Gestural troping

At the end of the last lecture I suggested as an assignment the analysis of “developing gesture” with respect to Beethoven’s Piano Sonata in A Major, Op. 101. The particular gesture that fascinates me, especially given Schubert’s use of it in his own A major sonata, D. 959 (see Lecture 4) and Beethoven’s use in his immediately prior piano sonata (Op. 90), is the upbeat-downbeat articulated gesture with which the Finale of Op. 101 begins. Anticipated by the extended anacrusis of the second theme motive from the first movement (mm. 16ff.), the articulated separation of upbeat and downbeat pervades the march and pastoral trio themes in the second movement, is echoed in the brief third movement’s turn motive (especially in mm. 11-14), and is clearly foregrounded in the fragmented, stringendo fragments of the quotation from the first movement (mm. 25-27) leading to the Finale proper. The Finale echoes the forte, upbeat-downbeat fanfare motive in a stretto imitation between the hands (mm. 1-4), and the musette-like continuation also begins with a softer version of that anacrusis (mm. 5-8). If you have read the chapters assigned from my book (Musical Meaning in Beethoven, 1994, chapters 3-4), you will recall the identification of three topics in this theme, and their respective correlations: (1) fanfare = heroic, victorious, (2) learned style = authoritative, and (3) pastoral musette = graceful simplicity. Somehow, these three meanings all contribute to the overall interpretation of the theme, and hence of the movement that plays with their contrasting characters. In chapter 7 (pp. 170-71) I return to this Finale theme as a prime example of tropological meaning in music, defined as that which achieves the creative force of metaphor, but through musical means. Musical tropes must meet the following criteria:

- The trope must emerge from a clear juxtaposition of contradictory, or previouslyunrelated, types [here, the opposition between heroic and pastoral is primary].
- The trope must arise from a single functional location or process [here, a theme]
- There must be evidence from a higher level to support a tropological interpretation, as opposed to interpretations of contrast, or dramatic opposition of characters [here, the opposition has been established by the pastoral first movement followed by a heroic + learned march with pastoral trio, and a learned Adagio leading, via quotation of the pastoral first movement's main theme, to the Finale. Hence, the drawing together of these contrasting topics in the opening theme of the Finale appears to be well-motivated as a premise for the cycle as a whole, which I view as being coordinated by the presuppositions of a pastoral expressive genre in terms of its positive outcome].

(Hatten, 1994: 170)

The fusion of topics in the opening theme of the Finale thus creatively engenders a tropological meaning that goes beyond the sum of the correlations of each. That interpretation, in my view, moves from the outward determination ("Entschlossenheit") of the authoritatively victorious theme, by way of an elevated pastoral connotation of spiritual grace, into the realm of an inward victory of the spirit–a richer and more subtle outcome, to be sure, than those noisy triumphs of the will characteristic of Beethoven's middle, or heroic, period.

Further analysis of the Finale reveals that the pastoral musette (a "low" style) is itself fused with the learned (stretto imitation in mm. 29ff.), and the play of low vs. high is humorously troped in passages such as mm. 55ff., in which the characteristically pastoral, horn-fifth figure is quoted (pianissimo, as if from a distance) and then mockingly dismissed (forte, in mm. 57-8)

before being replaced by a rollicking folk dance variant of the opening motive (in imitation, mm. 59-66).

What further integrates the tropological fusion of these contrasting topics is the very gesture with which we began, which continues to return in various guises as more than a mere anacrusis. Its isolation as a fragment (mm. 74-5) in the closing theme of the exposition leads to its brutal punctuation as a descending third to launch the fugal development in A minor. The harmless transformation of that fateful third into the cadential, cuckoo-like echoes of perfect fifths in the coda (mm. 308, 310, and 312-14) provides yet another example of the kind of gestural developing variation with which Beethoven was fascinated–here, anticipating the thematic transformation technique of Franz Liszt in much subtler fashion through the contrast of topical contexts (tragic/learned high style and comic/pastoral low style).

Gestural development is guided in this movement by an underlying trope that was engendered by juxtaposed contrasting topics; gestural development in turn supports the conceptual fusion of the trope by serving as a further unifying feature among the various topics. But can we speak of gestural troping in such a case? Surely the same constraints on gestural troping ought to apply as were outlined for topical tropes, and in the case of the Finale, instead of contrasting or otherwise incompatible gestures being juxtaposed, we have a single gesture being transformed as needed to fulfill several topical roles. What kinds of situations might arise musically that would warrant interpretation as a gestural trope? The next two examples, slightly revised and expanded from a recently published paper on gestural troping (Hatten, 1998), may help clarify what might be involved in claiming that the meanings of two gestures engender a trope, and what standards of plausibility such tropes must face.

