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Author(s): Edward T. Cone

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Schubert's Promissory Note: An Exercise in Musical Hermeneutics

EDWARD T. CONE

Hermeneutics is defined by the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* as "the art or science of interpretation, esp. of Scripture." It was toward the end of the last century that Hermann Kretschmar applied the word to the verbal elucidation of musical meaning, but musical hermeneutics was an art (or science) that, under one rubric or another, had long been practised. Music, it was generally agreed, had meaning. It was an art of expression; therefore it should be possible to determine what it expressed and how. Kretschmar, with his detailed attempts at exact explanation, thus represented what might be called the dogmatic climax of a long tradition.

At the very time he was writing, however, a more formalistic view, expounded by critics like Gurney and Hanslick and furthered by theorists like Schenker, was gaining support. Indeed, for a time the purists were successful in discrediting hermeneutical methods and

results—although their victories may have been due less to the force of their own logic than to a widespread reaction against the excesses of ultra-realistic program music on the one hand and of literalistic "interpretations" on the other. As a result, even those who still defended the possibility and relevance of musical expression were loath to define its nature in any specific terms.

Today, however, when it is once more acceptable to admit an interest in the subject-matter and iconography of a painting, it has become increasingly feasible to discuss the putative meaning of a musical composition without evoking immediate derision. There have been a number of recent books that try, from various points of view, to come to grips with the problems involved.¹

¹E. g., Leonard B. Meyer, *Emotion and Meaning in Music* (Chicago, 1956); Deryck Cooke, *The Language of Music* (Oxford, 1959); Donald N. Ferguson, *Music and Metaphor* (Minneapolis, 1960); Terence McLaughlin, *Music and Communication* (London, 1970); Wilson Coker, *Music and Meaning* (New York, 1972); Peter Kivy, *The Corded Shell* (Princeton, 1980).

To be sure, not all discussions of musical meaning rely on the concept of expression. Wilson Coker, following certain semiologists, conveniently distinguished between two types of meaning: *congeneric* and *extrageneric*.² The first of these refers to relationships entirely within a given medium. As applied to music, it includes the significance that each part of a composition possesses through its connections with other parts of the same composition, and the significance that inheres in the composition as a whole through its employment of a recognizable sonic vocabulary organized in an appropriate manner. Congeneric meaning thus depends on purely musical relationships: of part to part within a composition, and of the composition to others perceived to be similar to it. It embraces the familiar subjects of syntax, formal structure, and style. And in fact, when the lucubrations of the recent school of musical semiologists are shorn of their pretentious jargon, that is all they are usually discussing—syntax, form, and style (and by no means always originally or even sensibly).

What will chiefly concern us, however, is extrageneric meaning: the supposed reference of a musical work to non-musical objects, events, moods, emotions, ideas, and so on. Here, obviously, we have returned, under another name, to the realm of hermeneutics, and to the problem of musical expression. On this subject there is still wide divergence of opinion; even those who vigorously defend the concept often disagree as to its nature, its range, and its limits. Whereas the relative stability of congeneric interpretations has tempted some analysts to claim that their conclusions are objectively demonstrable, it is hard to reach any consensus about the expressive or other extrageneric significance of even the simplest composition, save perhaps in the broadest terms. Writers who are clear and precise on congeneric meaning often become very fuzzy when they turn to extrageneric, even while insisting on its importance.

