 5a and 5b.

a.

b.

sudden increase in pace is needed in order for an otherwise slow Finale to serve as a suitable close for the four-movement cycle as a whole. A more analytical explanation might attempt to construe the opening chromatic motive as an inversion of the basically chromatic four-note descent featured in the slow movement's tragic fugato (Example 5b). Although the inversion supports a corresponding reversal of affect, I have not found the distant relationship to be at all convincing. Kerman (1966: 182-84) suggests an even further distant motivic connection, or "reflection"—of the opening movement's basic progression from F—G-flat—G-natural. But how can one explain the "fantastic evocation of an opera buffa finale in which all the agitation and pathos and tautness and violence of the quartet seem to fly up and be lost like dust in the sunlight" (182)? Kerman compares this "joke" to the more clearly earned "volte face" at the end of the Finale to Op. 132, suggesting that Beethoven somehow "solved" the problem with the latter work.

None of these stylistic and motivic rationales are convincing explanations for the late shift in expressive direction. I agree with Kerman that one expects a change of emotional state in Beethoven's

music to be earned through a progressive thematic discourse that rationalizes the sudden contrasts. This is the case in the slow movement of the *Hammerklavier*; it is also true of the slow movement of Op. 95, where the return section recalls the struggle of the fugato and then gradually achieves a serenely transcendent close.

But I would argue that the coda to Op. 95 is not a miscalculation or poorly solved problem, since its sudden jolt can be explained in terms of a shift in level of discourse. Such a shift may take one out of the prevailing discourse and provide for a critical perspective on the preceding music, recalling the detachment and self-critical projection of consciousness that Friedrich Schlegel defined as Romantic irony. Rey Longyear has construed the shift in the coda of the Finale in just such terms:

This ending exemplifies many of the . . . characteristics of romantic irony which Schlegel described: paradox, self-annihilation, parody, eternal agility, and the appearance of the fortuitous and unusual. (1970:147)

Indeed, I would go further to suggest that the comic reversal could be understood in terms of Nietzsche's concept of laughter, which for him signaled that higher consciousness distinguishing the fully realized human (the *Übermensch* in this sense, not in its perversion as a racial distinction, nor in its connotations of power as in the popular translation, "superman"). Viewing Nietzsche's concept as an outgrowth of Romantic irony, the philosopher's construct can be seen as prefigured in the composer's music. The conscious shift in level of discourse reveals a deeper persona that in turn places all of the previous musical discourse in a new perspective. Thus, there is a kind of power expressed here, since only a strong consciousness can be both fully aware of its own suffering and still capable of projecting above it. The projection is powerful in that it reduces the exclusive claims of suffering stemming from a tragic experience.

Example 6.

301

302

Allegro assai vivace. (d. = 24)
Alla Marcia.

Flauto piccolo
2 Flauti
2 Oboi
2 Clarinetti in B
2 Fagotti
Contrafagotto
4 Corni in D
in B
2 Trombe I in C
II in B
Timpani
Triangolo
Piatto
Gran Cassa
Violino I
Violino II
Viola
Tensore Solo
1. Tenore
2. Tenore
Basso
Violoncello e Contrabasso

Another example of problematic contrast is the famous Turkish march from the Finale of the Ninth Symphony (Example 6). The jarring shift of stylistic register from high to low was offensive to many listeners in Beethoven's day. Coming after the cultural and pitch-registral heights of the choral pronouncement, "Vor Gott," the march must be read with some sense of Romantic irony if it is not to be misinterpreted as blasphemy. Another interpretation of the contrast is what I would call *tropological* (Hatten 1988). There is a deflation that could be considered humanizing, very much in accord with the message of the choral hymn: "Alle Menschen werden Brüder." All styles can be accommodated under one formal roof, and the all-embracing message is further exemplified by the large number of formal genres suggested by the omnibus Finale.

One of the genres that figures prominently in the Finale is that of recitative. There is a very obvious cueing of levels of discourse through the quotation of previous movements, as directed by an orchestral, and later solo recitative. With the words, “Nicht diese Töne,” the baritone soloist plays a dramatic role akin to a persona, rejecting the earlier discourse to emphasize that the Finale will achieve a definitive response to the larger issue with which each of the previous movements had been concerned.

