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Favio Shifres.

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MUSIC PERFORMANCE AS INTERSUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE. TIMING AND NARRATION OF MUSICAL STRUCTURE

Favio Shifres

University of La Plata

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the topic of narrativity in music from a psychological point of view. It is proposed that narrative function arises from music performance as it may be considered a second person intersubjective experience. For this, narrative is analyzed as a human behavioral propensity and general features of narrative thinking on any medium are drawn. From this view, experience of narrative time is crucial. Furthermore main traits of secondary intersubjective experiences are described in order to appreciate the convenience of considering music performance as one of such experiences, where timing mechanisms regulate important attributes of the intersubjective exchanges. Finally a musical example is given, with the aim of showing how the performer can elicit a two-side time structure and activate different timing mechanisms in himself and in listeners. Implications for further studies are discussed.

1. BACKGROUND

Conceiving music as narrative is based on the music/story isomorphism as both of them present a linear temporal succession of events. However, the topic is highly polemical. On one line, some scholars reject to talk about narrativity in music (Nattiez 1990; Abbate 1992): although the very temporal unfolding gives to music a narrative appeal (according to Nattiez linear temporal features *narrativize* music) music does not reach a narrative status since:

- (1) Music is an expression system with fuzzy contents (Eco 1976). We can understand that something is being telling. In other cases we may suppose that a dialog is being held. That is because music has a great imitative power. It can imitate the “external appearance” of a literary form, but not its content, not what this dialog (or monolog) is about.
- (2) Story does not have its own time in Music. Story is not temporally independent from music structure that is supporting it. Abbate says that Music does not have past tense.

In Nattiez’s opinion, conjunction of these two characteristics is crucial: we can separate *what* is told (story) from *how* is told like (discourse). Stories can be translated to numerous mediums (transpositions, in semiotic terms). As we can not determine what music is about, we can not transpose it to another medium. For that reason, it is not narrative. “Historical facts do not in themselves constitute a narrative. They are taken over by a narrative which gives them their sense.” (:245) From this point of view, music can only *imitate* ways of telling. Although these ways elicit symbolic typical forms from a given style and culture, they lack specific meaning.

More optimistic of the narratological view, some authors consider that music has a plot and that its meaning can be explained on the analogy with the plot of a play or a literary story (Robinson 1997). This analogy is characterized by existences (or characters) and events (e.g. circumstances that affect those existences [Newcomb 1987; 1997; Micznik 2001]). Therefore, narrative function in music derives from the conjunction of two key attributes:

- (1) *The Plot*: it is the structural aspect par excellence. Like that in the literary work musical plot keeps unity of the piece. (Maus 1997; 126). Following some insights from Russian Formalism, core Newcomb’s (1987) hypothesis establishes that we understand a musical piece as a narrative since, while listening to it, we capture the successive events and interpret them in a temporal fashion, in terms of some sort of well known paradigm of time organization. Accordingly, narrative nature of music lies mainly in what the listener does; in particular the time aspects of his activity. Listeners not only reckon on time, but also *assume* it dialectically (Ricoeur 1992 [1980]). If the aesthetic activity of following a story consists of eliciting a shape (a meaningful whole) from a mere succession, then the listener’s (aesthetic) activity entails *to plot* the events succession. According to Newcomb (1987), as 19th Century progresses, together with the problematization of Classical Form, this listener’s activity is increasing, increasing in turn narrative nature of compositions. Narrative function emerges from tensions between Classical Form Paradigm and a reality that problematizes and transforms it. Understanding the course of narrative action imply firstly to select the *characteristic* musical attributes typical of a given formal arrangement (Newcomb 1997).
- (2) *The Invention*: It refers to *humanization* of structural components (Maus 1997). Components of musical structure adopt human traits and they become into protagonists of the story, which is *narrated* while analyzing the piece. The idea is that if musical analysis used dramatic analogies in order to organize its discourse, our cognition must be equipped with a level of *dramatic* comprehension. Otherwise, the use of anthropomorphic and dramatic metaphors and metonymies would require further explanations, which, indeed are superfluous.

As we can see, the debate has been hampered since some define their position from semiology and the others from narratology, which, in fact, are very different disciplines as regards systematicity and rigor (Newcomb 1987). The semiological view stresses the topic of meaning, mainly from analysis of “neutral level” (Nattiez 1990 [1987]). Implicitly, this perspective interprets that to communicate implies to understand: the meaning of the message, the sender’s intention and the receiver’s attribution of intention.

