

# A Minimal Violence: Seven Theses on the Classical Style

## Une violence minimale : sept thèses sur le style classique

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Article abstract

This article proposes a series of speculative and likely controversial theses about the ethical possibilities and dangers of the Classical style. Taking a concept of ethics that is both Heideggerian and subtractive in the mode of recent French thought, it begins by arguing that music itself—in its structures and stylistic features and not merely in the contingent circumstances of its genesis or reception—is capable of being an ethics. The next crucial claim is that, insofar as ethics is a question of proximity to one's Being, the Classical style is minimally violent in Derrida's sense both on account of the place it occupies in the emergence of an aesthetic disposition and, moreover, insofar as its construction hinges on a process of articulation, that is on the separation of form and content, of convention and expression. Finally, the article assesses how the Classical style responds to the fundamental principle of division at its heart.

It is widely acknowledged that at some point between the late works of J. S. Bach and Haydn's first compositions a decisive stylistic change took place, and the emergence and evolution of what we now call the Classical style has long been of interest to scholars of eighteenth-century music. Musicology, however, has to yet to grasp just how decisive this shift was. As Karol Berger argues:

We not do claim that this change was different in kind, more fundamental, let alone catastrophic, than the stylistic change which preceded it and transformed the 'Renaissance' into the 'baroque' style... [and] we certainly do not see the mid-eighteenth-century revolution as more thoroughgoing than the one effected by Schoenberg and Stravinsky around the time of the Great War—quite the contrary. (Berger 2007, 5-6)

If this development is perceived only as an evolution of music's internal technical means rather than as a change in the broader, extra-musical ramifications of this technique, then it is easy to understand how the significance of the shift could be underestimated. A survey of the recent literature on music of this period yields numerous examples of musicology's relatively narrow construction of the mid-eighteenth-century transition. One of the ways in which W. Dean Sutcliffe's monograph on the keyboard works of Domenico Scarlatti (2003) addresses the question of the composer's unusual position between Baroque and Classical is to locate aspects of his musical style on a continuum between *Fortspinnung* and a distinctively Classical principle of formal articulation, but the specifically ethical significance of Scarlatti's stylistic eclecticism is not at issue. The same distinction arises in Michael Spitzer's Adornian reappraisal of late Beethoven (2006), but even here, where the social and ethical aspects of the Classical style's communicative impulse are at stake in the book's overall argument, the ethical importance of this particular distinction between *Fortspinnung* and Classical articulation is not explored.

What is striking about Berger's ambitious study, by comparison, is that it aligns the emergence of a new musical style with a wider intellectual shift towards a distinctively modern worldview, though without imputing any causal relation between the two trajectories. Berger's focus is on how music comes to

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represent a new, modern experience of *time*, but, as the book's centrepiece discussion of Augustine and Rousseau makes clear, what is ultimately at stake is a shift from a Christian to a secular moral landscape. It is in this way that Berger's study makes a decisive contribution to an ethical turn in musicology: he recognizes that music's technical means open immediately onto an ethical paradigm, that music can in its very structures and stylistic characteristics be ethical. And, although he is by no means alone in this seemingly provocative assertion, it does come at a decisive point for a musicology now close to exhausting its fiercely relativist tendencies.

Although Berger's extended essay explores how the distinctive organizing principles of the two musical styles give rise to different temporal paradigms, it also raises further questions which are beyond its scope or raised only with tantalizing brevity. Chief among these are the ethical significance of two inter-related developments, namely the evolution of the tonal system and of the Classical style's distinctive punctuation from the local to the highest structural levels. A further issue arising from these two is the emergence of a conventionalized musical language of hitherto unparalleled homogeneity. Berger's notion of ethics is broadly conceived. Although it overlaps with the moral sphere, it is by no means reducible to it and is perhaps more accurately understood as theological. To the extent that Berger's conception of ethics is concerned with our humanity and capacity to relate, mine is similar. Our word 'ethics' derives from the words *ethos*, meaning 'accustomed place' or

perhaps 'home'. To be ethical, in the sense that this term is used throughout this article, is to be in touch with one's dwelling place: that is, to be—rather than to be given over to—what one is. By contrast, following the analysis of Jacques Derrida (1978), any form of alienation of the self from itself is violent. Hence it is possible to argue that music may, on a purely structural level, be ethical or violent.

