Gesture and the problem of continuity

With the final lecture in the series “Musical Gesture,” it may be useful to provide a summary of four interrelated competencies we bring to our understanding of gesture. These competencies enable us to comprehend four fundamental aspects of a musical gesture:

- **Gestalt identity.** A musical gesture is the product of a single or coordinated set of represented and/or inferred (human) movements.
- **Continuity.** A musical gesture bridges the discreteness of isolated acoustical events by providing coherent and nuanced shaping, shading, and/or consistency across possible highly variable parameters.
- **Qualitative character.** Arising from (1) and (2), the perceptually dense and replete experience of a musical gesture can exemplify the qualities that it possesses (cf. Nelson Goodman 1968).
- **Implied agency.** The qualitative character of a musical gesture, and its continuities, typically enables us to infer a precise (if unnamable) expressive motivation or modality, and thus, in many cases, an implied agency (or in special cases, a persona, or actant, or character) in an enacted (or in special cases narrated) drama or “story.” Even the musical representation of natural objects (e.g., wind, or a storm) may be freighted with a human quality or amalgam of affective motivation (in cases where an agent identifies emotionally with the turbulence of a storm). Other gestures may suggest reaction (in cases where an agent responds with fear or anxiety), or the represented storm may constitute a background heightening of intensity as appropriate to the charged emotions of a portrayal (along

the lines of the pathetic fallacy in literature and drama, where “it was a dark and stormy night” sets up an appropriate mood).

There are two powerful sources for the gestural competencies outlined above. The first is physical: biological and cognitive. Our brains encompass a highly refined perceptual-motor awareness that over a long period of evolutionary development has successfully coped with visual, kinesthetic, and aural gestures, in terms of their intermodally linked shapings and shadings. Thus, our physical bodies are designed such that we quickly achieve (through experience and bodily learning) what soon appears to be an ingrained perceptual/cognitive capacity for identifying aural gestures, their continuities (and hence duration), their qualitative character (a skill essential for social interaction via utterances), and their implied agency (a skill essential for survival — escaping predators in situations where they are not visible).

The second source is social: cultural, and more specifically, music-stylistic. Culturally, we absorb typical bodily movements in response to typical social interactions, ranging from emotive expression in everyday life, to the intonations of a language, to the more ritualized gestures of cultural institutions ranging from social dance to civic ceremony and religious ritual. What a musical style clarifies and constrains is the identity of a gesture as a motive; its duration in a matrix of tempo, meter, and rhythm; its coherence in terms of these and other musical values, and its contextualization in terms of other musical events and cultural significance. What a musical work clarifies and constrains is the significance of a musical gesture in terms of its strategic role in the work.

We have explored the thematic roles of gestures in sonatas by Beethoven and Schubert in previous lectures. Gestures may also play embellishing, closural, reinforcing, or other rhetorical roles in an ongoing musical discourse. Our interpretation of a musical work will further clarify the kinds

of agency appropriate to a musical discourse, and the interactions of gestures in such cases as rhetorical opposition (along a continuum from thematic conflict, to contrast, to mere differentiation). And we can reconstruct instances of gestural troping, where contrasting or incompatible gestures are brought together based on unsuspected similarities or because the association can create (or recreate) a story or dramatically motivated discourse.

Gesture (musical or otherwise) is molar, by analogy with chemistry: we cannot precisely break down the ingredients that it synthesizes (at least in our conceptual efforts), or prescribe the exact proportions of each of the elements that help achieve its effect. In performance, as in speech, an effective gestural realization may be a unique amalgam for each individual, while still affording sufficient categorial typing to be effectively understood. Gesture may require more right than left brain processing, and evidence of this conflict may be heard in performances that are technically proficient at reproducing notated values, while woefully deficient in capturing the continuities that provide coherence — structurally and expressively. Interestingly, the possibility of a gestural type does not imply the necessity of sterile abstraction — we reach the type by processing invariants that are accessible from nevertheless replete tokens. Thus, gesture can not only enter hierarchies of a symbol system such as a syntactically developed musical style, but it can maintain access to the apparent immediacies of identification — those affordances that constitute our biological and cultural inheritance.

