

The Narrative Persona and the Nineteenth-Century Solo Concerto: An Analytical Study of Stylistic Competency and the Troping of Temporality

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The philosopher Jerrold Levinson has described the expressive quality of music as the process of manifesting or externalizing the psychological properties of a sentient being. Levinson (1990, 193) proposes an analysis of musical expression as follows: “a passage of music P is expressive of an emotion E if and only if P, in context, is readily heard, by a listener experienced in the genre in question, as an expression of E.” As Levinson describes the listener’s process of perceiving a passage of expressive music, at least a minimal musical persona must necessarily exist in order to be an agent of the expressed emotion. “Since expressing requires an expresser, this means that in so hearing the music the listener is in effect committed to hearing an agent in the music—what we can call the music’s *persona*—or to at least imagining such an agent in a background manner” (Levinson 1990, 193). In Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, according to Levinson (1990, 201), it is difficult not to hear the finale “as if there is someone, or some agent, there who is expressing his, her, or its triumphant joy in those familiar musical gestures.”

The Narrative Persona

Edward T. Cone has suggested that all musical expression is a form of utterance that, to some extent, depends upon an act of impersonation on the part of the performer or performers. In Cone’s view (1974, 94), there is a theoretical persona in an instrumental or absolute musical work that is the “experiencing subject of the entire composition, in whose thought the play, or narrative, or reverie, takes place—whose inner life the music communicates by means of symbolic gesture.” A musical performance would therefore represent a dramatic reenactment of an emotional expression in which some agent or persona could be presumed to have experienced the emotion in question.

The nature of the authorial voice in musical diegesis may only slightly influence the perceived independence of the narrative persona from the narrative text. According to Gérard Genette’s (1980, 228-48) idea of “diegetic levels,” the *extra diegetic level*, or the telling of the narrative, which I equate to the *act of narrating*, is external to the diegesis itself. In the case of the solo concerto, the role of the authorial voice, though still influential, is perhaps minimized by the extra diegetic nature of the concerto soloist, who already inhabits and controls the temporal space of the extra diegetic narrative voice.

The act of narrating is perhaps the aspect of the literary narrative that instrumental music may come closest to approximating. As Carolyn Abbate has described the initial improvisatory vocalization that begins Lakmé’s Bell Song, the act of narrating and therefore the existence of a narrative persona are forcefully and compellingly established by the beauty of the wordless vocal solo. “The tale that Lakmé tells is insignificant, for it is not the story that acts upon the listener.

The act of telling it—the act of narrating—is the point” (Abbate 1991, 6).

In instrumental music the narrative text and the act of narrating may become subjectively fused. As the concerto soloist steps upon the stage and begins to play an instrumental solo, that may in some instances reference the style of an operatic recitative, the act of narrating is established. Although the specific content of the narrative text may remain “unknowable,” the act of narrating is already understood by the competent listener and the absence of specific meaning within the narrative text is simply an aspect of this particular narrative.

The temporal separation between the narrator (or the act of narrating) and the narrative text, a distinction that is explicitly established within the literary narrative, may also be established for the competent listener in an instrumental musical work, either through reference to the conventions of the literary narrative, or through musical signs and symbols that create multi-linear temporal associations. When this occurs, the act of narrating subsumes the narrative text and its meaning. In most instrumental works, the content and meaning of the narrative text may be determined or supplied subjectively by the listener, although competent listeners will additionally respond to the topics and the expressive content within a specific musical act of narration.

The Solo Concerto

In his discussion of the two distinct “sound bodies,” or *Klangkörper*, from which a solo concerto is derived, i.e. the soloist and the orchestra, Joseph Kerman (1999, 18-23) describes each as a separate musical agent. Kerman cites Heinrich Christoph Koch’s comparison of the orchestra-soloist dichotomy to the relationship between the chorus and the protagonist in classical Greek drama. Kerman (1999, 22) also observes that the music of the soloist often serves a different musical function than the music played by the orchestra, the orchestra primarily providing a foundational layer of musical discourse, concerning the development of aspects such as theme, tonality, rhythm, texture, etc., while the soloist, in addition to participating in the larger musical discourse, may also be concerned with musical “display,” which could at times be described as loud, fast, sexy, extemporaneous, or unpredictable.

