

Introduction

Steven Wadsworth's 2001 production of Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* opens with the three Norns standing in the depths of a rocky chasm, spinning their knowledge of past and future. The set, designed by Thomas Lynch, brings to mind the gorges of the Grand Canyon, whose differently hued layers record the passage of geological time. The rocky backdrop renders visible the ancient wisdom of the Norns and the temporal distance of the events they chronicle, especially the story of Wotan and the world-ash. Wagner's music, too, recapitulates its own history by recalling leitmotifs linked to the agents and actions depicted by the Norns. More remotely, the scenery calls to mind Wagner's efforts to plumb the submerged linguistic and cultural seams of the German psyche, which he believed lay dormant beneath more recent deposits of French-dominated civilization. In the Wadsworth–Lynch production, the prologue to *Götterdämmerung* becomes a veritable allegory of depth, one with nearly as many layers as the rock face on stage.

With its connotations of profundity and distant origins, it is no surprise that depth enjoys a distinguished position in the lexicon of Western metaphors – so distinguished that pinning down its provenance and meaning, even in the relatively limited sphere of music history, might seem an insurmountable task. From scholarly and journalistic promises of deeper investigations and in-depth inquiries to Jack Handey's splendidly oblique “Deep Thoughts,” from fears of postmodern depthlessness to advertisements promoting a “deeper” internet, depth metaphors are equally at home in high culture and pop culture, humor and advertising, art and science.¹ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's study *Metaphors We Live By* argues that several basic cognitive metaphors converge in the notion of depth, giving it a semantic complexity that thwarts easy synopsis.² Even the most cursory survey of writings on music would show that musical works are routinely praised for their deep emotional or spiritual impact, probed for their deep meanings, and pried apart for clues to their deep structure.³ It would be folly to suppose that a single study could address the sum total of usage in the case of such a wide-ranging metaphor. My intention here is rather more modest: to explore the manifold functions and ramifications of depth metaphors in a critical tradition of special relevance to modern musical scholarship – the

German tradition of music criticism and analysis spanning the period from the late eighteenth century to the middle of the twentieth.

The broad geographical, temporal, and semantic scope of depth metaphors does not alter the fact that concepts of musical depth employed by musicologists and music theorists today have a quite particular history. That history, I propose, begins in earnest in Germany with the rise of Romanticism and its preoccupations with history, spirit, and the inner depths of feeling. “The unutterable depth of all music,” wrote Arthur Schopenhauer, “rests on the fact that it restores to us all the emotions of our inmost nature.”⁴ To Schopenhauer’s German contemporaries, music was uniquely equipped to penetrate the innermost regions of the soul, an ability that Enlightenment aesthetic theory, with its focus on the representation of universalized, impersonal feelings, had failed to explain. In return, music’s German devotees began to speak of the art as if it possessed an inwardness all its own.

The listener at the heart of this transaction was not the featureless subject of philosophical treatises, nor was the music in question primarily Schopenhauer’s ecumenical “all music.” Music’s reciprocations with the depths of subjectivity were chiefly the concern of Germans, that “people notorious for its inwardness,” in Friedrich Nietzsche’s words.⁵ Spurred by the spiritual topography of Lutheranism and intercultural rivalries dating back to at least the seventeenth century, Germans had long prided themselves on their collective depth (*Tiefe*) by the time Nietzsche made his unfashionable observation.⁶ Minted in the chaotic years following the Thirty Years’ War (1618–48), the trait of depth evolved into a national treasure whose value skyrocketed in the nineteenth century, especially after the Napoleonic wars. As the sonic record of the Germans’ much-vaunted interiority, German music came to be considered a paradigmatic locus of depth, a status secured by the multiform efforts of nineteenth-century critics, analysts, and composers.⁷ The discursive traditions they spawned continue to resonate in contemporary appraisals of the depth of Beethoven’s music, the cozy inwardness of Schumann’s compositions, and the deep psychology of Wagner’s operas, not to mention the Schenkerian analyst’s hunt for deep structure or the set theorist’s quest for underlying motives. The time is ripe for an investigation of this heritage.

