Toward a characterization of gesture in music: An introduction to the issues.

The opening idea of the second movement of Schubert's Piano Sonata in A Minor, D. 845 (Op. 42) is the theme for a set of variations in C major. Its first eight bars have a rather simple harmonic and phrase structure (4+4), with the second phrase moving to the dominant. The melody is in the "alto" voice, and the "soprano" reiterates a dominant pedal point, creating a somewhat veiled effect. The meter is 3/8 and the tempo is Andante poco moto; there are accents on the downbeats of mm. 1, 2, 5, and 6. The music suggests a low-style waltz or Ländler. If you have the score (Henle or Dover), play these eight measures, or listen to a recording.

When I first attempted to play this theme as a piano student in college, I was more attracted to thematic complexity of composers such as Brahms, and I found Schubert's opening somewhat trivial both melodically and harmonically (though the texture was interesting). I followed the notated indications, but without much enthusiasm for what seemed a rather trite idea. (Actually, the simplicity of the theme is not unusual, since it is to be subjected to increasingly complex variations.) But when I played the opening of the theme at my lesson, my teacher proceeded to take my place at the piano to illustrate how it could sound. I still remember my reaction: sudden tears at the poignance of the music, which I had completely missed in my concentration on the typical elements of musical syntax. The character of the dance which underlay the gesture, and the delicacy of human touch, were intimately conveyed by my teacher's performance, which evoked the vividness and acute beauty of an experienced past,

remembered with a deep sense of yearning (or some such inadequately verbalized description!).

Years later, drawing on my work with musical meaning in Beethoven (Hatten, 1994), I might account for part of the expressivity of the theme in terms of its cueing the pastoral by means of the dominant pedal and the simplicity of harmonic structure; or suggest how our interpretation of a low, peasant dance might be raised to the sublime by means of a pianissimo marking; or conjecture how the pastiche-like quality of the dance might trigger a sense of poignant reminiscence, as well. But even after tagging each of these separate elements' contribution to the more symbolic articulation of musical meaning, I would not fully account for the quality of emotion I felt, an emotion that seemed to be generated by the character of the motion itself – its gestural shaping. Unlike Beethoven's Cavatina from his String Quartet in Bb, Op. 130 (analyzed in Hatten, 1994: 203-23), that depth of emotion was not sufficiently interpretable from a distinct treatment of melody and harmony, or from an interpolated expansion of the phrase. Rather, the human intimacy of performance seemed in this case indispensable to any attempt to explain the depth of my response. The gestural performance which gave the theme such life and character was a very tangible gestalt composed of a synthesis of elements that I had heretofore considered as separable components. And that gestalt contributed to a sense of continuity richer than the (mere?) sequential continuity of enchained pitches and rhythms.

It is that temporal and textural gestalt of shaping and shading that I wish to explore in these lectures, under the general rubric of "gesture." Gesture, to speak more semiotically (as I promise to do more extensively in lecture two), may be considered provisionally as movement that is marked for its significance, whether by or for the agent or the interpreter. By this definition, not just any movement would qualify as gesture. Furthermore,

one might be unconscious of a movement that could be interpreted by another as significant. For example, when I detect subtle movements indicating that another is bored with my conversation, that person's movements need not be conscious to take on a gestural significance. For music, presumably every technical movement a performer makes is already marked as belonging to the production of "significant" sound – hence, as artistic gesture. Yet not every movement made by a performer is interpreted in quite this way. Some movements appear more significant than others. In fact, those movements that highlight thematic gestures are somehow primary to our attending. That which is thematic in a work is earned by initial foregrounding and subsequent development. And yet gesture can distinguish accompanimental textures, or even cadential material, giving these an undeniable significance, as well. Whenever characterization is involved, we can speak of meaningful gestures. And the gestural motivation for that character can be heard – it need not be seen to be inferred. When hearing a performance with our eyes closed, or when listening to a recording, we can reconstruct the kinds and qualities of motion that give character to musical gestures. It is this character that, as we shall see in later lectures where the focus is on the thematic, motivates the motives – and their development.

Given the importance of gesture to interpretation, why do we not have a comprehensive theory of gesture in music? Historically, one reason may be that musical notation, which is largely digital or discrete in its symbols, cannot easily represent the continuities of gesture. Practical manuals for performance, which developed historically in tandem with musical instruments and their notation, were constrained by this discreteness of notational systems, in two dimensions:

Horizontally, even the analog indications of notation (e.g., slurs, crescendos, ritardandos) were soon separated into distinct chapters

dealing with topics such as articulation, dynamics, tempo, and the like. Even unwritten, stylistic assumptions about how to convey expressive subtleties were covered in separate sections on rubato (flexibility in timing) or accentuation (flexibility in dynamics). This is true even today, in the chapter divisions of books such as Sandra Rosenblum's (1988) superb study of Classical piano performance practice.

