

Gesture and motive: Developing variation II

Schubert's Piano Sonata in A major, D. 959 (discussed in the previous lecture) was composed in the last year of his life, 1828. I want to turn now to another of his piano sonatas, in A minor, which he composed in 1823, perhaps in response to a foreboding sense of doom associated with the awareness that he had contracted syphilis. In any case, the last five years of Schubert's short life were marked by a turn toward serious composition of major works in the genres of piano sonata, string quartet, symphony, and song cycle; and many of these profound works plumb the depths of the tragic. The Piano Sonata in A minor, D. 784 (originally published as Op. 143) is a remarkable example of Schubert's use of gesture to pursue an at times obsessively tragic scenario throughout a three-movement work. Its allusion to perpetual motion in the rondo theme of the finale (as in the rondo-finale of his four-movement Piano Sonata in A minor, D. 845 [Op. 42] of 1825) may have been inspired by Mozart's thoroughgoing perpetual-motion finale in his own tragic Piano Sonata in A minor, K. 310.

Schubert achieves another kind of obsessiveness in his first movement through the ostinato-like reiterations of a particular gestural configuration. The character of this gesture, which appears in mm. 2 and 4, is given topical specificity beginning in m. 9 as part of the minor-mode, iv-i progression characteristic of a funeral march. The gesture involves a held downbeat and accented half note slurred to an abrupt release on an upbeat eighth-note, and typically involves a downward melodic drop. In m. 9 the first event is a low-register, closely spaced triad, and the second is a single note. As a heuristic guide to interpretation, the pianist can kinesthetically

explore the sense of heaviness in the accented chord and the almost “shrugged off” quality of the transferred release onto the single pitch.

Through the immediacy of intermodality, the listener quickly accesses the affective quality of the gesture: heaviness of grief that is not expelled by force (as in the emotion of disgust), but “sighed off,” only to return with an insistence that suggests its implacability. “A weight that is too heavy to bear and must be constantly shrugged off with a sigh” is but one attempt to capture in words what is a much more palpably immediate sense that can guide the pianist to a “just so” dynamic shading and articulatory timing of that gesture. Of course, the precise performance cannot be prescribed, since various mixtures of dynamics, voicing, timing, and articulation may achieve comparable gestural effects. With a clear expressive sense in mind, acquired both heuristically from the notated gesture and topically from the associations of the funeral march, the performer will be led to reject and refine various less adequate physical realizations. Certainly, maintaining a singularity or continuity of physical gesture — i.e., sinking deeply into the chord and transferring part of that weight into the smoothly-sequenced release of both chord and single pitch, rather than employing two motorically-disjunct attacks — would appear to be crucial to a proper realization of the motive’s expressive sense.

The physically-conceived (indexical, even iconic), gestural motive is part of a more abstract (symbolic) developing-variational design in which certain pitch configurations play a significant role. The first appearances of the abruptly-released gesture occur with the striking D#-E, #4-5, in m. 2 (the D# is treated as a Classical thematic dissonance), and with the drop of a third, C-A, in m. 4 (the descending third plays a thematic role in transitions and figures at the level of key relationships, as well).

The two seeds of this gesture — accented (weighted) beginning and abrupt release — are themselves detachable motives that support a consistent approach to the texture, lending the movement (and the work) a coherent expressive character throughout. For example, after the tutti-like (*forte*) counterstatement of the opening 2-bar motive we hear a series of parallel 6/3 chords in dotted-rhythm (mm. 27-9). This passage alludes to the French-overture style and carries the connotation of authority by drawing on venerable style patterns. But just as importantly, it ends abruptly on a metrically weak eighth note; we can hear the passage not only as parenthetical, but a “filled-in” response to the opening motive, leading to a similar release (the primary difference is the infusion of determined energy from the driving, stepwise, dotted-rhythm motion).

