

Telling Tales: A Survey of Narratological Approaches to Music

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Briefly stated, the narratological analysis of music adapts the theoretical tools of literary narrative theory as a means of investigating music that can be conceived as narrative in conception and/or reception. Of the various hermeneutic approaches to the study of music developed in the last half century or so, narratological analysis has gone further than many in navigating a path that draws on both cultural and structural contexts. Often defined in opposition to structuralism—the focus of which is on formal (or “purely musical”) relationships within works and styles—hermeneutics is concerned with the “meaning” of musical elements. Despite the apparent dichotomy, musical narratology and semiotics (the study of musical sign-systems) are frequently concerned with the manner in which meaning can be understood to arise from structural properties, and it is scholars working at the intersection of hermeneutics and structuralism who have produced many of the more striking accounts of music in recent years.

Although the application of what might be broadly termed “narrative thinking” to the analysis of music can be seen to date as far back as the composer-theorist Jérôme-Joseph de Momigny in the early 1800s (see Le Huray 1990, 113–122; Almén 2008, 16–23), the modern investigation of music and narrative theory stems from scholars of the 1980s and 1990s. This generation is defined by Nicholas Reyland (2005, 139) as the first of two “waves” of musical-narratological engagement, “soon followed by the work of a second wave of scholars less persuaded of music’s narrative propensities.” To Reyland’s two we can add a recent “third wave” of scholars, who have sought to steer narrative approaches in new directions; this includes the consideration of post-tonal music, previously beyond the scope of narrative analysis. In the following review of musical applications of narrative theory, these three waves will be considered in turn, concentrating on the particular coordination of structural and hermeneutic approaches that has long been the focus of narrative analysis, before looking at the broader repertoires to which contemporary narratology has turned.

First-Wave Approaches to Musical Narrative

The focus of the first wave of musical narrative theorists was on devel-

oping the means to adapt the narrative tools of literary theory to music. The impetus behind this arose from the observation that music theorists frequently went beyond purely technical descriptions in analyzing music, applying metaphors of human action and, more broadly, anthropomorphic language in their accounts of structure. Discussing this scholarly inclination, Fred Everett Maus (1988, 73) has argued that “[f]or at least some music, a satisfactory account of structure must already be an aesthetically oriented narration of dramatic action.” As Maus later put it (1991, 3) “tonal music, as depicted by conventional analysis, resembles narrative, as depicted by Formalist and Structuralist writings, in that individual texts consist of identifiable kinds of objects arranged in partially predictable patterns.”

It is the sense of a correspondence between the sequential arrangement of musical elements and the succession of events in a plot that suggests the possibility of musical narrativity. This correlation led early musical narratologists such as Anthony Newcomb to borrow the notion of archetypal plots from narrative theory and use it as an analogy with formal expectations in music, demonstrating how deviations from such norms can be understood as equivalent to the discursive elements of narrative. The intention was not, however, to read programmatic narratives into abstract musical structures; as Maus argued, a musical narrative

does not encode a story about something completely nonmusical, in the manner of program music. Rather these goals, actions, and problems of the story are musical ones, and they share only rather general descriptions (for instance, “trying to return to a position of stability”) with everyday actions. (*Ibid.*, 14)

Maus notes the similarity between the *syntagmatic* dimensions of music and narrative, which is to say the manner in which both music and narrative arrange their elements in sequential groupings. Other scholars, such as Patrick McCreless, alongside Richard Littlefield and David Neymeyer, found more direct connections between narrative and music theory. For these writers, theories of literary narrative could be more or less precisely correlated to aspects of established music theory. These correspondences were valued for the manner in which they allowed a greater integration of music with theoretical work elsewhere in the humanities, offering links between the structural and expressive domains of human discourse, in place of “a technical discourse that remains aloof from aesthetic issues” (Maus 1988, 73).

One may broadly conceive of these various narratological approaches to music as existing somewhere on a spectrum from pure structuralism to more expansive cultural hermeneutics. At a wholly structural level,

analyses seek to outline and account for relationships between functional elements in a narrative structure. In musical terms, we might understand this as similar to the study of formal elements within a work, such as the relationship between themes, tonal areas, and formal spaces in sonata form. At the other end of the continuum, broader hermeneutic approaches are more concerned with the cultural meanings that can arise from conceptualizing music as narrative. This usually involves a mapping of something extra-musical onto musical structure, frequently as a “metaphor for human action”—for example, conceiving the “teleological drive” of sonata form as analogous to a quest narrative (Hepokoski and Darcy 2006, 251).¹ An overwhelming majority of structurally focused narrative analyses eventually pivot to the interpretation of musical meaning through narrative structure; it is rare indeed that the extremes of the structuralist/hermeneutic dichotomy are reached.

To those music scholars working towards the structuralist end of the continuum, the theories of the Russian Formalist critic Vladimir Propp (1895–1970) have been significant. In his classic *Morphology of the Folktale* ([1928] 1968), Propp outlines thirty-one “functions” (minimal narrative units) of Russian fairy stories, from which various archetypal narrative patterns or plots can be derived.² The basic shape of the tales studied by Propp is similar to that of Joseph Campbell’s “Hero’s Journey” ([1968] 2008), and can be summarized thus:

- (1) a hero (protagonist) sets out on a quest;
- (2) various obstacles are met and overcome;
- (3) the hero returns from the quest with new knowledge or power.

The precise number and selection of the thirty-one functions will differ from story to story, but Propp ([1928] 1968, 22) is clear that the *sequence* of functions remains the same regardless—a hero always sets out before he encounters obstacles, for instance. Some functions belong to the opening stages of a narrative and serve as initiating factors in the unfolding of the plot, such as Function II, in which the hero is given an interdiction or order which motivates the ensuing quest (*Ibid.*, 27). Other functions belong either to the middle stages (e.g. Function XV, in which the hero is transferred to the location of a quest object, initiating a new phase of the quest [50]) or closing phase of a narrative (e.g. Function XXXI, in which “the hero is married and ascends the throne,” concluding the quest [63–64]). Propp’s functions represent *invariant* elements within narrative trajectories, with sequences of functions representing something akin to a narrative “grammar.”

In a series of articles that since have become classics in the field of musical narrative, Anthony Newcomb (1984; 1987; 1992) adapted Propp’s

insights for music by drawing an analogy between functional sequences and plot archetypes in literature, on the one hand, and formal types in music, on the other, explaining that both can be thought of as “a standard series of functional events in a prescribed order” (1987, 165). Newcomb notes the similarity between the manner in which narrative functions appear in normative sequences and the syntagmatic structures of Classical and Romantic music, which govern “the structure . . . at every level, from phrase to section to movement to cycle of movements” (*Ibid.*, 165). Newcomb draws a distinction between formal archetypes—for example, sonata or rondo form—and the surface realization of individual examples of those forms. This distinction is a fundamental one in narrative theory, and is usually described as a dichotomy between *story* (the basic plot archetype; the ordered events of the narrative) and *discourse* (the manner in which the basic functional events are presented). To use the example of rondo form, the story level of the narrative would represent the rondo paradigm (ABACABA, with stable refrains and dynamic episodes), with the discourse being the particular expression of that paradigm within a specific musical work (C is more tumultuous than B, one of the refrains is longer than the others, etc.).³

Newcomb understands Schumann’s music to be in a dialectical relationship with that of his predecessors, in that his works’ discourses interrogate the story norms inherited from the Classical period. To illustrate this, Newcomb discusses the rondo finale of Schumann’s String Quartet Op. 41, no. 3 (Example 1). He explains that the movement’s principal theme “presents itself with the rhythmic vigor, the straightforward homophony, and the chunky phrase-structure of a rondo tune,” but does a “pretty poor job” at fulfilling the formal expectation that a rondo’s refrain should be tonally stable (1987, 171). This is especially true of the opening of a movement, which normatively functions to establish the key. Although the piece begins (mm. 1–4) with a repeated cadential progression in its tonic, A major, the next phrase (mm. 4–6) suddenly tonicizes the subdominant by flattening the leading-tone; this flat-side tilt is “corrected” in mm. 6–10 with a move into the mediant (F# minor), but this is followed up by a varied repeat of mm. 4–6, closing the rondo theme by twice articulating the opening cadential progression in the subdominant (D major, the key of Schumann’s previous movement).

