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Marcus Aydintan, Florian Edler,
Roger Graybill und Laura Krämer

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Małgorzata Pawłowska

Narrative and Time in Music

A Few Insights

Once upon a time, narrative used to be understood as a kind of structure of literary texts. Such an understanding goes back to the 1960s, when narratology was emerging as a separate research discipline. Since then, the meaning of the term ›narrative‹ has expanded considerably, especially during the 1980s and 1990s when the concept ›travelled‹ from literary theory to other spheres of thought, including music theory and musicology. Ever since this ›narrative turn‹,¹ narrative has often been understood as a primary mental act, a basic strategy of thinking, helping us make sense of our, in Paul Ricoeur's words, »confused, unformed and at the limit mute temporal experience«.²

The broadening of the conceptual scope of ›narrative‹ is indisputable; yet this very broadening has also made it difficult to define the term with any precision. A comparison of definitions found in various dictionaries and encyclopedias, including dictionaries of literary terms, linguistics, narratology, and the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*,³ as well as the definitions that appear in various scholarly texts on classical and post-classical narratology, seems only to highlight this diversification. Today, some of the leading contemporary narratologists admit that no one definition has achieved consensus. This expansion of the meaning of the term ›narrative‹ in turn provokes a question: Is everything a narrative? In reference to music, we can ask: Is all music narrative? Do all musical pieces constitute narratives? The answer to the questions when posed in this way is probably negative. What can be observed, however, is that the diversified palette of definitions and uses of the term do share certain aspects. These common aspects, which are listed below, provide the fullest picture of narrative in a strict sense. They are to be understood as common to all forms of

1 For one of the first diagnoses and uses of the emerging term ›narrative turn‹, see Kreiswirth 1995 and 2005.

2 Ricoeur 1990, p. xi.

3 Herman/Jahn/Ryan 2005.

narrative (including literary, filmic, dramatic, and so on); later we will consider how they apply to music in particular.

- 1) *Narrative presents a certain arrangement of events or elements of temporal structure – that is, a plot.* The world presented in narrative is temporal. The events, or elements, appear on the syntagmatic (temporal) axis according to the principle of succession discussed, among others, by Tzvetan Todorov.⁴ The principles of temporality and succession also raise some complications, which I will discuss later in the essay.
- 2) *In narrative, certain relationships obtain among the presented events or elements.* It is possible to define how these presented events or elements relate to each other. The causality principle is one such type of relationship, according to which one set of events/elements results from another.⁵
- 3) *In narrative, the subject, characters, situations, or values, undergo change.* What is essential in narrative is the principle of transformation (discussed by Todorov,⁶ among other authors), which is related to its processual aspect. Byron Almén, the author of *A Theory of Musical Narrative*, claims that even if narrative does not present specific characters or situations, the arrangement of qualities or values undergoes change (*transvaluation*).⁷
- 4) *Narrative is a meaningful whole, with at least a beginning, middle, and end.*⁸ This concept of narrative has been discussed by many authors, among them Étienne Souriau and Algirdas Greimas, who cite Aristotle's *Poetics* as the earliest source to make that point.⁹
- 5) *A presenting or storytelling voice is present in narrative, characterized by the human expression of the experienced world.* The ›voice‹ might take the form of

4 Todorov 1990, pp. 28–30.

5 It is debatable whether the cause-effect relationship is embedded in the text itself or is deconstructed by the reader. It must probably be ›coded‹ in the text, but much theorizing remains to be done, especially regarding the part of the receiver in ›filling in the gaps‹ in under-defined places. The situation varies depending on the medium used and on the properties of individual narratives. The question of ›how much‹ narrative there is in the text itself and ›how much‹ on the receiver's part is usually accompanied by heated debate; it is worth referring to Ricoeur's interpretation of narrative in the light of the triple mimesis; see Ricoeur 1990, p. 52.

6 Todorov 1990, pp. 28–30.

7 Almén 2008.

8 With one reservation, however, that the telling of the story chronologically from the beginning to the end is not a condition for the presence of the beginning, the middle, and the end. We must not confuse narrative with the narrated story.

9 Greimas 1966, pp. 207–208.

a narrator who is the subject of mental processes, or might be spoken through characters.

