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Matthew ARNDT

The Two Deaths in Beethoven's Bagatelle Op. 126 No. 4

Abstract

Theodor W. Adorno discusses Ludwig van Beethoven's Six Bagatelles, Op. 126 (1824), as exemplars of the composer's late-style music, which reflects on different dimensions of mortality, both literal and figurative. Adorno's commentary, while suggestive and pertinent for our time, is hindered by inadequate analysis. A renewed look at the Fourth Bagatelle, the darkest of the set, with the aid of Heinrich Schenker's and Arnold Schoenberg's theories lends heft and bite to Adorno's critique.

Keywords

Beethoven; Bagatelle Op. 126 No. 4; Adorno; Schenker; Schoenberg; death

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The Two Deaths in Beethoven's Bagatelle Op. 126 No. 4

Matthew ARNDT

Ludwig van Beethoven's Six Bagatelles, Op. 126 (1824), are striking for what Theodor W. Adorno calls their "fractured" nature. In Beethoven's late works, including the Bagatelles, the themes are "disrupted" and juxtaposed in various ways, such that "they appear not as themselves but as signs of something else." In other words, the music becomes "allegorical." And the specific content of this allegory, according to Adorno, is a "reflection on death."¹

Daniel K. L. Chua explains that for Adorno, Beethoven's late music "is torn between two deaths." The first is the death of "the individual, who is ultimately reducible to nature and [thus] death," "because nature decays."² The second is a kind of living death, where, as Simon Jarvis puts it, "the whole nexus of self-preservatory thought and action" in society ironically "mimics death, strives to become inorganic, object-like in its attempt to ward off death."³ In other words, as Adorno and Max Horkheimer write, "Individuals shrink to the nodal points of conventional reactions and the modes of operation objectively expected of them."⁴ For this reason, they argue, "the history of civilization is the history of the introversion of sacrifice," that is, of self-sacrifice to a coercive regime.⁵ According to Adorno, music imitates the first death (that of the individual or nature) through the functionality of the content—above all, the *establishment and elaboration of themes*. He writes: "The thematic and developmental [i.e., elaborative] parts [...] can accommodate

1 Theodor W. Adorno, *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 158 and 125.

2 Daniel K. L. Chua, "Beethoven's Other Humanism," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 62/3 (2009), 593, 592n100, and 592, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jams.2009.62.3.571>.

3 Simon Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 31.

4 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 21.

5 *Ibid.*, 43.

the particular.”⁶ Music imitates the second death (the introversion of sacrifice in society) through the conventionality of the form—above all, and particularly in Beethoven, the conventions of tonality. As Adorno writes, “[T]he collective is immanent in [Beethoven’s] work through the universality of the tonal.”⁷ Tonality is not simply a pervasive condition like society; as Heinrich Schenker recognizes, it metaphorically requires “sacrifices” by the tones to the regime of the ground tone (*Grundton*), which Arnold Schoenberg accordingly calls “the tyrant.”⁸ According to Adorno, “[W]hereas the ‘classical’ style sublates [the particular thematic] element within the [tonal] totality and gives it the *appearance* of significance,” of a “‘symbolic’ unity” of the individual with society, in Beethoven’s late music this appearance is dissolved: “subjectivity breaks away from the work,” leaving behind conventional shards that “it has violently vacated,” which allegorically reveal both the mortality of the subject and the deathly “*alienation, violence, privation*” at the root of the social compact.⁹

Adorno’s fragmentary comments on late Beethoven and on the Six Bagatelles in particular are deeply suggestive, and in an age, like Adorno’s and Beethoven’s, when humanism and civilization continually revert to nihilism and barbarism, both his commentary and the music deserve further critical attention.¹⁰

Nowhere do Adorno’s statements on the way the *fractured* quality of Beethoven’s late works gives rise to an allegory of death apply more potently than in the Fourth Bagatelle, which is presumably why Adorno calls it “the most important of the cycle.”¹¹ This piece is one of Beethoven’s most unnerving, and it is one of his very few in B minor, which Beethoven, alluding to the tradition that associates B minor with suffering and death, refers to as the “black key.”¹² The music *juxtaposes*, in “the harshest contrast,” a brutal,

6 Adorno, *Beethoven*, 61.

7 *Ibid.*, 49.