Moreover, the phrase construction of the rondo theme is extremely unusual, when measured against Classical models. The exact repetition in mm. 3–4 of the two-measure basic idea suggests that mm. 1–4 function as the presentation phrase of a sentence structure (see Caplin 1998, 35–40). Initially, mm. 5–8 might be understood as a continuation phrase,

Allegro molto vivace

Violin I
Violin II
Viola
Violoncello

PRESENTATION
basic idea
repetition

CONTINUATION

PRESENTATION (2)
basic idea
repetition

PRESENTATION (3)
basic idea
repetition

Example 1. Schumann, String Quartet Op. 41, no. 3, IV, opening.

with the cadence in the mediant in m. 8 forming the cadential function of a modulating sentence (*Ibid.*, 47); however, this gesture is immediately repeated, suggesting that mm. 7–10 function as a presentation phrase of another sentence in F# minor. To cap off this unusual structure, mm. 11–14 provide yet another presentation, this time in the subdominant, meaning that the whole fourteen-measure theme has no less than three beginnings (mm. 1–4, 7–10, and 11–14), one middle (mm. 4–6), but no ending. That is, unless you consider that the harmonic progression underpinning the presentation phrase is actually cadential (i.e. a closing gesture), and therefore the *harmonic* rhetoric (cadential = ending) is at odds with the melodic structure (presentation = beginning).

By contrast with the unstable, open-ended rondo theme, Newcomb notes that the episodes “reveal themselves increasingly as the islands of stability between the recurrences of a forward-pushing, unstable, transitional refrain” (Newcomb 1987, 173). For example, the lengthy and curiously labeled “Quasi Trio” episode (mm. 72–112) is a “tonally stable, rounded binary form in eight-measure phrases, both of whose sections are repeated and end in the same key” (173). In contrast to the abstruse phrase structure of the rondo’s refrain, the opening of the trio (Example 2) is straightforward: a compound basic idea (mm. 72–76) followed by a consequent that closes with a PAC (mm. 76–80) (see Caplin 1998, 61–63).⁴ Moreover, the eight-measure phrase outlines a complete cadential progression (I–IV–ii–V–I), in contrast to the rondo theme, which compressed an entire cadential progression into a single presentation phrase.

In reversing the roles played by what would traditionally be a stable rondo theme and conventionally dynamic episodes, Schumann is “laying bare . . . the conventions of the rondo scheme in order to turn them upside down” (Newcomb 1987, 174). Newcomb compares this to Russian critic Victor Shklovsky’s account of Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, which

laid bare conventional narrative schemes in order to mock them and turn them on their heads. In so doing, Sterne not only called attention to the artful, nonrealistic side of narrative, he also “defamiliarized” (to use Shklovsky’s word) narrative conventions and thereby gave them back some of their original power. In this curious finale, Schumann has done something of the kind with the paradigmatic rondo. (*Ibid.*, 174)

For Newcomb, then, narrative hearing involves separating the music into both “story” (plot/archetype) and “discourse” (realization) levels, in order to perceive and confront any gap between the two. As he later put it, narratives are best understood as “paradigmatic temporal procedures, operations, or transformational sequences,” the comprehension of which

Quasi Trio
COMPOUND BASIC IDEA

basic idea contrasting idea CONSEQUENT

Violin I
Violin II
Viola
Violoncello

FAC

Example 2. Schumann, String Quartet Op. 41, no. 3, IV, “Quasi Trio”.

“is part of a person’s narrative competence in a given culture” (Newcomb 1992, 119). This dual emphasis on (1) the temporal, sequential nature of narrative and (2) the importance of “narrative competence” in perceiving the significance of such sequences is an important component of the arguments of many musical narratologists. It is the sense of a homology between the syntactical aspects of musical discourse and Propp’s emphasis on the succession of events that suggests the possibility of musical narrativity. The observation of a similarity between music and literary theory, which “abstracts from individual narratives in somewhat the same way that instrumental music abstracts from everyday human action,” (Maus 1991, 15) led theorists to suggest that “One could almost claim that music is more like narrative *theory* than it is like narrative” (*Ibid.*, 15 n. 17).

Patrick McCreless has explored connections between narrative theory and music through an investigation of the narrative theories of French literary theorist and semiotician Roland Barthes. McCreless (1988) considers the structuralist aspects of Barthes’s narratological approach through the five narrative “codes” Barthes developed in his discussion of Balzac’s *Sarrazine* ([1970] 1993). Of these, perhaps the most significant from a musical perspective is Barthes’s *hermeneutic code*, which is concerned with the formulation, delay, and eventual solution of narrative “enigmas.” By “enigmas,” Barthes means the aspects of narrative that create suspense, such as the discovery of a dead body as the story develops; the enigma is prolonged “by delaying, subverting, and complicating its solution” (McCreless 1988, 14). McCreless views this code as comparable to Schenker’s description of the “obstacles, reverses, disappointments” of goal-directed motion (Schenker [1956] 1979, 5, McCreless 1988, 15).⁵

McCreless (1991) develops this by focusing on what Barthes terms the “hermeneutic sentence,” which employs the notion of a “well-made sentence” as a metaphor for the structure of a narrative:

The proposition of truth is a “well-made” sentence; it contains a subject (theme of the enigma), its question mark (proposal of the enigma), various subordinate and interpolated clauses and catalyzers (delays in the answer), all of which precede the ultimate predicate (disclosure). (Barthes [1970] 1993, 84)

McCreless (1991, 37) sees this as bearing “remarkable similarities” to Schenker’s *Ursatz*:

Like Barthes, Schenker in effect creates a “sentence” out of an entire discourse; that is, he defines the syntax of a tonal piece in categories appropriate to a single musical-grammatical sentence (a phrase).

Thus, McCreless establishes a conceptual link between the generation of surface discourse from fundamental structure in Schenker and the production of the discourse level from the underlying construction of story in narrative.

While acknowledging that Barthes's hermeneutic code can be observed in a variety of tonal contexts, McCreless (1988, 16) asserts that "the code works best . . . in a limited class of tonal pieces: those works of the late eighteenth century to the nineteenth century that employ the technique of expanding a chromatic detail into a structural issue at deeper levels." In his analytical example, drawn from the first movement of Beethoven's "Ghost" Trio (Example 3), McCreless identifies a chromatic feature introduced in the opening measures—the lowered $\hat{3}$ in m. 5, supported by $\flat VI$ in m. 6⁶—as an enigma whose resolution is a necessary condition of the narrative's completion. This enigma also represents a sudden interruption of the lively motion and unison texture of the opening measures. The rupture with the previous music draws attention to the unexpected, disruptive quality of the intrusion, which in turn marks it "for consciousness in such a way that it strongly suggests a reappearance later in the story" (*Ibid.*, 24). McCreless notes how this brief interjection of the flattened submediant returns throughout the movement, and how the two resolutions of the $F\sharp$ offered by the exposition—up to $F\sharp$ in m. 7, and down to E in m. 35 (not shown)—also recur in both the development and recapitulation (for example, mm. 87–98, 128–136, 171–195). The $F\sharp$ becomes something akin to a character in the tonal narrative, and it is the development of this character that we follow across the piece: "because of the degree to which it is rhetorically marked, [we] tend to structure our hearing of the rest of the piece dramatically or narratively according to the evolving discourse concerning the $F\sharp$ " (*Ibid.*, 25).⁷

The pitch can also be understood to demonstrate aspects of another of Barthes's codes, the *semic code*. This code is partly concerned with the way in which a narrative's characters are built up through features that connote additional meanings. For example, the fact that the $F\sharp$ is first introduced as interrupting the flow of the musical discourse might suggest a character who is disruptive, or antagonistic, and therefore must be overcome. McCreless's (*Ibid.*, 23–24) likens this to "a Hollywood cowboy in a black hat riding into a crowded town square and announcing to the sheriff, "There ain't room for the both of us in this here town!" To be clear, McCreless is *not* suggesting this as a programmatic interpretation of the movement, but is drawing a comparison between the disruptive plot function of his "cowboy in a black hat" and the troublesome chromatic enigma of Beethoven's trio, whose challenge to diatonic authority is of a similar

The image shows a musical score for Beethoven's Piano Trio Op. 70, no. 1, "Ghost". The score is written for Violin, Violoncello, and Piano. The tempo is "Allegro vivace e con brio". The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4. The score is divided into two systems. The first system shows the Violin and Violoncello parts with dynamic markings of *ff* and *stacc.*. The Piano part also has *ff* and *stacc.* markings. The second system shows the Violin and Violoncello parts with a *dolce* marking and a *p* marking. The Piano part has a *p* marking and a *stacc.* marking. A section of the score, including the Piano part, is enclosed in a box and labeled "ENIGMA".

Example 3. Beethoven, Piano Trio Op. 70, no. 1 ("Ghost").

order to that of the outlaw in McCreless's imaginary movie.