What follows is a series of speculative hypotheses on the Classical style which are necessarily to some extent provisional and at the level of a generalized theory, given that detailed analytical exploration of their usefulness lies beyond the scope of this article. They set out an intertwined music-theoretical and philosophical argument, making out two central claims which go to the issue of whether music itself might constitute an ethics. First, I maintain that the Classical style is constituted in a minimal, yet irreducible, violence (defined at a fundamental, ontological level). By 'minimal' I intend to indicate that this violence is in no way excessive; the separation is no greater than is necessary to constitute the relationship such as it is. Second, I argue that music's response to this constitutive condition is the measure of its ethical stature. That is, a piece of music may meet this constitutive violence with a further, more final violence, or it may be constructed so as to free itself of its constitutive condition; it is the nature of this response which determines the extent to which music may be said to ethical or unethical. The steps of the argument thereby provide a framework within which to assess the extent to which individual pieces from this period fit alongside or contribute to our modern understanding of ethics.

### **1. Music is always already an ethics**

This is a potentially divisive claim, since for some it will be self-evident, and for others, intensely provocative. Perhaps the most challenging lacuna in Berger's study is that he declines to specify the relationship between the musical stylistic changes he observes and the larger transformation in worldview of which he speaks. He sensibly dismisses the explanation that the developments coincide by virtue of "some mysterious workings of the *Zeitgeist*" (2007, 9), but is then content to 'register the structural homology' without seeking to answer whether new musical means or modernity's new aims came first.

There is an elegant, though admittedly controversial, 'solution' to this chicken-and-egg dilemma, and that is to argue that music is *immediately* an ethics. This is to say that music is ethical, not because it resembles a certain set of social relationships or philosophical arguments in the wider world, but because its own construction—its structural relations, its stylistic features, its entire technical apparatus—is capable of being ethical. Music does not need to be 'translated' into ethical paradigms because it is always already ethical.

Music, it is reasonably countered, cannot commit genocide. It cannot even evade taxes. So, what harm can music really do? Surely music can only be ethical insofar as it mediates extra-musical conditions and social relations? There is a profound danger, however, in this line of thought in that it risks rehearsing a gesture that is itself arguably violent or unethical. By excluding the aesthetic sphere from the reach of ethical judgment, it promotes the idea that certain aspects of human activity are beyond the moral law. When a certain practice (extraordinary rendition, Guantánamo) is placed outside the protection of state or international law there is a widely recognized need for close public scrutiny, not simply because it might be perceived as unfair, but, more importantly, because the idea that ethics can be suspended in certain circumstances is a threat to the very idea of ethics. Similarly, as will become clear, the act of suspending music in an ethical no-man's land is itself an act of violence in that it suppresses music's force and instead restricts its function to the domain of entertainment and distraction. It is violent both because it denies music a voice in the ethical sphere and conspires to suggest that music's structural violence is harmless because it is merely a *representation* of violence.

This claim is best justified, however, when one construes the concepts of ethics and violence in a broad and subtractive way. If ethics is restricted to the treatment of humans, animals or the environment, say, and violence to its physical or emotional realizations, then the connection with music is at best tenuous and at the very least subject to contingent circumstances and relativist arguments which would seriously undermine any claim to its enduring ethical force. If ethics is instead measured less by the consequences of particular acts than by underlying principles or conditions subtracted from the material effects of concrete actions, then music is much more readily implicated within its sphere. While this subtractive approach may seem to ignore any distinction

between the actual and the theoretical or purely imaginary, it does have a very real advantage when one considers ethics as a future-oriented, programmatic way of thinking: identifying the conditions and structures of thought which make (un)ethical acts possible rather than simply mourning the taking place of actual atrocities is necessary if ethics is to have a redemptive, as well as a diagnostic, potential.<sup>1</sup>

