

Performer's Mind and Spirit: Reflective practice 'alla tedesca'

Performance Studies Network International Conference, 14-17 July 2011

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To those seeking to capture the significance of musical performance as reflective practice George Steiner poses a distinct challenge: 'Asked to explain a difficult *etude*, Schumann sat down and played it a second time'.¹ The implication is that musicians answer for their actions only through the immediacy of performance itself; Steiner seems to wish to shut off all further scholarly enquiry. However, in the Schumann anecdote the second performance is distinct from the first in being offered in response to a request for explanation. The pause between the two performances suggests the second is a mimesis of the first, a reflection, which adds an emphatic layer of 'I meant this' in relation to a memory of what has been performed. Action is paired with reaction, or even with deliberation if the demand for explanation is seen to throw doubt on the coherence of what has been presented. Yet there is still the expectation that for a musical performer reflection happens almost instantaneously, as part of the immediacy of delivering the text that sits – whether literally or metaphorically – on the music stand. For performers immersed in responding to music's notated instructions, the text itself is often seen to prompt how they should balance mind and spirit, thought and action.

Susanne Langer has spoken eloquently of the 'contagious excitement of the artist over the vital content of the work'² so that he can 'think in musical forms and feel only their import'.³ This understanding of musicians' activity – their play of mind and spirit – as stemming from music's activity – the play of form – could seem to undermine the 'potential knowledge-value of interpretive acts', to use the words of Lawrence Kramer.⁴ However, if musical works themselves are approached as 'performative phenomena',⁵ or to put it even more strongly, as depictions of what a performer does, then performers' absorption in their act of delivering a text can simultaneously offer a reflection of themselves as performers. Within Aristotle's essential distinction between the formal trajectories of the epic and drama, as laid out in his *Poetics*, lies the assumption that these modes of presentation can be switched or alternated at will if presented through the skill of a Homer. The skill of Homer as performer in the moment of performance is captured in his activity as poet, where both the epic and dramatic are confirmed as potentialities rather than fixed generic categories:

For it is possible to use the same media to offer a mimesis of the same objects in any one of three ways: first, by alternation between narrative and dramatic impersonation (as in Homeric poetry); second, by employing the voice of

¹ George Steiner, *Real Presences* (London, 1992), p.20.

² Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form* (New York, 1953), p.141.

³ Langer, p.147.

⁴ Lawrence Kramer, *Interpreting Music* (Berkeley & Los Angeles, 2011), p.31.

⁵ Tobias Janz, 'Performativity and the Musical Work of Art' in *Word and Music Studies: Essays on Performativity and Surveying the Field*, ed. W. Bernhart (New York, 2011), p.2.

narrative without variation; third, by a wholly dramatic presentation of the agents.⁶

For all the effort that Aristotle gives to making the generic distinction between the epic and dramatic, between narrative perspective and dramatic enactment, he acknowledges that the fixity of genre acts as a foil to the possibility of alternation in the moment. And the same can be said of Goethe's desire to distinguish between epic, dramatic and lyrical modes of address, as revealed in his correspondence with Schiller. In a famous essay on the performance of poetic ballads, Goethe said it was the business of the performer to mix the ingredients of the epic, lyric and dramatic, and create a 'flight' from the 'Ur-Ei' (foundational egg) prepared by the poet.⁷