Vertically, even the presumed gestalts of phrasing tended to be defined as slices of the temporal continuum, comprised of discrete motivic or metric units, stages of a tonal progression, or (perhaps most tellingly) hierarchies of closure – in other words, as articulated units of form. Gesture, on the other hand, is a holistic concept, synthesizing what theorists would analyze separably as melody, harmony, rhythm and meter, tempo and rubato, articulation, dynamics, and phrasing into an indivisible whole. All of these various musical elements overlap in various ways in Western notational systems. The continuity that they may suggest is at best analogous to the twisted strands of a cable. For performance, these overlapping strands must be further melded into a smooth, and at some level undivided, continuity. That melding is achieved most efficiently by means of an apparently natural, human gesture. Performers strive to create a shaping and shading of each phrase that is more than the sum of the motivic and harmonic units of which they are composed.

If tonality and meter each offer an orientation akin to gravity – with the tonic being a directional goal that corresponds to stasis, and the meter serving to orient embodied motion as either up or down – then melody, harmony, and rhythm already play with and against these frameworks to cue a human energy and flexibility. The energy and flexibility which we acknowledge as artistic is also necessary to counteract the dull regularities of the frame. Thus, we can to some degree reclaim the gestural from the basis of music's "syntactic system." But, as we saw with the Schubert example,

sometimes these tonal and rhythmic energies and flexibilities are minimal, and gesture appears to arise from (or cause?) subtle warpings in performance. This is especially true of much popular music, where the microstructural is the focus of a very subtle and sophisticated shaping that might be entirely missed by the scholar focusing solely on syntax (compare Keil and Feld, 1994).

For an interpreter to achieve a “top-down” gestural integration of notationally separable components at the piano, he or she must also integrate in a goal-directed fashion all the separate muscles in the arm and hand. There are thirteen degrees of freedom in the movement of the arm alone, and to date no machine or neural net can accomplish the sophisticated coordination of that many possibilities, whereas trained pianists exhibit such refined motion without a second thought. On the other hand, only a dogmatic pedagogue who has not observed a variety of superb pianists would assume that a single “correct” combination of weight or muscular involvement throughout the body was required to achieve a given goal or expressive effect. Analogously, expert (technically and stylistically competent) performers will exemplify individual or unique integrations of the variables of performance (tempo, timing, articulation, dynamics, phrasing, pedal).

Thus, it would be counterproductive to try to describe and hence define gestures exhaustively with respect to some precise recipe combining their musical components or their muscular embodiments. Different combinations can achieve similar effects. But that is not to say that there cannot be refinements in one’s performance, as well as in one’s theoretical understanding, if one has, as in the case of Alexandra Pierce (1994), an articulated pedagogy that addresses physical movement as artistically conditioned by the constraints of a musical style and the unique configurations of a musical work. Her pedagogy extends the concept of

gesture beyond the muscles to the expressive intonations of the voice, and seeks to transform feeling in spoken language to the “feeling” (physical and emotional) of performance (see lecture 3).

And although gestures are high-level syntheses, they are also typically conceived as a basal level, characterized by the bottom-up immediacy with which we identify primary expressive units. But smaller gestures can be subsumed by larger ones, which suggests that gestural performance may also benefit from Schenkerian analysis, as Alexander Pierce (1994) and William Rothstein (1995) have demonstrated.

Much important work is also being done from the perspective of “microstructure,” by investigating those variables in sound production that fall between the cracks of our discrete notational systems. Manfred Clynes’ so-called “composers’ pulses” are individualized “warpings” of the framework of common-time meter, with a consistent timing and dynamic differentiation of each beat serving to distinguish the characteristic pulse frameworks of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert. Clynes (1995) has tested the validity of his hypotheses by designing various “warpings” of actual themes generated electronically with these adjustments, and his expert listeners – concert artists – apparently prefer (consider as more stylistic) his ideal pulses over other possible warpings. One might question whether these warpings capture the holistic character of gesture, but there may be a real contribution to one strand of the twisted cable, to use an earlier analogy. But how would plays with timing as conditioned by unique gestural interpretations at the freer motivic level be negotiated with such regualized warpings of the frame? Should we attempt to fix a composer’s pulse and insist that others adopt such a “warp” if they wish their performances to be valid?