Coker, for example, discusses the Funeral March from the *Eroica* Symphony in terms that, with very slight modification, could

equally well be applied to, say, the Funeral March from Chopin's Sonata in B \flat Minor:

The first part . . . is dominated by an unmistakably mournful attitude, to which the second part . . . contrasts a prevalent mood of comfort with an alleviation of sorrow and even moments of exultation. . . . The lament of the song is conveyed in gestures striving to ascend only to fall back. . . , as under the weight of sorrow. The tone of mourning is established by a number of effects: the very slow, fixed pace of the underlying march rhythm; the minor key and the long initial reiteration of the tonic triad. . . ; the prevailing lower registers . . . in fairly dense sonorities; . . . and the suppressed dynamic levels.³

One could continue further, omitting (ws above) only the tell-tale measure numbers and remarks on instrumentation; for this account of extrageneric meaning, like many others, deals primarily in surface generalities. A slow, plodding pace; narrowly circumscribed melodies; somber—usually minor—harmonies in a low register: these are the immediately apprehensible characteristics of the musical surface that identify the typical funeral march, whether by Beethoven or by Chopin.

As the example shows, it is easy to assume that one has explained content when in fact one has only defined genre. Marches and dances, nocturnes and scherzi—the names suggest gestures, affects, or moods, to which certain musical characteristics are thought to be appropriate—usually broad features of tempo, meter, rhythm, mode, and the like. And such features in turn are, it is true, often accepted as defining basic types of expression. But generalizations are not enough; for surely, if a musical composition expresses anything at all, the importance of the expression must reside in its uniqueness to that composition, not in what the composition shares with a dozen others of the same genre. Specificity: that is what Mendelssohn was getting at in his oft-quoted statement: "The thoughts which are expressed to me by music that I love are not too indefinite to be put into words, but on the contrary, too definite."⁴

³Ibid., p. 172.

⁴Letter to Marc-André Souchay of 15 October 1842, rpt. in *Composers on Music*, ed. Sam Morgenstern (New York, 1956), p. 140.

²Coker, *Music and Meaning*, p. 61.

Surface generalities, then, can tell us no more about the content of a piece of music than the subject of a picture—e.g., a Crucifixion or a still-life—can tell us about its content. Chardin and Cézanne both painted oranges and apples, but what each expressed in his pictures was his personal vision of the fruit. In the same way, Beethoven and Chopin produced widely differing versions of the same subject, Funeral March.⁵

Subject matter again is what is described, in a more detailed way, by the motivic vocabularies of the various types of *Figurenlehre*, whether in earlier or in more recent formulations. More detailed, and often more mechanical—yet not more specific, as Coker reveals when he employs the method to explain the effect of the Trio of the Funeral March, which “clearly contrasts to the first [part] by giving a relief from distress and a more encouraging attitude. Emphasis is on ascending gestures in triads . . . and in steadfast scales rising.”⁶

No: the locus of expression in a musical composition is to be sought neither in its wider surfaces nor in its more detailed motivic contours, but in its comprehensive design, which includes all the sonic elements and relates them to one another in a significant temporal structure. In other words, extrageneric meaning can be explained only in terms of congeneric. If verbalization of true content—the specific expression uniquely embodied in a work—is possible at all, it must depend on close structural analysis.

That analysis is all most of us need, most of the time. For surely the best that can be said for the verbalization of content is what Mendelssohn went on to add, in the quoted letter: “And so I find in every effort to express such thoughts, that something is right but at the same time, that something is lacking in all of them.” Nevertheless, those of us who do believe in the existence and relevance of ex-

trageric meaning ought to find it uncomfortable to be in the position of insisting on the validity of a concept that cannot be precisely defined, and instances of which are at best problematic. Once in a while we should try to derive from the structural analysis of a composition an account of its expressive content. That is what I propose to do in the case of Schubert's *Moment musical* in A \flat , op. 94, no. 6.

Since a complete analysis of even such a short piece—let alone a detailed treatment of its expressive content—would take much more than the available space, I shall limit my discussion to salient features that are special to this composition, and I shall try to show how their congeneric interrelations account for their extrageneric significance. I shall therefore assume agreement about certain formal aspects of the piece, taking it as established that the *Moment musical* consists of a three-part song form in A \flat major with a Trio in the subdominant, D \flat major. Its phrase-articulations, harmonic progressions, and motivic manipulations are clearly defined. The opening statement consists of two balancing eight-measure phrases, each articulated 2 + 2 + 4, the antecedent cadencing on the dominant and the consequent on the tonic. The soprano line establishes the fifth degree, E \flat , reaffirms it by the tonicization of V, and descends to A \flat for an authentic cadence. A pattern of suspensions set up at the outset suggests a meter of $\frac{3}{4}$ underlying the notated $\frac{3}{4}$; moreover it produces a little rhythmic aaba pattern in each large phrase. All then is in order: a period exhibiting exact parallelism.

