

Rehearings: Beethoven

In and About a Few Measures of Beethoven

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This sentence is, as we say, “in English.” Informally, “in English” seems to refer to that connected system of ordered relations that we call the English language. The *in*-ness to which we refer is the syntax and grammar of a natural language. Rudimentary English syntax is to some degree context-free. What a word denotes is distinct from how it functions as a grammatical element, and though a sentence may be *in* English, it need not be *about* English or, for that matter, about anything at all.

A word seems to stand for some thing “out there”—some thing that is separate from its syntactical function: it seems *about* as well as *in*. However, if we consider a work of literature (that is, of pure natural language—a poem, say), we soon find that what a word denotes in itself is so confined, expanded, or otherwise altered by that poem’s particular syntax and grammar that the apparently sharp division between its *in*-ness and *about*-ness dulls considerably.

As musicians, we speak of music as being *in* something as well—say, *E♭*. By analogy with the “in English” model however, it seems more proper to say that a work is in tonal language, since it appears to reify a tonal system that we

have construed from a repertoire of similar works. Is there musical *about*-ness analogous to our “in English” model? Can the grammatical elements of a musical language denote—or even connote—some thing beyond their syntactical function?

Even more than a work of pure natural language, a musical work is about its syntax—about that syntax to such an extent that we need not even construe that work in terms of an *a priori* language. The work creates itself—its own particular syntax, grammar—as it unfolds in time. Certainly, those works of the tonal repertoire that we admire are exemplary in this: so contextually satisfying, so profoundly integrated.

Is this possible in a natural language? Consider the following:

Language a this in natural possible is?

Even though randomly ordered as to meaning and syntax, this sequence is still in English, to the extent that what these words denote is still relatively clear. The sequence is not, however, a sentence; it is not about anything. It lacks the syntactical structure that expands the meaning of the individual words. Now, consider this:

Is language natural in a possible this?

Ordered randomly as to meaning, but syntactically as to grammatical elements (that is,

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nouns, verbs, adjectives, and so on, all stand in a syntactic ordering proper to an English sentence), this sequence, too, is in English. Its words also carry their simple denotations; but, unlike the first example, this sequence carries a dynamic meaning as well, an almost musical about-ness. The dynamic functional relationship between grammatical elements is maintained, even though the ensemble of such relationships—the sentence—loses its extended denotative significance.

It is difficult to imagine such pure language; and yet, I construed those exemplary musical works mentioned above in just this way. Is that final example, then, the analogue for our musical language? No, it is not quite right: there *is* some sense of meaning—about-ness—attached to these musical words that is not accounted for in this last English sequence.

Allow me to maintain, for the moment, that the linguistic dichotomy between about-ness and in-ness holds in music, even though the boundary between the two is not at all clear in music or, for that matter, natural language.

What might about-ness and in-ness be in musical guise? About-ness would seem to concern the quality of a musical object or particularity—its proper, essential, or ontic nature; it would concern effect only in relation to its context. In-ness, on the other hand, would seem to concern the object's effect in relation to a concomitant syntax or connected system of ordered relations; quality is relevant only in so far as it is inseparable from relational or effective significance. Put another way, in-ness is concerned with the relational contexts of a work's area of

activity or opportunity: its field. About-ness has to do with the specific qualities of that field in relation to some object in or intruding upon the field. The musical object considered in its in-ness is a symbol only, a sign for some relational characteristic or grammatical element; the same object considered in its about-ness is the thing itself, a thing revealed by its ontic qualities.

The circled sonority below is, in one clearly apprehendable sense, a symbol: a sign for a familiar grammatical element, a move from a familiar repertoire of moves, an example of (say) modal mixture (see ex. 1).

This observation does account for a measure of the significance that I attach to the object and the quality of its context. The measure is small, however. It tells me (syntactically) *what* that object is (a symbol for), but it does not tell me *how* the object is, nor *where* it is, nor *why* it is (what it is)—all questions whose answers are, contextually, as clear to me as its minor ♯-ness, though more difficult to reify.

One might argue that the answers to these questions also construe the objects as symbols, but that is only partly true. The objects are symbols of contextual relations, not syntactical ones. They are signs applicable only to their peculiar context. The *how* of this particular context is a sign for the work's dramatic registral discrimination; the *where* of it is a sign for a particular location within the work's theme, the object particularizing that sense of place through contrapuntal intensification. The *why* of it is a coalition of all these relations, qualities, and places—yet particular to itself and to the work. The first definition of this object defines its in-ness, the subsequent definitions, its about-ness.



Example 1: From Sonata in C Minor, opus III, movement II.

If something is vividly *about* (one might continue) it *would* be syntactical, in that there must be a connection apparent between progressive parts. In order to understand some progressive about-ness, sense would have to be made: one would have to understand *something*. What meaningful definition of syntax would not fit such a case? Any utterance, whether syntactical (in any sense you choose) or not, will yield a

particular context when an object is isolated within it. But one needs a field of objects where context yields some sort of systematic, ordered continuity (actual or potential) or relational point of view in order to be representative of a syntax in the sense in which I invoke the term here.