8 Heinrich Schenker, *Harmony*, ed. Oswald Jonas, trans. Elisabeth Mann Borgese (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), 40; and Arnold Schoenberg, *Theory of Harmony*, trans. Roy E. Carter (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978), 151. Adorno’s notion of the mimesis of death is not to be confused with his notion of music’s mimesis of concepts, which Michael Spitzer calls simply “mimesis.” Michael Spitzer, *Music as Philosophy: Adorno and Beethoven’s Late Style* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 54.

9 Adorno, *Beethoven*, 161, 158, 125, and 161. On symbol versus allegory, see Tzvetan Todorov, *Theories of the Symbol*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), 198–221. On exclusion and violence in musical form, see Chua, “Beethoven’s Other Humanism,” 577–80.

10 Janet Schmalfeldt has analyzed Nos. 2 and 5 in depth, and Lisa Ann Musca has provided commentary on the set. Schmalfeldt’s study is a precedent for my own in its joint concern for motivic development and voice leading. Janet Schmalfeldt, “On the Relation of Analysis to Performance: Beethoven’s Bagatelles Op. 126, Nos. 2 and 5,” *Journal of Music Theory* 29/1 (1985), 1–31, <https://doi.org/10.2307/843369>; and Lisa Ann Musca, “The Piano Fragment and the Decomposing of the Musical Subject from the Romantic to the Postmodern” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2007), 31–63.

11 Adorno, *Beethoven*, 131.

12 Ludwig van Beethoven, sketchbook from 1815–1816 (Scheide Library at Princeton University), fol. 40, reproduced and transcribed in Lewis Lockwood, “The Beethoven Sketchbook in the Scheide Library,” *Princeton University Library*

“polyphonic” A section with an “almost monodic” B section of “horrifying simplicity” and conventionality. This conventionality especially concerns the inert, “mask-like or husk-like” harmony. It is not that the drone as such is especially conventional in Classical style, but that the tonic triad, the postulate of tonality, “has become so substantial through the process [of the Classical style] that it no longer needs its confirmation as result. But precisely thereby [tonal harmony] loses its substantiality and becomes a discarded convention.”¹³ Both sections are riven with *interruptions*, and the piece’s ABAB design (mm. 1–51, 52–105, 106–162, and 163–216) represents a ternary form turned inside out, so to speak: it is clear from its contrasting modality that the B section is an interior theme, but just before the end of the ABA ternary form, the A section is *cut off*, and the B section returns.

Adorno singles out such a “splitting into extremes: between polyphony and monody” or between “counterpoint” and “conventionality” as decisive for the fractured nature of Beethoven’s late music.¹⁴ He describes counterpoint in late Beethoven—a means of *thematic elaboration*—as “an attempt to reconstruct the *cantus firmus* from subjectivity.” Conversely, he says that “to tolerate no *conventions* [...] is the first demand of every ‘subjectivist’ procedure.”¹⁵ So in their immiscibility, the polyphonic A section and the monodic B section allegorize “the friction generated between the two deaths,” the antagonism between individual and society.¹⁶ Adorno does not directly posit this opposition between the sections, perhaps because he perceives that “a secret is shared between them.”¹⁷ He cannot elaborate on this shared secret or what it might tell us about the opposition, because that requires a deeper understanding of the tonal and motivic coherence than is available to him. But it is available to us.

In this same passage about a shared secret, Adorno makes the sweeping claim that Beethoven’s “late work still remains a process, but not as a development,” and, like most sweeping statements, it is not exactly true.¹⁸ With the aid of Heinrich Schenker’s and Arnold Schoenberg’s theories, it can readily be shown that many of Beethoven’s late compositions, like his earlier works, cohere by means of the unfurling of a tonic triad and the development of a main motive or at least a *Grundgestalt*. It is just that in the later works the motivic development is not typically highlighted rhetorically; it is a subtle,

Chronicle 37/2 (1976), 150 and 151. On B minor, see Rita Steblin, *A History of Key Characteristics in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Century*, 2nd ed. (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2002), 295–98.

