1. Music Representing Music

The *Arioso dolente* (*Klagender Gesang*) from Beethoven’s Piano Sonata op. 110 in A-flat major (1821) represents what the words written over it indicate: a mournful song, or vocal lament.\(^1\) Even without help from the score, a listener who is sufficiently familiar with the music of the period will easily recognize its quasi-vocal qualities: the introductory chords and declamatory line in the recitative, and in the arioso the long drawn-out melody, which challenges the piano’s decaying, percussive sound.\(^2\)

We could put the vocal quality of this movement to the test by asking a soprano to sing the vocal line. She might have some trouble with the longest phrases, and definitely would not be able produce the pitches that are in the piano’s upper register. As a ‘picture’ of vocal music, the recitative and arioso are not quite realistic, but in an interesting way they combine pianistic and vocal devices. Most remarkable is the repeated A in the recitative; it is an unconventional idea, the proper execution of which is somewhat doubtful.\(^3\) The solution is probably to play the second note of each pair very softly, as an echo of the first, as if it were merely the release of the key which produces the sound.\(^4\) It is an exquisite pianistic effect that may suggest a repeated vocal swelling or *messa di voce* <> within the larger *crescendo* and *diminuendo*. A singer might realize this on a single vowel, though hardly at such length.

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\(^1\) I first discussed this in Muns (2021).
\(^2\) Many have noted the arioso’s similarity with *Es ist vollbracht* from Bach’s St. John’s Passion. Both rely on a common melodic-harmonic schema which is found also in Beethoven’s Cello Sonata op. 69. Such schemas abound in the seventeenth-nineteenth-century tradition.
\(^3\) The notes are marked pairwise by what seem to be ‘ties’, which however would make the prescribed change of fingers (4-3) inaudible, and the notation absurdly laborious. Badura-Skoda (1988) disagrees, following Heinrich Schenker: he thinks the fingering indicates a gesture with no audible result. Badura-Skoda may be right, however, in dismissing the association with the clavichord.
Beethoven, *Sonata in A-flat major op. 110, third movement* (*Viennese edition, 1822*).
Before making her attempt, our unfortunate soprano would no doubt have asked: *what are the words?* Understanding the arioso as a representation of vocal music entails the notion of a *text*, even if no thought of it has crossed the listener’s mind. Quasi-vocal music like this sonata movement most obviously demonstrates the linguistic qualities which are pervasively present in the classical-romantic tradition: poetic phrase building, vocal inflections and contours, the dynamics of expressive declamation.

It is remarkable how listeners have got used to textless instrumental ‘song’, even though vocal music is nearly always bound to *words*. We are able to feel, sympathetically, the kind of thoughts and feelings that are musically communicated without the help of words. Clearly enough, Beethoven’s arioso is a heart-breaking and tender lament. And even in vocal music with text we are usually more interested in the underlying feelings and attitudes, and the nuances of their expression, than in the strictly semantic level of meaning.

As a piece of instrumental music representing vocal music, this sonata movement is an instance of musical representation. One could object that it does not represent, but simply *is* an arioso, though not one for singing. A harpsichord fugue played on the piano is not a representation of that harpsichord fugue – unless the pianist would try to imitate the sound of the harpsichord. Obviously, playing an opera tune on the piano is not a ‘representation’ of opera. In the present case, however, it is the pianist’s task to conjure an imaginary vocal-dramatic *scena*, a monologue, the speech act of some otherwise unidentified dramatic character. In a different sense, this speech act ‘represents’, or is the expression of that character’s supposed thoughts and feelings: those of a human being communicating, no matter how abstract or vaguely defined that human being may be. Presumably these thoughts and feelings are of a highly subjective and intimate nature; we may conclude this from such factors as the soft dynamics and high level of nuance (*una corda, dim. smorzando*). This is, evidently, not a piece of public rhetoric.

2. The Musical-Literary Persona

If we would try to help the soprano by giving her words to sing, the text should reflect this subjectivity and intimacy. It might contain the self-referential ‘I’ or not (though more likely it would); in any case, it would be about personal perceptions, rather than an objective, external state of affairs.

In lyrical poetry (as I understand it, poetry that is reflective rather than narrative), there is a ‘voice’, ‘lyrical subject’ or ‘poetic I’ (*lyrisches Ich*) implied in the very act of expressing anything poetically. This may be an explicit first-person ‘I’ or merely an implied ‘I’. Thus, in Keats’s *Ode to a Nightingale*, the poem’s *I* figures explicitly as a character in its own discourse (*Do I wake or sleep?*). That same poet’s *Ode to Melancholy* does not contain the first-person pronoun in any form, but clearly implies a speaker in its address to a *thou*, which we may interpret as a form of self-address (*No, no, go not to Lethe … / Nor suffer thy pale forehead to be kiss’d / By nightshade …*). Even in the absence of ‘I’ or ‘thou’, however, a speaking subject is implied in the fact that the poem is *something said*. Texts don’t speak themselves, by some mysterious verbal autonomy. More
vaguely, any poetic speech act implies a *thou* too, since one cannot speak to nobody, or if one does, this ‘nobody’ inevitably becomes a self-reflection.

On the other hand, the speaking subject may also be identified as a specific character that has little or nothing in common with the poem’s author. In Goethe’s *Schäfers Klagelied (Shepherd’s Lament)* the speaker is, as the title suggests, a shepherd; the poem must be understood therefore as if it were between quotation marks. The same holds true, according to literary orthodoxy, when the speaker has no such role, is merely an explicit or implied ‘I’. He or she always is a character, and should not be identified with the author. It is not John Keats who wonders whether he is awake or asleep, even if the poet may have poured much of his thoughts and feelings into the poem. The speaker is part of the world represented in the poem, just like the narrator of narrative fiction belongs to that fictional world. One of the narrator’s regular functions is to report, that is, to quote, what other characters are saying. The narrator, in turn, is quoted by the author, with the crucial difference that in this case the quotation is invented, rather than reported.⁵

Following literary convention I will use the word ‘speaker’ or ‘persona’ to refer, generally, to this character that is the text’s implicit or explicit ‘I’, the subject to which the text is attributed as a speech act, not as literary artefact. In narrative fiction the speaker is the narrator, who may be a character, with name, personality, and possibly a part to play in her own narration. I will assume that the term ‘persona’ (‘mask’) is used where such distinguishing features are absent, and the speaker can only be inferred from the mere speech act, with or without use of the first-person pronoun.