But does it? There is an arpeggiated upbeat in m. 4 that is not duplicated at the corresponding point in the consequent (m. 12). This prepares for a much more momentous element of imbalance: the descent of the bass into a lower register and the *fp* that marks the tonicization of V in m. 7. These characteristics of range and dynamics are echoed, not at the corresponding cadence at the end of the consequent, but at its midpoint, mm. 10–12. Here too is a tonicization, this one effected by two chromatics: a B \natural , which, like the earlier D \natural , resolves normally upward, and an E \natural . The arrival of the latter, replacing a previous E \flat as the resolution of the suspended F, produces another half-cadence, this one on V/vi. But now the E \natural moves down to E \flat , pulling an implied tonicization of vi back into the original key.

The result is to make of the prominent E \natural what I call, if the pun may be forgiven, a promissory note. It has strongly suggested an obligation that it has failed to discharge—in the present case, its function as a leading tone. Now, I do not wish to suggest that all incomplete tonicizations represent promises to be

⁵For further discussion of this analogy, see my “Music, a View from Delft,” rpt. in *Perspectives on Contemporary Music Theory*, ed. Benjamin Boretz and Edward T. Cone (New York, 1972), pp. 57–71.

⁶Coker, *Music and Meaning*, pp. 174–75.

kept during the future course of the composition in which they occur. The persistence of such an implication depends not only on the specific context in which the progression occurs, but also on wider influences of style, both personal and historical. I suspect, for example, that the development of nineteenth-century harmony might be analyzed largely in terms of the increasing freedom shown by composers in their dealings with promissory situations—in the development of more and more unorthodox methods of repayment, even in the eventual refusal to recognize the debt. (As we shall see, that is almost the case with Schubert in the *Moment musical*.)

Normally, in music of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, promissory status is demanded, or at least requested, by a note—or more accurately, though less paronomastically, an entire chord—that has been blocked from proceeding to an indicated resolution, and whose thwarted condition is underlined both by rhythmic emphasis and by relative isolation. Rhythmic emphasis, of course, results from the stressed position of the chord within (or outside of) a phrase, from special agogic or dynamic inflection, or from a combination of those. Isolation is effected not only by the motivic detachment that often separates such a chord from its surroundings, but also by harmonic novelty. The promissory chord is promoted, so to speak, by an insurrection that tries, but fails, to turn the course of the harmony in its own new direction.

Although such chords are temporarily deprived of their expected resolutions, the result is not, properly speaking, a deceptive cadence. What makes the standard deceptive cadence work is the fact that the dominant chord is *almost* properly resolved; indeed, the voice-leading binds it even more tightly to its successor than in the typical authentic cadence. A promissory chord, on the other hand, is separated from what follows by a sudden switch in direction, of voice-leading as well as of harmony—and most often by a break in the rhythmic flow too. The combination of emphasis and separation draws special attention to the unresolved chord and enables it to establish its influence so powerfully that it seems to require later attention, the most obvious form of which is a prominent resolution so stated as to remind the acute listener of its connection with the promissory chord.

