

Gesture and motive: Developing variation I

In this lecture we move from the heuristics of performance as embodying all the “moving parts” stylistically implied by a musical passage to a focus on what I have called “strategically marked” events that are crucial to the unfolding of a work. Markedness in this sense is akin to thematization. The thematic element, or motive, is often foregrounded or presented in a manner that guarantees its salience to the listener. But even if that is not the case, in order to be strategically marked as thematic for the work, a theme or motive must appear often enough to play a significant role in the drama of a work, or to be recognized, according to a familiar music-theoretical analogy, as one of the “subjects” of a musical “discourse.”

A theme may be varied (which implied that its length or form is preserved) or its motive(s) may be broken out and developed, either in a separate section (e.g., the “development” section of a sonata), or by the more continuous evolutionary process that Arnold Schoenberg termed “developing variation.” In Schoenberg’s examples, and in much of the analytical literature, a group of pitches is shown to be the essential kernel of a “Grundgestalt” or “basic shape” that is transformed through such standard developmental techniques as inversion, interval expansion, fragmentation, or reorientation with respect to the meter. Schoenberg featured Brahms’s masterful use of such an evolutionary thematic process, and dubbed him “progressive” for having achieved an ongoing thematic coherence that in Schoenberg’s style ultimately became a substitute for the coherence provided by the tonal system. Schoenberg also traced developing variation to the style of the Viennese Classicists; the sonatas of Beethoven and Schubert support this claim not only with respect to pitch-

generative material, but also when viewed from the perspective of gestural development.

In the article assigned for this lecture, I demonstrate exemplary motivic evolution in the first movements of Beethoven's Piano Sonata in E Minor, Op. 90, and Schubert's Piano Sonata in A Major, D. 959. But in my analysis the thematic idea is conceived in gestural terms, rather than as a particular pitch configuration in the Schoenbergian sense. Whereas the analytical bias toward pitch provided Schoenberg historical validation for his own practice of selecting atonal cells or twelve-tone rows to supply the entire compositional fabric, in my analysis of Beethoven and Schubert gestural ideas play a significant role, such that the weight of compositional coherence is not on pitch structure alone. Indeed, gestural motives may contribute to the unfolding of form within the field of possibility afforded by, in this case, a sonata schema. The advantages of this "motivation" of form may be readily grasped from the points made in earlier lectures: gesture offers an immediacy of affective meaning from a synthesis of musical elements that can be projected by a performer as a gestalt; and by following the evolution of meaning through developing variation of a gesture, the listener is guided securely through the discourse of a movement as it traces the path of an expressive genre (e.g., tragic struggle to triumph or transcendence).

Perhaps most significantly, the specificity of gesture (as movement and affect, for which verbal labels may be woefully inadequate) can contribute to further articulation or individuation of the generic expressive trajectories so familiar to us from Classical sonata movements. In this respect, it is striking that the Beethoven (m. 1) and Schubert (m. 8) sonatas both feature what appears on the surface to be the same gesture: two sound events, in an upbeat-downbeat, short-long, and released-held articulatory configuration. Dynamics and tempo suffice to create an enormous

difference in affect, and of course the two movements develop in strikingly individual ways. But the expositions of both sonatas demonstrate an ongoing evolution of the gesture, without implying that a particular pitch relationship was the “kernel” from which variants emerged. Nevertheless, the thematic discourse is in a significant way generated from the set of gestural properties I have identified.

If a thematic gesture is progressively varied, a derivation process relates the variants to a single “genealogy,” even if a later variant has a radically different affective character from the original gesture. This is important if we are to infer a dramatic agency, or even persona, as mapped onto the dramatic evolution of a gestural motive. Beethoven progressively alters the articulatory relationship, the durational length, and even (most impressively) the metric orientation of his initial gesture, yet the coherent linkage of developing variation allows the listener to follow, and identify bodily, with each stage of the propulsive drama. The compression of events in the sonata exposition of Op. 90 (a strategy Beethoven pioneered with his Piano Sonata in F Minor, Op. 2, no. 1), compensates for length with passionate depth: the gestural development suggests a single dramatic span sweeping the sections of a Classically correct sonata exposition into one large wave of Romantic intensity.