Interpreted as speech act, the text in effect becomes a monologue, a kind of closet monodrama. The situation is different in regular drama, where actions and events are enacted, not narrated. Even with such seemingly unmediated action, what we are witnessing is a particular selection of events, some of which happen onstage, others offstage. Often we may feel that what we are watching has been presented and manipulated from a subjective perspective. Although this perspective is not created through narration, the sense of subjectivity may become so strong that there seems to be something like an ‘implied narrator’, who may be one of the actual characters in the play. This happens frequently in film, where there is not merely a selection of events, but also an often very particular, conspicuous choice of visual and auditory perspective.

The creation of a textual persona is not exclusive to fiction. When the first-person pronoun is occasionally employed in this essay, it is a conventional stylization that shows little of the author’s informal true self. And even in ordinary conversation we may create a persona, as part of the ‘presentation of self in every-day life’ (Goffman 1971). The significant difference is that the reader of this essay (‘you’) is justified in holding ‘me’ (the stated author) responsible for anything ‘I’ say, which must be assumed to be ‘my’ sincere opinion and best judgment. This is, evidently, not a rule that holds in fiction. We do not hold Thomas Mann responsible for the truth or falsity of

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⁵ On fiction as quotation, see Muns (2021). Misunderstanding this function of the narrator leads to such absurdities as ascribing lines of dialogue to as many different ‘narrators’ as there are speakers (Walton 1990: 356).
the following sentence:

An unassuming young man made the journey, in midsummer, from his native city of Hamburg to Davos-Platz in the Grisons. (Mann 2019: 11, my transl.)

Here the context is that of a novel, and the narrator-persona ‘uttering’ this sentence (in a vague, timeless way, undetermined as to speech or writing) is a nameless chronicler and commentator. He may resemble the actual author in certain matters of judgment and sympathy; but what is here stated as a fact by the narrator is fictional for the author. As it is, obviously, for us. But equally obviously, many elements of the fictional content correspond to reality. Without any such correspondence it would be impossible to create fiction, and it is up to the reader to decide, pragmatically, how far this correspondence goes. She will assume, in this case, that the young man will be like male human beings in general, but not a historical personage; that Hamburg is in Germany, and so on.

The reader may attempt to form a judgment about the narrator’s character: is he sincere, knowledgeable, partial? She may also wonder what kind of judgment she is supposed to have about this narrator and his narrative. Should she share his perspective? – If his perspective seems alien to her, is it meant to be that way? Is the world represented supposed to be realistic or not? With questions like these, her attention shifts from the narrator towards the author, as he emerges from her interpretation and appreciation of the text. This is the ‘implied author’ of literary theory, the putative creator of the fictional world, another kind of persona, distinct from the narrator. It is not a mask put on by the author, but the image of the author that the reader creates on the basis of her interpretive assumptions.

The term ‘implied author’ has been introduced in literary criticism by Wayne C. Booth (1961/1983) as a means of reconciling authorial intention (or ‘rhetorical’ strategy) with the demands of aesthetic autonomy – the idea that whatever a literary creation may be intended to accomplish, should be realized by reading the work itself, not by an appeal to what the actual author may have had in mind. Usually there will be an overall agreement between the implied author and what the actual author intended. Writing and reading fiction is a game played according to rules of literary convention, linguistic semantics, a common understanding of the world, and so on. And in this game, the author may intentionally or unintentionally create the conditions for the reader to construct an implied author with views and intentions different from

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6 Booth (1983: 74-75): “The ‘implied author’ chooses, consciously or unconsciously, what we read; we infer him as an ideal, literary, created version of the real man; he is the sum of his own choices”. Schmid (2009: 161): “The concept of implied author refers to the author-image contained in a work and constituted by the stylistic, ideological, and aesthetic properties for which indexical signs can be found in the text”.

7 Schmid (2009: 164). The taboo on (non-implied) authorial intention has a reasonable justification in the assumption that a successful artwork is self-explanatory. But self-explanatoriness can never be absolute; works of art are not created in a timeless vacuum, and an adequate understanding may require a considerable dose of contextual knowledge, which may include knowledge of the author’s historical situation, his intended readership, and the conventions of the genre (cf. Leinson 1996: 190). Even Wimsatt and Beardsley (1946: 478), who introduced the notion of the ‘intentional fallacy’, maintained that “The meaning of words is the history of words, and the biography of an author, his use of a word, and the associations which the word had for him, are part of the word’s history and meaning”.

her own.

Playing games with the implied author and his (her, its) relation to the speaker or narrator has become one of the main attractions of fiction since the rise of the novel in the eighteenth century. Continuing this tradition, Thomas Mann's Der Zauberberg offers the reader opportunities to think about implied-authorial intentions in the way the detached, omniscient and nameless narrator performs his task, strewing in observations and commentaries, and occasionally referring to himself in the first person plural. The unsigned Vorsatz that precedes the novel (the word means ‘preface’, but also ‘intention’), seems to have been written from the narrator’s perspective, but it addresses the reader in an authorial manner (The story of Hans Castorp we intend to tell … the reader will get to know him as a plain but pleasant young man …). Exploiting the ambiguity of the word Geschichte (‘story’, ‘history’), the implied author seems to identify himself with the narrator. The fusion is illusory: as the reader’s image of the author, the implied author cannot be a participant in the fictional world.