Before going further, a word on terminology. Depth, interiority, and inwardness – words that appear frequently in this book – are closely related to one another but harbor different shades of meaning. With regard to subjectivity, for example, references to “inner” or “inward” impressions arise from the way thoughts and feelings seem to originate inside the body. The nominalization of such impressions into concepts of “interiority” or “inwardness” points to some added investment in cultivating thoughts and

3 *Depth and the subject of analysis*

feelings for spiritual, intellectual, moral, or aesthetic reasons, often at the expense of action in the “external” world. When this investment is very large, as it was for many Romantic thinkers, the fluid distinction between inside and outside tends to harden into a dogmatic opposition. Depth then serves to measure the extent of interiority or inwardness: the “deepest” subjects are those whose inwardness is most highly developed. Of course, the metaphor of depth applies to many things besides subjectivity, but this example offers a brief illustration of how depth functions in relation to its not-quite-cognates. That said, I will occasionally interchange words such as “deep,” “inner,” “inward,” and “interior” in the interest of literary variety. I can only say that I have tried not to distort their meanings in the process.

Depth and the subject of analysis

The looming bulk of depth in the storehouse of musico-aesthetic values has not gone unnoticed in recent years. In keeping with the continuing interest in disciplinary genealogy, musicologists have recognized that depth, like many evaluative metaphors popular among historians and theorists, bears distinct traces of a Germanic orientation.⁸ Yet the good vibes of depth have not proven easy to still. The voices of scholars who argue that structural depth should at least not be demanded of non-Romantic repertoires resound with the zealous intensity of cries in the wilderness.⁹ As for Romanticism, depth would seem to be so integral to its system of aesthetic and personal values as to be impossible to dislodge from its modern-day reception.

No reader will be surprised to learn that it is Beethoven’s music which is most often singled out for its superior depth. From the anguished rumblings of the “Tempest” Sonata to the surging glory of the Ninth Symphony, Beethoven’s music has set the souls and minds of countless listeners in motion, inspiring a centuries-long effort to understand an oeuvre by turns compelling and unsettling. The very resistance of Beethoven’s music to ready comprehension has spawned innumerable quests for a “deeper” level where the music can be shown to make sense. That level may be poetic, structural, or even philosophical: Scott Burnham has argued that the judicious mixture of Goethean becoming and Hegelian dialectical reconciliation in Beethoven’s heroic-style music sounded the “deepest keynote of its age.”¹⁰ Burnham places the mythology of selfhood articulated by Beethoven’s music and the modern discipline of music analysis in the double orbit of a binary star, showing how periodic revolutions in analytical technique are but so many attempts to come to grips with the enigmatic power of Beethoven’s music to “reach within us,” to present us with an aural image of the “human will and its struggles.”¹¹

The pervasive impression that Beethoven's music tells us twin stories about subjectivity and musical structure continues to inflect musicological discussions of depth. Lawrence Kramer and Susan McClary have urged that we listen to both narratives – indeed that we should hear them as very nearly one and the same.¹² McClary questions music theory's narrow focus on “discerning hidden depth,” but she also surmises that this obsession is a natural outgrowth of the disjunction between interiority and exteriority in Romantic (and later modernist) subjectivity.¹³ In McClary's account, the (German) Romantic notion of the subject demanded a separation between “inward” experience and “external” social and economic realities, a tactic designed to safeguard the subject's putative autonomy. This strategy, however, quickly began to unravel the fabric of intersubjective communication. Achieving authentic expression in art increasingly demanded that artists flout aesthetic conventions by subjecting the solicitous exterior of the artwork to stresses that fractured its congenial surface. Yet these developments, McClary argues, only served to foreground the “increasingly more distilled integrity of the ‘real’ subject,” a construction that found its musical equivalent in the “underground network” of structural relations required to hold the Romantic work together.¹⁴ Music theory's continuing love affair with this network reflects a similarly enduring belief in the deep, integrated subject, even if the aesthetic traces of that subject are so inaccessible as to be virtually nonexistent. McClary's reading of Beethoven's String Quartet in A minor, op. 132 – a piece that no longer projects the kind of synthesis that Burnham explores in the heroic works – suggests that the disjunctions enacted upon the surface of Romantic music precede the production of depth, a situation that inverts, or at least qualifies, the generative priority normally granted to depth over surface.