Schubert’s exposition is more dialectical in first contrasting, then integrating (mm. 16-21), an opening theme (mm. 1-6) with the “response” (mm. 7-15) that features the articulated gesture to which I have alluded. Since we have Schubert’s first draft of the opening, we know that the gesture in m. 1 was conceived after the gesture in m. 8, and thus there is evidence to support my claim that the opening gesture was intended in dialectical opposition to the later one: both are two-event, articulated gestures; but in first, the two events are downbeat-upbeat, equal length, separated by large leap, and forte in dynamic, whereas in the second they are upbeat-downbeat, short-

long, separated by step, and piano. As argued in my article, I consider the first gesture to be intertextually related to the opening of Beethoven's "Hammerklavier" Piano Sonata, Op. 106, with the intervallic inversion suggesting a more stoic kind of heroism (kept under the lid of an upper pedal point on A). The "response" of mm. 7-8, on the other hand, implies both freedom from dutiful constraint (the arpeggiated descent from a higher register, suggestive of inspiration from outside the encapsulated sphere of the opening) and a more tentative, questioning, palpably humane reaction to a **presumed existential conflict**.

The article's ensuing analysis demonstrates how thoroughly Schubert works out the consequences of his articulated gesture in the first movement, and how skillfully he combines the opposing gestures into a larger, three-note gesture (created by overlapping the two) that is the basis of a lengthy "pre-development" (mm. 82-115) inserted between statements of the second theme in the exposition. I will not rehearse that analysis here, since it may be traced more efficiently in conjunction with the article's musical examples. I will instead underline the contribution of the first movement's two primary gestures to subsequent movements. Schubert draws on the articulatory character of the second motive, in the metric setting of the first, for both the accompanimental figure at the beginning of the second movement (*Andantino*) and the declamatory melody at the beginning of the fourth movement (*Rondo: Allegretto*). The only performance I have heard in which the articulatory character of these gestures was consistently projected was by Malcolm Bilson, in a **live fortepiano recital**. Most recorded performances either blur these distinctions or observe them so inconsistently as to negate any sense of developing variation in the gestural motive. This unfortunate tendency may be the result of several factors: the bias of Romantic-school piano playing, which emphasizes pedal and thick, legato melodic lines; the corresponding lack of awareness of articulatory performance practice in Viennese Classical

music (note that the modern piano, while not as “true” as the fortepiano in absolute dynamic or timbral values, can nevertheless emulate the articulatory aspect of the gesture with relative success); and a bias for pitch-oriented motivic development, which tends to factor out articulatory notations as expressive surface detail without structural significance for the unfolding discourse (hence, often left to the performer’s discretion rather than respected as an indicator of thematic gestural character).

The *Intégral* article examines another kind of thematic element, again traceable to Beethoven, involving the overtone resonance of the instrument (which is even more prominent in the fortepiano). The peculiar technique involves forceful accent and release of one or more bass notes beneath a sustained chord in the right hand. Overtones from the bass pitch(es) reinforce by sympathetic vibration the undamped strings in the treble, creating an eerie enhancement of sound that seems incompatible with an instrument in which the norm is sonic decay. Examples may be found in all four movements in various approximations. But to what extent does such an instrumental “effect” constitute a gesture? Certainly, human gestures are required to create the effect, and these will convey their proper “sentic” significance, as further enhanced by the visual component in live performances. But is human gesture marked as such? A provisional answer to such a conjecture might first consider the expressive role of the idea, which is projected in the opening theme of the first movement. Here, the left hand has the previously analyzed gestural motive one, and its “stoic heroism” may be seen to “resonate” the right — hand’s sustained chords, which (though kept under the lid of an upper pedal point on A), strive in stepwise ascent until relaxing into the half cadence on the dominant in m. 6. The determined will of a persona is clearly implied and gesturally projected. But when the theme returns in the coda, up an octave, pianissimo, and the overtone effect is more clearly pronounced, then the effect, though still requiring accurate gestural performance, no longer

appears to have the same immediacy of human agency. Instead, it takes on an ethereal character, transcendent in that it sounds from beyond the body as a spectral reminiscence of — shall we say — the noble spiritual character of the persona. The reverberation of each chord captures the “resonance” of such a spiritual connotation, I would claim, while severely attenuating the physical component, as compared to the original, forceful embodiment of the opening theme complex. Thus, one might conjecture that physical movement by the performer (which will be as energetically embodied, if not as dynamically projected, in the coda as in the opening theme) must not be simplistically equated with interpreted human-gestural meaning as embodied in a physical persona.

