

Olivia Berlin

Ryan Bañagale

Emotion and Meaning in Music

22 Oct. 2014

Timeless Themes:

The Interchangeability of Interpretations in Music

First impressions are often misleading. In a single interaction one can gain only a limited perspective of another's character and personality; as the saying goes, there is more to each person than meets the eye. Only with repeated and prolonged interaction with someone can we truly gain a sense of who they are. A similar idea applies to music. Our initial impressions and interpretations may have value, but it is only with repeated listening and an open mind that we can form deeper, more personal connections with the music. One work that demonstrates this clearly is Beethoven's piano sonata in D minor. Commonly known as the "Tempest" sonata because the first movement evokes the image of a storm, the work is often interpreted as a program piece inspired by William Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*, despite a significant lack of evidence within the music to support that theory.¹ The storm depicted in the music is undeniable, however, prompting musicologists to interpret the piece instead as a musical representation of a tempest.

¹ 1; Schiff, Andrés. "Andrés Schiff Explores the Beethoven Piano Sonatas." Lecture, from Wigmore Hall, London, UK, 2004-2006.

2; Tovey, Donald Francis, and Barry Cooper. "Sonata in D Minor, Op. 31, No. 2." *A Companion to Beethoven's Pianoforte Sonatas: Bar-by-bar Analysis*. Revised Edition ed. London: Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music, 1998. 121-29. Print.

Over two hundred years later, storm imagery in music has taken on a vastly different role, and is often used in popular music as a metaphor for love and relationships. While this new programmatic idea differs greatly from the literature-based theories of the nineteenth century, it is still possible to apply such contemporary metaphors to classical music. If examined in the context of the arousal theory of emotional expression and contemporary musical representations of storms, such as Hunter Hayes' songs "Storm Warning" and "Rainy Season," it is possible to interpret the first movement of Beethoven's "Tempest" sonata not only as a representation of an actual tempest—Shakespearean or otherwise—but also as a musical metaphor for love and relationships.

The first movement of the sonata, the *Largo-Allegro*, has an unmistakably tempestuous feel to it. It begins with a wistful arpeggiated dominant chord in the first inversion, immediately followed by a 4-bar *Allegro* theme in D minor (the tonic key).² The *Allegro* theme gives way to an *Adagio* pause, once more on the dominant, then the *Largo-Allegro* sequence repeats again a third higher. As shown in Figure 1, the tempo shifts four times within the first twelve bars, preventing the listener from feeling settled in one consistent tempo.

² Music analysis drawn from Tovey, 121-129.

Figure 1

The image displays two systems of musical notation for a piano piece. The first system, starting at measure 17, is divided into three sections: 'Largo.' (measures 17-18), 'Allegro.' (measures 19-24), and 'Adagio.' (measures 25-26). The 'Adagio' section is marked with a circled '5'. The second system, starting at measure 10, is divided into 'Largo.' (measures 10-11) and 'Allegro.' (measures 12-17), with a circled '10' at the beginning of the 'Allegro' section. The notation includes treble and bass staves with various musical symbols such as dynamics (pp, p*, cresc., sf), articulation marks, and fingering numbers. The bass line in the first system shows a clear upward trend in pitch, contributing to a sense of tension.

These first twelve bars set the mood for the rest of the movement as Beethoven continues to shift tempo between *Largo*, *Adagio*, and *Allegro*. He also uses a rising bass line to create a feeling of tension and agitation, evident in measures 8-12 above. The second theme, beginning at measure 62 after a short transition, contains elements of the traditional “sigh” theme, with short phrases that descend from a higher pitch to a lower one, however it is not lyrical in the way one might expect, rather the phrases are more disjointed and punctuated with high notes (as in measure 67-68, shown in Figure 2) and accompanied by a tumultuous rising bass line in measure 68-73.