These aspects or features that are characteristic of narrative are formulated in a rather general way as a compromise between two roughly opposing positions: one that confines narrative to a full, exclusively literary representation of the world (with a full semantics) on one hand, and one that considers all forms to be narrative, on the other. In order to call a given work a narrative, it seems necessary to meet all five criteria. Moreover, each of the five criteria may exhibit different degrees of strength along a continuum from weak to strong.¹⁰ For example, with respect to the first feature, the lowest end of the scale may consist simply of the arrangement of elements (that is, functional and/or formal objects) along the temporal axis. Such an arrangement, for instance, might be encountered in musical narratives of so-called absolute music. At the highest end of the scale we will find a literary or film plot including specific and semantically well-defined events or situations. Hence, one could say that a literary or film plot is ›more narrative‹ than a musical plot. With respect to the fifth feature, the low end of the scale would correspond to a default virtual subject of mental processes (for instance, in musical narratives), and at the high end, an actual narrator telling a story (for instance, as encountered in literature).

So far I have been discussing narrative as a general category that can be exemplified through various arts. The following discussion revisits each of the five narrative features just listed, but now with an emphasis on their bearing on musical narrative in particular.

1) Narrative presents a certain arrangement of events or elements of temporal structure – that is, a plot.

We can easily understand how a plot is constructed and presented in verbal stories. We also know that such verbal stories can accompany music. But what about instrumental music without a literal text or program? In music theory there has been extensive discussion over whether absolute music can be inter-

¹⁰ The concept of ›degrees of narrativity‹ was introduced to literary theory by Gerald Prince and adapted to the theory of musical narrative by Vera Micznik. According to this notion, narrativity is to be understood as a broad spectrum, from which a piece of music can draw in varying degrees; it is not to be understood exclusively as a quality that music either possesses or does not possess. See Prince 1982, p. 145, and Micznik 2001.

preted in narrative terms. Even though music does not present concrete meanings in a literary sense, it has »its own musical meanings which, hence, qualify its materials broadly speaking as »events«», as Vera Micznik states.¹¹ According to this view, music does not need to »represent« something else in order to create a plot. Not only can music carry the meanings through musical gestures, topics, and symbols, but also through functional and formal »objects«, as for instance a contrast of two qualities that create some sort of »event« and therefore create an element of musical plotting. Of course, a listener may construct a specified plot by imagining a verbal story or images to go with the music. But most general musical plotting can be intersubjectively verifiable, encoded, and present in the music itself, and it hardly needs to be verbalized or conceptualized for the plot to be followed.

It must be emphasized, however, that temporality and succession in narrative does not always stipulate that events must be presented in chronological order. Neither should these principles be confused with the causal principle. According to Gérard Genette, a narrative presents a certain time structure within another time structure; that is, it introduces a tension between the time of a story (*raconté*) and the time of discourse, work (*racontant*).¹² Can this distinction occur in music? It most probably cannot in a literal sense, but it might be able to do so indirectly. First of all, it seems that music can convey an illusion of temporal distance. One way of achieving this temporal distance is the use of archaizing topics and timbres, usually in slow tempi, as if to indicate that it is a story that happened »a long long time ago«. But another way to create an illusion of temporal distance is through apposite use of musical motifs and themes, repeated in the course of the work so that the listener may compare later passages with earlier ones. For instance, according to Eero Tarasti, if a composition begins with a distinct main theme, and if that theme is developed dramaturgically in the midst of other musical »events« (other themes, transitions, etc.) throughout a work, then a reoccurrence of the theme at the end can suggest that a great deal of time has passed in the musical story.¹³ The listener, comparing passages, can have

11 Micznik 2001, p. 219.

12 Genette 1980. Cf. Todorov 1966.

13 Tarasti 1979, pp. 67–68. Vera Micznik (2001) seems to share this view. In comparing the degree of narrativity in Gustav Mahler's Ninth Symphony and in Ludwig van Beethoven's *Pastoral* Symphony, Micznik comes to a conclusion that Mahler's symphony is more narrative, containing illusions of taking us back to various times in the past, on the one hand due to use of the connotations of archaic and ritual sounds, and on the other, due to the return of the thematic material five times, each time changed (p. 202).

the impression that ›a lot has happened‹ since the theme's first presentation – especially if such repetitions of a theme at the end of a story have a special significance (through augmentation, specific instrumentation, etc.). An example of this may be found in Sergei Prokofiev's ballet *Romeo and Juliet*. Here several basic themes are assigned to particular characters and situations (e.g., the fate theme, Juliet's theme, or the family theme). In the coda, after a number of musical disruptions, the fate theme returns, now emphasized through augmentation and reinforced instrumentation. Juliet's theme also returns in greatly altered form, appearing in a higher register and with different instrumentation and dynamics; moreover, it is repeated up to five times in different keys. Such a reappearance of an earlier theme in a completely new context, along with the listener's memory of many diverse musical events that have occurred throughout the composition, can give the impression that a great deal of time has passed since the first appearance of the theme.