3. Musical Persona and Implied Composer

The implied author is an abstraction; it is the reader’s understanding of the rules of the literary game, of the conventions that supposedly have been set up by the author. As such, the concept may easily be applied to music. Though most questions related to an ‘implied composer’ could probably be formulated in an impersonal way, this would still result in a circumscription of actions (Why is the C major chord pounded on so long? instead of Why does the composer keep pounding on the C major chord?). In practice, this is not how music is usually spoken about. What happens in music is often something the composer ‘does’. The composer, in such discourse, is primarily the ‘implied composer’. In spite of the recent origin and infrequent use of that term, the implied composer is a reality of analysis and aesthetics.

We may ascribe structural-compositional choices to the implied composer, but also the intention to represent or express events, actions and states of mind, as well as a certain personal ‘ethos’, what Booth (1983: 73) called “the moral and emotional content of each bit of action and suffering of all of the characters”. Even without characters or defined action, music is able to convey not merely emotions, but also emotionally loaded themes such as suffering, heroism, and love. The treatment of such themes reveals an ethical stance that is somebody’s stance. Ironies to which one should be alert in literary fiction, frictions between implied-authorial and narrative perspectives, are no doubt rare in music. The temptation may then be all the greater to identify the implied composer with the historical composer, and also with the persona, or the music’s ‘speaker’, if any can be found. This is the basis for the kind of fictionalized biography that interprets the oeuvre as a diary.

When persona theory was introduced into musical aesthetics in the 1970’s (Cone 1974), it came along with an unfortunate mix-up of persona and implied composer. Edward T. Cone borrowed the implied author concept from Booth, but spoke of it as a ‘voice’, ‘the composer’s voice’, that emerges from the several musical voices, agents
or persona’s, that he identified with the various parts of the score. Thus, the accompanied song implies “a triad of personas, or persona-like figures […] : the vocal, the instrumental, and the (complete) musical”, the latter being the composer’s voice. Music for piano solo implies a single pianistic persona. In an orchestral work, the composer’s voice emerges “from the collaboration of a number of agents” (Cone 1974: 17-18, 98).

It is, however, not necessarily every individual instrument that ‘speaks’. In Schubert’s *Erlkönig* the piano’s galloping horse belongs according to Cone (1974: 12) to a distinct ‘narrator’s’ voice. Since ‘narrating’ is something done with words, the pianistic gallop is more plausibly described as part of the scenery evoked by the narrator, who speaks through the text, the singer’s voice, and the piano combined. The implied composer, on the other hand, is not a character or agent in the musical action, which constitutes a fictional world analogous to that of literary fiction. The ‘presence’ of the implied composer – more precisely, the question whether the concept of the implied composer points out a significant part of our listening experience – does not depend upon a musical persona or speaker. Even in the most abstract music we may discern authorial intentions.

4. Music as Utterance, Expression and Thought

While the implied composer is a fact of aesthetic and analytical discourse, the case for the musical persona is less straightforward. The question who’s speaking? may make sense in cases such as the recitative and arioso of opus 110, where a dramatic genre is represented. But what of the sonata as a whole? Is the persona an entity that emerges occasionally, or does it have a permanent presence?

What has motivated the application of the musical persona concept (henceforth: MP) to music is, in most general terms, the communicative nature of music, or of particular works of music. There are several, closely interrelated ways in which music has been seen as communicative in a way that might call for the MP: as a form of quasi-linguistic utterance or discourse; as expression of emotions; and as a form of thought, or representation of thought processes.

The basis of the interpretation of music as utterance is the analogy between music and language that has evolved over centuries. What is quite obvious in cases where a vocal-dramatic model is imitated, as in opus 110, has a broader validity. Most instrumental music contains at least elements which have been modelled on speech or (text-based) singing. Together with a quasi-linguistic harmonic syntax, which allows us to create musical phrases and sentences, these quasi-vocal, prosodic elements constitute a

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8 Cone (1974: 57): “[…] the persona is by no means identical with the composer; it is a projection of his musical intelligence, constituting the mind, so to speak, of the composition in question”; (1974: 2): “Prose fiction, too, according to this theory, is narrated not by the author directly but by his persona, who may or may not be a character in the story.” According to Maus (1989: 33, 34): “[…] Cone’s musical persona may already occupy the position of an implied composer”; “Passages in which the persona seems to merge with the composer have a strange, somewhat obscure pathos”. Answering Maus, Cone (in Maus 1989: 77) has acknowledged the fusion, without considering it confusion: “[…] I tend to bring person and persona closer together, although maintaining the distinction between them. As a result the persona becomes something very like Booth’s implied author […]”. 

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kind of musical ‘discourse’; and if music (or some music) is or represents such discourse or utterance, it is a reasonable assumption, if not an analytical truth, that ‘utterance’ implies ‘utterer’. This requires that we interpret music as a form of action, rather than mere process or even static object. Action implies an agent. In one sense, one may think of the performer as the agent: it is she who produces music-as-sound. But music-as-discourse is not the sound event of performance, but the imaginary, fictional action that music becomes in the listener’s (and interpreter’s) imaginative understanding, such as, in opus 110, the singing of a lament.

It is primarily the interpretation of music as a kind of (represented) quasi-linguistic utterance that motivated Cone (1974: 1) to ask the question who in a piece of music is ‘speaking’, and to answer it by drawing the parallel with literature. Generalizing his observations on art song over instrumental music, he insisted that “any instrumental composition, like the instrumental component of a song, can be interpreted as the symbolic utterance of a virtual persona” (1974: 94, my emphasis). This generalization, together with the confusion of persona and implied composer, has been the cause of the somewhat abstruse quality of the ensuing debate over the MP.