Goethe's own documented activity as performer and director of performers might encourage a literal interpretation of his words. The openness of Goethe's poetry to inflection and coloration can be amply demonstrated by the hugely differing musical interpretations offered by composers even to a simple ballad like *Heidenröslein*. In his sketches for *Heidenröslein* from his later period Beethoven seemed uncertain whether to approach the poem as a comedy or tragedy.⁸ Goethe prepares elements of both even within such a tiny circumference, so that the raising of an eyebrow can make all the difference between raising a laugh or a tear. This is where the poem's mode of address as comedy or tragedy, as lyric, epic or drama, is decided, not in the poem's formal trajectory itself. Goethe did not believe Beethoven was capable of such artistic openness or subtlety. His first impressions of the composer were that he had never seen any artist 'so concentrated, so forceful, with such depth of feeling. I can well imagine his strangeness in the world'.⁹ Whilst Goethe criticized Beethoven for his 'strangeness', Schopenhauer viewed the composer's self-assertiveness as a mark of what music might do in offering a 'true and complete picture of the nature of the world'. According to Schopenhauer, in Beethoven's instrumental music we see 'the greatest confusion which yet has the most perfect order as its foundation...the most vehement conflict which is transformed the next moment into the most beautiful harmony'.¹⁰ As in Aristotle's praise of Homer, Schopenhauer makes mention of Beethoven's balancing of alternatives – confusion and order, conflict and harmony – but the implication is that this balance is sorted out at the stage of conception, not left to matters of presentation. Rather than truly being a matter of openness in the mode of address, one state is created to follow the other in due sequence without the possibility of reversal or switch in performance.

Yet this model of what Beethoven offers to performers – the imposition of a compositional will – comes dangerously close to caricature, as well as conveniently ignoring some of the more provocative parts of his creative legacy. It would be

⁶ Stephen Halliwell, *The Poetics of Aristotle* (London, 1987), p.33.

⁷ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 'Ballade: Betrachtung und Auslegung', *Weimar Ausgabe. Goethes Werke*, ed. G. Von Loeper, E. Schmidt, H. Grimm et al. (Weimar, 1887-1912) I, 41, p.223.

⁸ See Paul Reid, *The Beethoven Song Companion* (Manchester, 2007), pp.179-180.

⁹ See Goethe's letter to Christiane von Goethe of 19 July 1812, *Letters from Goethe*, ed. M. von Herzfeld, tr. M. von Herzfeld & C. Melvin Sym (Edinburgh, 1957), p.375.

¹⁰ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, tr. E. F. J. Payne (New York, 1958), II, p.450.

interesting, for example, to see what happened if the String Quartet Op. 130 was taken as a prime text for understanding Beethoven's call upon performers. Apart from its fiendish technical demands, so much in this quartet provokes questions about intention and modes of address that can only be answered in and through the act of performance. The question about which finale, the 'Grosse Fuge' or the lighter replacement finale, represents Beethoven's true intention continues to disturb musicologists. John Daverio represents opinion as being almost equally divided between those who think the publisher Artaria exerted undue influence in persuading the composer to compose a replacement finale, and those who believe Beethoven had rightly taken to heart the audience's adverse reaction.¹¹ Joseph Kerman is the most outspoken in speaking of the piece being turned upside down by the presupposition of a change of heart:

When a mature artist has produced and promulgated a work of the calibre of Op. 130 he does not ordinarily change his mind about it, within a year, in such a drastic way.¹²

Michael Talbot talks of Beethoven revealing inner doubts¹³ in offering a replacement finale, doubts that some have extended from questions of the suitability of the 'Grosse Fuge' to the coherence of the work as a whole. Brodbeck and Platoff have described the aesthetic experience of Op. 130 as governed by disorientation, where 'events of the most unexpected sort are common'.¹⁴ Kerman is blunter still; if Op. 130 has essentially no finale, then how can there be expectation of any sort, or any sense of 'idea' in the work?¹⁵

Barbara Barry points to the pragmatic answer offered by performers to this crisis of meaning. She suggests that just as there are two finales, there are essentially two works for performers to choose between as 'each of the diametrically opposed endings accordingly affects the internal weightings and proportions of the work'. According to the finale chosen, performers will embark on a particular routing of 'characterisation, expressive emphasis, texture and trajectory'.¹⁶ Clynes and Walker have even shown that the choice of finale affects the tempo at which the previous movements of Op. 130 are performed.¹⁷ They found that the 'Grosse Fuge' encouraged a slower tempo throughout, as though its epic proportions imposed a sense of weight from start to finish. The replacement finale is, by contrast, much lighter and more literally song-like. Its introductory octave figure in the viola suggests a bagpipe-style accompaniment, reminiscent of Beethoven's arrangements of the Scottish folksongs *Duncan Gray* and *Highland Harry*. The nifty arpeggio-based figures in the first violin resemble the vocal line of *Polly Stewart*, also from the composer's Scottish settings. These are the trappings

¹¹ Glenn Stanley (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Beethoven* (Cambridge, 2000), p.162.