However flexibly construed, a theory of musical gesture (for a given style, since historical placement should not be viewed simply as an option in the performer's toolcase) will draw on what we can learn of culturally conditioned human gestural languages, especially those that are preserved due to their artistic or rhetorical development (dance, mime, styles of oratory, social posturing in aristocratic courts), as described in manuals or inferred from artworks and illustrations. Interesting work has been done on Baroque dances (Little and Jenne, 1991), and the rhythmic gesture of Classical dance genres (Allanbrook, 1983). But we may compensate for the missing information we would wish to have found in historical sources by looking more closely at clues to be found in the preserved notations of scores. One hears too many performances that ignore "inconvenient" articulation markings, perhaps by overpedalling, or that fail to distinguish potential differences (for Schubert, at least) among the markings of decrescendo, diminuendo, and the closing hairpin wedge.

Musical works thematize gesture, but can we consider the motivic structure of a phrase to be equivalent to a gestural "articulation" of the texture? Certainly, motivic boundaries may coincide with gestural boundaries, and slurs and other articulatory indications may help us recognize the proper segmentations, but how do we find the right "groove" (Keil and Feld, 1994) that projects motivic character and ongoing development in an expressive, embodied way? Are there gestures that serve to combine or integrate motives, especially in cases where thematic ideas appear oppositional on the surface? Might a gestural idea coordinate motivic development across a larger span, contributing to a dramatic scenario?

As might be expected for such a holistic, Gestalt, synthesizing, or integrating concept as a musical gesture, clues to its "just so" realization may also come from interpretation at the level of an overall expressive genre for a movement, as pursued in my book on musical meaning in

Beethoven (1994). But just as typically, one reaches into the music's physical manifestation by the heuristic of simply sitting down and playing the piece – feeling what the hands must do to cover the notes at the right times, engaging in the plasticity or flexibility that leaps or passage work or sudden shifts demand of the body, and then inspecting one's bodily engagement for clues as to expressive correlates. This is transparently true of solo improvisation, but more opaquely, and painfully, so when learning to improvise (Sudnow, 1978).

Such a heuristic approach, ironically, is often the best one can hope for when learning (engaging one's mental/physical/emotional complex with) an avant-garde composition. I say ironically, since one would expect that music of one's own age would come with a gestural realization transparently encoded in the style as in the culture. But as many performers have experienced, playing an abstractly conceived work "goes better" if the composer gives gestural or expressive clues (and especially if the composer is present to coach the work). If the composer demands a "cool" performance (or one unladen with "baggage from the past"), the performer may opt to introduce gestural meaning from a personal store, if only in order to achieve an adequate sense of continuity among "segments" (whether explicitly motivic or Gestalt/default-interpreted) in the work (compare a similar strategy applied to abstract ballet choreography by Kirkland, 1987: 185).

The problem of fragmentation in culture and musical style almost makes historical reconstruction of a gestural language for, e.g., Beethoven, easier than for the interpretation of a work written yesterday. I need not add that many composers are very concerned these days with incorporating just such gestural and expressive "connections" with which the performer (or listener) has some familiarity; hence, we find another possible motivation

for twentieth-century composers incorporating music of the past, besides the ones familiar to us from neoclassicism's many perspectives.

But these lectures will not address the added complexities of modern music. Instead, I have chosen the ground of more familiar music (Beethoven and Schubert) and a very familiar instrument (the piano) to exemplify what a theory of gesture might be able to achieve, and how a theory of gesture might be conceived. The piano offers a particularly acute case of a musical instrument where gestural realization is absolutely necessary to produce even the illusion of a legato. We can learn a great deal about the role of gesture in continuity by studying its realization through the discrete mechanisms of keys and hammers. And I have chosen Beethoven and Schubert to enable a range of comparisons and contrasts: both were imbued with Viennese culture, their works encompass a mere forty years (c. 1790-1828), and they exhibit a progressive style change from high Classical to early Romantic ideals.

That I know and play the works I discuss has its obvious advantages, especially since a theory of gesture – even more than the symbolic theory of musical meaning I introduced in my book on Beethoven – requires a kind of subjective involvement that may be variously conceived as experiential, or embodied, or personally manifested. Finding the common ground in such personal experience is one goal of my work. I will explore the mappings of a stylistically regulated semiotic of (conventionalized) gestures; but I will at times appear to be more phenomenological than strictly semiotic in exploring the immediacy – what C. S. Peirce would call the Firstness – of my own physical realizations, and my subjective assessment of that experience. After all, communicating such states is part and parcel of any apprenticeship with a master teacher in the studio. If part of what might have been commonly shared by performers in the age of Beethoven, and Schubert has been lost – at least in its impact on theorizing

about music, if not in actual performance – then making subjective experience explicit within the framework of an intersubjective theory may help restore our sense of what a stylistic realization of a musical work can entail – both in physical embodiment and in spiritual engagement.

References for Lecture 1:

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