The basic assumption that any utterance implies an utterer is intuitively appealing, if not self-evident. It yet has its detractors in the literary field, for whom the notion of narratorless narrative or speakerless discourse is no contradiction in terms. I have found no better argument for this view, however, than the fact that utterances may exist in the codified form of a text, which may bear no traces of authorship. Obviously, we cannot always find clues as to its originator, and a text may be read just for what it is about, without raising any thought about its author- or speakership. The human world is filled with impersonal communications such as traffic signs, weather forecasts, commercial slogans, and so on; we do not usually think of these as communications from anyone. Nevertheless, we are aware of the somewhat abstract corporate or collective authorship of such messages; in fact, it is crucial to our understanding and acceptance of them. When you encounter a no entry sign on a footpath, ‘Says who?’ is a sensible question: somebody must have put it up, backed up by some human authority. If not, you might ignore it.

The sign would not merely be ineffective, but meaningless if it were not interpretable as some kind of speech act (by which I mean any communicative linguistic act), but just a graphic pattern. The apparent no entry sign might be a random scribbling resembling the letters no entry—say, a snail’s trail or weathering on a rock; such rather absurd scenario’s abound in the philosophical literature. Despite the resemblance, it would be neither English nor writing or communication, and therefore not be a prohibition to enter. There is no such thing as an ‘autophatic text’, even if authorship may be diffuse and collective. And evidently, if music resembles discourse, it is of a far more subjective and poetical nature than road signs and weather forecasts.

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9 Ryan (1981: 139): “If the sentences of impersonal narration were ‘freed from the speech act,’ it would be impossible for the reader to reconstrue a fictional universe. Words coming out of nowhere could not refer, could not express propositions, and could not be assigned a truth value”. According to Eagleton (2012: 152), “Texts speak themselves, as it were – a self-speaking which may include from time to time the presence of a fictional narrator”. It raises the question what is concealed in the “as it were”.

As for ‘narratorless narrative’ (which has seemed to open up possibilities of ‘musical narrative’), this concept owes its acceptance to an established misuse of the term ‘narrative’ as equivalent for story – the sequence of events, abstracted from the act of telling. A narrative is the product of the act of narrating, which implies a narrator (no matter how impersonal), and events told. This requires the semantics of reference and tense, which are obviously unavailable in music. Facts about events that can be told as a story do not themselves constitute a narrative; all history books dealing with the Napoleonic Wars contain different narratives of roughly the same story. Of course, the moment one starts speaking of events, it becomes a ‘telling’; and when the listener starts speaking of musical events, this becomes her narration and narrative – but it is not a narrative in music.¹⁰

More often than on (quasi-linguistic) utterance, the debate around the musical persona has been focused on the potential of music for expression, particularly, the expression of emotions. Just like utterance implies an utterer, the common perception of music as being expressive or expressing some state of mind implies a hypothetical-imaginary, but otherwise undefined ‘expresser’.¹¹

Besides speech-like features, such as prosody and articulation (softly dragging, nervous staccato, …), what is involved in musical expressiveness are signs of physiological behaviour, such as movements and gestures (slowly descending, smoothly gliding, gracefully swirling…).¹² These may include certain motions elicited from the performer by the way music has been written for the voice or instruments. Gestural qualities may be implied in the score as an essential part of the composer’s conception, particularly in music for bowed string instruments and piano, where tone production depends on arm movements.

In the introduction to the recitative of opus 110, the slow march-like rhythm suggests a certain way of moving about, purposeful but reluctant, maybe. The wide spacing of the pianist’s hands, the displacement between the higher and middle register, and their coming together at the dominant chord which marks the ‘singer’s’ entry are suggestive of a search of focus. A first-time listener who has not understood the nature of the introductory measures may do so retrospectively, with the arpeggio, and may relate their gestural qualities to the persona which emerges in the recitative. This, at least, is an intention we might ascribe to the implied composer.

A complicating factor is the vagueness of the terms ‘expression’ and ‘expressive’.

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¹¹ Levinson (2006: 92, 93): “[…] to hear music as expressive is to hear it as an instance of personal expression”; “Since expressing requires an expresser, this means that in so hearing the music the listener is in effect committed to hearing an agent in the music—what we can call the music’s persona—or to at least imagining such an agent in a backgrounded manner”.
¹² Cone (1974: 64): “It is the gestural aspect of utterance that is simulated, and symbolized, by music”. Levinson (2006: 82): “The expressiveness of music is grounded on the fact […] that the actions or gestures that one hears in a passage of music recall the actions or gestures that serve as behavioral expressions of emotions, which allows us to hear the former as the latter, and so the passage as expressive of those emotions.” Young (2014: 11) discusses this under the label ‘resemblance theory’; it agrees with Kivy’s (2002: 40) rejected ‘contour theory’. 
It is possible, maybe, that music (or any object) is interpreted as ‘expressive’ without being an expression of anything by anyone, merely by having a certain shape and character that evokes, through certain analogical resemblances, the idea of a mood or emotion. Weeping willows and certain dogs (St Bernard, basset hound) have been philosophers’ pet examples.\(^\text{13}\) Whether one calls those ‘expressive’ of sadness may be a matter of personal choice, but if one does, it is most likely without the implication that their drooping features express sadness. Expression implies an activity and an inner life which willows don’t have, and the dogs’ facial features are merely a by-product of selective breeding (though the resulting health issues might justify a sad outlook on life). In the same way, music might display features associated with, or evocative of a certain mood or state of mind, and in that sense be said to be ‘expressive’ without being an expression of anything.\(^\text{14}\)

Instead of ‘expressing’ a certain state of mind, a piece of music may often be said to represent such a state of mind, or certain aspects of it, through the dynamics of fast and slow, tense and relaxed, aggressive and affable, and so on. Or maybe it would be more accurate to say that the music represents that expression, assuming that the musical expression is derived from vocal or gestural expressive behaviour, as it is in the slowly pacing introduction to the recitative, and the plaintive melody of the arioso of opus 110.