Ethics is at bottom concerned with the problem of finding one's *ethos*, that is one's accustomed place, one's habit, one's Being.<sup>2</sup> The unethical is that which precludes the possibility of humanity simply being itself. The claim expounded here, then, is that violence, in its most subtractive form, is the minimal separation of the self from the self; it consists in a small cut which divides beings from their condition of possibility, from their Being. For that reason, violence is characterized by a structure of exclusion. In this sense, to define something by its belonging to or exclusion from a given category is minimally violent not only insofar as it reduces the plenitude of its existence to the criteria by which it is in/excluded. This inclusive-exclusive relation also does violence, moreover, to the extent that the something in question can only encounter itself as something else: to the extent that something with the rich and irreducible variety of all its predicates can only grasp itself—can only identify itself—as that other something which is exhausted in the criteria for in/exclusion.

## 2. The Classical style is born of a fundamental schism (I)

The Classical style is immediately embroiled in the ethical sphere because it has its origins in a twofold schism—a schism which is, by its very nature, minimally violent. This division operates on two levels: at the level of aesthetics and at the level of musical technique, and I shall consider each in turn.

The idea that music of the later eighteenth century is highly *sociable* has gained currency in recent decades. The introduction to a recent collection of essays on this repertoire goes so far as to claim that the Classical style is “an expression of the aesthetic stance which conceived of music as communication between composer and listener” (Mirka 2008, 1). Acknowledging that the comparison with rhetoric that has existed for two centuries is insufficient to explain the distinctiveness of the Classical style, Mirka (2008, 2–5) then describes how the emergence of a public sphere that saw an increasing musical literacy

and amateur involvement led to the development of a highly conventionalized musical style. The widespread assumption is that this music served as an instrument of social cohesion because the reliance upon codified convention facilitated greater engagement. That the Classical style's conventionality gave rise to clearly-defined expectations led, in turn, to the possibility of misapplying those conventions and thereby confounding expectations. In this way, the listener was invited to participate in a guessing game based upon a shared understanding of the ‘rules’ of composition. This play might typically include deviating from norms at the level of large-scale form (for instance, false recapitulations), or more locally at the level of musical syntax (substituting cadential gestures for beginning functions), or deploying musical topics so as to allude to readily recognizable genres, national styles or social functions (from horn calls to operatic numbers).

This would seem to contradict my thesis, suggesting instead that the Classical style, far from originating in a division, actually arose from a higher degree of social unity and shared understanding. There is, however, a counter-narrative, or rather another version of this story, which casts the Classical style's conventionality in a different light, revealing the price at which such uniformity is obtained. The story's culmination in the figures of genius and absolute music is familiar, but its lesson is often forgotten. Hegel's astute analysis of the dissolution of art in the period leading up to the early nineteenth century observes that, at the same time as art is assimilated to the sphere of aesthetics—that is, as art begins to be conceived as an object of spectatorship—the intimate union of the artist and his material breaks down (1975, 603). The appearance of aesthetic judgment involved a transformation in the status of the work of art which would come to be regarded as the exclusive competence of the artist and a creative imagination which knows no bounds. Listeners, by contrast, could only become increasingly unnecessary and passive partners in the creative process. It appears at first blush that the artist, unlike the spectator who confronts absolute otherness in the artwork, could still immediately identify himself in the creative act, but Hegel recognized that the fatal moment of a radical split would come when creative subjectivity soared above its contents in their prosaic objectivity. Art now sought its end and foundation in itself alone. The pure creative-formal principle annihilated every content in a

<sup>1</sup> A subtractive tendency is noticeable among a generation of French thinkers, most notably Alain Badiou (1988) and, contrary to popular reputation, Gilles Deleuze (1995). The work of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben (2000) is also subtractive insofar as it equates politics, ethics and art with first philosophy.

<sup>2</sup> I follow Heidegger's reasoning here (1977, 233).

continuous effort to transcend itself. The artist could find no content which he can immediately identify with his innermost consciousness, but was forced to find it in mere form. The combined effect of the rise of the man of taste and of the composer-genius did not so much produce a split between consumer and creator as it alienated the aesthetic object from both composer and listener.

