

Metamorphosis of the Sublime

Patterned Significations of the Sublime
in Nineteenth-Century Piano Works

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Bold, overhanging, and, as it were, threatening rocks, thunderclouds piled up the vault of heaven, borne along with flashes and peals, volcanoes in all their violence of destruction, hurricanes leaving desolation in their track, the boundless ocean rising with rebellious force, the high waterfall of some mighty river, and the like, make our power of resistance of trifling moment in comparison with their might. (Kant, 261)

But if these very objects whose significant forms invite us to pure contemplation, have a hostile relation to the human will in general. . . if, nevertheless, the beholder does not direct his attention to this eminently hostile relation to his will, but. . . forcibly detaches himself from his will and its relations, . . . comprehends only their Idea. . . so that he lingers gladly over its contemplation, and is thereby raised above himself, his person, his will, and all will:—in that case he is filled with the sense of the sublime, he is in the state of spiritual exaltation, and therefore the object producing such a state is called sublime. (Schopenhauer, §39, 267)

This monograph is concerned with the historical metamorphosis of the philosophical-literary concept of the sublime and its musical signification in the piano works of Beethoven, Schubert, Brahms, Chopin, and Liszt. It consists of four parts: 1) a historical survey of the sublime as a concept in the works of Burke, Kant, Schlegel, and Schopenhauer; 2) an assessment of the quality and strength of influence of these philosophies on the aforementioned composers, including an investigation of their social circles and personal libraries; 3) a theory of the sublime in nineteenth-century piano

literature that endeavors to identify patterns of musical signification; and 4) the application of this theory in the form of musical analyses.

The concept of the sublime first surfaced as a theme among several British philosophers and writers who described their striking emotional experiences while visiting the Alps (Shaw), the concept culminating most notably in the writings of Edmund Burke (1729-1797). For Burke, the sublime pertained to anything that inspired terror in the observing subject, who experiences both distress and pleasure emerging from the fact that the subject contemplates from a location not endangered by the object (Liddle, 301). The problem of distinguishing the sublime from the beautiful surfaces often, and Burke addresses it with a warning to an audience that might well include composers:

On closing this general view of beauty, it naturally occurs, that we should compare it with the sublime; and in this comparison there appears a remarkable contrast. For sublime objects are vast in their dimensions, beautiful ones comparatively small: beauty should be smooth and polished; the great, rugged and negligent; beauty should shun the right line, yet deviate from it insensibly; the great in many cases loves the right line, and when it deviates it often makes a strong deviation: beauty should not be obscure; the great ought to be dark and gloomy: beauty should be light and delicate; the great ought to be solid, and even massive. They are indeed ideas of a very different nature, one being founded on pain, the other on pleasure; and however they may vary afterwards from the direct nature of their causes, yet these causes keep up an eternal distinction between them, a distinction never to be forgotten by any whose business it is to affect the passions. (Burke)

The concept subsequently featured as a theme in the poetry of Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) and William Wordsworth (1770-1850), while in continental Europe it figured strongly in the works of German philosophers, firstly and significantly in the writings of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and then in those of Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829), Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), and others. Kant described two categories of

the sublime: the mathematical, wherein the observer is impressed by the scale and size of the object, and the dynamic, wherein the observer is overwhelmed by the sheer power of the object. In both cases, the sublime is a quality that exists in the mind of the observer, whose own imagination fails to perceive the totality of the object (commonly described as infinite, boundless, or limitless), and whose reason therefore “sublimes” the imagination, it alone being able to fully conceive of and comprehend the object as an idea (Ginsborg, §2.7).¹ As in earlier English writings, Kant’s examples of the sublime are often natural ones, in which the observer lies outside an immediate threat: “the irresistibility of [nature’s] power certainly makes us, considered as natural beings, recognize our physical powerlessness, but at the same time it reveals a capacity for judging ourselves as independent of nature and a superiority over nature. . .whereby the humanity in our person remains undemeaned even though the human being must submit to that dominion” (Kant as cited by Ginsborg, §2.7).

Schlegel entertained somewhat different views than Kant about the sublime in its relation to beauty, rather asserting that beauty and sublimity coincide (rather than oppose) in great art and that the sublime involves both joy and despair, the beautiful and the ugly (Schulte-Sasse, 163). For Schlegel, the sublime is itself limited, “a relative maximum, the highest point of beauty one can reach at a particular moment in time” (Verstraete, 39-40). Also in contradiction to Kant, the sublime does not emerge from the mind of the observer, but is rather “inherent in art” (41).