Composers often represent aspects of the inanimate world. As Peter Kivy has observed, musical representation or “illustration” can possess expressive features, but the illustrative features of a passage of musical representation need not always be expressive in this sense. In similar fashion, I would suggest that musical ideas, while embodied in performance and hence expressive due to the character of the embodied performance, need not always “mean” or draw their significance from the association between performing body and assumed persona in the work. Recall Barthes’s enjoyment of Schumann’s “physicality,” discussed in lecture 2, as a prime example of direct association (for Barthes). The inevitable gestural character of the Kontarsky brothers’ performance of Pierre Boulez’s Structures for two pianos, on the other hand, is perhaps more an emergent property of a work conceived in more abstract terms as pure structure — a work in which every variable (including those associated with expressive performance, such as dynamics or articulation) is strictly controlled by a precompositionally designed series.

To conclude, I should like to summarize what this inquiry into thematized gesture has revealed:

1. For Beethoven and Schubert, gestural developing variation can help generate the structure and motivate the expressive meaning of major works in sonata form. In the next lecture I will demonstrate how gestural shapes interact with pitch-structural strategies in the creation and working out of the thematic premise for a work.

2. The thematizing of gesture entails expressive identifications with the character of the gesture as physically performed, and these in turn may be mapped with considerable individuality onto an expressive genre, as negotiated within the schema of sonata form (as further argued for these two examples in the *Intégral* article).

3. Performers knowledgeable about historical performance practice (e.g., Malcolm Bilson) are more likely to project articulations and subtle details that realize characteristic gestures in a way that is stylistically consistent with their implied expressive meaning and ongoing development. Romantically-schooled pianists are less likely to adjust to these stylistic constraints, perhaps due to differences in the modern piano, a bias toward unbroken continuity of (melodic) line, and/or a bias toward pitch-generated structural motives.

4. In the first and second lectures I claimed that physical movement must be marked to be gestural, and here I have observed that gestures must be marked thematically to be fully relevant as embodied meaning. Whereas the movements of the performer will always contribute a qualitative character, and stylistic markedness will account for the relevance of many of the movements contributing to musical meaning as discussed in lecture three (Alexandra Pierce's pedagogy), not all musical gestures are strategically marked as subjects of musical discourse.

Strategically marked (thematic) gestures, despite the presumed symbolic level of their “abstraction” as musical motives subject to development (cf. David Lidov’s claims discussed in lecture two), are perhaps even more concretely significant in terms of their physical qualities and overall expressive character than other stylistically marked movements contributing to the realization of a score. As focal to our primary level of attending, and a fundamental means by which we following the logic of a musical discourse, thematic gestures reveal the embodied physical energies, dynamic motivations, and affective stances of the (implied) agents that listeners typically map onto Classical or Romantic works. Even purely tonal events (motives, voice-leading, or chords analyzable solely in pitch-based melodic, contrapuntal, or harmonic terms), imply stylistic, if not specifically notated strategic realizations that gesturally underline their significance. Thus, the highly gesturally-conceived motives examined in this lecture are special cases of a more general phenomenon with respect to the interpretation of thematic discourses.

Footnotes

1. See Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven* (Indiana, 1994), 111 and 133-60.

Back to where you left off.

2. See Schoenberg, “New Music, Outmoded Music, Style and Idea” [1946] and “Brahms the Progressive” [1947] in *Style and Idea*, ed. Leonard Stein, trans. Leo Black, (Berkeley, 1975), 113-23 and 398-441.

Back to where you left off.

3. See Hatten, “Schubert the Progressive,” *Intégral* 7 (1993), 38-81.
Back to where you left off.

4. Here I go further than the article in suggesting that in his late sonatas Schubert is plumbing the depths of existentially profound questions even as he shapes an agency which the listener will also assume, as a fictive persona undergoing an epic inner or outer struggle in relation to the unspecified situation at the heart of the discourse. We cannot know the precise content of the situation since music is not referential in that sense, but situational precision is irrelevant to our sense of the “significance” of the music, and music’s affective meaning can be “more precise than words” — as Mendelssohn would later claim.

5. The recital was one of several featured as part of “Schubert’s Piano Music,” an international symposium of performers, musicologists, and theorists, at the Smithsonian Collection of Musical Instruments, the National Museum of American History, Washington, D.C., April 5-9, 1995.
Back to where you left off.

6. See Kivy, *Sound and Semblance* (Princeton, 1984), 124-42.
Back to where you left off.

References for Lecture 4

Hatten, Robert. “Schubert the Progressive: The Role of Resonance and Gesture in the Piano Sonata in A, D. 959,” *Intégral* 7 (1993), 38-81.

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Schoenberg, Arnold. “New Music, Outmoded Music, Style and Idea” [1946] and “Brahms the Progressive” [1947] in *Style and Idea*, ed. Leonard Stein, trans. Leo Black, (Berkeley, 1975), 113-23 and 398-441.