

Memory, hope : recapitulation, anticipation

Meditations on time initiated by Haydn sonata #49

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The main theme, based on a short, hopscotchy, double-neighbor motif, starts the piece off cheerfully enough. When you've written 48 previous keyboard sonatas, and hundreds for other instruments and ensembles, what's yet another main theme? Is it a moment of creative expansion, of individual exploration, of newness? Our mythology about the sacred, inspired creative act might ascribe such intent. But that's a Romantic era myth, barely *in utero* in Haydn's day. Haydn was a "house officer" for the Esterházy family, wearing livery like the cooks and butlers that also followed the court from palace to palace. He wrote music on demand, in copious amounts. How does our awareness of that social-economic situation change our understanding of a moment in the music—for it surely does? Does the theme take a role in a composer's oeuvre other than that of inspired utterance—expressing something particular to him and his audience at that time that through our distance we cannot hear?

A challenge in any sensitive reading of a text (like a piece of music) is to state clearly the vantage of the reader, especially the social, economic, spiritual, and psychological differences that animate the reading. Without that consciousness, a reading can become simply a rehearsal of the tropes of power and exclusion that haunt the analytic exercise already, and which cry out for intercession. And in the reading itself, a core task, like that in physical sensation, is to separate out meaning-full information from a sea of noise, constructing foreground communication out of pattern and boundary, light and shadow, vibration and stillness. Franz Haydn tolerated a loveless and childless marriage, maintaining an extramarital affair for much of his life. Is this relevant information, or noise? In accord with the practice of his day, the sonata emphasizes a central acoustic frequency (the *tonic*, E flat) through mostly conventional note choices that support a perception of this frequency as being stable. Is this relevant information, or noise? Structural analysis, still the *modus operandi* of academic discussion of classical music, chooses the latter over the former. However, in doing so a core assumption must be asserted and maintained, and that is of the meaningfulness of harmonic structure. This assumption is akin to a belief in the meaningfulness of narrative structure in literature, and the two structures have many similarities, but narrative is not the only lens through which to interrogate a text, even one which embodies narrative quite clearly. For the fruitful analytic question is not "What is the structure of the piece?" but "What is a relevant (useful, inspiring, challenging, productive) reading of the piece—one that shines light on that which is still dark?" Perhaps this is an activist analysis, perhaps just one that admits the person, the body, the hearing soul and longing heart of the analyst, of the reader. To do else is to hide behind a certainty that does not exist in nature. There is no sonata form. There

are only sonatas: notation, translation, received clues. Then, sounds ringing through open air. And each heart's response.

The sonata, one of the composer's last, is dedicated to Maria Anna von Genzinger, called Marianne, an accomplished musician, friend, and the wife of the Esterházy's personal physician. Their correspondence, scholars muse, seems to imply feelings beyond that of platonic friendship on Haydn's part. In 1790, the year after the sonata's composition, Haydn writes to Marianne from Hungary, "Well, here I sit in my wilderness; forsaken, like some poor orphan, almost without human society, melancholy, dwelling on the memory of past glorious days. Yes, past, alas!"¹ Is this a sonata dedicated to a lover? Or simply to a kind and sympathetic ear, one who could hear Franz's complaints of the isolation he endured living much of the year at Esterháza, deep in the countryside, far from busy, social Vienna, which he loved? If indeed Haydn loved her, as his biographers suspect, the sonata, like a letter of Cyrano de Bergerac's to his beloved Roxane, embodies an affection that could not be spoken openly.

What critical ear, centuries after a composer's death, can assess the communication that a sequence of notes manifested in such a different time and place? Concerned with perceptible meaning, the analyst uses what information s/he has to construct a narrative that swirls around a piece of music as s/he and others listen to it. Here is an old joke about the Sufi sage/fool Nasruddin.

A man comes across Nasruddin, late at night, on his hands and knees, inspecting the ground beneath a streetlamp. "Mullah Nasruddin, what are you doing down there?" he asks. "Looking for my keys," says Nasruddin, "I've lost them." "Oh," says the man, and joins Nasruddin in inspecting the ground. After a while, the man asks, "Are you sure you lost them here?" Nasruddin says, "Oh, no—I lost them over there in that field." The man says "Well why aren't you looking over there?" Nasruddin responds, "Because the light's better here."²

Looking at a transcription of music notation from 1789, we have precious little to go on if we want to understand how the piece might have been heard. We can read the notation, or at least we think we can, and produce sounds on instruments that we think are similar to those it was written for. Perhaps, like Nasruddin, we're looking where the light is better (at the notation), because what we've lost (the situation of the music itself), is over in the dark field of the unretrievable past. Notation in western music poses a unique challenge in the close reading of a text. Musical notation did not "mean"—result in the same reproductive actions—the same thing from one generation to the next. In this way it is

¹ Karl Geiringer, *Haydn: A Creative Life in Music* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1982). 403.