The conventions of the Classical style function like currency. They are signs in mass circulation with no expressive worth of their own, but have value only insofar as they represent something other than themselves. Topics, for example, a staple of the Classical style, are fragments of social reality torn from their context and function: a minuet is no longer for dancing nor a drone the preserve of the shepherd. Their use value evaporates in the pure exchange of musical signs. As music shifts from the mimetic sphere to the logic of representation, musical material can be traded as cultural capital, but it thereby severs its intimate unity with subjective expression.

The Cavatina from Beethoven's String Quartet Op. 130 is an acute example of this alienation of expression. The movement consciously inhabits a theatrical milieu, to no small degree because of its prominent operatic associations. A difficulty arises since, if we are to believe the anecdotes concerning Beethoven's own emotional response, the Cavatina is an intensely personal outpouring embedded within the confines of a highly conventionalized genre. The movement has often left commentators with a sense of unease, if not outright embarrassment (Kerman 1967, 198), but it would be mistaken to assume that the discomfort experienced by commentators stems from the mere fact that the movement's stylized rhetoric and superficial gestures are necessarily inadequate to the poignancy of its heartfelt message.

The problem is less that the cavatina as a genre is insufficiently expressive than it is excessively so. The Cavatina draws its figures—the sighing semitones and the syncopations suggestive of stuttering—from a style which is itself already an externalization of expression. The Baroque *stile rappresentativo*, whose rich depository of signs provides the raw materials for Beethoven's movement, sought to depict dramatically the *affetti*. The Cavatina thus redoubles the play of convention in that it presents as conventional material that which, as an outward representation of the human emotions, is already a conventional-

ized form of expression. The Cavatina rings hollow not because the conventions it draws upon are inadequately expressive. On the contrary, what if the source of the commentator's embarrassment were actually a fear that they are perfectly adequate? What is unnerving about this music is that reveals *that there is no surplus subjectivity beyond that which is sedimented in convention*. The references to the *stile rappresentativo* (chiefly through melodic ornaments and especially sigh figures) are so plentiful that they make up the basic fabric of the piece such that the movement's expressive potential is exhausted in conventional means, as if there were no expression beyond stylized rhetoric.

In this way the Cavatina exemplifies the crisis of the Classical style: it is not that there is no musical material that would be a proper vehicle for the particular emotional weight the composer seeks to convey, but that there is never any authentic mode of expression. There is no intimate experience or expression which we can call our own. The Classical style is thus everyone's and nobody's. It is the social world in which we live, and yet it can never be our ethos.

### 3. The Classical style is born of a fundamental schism (II)

The schism of the aesthetic replicates itself at even the most elementary level of music's technical construction. One of the main consequences of the Classical style's conventionality is that it becomes possible to identify where one is in a piece and to anticipate what will come next. This predictability, often seen as its greatest revolution, actually derives from a logic of division which underpins the style's syntactical construction. What allows a listener to form a mind-map more readily of a piece from this period is the fact that, in contrast to the Baroque technique of *Fortspinnung*, the succession of musical events is punctuated by a series of caesuras. These punctuations articulate the decisive moments in the form, enabling one to keep track of its progress. Or rather, the form itself is generated by the succession of cadences. Each of these cadences signals tonal closure as the attainment of a goal, and yet not all cadences are equal. Rather, they embody varying degrees of closure, with some cadences serving only as temporary resting points while others are able to summarize larger spans. It is this differentiation of cadences which produces the distinctive hierarchical character of Classical

form.<sup>3</sup> As a series of less significant cadences is subsumed under one more weighty cadence, an increasingly synoptic understanding of the whole emerges. This result is a type of recursiveness where the highest-level closure and every local, partial cadence rehearse the same basic principle. The Classical style's formal construction at every structural level is thus predicated upon a logic of division.

These surface punctuations of phrase-endings and local cadences, however, stem from a more fundamental schism which they simultaneously cover over. As Taruskin argues (2005, 181–188), the punctuated construction of the Classical style has its origins in the sequence-and-cadence model that emerged in Italian instrumental music of the 1680s. Upon closer inspection, this model turns out to be a technique for overcoming a constitutive slippage within tonality. The tonal system that grounds the Classical style only obtains its cohesion by papering over a crack at its heart. Unchecked, the cycle of fifths produces only non-identity and is therefore unable to achieve tonal closure. The fifths cycle only appears to return, for the key in which the cycle culminates is, in fact, irreducible to the key from which it departed. When we spin flatwards from C twelve places around the cycle, for instance, we arrive not at C, but at Dbb. Even as the cycle gives the impression of returning to itself, it is unable to coincide with itself absolutely, but is separated from itself by the minimal gap which inheres in tonality: the Pythagorean comma. Tonality is ultimately unable to grasp itself as itself, but, in temporalizing itself, it can only return to itself as other.