Kramer also seeks to supplement the structural depth that commentators such as Carl Dahlhaus and Janet Schmalfeldt have attributed to Beethoven's music with a narrative about the subject.¹⁵ He contends that the composer's “stormy” piano sonatas project a sense of deep subjectivity by appealing to the sympathy of the listener. Kramer compares the sympathetic economy of the “Tempest” and other sonatas to the primitive encounter as imagined by the French philosopher Étienne Bonnot de Condillac and given visual representation in the storm scenes of late eighteenth-century French painting. Condillac's *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge* portrays sympathy as a series of “inward emotions” provoked by the encounter with suffering.¹⁶ Nestled within the sublime surroundings of formally indeterminate, agitated, stormy music, the pathos-laden interludes in Beethoven's sonatas stir up feelings of sympathy in the listener by mimicking vocal expressivity; the paradigmatic example would be the famous recitative in the first movement

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-46098-0 - Metaphors of Depth in German Musical Thought: From E. T. A. Hoffmann to Arnold Schoenberg

Holly Watkins

Excerpt

[More information](#)

of the “Tempest.” Beethoven’s sonatas turn suffering into a spectacle, and the listener’s identification with the music in turn “produces subjectivity,” that is, the inward experience of sympathy.¹⁷ Kramer’s essay closes by proposing that Beethoven’s stormy sonatas participate in the quintessentially modern quest to “ground the human subject in its own interiority rather than in a centralized external authority.”¹⁸ Even though his interpretation is based on Enlightenment rather than Romantic thought, Kramer views subjective (and musical) depth as a product of the same concern with autonomy that McClary discerns in Beethoven’s later music.

Both Kramer and McClary make laudable attempts to enumerate the cultural work performed by music that appears, in some way or another, to be “deep.” But they share a tendency to assume that subjective depth is adequately represented by single traits like autonomy or inwardness, traits which they invoke in a more or less static fashion. Depth does indeed constitute a core component of that shifting collection of practices, values, and experiences that Kramer calls “modern subjectivity,” but it was hardly a monolithic or unchanging concept.¹⁹ Kramer’s own suggestion that depth is the result of an ultimately inscrutable “will to mean” comes closer to recognizing the indeterminacy at the heart of the metaphor than his appeal to autonomous subjectivity.²⁰ In addition, the particular set of concerns that brought about a fascination with depth are bound up with German Romanticism more than Kramer might care to admit; his essay’s attention to French Enlightenment theories of “inner emotions” at the expense of abundant German counterparts is never truly justified. McClary’s chapter, on the other hand, makes no mention of actual reflections on subjectivity, depth, or inwardness dating from the nineteenth century.

Kramer’s and McClary’s lack of engagement with German Romantic discourse on depth in their discussions of Beethoven perhaps results from the fact that their primary scholarly interlocutors are contemporary music theorists, whose “purely musical” notions of depth stand sorely in need of more culturally situated readings.²¹ McClary treats the submerged traces of subjectivity that she exposes as if they were simply the equivalent of present-day notions of structural depth.²² While she is correct to see a shared heritage between current analytical methodologies and the Romantic ideal of deep subjectivity, the musical depth in fashion today is much more limited in meaning than its multivalent and often contradictory Romantic antecedents. Accordingly, the use of depth metaphors in these two very different historical contexts should be carefully distinguished rather than conflated. If the “meaning of words is the history of words,” as the literary critics W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley argued long ago, the history in question is often one of forgetting.²³ Old meanings erode under pressure of the new.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-46098-0 - Metaphors of Depth in German Musical Thought: From E. T. A. Hoffmann to Arnold Schoenberg

Holly Watkins

Excerpt

[More information](#)