² [from author's memory.] It is a well-known Sufi folktale, reproduced in many variations.

similar to written language, which evolves both grammatically and stylistically, and is laden with historical performance convention. The *seeming* consistency of language is the trap. (Ask any parent who can't understand the language their 13 year old is speaking!) Our conceit in thinking that we can "read" Shakespeare is just as fraught as the conceit that we can "play" Haydn. Evidence of improvisation, for instance, in eighteenth century instrumental music has challenged received wisdom about the finality of an urtext, and anyway the modern fetish of the urtext, or "official version", did not exist in the musical economy of 1789. Cadenzas were regularly inserted into virtuoso concerti of the time, often composed by the performer, not the composer, and were rarely included in the published versions of a piece that are now collected in expensive editions with scholarly notes angling for the pronouncement of definitiveness.

In addition to uncertainty surrounding versions and performance conventions in a piece, it is impossible for contemporary analyses to take into account the many layers of intertextuality that also undoubtedly sing through any text of that age and distance. We try. We read Shakespeare, the Bible, the *Mahabharata*, translating all into our own language, spelling, customs, but how far are we from the "originals"? Leagues, for sure. Centuries. We translate an ancient music notation using diagrams of the Guidonian Hand, but still have only guesses as to the rhythms that were played. By what measure can we read a text like a sonata of Haydn? Again like Nasruddin, we look where the light is brightest, at perceivable internal structures and scant gleanings of extra-textual information—whatever is left us after the long, violent centuries. In the impossibility of the task, still, volumes of meaning are revealed. It is the very impossibility of definitiveness that animates the analytic process, making the analyst's task less like dissecting a pinned frog than like wandering in the marsh itself, looking and listening to what is there, finding tiny green singers in their moist, unspeakable immediacy.

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Sonata 49 in E-flat major, written in 1789, is one of the last of Haydn's sonatas, and his mastery of the standard form was and is unquestioned. Looking now at pieces of the time, the convention provides a template by which to judge divergence and innovation. Was that judgment a mode of listening in his time? Were his listeners hearing (reading) his stylistic choices as utterances in an ongoing dialogue with other current composers about the formal evolution of the sonata? (Was Marianne?) I look at this "sonata" and expect to see a first theme in the tonic key followed by a contrasting theme in the dominant, followed by material that confirms the dominant key and leads to a cadence in it. And I do, for the most part. In the longer second half I expect to see a "development" section that begins in the dominant and moves through more distant harmonic areas while exploring motivic material from the themes, leading to a cadence on the tonic and a recapitulation of both original themes, now planted firmly in the tonic key. And I do. The standard narrative, reiterated in sonata 49, is of travel: home,

departure, and return—“the hero’s journey”. There is also a convention that the first theme has a masculine identity and the contrasting theme a feminine. The standard form, then, iterates a phallic and hetero-centric theme: a male hero is established, followed by a female counterpart introduced as contrast/Other, and her force (key area) is the “dominant” pull on the energies and attention of the hero. Both undergo challenge, being transformed by their journey through exotic key areas—also heard as Other (development), before returning home (recapitulation), where both themes now sound in the original key (his).

Theorist Susan McClary identifies, in the tonal narrative, patriarchal subjugation and domestication of the feminine,³ and this gendered reading of the tonal story is evident enough to be recognized by many theorists, including Arnold Schoenberg, whom McClary quotes comparing the inevitable tonal recapitulation to the heterosexual marriage that always concluded eighteenth century theatrical comedy.⁴ Inevitability would become the central quality proposed by Heinrich Schenker as defining the “masterworks” he favored, valorizing linearity over other meaning-shapes, and placing sonata form at the pinnacle of his aesthetic value system. Does this Haydn sonata conform to this traditional structure? It does. Did Haydn *intend* a demeaning marriage narrative in the piece he would dedicate and send to his beloved friend? Of course not. But myth courses below the surface of every discourse, and it is not beside the point to remind us of the unspoken social conventions implied in a piece of art, especially where they touch the sword of power, which always divides.