Two years ago I first performed Schubert's Winterreise with Prof. Norman Spivey, chair of the voice faculty at Penn State University. One of our students noticed that at a certain point Norman's body appeared to move spirally upward as he sang a yearning melodic contour, while his eyes remained downcast, as though miming a gesture or posture of grief. Although such physical "extras" are not specified by the score, they are one means by which a performer may complement and enhance a gestural trope implied by the music. In this case, the troping might be between overall mood (the heaviness of grief) and local emotional response (the pull of yearning or hope). The constraints we noted are fulfilled in this example of actual physical gesturing: there are (1) two incompatible or contrasting gestures that (2) "come together" in a single functional location, and (3) there is a compelling reason to consider the trope as motivated by higher-levels: these emotional states had been individually introduced prior to the moment of their fusion, and their fusion suggests a highly poignant intensity that goes beyond the individual correlations of the two gestures.

By contrast, Machado de Assis, the 19th-century Brazilian writer, offers what would appear to be an oxymoronic trope in his novel, Epitaph of a Small Winner, when he speaks of the "voluptuousness of misery" (de Assis 1952, 72). The combination of grief, and a luxuriant wallowing in one's feelings of grief, may indeed constitute a striking literary trope, but in real life such a trope may be fictional. Psychologically, the two separate kinds of feelings may actually remain distinct. The "voluptuous" feeling suggests misinterpretation of a kind of psychic reward one might obtain if one's response to grief entails shutting off all normal (and fatiguing) daily activity and immersing oneself in one's feelings–a savoring which is all too rare in the normal course of events. Psychologically one may have "mixed emotions," but these need not "trope" into an emergent emotional state–for most people, there would tend to be at best an oscillation between the

unalloyed suffering of grief and the psyche's provision for relief by means of the satisfying catharsis of an exhaustive emotional expression.

Notice that in my critique of what is admittedly an effective literary trope, I moved the discourse to the level of psychological realism, thereby–perhaps unfairly–suggesting that the literary trope might be suspect in its applicability to human experience (but see below). My psychological analysis thus belongs more to the realm of critical valuation than interpretation, per se, and yet it is just this challenge that artistic tropes must face, if their creative fusions are to succeed in producing the sense of rightness characteristic of a moment of insight.

I want to return now to the remarkable second theme from Schubert's Piano Sonata in A Minor, D. 784, and fulfill my promise from the last lecture to examine its meaning from a tropological standpoint. In turn, I will argue that this theme is more psychologically plausible as a trope than Machado de Assis's.

Recall that the second theme presents a relatively sustained, hymnlike topic whose portato chords provide our first gestural type, which supports the positive correlations of major mode and hymnic topic with a gentleness associated with the palpability of portato touch. Clearly, the theme suggests a vision of serenity, even of spiritual grace, emerging after the tortured expressions of raw grief have been willed away by means of the heroic fanfare reversal in the transition. But there is also a trace of the earlier grief gesture, referenced by the marked accentuation on the first of each pair of half notes, which is a contradictory gestural type due to its distortion of the placid hymn prosody and its affective association with grief. What happens when these two contradictory gestural types are fused in a single functional location? Clearly, the hymnic vision is being underminded by the obsessive reminders of grief. This interpretation is strongly supported by later events

in the second theme: the isolation of the two-chord grief gesture with a release of the second chord, its registral echo with poignant mixture, and its fortissimo disruption, again with modal mixture. The expressive trope achieved already in the opening of the second theme is merely confirmed by these dramatic developments. In my interpretation, the trope achieves a greater sense of expressive poignance due to the almost chilling fragility of its vision of serenity and peace, undermined by the unrelenting reminders of grief. A performer who accepts this tropological interpretation must somehow convey a mixed gestural realization–a seeming impossibility, but surprisingly achievable in performance. My own solution is to let the accents just slightly distort the otherwise placid theme, and not to exaggerate but to respect the slight separations indicated by the portato as a subtle trace of the released part of the grief gesture.