The question whose state of mind it is that is here represented need not arise. When a music student fails to respond adequately to the emotional qualities of opus 110, the teacher might ask him to imagine what kind of character in what kind of situation would express herself in this way, and to try to find the appropriate gestures. He would start creating a persona. And far from being an extramusical phantasy, this is simply a way of exploring how this music makes sense to us. It is often merely a matter of choice of focus, of which questions to ask, whether or not a persona is invoked to account for music’s expressive qualities.

The inner processes that music can represent are not limited to emotions. Music has frequently been characterized as a thought process, or as the representation of such a process. ‘Musical thoughts’ or ‘ideas’ have been a topic of discussion at least since the late eighteenth century. These may be specifically musical ideas – the composer’s spontaneous invention or Einfall, a pattern in musical parameters. The mental process of musical invention may become an audible process of ‘thinking music’ when the musician’s mental and physical actions are in a continuous flow of improvisation. The written-out fantasia may be a simulation or representation of such ‘thinking music’.

Improvisation is an instantaneously productive musical thought process. It is not a representation of conscious reflection, which is typically about something, though not necessarily in words. The discursive qualities that allow us to interpret music as a kind of wordless ‘speech’, lacking the semantics of language, make it possible that music

\(^{14}\) Levinson (2006: 104).
represents something of the intuitive discursive structure and emotional dynamics of preverbal thought: processes of questioning and answering, doubt and confirmation, drawing conclusions; thought processes which have their accompanying emotional contours. Even when pondering the most abstract problem, we are driven by the desire for its solution. It would be hard, however, to lay down a rule that allows us to distinguish musical representations of thought from those of speech. We might be more inclined to call it ‘thought’ when the musical utterances are less rhetorical, outwardly directed (a statement that obviously calls for clarification: when do we call music ‘rhetorical’? – But I’ll leave that aside).

Where there is thought, there is a thinker. Inversely, where there is a thinker, there is a locus where seemingly disconnected ideas and feelings may occur and cohere. The MP therefore offers a possibility of explaining discontinuity, even apparent incoherence, as embedded within the stream of thought and experiences of a subject. That is one of the MP’s main attractions. It implies that the concept is most called for where there are such moments of discontinuity, a dramatic break in flow.

By unifying a variety of experiences within a hypothetical thinking-feeling mind, the MP helps us explain how some music may strike us as psychologically complex and emotionally profound. It allows us to identify mixtures of simple emotional states and transitions between them, rather than a loose sequence. A laughing Democritus who turns into a weeping Heraclitus is a more interesting human being than either of those two-dimensional characters. Which does not imply that we should always attempt to interpret contrasts as different states of one mind; the question can only be decided within the context of the individual work.

Beyond such particular cases, what would be the significance of the MP? Not much, necessarily. We may accept the thesis that music may be a representation of communicative, expressive action, and its corollary, the imaginary agent or MP, without thinking of that agent. The persona can be merely a background assumption, a dormant belief. It may be called from its state of dormancy when we are forced to think of it, either by the speculations of philosophers, narratologists and musicologists, or, more interestingly, when the music itself seems to be designed to foreground intention, individuality and subjectivity. One of the factors that have confused the debate about the merits of the MP is a false generalization over music tout court. Not all music is representational and allows for parallels with literary fiction; and only within

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15 Levinson (2006: 213) lists examples of “mindful actions” in music: questioning, musing, imploring, angrily despairing, menacing, defying, cajoling, comforting, disapproving, “and even nose-thumbing (e.g. the opening of the finale of Beethoven’s Second Symphony)”.

16 Karl and Robinson 1995: 495: “[…] the formal coherence of the music often consists precisely in its embodying a coherent unfolding of psychological states in a musical persona”.

17 Robinson and Hatten (2012: 79): “First, if we are invited to imagine a persona in the music, then music can (although it need not) express cognitively complex emotions such as yearning, resignation, or nostalgia—emotions that can be attributed to this persona […]. The music can also express blends of emotion, emotional conflicts, and patterns of emotion. […] Finally, if we postulate personae in music […] it also becomes possible to identify an entire piece as enacting the psychological story of a persona.”

18 Davies (1997: 107): “If the work strikes us as episodic and disjointed, it is not plain that we should prefer a coherent narrative over another that is less so.” Not where disjointedness is perceived as a virtue in its own right. But sometimes it seems to pose a riddle.
the proper historical setting, with a focus on specific works, the issue merits interest.  

5. Pro and Contra the MP

Unsurprisingly, the MP has found no favour with those who hold to a formalist view of music. For the formalist, music is an abstract, non-mimetic art; ‘pure’ music does not represent anything, nor is it determined by such extramusical factors as a text. Pure music is instrumental music; vocal music, even though it is probably the most common worldwide and has a history that goes back to mythical times, is ‘music plus words’. It is only through the association with words, as a sung text or narrative ‘programme’, that meaning can be grafted upon music. Formalism therefore implies an essentialist view of music, based on what is its supposedly true (‘pure’) nature, rather than a historical and culturally relative view: that music is what it has become, in a certain historical context.

I assume that there is considerable flexibility in what music can be and can do. Its potential is realized differently within different cultural contexts, and is limited only by human cognition, not by any a priori assumption about its essence. The potential for musical representation has grown with increasing complexity, though evidently much highly complex music is abstract (‘absolute’). Various degrees of abstraction and representation may coexist within one work. It is this circumstance which poses a particular challenge to analysis. In opus 110, the arioso is followed by a fugue. Unlike the arioso, the fugue does not clearly represent anything – except, perhaps, a fugue: in the context of the sonata, its baroque counterpoint is a retrospective element, a kind of stylistic reminiscence. One might call it a fugue represented rather than a fugue simpliciter. A formalist might deny that such a construal makes any sense; a fugue is a fugue. This ignores the fact that an author or a composer may speak or make music in the manner of this or that personage, community, or style, foreign to his regular style, and thereby implicitly represent those origins. When we think of it as ‘a certain manner that has been adopted’, that rather forced impersonal way of speaking may be exchanged for ‘someone adopting a manner’; and then the question who? again arises. The answer would be: either the implied composer, or the persona.