As in the standard model, sonata 49 begins with a perky theme, outlining the tonic triad through a neighbor tone figure, and announcing both the tonic chord and its counterpart dominant (here represented by the slimmer, but similarly functional, vii6).



It is momentarily interesting that the opening motif doesn’t contain the tonic note in the melody, instead progressing through small skips to the 5th scale degree, accented. The landing of the second motif, an inverted variation of the first, on 1, also accented, completes a first micro-narrative, moving from I to V and back to I. A common analytic observation of motivic tonal music is of the enunciation

³ Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1991). 14.

⁴ *Ibid.* 15.

of basic structural conceits, like the tonic-dominant-tonic sequence, on multiple levels of the music, and this opening motif reliably supports that observation. With its chunky bass hits, this first theme is indeed passably masculine, though like much Haydn being played on booming modern pianos rather than on the parallel single-strung fortepianos of his day it sounds best played gently. The 7-6 suspension at the beginning of the third full bar is a pleasure, and benefits from the departure from contrapuntal convention provided by not tying the treble voice. The down beat dissonance, attacked in both hands, will become a repeated gesture in the piece, and provide some of the more satisfying tension-release moments.

The second theme, as expected, is more lyrical, a rhythmic and melodic contrast, and though it doesn't live entirely in V as the model would have us expect, it spends time there, emphasizing vi just as much, the minor key that will be the primary contrast area later in the development.

The image shows a musical score for the second theme, consisting of two staves. The top staff contains a melodic line with various note values and rests, including a long note on the downbeat. The bottom staff contains a bass line with rhythmic patterns and rests. Below the staves, there are harmonic annotations: I, V, 4-3, I, 7-6, V, 4-3, vi, 9-8, V/vi, vi 9-8, 4-3. A 'cresc.' marking is present above the third measure.

The dissonance-resolution pattern in this material, like the suspension in the first theme, is a long note on the downbeat of each bar, which “resolves” by descending a step on the last 8th note of the bar. All of the iterations outline suspensions, with the dissonance on the 3rd beat of the bar and the resolution on the last eighth note. The second theme ends with another 4-3 suspension emphasized through the dissonance not being tied to its anticipation (m. 20). That suspension resolves to F major, or V/V, and a coda emphasizes F through the repetition of its own dominant, C. The passage ends with a caesura on F7 (V7/V), leading to an ornamented return of the first theme, this time in the key of the dominant, B flat. Ornament proliferates, enough to call this return of the main theme a variation. It leads to a strong cadence in V, emphasizing vi on the way, which offers a hint of the coming development. After a perfect half-cadence on V (in m. 42), we hear bouncy coda material through to the end of the first half, all confirming V.

All seems inside the bounds of the expected model, but in the coda a few interesting ideas appear which open up the sense of time in the piece. The first is in measure 50, where steady rhythmic momentum on the final dominant chord is interrupted, harmonically—through a suddenly wandering chord progression, and rhythmically—through a drastic slowing of the surface rhythm.

49

52.

dim.

p

p

p

f

After the initial landing (50), a sequence of bass-treble alternations outlines a progression that travels through the three key areas important to the piece: B flat (V): I – V – vi (deceptive cadence); E flat (I): vii – I; and C minor (vi): V – VI (which also reads as deceptive). Two deceptive cadences in contrasting keys, and we're not even at the development yet? What kind of marriage is this? Haydn saw extramarital lovers all his life. Was there deception involved? Undoubtedly, given the politics of the day, there was at least a little 'Don't Ask, Don't tell'... (Relevant? Noise?) But we've been set up already for deceptive cadences: a prominent V – vi resolution ends an ornamental sequence in bar 36. But what are they doing here, near the end of what should be a comfortable soft landing in the dominant? And after the second one, a Very Long Pause. Even at a good allegro clip, the rests in bar 52-3 are substantial. Everything stops. And when it restarts? Hesitation. The IV chord, which destabilizes the long cadential dominant since it's taken from the key of I and doesn't naturally occur in V. And the rhythm is still halting. The rhythm is...

Beethoven.

Of course that association is out of bounds, isn't it? I immediately hear the ominous repeated tones of the *Appassionata*, written 15 years later by the student, eclipsing his teacher in fame and myth.

