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Psychoanalytic Reflections on Modulation

ABSTRACT

Background

Psychoanalytic explorations in music, from Ernst Kris, Heinz Kohut, to Stuart Feder, to Gilbert Rose, Julie Nagel, and my own research, point to isomorphism between musical structures and processes, and unconscious primary processes, and emphasize the role of primary process mechanisms (condensation, displacement, fragmentation) in various aspects of music (thematic procedures, large-scale formal processes, elaborations of fundamental structures etc.). Little research, however, has focused specifically on modulations from that vantage.

Aims and repertoire studied

The present paper aims to shed light on the ways in which different modulation strategies relate to the unconscious mind. The psychoanalytic perspective on modulation is itself multifaceted, and only some of its aspects will be possible to present here.

Mozart's Piano Sonata in C minor will show how modulation can be viewed as interplay between id, ego and superego. The repeated attempts to establish the key of F minor, first within the subsidiary theme space in E-flat major, then in the development and finally in the recapitulation (again within the second theme, this time in C minor), have the disruptive, „unruly“ character that can be ascribed to the workings of primary processes, or the id function. The unique, inventive way, in which Mozart effects modulations, clearly revealing his ‘creative fingerprints’, serve the ego functions. At the same time, all these events ultimately conform to the harmonic syntax of the late 18th century, which may be attributed to the activity of the superego. The tone D-flat – the last of the 12 chromatic tones to be introduced – merits special attention. It recurs with an unsettling effect, chiefly as the sixth degree of F minor; in the recapitulation it even comes close to being established as a tonal center in its own right, but the attempt is thwarted and the second theme ensues in the normative key of C minor. This is comparable to the return of a repressed, illicit wish, undercut by the intervention of the superego. This granted, we can interpret other events (e.g. C-flat in measures 30–33) as such returns in a disguised, distorted form. The disguise serves to bypass psychic censorship: a mechanism most commonly found in dreams (the study of which is the royal road to the unconscious, as Freud famously said).

The effects of modulation can also be experienced as traumatic splitting and integration, loss and denial. A particularly traumatic loss may leave us with a sharp ego split, where the loss is intellectually accepted but emotionally denied: wish and reality exist side by side. The analysis of César Franck's Violin Sonata reveals numerous splits, e.g. within the first theme between A major and C-sharp major; the latter brings the original material, partially and in a distorted form (another instance of dream-like distortions). The very mechanism

whereby this tonal shift is effectuated is based on one of the primary-process transformations, i.e. condensation: there is a common chord enharmonically reinterpreted, which therefore conflates harmonic functions in both the source and the target key. From a broader perspective, the entire sonata arguably exemplifies ego split where harmony represents wishful imagination, whereas highly ‘disciplined’ and ordered craft (existing in the phrase structure, form, canonic voice leading in the last movement...) stand for intellect (secondary processes).

Methods

As the paper brings together music and psychoanalysis, it relies on relevant methods from both fields. Music analysis employs harmonic functions of the Riemannian provenance (Despić 1970 & 1993), as well as formal analysis as exemplified by Peričić and Skovran (1990) and Caplin (1993).

Psychoanalytic considerations are partially based on Freud's topographic and structural theories of the mind, his interpretations of dreams, and teaching on drives. Of special importance will be those authors who applied Freud's theories in their explorations of music, like Stuart Feder. I will also use some concepts of Kohut's self-psychology, as well as ‘clinical vignettes’ provided by practicing therapists who are also competent in music (Rose, Nagel).

Implications

Having its roots in the archaic, unconscious mind, music incorporates the rules of primary processes, however sophisticated it may be owing to secondary processes. The process of modulation is an integral part of music flow, and most of the psychoanalytic observations made in this paper are applicable to music in general, modulations only being the points at which the archaic mental principles are manifested with particular clarity.

The paper feeds back into psychoanalytic theories, providing support for the claim that both the creation and reception of music invoke the most archaic strata of human psyche, and more generally points to the capability of human mind to fluctuate between primary and secondary processes. From that perspective, it can be argued that music allows ‘the listener to better integrate multiple levels of complex mental polyphony’ and is ‘capable of linking psychic past with present, affect with idea, feeling with meaning’ (Nagel 2013). While representing inner conflicts, splitting, and dissolution of boundaries, modulation (music) does so in a ‘controlled environment’, in an orderly fashion, providing insight into psychological struggles, facilitating integration of perception, emotion and thought.

Such considerations also reaffirm the view held by certain psychotherapists that the relationships between the therapist and analyzand on the one hand, and music and the listener on the other, have a great deal in common.

Keywords

Modulation, primary process, Freud, Kohut, Rose, trauma

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