Previous lectures have dealt extensively with identifying gestures (particularly thematic ones), describing their qualitative (and hence emotive) character, and exploring their agency (and hence their role in a musical drama or expressive genre). I wish to explore in this final lecture some of the implications of the fourth of these competencies,

understanding the continuity of a gesture. Continuity as a musical issue arises in contexts larger than that of a thematic gesture, and in exploring what we might mean by continuity in larger musical spans, we can see how a gestural competency has implications for other dimensions of musical structure than the strictly thematic. I avoid here the conclusion that these larger constructs should be conceived as global gestures, and instead merely observe that our processing of them draws upon a competency in perceiving continuity that is fundamental to musical gestural understanding. Thus, the analyses that follow might be seen as exploring some of the consequences stemming from the unique perspective of our investigations into musical gesture.

One of the most striking differences between Classical and Baroque styles is found in the treatment of texture. Classical composers typically articulate texture by implementation of clear phrase breaks and introduction of rhythmic contrast, thereby breaking up the *Fortspinnung* and “single-affect” continuities characteristic of Baroque movements.

Classical articulation provides several advantages, of which two are paramount. The hierarchical organization of discrete phrases and sections enables composers to construct larger movements with audibly coherent formal organization. But equally important, the introduction of rhythmic contrast leads to highly dramatic oppositions of affect. These two facts are interrelated, in that a hierarchial organization of tonality and phrase construction is required to accommodate highly contrastive sections as part of a dramatic whole. Sonata form, with its deeply hierarchical tonal and thematic rhetoric, was one successful schema in which the competing demands of coherence and dramatic opposition could be reconciled, and in ways sufficiently flexible that characteristic features of themes might help determine aspects of the resulting form. Hence, the powerful impression of deeper organic unity could compensate for extremes of discontinuity in

dramatically conceived surfaces, with the artistic result being a balanced integration of dynamic drama and coherent form.

But the discreteness of section, texture, and theme that gives Classical form such dramatic potential and expressive force is sometimes relinquished in favor of apparent textural or thematic continuitites of perhaps greater dramatic or expressive power. The “perpetual motion” movement is the most obvious example of textural continuity; it is marked in opposition to the unmarked, stylistically established expectation of clear textural articulation. In other words, the salience of perpetual motion textures in the Classical style (psychologically marked as different/ unexpected) contributes to their theoretical interpretation (stylistically marked as oppositional) and eventual establishment as a type in the (expanding) Classical style.

It is continuity in a broader sense, not merely the textural continuity we find in perpetual motion movements, that will be my concern in examining striking passages from the piano sonatas of Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert. My speculations will range from the local — the expressive interpretation of a particular passage — to the global — the explanation of one of the motivations underlying the apparent shift in style between those eras we refer to as Classical and Romantic.

One of the best early examples of textural continuity as a compositional premise occurs in Mozart’s Piano Sonata in A Minor, K. 310; the third movement is an ongoing perpetual motion finale. Already in the first movement, however, the second theme and closing group (to the double-bar of the exposition) unrolls in nearly continuous sixteenth-notes, despite clear divisions of function between presentational, transitional, and closural types of material. Subtle articulations of the continuous sixteenths are also achieved by the discrete rhythms of accompanimental chords and the shift

of sixteenths between registers. The continuous sixteenths, at first decorous and galant (mm. 23-27), become increasingly obsessive in the continuation (mm. 28-35), and resume a galant cadential character to head toward closure (mm. 35-42). In the final drive to cadence, (mm. 42-49), however, the sixteenths take on a more fateful aspect in their relentless descent in the left hand to the lowest register; and the return of the dotted-rhythmic motive associated with the A-minor first theme underscores their obsessive-fateful character.

At the beginning of the second theme group, each measure appears motivically self-contained, creating the effect of addivitve phrase construction from the start. Yet the first four bars also establish an expectation of symmetry based on their closed harmonic progression. Only in the continuation is this symmetry broken, by an interruption in m. 28 that embeds a new eight-bar phrase. Note that the accompanimental texture changes radically in m. 28, helping to underline the unusual phrase embedding, while the sixteenths maintain their continuous flow. The galant style shifts to the learned and bound styles (Ratner 1980, 1-30), non-legato becomes legato, and a circle-of-fifths sequence in the first phrase is answered by a linear descending sequence with 7-6 suspensions. Ironically, an interruption appears to promote continuity in this passage, since the interpolation, as an embedded phrase that continues by displacement, evades the hierarchical construction that would have emerged if another, clearer four-bar unit beginning in m. 27 had been completed. By foregoing regular symmetry, Mozart achieves an effect more akin to musical prose.