The image displays three systems of musical notation. The first system is a piano introduction in F minor, featuring a fast scale sequence in the right hand and a long enunciation of the dominant chord in the left hand. The second system shows the vocal entry with lyrics 'nu tar en dan do do' and a piano accompaniment. The third system is marked 'Più Allegro' and features a full block chord on the dominant.

Time only moves forward, right? The flow of evolution, of influence, is a one-way street, past to future? Stormy Beethoven was a teenager of 19 when this was written, and wouldn't meet Papa Haydn for many years. But compare the passages! A fast scale sequence coming out of a long enunciation of the dominant chord (in the Beethoven it's C, V of the tonic F minor), suddenly interrupted by open space, and these three repeated notes alternating bass & treble. Even the way out of it is similar—Beethoven escapes the sequence by banging the dominant chord, then using it to back into his main theme at the *Piu Allegro*. Haydn also sets up a full block chord on the dominant (m. 58), which he'll take right into the real coda that ends the first half. Haydn will use the Beethovenian sequence again at the end of the development section (m. 107-130), with a much longer sequence of secondary dominants. Beethovenian? Haydenian! Of course, linearly, if there was indeed influence (or theft, its sincerest form), it was from Haydn to Beethoven, and not the other way around, but it is an undeniable experience of intertextuality—conditioned meaning appearing in the psychic meeting place between two texts—that my ears hear first the familiar piece, the “warhorse”, and then its earlier prototype. Time, for me, flows backward here, as the swirl of associations I carry and know *as my self* admit no linearity, no logic. For the modern listener, a child of recordings more than live performance, it is always like this. We do not listen in historical order. I hear the layers in order from which first impressed a seal upon my mind, my heart.

And the time river flows backward again for me as the second half begins. The parallel thirds that first appear in the Beethoven rhythm begin the development, taking what seemed like a simple cadential formula three bars earlier and using it to turn in a new direction. Again, a surprise: counterpoint! Expecting a motivic sequence in the same classical style we've been hearing so far, built up with chord forms, scales and arpeggios, it is a shock to hear this stately hint of canon. The eighth note is the audible subdivision, so the surface texture has slowed by half. Haydn shows his training: he taught himself music theory at age 20, working through Adolphe Fux's *Gradus ad Parnassum*, the standard counterpoint text, and studying the work of CPE Bach.⁵ That study appears here clearly. The first 14 bars of the second half are almost pure three-part counterpoint, with the voices beginning in a loose two-part canon and settling into a chain of secondary dominants, starting in V and temporarily resolving on vi/V, V, vi (another deceptive!), V7, and I. The sequence continues with key area emphases in vi and ii, leading to a strong half-cadence on V/vi, setting up the return of the main theme in the minor key area of vi.

65

71 (in V) V V/V - vi/V V - vi V7 I (in vi) ii - V

77 (in vi) i (in ii) V i (in vi) V vi V...

V/vi - vi

The music sounds like nothing so much as a transitional sequence from a simpler Bach fugue. While the harmony continues to press Haydn's home keys, V - I - vi - ii, a series of suspensions and baroque contrapuntal figurations dominates the texture. Here the analyst hesitates, as the quantum scientist does observing an atomic probability. Is it a particle or a wave? Is this a chord progression ornamented by suspensions or a chain of suspensions (mostly 7-6) that implies a chord progression? Is it another

⁵ Geiringer, *Haydn: A Creative Life in Music*. 30.

love letter—this time to Bach, the Old Master? Compare bars 74-75 in the Haydn with these two bars from the B flat minor prelude in the Well-Tempered Clavier, book 2:



In a three part texture, the bass voice walking down to 7, jumping to 5 and walking up to 1—nearly identical to the Haydn. The same voice exchange on beats 2-3 between bass and alto (beats 1-2 in the Haydn). The same 9-8 suspension on the downbeat, preceded by the same melodic contour in the soprano: 6 5 4 3, Bach's line more ornamented, but audibly the same, continuing through the same voice cross to a first inversion of the tonic triad, enunciated between bass and alto. As I play the Haydn, my mind leaps to the Bach, an old favorite, played for years at the piano late at night, my restlessness soothed in its steady melancholic pace and unfathomably easeful unfolding. Different bodies hold different associations, but isn't this exactly the process of language? Every word an imprecise referent to an earlier hearing, with a crisp origin story always a myth, never an experience. Everything comes from somewhere.