Figure 2

The image shows two systems of musical notation for a piano piece. The first system covers measures 67 to 70. The right-hand part (treble clef) features chords with fingerings 4, 2, 3, 2, 4, 3, 4, 2, 5, 2, 4, 1, 4, 2, 4, 1. The left-hand part (bass clef) has fingerings 3, 4, 3, 4, 3, 1, 4, 1, 2, 1, 3, 4, 1, 3, 2, 1. Dynamics include *sf*, *ff*, *p*, *sf*, and *cresc.*. A circled measure number (70) is present. The second system covers measures 71 to 75. The right-hand part has fingerings 3, 2, 4, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 3, 4, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. The left-hand part has fingerings 3, 4, 3, 2, 1, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, 1, 2, 1, 4, 1, 2, 1. Dynamics include *p* and *sf*. A circled measure number (75) is present.

The exposition repeats, and the development section begins in *Largo* once again with three more long, arpeggiated chords. This time the chords are more dissonant; the second is a diminished 7th chord, the third an F# major which becomes a C# major that does not resolve.³ The *Allegro* tempo bursts forth once more in F# minor and rises up by steps as it did in the exposition. Beethoven concentrates the melody in the left hand rather than the right, creating a dark and stormy mood. In the recapitulation, Beethoven follows the same pattern of *Largo*, *Allegro*, and *Adagio* as in the exposition, but with short recitative-style phrases inserted between the *Largo* and *Allegro* sections. The movement ends with a coda that resonates deep in the bass, and two final chords: an F that resolves into the tonic D minor.

While many listeners assume that the piece's nickname and its storm-like features harken to Shakespeare's play, this is not necessarily the case. Noted classical pianist András Schiff and musicologist Donald Francis Tovey adamantly disagree with that notion, stating that trying to find parallels between the music and the play is merely empty speculation, and that each work "contains much that would

³ Tovey, 123.

be violently out of place in the other.”⁴ Both men do concede, however, that there is a mood common to both pieces. That mood leads others, like music professor Owen Jander, to interpret the sonata not as a representation of *The Tempest* but rather of a tempest. The literary work need not have any relation to this piece. In fact, at the time of its composition, tempest and storm scenes were incredibly popular in operas and other theatrical works, as well as in paintings.⁵ Even other instrumental compositions that precede Beethoven’s, such as Justin Heinrich Knecht’s organ piece, *Die durch ein Donnerwetter unterbrochne Hirtenwonne*, or “Shepherd’s celebration, interrupted by a Thunderstorm” (1794), depicted a musical storm rumbling in the distance, then violently erupting above a pleasant pastoral scene. Musical storms in the late eighteenth century were particularly popular among organists because of their instrument’s unparalleled ability to produce thunderous sounds. Less common were musical storms composed for other instruments, for instance Michel Woldemar’s solo violin piece, *Gamme en orage*, which loosely translates to “Range in storm,” and of course, Beethoven’s piano sonata in D minor.

In the context of this plethora of musical storms, Jander proceeds to analyze the sonata in the same way. He describes the *Largo* sections as the calm before the storm and later the peaceful eye of the storm. According to him, the first twenty measures comprise the building of the storm, which breaks at measure 21, not with a loud crash of thunder or a lightning strike, but with a percussive D in the bass.

⁴ 1; Schiff, 2; Tovey, 121.

⁵ Musical analysis and historical context from Jander, Owen. “Genius in the Arena of Charlatanry: The First Movement of Beethoven’s ‘Tempest’ Sonata in Cultural Context.” In *Musica Franca: Essays in Honor of Frank A. D’Accone*, edited by Irene Alm, Alyson McLamore, and Colleen Reardon, 589-620. Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1996.

Through the development section the storm grows and advances, and the recapitulation draws both on the final burst of the storm, and the eerie calm after it has finally ceased. Given the popularity of storm imagery in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and Beethoven's own comments about *The Tempest*, his D minor piano sonata clearly represents a tempest of some kind, though perhaps not Shakespeare's.