Arguing from a formalist standpoint, Peter Kivy denies that the fact that we associate music with certain emotions, calling it joyful or sad, melancholy, fearful, and so on, calls for an explanation in terms of expression or representation. When we call music sad, we do not recognize it as expressing sadness, or as representing a human expression of sadness. We hear this sadness as a quality of the music itself, thanks to

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19 Cone (1974: 5): “What I wish to suggest is something more fundamental: that all music, like all literature, is dramatic; that every composition is an utterance depending on an act of impersonation which it is the duty of the performer or performers to make clear.” Cf. Ridley (2007: 130): “[...] whether the construction of a persona is necessary or not depends upon the particular character of individual pieces of music.”

20 Hanslick (1854: 20): “Was die Instrumentalmusik nicht kann, von dem darf nie gesagt werden, die Musik könne es; denn nur sie ist reine, absolute Tonkunst.” Hanslick uses the practical equivalence of Musik and Tonkunst to define music as the art of ‘tones’ exclusively. Use of the word Tonkunst, a Germanization of Musik, had a sharp rise in frequency shortly before 1800 (https://www.dwds.de/wb/Tonkunst). How this very German dogma got a hold on US-American musical aesthetics would be a story worth telling.
certain features typically associated with that emotion (such as slow tempo, subdued dynamics, chains of dissonances, etc.).

This seems to close the door to the persona by eliminating expression as a process or action. The emotional quality is predicated of the music itself. But if both representation and expression are locked out, to say of the music that it is sad either presupposes a very peculiar meaning of the word ‘sad’; or it implies that the music itself is an emotional being capable of sadness, and the persona would have slipped in before the door was closed. Melancholy and cheerfulness are not phenomena that occur without being felt by a human being. Unlike the dog’s false appearance of sadness, the sadness of sad music is an intentional feature of its design.

Another argument that has been brought forward against the MP does not rely on an a priori rejection of musical mimesis. It is, simply, that the critic does not recognize it as a reality of his musical experience. This is an empirical argument, in principle, though it may be difficult to test it by empirical means. Self-reports are not to be trusted, including one’s own.

Kivy’s formulation of this argument is not only confident, but makes it doubtful whether he has even given the MP hypothesis serious consideration.

[...] I was being powerfully moved by pure instrumental music long before I ever even heard of the musical persona, or that such a creature might inhabit the works which so powerfully moved me. So there must be another explanation, besides the persona theory, for how absolute music is ‘so powerfully moving’. (Kivy 2009: 105)

For a great part of humanity, it has been a centuries long struggle to arrive at the insight that we are part of the natural world, evolved from animals like us, without divine interference (and many still refuse to accept it). Science finds new explanations for familiar phenomena all the time, even within the realm of our inner self. No one fully knows his own mind. There are many matters in which we entertain silent beliefs – beliefs that come to the surface only when we ask certain questions. Evidently, the formalist creed opposes such questions. That having been said, it must be admitted that the MP hypothesis has sometimes been put to work somewhat overenthusiastically. Stating that a certain action has been brought about by a certain otherwise unidentifiable agent does not necessarily add anything to one’s perception or appreciation of that action. It’s just that without the notion of an agent that of ‘action’ doesn’t make any sense – but that is precisely a notion the formalist opposes.

James O. Young, whose Against Pure Music might also have been titled Anti-Kivy, yet shares the latter’s disbelief in the MP. Music can represent emotions, but it does so “without representing the person who has the emotion” (Young 2014: 111). It is true, of course, that the arioso of opus 110 does not represent the character responsible for

21 Kivy (2002: 40): “We hear the melancholy and cheerfulness of the music immediately, in the music, and can be quite unaware of the features of the music in virtue of which it is melancholy or cheerful.”

22 Young (2014: 119) criticizes the same argument as “very close to question begging”, since all it says is that “music does not represent because we do not perceive music as representing”.

23 The same holds for his argument about the MP’s lack of identity, which I will not consider.
the lament – except by her-its singing that very particular lament. When we hear a singer who is invisible in another room, we may attend to her singing only, without thinking about her gender, appearance, and so on. We still infer that someone is singing.

Young’s willingness to recognize expression without an expresser may be due to a very broad notion of what it means to be ‘expressive’.

The claim that something can be expressive of some emotion only if it is experienced as the expression of some persona’s emotion seems doubtful. The yellow on the kitchen walls together with William Morris-patterned curtains may be expressive of cheerfulness without being experienced as the expression of some persona’s cheerfulness. Similarly, it seems that a musical work could be experienced as expressive of happiness without being experienced as some persona’s happiness. (Young 2014: 10)

Yellow kitchen walls and flowery curtains are themselves not an expression of cheerfulness; they are, at best, an index of the owner’s desire for cheering surroundings (‘expressed’ in his or her choice). Even so, a visitor to the kitchen may well start wondering what kind of person is to blame for its decoration.

As an illustration of aesthetic discourse which demonstrates the dispensability of the MP in experiencing emotion in music, Young quotes Ferdinand Hand’s Aesthetik (1837) on the funeral march from the Eroica:

It is true that in Beethoven’s Funeral March we cannot tell whether children are mourning their father, or a lover his beloved; but unmistakably it manifests life’s sorrow, in which the difference of those external conditions may vanish, but the heart is certain of its grief. (Hand 1837: 90; my transl.)