A look at a recent review of three publications illustrates this narrowing of semantic focus. Stephen Rumph's "Op. 132 and the Search for a Deep Structure" appraises book-length studies by Kofi Agawu, Robert Hatten, and Michael Spitzer, all of whom test their analytical mettle against Beethoven's famous string quartet (as does McClary).²⁴ Rumph compares the three authors' accounts of the perplexing first movement with the (in his view) less successful venture of Carl Dahlhaus. Dahlhaus, Rumph explains, was quite forthright about the circular nature of the structural depth he was after, admitting that the only thing which justified his faith in such depth was "the sheer impossibility of explaining the compelling impression of formal integrity . . . in spite of the rhapsodic laceration of the surface, unless it is assumed that there is a network of latent relationships."²⁵ Taking his cue from Schoenberg, Dahlhaus presumed these relationships to be motivic in nature, and he offered an analysis of the movement based on the integrating role of a single four-note motive (G#-A-F-E). Unconvinced by Dahlhaus's out-of-fashion motivicism, Rumph concludes that the German scholar's approach lacked both "explanatory power" and a "systematic basis." The "deep-structural analysis" Rumph calls for, on the other hand, must "explain how [an] underlying tonal logic generates the surface transformations of the motive."²⁶

Rumph's concept of deep structure, which he bases on linguistic structuralism, is no less circular than Dahlhaus's. That is, Rumph takes it on faith (and here he is in good Schenkerian company) that there is a consistent generative process by which "tonal logic" gives rise to "surface" motives, a process analogous to that which generates real sentences out of the abstract fund of grammatical rules. The problem, however, is not so much circularity itself – as an essentially hermeneutic enterprise, all analysis is circular to some degree – as Rumph's implication that the often considerable strangeness of Beethoven's music, notably its frequent formal and generic disjunctions, must be assimilated to higher-level "explanations" in order to be properly appreciated. Rumph suggests that had Dahlhaus paid more attention to counterpoint in op. 132, he would have seen that "the eruptions and lacerations of the surface . . . make sense in terms of the deeper contrapuntal tension between the *alla breve* motive and its martial countersubject."²⁷ Similarly, Rumph praises Hatten's discussion of the string quartet for the way it "rationalizes" a musical disjunction that Agawu had allowed to stand. The rules of the analytical game are clear: whoever provides the most convincing proof of a piece's coherence, extirpating all traces of disjunction or fragmentation along the way, wins. The search for coherence entails the search for deep structure, which, in turn, is tacitly assumed to be synonymous with music's depth.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-46098-0 - *Metaphors of Depth in German Musical Thought: From E. T. A. Hoffmann to Arnold Schoenberg*

Holly Watkins

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The game Rumph describes (and appears to endorse) is largely the outgrowth of music theory's post-war emulation of the sciences, which seek to uncover the "underlying" laws governing natural phenomena. Beginning in the 1950s, theorists tried to dissociate their activities from the unpredictable impressionism of casual commentaries on music as well as the questionable political entanglements of pre-war criticism and analysis (especially Schenker's).²⁸ To do so, theorists promoted the investigation and formalization of the deep structures common to particular repertoires (e.g., "common-practice" tonality or twelve-tone music). The pursuit of such theories is anathema to criticism as it has traditionally been practiced, which tends to lavish attention on the unique aesthetic detail.²⁹ Yet it has never been entirely clear that the explanatory depth sought by theorists is wholly independent of the hermeneutic depth that interests critics. This indeterminacy can be traced to the remainder left over when music is equated with a natural object – which after all it is not. This remainder is shot through with under-theorized convictions about meaning and the nature of historical artifacts, convictions that fall well outside the province of science.