In such cases, we observe a discrepancy between the structure of the two times – that is, the narrated time (the time of the story imagined by the listener) and the time of the work (the real time in which it is performed). A musical work that lasts for, say, thirty minutes, can suggest that a much longer amount of time has passed with respect to narrated time. For instance, when a listener identifies a musical theme with a protagonist and traces the course of diverse events it is going through, the reappearance of this musical theme at the end of composition in a completely new context can suggest that the protagonist has gone through a strong psychological transformation. This imagined story, represented by musical events, is often unlikely to happen in the real time of a musical piece. Such is the case with many compositions based on the story of *Romeo and Juliet* (Prokofiev, Pyotr Tchaikovsky, Charles Gounod, Hector Berlioz, Leonard Bernstein), in which main themes reoccur as a final apotheosis in a completely new expressive context.

2) In narrative, certain relationships obtain among the presented events or elements.

Not only can music present time-structured elements (or events), but it can also present relations among them. One especially important kind of relation found in narrative is causality, which can be most easily observed in music with tonal syntax. However, when we speak about causal relations with regards to music,

there arises the tantalizing question of whether these relations are in the music itself, or whether they are constructed by the listener. Most probably they are ›coded‹ in the music, but they need the active mind of the audience for the causal connections to be inferred. Almén claims that the problem of causality in literature is also controversial, and states: »There is no qualitative distinction (...) between the way narratives are constructed in literature and the way they are constructed in music. In each case, we must infer connections.«¹⁴

The function of the listener's memory and expectations is essential for extracting the similarities or transformations. Edmund Husserl's categories of retention and protention are useful here. As Leszek Polony writes in a book *Time of a Musical Story* (original title: *Czas opowieści muzycznej*):

Retention, the arch of memory, is the basis for the formation in the musical course of recognizable forms, musical themes, changes and transformations taking place in it; *protention*, with its focus on the future, anticipating it, is the basis for musical development, enhancing or smothering of tensions, a faster or slower flow of time. They imply the identifying of the external time of the performance of the work of music with the time of consciousness.¹⁵

But again, not all music invites listeners to infer connections. When music lacks repetitions, contrasts or transformations of themes that can preserve their identity through transformations, it cannot be a narrative.

3) In narrative, the subject, characters, situations or values undergo change.

As discussed earlier, musical themes usually undergo change throughout a musical narrative. But the expressive qualities and overall mood or character can also change to a great extent from the beginning to the end, as in Beethoven's 5th and 9th symphonies, or Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 6 (as well as the already mentioned *Romeo and Juliet* by Berlioz and Tchaikovsky, both of which end in an apotheosis reached, inter alia, by changing the mode from minor to major¹⁶). It is especially clear in some apotheoses in codas of many compositions from the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

14 Almén 2008, p. 31.

15 Polony 2005, p. 281.

16 Interestingly, both works end in the key of B major.

Robert S. Hatten notes that the organization of musical topics and topical fields at the level of the whole composition, corresponding to narrative figures, manifests itself in the so-called expressive genres, which in Hatten's theory are the categories of musical works based on the change of state or type of expression – e.g., ›tragic-to-triumphant‹ or ›tragic-to-transcendent‹.¹⁷ Similarly, the main thesis of Almén's book¹⁸ is that, through musical narratives, the listener perceives and tracks culturally significant *transvaluation*. The author particularly draws on James Jakób Liszka's work, *The Semiotic of Myth*, where the concept of transvaluation appears as crucial to narrative. Transvaluation regards changes in hierarchy and in the arrangement of values presented in narrative.¹⁹ According to Almén, the dynamics of narration are expressed by two binary oppositions: order/transgression and victory/defeat.²⁰ The combinations of these oppositions create four narrative strategies, which are integrated with Northrop Frye's archetypes (by Liszka with respect to myth, and following him, by Almén with respect to music): (1) romance: victory of order over transgression (victory + order); (2) tragedy: transgression is defeated by order (defeat + transgression); (3) irony: order is defeated by transgression (defeat + order); and (4) comedy: transgression wins over order (victory + transgression).

4) Narrative is a meaningful whole, with at least a beginning, middle, and end.