Schubert's expressive meaning in this second theme should not be confused with de Assis's "voluptuousness of suffering," a trope that perhaps only Oscar Wilde could realize convincingly, with the help of an aesthetic of lurid decadence, in his play, Salomé. Rather, my less extreme interpretation of Schubert's second theme is psychologically plausible in that one might imagine or experience a visionary release from suffering that is rendered fragile and unsustainable by an underlying sense of inescapable grief. The consequent tragic import of serenity's impermanence is thus enhanced by the creative force of a musical trope.

Compare now the interlude theme from the Finale of the Schubert sonata and consider its tropological fusions, about which I had this to say in the last lecture:

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.
(Lecture 5)

That interpretation is clearly tropological, although I did not identify it as such in the last lecture. But how might one convey the tropological significance? In my own performance of the theme, I try to play the lyrical melodic line legato in the first two measures, and then I express the "sighs" in the third and fourth measures with greater declamation (a slight break after each two-note sigh). Meanwhile, beneath the "ameliorated" serpent theme and its consequent sighs, I play the accompaniment by releasing the fifth eighth-note, as written (and without carrying over the sound with the pedal, as is the case in most "romantic" interpretations). But the third and fifth eighth-notes also create their own sigh motive, which I attempt to bring out as an inner line that first anticipates (in inversion) and then echoes the sighs in the melodic line. Thus, the troping here is more complex–several motivic elements carrying expressive associations from earlier movements are ameliorated and undermined at the same time, and the gestures which might underline that opposition–smooth singing style and breathy accompaniment–are each modified in the direction of the other (the legato melody admits the slight discontinuity between sigh gestures, and the released accompaniment figure features the internal continuity of each "legato" two-note sigh motif). Again, I would like to think that I can convey this complexity in performance–at least for the informed listener. But as Leonardo da Vinci warned, "the supreme misfortune is when theory outstrips performance." In this case, I would argue that my tropological interpretation merely ratifies what Schubert has already achieved in his compositional "performance," and the pianist's attempt to realize this

admittedly complex theoretical ideal can only further enhance the subtlety with which this fragile theme “speaks.”

One might counter that the texture of the accompaniment merely suggests an instrumental realization by strings, and supports a dance topic such as might be found in a trio of a minuet. But Schubert’s trios that feature flowing eighths (including those few for the piano waltzes) typically promote continuity, often with one or more pedal points, rather than releases–and even his implied releases are not notated with rests in these other works. Unfortunately, I could find no comparable example in Schubert to Beethoven’s Alla danza tedesca movement from the Op. 130 String Quartet, which by its rhythmically-notated releases guarantee the homely yet sweetly evocative gestures of a lower-style peasant dance. In any case, a dance-topical motivation can only contribute to a stronger episode-like contrast between Schubert’s episode theme and the obsessive perpetual motion character of his rondo theme, and the rareness of such a written out release in the accompaniment supports consideration of another motivation which is more thematic to the work.

The play of topical tropes may also involve the characteristic gestures of those topics, especially in the case of topics like dances and marches. A charming example is found in the minuet from Mozart’s Linz symphony, where a topical march competes with the minuet both gesturally and metrically, and a delightful hemiola accomodates the march’s characteristic quadruple-meter motive and cadence. Schubert plays a similar game by importing a fanfare figure and a polonaise rhythmic gesture into the context of two waltzes (Twelve Waltzes, D. 145, nos. 12 and 3, respectively). The contradictory gestures are part of a larger scheme of alternation between loud, martially ceremonious waltzes and soft, dreamily intimate ones.

Although stylized or topical gestures may be involved in tropes, these tropes will typically lack the expressive originality and depth of thematically created gestures such as those found in the two sonatas examined in this lecture. Indeed, what is the expressive yield of a march-minuet, or a fanfare-waltz? Certainly, the play of incongruity in the former is witty, and the fanfare signals ceremonial closure of a waltz sequence with the pomp appropriate to a formal dance. But do these juxtaposed topical gestures really fuse into something that is creatively more than the sum of their individual contributions? As in language and literature, the best tropes engender a unique interpretive insight or experience that transcends the generic correlations of genres taken as whole cloth. The more interesting tropes will thus likely be found at more thematic interpretive levels, where topical features are absorbed into the particular configurations of a theme or motive that has expressive specificity earned from the work itself, and not merely from the style or styles it presupposes.

In the next lecture, I will explore another approach to contrasting gestures when their fusion does not appear to be the case. The range of interpretive possibilities expands when we consider multiple agencies for musical gestures, but we will also consider tropes that emerge from a dramatic dialogue, not merely those that fuse two gestures into a single agency.

References

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