Now, if the music represents a storm, let us take a moment to examine what the storm may in turn represent. We begin this process by analyzing the emotions expressed in the sonata. Jander cites Johann Jakob Engel's belief that in writing musical storms, the emphasis must be placed on the expression of human emotions that the storm generates.⁶ Thus, the composition becomes less about the storm itself than about people's emotional reactions to the storm. Jander points out that what makes Beethoven's D minor sonata an effective musical tempest is the gradual intensification of human fear throughout the piece.⁷ As the storm advances and recedes during the development and recapitulation, we experience new waves of fear, which help to build the feeling of tension and release that composers often strive for. The true effect of the storm the listener experiences stems not from the music's depiction of thunder or lightning, but from its expression of foreboding, fear, and finally relief at the passing of the storm. This theory incorporates elements of the arousal theory of emotional expression, which philosopher Stephen Davies

⁶ Jander, 606.

⁷ Jander, 620.

explains as music's ability to "evoke the corresponding emotion in the listener."⁸

The purpose of Beethoven's sonata is not to illustrate an actual tempest, but rather to evoke the emotions associated with one, so that listeners will feel the emotions first, and subsequently experience the storm as well.

But if the representation of the storm in music is entirely emotion-based, is it not quite possible some listeners will associate those emotions with a different concept or experience? It is, and such associations are common if we fast forward two hundred years or so to examine representations of storms in contemporary popular music. For the purpose of this particular discussion, two contrasting songs by up-and-coming country artist Hunter Hayes provide an interesting perspective on the modern-day version of the musical storm. Hayes' first single, "Storm Warning," originally released in April of 2011, depicts him regretting falling in love with a beautiful and charming woman.⁹ Hayes uses a storm as a metaphor for the woman, calling her a "cat 5 kind" (a reference to category 5 hurricanes) and "the kind of flood you'll never forget."¹⁰ Such imagery paints a picture in the listener's mind of a tall, beautiful, tantalizing woman with whom men fall madly in love and lose all sense of reason, until they are left wondering what just hit them.

Musically, the song follows a similar idea as the storm in Beethoven's sonata. The verses depict the anticipation of the impending storm with the catchy melody

⁸ Davies, Stephen. "Emotions Expressed and Aroused by Music: Philosophical Perspectives." *Handbook of Music and Emotion: Theory, Research, Applications*, edited by Patrik N. Juslin and John A. Sloboda, 29. Oxford University Press, 2010.

⁹ Hensel, Amanda. "Hunter Hayes, 'Storm Warning' – Song Review." <http://tasteofcountry.com/hunter-hayes-storm-warning-review/>. 11 October 2014.

¹⁰ "Storm Warning Lyrics." <http://rockgenius.com/Hunter-hayes-storm-warning-lyrics>. 19 October 2014.

concentrated in the electric guitar, and the chorus portrays the storm breaking with the addition of heavier percussion and bass guitar. Between the second and third choruses there is a brief electric guitar solo, which builds up the intensity only for it to drop in the third chorus, giving the impression of reaching the eye of the storm. This lasts only until the final chorus breaks out in one last burst of energy. The outro keeps up the that energy at first before finally fading into Hayes' acceptance of his fate in the aftermath of the storm, that is to say, the aftermath of his encounter with this whirlwind of a woman.

Hayes' other metaphoric storm song, "Rainy Season," is the longest track on his self-titled debut album at just over five minutes. It is a soft, soulful ballad that, along with "Storm Warning," has been hailed as a standout song on the album, even with just one listen.¹¹ The mood of "Rainy Season" could not be more different from "Storm Warning." In this song, Hayes uses the idea of a storm as a metaphor not for a person, but for his failing relationship. He expresses that while he hopes "this storm is just passing through," he knows deep down that "drop after drop we're destroying this house and each other."¹² Hayes begs his lover to "tell me you're not leaving / It's just the rainy season."¹³ Hayes' storm in this song shows a drastic shift, from the tempestuous woman he encounters in "Storm Warning" to the gloomy torrential rainstorm that simply does not let up.

¹¹ Dukes, Billy. "Hunter Hayes, '(Encore)' – Album Review."

<http://tasteofcountry.com/hunter-hayes-encore/>. 12 October 2014.