¹² Joseph Kerman, *The Beethoven Quartets* (New York, 1966), p.367.

¹³ Michael Talbot, *The Finale in Western Instrumental Music* (Oxford, 2001), p.95.

¹⁴ David L. Brodbeck and John Platoff, 'Dissociation and Integration: The First Movement of Beethoven's Opus 130', *Nineteenth Century Music*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Autumn 1983), p.149.

¹⁵ Kerman, pp.373-4.

¹⁶ Barbara R. Barry, 'Recycling the End of the "Leibquartett": Models, Meaning and Propriety in Beethoven's Quartet in B-Flat Major, Opus 130', *The Journal of Musicology*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (Summer 1995), p. 375.

¹⁷ Manfred Clynes and Janice Walker, 'Music as Time's Measure', *Music Perception*, IV (1986-7), p.99.

of a lyrical *Tanzlied*, with its toe-tapping, dancing-on-the-spot tendencies. And these tendencies can also be swiftly identified in the second, third and fourth movements of Op. 130. In the third movement, the cello figure in bar 3 and 4 could be taken ponderously as a walking bass-line, or it could be roused into a hurdy-gurdy *Tanzlied* accompaniment. The viola's opening melodic line in bars 3 and 4 can be lightly sung as a two-bar melody, with balancing question and answer phrases, or it can be treated more weightily as two one-bar sequences, extending towards further motivic repetitions in the first violin.

The performance instruction to the third movement of Op. 130 – *poco scherzoso* – reminds the performers to consider the lightness of a *Tanzlied* approach, even as the amount of contrapuntal elaboration increases the music's textural density and the 'scope for considerable extension of length' which Aristotle identifies with the epic.¹⁸ Throughout the movement phrases can be swung either way, towards travelling forwards or dancing on one spot. Kerman has pointed out how much Beethoven employs revolving circle-of-fifths progressions at micro and macro levels,¹⁹ so that the movement can seem to extend and contract at once, extending forward or spinning back. Either the epic shadow of the 'Grosse Fuge' or the lyric lightness of the alternative finale can seem to beckon, though in truth the beauty of this movement is that both can seem to be in mind simultaneously given the potential swiftness of the shifts in perspective. Distinctions between epic or lyric modes of presentation are here traceable at levels of detail that do indeed correspond to Goethe's language of the eyebrow, and his invitation to performers to make their own flight from the mix of ingredients offered. The mixture is so extreme that different possibilities have to be held in the performers' minds and constantly juggled. Each member of the quartet is taxed with deciding whether a particular figure represents an elaborating countermelody, accompaniment to a melody or perhaps part of the melody itself. In bars 13 to 15 Beethoven displaces the melodic line across the registers, Schoenberg-like. If placed in the same register the melody would appear almost exaggeratedly folk-like. A communal measuring of melodic quality has to be engaged in across the ensemble, as all respond to what they see and play versus what they hear. There are points when melodic qualities seem to vanish altogether, as in bars 69 and 70, and in a more extended four-bar passage from bar 81. The resulting sense of vacuum completes the continuum from maximum to minimum melodic capacity, although these extremes do not disturb the rhythmic continuity. The steady 'ticking' of accompaniment assures each figure's place on the continuum, and thus a potential tipping back into tune within the shortest space of time – as happens with the melodic recapitulation of bar 26 in bar 86. Across the extended formal nature of this third movement, Beethoven prepares a moment by moment alternation between tune and non-tune, lyric focus and epic delay.

It is not so much the immediate character of the third movement that justifies Beethoven's *poco scherzoso* instruction, as the play of character opposites which ensues. The performance instruction appears in the score over two bars of sighing semitones in the violins, which seem more like an introduction to lament as would befit the character of the fifth movement, the 'Cavatina'. The performers are invited to reflect playfully on

¹⁸ Halliwell, *The Poetics of Aristotle*, p.59.