Although narratological approach has a more psychological appeal – note that it emphasizes the listener’s activity rather than musical structure itself -, it eludes psychological aspects that may be crucial for this discussion. Here, the key point is *how* musical structure is told. However, this perspective does not achieve to identify two independent time structures in a state of tension, which is, as we will see, decisive in order to determine music narrative. Finally, it justifies narrative of analysis rather than narrative of music itself.

The topic of music narrativity has not been examined directly from Psychology of Music. This fact attracts our attention since narrative thinking is rooted in a human impulse for which we tend to organized perceptions and representations of the world in a temporal way, and in a strong need of communicating those we know (White 1981). An approach to this perspective is given by Imberty (1997). Revisiting Nattiez’s ideas, he contributes the insight that bases of music narrative experience are related to ways of learning to organize and to communicate time experience, which are developed in infancy. According to Stern (1985) early interactions are *proto-narrative* since they precede language. Language is a representation of - so it is distant from - reality. Likewise, musical experience is *proto-narrative* because it is not a representation of reality, it *is* reality. There is no distance between reality and representation. It is odd of Imberty not to face this issue from music performance, as the most demanding temporal constrains are in play in performance. Such time constrains give performance a narrative charisma par excellence (Ricouer 1981). Moreover, music performance *represents the reality* of music structure.

2. AIMS

The aim of this paper is to inquire into the narrative appeal of music from a psychological perspective. I will propose that psychological background needed to think in music as narrative is found in the tensions that emerge from time features of performance. This dimension of narrative discourse is independent from the topic of meaning as is treated in Musicology.

Taking up again Imberty’s ideas, we will go further in the examination of mechanisms put in music performance experience, relating time processes of early infancy to processes of music performance. For this aim, we will show how music performance elicits a double time structure, which is the origin of tensions and expectations related, on one hand to musical structure, and on the other hand, to ways of *interpreting and telling it*.

3. MAIN CONTRIBUTION

This submission assumes that difficulties Musicology faced discussing on musical narrativity concern its carelessness of psychological substratum of narrative function - of narrative as a way of knowing and understanding the world.

Communication seems to be an inherently narrative issue. According to Malloch (1999/2000) “narratives are the very essence of human companionship and communication. Narratives allow two persons to share a sense of passing time, and to create and share the emotional envelopes that evolve through this shared time. They express innate motive for sharing emotion and

experience with other persons and for creating meaning in joint activity with others” (p45). Shared musical experience creates meaning by itself.

We will propose that narrativity in music emerges from the intersubjective context created by performers and listeners. In order to strengthen this hypothesis, we will have to: (1) locate communication in this dyad without constrains concerning to *intention* and *meaning*; (2) understand narrative as a human behavioral propensity, from which higher forms of narrative - novel for example - are a particular case, intensified by especial practice and intervened by language (Dissanayake 1985; 115); and (3) explain two independent temporal structures in music performance: discourse-time (determined by rhythmical norms) and story-time (set by the performer’s timing). In this intersubjective experience, modes of interactive behavioral timing used at each moment are crucial.

3.1. Music Performance as Intersubjective Experience

Concept of intersubjectivity appears –mainly in developmental literature - in order to refer to processes that, in interpersonal engagements, give rise to infant’s understanding of thought and emotion of the others. At least implicitly, most of the music communication research is in line with the theoretical frame of “Theory of Mind” (TOM). According to its principles, apprehending of the other’s subjectivity is based on a sort of theoretical knowledge about the other’s mind -for this reason it is named *theory theory* (Gopnik y Meltzoff 1999). However, from another perspective, Trevarthen (1998, 1999/2000; Trevarthen y Hublely 1978) asserts that long before reaching language acquisition, infants can understand others’ subjectivity by adjusting emotional behaviors in dyadic interactive contexts. In that way, a sort of emotional intersubjectivity precedes and is inseparable from the intellectual one (Gómez 1998). As both subjects share the process of apprehending the other’s subjectivity, it is named *second person intersubjectivity*. While studies in TOM have been focused on higher ages, research on second person intersubjectivity starts inquiring from birth (Kugiumutzakis 1998). Nevertheless, Bråten (1998b) affirms that each level of intersubjectivity persists in further life, reinforcing, adapting, and improving their achievements. From the age of 9 months, a level of secondary intersubjectivity begins its development (Trevarthen y Hublely 1978), which is characterized by a *triangular subject-subject-object* format: both members of the dyad share their manipulations, perceptions and emotion about objects. This exchange (or communication) is unfolded regardless any system of previous notions and concepts.

