

A Reply to Yee

I start this commentary with two confessions.

First, I must admit that I lack the capacity to engage in any detail with Yee's attentive musical and semiotic analysis of the piece in question. I will therefore assume the validity of the analysis, except for a minor, but relevant caveat regarding rumination.

Second, I confess I am of broadly formalist sympathies, in that I regard the enjoyment of absolute music to consist primarily in the understanding of the abstract structure of a music piece. While I do think that expressive properties play a considerable role in the appreciation of music, I deny that their appreciation requires, encourages, or even supports, in the majority of cases, a narrative or referential framework. In this I am in line with Peter Kivy, and from him I borrow the following modest claim regarding the coexistence of formalist listening with other approaches.

Whether or not the 'formalist' way of listening to so-called 'absolute music' is the only acceptable, fruitful way of listening, it is certainly *one* acceptable, fruitful way of listening. (2001, 167)

The first part of this commentary deals with two possible challenges to Yee's claim regarding the profundity of the *Kreutzer* sonata. The second part takes issue with an aspect of Yee's interpretation of it, namely the claim that depressive rumination is presented by the work.

I.

The first challenge is a request for clarification, and it may be summarised in the question: "who, exactly, is profound?"

If the interpretation of the piece as presenting some of the symptoms of depressive states is mandated by the piece as the work of art it is (a Beethoven sonata), then we have good reasons to say that it is Beethoven who is profound. On the other hand, if Yee's interpretation, while informed by an analysis of the musical material, is one among many possible interpretations of the piece, then it seems inappropriate to credit Beethoven alone for a profundity that is partly derived from an interpretive enterprise conducted by someone else. I illustrate this worry with an example.

Petr Eben's organ work *Moto Ostinato*, the third movement from his *Musica Dominicalis*, seeks to represent the perennial battle between good and evil by means of opposing melodic and contrapuntal forces. Hamilton (2014) has suggested that the piece is apt for use in the Palm-Passion liturgy, grounding the claim in an analysis of the work. For instance, regarding the beginning of the piece, he notes that

The unrelenting rhythmic figure can underscore the sense of motion in both the physical sense of Jesus' entry, as well as the figurative moving toward his inevitable death. Though the ostinato rhythm is displaced and manipulated, it is rarely absent. (Hamilton 2014, 30)

If the interpretation of *Moto Ostinato* as about the Passion of Christ is profound – something we can grant for the sake of the argument – then the credit for this profundity goes to both Eben *and* Hamilton, as the latter has supplied a more specific meaning for the rather general narrative of the original piece.

The issue now is whether Yee's interpretation of the work as profound is actually an interpretation of the work *as interpreted by Yee* as profound. Recall that Yee borrows Dodd's characterisation of musical profundity. Now, Dodd's characterisation of profound music is built upon a notion of aboutness that rests on a work's capacity to *display* certain properties. Which properties are displayed by a work, of all the properties that are *possessed* by it? Dodd's answer is that the properties displayed by a work are those that appear to the attentive and competent listener as crucial to the piece's artistic meaning. This meaning, in turn, is determined by a bundle of "intentional, contextual, and conventional factors [...]" (Dodd 2014, 311).

While Yee gives reason to think that he is not after an unconstrained interpretation of the piece, he does not offer compelling reasons to believe that Beethoven himself regarded the piece as a musical presentation of depressive symptoms. Depression, Yee informs us, hit Beethoven throughout his life, but he hastens to add that "one need not make as specific an interpretation as this". But is this enough to warrant the presence of an authorial intention? And if Beethoven's intention to present rumination in the piece is missing, is the description of the piece, *qua* Beethoven's piece, as profound compromised?

But let us put aside for a moment the concern regarding who exactly is being profound, and move to the second, more radical challenge to Yee's claim that the first movement of the *Kreutzer* sonata is profound.

Under Dodd's account, profundity requires aboutness, but isn't exhausted in aboutness.¹ A work of music, if it is to count as profound, should not simply be about profound things, it should also allow us to "gain previously unattained insight into the nature of these things". (Dodd 2014, 321).