In order to achieve a semblance of identity and harness the descending fifths progression as a form-generating device, “the decisive practical move”, explains Taruskin, “was to limit the circle of fifths to the diatonic degrees of a single scale by allowing one of the fifths to be a diminished rather than a perfect fifth ... [transforming] a modulatory device ... into a closed system of harmonic functions that interrelate the degrees of a single scale” (2005, 185). To create the illusion that tonality is selfsame requires a sleight of hand and, more importantly for our purposes, this magic trick relies upon a gesture of exclusion by dividing diatonic from non-diatonic pitches. Tonality is irreparably split in that it is not selfsame, but in order to transform it into a coherent, operable system, instrumental music disavows this constitutive violence with a violent gesture of its own.

#### 4. This fundamental schism is minimally violent

In order to understand how this schism amounts to violence, it is first helpful to recognize that this fundamental alienation, elevated into a structuring principle in the Classical style, is the minimal structure of being. It then becomes possible to specify more precisely wherein its violence lies. For these purposes, I follow closely Derrida's analysis in *Margins of Philosophy* (1986), for it is in deconstruction that this position finds its clearest expression. For Derrida, the impossibility of being in itself, of self-presence, follows directly from considering the implications of time. Aristotle's consideration of the now (*nun*) in book IV of the *Physics* is his starting point. Aristotle quite sensibly observes that, in order for there to be time, there cannot merely be one now, but there must exist at least two nows, a later one and an earlier one. Time is necessarily succession. But, Derrida observes, this conclusion is inconsistent with Aristotle's assumption that identity is presence in itself:

Let us consider the sequence of nows. The preceding now, it is said, must be destroyed by the following now. But, Aristotle then points out, it cannot be destroyed ‘in itself (*en heautoi*)’, that is, at the moment when it is (now, in act). No more can it be destroyed in an other now (*en alloi*): for then it would not be destroyed as now, itself; and, as a now which has been, it is (remains) inaccessible to the action of the following now. (1986, 57)

So long as one holds on to the idea of an indivisible now—the identity of self-presence—it is impossible to think succession. The now cannot be destroyed as itself but only when it is no longer now and that means: when it is no longer itself. It makes no sense to say that the now is destroyed after it has already ceased to be. The only explanation is that the now is not selfsame in the first place. Only if the now always already contains within itself the possibility of its own disappearing even as it appears can it give way to another now. Only if the now is always already divided—only if the now can also not be now—can there be succession. Derrida thus argues that the present itself is absolutely divided. The movement of temporalization cuts across every purported identity, separating it from itself.

There cannot be both time and self-possession, with the consequence that there can never be any experience of presence, for

<sup>3</sup> This understanding of Classical structure, which blends a revival of Schoenbergian *Formenlehre* with an interest in Heinrich Koch's theory of articulation, is becoming more widespread in the analysis of eighteenth-century music. See, for example, the work of William Caplin (1998) and Michael Spitzer (2008).

experience requires temporal succession and presence is irreducibly divided. Time is the impossibility of something ever grasping itself as itself. Every temporal moment is marked by an irreducible interval which separates it from itself, but this interval is the condition of possibility of time; without it there can only be a static ever-same presence.

