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Viewpoint

Beethoven’s Orpheus—or Jander’s?

EDWARD T. CONE

Owen Jander’s interpretation of the *Andante con moto* of Beethoven’s Fourth Piano Concerto (see this issue, pp. 195–212) is provocatively fascinating as an imaginative suggestion, but as a literal prescription it is likely to arouse strenuous opposition. Jander himself seems undecided about how he wishes us to take it. On the one hand he speaks of Marx’s “discovery,” and he announces his own “intention here to *demonstrate* that the constantly resurfacing rumor about this piece of music is indeed true” (my italics). Later he characterizes the “five musical-programmatic sections” revealed by his analysis as “in my opinion, incontrovertible.” Yet, as his conclusion frankly admits, “All of the above may be nothing more than an amazing array of coincidence.”

Coincidence or not, Jander himself—regardless of what he may expect of his readers—is obviously convinced of the truth of his basic hypothesis that Beethoven had the Orpheus legend in mind. In view of his scrupulous documentation, he may well be right. But on that assumption, just how well does his reconstruction match program to music?

Certainly the way he fits the dialogue from Kanne’s Hell-gate scene to Beethoven’s opening colloquy is brilliant—even though he does have to transfer Orpheus’s opening line. After that, however, he falters. “Evidence suggests,” he says, “that the story continues right to the last measure of the movement.” By this he means that the music depicts not only Orpheus’s entrance into Hades, but also his further adventures there. But where is the evidence? Finding no single poetic source that seems to fit the direction of the music, he concocts one by juxtaposing lines from Ovid and Virgil, sometimes out of their original order. Even so, his version moves from Orpheus’s confrontation with the Furies directly to his homeward journey with Euridice, drastically telescoping the action.

There are other problems as well. Why is the imitative reference to the lyre reserved for the depiction of the return journey? Surely Orpheus accompanied himself while he sang to the Furies—as attested by Gluck’s orchestration and by Kanne’s libretto ("*Ihr Saiten*"). Then there is the question of role. At the outset we are asked to accept the piano as representing Orpheus and the orchestral strings as those forces marshalled against him. But in Jander’s analysis, those roles become strangely confused during the latter half of the movement. The three thunderclaps are relegated to the piano (not very convinc-
What emerges, then, is a two-part form: AA'–BB'–Coda according to thematic structure, i–i–V–i in E minor according to the chief cadences. From both points of view, the third and fourth subsections are closely bound together. Moreover, B', despite the partitions that indicate its parallels with B, is essentially unitary. It is not broken up by the cadenza, which merely expands a single chord \( V^9 \). According to this analysis, I can find no justification for the major thematic and temporal break in the program that Jander assumes at m. 47. I conclude either that Beethoven was not trying to represent the entire journey through Hades, or else that he was doing so very ineptly from a musical-formal point of view.

Preferring to think the best of Beethoven, I confine my hypothetical reconstruction of the story to the Hell-gate scene alone, and I next examine details of the individual phrases to see what support they may offer. When I do so, I discover that the confrontation between the aggressive, peremptory strings and the pleading piano is not limited to the obvious contrasts of dynamics, texture, and melodic material. The linear and chordal motion as well is most revealing:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>mm.</th>
<th>1–5</th>
<th>6–13</th>
<th>14–18</th>
<th>19–26</th>
<th>26–38</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The strings outline a half-cadential progression in E minor: i–VI–ii(^{-})–V.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6–13</td>
<td>The piano, accepting the challenge, picks up the dominant and leads it, despite a pause on III, firmly back to the tonic.</td>
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<tr>
<td>14–18</td>
<td>The strings try to divert the tonal direction toward VII. This they do by substituting C(^{#}) in m. 15 for the C(^{#}) of m. 2.</td>
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<tr>
<td>19–26</td>
<td>The piano parries the threat by using ( V ) to effect a deceptive cadence in VII; a second phrase insists on returning to i.</td>
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<tr>
<td>26–38</td>
<td>The strings, impatiently overlapping the piano's cadence, try a new diversion, this time toward VI, through the melodic rise A–B–C. But the piano, equally impatient, interrupts and reinterprets those moves in such a way as to force the strings to return, by way of the melodically awkward harmonic minor scale (C–D(^{#})–E) to i. In that key the piano descends to a half-cadence on V.</td>
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Example 2
38–47: The strings now show signs of indecision or exhaustion—but not only through the obvious change in dynamics. This time they cannot overlap the piano V and must consequently lose their initial downbeat. Gradually they accede to the piano’s occupation of E minor, demonstrating acquiescence by rising smoothly through the melodic minor scale to E. [Notice how neatly this move answers that of mm. 14–18. There, C♯ replaced C♮ in an attempt to dissuade the piano from its resolution; here the same substitution suggests submission.]

47–64: The piano, as if emboldened by its apparent success, makes its most impassioned appeal so far, breaking away from the thirteen-measure model and freeing its melody from periodic and motivic constraints. Harmonically, however, its burden is simple and familiar: an expanded i–iv–i§–V–Ⅰ. [From a programmatic point of view, the free expansion might emphasize that here Orpheus is making his supreme effort. And if one wishes to hear an imitation of the lyre in this passage, I have no objection.]