Consider the following:

Adagio con molt' espressione.

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Example 2: Opening of Sonata in B^b, opus 22, movement II.

It is not that E^b-major-ness is unimportant here, for the obdurate tonality of the left-hand music exacts respect. Rather the very doggedness, challenged by the anomalous ruminations of the right-hand, claims priority. My perception of the right-hand music acquires no depth of meaning without a prior assumption of this E^b-major-ness. The tune presented in the first two measures of the right-hand is destroyed if heard only in relation to the pitches and rhythms below it. I find that I must hear the right-hand against an immanent diatonic field of E^b-major, and must assume the relative stability of the utterance in the left, in order to apprehend it as richly and poignantly as is possible.

Though fraught with innumerable ill- or undefined assumptions, this apperception appears not only necessary, but unavoidable in comprehending the cumulative complexity of these first three measures. For example, I am unable to apprehend the right-hand motion—the tune—as uncovering, or building, the diatonic collection. There is a convoluted quality to its motion, one that obfuscates rather than generates. The A[♯] that breaks the motion from G through A^b to B^b (mm. 1–2) palpably thwarts that motion. It is not merely that A[♯] is not B^b: the A[♯] is equally non-B^b. However, it is of the field—the immanent field of E^b-major. The A[♯] is not; and the spectacular intrusion of that A[♯]—the longest tone thus far—

is mitigated only partly by its ready absorption into B^b . It is both tonally and motivically anomalous. The half-step upper neighbor, whole step lower neighbor pattern around G is inverted around B^b (see ex. 3). (It is important to keep in mind at this point the “ E^b -major-ness” of what I am reporting and that the A^{\sharp} is a fabricated pitch. A^b is the proper lower neighbor to B^b , as C is the proper upper neighbor.) The return to this upper neighbor C is delayed—frustrated—by the intrusion of B^{\sharp} . This most recent “fabrication” further complicates matters: on the one hand correcting the image of the opening figure by reinstating the semitonal upper neighbor (we already apprehend the falseness of that semitonal lower neighbor, A^{\sharp}); and, on the other hand, creating yet another tonal imposture, B^{\sharp} .

The convolutions of this line reach their most acute phase here at the beginning of m. 3. By analogy with the beginning of m. 2, I await a motion to C. The tone’s concreteness has already been established in the previous measure, in confirmation of the diatonic assumption, and is reestablished (though by no means reasserted) with the first note of the turn that follows. But I sense from the very concreteness of that C that even a fulfillment of my expectations—a return to C—will stabilize nothing. The non- B^b A^{\sharp} of m. 2 brought me to B^b —a place to be, a left-hand tone. But even though the non-C B^{\sharp} might take me to C, what good will it do? B^b is still the closest thing to a place that I would want to be. (The D realized subsequently does not even seem a possibility at this point.)

A second image of the opening figure is created—one complexly tied to the first, and in temporally contracted form. Though the image is intervallically orthodox, it is utterly catholic in all other respects. While the original winds naturally, diatonically, around the left-hand G, and the first image a bit more eccentrically around the left-hand B^b , the second is quite fantastic in its avoidance of all things related to the left hand: it floats through but does not touch

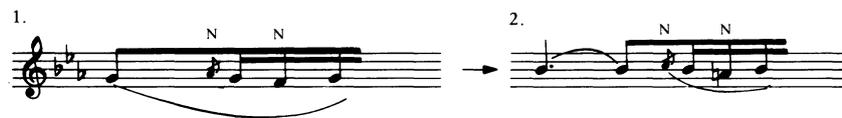
the previously centric B^b , or the newly stabilized A^b .

The leap to D, though a left-hand tone, settles nothing, for the tune is still headed toward C. The D, though potentially stable, has none of that upward pull concomitant to a condition of stability within a dominant-seventh on B^b ; rather, it is apprehended immediately as an intensification of C: an upper neighbor, and, in this sense, fantastically dissonant.

This is bizarre stuff: a chord tone present in a supporting harmony, yet apprehended as dissonant. The tune has run off its diatonic track; it has slipped out of phase with its immanent background, and one requires an initial syntactical toe-hold to fully apprehend the dislocation.

This dislocation is sensed from the beginning in a performance as sensitive as Artur Schnabel’s (*The Complete Piano Sonatas of Ludwig van Beethoven* [London: Angel Records GRM4005-5, 1962], disc 5, side 1). By lengthening certain tones (marked “=” below) and placing a dynamic, *espressivo* emphasis on others (marked “>”), Schnabel allows the anomalies to grow in importance as the tune progresses. The proper diatonic collection is at first ubiquitous, then only the goal, and, finally, virtually eliminated. The ultimate perception is not merely one of wrong note, but one of wrong collection (see ex. 4).