How, then, to speak of identity if there is no presence as such? One solution, of which Hegel (1986) among others avails himself, lies in the recourse to an absolute now which supersedes and unifies the succession of individual moments. Musicology's version of this solution is the organicist snapshot which captures every moment of a piece in a single over-riding principle, collapsing musical succession into a single simultaneity. Derrida, though, seeks an alternative explanation which would not have recourse to the notion of an indivisible present. To this end, he develops the idea of the "trace". Derrida starts by asking how, if the now only appears in its disappearing, it can have any existence whatsoever. He proposes that in order to be, the now must be inscribed as a trace. Martin Hägglund explains Derrida's analysis with particular clarity:

Given that the now can appear only by disappearing, it must be inscribed as a trace in order to be at all. This is the *becoming-space of time*. The trace is necessarily spatial, since spatiality is characterized by the ability to remain in spite of temporal succession. Spatiality is thus the condition for synthesis, since it enables the tracing of relations between past and future. (2004, 43)

But, if space is the condition for the synthesis of time, how can space correspond to itself as space? Surely, spatialization can never be simultaneous with itself either. For there to be space, time must be at work in space. This is because, if one attempts to think space in the basis on a single point, there is no space. Space only arises when the point is able to form a relation with another point or with itself. To form space, therefore, the point must temporalize itself in order that it might relate to itself and thereby posit itself as space. It is time which relates one point to another and space qua simultaneity is thus unthinkable without temporalization:

To the extent that it *is*, that is, to the extent that it becomes and is produced, that it manifests itself in its essence, that it spaces itself, in itself relating to itself, that is, in negating itself, space is time. It temporalizes itself, it relates to itself and mediates

itself as [*comme*] time. Time is *spacing*. (2004, 42-43)

This is what Derrida calls the becoming time of space, which is necessary not only for the trace to be related to other traces, but also, as Hägglund argues, "for it to be a trace in the first place" (2004, 43). This is so because the trace is legible "only after its inscription and is thus marked by a relation to the future that temporalizes space". On the one hand, the becoming-space of time makes synthesis possible while, on the other, the becoming-time of space makes it impossible for that synthesis to be grounded in indivisible presence. As a result, the trace can never be itself, but is always exposed to that which may erase it.

This conclusion means that claims to self-mastery and self-presence are made on shifting sands. The act of turning of the self back on itself forms the totalizing gesture that is sovereignty. To be sovereign, the subject must be in touch with itself immediately. Such totalization is strictly impossible, however, insofar as it is irreducibly marked by the aporetic logic of spacing. The totality is an illusion. For Derrida, this illusion is paradoxically sustained by a gesture of turning which undermines the very possibility of totality; the cycle of fifths is an instance of such turning back. At stake in Derrida's interrogation of sovereignty is the impossibility of the gathering of the self. Such simultaneity is possible only if time were annulled. Even when this becoming-space of time is effected, space is only able to grasp itself as space by temporalizing itself, which is to say, by dividing itself. Sovereignty is only achieved at the cost of the sovereign turning back on itself and dividing itself. Divided, it is no longer sovereign. Sovereignty is therefore the impossibility of sovereignty.

Even once one accepts Derrida's analysis, the question remains: in what sense is this violence? For Derrida, violence is not something which is done, but which simply is. It is not damage to a pre-existing whole, but an essential impropriety which destroys the possibility of wholeness from the outset. Derrida argues that what makes it possible for anything to be at the same time makes it impossible for anything to be in itself. Violence names the fact that something only exists because it is irreparably held in relation to something else. Violence is another way of saying that there is an irreducible alterity within every identity.

What makes this originary relation to the other violent as opposed to warm, cordial or even merely cold? From close analysis

of Derrida's argument, it would appear that the violence of which he speaks consists in a breach of the interiority of the subject. Its integrity is undercut by the fact that it is always already compromised by and at the mercy of its other. Although Derrida himself never uses such language, a close analysis of his position suggests that the breach of interiority which arises as a result of the logic of spacing is violent insofar as it inaugurates a *debt*. The subject *owes* its existence to the other or, more precisely, to the fact that it is always divided and held in relation to its own inherent, subsisting alterity. The lack of self-sufficiency is an irreparable violence. Insofar as the Classical style partakes in this structure of being, insofar as it owes its existence to internal division, it too is minimally violent.