64–72: The strings, completely subdued, recall their move to VI, now of their own accord they continue to a iv–V–i cadence. The piano, having gained their acceptance, joins them in the progression, even imitating their motif of mm. 68–69 with a version of its own, mm. 69–70.

A certain amount of anthropomorphism has adulterated the above description, for in the interests of concision I have combined two steps: a rudimentary harmonic outline, and its possible programmatic interpretation. In so doing I hope I have made clear why I prefer reading the entire movement as a depiction of the single scene of Orpheus’s encounter with the Furies.

Let me make it clear, though, that I do not insist on the relevance of my program. I offer it only as one that is more convincing to me than Jander’s, and one that equally well fits the historical context he has described. But in the absence of a well-defined iconography [which music has never had, even in the days of the Baroque figures or of Wagnerian leitmotives], only a definitive word from the composer could designate a program as anything but conjecture.

A more crucial question emerges here. Regardless of which program we choose, do we need one at all? Indeed, in the absence of a descriptive title or other verbal indications, have we the right to accept any?

I have argued elsewhere that a program can influence our experience of musical content by giving it a specific conceptual context, but that this context can only be exemplary—that is, “suggestive of the total expressive potential” of the composition, but by no means exhausting it. If the music is good enough, one can ignore the program and “let the music communicate its expressive message through one’s subconscious associations with its symbolic gestures.”

Beethoven, I am sure, would have agreed. Czerny, as quoted by Jander, reports the master’s belief that “music is not always so freely felt by the hearers when a definitely expressed object has already fettered their imagination.” I take that as a warning, not against the composer’s use of a program, but against the listener’s undue reliance upon it. If, as Jander suggests, Czerny’s surmise that the Andante represents “an antique tragic scene” derives from Beethoven himself, can we not infer that the composer, unwilling to “fetter the imagination” of his pupil, gave him only a vague suggestion of the program?

I realize that the act of making an identification affords deep pleasure, at least for many of us. The more difficult the identification, the greater the pleasure, as every bird-watcher knows. I am further convinced that this pleasure is at some level aesthetic: to be made aware of the iconography of a puzzling picture, such as Piero della Francesca’s Flagellation, greatly enhances my enjoyment of the picture as a work of art, not to speak of my appreciation of it as a historical and biographical document. But Piero was working within a tradition of clearly recognized pictorial and iconographic norms. He had no reason for wishing to conceal his subject. On the contrary, as an artist working on a commission for a patron, he had every reason for wishing that subject to be obvious. That it is no longer so is due not to his secrecy but to our ignorance. Our pleasure in the identification is thus fully legitimate, and it is all the greater because of our conviction that we are at last seeing the picture as Piero meant us to see it.

These arguments clearly fail to apply to the

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concerto movement. Jander’s investigation is certainly valuable for the light it throws on cultural history and on Beethoven’s literary interests, but its effect on our aesthetic enjoyment will always be tainted by the suspicion of illegitimacy. The case has not been proved, and even if it should ever be proved, the question would still remain: to what extent can a private program, never intended for public consumption, be relevant to the proper understanding of a composition? There is, to be sure, a joy in satisfied curiosity that explains our delight in the revelation of the secret program behind Berg’s Lyric Suite; but is our musical reaction to the work really affected thereby? We are perpetually teased by compositions that seem to embody undisclosed programs—e.g., the Andantino from Schubert’s A-Major Sonata, D. 959; or Chopin’s B-Major Nocturne, op. 32, no. 1. Would we be gratified or disappointed to have our imaginations fettered by the discovery of the composers’ extra-musical intentions?

Jander believes that such knowledge, whether or not sanctioned by the composer, can be especially relevant to a proper performance. If that is true, it is hard to understand why the composer should choose to withhold such crucial information. Nor does Jander tell us just how a performance in which “all of the musicians involved will be seeking to communicate the often-told story of Orpheus” will surpass, or even differ from, one in which all the musicians are seeking to communicate the musical values, formal and expressive, revealed by Beethoven’s text.

My own “counter-program” tried to put some of those values into words. I must now confess that it was not, in fact, really designed as a program. Rather, it was an attempt to verbalize the expressive effects of the most obvious musical gestures. If those effects constitute a program at all, it is a highly abstract one that could be adapted to any number of specific scenarios—the Orpheus scene among them. (It will be noted that my account mentioned the Orpheus story only once, and then only parenthetically. The other images can all be read as metaphors, as verbal parallels of specific musical events.)

I contend that a performance based on such an approach would adequately project the content of the movement whether or not the players kept before them the image of Orpheus and the Furies. That is an example of what I meant when I wrote, “The best program music . . . can be heard as absolute music.”3 Nevertheless, Jander has certainly aroused my curiosity: I eagerly await a sequel in which he will expand his teasing suggestion “that the op. 58 is a cyclic work and that it should eventually be recognized as Beethoven’s ‘Orpheus’ Concerto.”

3Cone, The Composer’s Voice, p. 169.