¹ “But, provided our own position is secure, their aspect is all the more attractive for its fearfulness; and we readily call these objects sublime, because they raise the forces of the soul above the height of vulgar commonplace, and discover within us a power of resistance of quite another kind, which gives us courage to be able to measure ourselves against the seeming omnipotence of nature.” (Kant, 261)

Rooted in Kant's legacy, Schopenhauer, like Burke, associates the sublime with negative feelings of terror and powerlessness: "When we are abroad in the storm of tempestuous seas; mountainous waves rise and fall, are dashed violently against steep cliffs, and shoot their spray high into the air. The storm howls, the sea roars, the lightning flashes from black clouds, and thunder-claps drown the noise of storm and sea" (Schopenhauer as cited by Vandenabeele, 95). According to Bart Vandenabeele, the sublime for Schopenhauer is not merely a painful contemplation, but one of pleasure as well, as the subject is himself removed from the threat (95). As he writes, "in the sublime, a purposive [*absichtlich*] turning away from what threatens the will takes place. The feeling of the sublime emerges through the contrast of the meaninglessness and dependence of us as a willing subject and the consciousness of ourselves as a pure subject of knowing" (92). This subject's knowing transcendence of limitation could be seen as somewhat analogous to Kant's triumph of reason over imagination.

The second part of the monograph addresses the nature of the influence of these concepts on nineteenth-century composers. This will require determining what works of literature and philosophy they possessed, as well as what works one can reasonably surmise they read. Thus, Brahms is known to have been significantly influenced by Schopenhauer (Beller-McKenna) Beethoven to have read Kant and Schlegel (Tymoczko; Stanley, 152), Schubert to have composed settings of Schlegel's poetry, and Liszt to have been both aware and resistant to aspects of Schopenhauer's philosophy (Merrick, 43). As Dmitri Tymoczko notes, "the association with Kant is not as farfetched as it might initially seem.

Beethoven mentioned Kant in one of his conversation books, writing, ‘the moral law within us and the starry skies above us–Kant!!!’ These are the two things that, as Kant claimed in the conclusion to the *Critique of Practical Reason*, ‘fill the mind with an ever new and increasing sense of the sublime.’”

The third part of the monograph develops a theory of musically signified sublimity using a technique I implemented when writing about *sehnsucht* in musical narrative, in which I proposed that the sense of remoteness, removedness, or otherness, either as a state or as a goal for which to long, may be musically signified by figures that imply spatial and temporal distance. Here I locate prevalent patterns of signification that may be indexical of qualities associated with the sublime. I therefore make special reference to semiotic and topic theories, tools already used by James Liddle to address Beethoven’s signification of the sublime using “extreme registers of the instrument” to signify “extremes of magnitude” (Liddle, 304). Though he identifies one such compositional device, I aim to develop a theory that can meet the challenges other signifiers encounter, namely, that sudden contrasts and climaxes of dynamic and range in time become too commonplace to be noticeably sublime, therefore posing the problem that “evocation of the musical sublime is thus frequently reduced to a question of degree, thereby becoming unquantifiable and subjective, hardly suited to topical signification” (Liddle, 303-4).

In addition, I examine the relationship of the sublime to *sehnsucht*, virtuosity, formalism, and expressionism, and propose that amongst the arts, music is uniquely privileged to defy imaginative perception due to its non-

representationality. Schopenhauer observes this in the following:

[Music] stands alone, quite cut off from all the other arts. In it we do not recognise the copy or repetition of any Idea of existence in the world. Yet it is such a great and exceedingly noble art, its effect on the inmost nature of man is so powerful, and it is so entirely and deeply understood by him in his inmost consciousness as a perfectly universal language, the distinctness of which surpasses even that of the perceptible world itself. (§52, 334)

I also consider the special position of solo piano works, whole composite entities that are to be interpreted, imagined, analyzed, remembered, and performed by a single individual, in which processes there is a partial mirroring of the subject-object relationships in the above descriptions and philosophies of the sublime.

This leads to analyses of works by Beethoven, Schubert, Brahms, Chopin, and Liszt in the fourth part. Examples are provided that exhibit signification patterns hypothesized in the preceding part, including excerpts from sonatas by Beethoven (Op. 109), Schubert (D. 894, D. 760 “Wanderer Fantasy”), and Brahms (the *Andante con espressione* in F Sharp Minor from his Op. 2), as well as excerpts from Chopin’s scherzi (No. 2 in B Flat Minor) and Liszt’s Transcendental Études. These analyses aim to discover practical implications for the performer. Appendices include a timeline of the relevant philosophers’ and composers’ lives and works, as well as information regarding composers’ social spheres and literary influences. The bibliography below is divided into historical and critical sources.

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