### **5. The Classical style either disavows or dwells resolutely in its fundamental schism**

To such constitutive division there are generally only two possible responses: either deny it or attempt to seize it and make it one's own. The Classical style's own attempt to grapple with its fundamental constitution broadly falls into one of these two categories or is torn between them. This is perhaps best exemplified by considering the widespread distinction made between Beethoven's heroic middle-period works and his late style. The former are praised for their unusual degree of aesthetic and formal unity, while the latter is perceived to be characterized on the whole by a tendency to fragment musical discourse at the level of local gestures and large-scale form. The first presents a semblance of unity, flying in the face of its underlying schism, while the second rejects this illusion and instead celebrates its fragmented condition by transforming it into disjunct surface gestures and overt breaches.

The minimally violent structure of being manifests itself most obviously in art through a separation of form and content, and the Classical style is typical in this regard. At that point in the history of aesthetics, the composer's unity with his material had been lost; conventions are only distant representations of subjective expression. Rather than this expressive intent generating the work's idiosyncratic form, with the rises of normative structural types form gains a certain autonomy from the musical signs which it houses. Take, for instance, the experience of wit in Haydn. Here, when conventions are misapplied and there is a slippage between the content of

the musical material and its formal function (a cadential trill, say, made to operate as an opening gesture), the artifice of the composer rises, rather like that of a puppeteer, above the musical structure and reveals itself. At the other end of the extreme, it is often noted that Beethoven's heroic works give an impression of unifying form and content.<sup>4</sup> Even though the structure may conform to a normative type, this norm appears to have been generated from the particular musical material. In this way, these works disavow the split in which their musical construction originates.

This denial is not simply a matter of surface gestures. It is worth considering how this disavowal is actually enshrined within the sonata process. Sonata form readily maps onto Derrida's analysis of sovereignty because its central issue is that of *return*. There are broadly two ways of construing this problematic. The first, oppositional model makes the double return itself the crux of the form; the non-tonic key of the second group is viewed as an external obstacle that is overcome with the return to the tonic. The alternative reading, which sees the second group as a displacement of the tonic, as if it were like pulling an elastic band, puts the emphasis on the structural dissonance; the injection of potential (elastic) energy drives the entire form, so that the return becomes an inevitable outcome rather than a hard-won achievement.

The question, though, is why the structural dissonance should automatically motivate the return? Or, how is it that the dissonance secures the illusion of the tonic's self-presence in the recapitulation? The answer to these questions emerges if one views the form as rooted in a structure of indebtedness. The system of debt is, in fact, inscribed into the tonal system at a fundamental level by virtue of the scale's intervallic structure. Its pair of semitones give rise to a voice-leading exigency which is most readily encapsulated in the dominant seventh chord: the diminished fifth contains a latent impulse to resolve inwards. The authentic cadence obtains on account of this intrinsic weighting. Moreover, the entire tonal system is credited at the outset with a measure of gravitational energy which tends towards sending it in freefall flatwards around the cycle of fifths. By virtue of its voice-leading exigencies, tonality's movement in this direction is self-propelling. A debt is incurred in that the sonata form relies upon its expectation that the dominant will fulfill its promise to move to the tonic.

<sup>4</sup> Scott Burnham's *Beethoven Hero* (1995) gives an excellent summary and critique of this discourse.



At first glance, it seems as if the debts were incurred by the displacement, but a closer analysis of tonality's constitution reveals that the tonic remains beholden to the dominant even once the authentic perfect cadence is achieved: the debt materializes precisely because *the tonic requires that displacement in order to master itself*. In other words, the tonic remains at the mercy of the dominant insofar as it can only obtain its own wholeness by relying on the gravitational energy or liquidity vested in the dominant. That is why the recapitulation relies for its existence on the dominant of the second group discharging its obligations. The Carolingian theorization of the Roman chant repertory led to a scalar conception of mode emerged which in turn ensured that the tonal system was inherently asymmetrical. On its own, a tonic triad would, if anything, have an inclination to move flatwards through a descending fifth progression. It is the dominant—and not any actual arrival on the tonic—which secures the tonic's presence. It anchors the tonic in what would otherwise become an unstoppable spin through the cycle of fifths.

A Derridean perspective unites with a Schenkerian one to evidence that the opposition between tonic and its other, the dominant, is not, in fact, an external one. The dominant is not absolutely other, but the mere fact that the tonic is always already unable to coincide with itself. As Schenker readily grasped, the dominant is nothing other than the temporalization of the tonic as it turns back on itself in an attempt to touch itself. The tonic can, therefore, never grasp itself as itself, but only as other, as the dominant.