¹² "Rainy Season Lyrics." <http://rockgenius.com/Hunter-hayes-rainy-season-lyrics>. 19 October 2014.

¹³ *Ibid.*

This mood is reflected in the music as well, which begins with the melancholy melody concentrated in the piano and soulful electric guitar, and rounded out with deep bass guitar notes and light percussion. This song, too, includes an electric guitar solo, which contrasts well with the one in “Storm Warning.” This solo builds intensity slowly (it lasts about four times longer than the one in “Storm Warning”) and the guitar takes on a pining, wailing quality that arouses a feeling of hopeless anguish. Even as the solo gains momentum into the second chorus, it never loses its slow tempo. One can imagine the rain pouring heavily at this point, and as Hayes sings the final chorus, all accompaniment except for piano drops out briefly, reflecting the emptiness Hayes must feel at the loss of his love. The minute-long outro includes very few words (the last thirty seconds consist almost solely of ‘ooh’s) accompanied by the wail of the electric guitar. The final burst of the storm hits at 4:29, which fades slowly from 4:55 to the end, as though the storm may at last be passing through, though it is already too late for Hayes’ relationship.

The long, slow-moving rainstorm depicted in Hayes’ lyrics and music represents the slow and agonizing decline of a loving relationship. We do not know why Hayes’ relationship fell apart, but the metaphors he incorporates into the song make clear that it has, and nothing he says or does now could prevent the inevitable breakup. While “Rainy Season” provides a blatant contrast to “Storm Warning,” Hayes is equally helpless in both songs, and has been thrown into circumstances he cannot control. This same helplessness is the cause of the fear and foreboding present in Beethoven’s sonata. It is a common theme in storm scenes and stories; humans can do little to prepare for a destructive storm, and once the tempest hits,

nothing will stop it from destroying people, land, and infrastructure. Hayes is at the mercy of the tempest woman and the dissolving of his relationship in the same way people are at the mercy of the weather.

This interchangeability of emotions from one situation to another demonstrates how the emotions depicted in a musical storm can translate into something entirely different given a new perspective. While the composer's or artist's intended meaning—a storm—is important to the listener's interpretation of their work, it is not the only valid interpretation that exists. Peter Kivy discusses this in his book *Music Alone*, explaining that the composer's intent, does not always signify a decisive meaning; rather the music's impression upon the listener can also give rise to unique and equally plausible meanings.¹⁴ To put it in Peircean terms, musical meaning is a product of the indexical connections individuals make between the emotions they feel and their own experiences.¹⁵ This is a phenomenon I discovered firsthand with the presentation of my creative reinterpretation of Beethoven's and Hayes' music.

My creative work is a small clay sculpture colored with acrylic paint, depicted in Figure 3.

¹⁴ Kivy, Peter. *Music Alone*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press (1990), 29.

¹⁵ Turino, Thomas. "Introduction: Why Music Matters." *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.



My original intention was to create a visual representation of the story of Shakespeare's *Tempest*, in which the center piece portrays the island Prospero and Miranda are stranded on. The blue texture on the island represents the tempest Prospero conjures, and the three colored threads wrapping around the center stand for the three subplots of the story, which all come together peacefully in the end. Only after finishing the piece did it occur to me that such an interpretation adds little value to the purpose of this project, which is to explore other meanings in Beethoven's music beyond the traditional ones. Fortunately, this forced me to reexamine my art piece in much the same way, and discover new meanings I had not originally intended to express. I formed a second interpretation of the piece as a representation of a relationship instead. In this interpretation, each thread represents a metaphorical "storm" that could befall a couple in a relationship: red for anger, green for envy, purple for vanity and self-centeredness. At the start of the relationship, the potential destructive power of these storms is great and vibrant, and as the couple grows together they learn to overcome these problems until

eventually they fade into insignificance. Without intending to, I created a piece of art that parallels the “Tempest” sonata and Hayes’ storm songs perfectly. At first glance all four pieces appear simply to depict a storm (or perhaps the program of a play, in the case of the sonata), but when evaluated from a new, broader perspective they present a deeper meaning: commentary on the nature of relationships.