Granted that the *Kreutzer* sonata is about a profound and significant aspect of our psychological life such as depression, in what way does it provide an insight into its nature? For it wouldn't be enough to present the dynamic structure of depressive states – this is something we could have learnt more precisely from a textbook. Yee concludes the paper with a rather general gloss on the value of negative emotions aroused by music. Perhaps this is meant to show that the *Kreutzer* sonata is profound precisely insofar as it allows us to feel *what it is like* to be in a state of depressive rumination? If this is the case, Yee's thesis would resonate with some recent proposals regarding the value of expressiveness in the arts. (Robinson 2005, 2007)

II.

As anticipated, it is not my intent to question Yee's general interpretation of the work. However, I devote the second part of this commentary to a remark on the musical representation of depressive rumination. I worry that this may not be possible in point of principle for a work of absolute music.

My first worry concerns the temporal structure of rumination. Depressive rumination extends over weeks, months, perhaps even years. Its morbid character is precisely related to the fact that the subject chews on her problem for too long – hence the name 'rumination'. In order for something to represent rumination, it is insufficient to present recurring states of malaise: the recurring negative state must be a familiar presence in one's life over a significant period of time.

Hence the problem: the temporal structure of music underdetermines the possible temporal structures represented by the music. The temporal order of musical events could be a real-time presentation of the corresponding extra-musical events, but this need not be the case – it shouldn't be, if rumination is the relevant extra-musical process. But there is no principled way to determine the relation between musical temporality and extra-musical temporality in a piece of pure music.

My second worry is about the sort of aboutness that is needed in order to have a musical representation of rumination. For rumination isn't simply a recurring bad mood. It is one's thinking about the causes of one's own depressive state, or about the nature of the emotional state itself. To ruminate is to engage in some sort of self-reflection. (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008)

If this is the case, it would seem impossible to represent rumination in absolute music, as absolute music lacks meaning of the propositional sort. It may then be that, while propositional content isn't necessary to musical aboutness (and consequently to musical profundity), it is necessary if music is to be about matters such as rumination, which involve recurrent, obsessive thinking.

But perhaps I am being unduly demanding in considering a propositional content as necessary to the musical presentation of rumination. For, while rumination may necessarily involve thinking when it occurs in real life, it does not follow from this that rumination could not be represented without a propositional content. As an example, consider the way in which the movie *Gran Torino* (2008) presents the protagonist's tormented relation with his past, both through occasional flashbacks and the attitude exhibited towards his Hmong neighbours. While we aren't confronted with any specific linguistic description of Walt Kowalski's state of mind, we understand that his solitary late life is haunted by the horrors of the war, and especially by remorse for the accidental killing of a Korean boy who intended to surrender. In this example, rumination (or a relevantly similar process) is presented without the need of linguistic description.

If this is the case, it may then be possible for music to do the same.

Once more, however, I am inclined to dismiss this possibility: what the cinematic examples teach us is that rumination may do without propositional content, but also that it requires at least two things. First, an intentional object, that is, something the ruminating subject is thinking *about* – for instance, one's lost love. Second, the representation of the intentional object as the cause of the subject's current state of mind – for instance, the circumstances of one's loss in love are repeatedly revisited and held as the cause of one's depressed state of mind.

One is left wondering how absolute music could meet these requirements: while pure music is certainly able to express emotional states, it does so without specifying the object of the emotional response. And even if it did it, this by itself would not be sufficient to convey the idea that the object is a past event that is considered as the cause of the emotional state the music is expressive of.

I have advanced two reasons to think that rumination couldn't possibly be represented in a purely musical form, one related to its temporal unfolding, and the other to its intentional structure. If I am wrong, then either I am mistaken regarding the requirements for the musical representation of rumination, or I have failed to see how a piece of pure music could meet such requirements. If the latter is the case, it needs to be shown how the *Kreutzer* sonata does it.

Finally, I believe it is appropriate to note how, despite Yee's anti-formalist approach, Kivy would have been glad to see that musicologists and composers are still willing to grapple with philosophical theses, and philosophers willing to reply back.

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NOTES

¹ For an account of musical profundity that does not require aboutness, see Davies (2002).