What is striking in this quotation is not so much that the musical expression is interpreted in terms of a kind of generalized emotion, independent of specific agents or circumstances (though the examples may in fact seem ill-chosen), but that Hand in fact does introduce a persona, under the name ‘the heart’. This is, probably, the listener’s heart, but as a grieving heart it still fulfils the role of expresser. The MP hypothesis does not imply that the persona is represented by other features than by his or her having that emotion, and a persona is not a person: it is merely the bleakest abstraction of a person, a blank that can be filled with the listener’s own feelings and experiences.

The answer to the question who’s speaking? is less interesting than the fact that sometimes it makes sense to ask the question. The mere feeling we may have that ‘someone is speaking’ is highly significant. It means that we acknowledge a human presence, have a reason to be attentive, and have certain expectations, even without any thought of the speaker’s identity. We will approach the music with different expectations than when it is an autonomous, abstract process (which it may also be). In particular, it allows us to look for psychological complexity, a locus where seemingly

24 Cf. Young (2014: 11); the published translation quoted there is incorrect.
25 Davies (2011), who defends ‘appearance emotionalism’ against the MP (‘hypothetical emotionalism’), concedes that “the appearance of emotion presented in the music is the result of an act of expression” (13), that “music is expressive in recalling the gait, attitude, air, carriage, posture, and comportment of the human body” (10), but concludes: “For myself, the experience is one of hearing the music as possessing appearances of emotion, while regarding it as neither alive nor as haunted by a persona” (19). The question remains how to make sense of this ‘act of expression’ without an expresser.
disconnected ideas and feelings may occur and cohere.

6. The First and the Third Person

When we think there is some sort of agency at work in music, this raises the question whether this is due to a persona, that is, has a first-person speaker presence, or is presented in a dramatic fashion, as a play with one or more characters. In both cases music is actually interpreted as a kind of drama, a representation of action, with an exclusive, subjective perspective in the first case, and a more or less objective perspective in the second, where several agents may be involved. These agents may still be subjectively characterized, simply through the time allotted to them, or through emotional depth or seriousness. Through this characterization they are presented in something like a third-person perspective, even if without narration there can be no actual reference to a ‘he’ or ‘she’. Instead of narration, it is the manner of presentation, the selection of what we hear and see, that constitutes a perspectivic framework.

It is somewhat different with the self-referential ‘I’. What justifies this self-reference is the conscious subjectivity implied in any act of utterance or expression which has discursive structure. The well-formed sentences in which sorrow is expressed in the *arioso dolente* show us that we’re witnessing not an act of raw expression (*ouch!*), but a deliberate pondering of what is expressed, by a subject capable of self-reflection, an ‘I’.

The question is then how this ‘I’ relates to us. We might be observers, as it were through a window, of the subject’s soul; we might overhear an intimate soliloquy, a speaking-to-oneself; or we might be spoken to, as the hypothetical subject’s intended listeners. Maybe these several options are undecidable. There is no established method for dealing with such questions, but we may tentatively compare a few examples.

<<(1) The brief *Andante con moto* of Beethoven’s G major Piano Concerto (1806) unmistakeably represents a dialogue between two agents, an individual (piano solo) and the collective of the strings, which play staccato in octaves, suggesting choral scansion, with a few typical recitativic inflections. It plausibly represents a choral recitative, answered in *arioso* manner by the piano in a tightening dialogue, followed by an outburst of feeling (protracted harmonic cadence in E minor), a moment of crisis (dominant, trill), and a subdued conclusion.

This quasi-operatic *seena* has traditionally been interpreted as Orpheus pleading before the Furies, and the signs are too strong to ignore, though the listener might think of similar scenes without the classical reference. This confrontation between two agents, which at the end come to a resigned agreement, gains nothing, as far as I can see, by being interpreted as an inner conflict within one persona. Of course, any dialogue could be an inner dialogue, but that trick is too easy; it needs justification in an interesting character conception.

26 First brought to attention by A. B. Marx. See Jander (1985).
The opposing characters are unlikely to be perceived as equals. Since the superior ethos, all subtlety of expression and capacity for tragedy is with the piano solo, the listener will tend to sympathize with ‘Orpheus’, and probably think that the implied composer intends her to do so. We are witnessing the scene over Orpheus’ shoulder, as it were. As a favoured agent, ‘Orpheus’ provides a subjective perspective, without being a persona.

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(2) *La malinconia*, the finale of Beethoven’s String Quartet op. 18 nr. 6 (1800), has two contrasting sections, a chromatic, gloomy and rather enigmatic *Adagio*, and a burlesque *Allegretto quasi allegro*, with a reprise of the *Adagio* before the coda.27

According to Stephen Davies (1997: 106)…

A work that might be heard as laying out the developing gloom of a depressed persona could be experienced no less convincingly as indicating the unconnected moods of a series of personas, each of whom (independently) is more depressed than the last.

Davies does not speak here of any specific work, and his point is that the MP cannot contribute to our perception of musical coherence: this coherence must first be established musically, without such hypothesizing. Moreover, we should not call upon the MP in order to explain away apparent musical incoherence.