Like McCreless, Richard Littlefield and David Neumeyer's (1992) article "Rewriting Schenker" begins with Barthes's narrative theories, but with the focus on one of the codes that McCreless disregards: the *cultural code*. This code denotes the expectations a reader brings to a text. In Littlefield and Neumeyer's case, the expectations are derived from the Aristotelian "beginning-middle-end" paradigm,⁸ which Littlefield and Neumeyer (1992, 45) interpret as a "recipe for drama as motion toward a goal."⁹ The narratological focus of their article is expanded by creating links between the analytical tools of Schenker and the "generative trajectory" of the French-Lithuanian semiotician A.J. Greimas (1917–1992). Greimas's model proposes basic character types at the story level—e.g., Subject (protagonist), Object (goal of the Subject's quest), etc.—which he terms *actants*. These actants are concretized at the level of discourse as *actors*, or specific manifestations of basic character types. For example, in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, the Subject (actant) = Jane Eyre (actor). As Littlefield and Neumeyer (1992, 47) see it:

Schenker . . . populates his semantic universe with actants. . . . Appealing to the first few intervals in the [harmonic] series, he creates the *Bassbrechung*, the scale-step succession I-V-I. Appealing to traditional notions of the priority of step in melody, and asserting priority of the passing tone in strict counterpoint, diatony, and descending motion through an interval of the tonic chord down to $\hat{1}$, he creates the *Urlinie*. The counterpoint of the *Urlinie* and the *Bassbrechung* is the *Ursatz*, the sole actantial content of the background.

In this formulation, as one works through the levels of a Schenkerian reading, one moves from the functional aspects of musical narrative (story) to their surface manifestations (discourse), a concept similar to McCreless's comparison of Barthes's hermeneutic sentence and Schenker's *Ursatz*. In this model, the *Ursatz* acts as the underlying story, and the process of gradual elaboration towards the musical foreground corresponds to the generation of discourse from the original story structure. This represents a significant enrichment of the simple story-discourse model, allowing for an examination of the interaction between the two levels through middle-ground structures.

The most thorough-going and systematic exploration of the implications of Greimas's generative model for music is that of Eero Tarasti (1979; 1991; 1994; 2002), who has constructed an entire musico-semiotic praxis based on Greimas. Tarasti's analytical method—his version of Greimas's generative trajectory, through which texts are generated from a fundamental syntax—is complex, and somewhat resistant to summary. However, its

Current Musicology

four stages do give a flavor of Tarasti's attempt to coordinate the structural levels of musical texts in a meaningful way (adapted from Tarasti 1994, 48–49):

- (1) segmentation of the work into *isotopies*, equivalent to the “functions” of Propp;
- (2) articulation of isotopies in terms of *spatiality* (tonality, pitch), *temporality* (syntagmatic arrangement, rhythm/metre), and *actorality* (motives, themes, other “anthropomorphic” elements);
- (3) categorization of isotopies by expressive content (Tarasti employs the Greimassian term, *modalization*);
- (4) examination of the patterns of signification generated by the previous stages, particularly the affective trajectory of the work as a whole.

One of the most valuable aspects of Tarasti's approach is that it coordinates structural (stages 1–2) and “humanistic” (stages 3–4) approaches to music. The most obvious way in which Tarasti relates structure and expression is through his development of Greimas's “modalities.” These derive from the grammatical concept of modal verbs, which are used to express ability, possibility, permission, and obligation. For example, “can” expresses the ability to do something, whereas “must” expresses obligation. The two sentences “Jane can go to school” and “Jane must go to school” contain the same outcome (“Jane goes to school”), but differ in terms of modal expression, in terms of ability (“Jane can”) and obligation (“Jane must”). In his analysis of the opening of Beethoven's “Waldstein” Sonata (1994, 116–127), Tarasti identifies different thematic “actors,” to which he ascribes different modal characteristics (Example 4). The first of these (actor *a*) is described as having a strong “will to do,” given that it pushes upwards with a chromatic #4– $\hat{5}$ motion. Actor *c*, by contrast, appears to express “will to be,” seeing as it returns to its point of departure;¹⁰ however, noting that its return is not to the tonic, and it therefore lacks complete stability, Tarasti (*Ibid.*, 125) instead suggests the opposite, that *c* expresses a “will not to be.” Although Tarasti does not elaborate exactly why this is, the implication appears to be that *c*'s skip up to a B—the tonic's leading tone—expresses a desire to return to the tonic that is denied by the return to G; in other words, actor *c* does not wish to remain on G, but is unable to countermand the will of actor *a*. In this sense, actor *c* is in a subordinate relationship with actor *a*.

Although during its first appearance actor *b* shares one of the features that characterized actor *c*—a stepwise descent to G—its extension and repetition in mm. 9–11 lend it increased significance, and therefore a modal quality of its own. Because of the manner in which actor *b* appears to replace actor *a* in importance in these bars—and due to its scalic descent

The image displays a musical score for the first movement of Beethoven's Piano Sonata Op. 53, I, "Waldstein". The score is written for piano and right hand. The tempo is marked "Allegro con brio". The piano part is marked *pp* (pianissimo). The right hand part is marked *pp* (pianissimo) and includes a section marked "OTRANC." (trancendo). The score is annotated with three "actor" labels: "actor a" (a bracketed section in the piano part), "actor b" (a bracketed section in the right hand part), and "actor c" (a bracketed section in the piano part). The score is divided into two systems, with a measure number "8" at the beginning of the second system. The piano part features a complex rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes, while the right hand part features a more melodic line with some chromaticism.

Example 4. Beethoven, Piano Sonata Op. 53, I (“Waldstein”).

forming the basis of the movement's second subject—Tarasti (*Ibid.*, 125) argues that it is “antithetic to actor *a*.” This antithesis can also be seen in actor *b*'s contradictory contour (descending, rather than ascending) and contrasting registral placement (high, rather than low). Thus, actor *b*'s modal expression is opposed to that of actor *a*, and projects “will not to do.” Actor *b* therefore functions as something like an antagonist to the initial protagonist, actor *a*: “even though this actor's kinetic energy at first impresses one as weak, *b* soon assumes the leading role and rules over the texture in mm. 9–11” (*Ibid.*, 126). Tarasti's analysis outlines a brief narrative contained within the first thirteen bars of Beethoven's movement of an antagonistic relationship between two short motifs, which are understood to express contrary modalities. In Tarasti's account, these short musical gestures become charged with the expressive character of independent agents, and therefore demonstrate an enhanced degree of narrative potential.

Tarasti's mapping of Greimas's theory of modalities onto musical discourse is an early example of one of the most significant contributions made by narratology to the analysis of music, in that it has provided a set of methodologies for coordinating structural and expressive features. Even at a basic level, narratology's examination of relationships between discourse and story can provide sound means for bridging the gap between our blow-by-blow affective experience of musical works and the analytical discourses that seek to explain them. It can be easy to lose sight of the importance of this amidst the debates of the second wave of narratological discourse. It was during this phase that the very possibility of musical narrativity was strenuously interrogated; the arguments that arose from this serve to clarify the developing position of musical narratologists during the 1990s, in which the intersection of structural and hermeneutic approaches came more clearly into focus.

These various approaches in the first wave emphasized the connection between music (or music theory) and literary narrative. However, some scholars, both before and after those so far discussed, relied on similar narrative homologies to those used by Newcomb *et al*, but without the explicit link to narrative theory. Indeed, before both Newcomb and Maus, Edward T. Cone wrote “Three Ways of Reading a Detective Story—Or a Brahms Intermezzo” ([1977] 1989), which outlined a view of listening that in many ways anticipated a distinction between story and discourse. In a “First Reading” (or First Listening), our approach to the text is “based on total or partial ignorance of the events narrated, whether one is actually reading a story for the first time, or [not]” (*Ibid.*, 79). In a Second (or Third) reading, by contrast, we transcend the moment-to-moment level of discourse; the “trajectory of thought is zigzag, or even discontinuous” and the listener

is “constantly shifting back and forth between the planes of memory and experience, until at last one is able to achieve a comprehensive bird’s-eye view of the narrative path” (*Ibid.*, 80). Like Newcomb, Cone’s focus is on observing a continuous narrative in a work of music through abstracting away from discourse to story level, but he does so without explicit reliance on Propp’s work.

Contemporary with this and other such work, Susan McClary (1986; [1987] 2007; [1993] 2007) was developing her own narrative approach to music, articulating plots that reflect on social norms, society, and the individual. Her discussion of the first movement of Bach’s Brandenburg Concerto No. 5 is a good example of her method in practice. Focusing on the changing role of the harpsichord in the movement, McClary outlines a narrative that she describes as the “[r]evenge of the continuo player” ([1987] 2007, 28). In her account, the harpsichord emerges as a character in a dramatic narrative who seeks to “hijack” the piece from the other soloists (*Ibid.*, 30), in the process subverting its traditional role as continuo accompanist. McClary focuses in particular on the harpsichord’s written-out cadenza, noting how the flute and violin (previously this concerto’s solo instruments) are composed “to make it appear that *their* piece has been violently derailed,” dropping out “exactly in the way an orchestra would if one of its members started making up a new piece in the middle of a performance” (*Ibid.*, 30).