It is not a coincidence that, also from the age of 9 month, adults intuitively start to stimulate infants with a mode of play that may be named Musical Play since it makes use of behavioral interactive timing mechanisms based on an underlying pulse (Merker 2002). Here, this underlying pulse is the center of activity that engages attention of the dyad. In turn, other interactive behavioral timing processes, existing from birth, remain. They are based either on a anticipatory mechanisms of *familiarity* or on mechanisms of *reaction time*. These are related to more primitive emotional exchanges, which provide enjoyment and interest (Kugiumutzakis 1998). During a performance of a musical piece, the performer manipulates his timing that turns into the focus of joint attention

both of himself and of the listener. We hypothesize that in further emotional interactions, these time mechanisms elicit enjoyment and interest to details of the object – in this case, music –, which attract the dyad’s attention, maintaining it during the time unfolding of the musical object. Moreover, it is possible to hypothesize that once that attention is paid on music, emotional communication elicited by activating those mechanisms does not require actual presence of the performer (Murray y Trevarthen 1985; Bråten 1998a).

3.2. Narrative as Behavior and Timing

Understanding narrative as a human behavioral propensity rather than as aesthetic product (Dissanayake 1992) may be the starting point to appreciate why narrative issue is still a core concern in the study of musical experience. According to Dissanayake (1992), this propensity is a human behavioral trait by which we tend to put things in order and to organize our knowledge. Furthermore, if we understand narrative so strongly dependent on the problem of “meaning of the facts” we run the risk of losing sight of why, in narratology, a text (or any other medium) is considered narrative. If, with the assistance of linguistics, we can isolate the narrative function of a text, we will be able to identify this function in other mediums, including music.

Ricouer (1981), clearly noticed that narrative function and time experience are strongly related to each other: “Temporality (is) that structure of existence that reaches language in narrativity, and narrativity (is) the language structure that has temporality as its ultimate referent. Their relationship is therefore reciprocal.” (p.165). Now, a simple anecdotal concatenation of events is not a narrative by itself. A succession of events may lead us to explain a history. But, narrative function of history emerges, according to Ricouer, when a given event is chosen by our capacity of understanding and telling the story, rather than when the history is explained. For such a capacity, “an event is historic as it contributes to the progression of history capable to be told” (Ricouer 1992 [1980]; p15). In music, an event is “historic” (is relevant, contributes to the structure) if it contributes to the story to be told. That is to say, an event is important if that importance is explained by the story by itself, by *how* the piece *is being told*. Therefore, a musical piece is not narrative in itself, or -more properly- *structurally narrative*. The piece’s structure brings a series of events, which turns into story as is actualized in performance. In other words, music turns into narrative when is taken by the capacity of somebody (whom may be if not the performer!) for narrating, who gives up explaining the events (like an analyst) in order to narrate them, giving to each of them a proper status in the story, and therefore legitimating them.

“Following a story, correlatively, is understanding the successive actions, thoughts, and feelings in question insofar as they present a certain directedness. By this I mean that we are pushed ahead by this development and that we reply to its impetus with expectations concerning the outcome and the completion of the entire process. (...) There is no story if our attention is not moved along by a thousand contingencies. This is why a story has to be followed to its conclusion. So rather than being predictable, a conclusion must be acceptable” (Ricouer 1981; p170).

According to Chatman (1981) narrative function is emancipated from expressive medium (words, images, etc.) and is subordinated

to establish a double temporality: (i) the story’s time structure (time of the events that are being told) and (ii) the discourse’s time (or time of the medium; Hernandi (1981) prefers to name it “performance time”). If both of these time structures are independent, tensions between them will be elicited, from which narrative function will arise. We hypothesize that these tensions are captured thanks to the mechanisms required in the interactive behavioral processes - as they were described above - since they are involved in performance understood as intersubjective experience.