The second theme (mm. 59ff), which contrasts its serene E major to the tragic A minor of the opening theme, is clearly derived motivically from the opening theme and even echos its intervallic shape in both diminution and contraction. But just as importantly, it draws on the downbeat accent that associates with the opening gesture, even while oppositionally attempting to ameliorate its abrupt release and tragic connotations. The “compromise” articulation achieved here is not entirely sustained, however; instead of legato, the important portato (slur plus dot) notation hints at the potential of a more abrupt release, which indeed occurs when the second theme begins to break up into registrally disjunct echoes of the sudden-release gesture (mm. 76ff). These changes anticipate the horrifying, fortissimo, minor-mode intrusions by the tragic (mm. 79ff) — which has now fully infected the initial, repeated-chord serenity of the second theme with the fateful heaviness and abruptness of the tragic gesture. I will return to the remarkable second theme in the next lecture, on gestural troping, where I will more fully articulate its expressive significance.

The development section may be analyzed in terms of its various thematic integrations (combinations of variants of the opening motive, the dotted-rhythm parenthetical idea, and the second theme) as well as in terms of its tonal strategy (oscillating between F major, the key of the second movement, and D minor, the subdominant anticipated by the funeral march version of the thematic gesture). Interestingly, the brief passages of sonorous continuity (unbroken by the abrupt releases of the gesture) are found in the opening of the development (transition to the first climactic statement of the gesture); the transition to an integrative statement of the second theme, dotted rhythm, and chromatic lower neighbor of the first theme; and the retransition up to the anticipatory statements of the opening motive. (I will return to the issue of continuity in the last lecture of this series.)

With the recapitulation, the second theme is transposed back to the tonic, now major, and a new rhythm is introduced. That this new rhythm is gesturally motivated appears clear from its late appearance, and from evidence of the initial doubling. The opening chord features a doubled third (as octave) in the right hand. This unbalancing of the norm is also used by Beethoven in major key contexts to heighten the contrastive serenity and sweetness of major by emphasizing its opposition to minor (Hatten, 1994: 50-54). Thus, the triplet quarter notes that subdivide the initial half note of each measure may be understood as deflecting by fractioning the direct force of the initial accents, with their potentially tragic associations. By this “reverberant” gestural strategy, Schubert suggests that the tragic force of the gesture is being somehow absorbed by a more resilient version of the second theme. Even the fortissimo disruptions cannot sustain quite the same fateful implacability, and there is a potential for expressive resolution in this passage that goes beyond tonal resolution.

I have not discussed the remarkable transition sections in both exposition and recapitulation. The former hinges on a dramatic acceleration of the descending third version of the gestural motive (G-Bb, mm. 47-50), followed by a sudden chromatic reversal from Bb to B as dominant preparation for E major. That willful reversal is reinforced by a fanfare-like passage in E major that suggests heroic effort and a victorious outcome, however temporary, and it sets up the second theme as a serene, hymn-like expression of tender joy. In the recapitulation, the descending third of the transition is Eb-C, but the shift from Eb to E-natural happens without a sudden infusion of heroic energy. Instead, an enharmonic reinterpretation of Eb as D# (recalling the D# of m. 2) resolves as part of a German augmented-sixth chord to an arrival/cadential 6/4 in A major. The transformative resolution suggests that this transition is to be interpreted as more miraculous than willed, a further argument in favor of the gestural contribution of triplets to the even more serenely contrastive amelioration of the tragic.

The coda of the movement in effect combines both heroic and transcendent outcomes to the expressive or dramatic genre of the movement. First, the transitional thirds on Eb-C (mm. 263-6) are subject to an additional acceleration and heroic reversal (modeled on the exposition) to triumphant fanfares in A major (mm. 267-70). This serves to restore what was varied in the recapitulation. Then, closural cadence pairs (mm. 277-84) echo the gesture in contrasting extreme registers, now absorbed within a tonic pedal and suggesting the transcendent serenity of the resolved second theme. Only the sudden fortissimo interruption of an augmentation of the descending third motive (mm. 285-8) serves notice that these triumphant and transcendent achievements may be short-lived.