13 Adorno, *Beethoven*, 131, 156, and 157. On the tonic triad as a postulate, see Schoenberg, *Theory of Harmony*, 28.

14 *Ibid.*, 156, 159, and 132; emphasis removed.

15 *Ibid.*, 159 and 124; emphasis added.

16 Chua, “Beethoven’s Other Humanism,” 593.

17 Adorno, *Beethoven*, 126.

18 *Ibid.*, 126.

logical through-line, coordinated with the voice leading and the working out of the unrest in the musical idea.¹⁹

In the Fourth Bagatelle, the A section features a fervid struggle between the tonic, B, and its submediant, G, along with a parallel development and clarification of a *Grundgestalt* composed of motives *w*, *x*, and *y* (Example 1). G in m. 5 is problematic, unrestful, because it is unclear whether it is merely VI in the tonic minor or is also I in the submediant major, and the latter possibility pulls the music away from B by descending thirds until it cadences on the remote C major (II in the tonic minor) in m. 16 (Example 2). Here we find an analogous motivic culmination, a development of *x* into *x'''* that links up with *w'''* (Example 1). Following a reappearance of G as an applied divider of C major, the imperious F# in mm. 20–21 calls the music back to B (Example 2). At first, C major resists (in mm. 22–24), producing a disturbing six-four chord with no explicit preparation. But when F# reiterates its demand in mm. 24–25, C yields to C# (mm. 26–27), which is led through F# back to B. Along the way, the music recontextualizes E minor, which had led decisively to C major (II) in mm. 9–11, as a neighbor to F# major (V) in mm. 30–37. B similarly appropriates an augmented retrograde of *x'* in mm. 44–47, which reverses the motion to G in mm. 7–8 and clarifies G as a neighbor to F#. A final fusion of variants of *w* and *x''* in mm. 50–51, tighter than the bond in mm. 16 and 20, coincides with the inexorable cadence on B minor (Example 1).

The B section lacks the rapacious development and tonal conquest of the A section. The melody is formed almost entirely of variants of motive *z* (Example 3), and the harmony consists almost exclusively of an open fifth, which leaves the two *Züge* in the upper voice unsupported (Example 4). As in Franz Schubert's song "Der Leiermann," the tripping melody and the B–F# drone imitate a hurdy-gurdy, a mechanical instrument that had been used to evoke the pastoral but "was fast going out of fashion again by the 1820s."²⁰ In both cases this imitation adds to the "derelict and abandoned," "deserted and alienated" feeling of the bare tonal material.²¹ One should not suppose that the additional pastoral markers in the Beethoven—the major mode and the turn to the subdominant in mm. 88 and 90—

19 Adorno intuits much the same thing: "Coherence in Beethoven is always achieved through a given formal element's realizing, representing tonality, while the motive power driving the detail beyond itself is always tonality's need for what comes next in order to fulfil itself" (ibid., 49). Spitzer may be right that Adorno "lacked the analytical skill to synthesize form and counterpoint within a single (anti-)systemic model" (Spitzer, *Music as Philosophy*, 65), or perhaps he lacked some combination of knowledge, skill, and desire. But I argue that Spitzer is mistaken to suppose that Adorno's insights into late Beethoven are Schoenbergian in spirit as opposed to Schenkerian; rather, they are both. It is relevant that Adorno read and annotated Schenker's *Free Composition*.

20 Graham Johnson, liner notes to Franz Schubert, *Winterreise*, Matthias Goerne, baritone, and Graham Johnson, piano (London: Hyperion CDJ33030, 1997), 101.

21 Adorno, *Beethoven*, 125 and 126.

Example 1: Motives and *Gestalten* in Beethoven, Bagatelle No. 4, Six Bagattes, Op. 126, A section, mm.

1–51

The musical score is divided into three systems, each with measure numbers above the staves:

- System 1 (Measures 1-4):** Bass clef. Motives labeled w , y , w' , x , w' , and x .
- System 2 (Measures 4-8):** Treble clef. Motives labeled w'' , x'' , and y . A bracket labeled "problem" spans measures 4 and 5.
- System 3 (Measures 8-51):** Treble clef. Motives labeled w , x , x''' , $x''' \Rightarrow w'''$, $w \Rightarrow x''$, and w''' .

produce any positive affect.²² Again, the melody appears not as itself but as an allegory of something else; it says, “[T]hat is not it at all.”²³ Adorno surely has this melody in mind with his remark that Beethoven’s late music becomes allegorical “when subjectivity,

22 On pastoral markers, see Robert S. Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures, Topics, and Tropes: Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 56.