¹⁹ Kerman, *The Beethoven Quartets*, p.316.

the third's movements ingredients, and - in a sense – make of them what they will. It is in this context that one can begin to grapple with why Beethoven entitled the next movement 'Alla danza tedesca'. 'Alla tedesca' is an archaizing term, applied to dances in the fifteenth century and to madrigals in the sixteenth century where the singers were required to mimic a German accent. Beethoven wrote 'Allegro Allemande' in one of his sketches for the movement. Such titles are again not so much a generic indication, as an aesthetic invitation to the performers to construe some kind of play with memory, a play with how dances used to go. The Italian title was used by Beethoven on one other occasion, in his Piano Sonata Op. 79. Here the tempo marking is *Presto* so it would be very difficult to make a literal dance out of it; the 'Alla tedesca' tag in Op. 79 links Germanness with wanting to play as fast as possible, or even with producing an unseemly scramble. In Op. 130's fourth movement there are more explicit dance topoi, in the sense of winding hurdy-gurdy lines, obsessively repeated eight-bar phrases, and even a drunken swell or lilt to the opening motif. However, aspects of the movement do not conform to how a traditional dance ought to behave. It is not entirely clear, for example, where the movement's Trio section begins and ends. The new eight-bar violin melody that is introduced in bar 25 appears more as a codetta-like figure, emphasizing closure on the tonic, than a definite contrast. A tonal contrast occurs with the move to C major in bar 41, but this overlaps with repetitions of the same codetta-like figure, which is subject to increasingly energetic and expansive variations. The elaborate ornamentation continues unabated across the return to the opening melody in bar 81, so that the dance's decorum of marking sections in time is in danger of being lost in a wave of textural accumulation. In this context the textural collapse and dismemberment of the tune in bar 129 suggests the players coming to a literal standstill, as if memory of the dance deserts them or they get tangled up in their own virtuosity. In immediate terms the eight bars from bar 129 to bar 136 might be seen as a comic representation of what happens when music falls off the music stand; the cellist plods on repeating the one-bar phrase the first violin has just played. The viola player attempts to offer a melodic connecting unit, whilst the violins echo fragments of the tonic triad. We hear the 'right notes but in the wrong order', to quote a catchphrase from a celebrated 20th-century British comedian. Or, more precisely, we hear the notes of the initial dance melody played backwards for four bars, and then forwards, to create a palindrome that fans out from the slurred D-B-D swell shape that first set the dance in motion. Conceived in space, as a palindrome, the eight bars make perfect sense; heard in time as a coda to an ABA structure they suggest dismemberment.

At this point of crisis, near the end of the 'Alla danza tedesca', Beethoven offers a particular mirror of how performers operate both within and outside time. Whilst they are caught up with events in time, they respond by keeping the dance going; in the coda the rhythmic structure of eight-bar phrases continues despite the extreme melodic and textural fragmentation. But performers also perform in response to memories held as an essence in the mind, which can be conveyed in nuances of detail irrespective of their sequence in time or of formal decorum. At the opening of the movement Beethoven notates not just a dynamic gradation within the first bar of the first violin's melody, on the D-B-D slur, but also a demisemiquaver rest at the end of the bar. Such a nuance can easily be lost in the interweaving of the four-part texture. But when exposed in the fragmentation of the coda, where each part plays by itself for a bar, this detail comes to

the fore with its implication of a catch in the breath, enshrining the moment, before the dance continues.

