Meaning Beyond Content: A Reply to Yee

“The Psychodynamics of Chronic Depression in Music: An Agentially-Enriched Narrative Reading of Beethoven’s “Kreutzer” Sonata, Op. 47, Movement I” provides a compelling interpretation of the famous violin sonata. Yee likens features of the composition to symptoms of chronic depression, specifically rumination, the “tendency to revisit and rehearse the causes and consequences of one’s depressive mood,” and alexithymia, “the difficulty in accurately identifying and/or describing one’s own emotions.” The depressive proclivity these symptoms indicate is taken to be a tragic flaw that prevents the virtual subject from realizing the tragedy-to-transcendence expressive genre, resulting instead in perpetual tragedy due to the subject’s “inability to complete or persist in peaceful or hopeful utterances.”

I am reminded of Amy Bauer’s suggestion that modern music embodies features of mental illness. While Bauer focuses on much later modernist composers such as György Ligeti and Pierre Boulez, some of the iconoclastic aspects of Beethoven’s music (e.g. “shattered subjectivity”) seem proto-modernist. If there is a disturbed or depressive “subject” to be found in the Kreutzer, it may be manifested in those features of the piece that deviate most strongly from conventional archetypes, those features in which Beethoven’s compositional originality (perhaps, his modernist tendencies) may be most strongly felt. In Philosophy of New Music (1949), Theodor Adorno discusses Beethoven in direct relation to modern composers (especially Arnold Schoenberg), and notes that one of Beethoven’s great formal innovations is his expansion and emancipation of development:

In Beethoven...development, the subjective reflection of the theme that decides its fate, becomes the center of the form altogether. It justifies the form, even when it is conventionally predetermined, by producing it anew, spontaneously.

As such, I am curious why so little of this essay is devoted to the development section – only one relatively short paragraph. The Adagio introduction, which inspired an entire chapter by William Drabkin and was considered by Donald Tovey to be “one of the landmarks in music history,” is not mentioned at all. The majority of the analysis focuses on the exposition and recapitulation, even going so far as to say that Beethoven’s expressive work “truly begins” at the end of the recapitulation.

While I find this claim dubious, and while there remains much to say about the parts of the sonata not addressed in this essay, Yee’s observations about the exposition and recapitulation are striking. The exposition features a tempesta first theme and a pastoral second theme with ombrà tropes: Yee focuses the unusual tonal and cadential structure of the second theme. As William Caplin points out, whereas a main theme may close with any standard cadence type, there is a strong tendency for second (“subordinate”) themes to end with a perfect authentic cadence in the subordinate key, thereby “to create the dramatic conflict of tonalities so central to the classical aesthetic.” The subordinate theme of mvt 1 of the Kreutzer, however, presents a phrase in the dominant key of E major ending in a half-cadence, followed by a restatement of the same theme in the parallel minor (e) and ending in a secondary dominant that sets up a modulation to its relative major (G): not at all the conclusive affirmation of the subordinate tonality that Caplin considers essential. Yee interprets this inconclusiveness as a tragic flaw of the transgression: “the flawed pastoral cannot manifest its identity with any closure or completeness but rather slips inexorably back into the tragic, betrayed by its own irregularities and imperfections.”
Similarly, at the end of the recapitulation, when (as Yee points out) conclusive closure in A minor “ought to” be achieved, Beethoven modulates sequentially to the Neapolitan key of B-flat major, which “would be a distant destination even for the movement’s development section, let alone its final moments.” Yee notes that the Neapolitan is associated “with the spiritual or transcendent” and interprets the transience of this modulation as further evidence of the virtual subject’s failure to maintain a positive mentality, as the movement ultimately and forcefully returns to the tonic minor.

This is a convincing account, and I applaud Yee’s thoughtful interpretation of a challenging piece of music which, as they believe, “more than adequately warrants the description profound.” My main concern – for this and any other piece of music – is that many convincing accounts are possible. For example, instead of insisting that the subject’s failings “are intrinsic, not extrinsic” – which one might read with an uncomfortable touch of victim blaming – we might point out that many of the tensions embodied by this piece come from its conflict with the externally imposed demands of sonata form. For example, that brief tonicization of the Neapolitan key at the end of the recapitulation is shocking because it contradicts the formal archetype imposed by convention. Such a bold move is in effect doomed from the start: is it really within the realm of the possibility that the movement could not only establish such a distant key late in the recapitulation, but actually end there (“complete the thought,” as Yee says)? That would be completely unthinkable in the musical culture of Beethoven’s time, and it is perhaps unsurprising that this fleeing gesture of individuality (the key is only maintained for about 8 measures) is soon reinterpreted as a chromatic predominant in the tonic key. Society forces the subject into submission, perhaps: the will to freedom can be briefly asserted, but not sustained for long before the subject is forced to comply with the expected schemata. Or else, this may be a “cosmic tragedy,” a failure by omnipotent design, in which assertions of individuality are illusory or futile: wrest as we might with the shackles of this mortal coil, the tragic end is predestined beyond our will or power.