Consider, for example, Hatten's response to McClary's reading of op. 132. From his perspective, the enemy of theoretical objectivity appears to be not so much the hermeneutic endeavor per se as the relativism and "ideology" of postmodernist criticism.³⁰ He chastises McClary for failing to grasp op. 132's "dramatic coherence" (or, as Rumph puts it, its "hidden logic"), a failure that places Beethoven's music in dangerous proximity to "those postmodern styles that are content to play with surfaces."³¹ Even though McClary concedes the presence of an underlying structural depth in op. 132 (if one rather at odds with the fractured musical surface), Hatten rejects McClary's diagnosis of communication breakdown, reiterating instead his own conviction of the music's "depth of meaning."³² Hatten appears to be trying to protect Beethoven by appealing to Romantic-sounding values, but his concept of musical meaning is strikingly un-Romantic in the way it restricts meaning to a transaction between the work and the listener exclusively mediated by the listener's stylistic competence (as opposed to, say, his or her imagination). Rumph concludes that Hatten "refutes the most common objection to music semiotics, that musical meaning rests solely on arbitrary or subjective associations."³³ Two unpleasant extremes vie for supremacy in Rumph's formulation: either the music or the listener has complete control over the production of meaning. This is surely an oversimplification of most musical experience. What is worse, denying listeners a role in the creation of musical meaning (beyond that provided by their competence) ironically produces an evacuated subjectivity not unlike that which Hatten appears to fear from postmodernism. The deep musical work is endowed with absolute

authority over its own meaning; responses other than those clearly derived from musical structure, especially those exhibiting an unhealthy dose of “subjective associations,” must be denied depth (and therefore value) because they fail to account for musical coherence.³⁴ To revise McClary’s thesis, then, modern notions of structural depth are more like simulacra of deep subjectivity than the formalized equivalent of Romantic inwardness.

Depth as metaphor

The restrictions placed on the meaning of depth in contemporary music theory would seem at odds with the embrace of metaphorical language in some quarters of the theoretical community. Rejecting the discursive limitations on the discipline promulgated by Milton Babbitt and endorsed by many others, theorists such as Marion Guck have explored metaphor’s intimate relationship to musical experience and its usefulness in the description of music.³⁵ Guck has argued that “even the legitimate technical vocabulary of Western music is rooted in metaphor,” an observation Naomi Cumming has expanded into searching studies of metaphors of musical space and motion.³⁶ The concept of musical space, of which depth is often a feature, has proven especially difficult to disentangle from metaphor. Cumming, for instance, finds it necessary to divide music theory’s spatial vocabulary into terms possessing a “literal musical meaning” (echoing Guck’s term “music-literal”) and terms which may “acquire a metaphorical status.”³⁷ Calling one pitch “higher” or “lower” than another, Cumming argues, is a perceptual measurement that depends on a rudimentary, non-metaphorical concept of musical space, one that does not involve the transfer of attributes from a different realm (namely, the visual realm).³⁸ In contrast, the versions of musical space entertained by theorists including Heinrich Schenker and Leonard Meyer are higher-order interpretations of musical structure, and to that extent, they betray the unacknowledged influence of more general notions of space, whether philosophical, psychological, or material.³⁹ Cumming concludes that music theory’s unconscious reliance on culturally embedded metaphors in its effort to provide true descriptions of music blurs the boundaries between theory and criticism. Both kinds of discourse, Cumming asserts, “demonstrate a projection onto sound of aspects of our own mentality.”⁴⁰

By exposing music theory and its constitution of the musical object to the influence of culture at large, Cumming’s perspective threatens to undermine the principle of musical autonomy so central to the discipline. Not surprisingly, some theorists have responded with another round of attempts to

secure the borders of the autonomous artwork, if in a manner that incorporates aspects of Western musical acculturation. Hatten's musical semantics is one such attempt (with the boundaries set around reigning stylistic norms), as are many of the cognitive approaches now popular among theorists. Lakoff and Johnson's work, for example, appears to promise a way to ground metaphor in the nature of the mind and body rather than leave it to the whims of criticism. *Metaphors We Live By* argues that the metaphors endemic to any conceptual system attest to the fact that "human *thought processes* are largely metaphorical," a position which overturns the view that metaphors are just a variety of rhetorical spice.⁴¹ According to Lakoff and Johnson, two especially important kinds of cognitive metaphors are orientational and ontological metaphors. Orientational metaphors are derived from simple experiential contrasts, such as up–down, in–out, front–back, deep–shallow, and center–periphery. Phrases like "You're in high spirits," "Wake up," "He's at the peak of health," and "She'll rise to the top" owe their origins to the projection of such metaphors onto many different areas of experience.⁴² Ontological metaphors, on the other hand, create discrete entities out of greater flux or complexity. For instance, the CONTAINER metaphor (to use Lakoff and Johnson's nomenclature) imposes boundaries. Nations and other territories are obvious CONTAINERS ("What's the weather like in North Carolina?"); less obvious ones are emotional states ("I'm in a funk"), professions ("How did you get into programming?"), and activities ("She got out of cleaning the house"). Lakoff and Johnson trace the structure of the CONTAINER metaphor to the human body, with its "bounding surface" and "in–out orientation."⁴³