If this is “their” piece, then the cadenza is played by the “wrong” instrument: the superiority of the flute and violin has been overthrown by the “frenzied continuo” (34). McClary goes on to note the sheer size of the cadenza (a quarter of the whole movement), as well as the “increasingly deviant strategies” employed by the harpsichord to prolong its moment in the sun, such as the progressive use of chromaticism and faster note values (Example 5), resulting in “what sounds like a willful, flamboyant seventeenth-century toccata” (*Ibid.*, 34). Although the movement closes normatively, with a return of the *ripieno* and the *ritornello*, McClary argues that the subversion has been too extreme to be brushed off so simply (*Ibid.*, 42), concluding that the piece enacts “the exhilaration as well as the risks of upward mobility, the simultaneous desire for and resistance of concession to social harmony” (*Ibid.*, 43).

Similar to Newcomb, McClary is interested in reading musical discourse against normative plot structures. However, she takes the extra step of extrapolating social meaning from her analysis, outlining a critical narrative that is about something “in the world,” so to speak, one that “articulates very powerfully precisely the dilemma of an ideology that wants to encourage freedom of expression while preserving social harmony” (*Ibid.*,

The image displays a musical score for Brandenburg Concerto No. 5, BWV 1050, by Johann Sebastian Bach. The score is arranged in five staves, each with a specific instrument label below it: Solo Flute, Solo Violin, Violin, Viola, and Harpsichord. The Solo Flute, Solo Violin, and Viola parts are written in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The Violin part is written in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The Harpsichord part is written in bass clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The Solo Flute, Solo Violin, and Viola parts are marked with a 'Solo' instruction. The Harpsichord part is marked with 'Cembalo solo senza strumenti'. The score shows a complex, rhythmic passage with many sixteenth and thirty-second notes, characteristic of the 'Cello' section of the concerto.

Example 5. Bach, Brandenburg Concerto No. 5, BWV 1050.

43). In a “conventional” Baroque concerto, the harpsichord’s role is that of accompanimental bystander, supporting the soloist protagonist(s). Against this normative plot, the harpsichord’s progressive subversion of its role—a denial of its subservient status and an increasing demand for an equal footing with the established soloists—allows it to emerge as the “real” protagonist of the movement’s narrative, eventually silencing the other soloists during its cadenza. McClary understands the Baroque concerto genre as a whole as addressing “the tensions between the dynamic individual and stable society” in its mediation between individual soloist(s) and “a large, collective force” (*Ibid.*, 23). However, in this movement, the harpsichord’s increasingly individualistic excesses appear to pose a question of no small social import: “What happens when a genuine deviant . . . declares itself a genius, unconstrained by convention, and takes over?” (*Ibid.*, 42).

Given the cultural significance McClary sees encoded in the concerto genre, the unusual manner in which its narrative dynamics play out in Bach’s movement readily allow for such implications to arise.¹¹ Such emergent cultural meanings are the real goal of McClary’s analyses of instrumental music. As she notes, her work “engages with the role of narrative-oriented musical procedures in the performance of basic cultural work” (McClary 2007, xiii). For McClary, narrative allows for the coordination of musical structure and broader cultural concerns, making “explicit the kinds of mediating steps that . . . link musical procedures with society” ([1993] 2007, 68). Thus, although McClary discusses ideas derived from narratologists such as Propp (see, for example [1993] 2007, 72), there is very little emphasis on their methodologies and a much greater concern for the ideologies that underpin archetypal narrative structures. In short, we might argue that, like Cone, McClary’s analyses are concerned principally with the interpretative end-product of narratology, whereas Newcomb and others remain focused on the theoretical links between paradigmatic musical discourse and plot archetypes in literary narratives.

The Second Wave: Nattiez, Abbate, and the Objections to Musical narrativity

Despite the general acceptance of music’s ability to enhance narrative and dramatic elements in multi-media settings (including opera, ballet, song, and film), the argument that one may understand the structure of music in terms of narrative has been contentious. This came to a head during Reyland’s “second wave,” when the claims of musical narratology were subject to vigorous and close examination. Byron Almén (2008, 29–37) has abstracted from these debates a number of arguments that have been levelled against the concept of musical narrativity, including the Verbal

Current Musicology

Cue Argument, the Referentiality Argument, the Causality Argument and the Narrator Argument, each of which I discuss below.

The Verbal Cue and Referentiality Arguments

Jean-Jacques Nattiez's (1990a) article, "Can One Speak of Narrativity in Music?", remains the most high-profile rebuttal aimed at those who claim to divine narrative in non-texted music. And, more recently (2011), Nattiez has returned to the arguments of his original paper in the journal *Cahiers de Narratologie*.¹² Nattiez regards narrative as too closely involved with linguistic expression to function convincingly as a model of musical discourse. He argues that while a narrative interpretation *may* be prompted by a verbal cue, this is essentially an external, rather than an immanent musical feature. Nattiez has remained consistent in his acceptance of narrative approaches to programmatic music, so long as the listener is primed to hear it as such: "I obviously do not have a problem in principle with the interest of narratological musicologists in explicitly narrative music" (2011, §37), but "when I hear the opening of *L'apprenti sorcier*, I need to know that it is a symphonic poem in order to approach the work in a narrative frame of mind" (1990a, 242).

Nattiez's objections hinge on the issue of what can be understood to be "in" a piece of music. If we as listeners hear narratives in music, this is according to Nattiez only a reflection of our status as "*Homo fabulator*, always ready to integrate into a narrative objects or actions that are available to our senses in a linear succession" (2011, §2). In other words, he maintains that one needs to consider music a narrative art *a priori* for a narrative mode of listening to be activated, objecting that any sense of referentiality is merely in the ear of the listener, and not "inherent" in the music (Nattiez 1990a, 249). As noted above, Nattiez does not oppose the narratological investigation of music that can be identified as *explicitly* narrative (that is, program music), but he is concerned over "the methods used to reconstruct the underlying narrative intention" (2011, §38); essentially, he insists on maintaining a strict distinction between "absolute" and "program" music, and policing the boundary between the two. He knows that some listeners will *want* to hear a narrative, but his language makes his views of such listeners clear; they demonstrate "the capacity of human beings to invent fictions reflecting a greater or lesser degree of fantasizing" (2011, §48).

Thus, as he puts it elsewhere (Nattiez 1990b, 12; original emphasis), listeners "*construct* meaning, in the course of an active perceptual process," rather than doing what they presumably "should" be doing, and concentrating on the meaning inherent to the work. Given "moment *y* in a musical work, we tend to establish a connection with an *x* that has already been

heard" (*Ibid.*, 116; original emphasis); such connections, Nattiez (1990a, 244) says, are "situated at the level of the discourse, rather than the level of the story," since there can be no explicit semantic content in music and therefore the content level of narrative (story) cannot exist in any meaningful sense without recourse to paratexts (e.g., the programmatic narrative of Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*, or the titles of works such as *Central Park in the Dark*). However, as Gregory Karl (another of Propp's advocates) points out, "the meaning of any particular unit is determined primarily by its relation to other units in a system and not by its intrinsic characteristics" (1997, 17); it is only the diachronic organization of the succession of musical events (story) that gives rise to the level of discourse. This is fundamental to Propp's project to classify the "functions" of narratives, which he describes as "stable, constant elements in a tale, independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled" (Propp [1928] 1968, 21). Thus, for Propp and other classical narratologists, the implication that narrative is principally activated on the level of discourse misses the point, by emphasizing the "variables" of narrative over the "constants" (*Ibid.*, 20).

The Causality Argument

Nattiez circa 1990 claims that temporal sequences do not in themselves constitute narratives, as a narrative requires the demonstration of causal relationships between elements (1990a, 244). For example, despite the marked quality of the F \sharp in the opening of Beethoven's "Ghost" Trio, Nattiez's comment implies there is no way of demonstrating that further appearances of the pitch are related to or "caused" by its placement in the opening measures. Because of this, there is therefore no way of establishing the role they play in a larger narrative strategy. Nattiez (*Ibid.*, 244) argues that it is "not within the semiological possibilities of music to link a subject to a predicate," and that narrative analyses seem "to retreat into metaphorical illusion."