The solo concerto is often described as a struggle between an individual and a larger external reality. Charles Rosen (1972, 227-40) provides an extended analysis of Mozart’s Piano Concerto in D Minor, K. 466, as a struggle between the soloist and the orchestra. The concept of the struggle between the two agents of the solo concerto genre seems to suggest that the listener clearly accepts the agent of the solo voice as a representation of an individual person, i.e. a musical persona, and that the listener therefore also accepts the orchestra as an agent of some entity or concept that is distinct from the individual musical persona.

Kerman (1999, 50) describes a number of possible “relationship types” between the soloist and the orchestra, such as “master-servant” or “mentor-acolyte.” In each of these types of relationships there is the clear implication of a musical persona, since someone must be the “servant” in order for a “master-servant” relationship to exist. The nature of the implied musical persona in a solo concerto, therefore, not only exists as a necessary element of the expressive

quality of the music, but also represents an individual engaged in a specific type of relationship with some external entity.

The narrative persona is always external to the narrative text itself. Since the narrative persona is usually understood to represent an individual human being, and since the soloist in the performance of a solo concerto is usually an individual human being, there is a necessary and meaningful connection between the soloist and the narrative persona. The orchestra represents things that are external to the narrative persona, which includes the narrative text itself.

It is perhaps the idea of *distancing* that most directly connects the solo concerto to the literary narrative. Just as the *act of narrating* must be distanced from the *narrative text*, so the concerto soloist is distanced from the orchestra and from the text of the orchestra. This form of distancing implies, for the competent listener, an aspect of temporal separation. The necessary temporal disjunction between the time-space of the literary narrative persona and the time-space of the narrative text is reflected in the solo concerto by the independent formal parameters, i.e. the separation of themes and the differentiated development of thematic material, between the soloist and the orchestra.

Stylistic Competency

We may assume that it is possible for a listener to understand a musical work. For that understanding to occur it is necessary that the listener interpret the music in some way. The technical, stylistic, aesthetic, expressive, and social choices that the listener must make in order to interpret and therefore understand a musical work may be described as a set of competencies to which the listener refers during the process of interpretation. Through historical or technical analysis it is possible to suggest a set of stylistic competencies that the composer may have intended the listener to possess in order to understand a musical work; however, the specific set of competencies that the listener decides to bring to any particular musical work will always derive from entirely subjective choices.

If the inherent applicability of the literary narrative to the musical genre of the solo concerto, together with its associated topics and metaphorical references, may be considered as constituting part of the genre's stylistic competency, then specific musical works could possibly extend upon, or alternatively could presumably undermine or problematize, this element of stylistic competency as part of the individual work's strategy for the realization of an established stylistic principle. In the case of the nineteenth-century solo concerto, one of the most effective and frequently encountered of these individual strategies seems to be the suggestion of non-linear musical temporality. Since the literary narrative persona is temporally distanced from the narrative text, any reference to non-linear musical temporality may function as an individual strategy that supports an important stylistic principle of the literary narrative.

Robert S. Hatten (2006) has suggested that individual musical works may demonstrate an idiosyncratic temporal strategy through the implication of a marked temporal method of organization that is unique to the specific musical work. These idiosyncratic patterns of temporal continuity may signal a narrative agency through the implied hierarchical re-structuring of the normative temporal flow. Hatten refers to the listener's process of interpreting a musical

meaning from the re-ordering of temporally coded events as the *troping of temporality*. Just as the past, or preterit, tense is the marked element of the present tense vs. past tense oppositional pair in literary discourse (Fleischman 1990, 52-63), so a non-linear temporal continuity is the marked element in the oppositional pair of linear vs. non-linear temporal continuity for the stylistically competent listener in regard to the genre of nineteenth-century instrumental music.

Jonathan D. Kramer (1988) has used the term *non-linear* to describe the consideration of a musical work independent of any aspect of linear continuity, as if all of the inherently successive elements of the work were to take place at the same time. A literary narrative would in this sense have an aspect of non-linear temporality, since both the time space of the narrative text and the extra-diegetic time space of the narrative persona must be considered together in order to understand the composite act of narrating that is usually the primary structure of the literary work. According to Robert S. Hatten's (2006) notion of the *troping of temporality*, a musical work may problematize the idea of linear continuity through the relative levels of temporal markedness that are associated with independent signifiers of linear continuity, thereby establishing an element of non-linear continuity in a manner that is somewhat similar to the inherent non-linear continuity of the literary act of narrating.