I further explored the concept of individual interpretation in my presentation of the sculpture to the rest of the class. Before explaining my intended meaning for the piece, I asked everyone to examine it carefully and write down what *they* believed it represented. From sixteen of my peers, I received sixteen vastly different interpretations of the artwork. Impressions ranged from a depiction of emotions spiraling out of control to raindrops falling and gaining momentum, or even octopus arms enveloping a sinking ship. Several people mentioned that the sculpture was upside down, and if turned over would resemble a tornado or vortex. One student viewed it in the exact opposite way I did. She described how a relationship starts out innocent and happy (the top of the sculpture) and with time negative emotions begin to appear, spiral out of control, and eventually cause the relationship to fail (the bottom of the sculpture). It is a pessimist’s approach, but one that connects the piece to Beethoven and Hayes even more accurately than my optimistic one.

Tempests do not build; they destroy. Similarly, this sculpture depicts the destruction of a relationship, though that was not my original intention. With this perspective in mind, let us examine the meaning of Beethoven’s sonata in a way he likely did not intend: as a metaphor for the deterioration of a loving relationship.

In order to fully understand this approach, we must come to an agreement on what musical metaphor is. Robert Hatten, professor of music theory at the University of Texas, draws on philosopher Nelson Goodman in his exploration of metaphor in music, stating that for Goodman, “any meaning resulting from the conjunction of two different domains was by definition metaphorical.”¹⁶ The problem with metaphor in music, however, is that metaphor is closely associated with language, and music and language exist as two entirely separate modes of expression.¹⁷ Thus, the conjunction of domains must translate between modes of expression in order to achieve the new meaning of a metaphor as it would function in language. Hatten goes on to describe how this is possible: “Something akin to creative metaphor in language may be achieved in a musical work when two different correlations [literal meanings in music] are brought together to produce a third meaning.”¹⁸ In this way, music generates metaphor internally, and that metaphoric meaning is drawn out through the language used to describe the music.

In the case of Beethoven’s D minor sonata, let us take this concept one step further by bringing together the literal meaning of the sonata and the literal meanings of Hayes’ contemporary songs. As previously explored in Jander’s analysis, the literal meaning of the sonata centers on its depiction of a tempest through the emotions of foreboding, fear, and relief. The literal meanings of Hayes’ songs center on their depictions of relationships through the emotions of regret,

¹⁶ Hatten, Robert S. “Metaphor in music.” In *Musical Signification: Essays in the Semiotic theory and Analysis of Music*, edited by Eero Tarasti, 374-389. New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1995.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Hatten, 376-377.

sadness and acceptance. When these two meanings are combined, they generate the metaphor that the tempest is a declining relationship. Looking back at the sonata from this perspective, the same melodies and tempos take on a whole new meaning. The opening chords evoke a sense of peace, quickly interrupted by the first wave of hardship the couple faces. In the repeat of the exposition the relationship once again returns to normal; they have weathered this first storm, but the reconciliation is only temporary. Soon the same problems erupt, again disturbing the once happy relationship. The couple barely manages to withstand this second storm, and the calm that returns at the start of the development section contains a new underlying tension that suggests the couple's disputes remain as unresolved as Beethoven's C# major chord. The development's rising bass line brings to mind the escalation of the conflict and resentment between the pair. By the time the recapitulation begins, the two have all but given up on their relationship, and that feeling of hopelessness is presented in the form of the somber recitative-style phrases in measures 143-148 and 152-157 (Figure 4).

Figure 4

The musical score consists of three systems of piano music. The first system, marked 'Largo.', begins at measure 140 and ends at measure 145. It features a treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a bass clef with a key signature of one flat (Bb). Dynamics include *p*, *sf*, *dim.*, and *pp*. Performance instructions include 'con espressione e semplice'. The second system, marked 'Allegro.', begins at measure 150 and includes measure 150. It features a treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a bass clef with a key signature of one flat (Bb). Dynamics include *p* and *cresc.*. The third system, marked 'Adagio.' and 'Largo.', begins at measure 155 and includes measure 155. It features a treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a bass clef with a key signature of one flat (Bb). Dynamics include *sf*, *p*, and *pp*. Performance instructions include 'con espressione e semplice'. Fingerings and ornaments are indicated throughout.