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The tonal narrative is built on a myth of encapsulated drama, with a clear beginning and end. The listener is expected (though by whom—the composer?) to hear/read a piece in linear order, tracking the peregrinations of the themes, expecting the inevitable return, and *feeling* relief at that arrival. Volumes have been written on the effect of delayed cadence, half/full cadences, deceptive cadence, modulation to and confirmation of key areas. Cadence signals arrival, and this “arrival” is only a metaphor—it's just changing acoustic frequencies, after all—but it's a seemingly useful metaphor for critics all along the spectrum. It must be reckoned with. When Susan McClary fired her famous shot across the bow of the canon, it was by associating a cadential delay in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony with the “throttling, murderous rage of a rapist”.⁶ It was a very dramatic charge that she later softened, but it did open a lively dialogue among her peers. Charles Rosen, among many listening critics, responded, and in his unusually kind response seems to defend his own feelings of (presumably non-rapist-like, or civilized, in the traditional sense of the word—made socially acceptable)

⁶ Susan McClary, *Minnesota Composers' Forum Newsletter* (January, 1987).

anticipation and release. Rosen's response is gentle, acknowledging the potential accuracy of the sexual violence metaphor for this potent moment in the music, even as he took issue with her reading of the moment's intensity.⁷ From other critics, vitriol poured. What all the sides took for granted was the core perception narrative, that music is to be read left to right, heard in sequence and with an ear for the conventional *meanings* understood to live in a sequence of frequencies in combination that we call V – I, or cadence. This may be a very useful reading of the text of a sonata, but it will never be the only reading, and the choice of a reading will be predicated upon the specific situation of each listener.

Haydn's (or Marianne's) sonata "finds its way back home", to the tonic key, after a beautiful sojourn in mournful C minor, vi. I have heard an homage to Bach and a fathering of Beethoven, and after reading Haydn's letters to Marianne, a love letter. I do not hang on the return of the tonic, and indeed when the recapitulation torques itself away from perfect repetition, like a diver twisting in mid-air, to state the feminine second theme in the tonic key, the result is momentarily jarring. Here is something being pulled out of its birth-key through an extended modulatory sequence (m. 150-58), a chain of suspensions that lasts longer than it sounds like it should, with the left hand part leaping around, far from the precise voice-leading established in the canon, all to get back to the original key. The myth of return. The wedding ring. Happily ever after.

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In *Unmarked: the politics of performance*, Peggy Phelan identifies two "laws" of representation: "it always conveys more than it intends", and "it is never totalizing".⁸ A representation is a piece of language being deployed to communicate something, and to communicate requires shared reference, which means that there is meaning-potential present. If a cadence is indeed read by many listeners as a drama of arrival, then the tonal language functions as a representative system. As such, it observes Phelan's laws. "More than it intends": the sum of meaning in a piece is never finite, and so can't be confined to structure, to compositional intent, or to any specific politics. "Never totalizing": one can't ever exhaust the meaning potential in a piece, since there are endless unique listeners, so no reading will ever be "correct". After this understanding, which shatters the myth of analytic certainty, one fragment that remains is *use-value*, which answers the charge of nihilistic relativism. Why analyze, if it's all contingent, subjective? To serve an end, and that end can be many things. How about "analysis as contemplative practice", "...as socio-political inquiry", or simply, "...as praise"? And analysis is not just *of* music, analysis *is* music. The analysis itself is a performance of the piece, a representation (of a representation, of course, and on and on, *turtles all the way down*).

⁷ Charles Rosen, *Critical Entertainments: Music Old and New* (Boston: Harvard Univ. Press, 2001). 266-67.

⁸ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (Routledge, 1993). 2.

The signifying thread winds back and forward through time, through memory and anticipation, past and future, binding the reader in a web with jewel-like nodes, infinitely reflective, recursive. In a moment of hearing, time may collapse as a linear experience, revealing the play of thought and association, flowing everywhere freely, way beyond departure, subjugation, and return, tonic and dominant. I hear Beethoven in the Haydn, and so time—which was only ever a temporarily useful *idea*—folds back on itself and Beethoven is there. And maybe in a distant moment in 1789, a small compositional choice is made—three repeated notes followed by a longer one might increase tension here—and one more knot on the web of the One Music is tied, a web that holds these two Austrian composers, holds Marianne von Genzinger, and countless others, including all of us reading and writing these words, and everyone beyond.

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Sources

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