Closely related to the promissory situation—and, indeed, often similarly treated—is the half-cadence, usually on V/vi, that sometimes concludes the development of a Classical sonata-form movement, or the entire slow movement of a Baroque sonata or concerto. Unlike the typical promissory chord, however, which appears early in a movement or a section, the secondary dominant in this case normally appears at the end of a progression that has already clarified its syntactic function. Its resolution, supplied in advance as it were, is clearly understood and requires no later confirmation (although,

to be sure, that may be forthcoming anyway⁷). Look, for example, at the end of the development of the opening Allegro of Beethoven's Quartet in D, op. 18, no. 3. The reiterated V/vi in mm. 154–56 is the climax of a passage in which the tonality of vi (F# minor) is explicitly formulated, and in which the responsibilities of its dominant have in a sense already been discharged. The composer even gives one ample time to think that over, as he sustains the cello's C# for two measures before transforming it into the leading tone of the true tonic, D, and quitting the F#-minor tonality for good.

Contrast now the opening Allegro of the same composer's Piano Sonata in F, op. 10, no. 2. Here the smooth progress of the movement is very soon (mm. 16–18) interrupted by a sudden half-cadence on V/iii—a threefold statement in an emphatic *forte*, rhythmically and motivically separate from its surroundings. What follows is a new theme in the dominant that leaves the unresolved V/iii hanging as an obvious promissory chord. It should therefore cause no surprise to find the development section beginning with a sudden shift to the mediant (almost as if the entire dominant section of the exposition had been a parenthesis). To be sure, the development might have started that way in any case; but the virtue of the promissory technique is rarely to elicit a harmony that would otherwise be missing—rather, it is to draw temporally separated sections of a work into more intimate and more interesting connection.

In the *Moment musical* No. 6, isolation and emphasis work together to produce a strong promissory effect. The pattern of rests has, from the outset, separated each motive from its fellows. That separation is exaggerated in the case that interests us, where the subito *forte*, the octave shift in the bass, and the octave doubling all draw special attention. (Contrast mm. 4–8, where the descent in the bass is arpeggiated, the doublings are introduced gradually, and the *forte* occurs during the rise and fall of the $\leftarrow fp \rightarrow$.)

The move toward F minor is hardly unprepared. That chord is foreshadowed in the opening: subtly embedded in the first downbeat, more frankly stated in the vi₄ of m. 3. But both of those are treated as

⁷The Phrygian cadence that serves as a slow movement for the Third Brandenburg Concerto is a revealing exception. Whatever this progression may represent in the way of improvised cadenza or other elaboration, its isolation and rhythmic weight are sufficient to ensure the promissory status of its concluding V/vi, for which there has obviously been no opportunity of advance payment. Satisfaction comes with the first modulation in the second section of the binary finale, which introduces an extended passage in vi, punctuated by an authentic cadence (m. 16) that explicitly recalls and resolves the dominant previously left hanging. A standard developmental progression is thus imbued with wider significance.

suspensions and fail as functional harmonies. The half-cadence of mm. 10–12, with its strongly dominant-seeking French sixth, uncovers the concealed submediant influence. So when the concluding phrase-member, dutifully remembering the demands of the true dominant of mm. 7–8 suppresses the tendency toward vi and turns the E_4 downward to E_b , the E_4 remains in the ear as a troubling element of which one expects to hear more.

It is not surprising, therefore, to find E_4 dominating the contrasting section of the song form. But unlike the development of the Beethoven sonata, which legitimized the foreign leading tone by an immediate reference to its tonic, this one is by no means eager to do likewise. It prefers rather to dwell on the promissory note and to investigate further its peculiar connection with E_b . The first step is to restate E_4 as F_b . In so doing, the music enlists the two other previously heard chromatic tones, B_4 (C_b) and D_4 , sounding all three together in a German sixth (mm. 16–17). The E_4 – E_b contrast is thus explained by reinterpretation as 6–5 in A_b minor—a detail stated three times during the initial phrase of the development: first in the bass, next in an inner voice, and finally in the exposed soprano.