With recitative, music makes its most obvious approach to speech. By association, then, the use of a formula from recitative may signal that the discourse to follow has the effect of direct statement, even if the music is without text. And there is always the possibility that such a projection will be interpreted as commentary on the surrounding discourse, in the Romantic-ironic sense described above.

Example 7.



In the third movement of the String Quartet, Op. 130, a typical recitative chord (first inversion dominant) creates a sudden shift of key from A-flat to F major (Example 7). The dramatic effect, in this case a sudden departure from the hardly completed imperfect authentic cadence on A-flat, is marked dynamically with a *fp* accent. The descending leap of a fourth is also characteristic of recitative, especially at cadences. The interruptive gesture is not exploited—the movement quickly gets back on track—even though there is a sense

of the discourse taking stock of itself at that point. Further evidence for this interpretation of discourse-shifting is found in mm. 80-83 where Beethoven quotes the main theme of the second movement within a texture germane to the third (Examples 8a and 8b). Quotation, whether of oneself or another, creates an obvious shift from the prevailing discourse; here, the variation of quoted material suggests that the higher perspective comes from the prevailing discourse.

Examples 8a and 8b.

a.

b.

Even the opening of this movement, a retrospectively understood two-bar transition from the previous movement, and the fermata expansion for the first violin in m. 65, create a sense of differing levels of discourse: the prevailing level is temporally and emotionally even-keeled, while the temporary level occurs outside of the normative temporal plane, either prefacing it with inward sighs (Example 9a) or interrupting it for a breathtakingly transcendent response (Example 9b). Indeed, introductions and cadenzas are familiar instances of textural and temporal gestures outside the time of the movement proper, and they provide similar opportunities for commentary upon the preceding discourse.

Examples 9a and 9b.

a.

b.

Recitative-like cueing can support still other varieties of discourse-shifting. For example, the opening chords of the String Quartet, Op. 59, no. 2 (Example 10a) serve to announce the tonality, but the characteristic move to a first inversion dominant and the

upper-voice leap of a fifth are typical recitative features that also serve to set up a larger discursive context for what follows. The chords are also treated as thematic (note that it is early enough in the movement for thematization to be possible, which was not the case for the extreme shift in the Op. 95 coda). The cello inverts the leap of a fifth in the continuation of the main theme group, and in the recapitulation (Example 10b) the isolated opening chords are integrated into the prevailing discourse by spilling over with sixteenths from the development—filling the gap, as it were, between announcement and message. Perhaps the recitative topic can be interpreted in this case as a *phatic* cue, establishing a channel, and determining the character of the subsequent musical message.

Examples 10a and 10b.

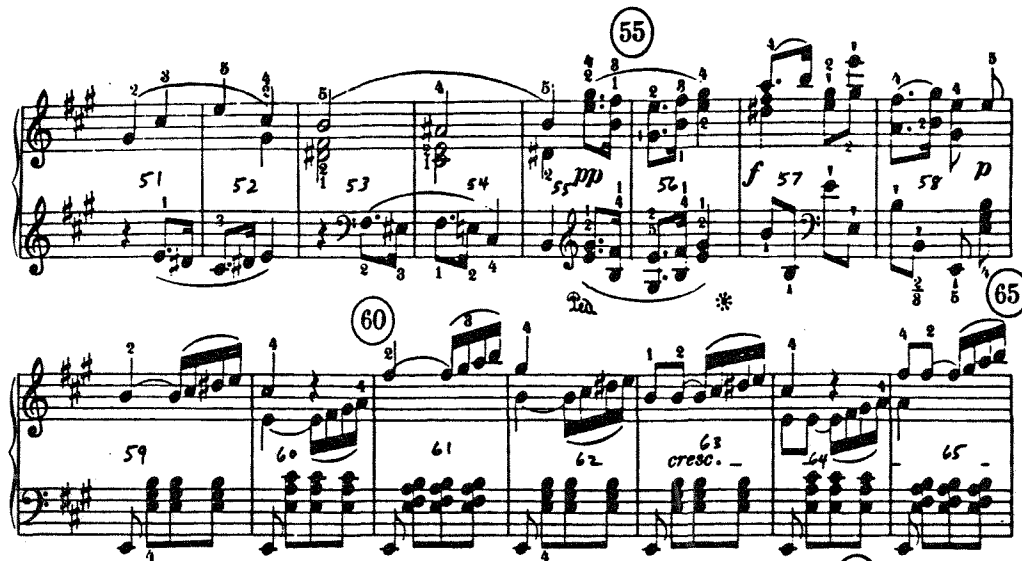
Allegro.

a.

b.