Although Nattiez may hesitate to infer causality from temporal structures—fearful perhaps of committing the fallacy of *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*, or a "confusion of consecution and consequence" (Barthes [1966] 1977, 94)—our ability to *infer* causality is, according to Barthes, central to the narrative experience: "the mainspring of narrative is precisely the confusion of consecution and consequence, what comes *after* being read in narrative as what is *caused by*" (*Ibid.*, 94; original emphasis). The musical analyses above evidenced such inference in action, contrasting some of the different methods listeners can use to infer causality from marked musical events. Such extrapolations are intrinsic to the narrative experience; the perception of musical causality is very much in the ear of the listener.

Carolyn Abbate views the Narrator Argument as the ultimate test of musical narrative. For Abbate, the discourse level is also the level of *narration*. The narrator may take many forms, but should not be confused with the author, whether “real” or “implied.”¹³ Unlike the narrator, as Gerald Prince (2003, 43) points out, the implied author “does not recount situations and events (but is taken to be accountable for their selection, distribution, and combination).” Drawing on the classical dichotomy between diegesis (“re-telling”) and mimesis (“depicting”),¹⁴ Abbate argues that

what we call narrative—novels, stories, myths, and the like—is diegetic. . . . It is a tale told later, by one who escaped to the outside of the tale, for which he builds a frame to control its dangerous energy. Music’s distinction is fundamental and terrible; it is not chiefly diegetic but mimetic. . . . [M]imetic genres . . . *mime* or even dance out the world in present time. They cannot disarm the action, or comfort us, by insisting upon the pastness of what they represent.¹⁵ (Abbate 1991, 53)

This lack of pastness implies a lack of narrator and therefore, for Abbate, a lack of narrative. A piece like “*The Sorcerer’s Apprentice*,” she argues, “is not a retelling of events, but rather a *depiction* of events, happening as we listen” (1989, 230; 1991, 57). The listener is trapped “in present experience and the beat of passing time, from which he or she cannot escape” (1991, 53).

Despite the rhetorical force of her argument, Abbate’s stricture that the listener is trapped “in present experience and the beat of passing time” arguably only holds true for an initial hearing of a musical work. She essentially describes one of Cone’s ([1977] 1989) “First Readings,” where the primary motivation is to follow the unfolding of the plot in time; in a Second or Third Reading, however, the listener escapes from present experience and the beat of passing time *in order to* synthesize the music into a narrative. But it is not only in the case of later hearings that one may disagree with Abbate’s (1991, 53) contention that “music’s existence as a temporal art precludes its speaking ‘in the past tense.’” As Cone argues elsewhere,

music is filled with commitments to the future—the expectations on whose satisfaction, immediate or delayed, its continuity depends. And although the listener is denied the power of prediction, he is nevertheless granted the pleasure of anticipation and also, if the ears of his memory are long enough, the joy of recognition when a long-postponed fulfillment arrives. (Cone [1984] 1989, 201)

In other words, a listener’s capacity to anticipate a musical future, and

to link events in a musical present to those in the musical past, forms an important element of musical appreciation, “the pleasure of anticipation and . . . the joy of recognition.” Although music might not be able to speak “in the past tense,” it is more than able to encourage listeners’ to hear the connections themselves. Rather than being trapped in the present, then, a listener’s memory of what happened in the “before” of a piece of music can profoundly influence how they hear what occurs moment-to-moment as the piece progresses. Cone’s description is echoed by Nattiez (2011, §9):

The “discourse” of music is inscribed in time. It is made of repetitions, recalls, preparations, expectations, resolutions. If one is tempted to speak of musical narrative it is due, not to its intrinsic and immanent content, but because of the effects of syntactic organization of music, the narrative course that orders the music thanks to the games of implications and realizations that [Leonard] Meyer has described so well.

Both these comments sit happily with McCreless’s adoption of Barthes’s narrative codes, especially the “games of implications and realizations” that match aspects of the hermeneutic and proairetic codes.

With regard to Abbate’s diegesis/mimesis distinction, Karol Berger argues that the distinction is not one of genre, but rather of mode, placing both under the banner of narrative, which he opposes to the “lyric,” arguing that

narrative and drama are modes of representation of human action, while lyric does not represent actions at all, but rather mental states, thoughts, emotions, situations. The difference, then, between narrative and drama is in the mode of presentation while the difference between both these and lyric is in the presented object. (Berger 2000, 191)

Berger suggests that syntagmatic structure is fundamental to the establishment of something akin to the diegetic mode:

Even the simplest immediate repetition of a statement (whether in music or literature, no matter) differs fundamentally from the original statement in that, while the latter calls only for the recognition that something is said in the “now” of the present speaker, the former additionally requires that we recognize that this something has already been said before in the “now” of the then-speaker. . . . Because the practices of repetition, recapitulation, and elaboration are so widespread in music, musical voices very frequently acquire the narrating character. (*Ibid.*, 178–179)

Berger nuances this point by suggesting that while the fulfilment of formal requirements, such as the recapitulation of thematic material in sonata form, is to be expected (and therefore not explicitly diegetic), thematic

recall that lacks formal or generic motivation may in fact be understood as the activation of the diegetic mode. For Abbate, the repetitive nature of musical form works against the potential for narrativity—stories do not conventionally return to the same material at regular points in the plot. But Berger argues that unexpected or unmotivated recall enacts at the discourse level something akin to a narrator's voice, in the sense that it can be understood to reorder the events of the story level in a meaningful way. Berger's argument is not dissimilar to Newcomb's examination of the manner in which Schumann's musical discourse can be understood to reorder and comment on the musical plots of his predecessors.

Robert Hatten makes a similar point when he describes “a *compositional* play with musical events or their temporal sequence or relationship, inflecting their significance, or proposing a certain attitude toward them.” This, he suggests, “provides a ‘point of view’ or filtered perspective. . . . The narrative agency is cued by shifts in levels of [musical] discourse” (2004, 225-226; original emphasis).¹⁶ Hatten (1991; 2004) defines such shifts as “any event that disrupts the unmarked flow of a musical discourse” (2004, 135; original emphasis). These marked disruptions are conceived as comments on, or reactions to, the unmarked discourse (*Ibid.*, 282). To illustrate this, Hatten (1991, 86–88) examines the startling contrast between the generally serious or tragic expression of Beethoven's String Quartet, Op. 95, and the “completely unexpected *buffa* passage” that interrupts the prevailing mood at the start of the last movement's coda (Example 6). Having maintained a bleakly tragic and at times violent atmosphere throughout, the apparently unmotivated emergence of an affect entirely at odds with the rest of the movement is startling, and casts the foregoing music in a completely different light. The event expresses something akin to a narrating voice, as the intruding passage places the musical discourse in a “new perspective,” exactly the sort of mediated viewpoint one expects from a narrator (88).¹⁷

Intriguingly, “disruptions” such as these are admitted as containing diegetic potential by Abbate. Discussing the epilogue of *L'apprenti sorcier* (Example 7) she notes that “The last ten measures pass over to the other world, speaking in the past tense of what has happened, in an orchestral ‘*he said*’” (1991, 60; original emphasis). Thus, although she might question the extent to which music may be heard to activate a narrative “voice,” Abbate seems not only open to the *possibility* of a diegetic mode in music, but is in fact in agreement with Hatten concerning the mode of its activation.

133 **Allegro.** *molto leggiermente*

["Change in the level of discourse"]

Violino I *ppp*

Violino II *ppp*

Viola *ppp*

Violoncello *ppp*

sempre piano

sempre piano

sempre piano

sempre piano

sempre pp

sempre pp

sempre pp

sempre pp

Example 6. Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 95, IV (“Serioso”).

The “Third Wave:” Almén and Reyland

The debates of the second wave of musical narratology arguably formed the stimulus for Byron Almén’s *Theory of Musical Narrative* (2008), which sought to synthesize the various approaches of his predecessors in order to provide a generalized theoretical framework for the examination of musical narrativity. Discussing the prevalence of narrative structures in temporal media, Almén notes the “powerful psychological impact” that narratives can have on their audience, suggesting this as a motivating factor in humanity’s desire to narrativize personal experience as autobiography and biography, as well as the “pervasiveness and significance of narrative organization in cultural artefacts with a temporal orientation” (*Ibid.*, 41). Almén sees the “core properties of narrative” as existing in the factors of “temporality, hierarchy, conflict, and the observer’s perspective” (*Ibid.*, 40). In particular, he understands narrative as a process of *transvaluation*, a term he borrows from James Jakób Liszka’s *The Semiotic of Myth* (1989):

a hierarchy set up within a *system of signs* is subjected to change over time; this change, filtered through an observer’s design or purpose, is interpreted as being isomorphic to a change applied to a *cultural hierarchy* (whether social or psychological). (Almén 2008, 40; original emphasis)

In simple terms, a transvaluation is a reevaluation of value. One might think of the well-worn fairy tale trope, in which an impoverished protagonist is revealed to be the true king over the course of the narrative. One way that this can be understood musically is by reference to McClary’s analysis of the first movement of Bach’s Brandenburg Concerto No. 5 ([1987] 2007), which Almén refers to in his book. The instrumental hierarchy that exists at the start of the movement is normative, with the harpsichord fulfilling its conventional role as accompanist. However, as we saw above, the harpsichord becomes progressively outspoken, to the extent that the rest of the ensemble—including the flute and violin soloists—are silenced by the harpsichord’s extensive cadenza. By bringing the normative *instrumental* hierarchy into question, McClary argues that the movement casts a critical light on the *social* hierarchies contemporary with the work’s composition. Or, as Almén might explain it, the transvaluation of the instrumental hierarchy in favor of the harpsichord is interpreted by McClary as being structurally equivalent to a critique of the social hierarchies of Bach’s time. Crucially, this places the observer at the center of narrative experience; for transvaluation to occur, it demands an observer’s perception of hierarchical change.