In the coda of the 'Alla danza tedesca' Beethoven sets up his quartet players to be singers, to catch breath and thus to vocalize in a way that echoes other key points in his quartet. The most famous of these is the passage marked *Beklemmt* from bar 42 of the fifth movement, the 'Cavatina'. But there is also an exposed recitative-style passage for the first violinist from bar 55 of the second movement, before the initial *Presto* dance resumes its mad scamper from bar 65. Even the melodic fragments in the strange development section of the first movement, which Kerman referred to as 'the most eccentric Beethoven ever wrote',²⁰ can be construed as moments of emphatic utterance, where a single phrase is isolated as demanding the listener's attention, like a singer stepping forward on a stage. From bar 105 the expressive sigh figure from the movement's *Adagio* introduction is hushed into a rocking accompaniment, whilst the cello line swells into an exaggerated *cantilena*. The soloistic phrase comes from nowhere and is left hanging after only two bars, even though the accompaniment figures continue. The cello interrupts with more bursts of eloquence in bars 111 and 117, the first violin imitates with its own two-bar arabesque in bars 124 and 131, but none of these arches connect. The expressive ingredients of song are assembled – the swelling dynamics, the rising and falling melodic contour – though without the expected continuity of song. The discontinuities and fragments only 'sing' with the players' persuasive articulation of each moment as a compressed soliloquy.

The culmination of such vocalizing tendencies can be found in the dramatic unison declamation of the opening of the 'Grosse Fuge'; Richard Kramer has underlined the affiliations of the 'Overtura' of the 'Grosse Fuge' to operatic recitative and aria.²¹ But being a singer on an instrument does not only mean physically to mimic the utterance or enunciation of words; it implies a particular relation to the musical text that assumes it is responding to another text – a poem, another song – held in memory. The invitation of the title 'Alla danza tedesca' to imagine an archaic source for the dance beyond the one immediately presented, encourages the players to hold different possibilities in their minds and to create their own 'flight' in the act performance as Goethe intended for the ballad-singer. Indeed, the challenge of the fourth movement's coda is that irony cannot be avoided, but whether to comic or tragic, epic or lyric purposes remains entirely with the performers. It would be tempting to view the choice of finale as the means of deciding how the ambiguities of the 'Alla danza tedesca' should be construed, whether to epic or lyric effect. But even if performers did believe one or the other finale, the 'Grosse Fuge' or its replacement, represented Beethoven's true intention, neither finale escapes the ambiguities so provocatively summarized in the 'Alla danza tedesca' movement. The replacement finale, as already discussed, sets up expectations of a *Tanzlied*, but in the coda from bar 413 the solidity of the bagpipe-like 'umpah' figures becomes mixed with more and more hectic textural elaborations. As the movement reaches its close the *Tanzlied* threatens to tip into a 'dance of death', if the performers choose to hear it that

²⁰ Kerman, *The Beethoven Quartets*, p.312.

²¹ Richard Kramer, 'Between Cavatina and Overture: Opus 130 and the Voices of Narrative', *Beethoven Forum*, I (1992), p.169.

way. References to the ‘Grosse Fuge’, as from bar 376 onwards, confirm that this finale is not as far from its epic predecessor as might be imagined. *Tanzlied* aspects are not entirely absent from the ‘Grosse Fuge’ either. In the *Allegro molto e con brio* section from bar 233, some of the recitative-like fragments from the ‘Overtura’ are reconfigured in question and answer phrases, around alternating tonic and dominant poles. Bar 249 even introduces a touch of song-like decorum, provided the melodic line is understood as passing from first violin to viola and back. With the recapitulation of this material near the end of the movement, from bar 533, the teasing fragments begin to settle into swinging eight-bar phrases. One might even dare to characterize the closing rendering from bar 716 of the Fuga’s originally jagged countermelody as a song-like arch.

Rather than treating the choice of finale as the key to interpreting Op.130, one might then focus on the distinctive ambiguities of the ‘Alla danza tedesca’ as the opportunity for performers to create the work’s trajectory whichever finale is chosen. With the mimicking tendencies of performing ‘alla tedesca’, Beethoven highlights the spaces to be found in the shape of a dynamic swell or the lifting of a rest. Such details are animated only in performance, as performers respond – in mind and spirit – to how they remember the music as making sense to them. Far from the presence of two finales leaving performers of Op. 130 without a centre of gravity, as Kerman believes,²² one could say that it helps make explicit a model of performance in which openness to possibility remains the touchstone at every level, from reflecting on the minutiae of articulation to creating the ‘flight’ of the whole.

²² Kerman, *The Beethoven Quartets*, p.374.