The second movement begins auspiciously in F major, the key encountered several times in the development of the first movement, most importantly

as the key of the integrative version of the second theme. Suspiciously, however, the half-note accompanimental harmonies in the opening of the second movement (mm. 1-2) are released halfway through each bar, leaving the melody vulnerably exposed. And the half-note chords in m. 3 release to an eighth-note tonic in m. 4, hardly a typical durational resolution. Clearly, the influence of the first movement's gesture is motivating these textural details. But the most compelling evidence for a continuation of the expressive premise of the first movement occurs after the release in m. 4. An uncanny, parenthetical figure is notated *ppp* and "sordini" (muted), which would have been realized on the *fortepiano* through the use of the moderator pedal, producing a muted, hair-raising sound that suggests the intrusion of another agency. (I will explore the issue of agency more fully in the seventh lecture). The figure, presented in octaves between the hands, is a chromatic turn around the dominant degree, emphasizing in its dotted-rhythmic configuration the scale-degree 5-#4-5 motive from the opening theme of the first movement. Furthermore, the figure releases on an eighth note, preserving the same gestural character of the enigmatic opening to the first movement. This motive takes on a fateful character in the *Andante*, undercutting the expansive gestures of F major with an otherworldly reminder of something less desirable. The additional chromatic twist provided by the upper chromatic neighbor (b6) lends this motive a serpentine shape that, in the *Affektenlehre* of the Baroque, was associated with Satan in his iconographic representations as a snake, worm, or serpent. Although one cannot establish Schubert's intent in this regard, previous evidence suffices to establish, if not an evil connotation, at least a reminder of the tragic.

A grandiose transition passage begins in m. 21 in the key of Db, down a third from the tonic F (just as F was down a third from the tonic A in the first movement). This transitional passage utilizes the deceptive sequence (I-V-vi-iii-IV-I) to build to a climax. The deceptive sequence, with its liturgical

associations (familiar to many from the “threefold Amen”) coupled to the heroic grandeur of texture and dynamics, suggests a powerful antidote to the serpent motive. But Schubert introduces an element of struggle that climaxes in sequential motion up from Gb, through a “crisis” diminished-seventh, and ultimately landing on the dominant of C major. This climactic outburst appears outside the horizon of expectations arising from the second movement’s placid opening theme. Its appearance suggests that the tragic premise from the first movement is still being addressed.

Having established the dominant key, Schubert re-presents his opening theme (mm. 31ff.) in a texture similar to the one used for the integrative second theme in the first movement’s development section. This texture is characterized by a tenor melody in the left hand, echoed in diminution by the right hand in a high register. Strikingly, the parenthetical “serpent” motive is maintained (mm. 35, 38) but “ameliorated” by scale-degree variation and full harmonization. Instead of outlining 5-#4-5 it is transposed to scale-degrees 3-#2-3, emphasizing the “sweetness” of the major 3 by means of a far less enigmatic embellishing chromaticism. When the E (3 of C major) threatens to become 5 of A minor in mm. 36-7, a dissonant B diminished-seventh chord over E (not an E eleventh chord, though a remarkable sonority nonetheless) pulls us back to the realm of C major just in time for the cadence. Modulatory sequencing on this strategic idea returns to F major, and the remainder of the movement is an extended closing section in which the serpent motive plays an increasingly prominent role. I will simply note here that a return to the opening four bars, with its pronounced abrupt cadence onto an eighth note, serves to cap a movement that has apparently lost its way (despite slipping back into F major, there are further digressions within the coda). The A minor-C major dissonant cadential strategy is twice played out, transposed, over a dominant ninth in D minor to V in F major. We are left with a sense of

unsatisfied resolution, despite the last-minute absorption of dissonant harmonies.