As Almén (2008, 41–43) notes, the notion of transvaluation identifies

musical narrative as part of a semiotic system. Although individual sounds may be meaningless in and of themselves, it is the organization of these sounds into larger musical units, and the relations between these units within specific cultural contexts, that allows for the emergence of meaning. For example, the transvaluative significance of the first movement of Brandenburg Concerto No. 5 lies not in any inherent qualities of the harpsichord, but in its normative cultural role as hierarchically subservient to “real” concertante instruments like the flute and violin. Importantly, this network of signification reflects communal consensus, the significance of a sign being arbitrary and culturally determined. Almén argues that this lends a “political and rhetorical component to interpretation” (*Ibid.*, 42), which is also central to the functioning of narrative. Despite the “purer” structuralist approaches to musical narrativity of some previous scholars, such as McCreless, in Almén’s model the significance of narrative and semiotic analysis ultimately lies in the hermeneutic.

Almén’s *Theory* also draws on the narrative archetypes developed by literary scholar Northrop Frye in his *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957). Frye’s archetypes are conceived as a cyclical model; thinking in terms of a clock face, we may imagine the archetypes moving from a state of “innocence” at twelve o’clock, to “experience” at six o’clock and back again:

(1) *romance*, the narrative of innocence, at the top; (2) *tragedy*, the narrative of the fall, moving downward from innocence to experience; (3) *irony*, the narrative of experience, at the bottom; and (4) *comedy*, the narrative of renewal, moving upward from experience to recovered happiness. (Almén 2008, 65)

To illustrate Almén’s use of Frye’s archetypes, one may take his analysis of the first movement of Schubert’s Piano Sonata, D. 960, which he identifies as a tragic narrative (2008, 139–161). Almén hears the principal theme of the movement (Example 8) as the embodiment of a pastoral topic, one that represents a cultural ideal of simplicity (*Ibid.*, 142). Given the valorization of the pastoral during Schubert’s era, the main theme is identified as of high rank, culturally speaking. The peaceful, almost static character of the theme—primary harmonies, principally stepwise melody, opening tonic pedal point, and a gently rocking inner voice—is according to Almén at odds with the essentially dynamic processes of sonata form (142). Thus, although embodying aspects of an “ideal” type (the pastoral topic), Almén echoes Newcomb by interpreting the theme as “flawed and insufficient” in its formal context (145). His analysis then tracks a “wave-like succession of surges and declines” (160) in the fate of the main theme, which is frequently derailed by distant modulations, finding itself in problematic

Molto moderato

pp *ligato*

pp *tr*

"decline"

5

Example 8. Schubert, Piano Sonata D. 960, I.

harmonic and expressive environments. Thus, the theme undergoes something akin to the vicissitudes of a narrative protagonist.

Indeed, the very first statement of the theme implies the sort of fluctuations in status that will develop as the movement progresses, when its peacefulness is disrupted by the G^b trill in m. 8. This G^b arguably functions something like a Barthesian enigma, in that it is a marked event that implies a resolution later in the piece. However, in contrast to McCreless (1988), who employs Barthes's code to make a point about the potential for narrativity (as described by literary theorists) in tonal structures, Almén is interested in a tighter theoretical coordination between music and narrative discourse across media; in other words, he is interested in the kinds of properties that *all* narratives share in common. Almén's generalizing of narrative expression into four basic paradigms makes it easier to understand how musical narratives interact in the expressive domain of narrative "in the world," so to speak. Almén (2008, 160) concludes his discussion of Schubert's movement with the observation that, "Although the remainder of the sonata will ultimately serve to redeem this subject . . . the first movement, taken alone, is almost unrelenting in its dismantling of the narrative subject's idealized status." The movement is therefore the very quintessence of a tragic archetype, in which the protagonist proves unable to overcome their unfortunate predicament.¹⁸

Although much of the musicological literature dealing with narrative has tended to focus on the tonal music of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the analytical examples in Almén's book include post-tonal works by the likes of Schoenberg and Britten. Nicholas Reyland has extended this reach yet further, and has been prominent among a select group of musicologists who have been concentrating on narrative in the context of music of the 20th and 21st centuries. Reyland's focus on narrative was initially a response to his investigation of Lutosławski's concept of *ackja*, translated as "action" or "plot." However, although some modernist composers have discussed their music in terms of narrative, Reyland (2013, 29) observes that "modernism's presence is often defined through the assertion of a notable absence: the desire (of composers) or ability (of post-tonal instrumental music) to represent narrative." Yet, as Reyland implies, this is to insist on (usually tonal) harmony as the only bearer of musical narrativity, rather than seek the potential for narrative in other musical parameters. For example, parallels can be drawn between the use of montage in narrative cinema and Stravinsky's block-like juxtapositions in a work such as *Symphonies of Wind Instruments*. Such an approach to structure highlights "narrativity's ability to intensify rather than collapse at moments of rupture" (*Ibid.*, 32): just as the use of montage in cinema

provides a mediated perspective on the underlying diachronic unfolding of story events, the continual recombination and re-juxtaposition of material in Stravinsky's forms draws attention to itself as discourse.

Exploring the different paths that musical narrative has taken in the twentieth century, Reyland—building on the literary theories of Gerald Prince, Martin FitzPatrick, and Alan Soldofsky—offers four categories of “narrative negation:”

- (1) *disnarration*;
- (2) *denarration*;
- (3) *subjunctive narration*;
- (4) *bifurcated narration*.

Disnarrations are elements in narrative in which events that *could* have happened are emphasized; for example, a climactic accident in which the protagonist could have died, but didn't. Disnarrations therefore offer a glimpse of “the possibility of an alternative fictional reality” (Reyland 2013, 37). Reyland presents examples from Lutosławski to illustrate potential musical applications of disnarration, such as the ending of his Third Symphony where, similar to Hatten's discussion of Beethoven's Op. 95, the music's apparently tragic trajectory is exchanged for “a celebration of pentatonic fireworks [that] seems set to usher in a joyous new age,” before a “smear of dissonance dumps the music back to where the symphony began” (*Ibid.*, 38).¹⁹

Denarrations, on the other hand, are narratives in which the narrator calls into question events that had previously been taken as fact. Reyland's example is taken from Birtwistle's *Earth Dances*, which exchanges a focus on D and F, sustained throughout the larger part of the work, for an emphasis on C and G at the end. This “might lead one to doubt one's hearing of the structural cardinality of earlier events in the music, . . . in turn unravelling any musical plot one had hitherto been constructing” (39). Denarrations rest on listeners' inclination to interpret certain musical events as Cone's ([1984] 1989, 201) “commitments to the future,” through which they may indulge “the pleasure of anticipation”. However, rather than the enjoyment lying in the moment when the delayed resolution is achieved, denarrations are stories with twists in the tale; we are denied the expected payoff, but are rewarded instead with something novel and unexpected.

Subjunctive narration is identified by FitzPatrick (2002, 244, 245) as “uncertain narrative,” one “in which significant information is not epistemologically secure.” As a musical example of a subjunctive narration, Reyland (2013) offers Vaughan Williams's Symphony No. 6. In a more conventional narrative structure, the undermining of the tonic E minor in the first movement of the symphony would likely be understood as an example

of a hermeneutic enigma requiring resolution, similar to McCreless's discussion of the flattened submediant in Beethoven's "Ghost" Trio. However, Reyland (2013, 41) argues that the "musical narrative withholds a satisfying sense of closure by evading the rhetorical or harmonic gestures needed to confirm whether the piece was truly 'in' E minor." This uncertainty over the tonic key of the work—even at its end—leaves the listener grieving the sense of closure that the solution to hermeneutic enigmas provides, and it is significant that Reyland chooses a tonal work to exemplify the subjunctive. As FitzPatrick (2002, 45) himself puts it, "In the subjunctive there are things we as readers wish to know and cannot know," and the withholding of a solution to a tonal enigma serves as a powerful musical analogue to FitzPatrick's literary concept.