Johannes Brahms, Piano Concerto No. 1 in D Minor

The biographical and extra-musical connections between Brahms's D-Minor Piano Concerto and real individual personalities could lead to the assumption that the musical persona in this work actually portrays or represents a specific historical human being. The contrast between the soloist as an individual human persona and the orchestra as representing a larger external reality is reflected in Karl Geiringer's (1948, 248) observation that "Brahms repeatedly entrusted to the piano in the first movement ideas that are only remotely, if at all, connected with the thematic material of the orchestral part." Carl Dahlhaus (1965) has suggested that Brahms arranged the themes of the first movement in distinct clusters and that a process of developing variation may be understood to unfold over the course of the movement as each of these themes is altered as it reappears within the form.

The essential narrative that is conveyed by the musical persona in the first movement of the Concerto may perhaps be primarily expressed by the manner in which the soloist either participates or does not participate in the formal and thematic process of the movement's sonata-form design. The initial entrance of the soloist begins not with the main theme, but rather with a melodic fragment that seems to be related to a portion of the closing theme from the orchestral exposition. Although this theme may subsequently be understood as a constituent member of the first-theme-group, the entrance of the piano soloist on a theme that is apparently different from the first theme of the orchestra establishes a powerful sense of narrative and structural division between the solo voice and the larger ensemble. The independence of the soloist, as narrative persona, from the narrative text itself is also strongly suggested by the extended presentation of the second theme, in both the exposition and the recapitulation, by the piano soloist alone, without any accompaniment from the orchestra.

In the first movement of the Concerto the narrative persona establishes a separation of the time-space of the soloist from the time-space of the orchestra through the independence of the

thematic processes of development that each “sound body” experiences, almost as if two separate but closely related concertos were being presented, one played by the soloist and another performed by the orchestra. Since the opening theme functions like a structural “frame” as much as a primary theme, the time-space of the soloist is perhaps also separated from the time-space of the narrative text itself by the function of the frame as a temporal reference that signifies separation. Each time the main theme or frame reappears in the Concerto it is significantly altered and it never entirely repeats its original form. When the soloist eventually participates in the presentation of the frame during the recapitulation, it seems surprising, since the soloist did not play the theme at the beginning of the solo exposition. At the beginning of the recapitulation, the listener may also be surprised by the transposition of the theme to the key of E major over a pedal D in the bass, the main theme originally being heard in the key of B-flat major over the same pedal D. The idea of structural separation is once again suggested by the harmonic contrast of the key of the piano soloist and the dissonant pedal point in the orchestra. Here again it is the piano soloist who seems to be out of phase temporally and therefore separated from the thematic process of the orchestra’s formal design.

Felix Mendelssohn, Violin Concerto in E Minor

[5.2] Perhaps the most stylistically marked aspect of the movement in terms of formal organization is Mendelssohn’s decision to move the solo cadenza from its usual place at the end of the recapitulation to the transition between the development and the beginning of the recapitulation, an innovation to the traditional concerto structure that Charles Rosen (1995, 586) described as “unprecedented.” During this transition the violin soloist, as narrative persona, distances himself from the time space of the orchestra not only by effectively silencing the orchestra with a lengthy solo cadenza, but more importantly, by continuing the cadenza throughout the entire orchestral statement of the recapitulation’s first theme, thereby separating the temporal structure of the solo voice from the linear organization of the primary narrative text. In a similar, if somewhat less dramatic fashion, the soloist also separates his time space from that of the orchestra by continuing the final pitch of the soloist’s transition theme as a lengthy tonic pedal throughout the entire orchestral presentation of the primary second theme during both the movement’s exposition and recapitulation. As the soloist appears to disregard the clear and important formal articulations that are presented by the orchestra, and instead seems to linger on thematic content of the previous formal sections, the temporality of the two sounding bodies (soloist and orchestra) are forcefully separated in a manner that makes clear the independence of the time space of the soloist from the necessarily more concrete and more limited temporality of the narrative text itself.

