

## A Reply to Yee

Don't be fooled, gentle reader - the article that is the object of my critical response is not solely about the benefits of an "agentially-enriched narrative reading of Beethoven's "Kreutzer" Sonata, Op. 47, Movement I" at all. It is far more ambitious than that. Rather, in the second half of this paper, Yee makes an unexpected turn into his *real* topic, a theoretical mediation of music's autonomous ineffability, and music's meaningful profundity. I applaud this attempt at reconciling *Musikwissenschaft*'s oldest Hatfield and McCoy rivalry,<sup>1</sup> though I take issue with what I perceive as several problematic theoretical imbibings, methodological glosses, and assumed conceptual givens. To contextualize my following response, it is worth noting that I would self-identify as a musicologist rather than an aesthetician, and that my methodological and epistemological preferences lean toward the continental rather than analytic. That having been declared, I forge on. And as Yee's paper unfolds in two almost discreet parts, so too does my response.

The first half of the paper engages in the promised narrative-cum-psychodynamic analysis of the titular movement from Beethoven. Deploying a taxonomy of musical archetypical narratives borrowed from Almén (who borrows it from Liszka, who borrows it from Frye), Yee offers a semiotic analytical reading. This is illuminating and performative as isomorphic connections between the score and musico-narrative gestures are drawn with expressionistic flourishes. We are told that the *transvaluations* of compositional musical events in the *Kreutzer* reveal a narrative contour in its formal structure, the performance of a recognizable phenomenological profile. A diagnosis of the musico-psychodynamic actor's internal conflict is then made: the virtual agent suffers from chronic depression. This tragic flaw of depression and its attendant "irregularities" and "imperfections" precludes the piece, when understood as an archetypal musical narrative (or, as Yee suggests at one point, as Beethoven himself), from achieving formal closure and manifesting its otherwise tragic-to-transcendent character. From this platform, Yee goes on to problematize the assumed emotional significance— the "aboutness"—of the work in the face of other methodological assertions of music's autonomy and ineffability (enter the aforementioned hoary debate).

Before moving on to Yee's *real* project of mediating said debate, it is worth interrogating the assumption that the validity of this sort of archetypical narrative analysis as, in the argument that follows, it is imported in Yee's explication of the presence of meaning in music. The concept of musical narrativity that understands a temporal subject making meaning of successively encountered musical texts is not a problem, and its significance has been considered by scholars on both sides of the methodological divide.<sup>2</sup> However, Almén's translation of Frye's narrative categories (romance, tragedy, irony, comedy) is, to me, redolent of an older rhetorical systems of musical theory, in particular the 17<sup>th</sup> century German musical practice of *Figurenlehre*.<sup>3</sup> It is not the systematic relating of musical forms to rhetorical forms that bothers me, it is the ontological and epistemological assumptions that accompany it. For example, the bedrock of belief in the atomist and universal concept of *Figurenlehre* is belief in the Thomist-cum-Aristotelean model of the soul and passions. One could only address the passions in this way if one understood them to be shared by all people and addressable via the medium of music. By extension, Almén's borrowed categories assume a universal subject - a musically-literate, sensitive listener that will normatively experience a work.

Furthermore, as Yee's chosen piece for analysis is a canonical work composed by a white, European male, it stands to reason the human subjectivity and experience it models (who could "correctly" decode the work) must also be white, European, and male - and apparently neurologically "normative" (if, although, depressed). This almost-certainly-unintentional chauvinism draws a confining frame around the population that can understand the narrative of this work (ostensibly "othering" those other subjectivities who might encounter the music), not to speak of the worlds of music this analytical method cannot approach. What sense could it make of Berio's non-narrative pastiche, *Sinfonia*? Would this work's virtual agent be deemed schizophrenic or dissociative and consigned to a Foucaultian "Great Confinement"<sup>4</sup> away from "normals"? What about improvisations, aleatoric, text, or graphic works that eschew organic unity and formal closure? This methodological insufficiency prohibits the successful analysis of huge swaths of important musical worlds.