That phrase, constructed on the 2 + 2 + 4 model of its predecessors, terminates on a half-cadence in A_b minor, and its consequent at first seems to promise the expected conventional balance. But no: the F_b reasserts its importance. Refusing to be drawn back into A_b minor, it replaces the E_b in i^6 in order to convert it into VI_4^2 (mm. 28–29), thus initiating a modulation to its own key, spelled for convenience as E_4 . This time it is the turn of the E_b to assume the subsidiary role. Spelled now as D_\sharp , it must resolve as

a leading tone to E_4 . The extension required to produce a convincing cadence results in the first violation of the eight-measure pattern, a phrase with one additional measure: 2 + 2 + 5. But that is not all. The final E is extended as a pedal in the bass, over which a new three-measure cadence is twice stated. The melodic and rhythmic flexibility that has gradually insinuated itself into the preceding phrases is now at its most ingratiating—by virtue not only of the three-measure format itself, but also of the triplet upbeat, the embellishing grace-notes, and the chromaticism of the sinuously introduced and cancelled A_\sharp (mm. 34–35). The melody, by completing an octave descent from the original E_4 (mm. 29–33), leads into a richly sonorous lower register. The restrained, carefully measured satisfactions of the opening have been gradually transformed by the development into the more sensuous delights of a berceuse.

The return to the original key is simple: the major chord on E , by the addition of a seventh, reverts to its status as an augmented sixth on F_b (m. 41). At the same time, the move suggests a slight uneasiness with respect to the cadence on E : was it as firm as it seemed? Was it not perhaps usurping a tonicization to which it had no right? It is significant that the key was never clinched by a clear reference to some form of subdominant. There was an obvious opportunity for a ii^6 in m. 32 (as in ex. 1), but the offer was spurned: the retention of B in the bass converted the chord into a dominant ninth. Moreover, in m. 41, only the momentary doubling of G_\sharp (A_b) keeps it from being heard as a leading tone, and the entire measure as V^{8-7} on E preparing for a cadence on A , with a continuation in that key (as in ex. 2).



Example 1



Example 2

Example 3

That temptation is resisted, however. The chord is interpreted as an Italian sixth which initiates the return to $A\flat$. At the same time, a recall of the original suspension motive induces a reversion to the binary measure-pattern. After two four-measure phrases (mm. 40–47), the third, on a climactic *forte*, is extended to six measures by a carefully written out diminuendo-ritardando merging without cadence into the two-measure motive that inaugurates the reprise. Thus the irregularities of the development section have yielded to a version of the original pattern: 4 + 4 + 8 measures (mm. 40–55) that overlap the returning 2 + 2 + 4 (mm. 54–61), much as the motives of the development overlap those of the opening.

That is perhaps one reason why the reprise does not begin immediately after the arrival of the tonic in mm. 46–47. There is another reason, equally important, in the F-minor harmony that introduces the transitional progression $vi^6-vii^7-V^6-6^{\sharp}$ (mm. 47–53). For here at last is the long-postponed discharge of the responsibilities of $E\sharp$ as a leading tone. True, the F minor is not tonicized, nor is its bass assigned to a root in the lower register; but there are significant indications of the connection nevertheless. The doublings are heavy. The subito *forte* recalls that of mm. 10–12. The line, leading from F down to $B\flat$, and forecasting an ultimate $A\flat$, is a reinterpretation of the original descent of mm. 11–16. To hear the long-range connection I am trying to establish, play the following in unbroken succession: mm. 7₃–9₂,⁸ mm. 10₃–12₂, and then mm. 47₃–53₂ (ex. 3).

At last, then, the promise of $E\sharp$ as a leading tone has been kept. Yet how close the music came to forestalling the fulfillment! That can be demonstrated very simply by a performance that omits the passage mm. 47₃–53₂. The result, superficially at least, is acceptable. And is there not perhaps a touch of irony in the insinuation of the problematic note once again into the descending line of mm. 51–53, immediately after the emphatic proclamation of F minor? To be sure, the note now seems docile, forming a passing and passive diminished seventh instead

of a recalcitrant applied dominant. At the same time, it can be taken as a signal that the road to the final cadence is not quite clear, despite the unusually felicitous reestablishment of the tonic major.