Sonata form, though, is more sophisticated than this. In order for the tonic to appear selfsame, it must disavow its reliance upon the dominant. For the tonic to seem to master itself at the recapitulation, it must purify itself of the stain of alterity. It does this by excluding the other from itself, by making it absolutely other. This is the meaning of the tonicization of the dominant through the move to the secondary dominant in the transition of conventional sonata forms. Sonata form excludes the dominant by construing it as explicitly non-tonic material rather than as a temporalization of the tonic. The tonic only attains integrity once the dominant is first able to secure its own sovereignty. The tonic's indebtedness is thus much more deep-seated, for it depends not only on the dominant for its closure, but, moreover, upon the pre-dominant in order to

sustain the illusion that this closure is the product of self-mastery.

## **6. Whether the Classical style disavows or exposes its fundamental principle of division, it thereby continues to presuppose the more fundamental condition of possibility of this principle**

The ethical stakes of this choice between unity and disunity, between disavowal and acceptance, are readily apparent and especially familiar to readers of Adorno. His philosophy of Beethoven (1993) proposes that the unified heroic works are untrue to the extent that they fail to represent the real, fractured state of society. Moreover, by presenting an unrealized and arguably unrealizable ideal, they give false hope. At the risk of oversimplification, Beethoven's late works are truer for Adorno because they restrict this reconciliation to being nothing but an unfulfillable promise. In order to preserve hope as hope, in order that it not be extinguished in either fulfilment or frustration, redemption (that is, identity) must be *unrealizable*.

Derrida likewise adopts this postulate of unrealizability (1978). His reasoning is elegant, but ultimately it is perhaps inconsistent. To represent, musically or otherwise, that the self-identical subject is all that there is, is to foreclose the possibility of that self being exposed to the unpredictability of the other. It is unethical, in short, insofar as it collapses potentiality into *necessity*. Anything that would eliminate the undecidable future would put an end to the possibility of life in general. In taking tonal closure for granted, the Classical style presupposes—that is, it relies and yet forgets—the very potentiality of that self-presence, by transforming that potentiality into certainty. If potentiality is to be genuine potentiality and not certainty, it must also be *impotentiality*; that is, if something is to be a possibility and not simply an inevitability waiting to happen, it must also be possible that it may not happen. It must be at once capable of happening and capable of not happening.

On this reading, an aesthetic which holds resolutely to disunity might seem to have an ethical trump card. By insisting upon the unrealizability of unity, it would seem that it preserves potentiality. Closer inspection, however, reveals that this strategy simply reinstates necessity in the form of absolute impossibility. If unity is to remain *unrealizable*

and not simply always already unrealized, it must at the same time be capable of being realized. But this is precisely the possibility which is foreclosed when the Classical style dwells resolutely in its condition of separation.

## 7. This presupposition of the (im)potentiality of violence is itself violent

In both cases, the Classical style thus presupposes the existence of (im)potentiality as such. Whether it disavows or embraces its constitutive schism, it continues to presuppose the fact there can or cannot be an experience of self-presence. This double potentiality is the very condition of possibility for the schism in the first place. There is only an experience of alienation because it is also possible that this rift not exist. If music were consigned irreparably to this schism—if the Classical style were only ever capable of existing at a remove from itself—then it would be unable to register this gap for it would coincide absolutely with it. It would simply be this gap. It is only because the Classical style is both capable of being this schism and of not being this schism that it is able to experience its alienated condition.

The true violence of the Classical style consists, then, not in the fact that it is internally divided from itself, but in the fact that, in consigning itself to this minimally violent structure of being, *it destroys potentiality as such*. Because what is at stake is not the possibility of any particular fate, but the existence of potentiality as such, this violence is not merely done to music, but to the very condition of possibility of all life. To destroy potentiality means that being is confined to the actuality that it is and is thereby precluded from being what it could be, from all its possibilities—that is, from what it truly is. The forgetting of potentiality thus tears all being apart from itself. Only when the Classical style realizes the possibility of not being consigned to and defined by its schism—only in those moments does it shed its violence. ◀

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