A related effect of interruption may be found in the last movement, a thoroughgoing perpetual-motion rondo in which four- and eight-bar phrases are the norm until the drive to cadence closing the second section in the relative major, C. Here, the chromatic disruption is a typical delaying

technique, and it promotes continuity by extending the phrase twice — first, in m. 52, by recycling the cadential progression, and second, in m. 56, by launching a sequential, modulatory transition to E minor for a restatement of the rondo theme.

That the continuity of motion draws something of its expressive force from allusions to the Baroque is clear from passages in the development section of the first movement and the middle section of the second movement, where minor mode, chain suspensions, and insistent motoric repetition may be found. Allusion to a venerable style carries with it the connotation of authoritativeness, interpretable here as relentless and implacable fatefulness, which complements the tragic obsessiveness attributable to minor-mode perpetual motion. Mozart wrote the sonata just after his mother had died, which may well have influenced his texturally cyclic expressive concept for the three movements.

Minor mode and obsessive sixteenths characterize two famous examples of perpetual motion in Beethoven, as well — the finales of the “Tempest” and “Appassionata” piano sonatas (Op. 31, no. 2 and Op. 57). But the continuity of sixteenths in Beethoven’s finales, or eighths in Mozart’s, does not constitute the sole level of articulation. Mozart’s rondo theme offers a variety of rhythmic articulations from the start (the melodic idea features repetitions of a dotted-quarter plus eighth rhythm), and the minor-mode obsessiveness is relieved by a contrasting middle section in which a major-mode musette “vision” is laid on top of the continuous eighth-note generation in a variation of the original melodic idea. In both locations, the continuous-eighth-note texture might be understood as absorbing the dotted-quarter-plus-eighth-note repetitions into a thematic complex characterized by obsessive continuity. The fine-grained repetition of eighth notes complements the coarser-grained repetition of the bar-length rhythmic motive.

In Beethoven's "Appassionata" finale the distinction between texture and theme is more striking. After offering a contour of continuous sixteenths as an unadorned theme, Beethoven creates a rhythmically varied theme by a process of layering, or lamination, of top of the continuous sixteenth-note texture. The originally foregrounded thematic sixteenths are backgrounded against the emergence of the laminated idea, without ceasing to be "thematic" in themselves.

Compare, with respect to the Mozart and Beethoven finale themes, the rondo finale of Schubert's Piano Sonata in A Minor, D. 845, with its perpetual-motion theme. Although the perpetual motion is not sustained throughout the entire movement, Schubert attempts a more thoroughgoing continuity of thematic texture in his eighth-note theme. Despite a slippery segregation into compound lines and even hints of two-voice counterpoint, there is no clear sense of lamination against a background, as in the Beethoven. More importantly, and in contrast to both Beethoven's and Mozart's finales, Schubert avoids symmetrical phrase construction from the very beginning. His 14-bar theme is constructed by an additive process that features recycling (mm. 5-6), shifting precipitously back to A minor from a premature move to the relative major (mm. 7-10), and spilling over the articulative half-cadence into the next phrase (mm. 14-15). Clearly, the expressive effect of a thematic labyrinth is part of Schubert's effect. One may "get lost," and the thread of continuity is precariously woven in an expressive world where nothing is quite what it seems.

What emerges from these examples of continuity as a thematic ideal in sonata-form and (sonata-) rondo movements from Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert are the first hints of a type that becomes so popular as to effect a change in style, fully achieved by the time of Schumann's rhythmically obsessive movements or Chopin's more subtly structured etudes (or etude-like preludes) with their extreme textural continuity. What would be marked

in Mozart or Beethoven as strikingly oppositional to the typically articulated textures in the Classical style increasingly becomes typical for the new Romantic style, and hence unmarked. For Schubert, however, the situation is still transitional and hence highly potent. I would suggest that continuity is still marked, but that more exotic means (such as the additive and recycling phrase construction analyzed above) must be employed to maintain the novelty.