This Aristotelian concept can be applied to music as well as to literature. As suggested earlier, a narrative (or discourse) does not necessarily need to start from the beginning of the underlying story (*raconté*); indeed, it can mix the order

17 Hatten 1994, p. 245.

18 Almén 2008.

19 Algirdas J. Greimas also treated narrative as a value-creating process. Paul Ricoeur says: »Greimas himself ... admits that the most general function of narrative has been to restore a threatened order of values.« (See Ricoeur 1990, vol. 2, p. 100.) Liszka defines narrative in the following way: »Narration focuses on a set of rules from a certain domain or domains of cultural life which define a certain... hierarchy, and places them in a crisis. There is a disruption of the normative function of these rules – they are violated, there is some transgression. The narrative then unfolds a certain, somewhat ambivalent, resolution to the crisis, depending on the pragmatics of the tale: the disrupted hierarchy is restored or, on the other hand, the hierarchy is destroyed ... « (cited in Almén 2008, p. 73).

20 Almén 2008, pp. 65–66.

of the events of the story in various ways. Narrative organizes events of the *story* level into a *discourse* level; this means, for instance, that a narrative can use retrospection or ›cut short‹ the story without resolution. A narrative also can employ particular stylistic figures that convey the idea of an ›opening‹ or an ›ending‹. In musical pieces, the narrative framework is often very clear, for instance by use of archaizing themes that function as though they are opening and closing the mythical world – for instance, as if we were hearing a narrator beginning a story with »once upon a time . . . « (see, for instance, Mendelssohn's overture to *Midsummer Night's Dream*, Smetana's *Ma vlast*, Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet*, or film music by Nino Rota to Franco Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet*).

In the understanding of a narrative presented here, any work of music without a composed beginning and end (for example, La Monte Young's *Dream House*, originally set out as an installation of light and sound played for twenty-four hours without beginning or end), would not constitute a narrative.

- 5) A presenting or storytelling ›voice‹ is present in narrative, characterized by the human expression of the experienced world.

This ›voice‹ is a subject of mental processes presented in a musical piece; we can have one such voice – a kind of inner narrator (referred to as ›persona‹ by Edward Cone²¹) or multiple such voices in those pieces that are closer to the dramatic than the epic (called ›agents‹ and ›actants‹ by, inter alia, Hatten²² and Tarasti²³). Even if this voice is not always identified or mentioned in a musical analysis, the tracking of musical ›modalities‹²⁴ or references to motives as ›musical gestures‹²⁵ presumes that there is a human factor as a subject of these musical processes.

In literature, there are two principal modes of presenting a story: first, through *mimetic narration*, which directly presents a story by the characters, as in a drama; and second, through *diegetic narration*, in which a narrator indirectly presents a story, as in an epic. When we speak about musical narratives, the

21 Cone 1974.

22 Hatten 2004, 2017. Cf. Kerman 1992.

23 Tarasti 1984, 1991, 1994.

24 Tarasti 1994, 1995.

25 Hatten 2004.

question is: does music ›tell a story‹ mimetically (as in a drama) or diegetically (as in an epic)? In other words, does music directly present actions, or does it rather relate them through some kind of narrative voice? Even if these labels cannot be literally applied to music, they do seem to apply to musical narratives in a metaphorical sense.

On the one hand, music is often compared to drama,²⁶ thus inviting comparison to a story being enacted in real time (mimetic narration). But on the other hand, musical narratives also feature moments in which one hears a narrative ›voice‹ telling a story. This narrative diegesis is mainly manifested at the beginning and end of the narrative framework, mentioned before, as if we were hearing a narrator beginning a story with ›once upon a time . . . ‹.

However, the diegetic narrative is not limited to beginnings and endings of works; it can also operate throughout an entire work, or through fragments of a work. It can be found, for example, in Robert Schumann's C major Fantasy, op. 17, in the section with the performance expression *Im Legendenton*, in which the theme appears in a slower tempo with a chordal, quasi-choral texture. The narrator's voice may also be heard in instrumental recitatives that interrupt the musical action as if to comment on it, emphasizing the illusion that there is a story ›inside‹ the action that belongs to a different time span (for instance Berlioz's *Roméo et Juliette*).

The understanding of narrative presented above is in line with Karol Berger's bipartite classification of forms of art.²⁷ First, the ›narrative‹ class, which involves epic and drama, is characterized by the presentation of a *temporal structure*, that is, a certain arrangement of events. An essential aspect of narrative form is the succession of its parts in a specific order, subject to a causal relationship. The difference between epic and drama is in the mode of presentation. Second, the ›lyric‹ class presents feelings or states. It is therefore atemporal, in that time is not essential in constituting it. The elements of this form, whether they occur simultaneously or successively, are ruled by the relationships of implication.