Indeed, not all shifts of discourse involve Romantic irony. Rather, it is the capacity of a musical style to cue shifts in levels of discourse that can help support ironic interpretation. Wilfred Mellers' (1983: 158) claim that the Finale of Op. 101 "lapses into farce" is apparently based upon his analysis of the "debunking" effect of the music in Example 11. Its childish character deflates "both song and drama." The ingredients of irony in the low-style folk song, and "irony that is witty rather than grotesque" at the cadence to the exposition, suggest that Mellers is reacting to the shifts in discourse level that do occur. But the precise nature of those shifts can be disputed.

Example 11.



In Example 11 a *pianissimo* horn fifth figure (mm. 55-56) is immediately followed by a *forte* cadence. The effect of the dynamic contrast is heightened by the dance-like tune that follows. But something of the message is lost if one does not realize that the horn-fifth figure is treated as a stylistic quotation—interpretable as a typical pastoral figure (*lontano*, here) that is mockingly rejected by the tossed-off leaps in the cadence that follows. What is being

debunked is not the optimistically triumphant and transcendent Finale theme, but the trite reference to a no longer potent pastoral figure. This irony functions more at the level of stylistic self-consciousness on the part of Beethoven than as part of the dramatic scenario for the movement. A miscalculation of the operative ironic level leads inevitably to Mellers' interpretation of the whole Finale as somehow undermined in its high spirits. Instead, the low style rusticity of the folk dance (raised, to be sure, by the learned aspect of imitation) inflects the high heroic and transcendent elements of the discourse, producing an interpretation akin to the all-embracing aspect of the Finale to the Ninth Symphony. For the Finale of Op. 101, one is led to interpret the spiritual victory as being grounded in the joy and vitality of everyday life.

The literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1981 [1935]) considers the play of styles and language types in literature as examples of "heteroglossia" [different voices], yielding the "dialogic" play of discourse in the novel. One of the effects of such play is to parcel out meanings between different voices, not unlike the personas I have investigated for Beethoven. It is this dialogic play, much richer than traditional theories of "point of view," that enables the author to present a myriad of perspectives on the discourse of characters and the events of plot. More subtly than in the musical examples I have given, the novel may alternate among several voices, and thus levels of discourse, within a single character. Non-texted music must instead signal its shifts by means such as the ones I have illustrated above: extreme contrasts in style or topic (especially those involving a change of stylistic register), cueing of recitative as a topic, direct quotation, disruptions of the temporal norm, or even negation. But the capacity of music to cue these shifts, and the perspective on discursive depth that such shifts afford the competent listener, must be recognized even when their interpretation is more problematic, and their significance more elusive, than for literature.

Conclusion

Although narrative may appear suspicious in music if one follows the model of literature too closely, one should nevertheless recognize that narrative has also been viewed as fundamental to other forms of discourse. Hayden White, for example, explores the contribution of narrative to the writing of history. He argues that “narrative . . . possesses a content prior to any given actualization of it in speech or writing” (1987, xi). If that is so, then certain musical styles would seem more than capable of exploiting the basic techniques of narrative: the meaningful ordering of expressive events (expressive genres), and their meaningful disruption, yielding a higher critical perspective (shifts in discourse level). The music of the nineteenth century sounds closer to the personal expression of the composer as persona largely because of the greater focus on just such techniques. If we tend to devalue a loss of sophistication in their handling, we should not for that reason discount the reality of their contribution to the way we understand that music.

More formal accounts of musical structure, such as Schenkerian analysis, are also fundamentally narrative, in that they infer significance from the particular ordering or interruption of musical events. Should we assume that competent listeners do less in their interpretation of expressive events, especially when there is such a clear correlation between expressive genres in music and the archetypal stories of their cultures?

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