The move from discrete to continuous texture may itself be thematized, as suggested by many sonata movements of the Classical era in which dramatic contrasts in the first theme group and transition are mollified by a more consistent rhythmic/textural drive to the cadence in the second theme group. In Schubert's Piano Sonata in G, D. 894 (1826), we find a first movement where the thematization of athe move from discontinuity to continuity is so remarkable that is apparently confused the generic perceptions of its first publisher, who appended the title "Fantasie" despite the movement's rather clear underlying sonata-form structure. But the surface may easily distract the listener from its underlying form. The motto-like first theme is introduced in isolation, then linked to varied statements by a five-eighth-note upbeat, which becomes an important motivic part of the second theme. The inadequacy of continuity in this bald stitching of first-theme statements, also characteristic of the brief transition, is finally overcome by the second theme's extensive presentation over a dominant pedal in D major (mm. 27ff.). A diminutional variation with continuous sixteenths (mm. 37ff.) leads to the highest register for a dynamically soft, ecstatic, visionary effusion (as opposed to a traditional climax). A scalar descent (mm. 46-7) returns the visionary to reality, represented by lower register, thick harmonic stasis, and a forte dynamic level (m. 48). This disjunction also inflects the affect of the haunting closing theme (mm. 49ff.), in which a trance-like continuity attempts to restore closural periodicity.

“Perpetual motion” adequately describes only the diminutional variation of the second theme. But the broader concept of textural continuity can admit less uniform instances than the bald reiteration of a single rhythmic value — for example, the topical use of the waltz rhythm in the first statement of the second theme (mm. 27ff.), where it appears on just the first and second beats of each broad 4-beat measure. In turn, despite the uniformity of a pedal point (implied if not actually sustained over the 20 measures of the second theme, resolving only at the end of each 10-bar unit), various harmonic and tonal motions offer a more discrete and varied rhythmic articulation of the upper strata.

Continuity (in this context, as opposed to the context of a more immediate musical gesture) must be defined in terms of consistency of action at some level, regardless of its possibly varied internal articulation. Thus, a sequence can create continuity from the most discontinuous of themes. And as we have seen, some kinds of interruption can promote continuity if they can be absorbed as phrase embedding, or phrase extending, since the previous phrase is not allowed to end with its predictably discrete articulation. Being “led on” is a basic ingredient of dramatic continuity. Unpredictability, as well as more predictable kinds of pattern change, can of course be used to break continuity. But strikingly, extended passages of continuity often incorporate their own unpredictability and yield expressive effects accordingly.

Such sections generally de-emphasize hierarchical organization in deference to more additive construction, as we have seen, and Schubert’s ten-bar second theme is no exception. It begins with a motivically clear, symmetrical organization (1+1), repeated up an octave (1+1), followed by (1)+(1)+(1+1+1+1), yielding what can be heard as a 2-bar extended variant of the *Satz* form. But the aural impression is far from Classical because of the continuous one-bar motivic-unit construction, which conspires with the

pedal point to produce an additive, hence somewhat unpredictable, effect of leisurely phrase growth with what sounds like an improvisation on a motive. The hierarchical structure of the 12/8 meter, which encompasses the equivalent of four waltz measures in each sonata measure (each 3/8 at this slow tempo corresponds to a typical 3/4 waltz or LSndler measure), is clearly predictable at the lower level of motivic organization. But the very length of the sonata measure makes the ultimate ten-bar phrase a considerable expansion of the *Satz* schema, since it constitutes the equivalent of forty "normal" measures. Thus, the temporal expanse of this single phrase foreshadows the stylistic shift from articulated Classical phrase hierarchies to continuous Romantic unfolding.

The sequential elevation to a high register may be interpreted as analogous to an intuitively evolving spiritual discovery. A searching or exploration is implied by the additive elevation of the motive, and it is thus expressively appropriate that the climax is not achieved in a singular crux, as often in Beethoven, but suffused over a broader stretch (note the placement of the decrescendo in m. 35, before the apex of the ascent). The effect is that of an emotion welling up on progressive waves of feeling, and the welling itself — not any particular peak — is the goal. Thus, even the Classical notion of climax as having a discrete point (apex, or crux) is diffused by means of continuity, and the expressive yield is approriately transcendent — akin to spiritual exaltation.