Briefly, we propose that narrative function emerges in music through the narrative capacity of the performer, who points out events with a particular directness, generating a discourse-time (performance time) different from a story-time (music structure time). In that way, he gives rise to tensions, which are captured by the listener as he uses different timing mechanisms – as in a second person intersubjective experience -. Thus, both of them share, pay joint attention to, the expressive microstructure of the performance (secondary intersubjectivity).

3.3. Narrating Musical Structure

The beginning of the Chopin’s First Ballade, may illustrate these ideas. Figure 1 shows the score of the first 17 measures of the piece. We have two different sections clearly delimited by different tempi marks (*Largo* and *Moderato*) and meter signatures (*C* and *6/4*). The *largo* section displays three units separated by rests with different structural features. The last one sets a dominant, which maintain tensions to be resolved at the beginning of the *moderato* section. This section starts with a cadential formulae ($V^{6/4} \text{ } ^{5/3}$) *horizontalized* in an idiosyncratic melodic motive (*X* in the score), which in turn presents two segments – one ascendant (*x’*) and the other one descendant (*x’’*)- arriving to the tonic *G*. Repetitions of this motive alternate with a second motive (*Y*) composed of two larger notes by step. Formal function of *X* is ambiguous: it is located at the beginning but is harmonically a cadence. If formal ambiguity is *the* conflict of an interpretation, the performer will *speculate* with this ambiguity making us doubt whether the *G* is the goal of the passage – the point of relaxation – by continuing immediately with the following motive. Points of segmentation are transferred – like comings and goings – from the end of *X* to the end of *Y*. In that way the oversegmented surfaced of the piece is emphasized. The performer *tells us* a concatenation of fragments with ambiguous content and *keeps us on tenterhooks* about what is coming. At the same time he affirms “*the piece is so. Do not wait for longer fragments or more formal definition*”. Alfred Cortot (1933) seems to tell us this: with the lengthening of each initial *C* and the shortening of each final *G* of *X* he highlights this ambiguity. (See figure 2; blue line)

Nevertheless, other readings of the fragment are possible. Figure 3 shows a graphic analysis of the underlying voice leading of the first 17 bars of the piece (Rothstein 1995). It is possible to observe an underlying formal organization under the surface: (i) Firstly, a linear progression $\hat{6} \hat{1}$ as introduction puts across the limit between *Largo* and *Moderato*. Thus, the progression units the fragments until the cadence. Next, two linear progressions configure a period structure: antecedent phrase – consequent phrase (Claplin 1998). The antecedent phrase presents a linear progression from *8* with a tonic prolongation through a double neighbor note (*G, F#, A, G*). The consequent phrase starts a linear



Figure 1. Chopin's First Piano Ballade (mm 1-17)

progression from $\hat{5}$ at measure 13, arriving to the tonic at measure 17. The sense of unity is given by cohesion of linear progressions and formal relations between them: introduction – period (antecedent-consequent).

Underlying voice leading offers a hierarchical criterion of unity, understood as a structure articulated by hierarchical levels and formal functions, in which “the whole is more than the sum of the parts”, rather than a concatenation of motives. The performer must *fight against* the surface segmentation, hiding those traits that guide attention towards it: motive X and its alternation with Y. For that, he will highlight some features that contribute particularly to reinforce the voice leading. The A of each linear progression seem to be the key point. From the surface's point of view, as they are eighth notes on weak beat, they go almost unnoticed. However, they are vital for the underlying voice leading, since they complete the linear progression and support the cadence $V^{4/6} \text{ } ^{5/3} - I$. The performance of Evgeny Kissin (1998) seems to show this alternative (see figure 2; magenta line).

Prolongation is almost by definition a *dramatic* feature of musical structure. It brings up a conflict between surface and deeper structural levels. In our example, this analysis led the performer to change the focus and to modify the relative emphasis of notes, giving importance to some events that were placed obliquely according to the other reading's perspective. In that way, the performer made the double temporality run. Each A (of the linear progressions) has a value related to the discourse-time (the value

of an eighth note on weak beat). But, they have a value according to story-time, which comes into conflict with the other one. This conflict is manifested in the idiosyncratic timing of Kissin. Rubato operates on our temporal expectations obliging us to follow the performance using some mechanism based on time reaction. Possibly, by running this mechanism we are capable to take this note as an important one. In that way, the performer guide us through the time plot of his story –in this cases the underlying prolongational relations.