The last movement, as mentioned earlier, features a perpetual-motion rondo theme in A minor. The imitative opening alludes to the learned style for its connotations of seriousness and authoritativeness, and the stretto-like overlap of hands immediately draws us back into the intensity of the first movement's tragic premise. I will forego a chronological analysis to focus instead on the contrasting theme of the episode, which appears nearly identically three times, in F major, C major, and A major. This theme is extraordinary for the multiple integrations it achieves, beginning with an allusion to the serpent motive in its "ameliorative" setting (on scale-degree 3, m. 51). The arpeggiation in the melodic continuation (m. 52) suggests a link with the F major theme of the slow movement, as well. The drop of a third and the long-short legato linkage in the next measure (53) recall the first movement's motive. Finally, the left-hand accompanimental pattern features the now-familiar abrupt release on an eighth note (a release that is difficult to achieve without a "bump" in performance, and which is thus typically ignored by overpedalled Romantic interpretations).

What I want to explore in the last part of this lecture is how the integration of these ideas carries not only formal but gestural expressive significance, in the context of the overall dramatic trajectory of the work. That trajectory ends neither heroically nor transcendently, but with an impalvably fateful climax in A minor, the perpetual motion theme set in nearly-impossible octaves in each hand to overwhelm the listener with a fortissimo peroration. What the episode theme attempts to achieve, I believe, is an amelioration of the tragic, but the effort is even more vulnerably exposed than in the earlier two movements. The episodes are set up by an ascending scale at the cadence to the previous section (mm. 45-6). The scale exceeds its proper goal, punctuating its release on a chromatic pitch that sparks a

modulation, and dying away in syncopated, isolated pitches through a descending arpeggiation (mm. 46-50) to the dominant degree of the key to follow. The “serpent” variant with which the episode theme begins (m. 51) is not only ameliorated in its scale-degree setting, but involves diatonic instead of chromatic upper and lower neighbors. Only the b6 of the arpeggiated continuation (Db in m. 52) suggests that all is not well. The gestural drops in the third and fourth bars (mm. 53-4) are not abruptly released, and their downward sighs complement the upward arpeggiation to the poignant b6. The key to the vulnerability of the passage is in the accompaniment, with its detached measure-units, broken off on the fifth eighth as if to catch a quick breath. When the ear detects a motivic echo of the melodic line in the third and fifth eighths of each measure’s accompaniment, then the abrupt releases in the left hand’s echo begin to inflect the melody’s “Empfindsamer” sighs with an even greater gestural association with tragic opening motive of the first movement.

To experience the fragile episode theme’s attempt to reconcile the tragic while lacking full support from the accompaniment is to experience an even greater expressive effect than would be gained by direct association with a correlated affect or specific gesture. Our reaction to the pathos of a theme that cannot achieve what it attempts is a more complex and deeper kind of tragedy than that created by playing a theme in minor. It is this heartrending vision of the desired within the context of the impossible that makes the episodes so dramatically effective.

To conclude, I have demonstrated through this interpretation that it is only by combining gestural evidence with traditional motivic, tonal, harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic analysis — all within the context of a dramatic trajectory that expressively motivates the developing variation of ideas and textures across the entire work — that we can begin to realize the richness of Schubert’s compelling late style. The ongoing developing variation of a

gesturally-inspired motive involves negotiation with the more symbolic, stylistically coded elements of a style, even as it helps support their strategic manipulation in a unique work.

In the next lecture we will explore how combinations of gestures can support tropological interpretations that go beyond the gestural types with which a culture may be familiar, lending gesture the capacity for figurative creativity that I have claimed (Hatten, 1994: 161-202) for the more abstract elements of a musical style.

Assignment

Pursue this kind of analysis for Beethoven's Piano Sonata in A major, Op. 101, paying special attention to articulation markings. The last movement features a motive not unlike that used by Schubert in his own A major sonata (D. 959), as discussed in lecture 4. Begin by reading chapters 3 and 4 of Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven* (Indiana, 1994) on expressive genres and Op. 101, respectively.