Narrative ambiguity takes a different form in *bifurcated* narratives, in which "a second, seemingly tangential narrative intrudes upon the first, generating a range of relationships between them" (Soldofsky 2003, 313). Reyland understands Berio's *Rendering* as an example of a bifurcated musical narrative. Based on sketches left by Schubert for a "Tenth" Symphony, the work flits between the music of Schubert and Berio, with the latter's intruding upon the former's. Significantly, the juxtaposition of styles serves to foreground contrasts as much as it forges links, with Reyland (2013, 42) noting that "both worlds become more wondrous through the uncanniness of their interwoven presentation." The examination of non-traditional narrative structures in Reyland's work has opened up new possibilities for the investigation of musical narrative within post-Romantic music. Most significantly, his work demonstrates the continuing validity of narrative approaches, even in musical works that appear to lack the strongly teleological structures of conventional plots, forging new links between music of the 20th/ 21st centuries and contemporary literary models.

Most recently, Andrew Davis's (2017) work on sonata narratives in Romantic repertoire resonates with Newcomb's (and, indeed, Hepokoski and Darcy's), in that nineteenth-century sonata forms are understood to be in dialogue with eighteenth-century sonata structures. Against the highly directional, teleologically oriented organization of Classical-era works, Davis hears Romantic sonatas as focused on the expression of manifold temporalities, to the extent that he identifies the disruption of directional narrative flow by structural and temporal discontinuities as the defining feature of the Romantic aesthetic.²⁰ Davis also recalls McClary's work, in his demonstrations of the cultural significance of narrative by relating the discontinuities of nineteenth-century sonatas to the broader concerns of Romanticism.²¹ For Davis, a sense of fragmented time is a common aesthetic strategy for the Romantics, and is employed to create "novelistic

effects” that deflect from the projected narrative trajectory “into an atemporal stream in which we experience the story not mimetically but rather diegetically . . . through a subjective agential presence” (*Ibid.*, 91).

Musical narratives beyond instrumental music

In his classic essay “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives,” Roland Barthes ([1966] 1977, 79) argues that “Narrative is first and foremost a prodigious variety of genres.” Looking at the repertoire studied by the first two waves might appear suggest the opposite, and that it is only in classical instrumental music that narrative can be seen to operate. However, narrative theory has increasingly been applied to texted music, musical multi-media, and music beyond the classical canon. Unsurprisingly, the relationship between music and film has been of particular interest, with Reyland being especially prominent in this field. However, although Reyland (2012) advances the relationship between musical narratology and film-music studies as a “beautiful friendship,” his recent article on narrative and affect (Reyland 2017) ponders whether the focus on narrative representation in film music has become an orthodoxy that deafens us to embodied responses to audiovisual media. Highlighting the dichotomy between the repellent visual imagery and Zbigniew Preisner’s tender, sentimental musical cues in Kieślowski’s *Decalogue 5* (1988), Reyland notes the music’s primary function in eliciting sympathetic responses from its audience towards unsympathetic characters. In other words, Preisner’s music can be understood to serve an affective, or emotive role rather than explicitly narrative function. However, rather than this leading Reyland to disavow narrative approaches to film, he advocates “Doubling up one’s critical agenda,” by listening both to musical affect and narrative representation (*Ibid.*, 105).

Another recent article considering narrative outside the classical canon makes a case for considering expressive affect as containing its own narrative potential. Ivan Mouraviev’s (2017) study of music in the video game *Journey* (2012) makes the case that emotions have an intrinsic narrativity, for they tend to be encountered in sequence and with an element of causality, whereby specific perceptions lead to particular emotional responses. Music plays an especially significant role in the game, as there is no dialogue or any other textual information. Mouraviev (2017, 71) notes how players’ interactions with the game world can impact the musical backdrop, giving the example of the game’s Pink Desert section, where the music changes depending on the length of time a player lingers in a certain section of the map, or whether or not the player is accompanied by an online companion. Such musical changes can affect the emotive response

of the player, as narratives are often experienced from an expressive perspective, invoking affective trajectories in their audiences as we attend to the ups and downs of characters and situations (*Ibid.*, 68–69). This linking of emotive and narrative experiences is particularly acute in audiovisual settings, as the sentiments aroused in the player by the music organize the emotional trajectory of the visual narrative in what Mouraviev (*Ibid.*, 71) calls “a synchresis of narrative affect.” Karen Collins and Ruth Dockwray (2017) make a similar point regarding the use of music in racing games. Although racing games have traditionally been based around winning races and progressing through stages, Collins and Dockwray note that such games have increasingly begun to structure their content around narrative devices, and that, as this has happened, scored music emerges to immerse the player in the game, playing “a more emotionally sophisticated and dramatic role” (*Ibid.*, 409).²²

Over the last ten years or so, scholars have begun to explore popular music from a narrative standpoint. Establishing a taxonomy of popular-music narrative, David Nicholls (2007) suggests five levels of possible narrative operation, of which levels three to five are the most relevant to the present discussion:

- (3) a narrative told through lyrics supported by the musical setting;
- (4) musical and lyrical narratives that operate at least partially independently of each other;
- (5) a multi-media narrative discourse of “lyrics, music, prose, and art work” (*Ibid.*, 301).

As an example of level 3, Nicholls offers Kate Bush’s “Wuthering Heights” (1978), noting how a shift from the recollection of the protagonist’s past to the present is supported by a sudden modulation from G₃ major to A major, the harmonic structure of the song reinforcing the narrative change in the lyrics. Music plays an active part in narrative signification at level 4. Nicholls uses the instrumental third verse of “Norwegian Wood” by The Beatles to illustrate this concept (*Ibid.*, 308), showing how the lack of verbal expression functions as a narrative suspension, delaying the revelation that the protagonist has spent the night in the bath, rather than in the antagonist’s bed, as had been implied by the lyrics at the end of the second verse. Nicholls demonstrates the most interesting potential for the application of narrative theory to popular music at level 5, with a discussion of concept albums by Genesis and The Who. Expanding his consideration of narrative to include all the albums’ media, Nicholls finds narrative potential in the interaction between lyrical and musical narratives, but also in plot summaries in prose and pictorial narratives included as part of the album sleeves

(309–312). For example, in *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway* by Genesis, the album's inner sleeve contains a prose narrative that not only appears to be narrated by someone other than the narrator of the songs' lyrics, but is actually disjunct with some of the events of the lyrical and musical narratives. The songs of Genesis's album are sung from the perspective of a single protagonist called Rael; however, the prose narrative of the album sleeve talks about Rael in the third person, suggesting that it is narrated by a "heterodiegetic" narrator—that is, a narrator who does not take part in the plot—as opposed to Rael's "homodiegetic" narration. This disconnection between narratives creates epistemological issues left unresolved by the difficulty in ascribing priority to one telling over another: which version is the "real" story?

The concern for narrative temporality that Nicholls notes in both Bush and the Beatles songs has been picked up in a number of other narrative studies of popular music. Jocelyn R. Neal (2007) focuses on "time-shift narratives" in country music, in which a multigenerational life-cycle forms the basis of the lyrical narrative; Keith Negus (2012) examines "circular time" in popular songs, suggesting that the recurrent patterns of popular music form a mode of narrative discourse that has been neglected by narrative more concerned with outlining change over time in narratives; Fred Maus (2013) focuses on AIDS narratives in songs by the Pet Shop Boys, noting an emphasis on narrative time in songs that describe the "before" and "after" of AIDS; and Méi-Ra St-Lauren (2016) notes changes in temporality between narrative sequences in the song "Mad Architect" by the extreme metal band Septicflesh (2011), explaining how breaks in the temporal rhythm of the story constitute a narrative of alienation and madness.

Telling Tales

Following the foregoing survey of approaches to musical narrativity, we may now define some of the constants of the theory of musical narrative:

- (1) Music and narrative are both temporal forms;
- (2) Music and narrative both depend on a deep structure that is elaborated at higher levels;
- (3) The patterns outlined by these deep structures belong to a limited set of archetypal patterns.

To this "structuralist" paradigm, we can also add the possibility of coordinating narrative structure with interpretative discourses via isomorphisms between musical structures and narrative archetypes. From the early work of Newcomb and McClary to more recent scholars like Almén, Reyland,

and Davis, this emerges as one of the most notable features of narrative analysis, allowing interpretative hypotheses to be more or less grounded in an analysis of musical structure.