23 Adorno, *Beethoven*, 158. Adorno invokes the image of a rutted country road in connection with this section, which suggests that for him the pastoral markers evoke squalor rather than an idyll (*ibid.*, 131).

Example 2: Harmony and voice leading in Bagatelle No. 4, mm. 1–51

Example 2: Harmony and voice leading in Bagatelle No. 4, mm. 1–51. The score shows two staves (treble and bass clef) with various annotations including fingerings (e.g., 5, 4, 3, 2), articulations (x', x'!), and chord symbols (I, H, V, I, VI). Measure numbers 1, 5, 9, 13, 17, 21, 25, 28, 30, 38, 40, 44, and 50 are marked above the staff. The key signature is one sharp (F#).

Example 3: Motives and *Gestalten* in Bagatelle No. 4, B section, mm. 52–105

Example 3: Motives and *Gestalten* in Bagatelle No. 4, B section, mm. 52–105. The score shows two staves (treble and bass clef) with various annotations including slurs (z, z', y) and a transformation symbol (z' => w). Measure numbers 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 59, 67, 68, 69, 70, and 71 are marked above the staff. The key signature is one sharp (F#).

escaping, passes through it and harshly illuminates it with its intentions. Hence the crescendi and diminuendi, which, seemingly independent of the musical construction, often shake this construction to its foundation.”²⁴

The sense of a dead subjectivity haunting empty music is underscored by the ominous bridge (mm. 68–71, with the pickup), which recalls *w*, the head motive of the A section (Example 3). This variant of *w* is a *back formation* (a backward development), clarifying how *z*, while to be sure prepared by the variant of *w* in mm. 50–51, is most directly a variation of *w* via *z'*.²⁵ At the same time, the passing tone B# in m. 69 (Example 4) may help to explain C in mm. 23–24 by analogy and thereby account for the irregular six-four chord in mm. 22–24 (Example 2). Furthermore, the bridge recontextualizes G as the ninth of V⁷⁹ and in so doing draws it still closer into the orbit of B.

24 Ibid., 126.

25 On back formations, see Arnold Schoenberg, *The Musical Idea and the Logic, Technique, and Art of Its Presentation*, ed. and trans. Patricia Carpenter and Severine Neff (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 137, 155, 159, and 265.

Example 4: Harmony and voice leading in Bagatelle No. 4, mm. 52–105

52/60 58/86 68 72/80 78/86 88/90 94/98/103

I V I

These motivic and tonal connections illustrate how the fey, reckless A section, with its stark 5–8 intervallic pattern (Example 2), secretly gives rise to and is completed by the faux-placid B section, which has the same barren intervallic pattern (Example 4), much as “self-preservation” in society, as a mimesis of death, is “intimately entangled with self-destructiveness” (the death drive).²⁶ And this truth is what makes the music so horrifying. For as we daily witness, our societies as groups of individuals can have *collective* death wishes, beneath shabby façades or empty invocations of peace and stability. The Bagatelle is indeed grim—as black as its key—but unlike Adorno, who sees people as “powerless” to change their fate, I like to hope that the piece, in its particularity, speaks to the reality of our freedom as individuals and societies to idolize death or not.²⁷

²⁶ Jarvis, *Adorno*, 31.

²⁷ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 22.

Abstract

Theodor W. Adorno discusses Ludwig van Beethoven's Six Bagatelles, Op. 126 (1824), as exemplars of the composer's late-style music, which reflects on different dimensions of mortality, both literal and figurative. Adorno's commentary, while suggestive and pertinent for our time, is hindered by inadequate analysis. A renewed look at the Fourth Bagatelle, the darkest of the set, with the aid of Heinrich Schenker's and Arnold Schoenberg's theories lends heft and bite to Adorno's critique.

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