If the work strikes us as episodic and disjointed, it is not plain that we should prefer a coherent narrative over another that is less so. Our preferring one narrative to another presupposes, without explaining, a high level of musical understanding. (Davies 1997: 107)

It is true, of course, that our choice for one ‘narrative’ over others is based on musical understanding; but by practising circular hermeneutics we may gain through such a choice a perspective on our musical options. Since in *La malinconia* the title already indicates that we’re dealing with something like a character sketch, we cannot really avoid thinking of “the gloom of a depressed persona”. The movement has struck many critics as odd, on the edge of incoherent, particularly because of the different ‘weight’ of both sections. The seriousness and harmonic complexity of the Adagio is worthy of the composer; the popular dance (*Deutsche*) of the Allegretto seems to fall below standards. We then have the choice of interpreting this piece as a depiction of two contrasting ‘humours’, following a mainly pictorial tradition (as in the pairing of Heraclitus and Democritus, the ‘weeping’ and ‘laughing philosopher’), or as two states of one mind. There are other musical factors to take into account: the enigmatic character and inconclusiveness of the Adagio; and the fact that the reprise of the Adagio does not interrupt the Allegretto in a dialogic fashion, but more like a flash from elsewhere, an erupting mood, a sudden loss of heart. The implied composer has posed a riddle for the listener to solve, and she might solve it by thinking of the appropriate persona: the sufferer of melancholy as a polar disorder.

Aesthetically true, and therefore masterly is Beethoven’s depiction of the melancholic: how, sunk in gloomy melancholy, scarcely capable of coherent ideas, he rises up to momentary

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27 I have discussed this movement in greater detail in *Melancholy, Memory, and Music (2): Beethoven’s La malinconia (String Quartet op. 18 nr. 6)*, https://lodewijkmuns.nl/2020/04/30/melancholy-memory-and-music-2/
cheerfulness, soon sinking back into his previous torpor; – I am gripped with compassion for
the state of mind that is being depicted, as often as Beethoven's tone poem presents this im-
age to my soul. (Von Weiler 1828: 48; my transl.)

Here, then, the MP provides a better 'narrative' than a two-agents hypothesis, and it
helps us see a coherence which otherwise might remain problematic. The Allegretto is
flimsy not because the composer had a lapse of inspiration, but because he has made a
successful representation of a passing mood of cheerful flimsiness. When it recurs in
the midst of the Allegretto, the Adagio remains a temporary intrusion. We observe the
poor melancholic experiencing a relapse in the midst of his superficial cheerfulness. It
is overcome, somewhat forcibly maybe, with a frenzied reprise of the dance.

We still may wonder whether this is a first-person or third-person representation.
Do we have the feeling that the melancholic here 'speaks' in a self-conscious way? I do
not think there is a definitive answer to that question, but I would propose, first, that
one of the striking aspects of the Adagio is that it is utterly un-speechlike. It presents
a motif, an 'idea' with various continuations and transformations – typically, the musi-
cal representation of a thought process that may occur without verbal articulation:
searching, disjointed, tortuous. It is not so clear what the dance-like Allegretto is to the
melancholy persona's mind. A tune in his head? An accompaniment to his extraverted
behaviour? A mere indicator of mood? Most likely, the change of mood coincides
with a reversal in perspective: from self-consciousness to self-forgetfulness. For the
self-forgetful dancer the word 'I' has little meaning; for the brooding ponderer the
world is nothing but the self.

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(3) The case of opus 110 has some similarity with the previous one, in that the arioso
recurs, as an unexpected and unconventional intrusion, within the fugue – and, of
course, a melancholy one. In other respects the case is very different. Here, in recita-
tive and arioso, we are dealing with either a soliloquy, or a monologue directed at some
fictional listener (with whom the real listener might feel tempted to identify). Can we
know whether it is one or the other? And does this vocally articulate persona survive
in some way through the fugue, or does it recede and re-emerge?

Answering these questions is more a matter of inquisitive listening than theorizing.
The persona is neither a person, nor a character; it is not a 'creature' that 'inhabits' the
music. It is, rather, our feeling of agency, and agency may be present in subtle degrees.
The fugue is a genre that tends to flow 'by itself'. In this, there is an unexpected link
with La malinconia: the new mood is one of self-forgetfulness, there in a bouncy dance,
here in spotless counterpoint, culminating in triumphant (or dogged?) exuberance.

Most telling are the transitions between the movements and sections. The slow Pi-
cardy-third arpeggio that closes the preceding scherzo at the same time makes it
inconclusive, and gives the implied composer, performer and listener time to prepare
for a new idea and a new perspective. The fugue subject is developed out of the con-
clusion of the arioso as a free inversion. The reprise of the arioso, in the middle of
the fugue, again emerges from a slow arpeggio. Its ending on a Picardy third refers
back to the end of the scherzo, but continues with a strikingly blunt reiteration of off-

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beat chords, unsettling the metre, as if ‘the music’ (the persona?) got stuck, buying time with an upcoming sense of exasperation. These are improviser’s devices, and it is in these moments that the sense of agency is strongest – the score is almost a stage direction for the pianist to act out the role of persona-improviser. The expressive content of music is not just there, ‘in the notes’; it has to be realized in the expressive act of performance.

A fine line has to be drawn here. The performer may give sensible form to the persona, but cannot act the persona’s role, even if that persona may occasionally show pianistic features. The persona belongs to the musical-fictional world, which the performer presents, but cannot enter; she does not embody the persona, in the way an actor may embody a role. In this respect, the pianist’s position is similar to that of the lieder singer. As I put it in another essay:

[...] much of the lieder repertoire transcends pure lyricism and requires from the singer a quasi-dramatic stance similar to that of the declamer: an ambiguous position between the functions of orator, reader or reciter, and actor. Like the orator, she confronts the audience with a monologue that requires some of the resources of rhetorical actio. Like the actor but unlike the orator, she reproduces a text or score that is not her own and does not convey a message to the audience. Unlike the actor, she cannot fully act out or impersonate the character contained or implied in the text. The singer remains in limbo – half-involved, half-detached, with a task that both involves her body language and constrains it. [...] By lending her voice and gesture to poetry or a lied, the declamer or singer has to define her relation to it, assimilating her voice, up to a point, with the metaphorical voice or voices that speak from the text. (Muns 2017: 384-5)

Even when the performer is not visibly present for the listener, her imagined playing actions are part of the listener’s appreciation. It is in this experience of expression enacted that the persona may most convincingly come to life.

References