There remain two other troubling points as well. One is the nagging doubt left by the E-major cadence in m. 33: was it a completely satisfactory tonic, or did it exude a faint dominant flavor? Did the development, in giving E its own head, perhaps encourage it to incur still further obligations? The other point looks forward to the course of the recapitulation: now that the V/vi has been satisfactorily resolved, how can it return? If it cannot, what will replace it?

What does occur, as Elizabeth Bowen says of the action of a well-constructed novel, is unforeseen in prospect yet inevitable in retrospect.⁹ The first phrase of the reprise is regular; it differs from its model only in a cadence that is *f* rather than *fp*. That modification permits a *forte* consequent that retains the lower bass register and its octave doubling—a type of instrumentation appropriate to a crucial chord: an alteration of the original IV^7 into the most painful dissonance of the entire piece. For the $E\sharp$ has returned once more, now as an $F\flat$ that replaces the F (m. 62). This $F\flat$, in turn, twice forces the suspended C to pass through $C\sharp$ on the way to its resolution on $B\flat$ —thereby filling in the one element missing in the chromatic descent of mm. 51–55, and at the same time reversing the situation of mm. 10–12, where it was the $B\sharp$ that had called forth the $E\sharp$.

The new combination of $F\flat$ and $C\sharp$ is too strong to be resisted. The *fortissimo* continuation of the phrase brings them both back with a new bass, $E\flat$, here spelt as $D\sharp$. That, of course, is none other than the dissonant tone of the old German sixth of mm. 16–17. This time, however, it is in the powerful bass position; and this time the chord insists on being treated as a dominant, thus confirming our earlier suspicions.

⁹"Story involves action. Action towards an end not to be foreseen (by the reader), but also toward an end which, having been reached, must be seen to have been from the start inevitable." Elizabeth Bowen, *Pictures and Conversations* (New York, 1974), p. 170.

⁸I.e., from the third beat of m. 7 through the second beat of m. 9.

The result is an expansion of the consequent phrase that is terrifying in its intensity. The phrase is, as it were, broken wide open by reiterations of the new V_2 and its resolution to a tonicized Neapolitan. A first attempt to return to the true tonic fails, interrupted again by an echo of the Neapolitan interpolation. The effect of that interpolation lingers even when the return to the tonic at last succeeds. The approach is made each time through the minor; and it is the minor color that remains in the ear, even though the final resolution is on a starkly ambiguous octave A_b . The harmonic material of the development, then, has infiltrated the reprise with devastating effect. In the same way, the rhythmic irregularity, experienced in the development as an agreeable loosening of the tight proportions of the opening, has now almost destroyed the original balance. Eight measures, $2 + 2 + 4$, are answered by sixteen, but not $4 + 4 + 8$: they are $2 + 2 + 5 + 7$!

The final empty octave is a neat tactical device. A return to major would have produced a sudden jar after the minor i_b ; moreover, it would have been immediately cancelled by the conventional repetition of the entire section. But a minor chord would not have led into the Trio, which, construing the final A_b as a dominant, plunges immediately into D_b as a new tonic.

About the Trio I shall point out only that it too plays with the chromatic neighbors to the fifth degree (now G_b and B_b), but in an innocuous way, as befits the unproblematical lyricism of the interlude. (In fact, even the minor third is safe here. It is heard only once—m. 97—and then enharmonically as a passing E_b , not as a true F_b .) The only moment of ambiguity occurs during the little digression, when the E_b and its embracing diminished seventh are given a new interpretation (m. 101) in a passage that occasions the only exception to the regularity of the phrase-structure (six measures instead of the prevailing four). The following reprise can now dispense with the B_b altogether, basing its consequent phrase on the unalloyed major scale.