Despite the debates of the second wave, one may recently perceive a greater confidence in narratological approaches among scholars, perhaps best summed up by Reyland's assertion that

Sensuous, extrageneric and congeneric signifiers braid together in a musical discourse, and once one begins to attend to how the ideas they articulate follow and relate to one another—particularly if one is then moved to consider the structure thus emplotted in terms of its potential revelation of an overarching pattern—one may swiftly find oneself tingling all over in response to music that can profitably be investigated as narrative because, put boldly, aspects of that music *are* narrative. (Reyland 2014, 213; original emphasis)

That narrative approaches to music have proved tenacious should not surprise us, for so much of the way that music can be experienced corresponds with the manner in which narrative is conceived in a variety of media. Crucially, narrative theory allows for a harmonization of “humanistic” and “structural” approaches to music, encouraging close theoretical links between cultural and analytical readings. It is this aspect of musical narratology that offers much to the broader field of musical scholarship, and it is to be hoped that the application of narrative theory in music analysis will continue to stimulate others to find new stories to tell.

Notes

1. Indeed, Hepokoski and Darcy's *Elements of Sonata Theory* (2006), is open to the narrative potential of sonata form, whilst not taking an explicitly narratological approach (see, for example, 251–254, but also *passim*).
2. Although Propp's work was focused on a specific repertory of Russian fairy tales, his methodology is applicable to other types of narrative. The basic principle of examining the invariant aspects of narratives is a common gambit in structuralist narratology.
3. As we shall see, the musical examples that tend to attract the attention of musical narratologists are usually those that present a complicated or unusual relationship between story and discourse. This is especially true for those scholars of a more hermeneutic bent, as such pieces offer more in the way of interpretative potential.
4. In the hearing proposed here, the consequent is thematically but not harmonically parallel to the antecedent (the antecedent begins on I, whereas the consequent begins on ii), which is not uncommon in nineteenth-century music. It is possible, however, to hear mm. 72–80 as antecedent, with the thematically and harmonically parallel mm. 80–88 as the

consequent. Nonetheless, the identical harmonic progression of both phrases, as well as the PAC in m. 80 suggest that the second phrase is better understood as a varied repeat of the first.

5. The other two codes that McCreless considers as significant for musical narrative are the

Proairetic: the “causal” aspect of narrative, the sequence of events in a narrative, equivalent to the rules of voice-leading and harmony (McCreless 1988, 12), and

Semic: principally concerning recurring characters in a narrative, but also places and objects: “the most crucial of the three with respect to tonal music, for it exhibits clear parallels to thematic and motivic structure” (11).

6. The chord is missing its third, which just so happens to be the tonic of the movement, enhancing its non-diatonic effect.

7. McCreless (1988, 24) uses the Barthesian term “function,” which refers to a more abstract narrative unit, not specifically a character. However, the simpler notion of following a character’s trajectory through a story is perhaps a more familiar concept for those unfamiliar with narrative theory.

8. This has also been drawn on by V. Kofi Agawu (1991, 51–79), who uses Aristotle’s paradigm as a framework for examining Classical syntax.

9. Littlefield and Neumeier (1992, 45) also draw an intriguing link between the ethical concerns of Aristotle and Schenker, arguing that, “If the telos of Aristotle’s beginning-middle-end recipe is to create good citizens through catharsis by inuring them to the possibility of tragedy in their own lives, its role for Schenker is to create the proper listener, one who appreciates the ‘creative mind’ that ‘can derive content that is ever new.’”

10. It might seem odd to identify two motifs heard sequentially as *a* and *c*, with *b* arriving out of sequence. However, it becomes clear that this is because actor *b* is to play a more significant, and more independent role as the movement progresses.

11. Although musical narratology owes much of its impetus to the more critically focused approaches that followed in McClary’s wake, her analysis of Brandenburg No. 5 makes it clear that McClary herself is concerned principally with a musical narrative’s contribution to social meaning. Because of this, McClary’s analyses are arguably somewhat outside the mainstream narratological concern with structural resonances between musical and non-musical narrative. This in no way diminishes the significance of McClary’s work to later musical narratologists, especially given the sustained focus on musical meaning in contemporary narrative studies, but it does point out the difference in emphasis between McClary and the more heavily theoretical approaches adopted by other narrative scholars.

12. All translations of Nattiez 2011 are my own.

13. The implied author is the authorial persona “as reconstructed from the text” (Prince 2003, 42), and is thus ontologically separate from the real author. For Chatman, this stricture is “a commonplace of literary theory” (1978, 147)

14. This diegesis/mimesis distinction is introduced by Plato (1993, 89) in *The Republic*, where he describes mimesis as “entirely representational” and diegesis as “in the poet’s own voice.” Aristotle (2013, 19) draws a similar distinction: “Narrative [diegesis] may be borne throughout by a single narrator, or with variation as in Homer. In dramatization [mimesis] all the personages play their parts as active agents.”

15. In the interim between its first appearance as an article in *19th-Century Music* and the version quoted here from her book *Unsung Voices*, Abbate added a qualifier to her argument. In her original, “music is fundamentally different, not diegetic but mimetic” (1989,

228); in the later version, music is now “not *chiefly* diegetic but mimetic” (1991; my emphasis). Where Abbate’s language is unchanged between the two versions of her essay, I provide references for both.

16. In studies of literary narrative, competing points of view are possible, articulated by the concept of *focalization*, the perspective from which the elements of the story level are perceived. For example, in the sentence “Susan was disgusted by Pete’s eating habits,” Susan is the focalizer and Pete the focalized, and both are distinct from the narrator who describes Susan’s disgust. As readers, we do not need to agree with Susan’s perspective, but we are able to experience her subjectivity through the act of focalization. The topic of focalization is not one that has attracted much musicological speculation—the issue with distinguishing multiple viewpoints in music rather militates against it—although Vincent Meelberg (2006, 68) has identified the function of focalization in music as fulfilled by the performer, as a musical work “does not receive its final appearance when the musical score is written by the composer, but only during performance.” However, the identification of the performer as focalizer is an unsatisfactory conclusion—should an actor in a drama be included among the list of focalizers in a play?—and arguably seeks to shoehorn the concept of focalization into musical narrative for the sake of finding musical equivalents of the features of other media’s narratology. A more convincing perspective on focalization is offered by Michele Cabrini (2012, 14), who co-opts Cone’s notion of the “composer’s voice” to fulfil a focalizing role, although it is difficult to see how this differs from New Criticism’s “implied author.” See Rink (2001) for a discussion of the performer as narrator. Southard (2011) engages the issue of focalization from the perspective of opera.

17. What Hatten observes in his example is a juxtaposition of *topics*, which he elegantly defines elsewhere as “patches of music that trigger clear associations with styles, genres, and expressive meanings” (2004, 2). Hatten is not alone in identifying the narrative potential of topical discourse; in *Playing With Signs*, V. Kofi Agawu (1991, 36) notes that a sequence of topics “suggests a discourse, possibly a narrative.” However, where Hatten is fairly free in admitting the possibility of narrative discourse in music, Agawu is more cautious, suggesting that there is little evidence that music can narrate “in any but the most trivial sense” (36 n. 30).

18. Another way of understanding Almén’s archetypes is as an abstraction of the more historically grounded cultural meanings found in the work of scholars like McClary. For example, rather than view the first movement of Bach Brandenburg Concerto No. 5 as a specific narrative about the power structures of Bach’s day, Almén instead views it as an example of the more general category of ironic narratives (174–176).

19. Another example of a disnarration can be found in Ravel’s ballet *Daphnis et Chloé*, in which the audience is set up to expect a wedding that never actually arrives (see Millard 2018, 348–351).

20. For similar approaches to sonata form as narrative paradigm in post-Classical music, see Monahan (2015) on Mahler and Tarrant (2017) on Nielsen.

21. If Davis’s work carries echoes of earlier narrative scholars, the same is true of other contemporaneous work in the field. For example, Loretta Terrigno’s (2017) focus on “tonal problems” in Brahms demonstrate kinship with McCreless’s use of Barthes’s narrative codes, whereas Tarasti’s musical adaptation of Greimassian narratology is reflected in a variety of recent studies of mixed-media genres such as song, opera, program music, and ballet (see Suurpää 2011; 2014; Everett 2015; Pawłowaska 2018; Millard 2018).

22. See Gibbons (2011) for a study of the use of popular music as a narrative element in

video games. Especially intriguing is his examination of the manner in which the same song can be interpreted as either a straightforward commentary or an ironic gloss on the ludic narrative, depending on the choices made by the player. The interactivity and degree of player choice in video games poses problems for the study of musical narratives, but also opens up new possibilities.

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