Hector Berlioz, *Harold in Italy*

[6.1] Although nominally not a concerto soloist, the solo violist in Hector Berlioz’s programmatic symphony *Harold in Italy* signifies not only an embodiment of the genre-derived *epitext* of the virtuoso, in reference to the tradition of the solo concerto, but also Byron’s solitary hero, as suggested by the juxtaposition of a single observer in contrast to a larger external frame. Berlioz’s rather vague and somewhat boundless program for the symphony further establishes the function of the soloist as a generative agent in the transmission of his own text, i.e. the story from the perspective of the viola soloist; a distinction easily lost had a more detailed program

allowed the character of the soloist to re-enact a finite and discreet story line. The inherent flexibility of Berlioz's open-ended program enables the soloist, as narrative persona, to achieve complete separation between story and story teller, perhaps a conditional requirement for the full qualities of the prose narrative to be obtained within an instrumental musical composition.

In mm. 68-71 of the first movement Berlioz suggests a rather subtle manipulation of two possible time-space identities, that of the orchestra and that of the soloist. Although the separation is only that of a quarter-note in terms of metrical displacement, and generally conforms to the technical expectations of an imitative response to the basic melodic line, an indication is clearly projected that the soloist, in some fundamental way, may be distinguished from the orchestra and therefore the orchestra's primary text. This separation corresponds to the characteristic discontinuity between story and story-teller encountered in prose narrative.

In mm. 16-25 of the second movement the dissonant C-natural of the horn may be perceived as a true textual disjunction, so unexpected as to almost represent an element of an independent composition inappropriately encroaching upon the movement's text. The process of con-joining or overlapping any two non-complimentary texts serves to establish the semantic limits of at least one of the component texts, since it is only through structural limitation that finite entities, such as musical works, may appear dissimilar to each other. The effort to achieve a truly functional separation between narrative and narrative text within an instrumental musical work seems to require the composer to create an exceptionally forceful separation of implied texts, such as Berlioz demonstrates in this example.

Metrical discontinuity establishes separation between soloist and orchestra in mm. 56-75 of the second movement. The initial one half beat separation between violist and orchestra gives way to a metrical distinction derived from rhythmic proportions, reminiscent of the proportional contrast possible in fifteenth-century notation. This metrical contrast reflects almost directly the implied temporal division between story and story teller.

The lengthy meditation of the soloist in mm. 169-247 of the second movement provides an interruption or suspension of the primary narrative text. Berlioz's soloist becomes almost lost in reflection, as the movement ends without a conclusion derived from its own thematic logic. It is at this moment in the symphony that the listener perhaps most clearly perceives the division in both time and space between the soloist and the primary text of the orchestra.

The entrance of the soloist in m. 65 of the third movement again suggest separation through metrical proportion, but in this case disjunction is also achieved through multi-valent harmonic re-interpretation. The primary harmonic function of mm. 64-66 is a secondary dominant sonority, V/vi in the key of C major; however, the viola begins its adagio theme on the pitch D as if it were a member of the tonic chord in G major. A subtle yet abrupt suggestion of poly-tonality is thus evoked, clearly dividing the violist's musical layer from that of the orchestra. Mm. 166-208 of the third movement provide the most extreme version in the work of textual disjunction through contrast in metrical proportion. Three distinct rhythmic and metrical layers are provided, one for the flute, one for the orchestral violas, and one for the viola soloist, perhaps suggesting a truly non-linear co-existence of multiple layers of quotation

Conclusion

Whether or not is possible for music to express specific meaning to the same extent and detail that language is capable of doing so, it is clear that music may reflect or convey the *process of expressing*. In the genre of the nineteenth-century solo concerto, a number of elements suggest the musical expression of the narrative persona or narrative voice, including but not limited to the stylistic conventions of the soloist as a representation of the narrative protagonist or hero, the associative connections between the concerto soloist and the operatic soloist, and most significantly, the reference between the non-linear continuity of the inherently divided structure of the solo concerto and the non-linear temporality of the literary narrative in terms of the necessary distinction between the narrative text and the *act of narrating*. In the three solo concertos, or solo-concerto-type works, that we have investigated, the musical persona seems to significantly intensify the aesthetic and metaphorical distance between the narrative voice and the narrative text, thereby referencing the temporal separation between story and story teller that is a conditional element of the literary narrative.

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