I do not offer these competing accounts because I believe they are better than Yee’s, but only to illustrate the plausibility of multiple extramusical interpretations rooted in the same musical attributes. Indeed, plurality (or putative arbitrariness) of interpretation – especially with respect to the canon of “absolute” music of which Beethoven’s sonatas are among the most esteemed war horses – led to the formalist orthodoxy of Edouard Hanslick and his followers, for whom “music was to be understood in exclusively structural terms while issues of meaning were ruled out of court”15: this is still the prevailing attitude in much music theory today. If extramusical meaning is to be recognized as a real and important feature of musical experience, worthy of scholarly attention, this charge of arbitrariness must be answered. Yee describes the analysis in this essay as an “exegesis” of “Kreutzer’s semiotic meaning,” implying that semiotic meaning is an immanent property of the music that can be uncovered through careful reading. I believe that this widespread orientation to extramusical meaning is the source of much of the skepticism at the heart of the formalist-referentialist divide. Furthermore, I believe this orientation is traceable to a problematic metaphor, a misleading schema for what it “means to mean”: MEANING IS CONTENT.

MEANING IS CONTENT is at work in the many descriptions of musical meaning in terms of semiotic content,7 semantic content,8 conceptual content,9 emotional content,10 and so forth. As held by metaphor theory, metaphors such as this are pervasive in our perception, thought and action, and can guide our reasoning without our necessarily acknowledging it or even being aware of it.11 This particular metaphor fashions music as a kind of container that delivers meaning to the listener, with the role of semiotic analysis being to unpack the meaning that exists within the music. Meaning thus conceived becomes a fixed property of the music, about which true and false claims can be made. Though Yee does not use the word “content” in this essay, the presented account of meaning is in line with the epistemological implications of the metaphor, aiming to explicate, “in rigorous detail, how music can refer to things that really matter to us, including extramusical things, by virtue of displaying properties that are not only possessed or expressed by the music, but instantiated beyond it,” without accounting for a plurality of plausible interpretations. I would like to suggest that extramusical meaning can be pursued within the framework of a different metaphor, one that locates extramusical meaning not as an immanent
property of the work but as a dynamical interaction between listener and music: MEANING IS HOMOLOGY.

Music presents a rich complex of attributes, and listening involves dynamically and selectively attending to subsets of those attributes. The attributes selected during a given listening (e.g. subordinate theme restated in the parallel minor) may share properties with attributes of an extramusical domain (e.g. rumination), and this homology may provide a plausible basis for an interpretation via cross-domain mapping. But those same attributes may also be homologous with other extramusical domains (e.g. imposed conformity), potentially yielding different but equally plausible interpretations. Attending to a different subset of attributes (e.g. half-cadence tonicizing relative major) yields still more potential homologies (e.g. pleasant distraction). Thus, a plurality of plausible, non-arbitrary extramusical interpretations of a given musical example may coexist, drawing on different attributes and/or homologies, but since these are conceived as dynamical interactions rather than fixed contents, there is no contradiction between them.

There are other interesting questions – about the ontological status of the virtual subject, about the nature and function of expectation and closure in extramusical meaning, about the de facto association of the major mode with transcendence and the minor mode with tragedy – that I cannot address here due to space limitations. I thank Yee for his compelling interpretation of the first movement of Beethoven’s “Kreutzer” sonata, and encourage them to account for the coexistence of other plausible, grounded interpretations without reducing extramusical meaning to arbitrariness, perhaps by considering my proposed solution of replacing the structural metaphor MEANING IS CONTENT with MEANING IS HOMOLOGY.

JASON NOBLE
McGill University
EMAIL: jason.noble@mail.mcgill.ca
WEBSITE: http://www.jasonnoble.ca

Notes

3 Theodor Adorno, Philosophy of New Music (originally published 1949), trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 46.
4 Donald Tovey, qtd in William Drabkin, “The Introduction to Beethoven’s “Kreutzer” Sonata: A Historical Perspective,” in The Beethoven Violin Sonatas, ed. Lewis Lockwood & Mark Kroll (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 84.
11 George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, Metaphors We Live By (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).