A musical style that draws on topical and gestural associations — such as those triggered by the waltz topic — can ground emotion in motion that is both physical (the feel of an embodied waltz rhythm) and cultural (the stylistic correlations and intertextural associations of a musical topic). The progressive intoxication of a waltz — even one as slowed down and reflective as this — supports a comparable expressive interpretation of Schubert's more strategic composition choices (the vast 12/8 metric frame,

the pedal point, the additive phrase construction, the sequential ascent to high register). Together, the evidence supports an interpretation beyond simple physiological responses to a reiterated motive, or personal and cultural associations with a topic, to a more transcendent state, such as the spiritual exaltation I believe Schubert to have achieved in this passage.

Continuity leading to trance, if not transcendence, is a strategy that achieves the status of a stylistic type in the emerging Romantic era. We can see how the technique, and its expressive motivation, has its roots in works of Mozart and Beethoven (and Haydn), where the continuous appears as highly marked texturally, and where its distinctiveness is used for spectacular expressive effect. Schubert takes the concept further, exploiting temporal expansiveness and additive unpredictability of phrase structure to achieve a kind of timelessness. If, in certain exceptional works, the Classical composer sought to transcend the constraints of periodicity and articulation, perhaps the Romantic composer sought surcease from temporality itself.

Footnotes

1. One of the best accounts of the interaction of these aspects of Classical style is found in Charles Rosen, *The Classical Style* (New York: Norton, 1971), 53-98.
Back to where you left off.

2. For more detailed explanation of markedness, style types, and style growth, see Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, Correlation, and Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press,

1994).
Back to where you left off.

3.Schubert injects a classicizing contrast in his episodes, but like Mozart (whose K. 310 finale may well have been the inspiration for Schubert's finale) he moves to A major in conjunction with the perpetual motion texture to launch the middle section's developmental integration of ideas. Other movements of Schubert sonatas justify their perpetual-motion thematic character (which is pervasive, if occasionally disrupted) by means of genre: the diminutional variations of the second movement of D. 845, or the topical tarantella used as the basis for the finale of D. 958.
Back to where you left off.

4.Historical style change leading to the continuities of Schumann and Chopin may have been fueled not only by the breakdown of Classical formal hierarchies but by the urge to respond to inner expression in shorter character pieces (in turn, prefigured by the Classical character variation and bagatelle). Textural continuity as the substrate for single-affect emotional consistency in early Romantic character pieces may help explain the oft-noted parallel with Baroque textures.
Back to where you left off.

5.Further drama may then be achieved by delaying or diverting that drive.
Back to where you left off.

6.The *Satz* is a Classical phrase design characteristic of many Classical themes (a prototype being the opening theme of Beethoven's Piano Sonata, Op. 2, no. 1). It features dynamic or propulsive phrase growth (by motivic fragmentation and acceleration) reconciled to a symmetrical outcome. The typical additive motivic pattern (2)+(2)+(1+1)+(2) nevertheless results in (4+4) periodicity. Thus, additive and hierarchical

phrase construction are yoked in perfect balance. Clearly, Schubert's construction of his second theme tips the balance toward the additive.
Back to where you left off.

7.I do not mean to imply that four-bar phrases cease to be the norm in Romantic music, but rather that they cease to be constructed as hierarchically as in the Classical style. For an interesting account of early Romantic manipulation of the four-bar norm, see Charles Rosen, *The Romantic Generation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 258-78.
Back to where you left off.

8.Interestingly, ritual performances also draw on the repetitive, often to generate a trance-like response, and some minimalist compositions reflect an awareness of the potential to generate a "deeper" expressive state or psychological mood by near-tantric repetition.
Back to where you left off.

References

Goodman, Nelson. 1968. *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols.* Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill.

Ratner, Leonard. 1980. *Classic Music.* New York: Schirmer.

Note from instructor

I hope you have enjoyed this series of lectures on musical gesture. Please be so kind as to send me a short e-mail message acknowledging your visit to this site. I welcome any reactions you may have. Please inform me, as well, of any citations from the lectures.