With Lakoff and Johnson's observations in hand, it is tempting to naturalize concepts of musical space and depth by ascribing them to the operation of cognitive metaphors. Contrasts like up–down and center–periphery are indeed very basic to the perception of Western music, and the saturation of Western thought with orientational metaphors helps to explain why musical events such as a rapidly ascending melodic line or a wayward harmonic progression can take on a host of expressive connotations. The work concept, on the other hand, owes much to the logic of the CONTAINER metaphor: witness the innumerable attempts to discern meanings or structures hidden "within" musical works. But these examples do not so much clinch the universality of the CONTAINER metaphor as situate it in the hermeneutic and analytical contexts of contemporary musical scholarship. The CONTAINER metaphor does not necessarily dominate all discourse about music, nor does it do so in the same way (for many listeners, what is "in" the music is much less important than being "into" it). Even where the CONTAINER metaphor does hold sway, the boundaries it defines and the contents it encloses

may be vigorously contested: what critics and analysts consider to be inside versus outside a work, in its depths versus on its surface, varies considerably with time, place, and discursive context. The mere presence of the CONTAINER metaphor ultimately reveals little about how music is understood as a cultural product, a stimulus to experience, an object of study, or a bodily practice.

Similarly, depth is not a straightforward “measurement” along the lines of proximity and distance from a tonal center or high and low register (despite the fact that the German adjective *tief* means both “deep” and “low”). The structural depths which occupy modern scholars lack a comparable perceptual immediacy, while the conceptual origins of such depths are just as multiple as those of the metaphor on which they are based. *Metaphors We Live By* shows how the notion of depth involves CONTAINER, BUILDING, and JOURNEY metaphors. For example, we can seek a deeper foundation for an argument (BUILDING), spell out an argument’s deepest core (CONTAINER), or go into an argument in greater depth (JOURNEY). In these cases, depth refers to what is most basic or essential, but also to what is hidden from view (and often to both at once – hence the need for “deeper investigations” of the truth). Indeed, Lakoff and Johnson’s analysis suggests that the orientational pair deep–shallow converges with the ontological metaphor CONTAINER to produce a kind of standard-issue conceptual entity, one whose surface we are quick to push past in order to plumb the depths. Explaining complex phenomena would seem to require that the object of study be conceptualized in terms of a variable surface versus an underlying depth where order holds sway.

At the same time, Lakoff and Johnson’s analysis overlooks cases where the metaphor of depth is applied to something not fully explicable or exhaustible. Deep works of literature or music are usually considered to be those whose meanings can never be spelled out once and for all. In such instances, the metaphor of depth switches allegiance, so to speak, renouncing its association with singular essences in favor of plural profundity: the artwork as CONTAINER, from this perspective, opens onto a bottomless abyss. A critic’s or analyst’s conviction that an artwork is deep can therefore motivate efforts to secure interpretive or analytical closure in “explanations” or, conversely, to show how the work exists in a state of permanent semantic multiplicity or openness. This paradox endemic to depth grates against Lakoff and Johnson’s hypothesis of “metaphorical coherence,” a situation that helps to account for the metaphor’s unusually variegated rhetorical history.⁴⁴ Sorting out the implications of particular depth metaphors therefore demands more than just an appeal to hypothetical cognitive universals; it requires confronting the larger discursive networks to which those metaphors belong and the cultural factors involved in their usage.