In the second half of the paper, Yee turns to the *big* issue at hand, that of music's simultaneous ineffability and profundity; reconciling perceived meaning to music's autonomy in order to make sense of music's ostensive "aboutness." Yee eschews Kivy's requirement of *quasi-semantic* meaning in favor of Dodd's *artistic meaning*: properties of musical works that can display properties of its subject for a "musically-literate, sensitive listener," without being denotively referential. Dodd's hugely complex (and disputed) theoretical structure is mobilized in a few sentences here to assert that "a work's marked and expressively-motivated characteristics—its identity unique from prototypes and schema [in reference to Dodd's token/type ontology]—are key to understanding the properties a musical work displays, and thus in determining its 'aboutness' or subject matter." So, the work can be autonomous while occasioning, for a musically-literate, sensitive (universal?) listener, a virtual subject's virtual depression. Semiotic interpretation, asserts Yee, *is*, then, the discipline of understanding the meaningful properties an artwork portrays—something akin to contextual manifestation of its universal, eternal form—and so diffuses the "aboutness" problem.

To paraphrase Yee: is this analysis significant? Is it profound? In the article's introduction, Yee suggest that the *agentially-enriched* narrative reading elevates the semiotic to the profound. I am not convinced this is the case. Rather, Yee's demonstrated conceptual-equivocations gloss important epistemic assumptions for the sake of forcing interpretive meaning to be friends with positivist formalism. From my perspective, there is a sort of false friend at work here in terms of knowledge generation.

A narrative, semiotic reading of a musical text is certainly helpful in that it can function as an aid to perception and facilitate the discovery of music's truth(s) and significance. This kind of reading is grounded first in the formal. But to again invoke Agawu, "the technical structure's objects, its products, do not constitute the truth content even if they participate in its articulation."<sup>5</sup> For that, me must look to the social, the lifeworld, and to experience. This is the direction our author looks when asserting that "[o]ur emotional response to music is multi-faceted, ranging from empathy to sympathy and even interiorizing—identifying with the music's expressive trajectory and applying its significance to our own lives." And that "psychodynamic trajectories occurring in music are as numerous and diverse as the flavors of human experience itself."

So, gentle reader, in closing I applaud Yee's attempt to connect music's expression of the extramusical—those things that really matter to us—to the "ineffable." However, I believe when choosing a methodology (and epistemological framework, to boot) to handle narrative experience, that it is important to keep in mind that the kind of knowledge generated by narrative experience comes from a subject experiencing themselves in a temporal, socially-situated body. To address this kind of knowledge generated by being-in-the-world, one needs a methodology informed by existential onto-phenomenology (rather than transcendental) that rejects Platonic universals, and certainly rejects the concept of a universal subject. Yee's contribution in accounting for the profundity of music otherwise understood as autonomous is no doubt helpful and stirs the discursive pot in the world of analytical aesthetics. But, I do not see what this kind of analysis has to say about music's significance in human affairs.

True, an analytical focus on structure can be helpful. Structural hearing and systematic approaches to music study teach us to hear better and think better, and in doing so open doors to better interpretation and more potential meaning. However, I wonder if a theoretical framework that assumes

universal subjects, asserts musical Platonism, and cannot speak to relevance of music in the construction and maintenance of identity or culture can be helpful outside of its parochial methodological corner. Narrativity is an important concept, but is perhaps the most engaging when used to understand music as a temporally unfolding phenomenon of comprising musical symbols (texts) charged with social significance, the experience of which is synthesized into synthetic wholes by unique, socially-situated subjects in a shared, plural lifeworld. I submit that, recognized as such, musical experience and meaning are immanent, non-reducible, intertextually produced, subjective, plastic, polysemous, ontologically open, and—perhaps most importantly—profound.

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<sup>1</sup> For helpful, contemporary reviews of this rivalry in terms of methodologies and epistemologies respectively, see: Kofi Agawu, “How We Got out of Analysis, and How to Get Back in Again,” *Music Analysis* 23, Volume 2/3 (July-October, 2004): 267-86, and, Joseph Kerman, “How We Got into Analysis, and How to Get Out,” *Critical Inquiry* 7, No. 2 (Winter, 1980): 311-31.

<sup>2</sup> I mean that divide described with in: Tiger Roholt, “On the Divide: Analytic and Continental Philosophy of Music,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 75:1 (Winter 2017): 49-58.

<sup>3</sup> This tradition was also referred to as the Doctrine of Affections and though most exhaustively codified by Joachim Burmeister in his *Musica Poetica* (1606). It would be practiced by other German composers and theorists in the 17th and 18th centuries. Reference to *Figurenlehre* can be found in the theoretical works of Georg Rhau (*Enchiridion utriusque musicae practicae*) and Sebald Heyden (*De arte canendi*) and in the musical compositions of Christoph Bernhard, Johann Mattheson, J.S. Bach, and others.

<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, translated by Richard Howard (London: Routledge, 2001): Chapter 2.

<sup>5</sup> Agawu, 2004: 273.