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The medium is the metre. A thread within the history of analyzing Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*

ABSTRACT

Background

The paper discusses some problems of metrical representation within mediatized presentations of musical performances.

The basic example chosen is the development section of the first movement of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* that includes a famous passage of thinned-out orchestral chords that has been of some importance both in older and in recent theories of musical metre. The passage has been prominently discussed in three different spots within the symphony's reception history: Firstly, it is a standard example in textbooks of romantic form and also of metrical design (London 2004, 94f.; Rosen 1980, 190; Cook 1987, 289). Secondly, it has been the object of an extensive discussion in German musicological journals about the 'proper' hypermetrical construction of the first movement in the earlier decades of the 20th century (see for instance Tetzl 1921; Wiehmayer 1922). Finally, the passage will be of variable importance within scholarly works on the performance history of the *Fifth Symphony* (see Schuller 1997, but also Laubhold 2014). These three areas of reception, however, have never been put together into a larger picture of the specific passage; this paper of course aims to do exactly that.

Central to the passage is a conflict of accent distribution: Accents of register change and orchestral timbre highlight a pattern of two notated measures that is shifted in relation to accents of harmonic change that connect the different registers into an alternative pattern (Petersen 2010, 291f.). Hugo Riemann's analysis of the passage can be used as an example of this conflict (and the mediatized nature of its representation): Riemann's graphic reduction leaves out all orchestral details and highlights the dynamic shading (or 'inner crescendo') that would enforce him to embrace the harmony-based reading. But his verbal description of the passage as a 'play of contrasting orchestral colors' decides in favor of the texture-based reading (Riemann 1905, 174f.).

One possible reading conceives the passage as a suspension of metric pulse (the passage does not display any regular metre). But a reverse reading conceives it as a suspension of all other parameters to the preserved metric pulse (the passage can only be explained through a reference to its metric design). In other words, the conflict seems to be that the passage at once displays a composed-out 'derhythmization' and presents a line of chords in equally spaced distances that form an abstract quasi-example of the principle of 'subjective rhythmization'. Therefore both the 'no-metre-reading' and the 'nothing-but-metre-reading' of the passage can be justified.

In a preliminary step, it will be shown that the decision for or against one of these two readings does not seem to be haphazard. More recent contributions tend to emphasize at least partially the importance of the 'texture-based' pattern generated by the orchestral register changes and link it usually to the 'no-metre-reading'. On the other hand, the publications in the

afore-mentioned debate in Germany are united (despite fierce rivalries over the suggested hypermetrical solution) in the fact that the authors do favor the 'harmony-based' pattern and link it to the 'nothing-but-metre-reading'.

In a second step, this change of preference possibly could also be detected as a historical shift in recordings of the symphony. Therefore a selection of recordings is analyzed empirically in order to establish cues within the interpretations that can be linked either to an emphasis of harmonic continuity (for instance lengthened Interonset-Intervals after the cadential measures) or to the sudden textural changes (for instance the use of Offset-Onset-Intervals between the single chords). But in another step this shift might be confronted with still another source: An analysis that refers to a sound recording might exhibit different preferences than an analysis that primarily refers to a piano reduction (that heightens harmonic progressions but obliterates orchestral colors).

The combination of these complementary threads of analysis allows a set of final hypotheses: Firstly, the suggested representation of the metre within the passage obviously is *influenced* in part by the media chosen for its presentation. Video sources of recent performances of the *Fifth Symphony* show (not surprisingly, but tellingly) that a metre based on textural cuts and not based on harmonic continuity is preferred for the visual presentation of the concert footage. This allows the second hypothesis that the medium at least partially will *generate* the metre of the passage. Whilst psychological perception (and also the gestures of the conductor!) do allow a relatively diffuse imaging of the passage, its visual or verbal presentation in theory textbooks or filmed performances demands a decision that then again shows the shift from the preference of the 'harmony-based' reading at the beginning of the 20th century towards the 'texture-based' reading at the beginning of the 21st century. This brings forward the final and strongest hypothesis that the medium in fact *is* the metre: The metre in this passage might be a different one today than it was hundred years ago, because the media paradigm has shifted from a primacy of pitch reduction (for instance in piano scores) to a primacy of sound fidelity (for instance in recorded and visually documented performances).

Obviously this shift can never be proven to be more than a particular fitting example of scientific presumptive evidence. Thus the history of music theory has to combine different species of investigation: The 'positivist' analysis of the written score, the 'empiric' analysis of performances and the 'cultural' analysis of media prerequisites have to be combined. Only then it is possible to arrive at a more complete picture why a particular passage has been selected to represent an analytical and/or performative problem that demands a solution. The linkages between media and metre therefore implicate that music analysis must retreat from the idea of the 'one and only' correct solution since metre as a psychological construct projected onto the musical phenomena never can be

fully separated from the media involved in either theoretical analysis or practical performance (and its preservation).

Aims and repertoire studied

19th Century Symphonic Music; Performance History; Reception History

Methods

Empirical Analysis of Recordings and Video Sources; Hermeneutic Analysis of Theory Texts; Accent Theory and “Energetic” Theories of Metre

Implications

Contextualization of Music Analysis in Media Developments; Finer Differentiation between Psychological, Performative and Score Based Aspects of Musical Metre

Keywords

History of Music Theory; Methods of Music Analysis; Media Studies; Musical Rhythm and Metre; Beethoven

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