It is remarkable that G, F, C, and D are members of both collections. The G and the F reappear here after the completion of that eccentric drive to C and—subsequently—D, forming a veritable demilitarized zone where one or the other collection might regroup. The easy motion to E^{\sharp} and up through F to G favors the anomalous collection. (E is a potential diatonic extension of that collection.) But the line collides, palpably, with the A^b of m. 4 (first eighth-note), and the concomitant registral symmetry



Example 3

Immanent Field:

Fabricated Field:

Example 4

leaves the question undecided. The line, having wound itself up for a final assault on A^b , breaks through. At the same time, it is pulled back into the ruling (left-hand) diatonic.

The next rise to C is easy. Nevertheless, the tune is waylaid by the same B^b . And though the C is regained, as before, the concomitant plunge to neutral F/G is aborted by a startling, intermediate F^\sharp . The attendant G is forthcoming, but to what end? The tune began with an increasingly bizarre ascent that took it to no place in particular (C), only to be thrown down to neutral ground. It ascended again, less iconoclastically, and on reaching the same non-place was plunged violently into that recalcitrant F^\sharp . Then? Well, it simply returned to where it began: G. It is nowhere in particular, though it has *been* someplace extraordinary.

Now, in one effortless arpeggio, it gets somewhere fast, closing all those gaping diatonic wounds on the way (see ex. 5). The enclosed registral world expands, its opaqueness clarified. The left hand unaccountably moves. The “immovable” B^b suddenly appears two octaves higher in the right-hand; the initial and terminal G of the right, two octaves lower in the left. The middle—the intricate peregrinations of the right, and thick referential harmonies of the

left—is no more, becoming all the more vivid in its emptiness.

Where the right hand once moved upward only with the greatest of difficulty and downward precipitously, it now moves wherever it wishes with the greatest of ease. The left has attained motion, but its descent entails a laborious ascent. While the right goes wherever it wants however it wants, the left moves logically and predictably from its nadir, G, to its initial position, E^b .

That non-place of the first five measures—the C goal of each ascent—has become a place of considerable consequence. Its symmetrical images (m. 7: the C's) are now stable and dramatically executed. The final conceptual wound is healed. All this signals the return of a more gravitationally constrained diatonic motion and the onset of a relatively orthodox close.

The sense of “otherness” in this C-centered complex remains more than immanent. The left-hand, so obstinate in its diatonicism, responds to the right's spectacular two-octave leap with an uncharacteristic indiscretion: the lower register's unchallenged diatonic field is broken by E^b . The significance of this move lies in the reasonableness of its effect. Here I apprehend not a sense of anomaly, but rather a sense

Example 5

of reasoned clarification. The intensification of the move E^b-F by a mediating E^b is a foil to the excess of the right's two-octave leap. (The left had made some slight adjustments in response to an earlier threat that emerged from the right in m. 3. Here it responds similarly, the intensification of that response commensurate with its newly acquired registral direction.)

There is—indeed, to my mind, must be—a clear distinction between the syntax (in-ness) of this excerpt and its meaning (about-ness). The assumption of a field with *in* which a “meaning” is reified is essential to my apprehensions.

Still, if I take a moment to review the discussion of the Beethoven example (a discussion that purports to reveal the work's about-ness), what happens to my concepts of in-ness and about-ness?

A. Mm. 1–5.

1. The right hand.

- a. The diatonic slots are, at best, elusive. The field is chromatic, the diatonic projected upon it and not adhesive.
- b. The field is directional: motions downward are precipitate; those upward, labored and strategic. Gravity is operative.

2. The left hand.

- a. The field is diatonic; triads are projected upon it.
- b. The field is non-directional. There is limited motion between limited registral slots: there is no distinction between “line” and “voice.” The motions are circular.

B. Mm. 5–7.

1. The right hand.

- a. The field is no longer chromatic or even diatonic: it is triadic.
- b. “Gravity” is neutralized. Any motion, any distance, is as easy as any other.

2. The left hand.

- a. The diatonic is no longer easy. The chromatic is possible.
- b. Space is directional; gravity, operative.

What happens to these concepts? They converge. The about-ness particularizes the in-ness. The generalized language is made particular through the application of normative (syntactically arbitrary) constraints—the gravity mentioned above, for example. Though arbitrary, these constraints are not syntactically neutral. Rather they create conflicts: one function is inhibited (the ability to ascend, for instance), while another is left unparticularized (the ability to descend).

But *is* this outline an accurate representation of the initial discussion? No: it is outside time. We have taken a walking tour of a small but complex edifice. On emerging, we have construed our experience syntactically, rendering that experience as an architectural drawing. Our experience remains distinct from this construal. Our *in* and *about* remain separate (though coextensive). The *a priori* nature of the Beethoven's E^b -major-ness (its tonality, its in-ness) is concomitant to the drama that unfolds. The Tragic Form is not a tragedy, Sonata Form not a sonata. The elements of the drama are set forth; but always, in the end, the play's the thing. Everything else is concomitant to *it*.