The subdominant tonality of the Trio as a whole can be heard as the expansion of a function embedded in the opening motive of the entire piece. That initial progression, before its second chord resolves as a suspension, sounds like I–IV⁷. The impression is even stronger when the first measures, returning after the close of the Trio, echo the V–I of the D_b cadence. Song form and Trio are bound together by the A_b – D_b bass that introduces the Trio and that governs its departure.

The foregoing partial analysis of the structure of the *Moment musical* has also been an analysis of its congeneric meaning, for those terms are simply two ways of characterizing the same body of information. Congeneric

meaning—or structural content, as I prefer to call it, stressing that identity—is precise and specific, for it is uniquely defined by a single composition. But possible extrageneric meaning—or what I call expressive content—seems to depend on choices from a bewildering array of admissible interpretations. I have coined the phrase “expressive potential” to signify this “wide but not unrestricted range of possible expression.”¹⁰ The range is wide because (*pace* those who subscribe to the more rigid versions of *Affektenlehre*) there is no rule or code by which we can translate musical gestures into exact expressive equivalents—certainly not in the sense that we can translate words into concepts, or images into objects. At the same time it must be stressed that the range is not unrestricted; for the expressive content—the human activity or state of mind adduced as an interpretation of the music—must be congruous with the structural content—the musical action itself. In other words, “We subconsciously ascribe to the music a content based on the correspondence between musical gestures and their patterns on the one hand, and isomorphically analogous experiences, inner or outer, on the other.”¹¹ What all such experiences have in common constitutes what I call the expressive potential.

What, then is the expressive potential of *Moment musical* No. 6? What kinds of human situations present themselves as congruous with its structure? An astute reader will have noticed that my analysis has not been wholly objective. I have insinuated a few leading phrases to suggest to him the kind of expression I find in the work, and to encourage him to hear it in the same way. As I apprehend the work, it dramatizes the injection of a strange, unsettling element into an otherwise peaceful situation. At first ignored or suppressed, that element persistently returns. It not only makes itself at home but even takes over the direction of events in order to reveal unsuspected possibilities. When the normal state of affairs eventually returns, the originally foreign ele-

¹⁰Edward T. Cone, *The Composer's Voice* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1974), p. 166.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 169.

ment seems to have been completely assimilated. But that appearance is deceptive. The element has not been tamed; it bursts out with even greater force, revealing itself as basically inimical to its surroundings, which it proceeds to demolish.

That is an account, in as general terms as possible, of the expressive potential I find in the principal song form of the *Moment musical*. When I try to relate this abstraction to a more specific situation by adducing an "isomorphically analogous experience" (always, of course, with Mendelssohn's reservation in mind), I assume the arrival of the "foreign element" to be symbolic of the occurrence of a disquieting thought to one of a tranquil, easy-going nature. Disquieting, but at the same time exciting, for it suggests unusual and interesting courses of action. As an old teacher of mine used to say (probably quoting one of the Church Fathers), "The first step in yielding to a temptation is to investigate it." That is what happens here. One can imagine the protagonist becoming more and more fascinated by his discoveries, letting them assume control of his life as they reveal hitherto unknown and possibly forbidden sources of pleasure. When he is recalled to duty, he tries to put these experiences behind him and to sublimate the thoughts that led to them. At first he seems successful, but the past cannot remain hidden. What was repressed eventually returns and rises in the end to overwhelm him.

The Trio, of course, tries to forget the catastrophe—just as one might try to comfort oneself in the enjoyment of art, or natural beauty, or the company of friends. The identification of the new D \flat tonic with the subdominant of the opening phrase might even be taken as symbolizing the attempted recovery of a past innocence. No matter: the Trio is doomed to failure. The memory of the original course of events is bound to recur, and the *da capo* leads inevitably to the same tragic conclusion. (Formal repetitions are often best interpreted as representations of events rehearsed in memory. A dramatic action can never be exactly duplicated; yet, as the *Moment musical* illustrates more than once, we must frequently accept literal repetitions of sections of

music usually considered to be highly dramatic.)

