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Performative Knowledge as an Analytical Tool: Embodying Beethoven's Musical Dynamics

ABSTRACT

Background

The richly diverse dynamic markings in Beethoven's scores have been the subject of various studies, not only in terms of the correct manner of performing them (Frogley 2000; Hughes 1994; Newman 1971) but also with regard to their role in clarifying the formal design of his compositions and in relation to melodic, harmonic and textural patterns (e.g. Huran 1990; Sheer 1990). However, there has not been any research on the embodied experience, and emergent meanings, of performing musical dynamics in general, and in Beethoven's dynamics in particular.

While dynamics and pitch are totally intertwined in the production of musical sounds — every pitch is necessarily embedded in a certain dynamic — there is an embodied sense in which musical dynamics are experienced as *effort shapes* that are related to but distinct from the pitch-timbre content of sounds. Sustaining an already established level of loudness, changing it gradually as in *crescendo* or *decrescendo* or suddenly as in *subito piano* or *sforzando*, articulating — subtly or more crudely — the metric accents, these are all part of the dynamic background or canvas of music as performed. The execution of these different kinds of dynamics involve different kinds of effort shapes, some of them calling for instrumental virtuosity; and in the making of any given musical dynamics, different kinds of instruments will afford different effort shapes. While the aural effects may be similar, a dynamic-producing gesture that is idiomatic on the violin, for example, can become difficult, effortful and virtuosic on the piano and vice versa. Requiring the exertion of force on the resistant matter of the instrument, such effort shapes at the same time constitute embodied rhythmic gestures, with phases of tensing and relaxing and a sense of direction, and revealing inner attitudes towards the use of energy. The creation of musical dynamics in performance reveals thoroughly the performer's body in action.

In the history of western art music, one of the hallmarks of the classical style has been the widening range and variety of musical dynamics that composers and performers began to employ — motivated in part by the developments in instrument design and technology, and in part to add dramatic force to the tonal adventures afforded by the developing sonata form. Already in Haydn, unexpected dynamics abound, and they sometimes become an integral aspect of thematic identity and thereby acquire structural significance. It is with Beethoven, however, that musical dynamics become not only more numerous and varied, but truly unusual, extreme and sharply contrasted.

This paper presents research on the role and meanings of the musical dynamics in the performance of Beethoven's Piano Trio Op. 70 No. 2 in E-flat Major. This work is extraordinary not only in terms of the dynamic markings Beethoven provided, but also in terms of the structural experiments and excursions, and harmonic ambiguities it involves. Each of the four movements of this work involves highly expressive and varied dynamic gestures ranging from off-beat accents to *subito pianos* followed by *crescendos*; while some of them corroborate the melodic and/or harmonic shape and tension-profile of a given passage, others work against it. In performance, the latter kind of dynamic gesture has the potential to interrupt the habitualness, and flow of action that skilled performers typically experience, and bring to the fore an awareness of the performing body: they articulate the body's presence, its striving corporeality, as opposed to its transparency. One can argue that through such dynamic markings, physicality of performing becomes written into the score. The interruptive character of some of the dynamic gestures in this Trio provokes a narrative account of the music (Maus 1991). One of the arguments put forward in this paper is that Beethoven's dynamic gestures problematize the epistemic security that performers normally have with regard to the relationship between dynamic and pitch-based shapes. The paper also considers the relationship between the performative effortfulness of Beethoven's dynamics and the aesthetic effortlessness that was so prized in Romantic aesthetics (Montero 2011).

Aims and Repertoire Studied

This paper aims to argue for the knowledge and meaning producing status of musical dynamics from the perspective of performers; and to present a case study of the relationship between the experience of performing musical dynamics and an emergent understanding of the formal/structural aspects of Beethoven's Piano Trio Op. 70 No. 2.

Methods

The research employs practice-based and theoretical enquiry based on the following questions: How do performers experience the execution of musical dynamics and what role does the musical instrument play in this process? How can the sense of effort that arises during the realization of certain kinds of musical dynamics be conceptualized and theorized? How do such dynamic gestures influence the experience of flow in performance? How can the performance of musical dynamics be integrated into a music-analytical understanding of a piece of music — in this case, an understanding of Beethoven's Piano Trio Op. 70 No. 2?

Implications

This research presentation contributes to a largely neglected area by theorizing about the performance of musical dynamics from the perspective of performers. In doing so, it also emphasizes the ‘messiness’ of the performance ‘event’, which third-party observers in performance studies tend to regard as a unified happening characterized by a homogeneous flow. The full article will appear in *Nineteenth-Century Music Review* in 2019.

Keywords

Musical dynamics, Beethoven, Effort Shapes, Piano Trio, The Body in Performance.

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