According to Berger:

It should be clear by now that the narrative-lyric distinction is not at all identical with the distinction between artworks that develop in time (as literary or musical works do) and those that do not change (say, paintings or buildings), that it is not the distinction between the so-called temporal and spatial arts. This is not simply because, as Dewey

²⁶ For instance, see Maus 1988.

²⁷ Berger 2000, pp. 189–212.

argued at length, the experience of art always has atemporal character. [...] Rather, what is at stake with these concepts is the structure, temporal or atemporal, of the world, which comes into existence in the work, the world which the work makes present.²⁸

We can say that the presence of the processes or arrangements of events on the temporal axis implies narrative, and the presence of the states or moments ›taken out of time‹ implies lyric.

Berger explains further on that the distinction between the two classes can be found in art as expressed in various media. Not only literature can be narrative or lyrical but also, for example, painting (with narrative representing human actions, and lyrical representing states) and music. A musical work has a narrative quality if the succession of its phases and the causal logic of mutual relations among them is of principal importance, whereas »the musical lyric«, Berger says, »is guided by the paradoxical, and, it should be stressed, never completely realizable, ambition to neutralize time, to render it irrelevant.«²⁹ Berger also observes that when it comes to music, the distinction is more relative than absolute. A lyrical work of music cannot be entirely atemporal whereas a narrative work usually contains lyrical moments.

According to Berger, the narrative form in music implies active-synthetic hearing, as opposed to the lyrical form which rather encourages passive hearing, evoking a specific mood. Recalling Heinrich Bessler's essay on musical hearing in the modern era, Berger indicates the moment in the history of music in which active-synthetic hearing reached its culmination – specifically, at the end of the eighteenth century, that is, the high Classical era. This was when a musical theme, returning throughout the work and undergoing continuous development, acquired individual and personal features, thereby expressing the unique personality of a particular composer. The work of music, integrated by the main theme that maintains its identity throughout the transformations, was understood as an expression of an enduring individual moral ›character‹.³⁰ Listening to such compositions involves tracing the ›plot‹ of recurring themes, which are most often presented as contrasting entities (›protagonist‹ and ›antagonist‹). Moreover, since these themes are subject to transformations, such listening requires the comparison of new passages with earlier ones, as well as an ongoing synthesis

28 Ibid., p. 190.

29 Ibid., p. 202.

30 Ibid., p. 199.

of the subsequent phases, so that they seem to form a single, integrated process in which something actually ›happens‹.

Conclusion

Narrative, as it was discussed above, is a phenomenon presenting a set of events or elements in a time-ordered structure. As such, narrative can be realized not only in literature, but also in other forms of art, including music. The ›time‹ meant here is not only the time of the composition itself, but also the time of the ›plot‹ presented in that composition. In a narrative composition, the time as presented (and as imagined) plays an important role, so that the listener is invited to follow the ›plot‹, which does not have to be a particular story verbalized or translated to pictures. So a narrative musical work not only happens or is experienced in time, but it also evokes time, whereas in a non-narrative composition, there is an attempt to overcome time and to make it irrelevant.

Without any doubt the peak of narrative music occurred during the high Classic and Romantic epochs. Interestingly, the dissolution of the tonal syntax in the 20th century gave composers more freedom to construct the music in such a way that they could choose to incorporate narrativity or to ignore it.³¹

Time in music can be treated in various ways; it can be multidimensional and is not necessarily linear. Composers can construct narrative or non-narrative music. Morton Feldman, who was not interested in organizing time in music, said: »I am not a clockmaker. I am interested in getting to time in its unstructured existence. That is, I am interested in how this wild beast lives in the jungle – not in the zoo.«³² Since time in musical narratives is organized, one might say that such narratives are works in which time is *not* a wild beast living in the jungle, to use Feldman's metaphor, but a tamed one. It is organized by a human mind so well suited to create stories, be they verbal or not.

31 Cf. Adamenko 2007, p. xii: »The void created by the disappearance of tonality was inevitably filled with those prime elementary structuring methods first used in myths.«

32 Feldman 2000, p. 87.

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Akademia Muzyczna im. Krzysztofa Pendereckiego w Krakowie [Krzysztof Penderecki Academy of Music in Krakow]

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