This, then, is the personal contact I make with the psychic pattern embodied in the musical structure of the *Moment musical*. It is an example of what I have called *context*: ". . . not the content . . . [but] the necessary vehicle of the content." For I believe that "the content of instrumental music is revealed to each listener by the relation between the music and the personal context he brings to it."¹² I can go further and suggest a more specific interpretation of that context: it can be taken as a model of the effect of vice on a sensitive personality. A vice, as I see it, begins as a novel and fascinating suggestion, not necessarily dangerous though often disturbing. It becomes dangerous, however, as its increasing attractiveness encourages investigation and experimentation, leading to possible obsession and eventual addiction. If one now apparently recovers self-control, believing that the vice has been mastered, it is often too late: either the habit returns to exert its domination in some fearful form, or the effects of the early indulgence have left their indelible and painful marks on the personality—and frequently, of course, on the body as well.

I stress this interpretation, not for any moralistic reason, but because of its bearing on the final step in my investigation. That consists in an attempt to answer what is possibly a forbidden question. What context might the composer himself have adduced? What personal experiences might Schubert have considered relevant to the expressive significance of his own composition?

In dealing with the relation of music to its composer's own emotional life, I realize that I can put forward only the most tentative of hypotheses. But I am encouraged to do so in this case by the memory of an illuminating passage from Edmund Wilson's essay on Oscar Wilde. In a discussion of the effects of the writer's syphilitic infection on his life and work, he wrote:

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 171.

Read *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, or even the best of the fairy tales, *The Birthday of the Infanta*, with the *Spirochaeta pallida* in mind. In such stories, the tragic heroes are shown in the peculiar position of suffering from organic maladies . . . without, up to a point, being forced to experience the evils entailed by them. . . . But in the end, in both cases, the horror breaks out: the afflicted one must recognize himself and be recognized by other people as the odious creature he is, and his disease or disability will kill him.¹³

It is well established now that Schubert, too, suffered from syphilis.¹⁴ The disease was probably contracted late in 1822; and although it was ameliorated by treatment, or perhaps just by time, it was, of course, in those days incurable. Did Schubert's realization of that fact, and of its implications, induce, or at least intensify, the sense of desolation, even dread, that penetrates much of his music from then on? (Our *Moment musical* dates from 1824.)¹⁵ To be sure, a rapidly increasing emotional

maturity was already in evidence—witness the contrast between the so-called “Tragic” Symphony of 1816 and the “Unfinished” (although that doom-laden score of fall, 1822, may already reflect the composer's early awareness, or suspicion, of his condition). Later on a cold wind seems to blow through even some of his sunniest or most placid movements. Listen, for example, to the Andante of the String Quartet in G, to the Adagio of the String Quintet, to the Andante molto that introduces and interrupts the finale of the Octet.

Listen, above all, to the *Moment musical* No. 6. Here, if anywhere, “the horror breaks out.” As Shakespeare's Edgar put it:

The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices
Make instruments to plague us.

Is it too fanciful to hear a similar reaction musically embodied in the tonal structure of the *Moment musical*?



EDWARD T.
CONE
Schubert's
Promissory
Note

¹³Edmund Wilson, “Oscar Wilde: ‘One Must Always Seek What Is Most Tragic,’” rpt. in *Classics and Commercials* (New York, 1950), p. 341.

¹⁴See Eric Sams, “Schubert's Illness Re-examined,” *Musical Times* 121 (1980), 15–22.

¹⁵It first appeared in an *Album musical* published by Sauer & Leidesdorf in December of that year. Gary Wittlich has called my attention to the suggestive title it bore in that collection: *Les Plaintes d'un troubadour*. Perhaps the title was the publishers' invention; but one who believes it was really the composer's may well wonder whether he was not his own Troubadour. See Otto Erich Deutsch, *The Schubert Reader* (New York, 1947), pp. 387–88.