4. IMPLICATIONS

Conceiving music performance as a second person intersubjective experience sheds light on how attributes of musical structure are communicated even when neither manifested intention, nor manifested attribution of intention and meaning exist. In that way, narrated events do not have linguistic content, but they are strictly musical – non propositional. From this perspective, story-time is the time of the musical structure, and discourse-time – time of the medium of the narrative – is the time of the performance. Musicology has been ignorant of music as performance and this is the reason of not being able to recognize the double temporality story – discourse in music. The performer is who has something to

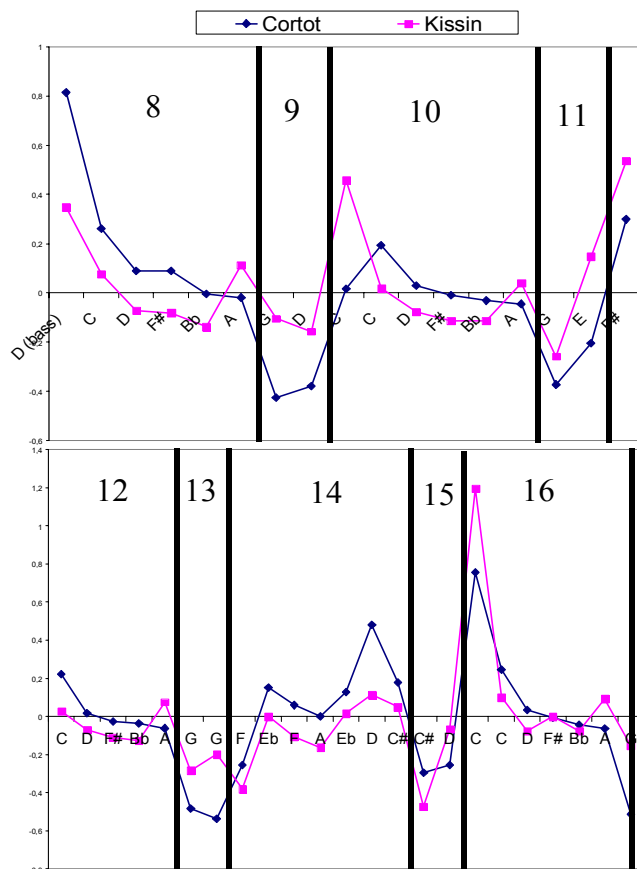


Figure 2. Expressive Timing of Kissin's and Cortot's versions of the Ballade (the higher is the point, the more lengthened –related to the nominal value given by the score -is the note). Horizontal axe displays names of melodic tones. Bars and numbers indicate measures (Upper panel mm 8 – 12; lower panel mm 12-17)

Figure 3. Analysis of the Underlying Voice leading of the first 17 measures of the Chopin's First Piano Ballade (Rothstein 1995)

tell us. He is also who, by using *rubato*, organizes his discourse from the story created by the composer. Paraphrasing to Nattiez (see quotation in Background section) "Music Structural facts do not in themselves constitute a narrative. They are taken over by a narrative performance which gives them their sense."

Psychology of Music neither has contributed to overcome this pitfall. By consider music communication related to linguistic contents, it is ignorant of the non propositional nature of music and therefore of other modalities of conferring meaning –as is proposed by the embodied meaning (Johnson 1987) and dialogical meaning (Rommetveit 1998) hypotheses. Understanding music communication in a second person intersubjective context allows us to recognize these modalities.

Second person intersubjectivity is compatible with the very essence of narrative as behavior. That is the aesthetic activity that consists of following a succession of events in a sustained way, due to attention is attracted by running the various mechanism which govern our behavioral exchanges with the world from very early ages. Musical structure (the story) provides us an underlying pulse on which we configure our time expectations. Our stylistic knowledge complements these expectations with others provided by another predictive mechanism of timing based on familiarity. However, originality of a given performance (originality of a given discourse) forces us to activate a mechanism based on time-reaction, like in our earliest interactions. We share with Schöglér (1999/2000) the idea that musicians – and we add listeners – use the infantile source of human communication. It is possible that the ontogenesis of narrative as behavior is in this early interactions. Thus, when we listen to music, we would transfer the narrative function from the context of the whole of human activities to the more specialized context of the events in performance (Maus 1997). However, research in this area is just beginning.

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