The same themes—the same troubles—from the exposition return, only more dramatically this time, with the left and right hands playing extremely low and high, respectively, in the register. The last two chords of the coda, F to D minor, signify the end of both the movement and the relationship with an utter and exhausted finality. The storm at last has passed, and it leaves the disheartened couple empty and alone in its wake.

I must acknowledge, of course, that this is merely one interpretation of Beethoven's work. Others who listen to this piece may interpret it in vastly different way. The subjectivity of meaning in music allows for the formation of such distinct interpretations, regardless of the composer's original intentions. This is not to imply that the intention of the composer or artist is insignificant. On the contrary, there is great importance in the emotions composers wish to arouse in their audience.

However, the indexical connections these emotions cause vary depending on the individual, giving rise to a myriad of potential interpretations for nearly any piece of music. This is demonstrated most clearly in instrumental pieces in particular, since the absence of established lyrical meaning allows for a wider range of interpretation. Even so, many contemporary pop songs include lyrics that could be interpreted in a variety of ways. Just as a single interaction with a person can only present a fraction of their personality, so one's initial impression of a piece of music comprises a mere fraction of its full meaning. If we as listeners are willing to explore unconventional possibilities beyond the music's traditional interpretation, we will find that in many cases there is much more to a song than meets the ear.

Bibliography

- Beethoven, Ludwig van. *Sonate: Op. 31. No. 2.* 1803. Heiligenstadt, 2006.
- Davies, Stephen. "Emotions Expressed and Aroused by Music: Philosophical Perspectives." *Handbook of Music and Emotion: Theory, Research, Applications*, edited by Patrik N. Juslin and John A. Sloboda, 29. Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Dukes, Billy. "Hunter Hayes, '(Encore)' – Album Review." <http://tasteofcountry.com/hunter-hayes-encore/>. 12 October 2014.
- Hatten, Robert S. "Metaphor in music." In *Musical Signification: Essays in the Semiotic theory and Analysis of Music*, edited by Eero Tarasti, 374-389. New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1995.
- Hensel, Amanda. "Hunter Hayes, 'Storm Warning' – Song Review." <http://tasteofcountry.com/hunter-hayes-storm-warning-review/>. 11 October 2014.
- Kivy, Peter. "What Music?" In *Music Alone*, 14-29. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990.
- Kivy, Peter. "Representation as Expression." In *Sound and Semblance: Reflections on Musical Representation*, 124-142. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984.
- Lidov, David. "Why We Still Need Peirce." In *Is Language a Music?*, 122-129. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005.
- Musical analysis and historical context from Jander, Owen. "Genius in the Arena of Charlatanry: The First Movement of Beethoven's 'Tempest' Sonata in Cultural

- Context." In *Musica Franca: Essays in Honor of Frank A. D'Accone*, edited by Irene Alm, Alyson McLamore, and Colleen Reardon, 589-620. Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1996.
- "Rainy Season Lyrics." <http://rock.genius.com/Hunter-hayes-rainy-season-lyrics>. 19 October 2014.
- Robinson, Jenefer. "The Musical Representation: Meaning, Ontology, and Emotion." Review of *The Musical Representation: Meaning, Ontology, and Emotion*, by Charles O. Nussbaum. *University of Notre Dame*, March 6, 2009, Philosophical Reviews. <https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/23934-the-musical-representation-meaning-ontology-and-emotion/>.
- Schiff, András. "András Schiff Explores the Beethoven Piano Sonatas." Lecture, from Wigmore Hall, London, UK, 2004-2006.
- "Storm Warning Lyrics." <http://rock.genius.com/Hunter-hayes-storm-warning-lyrics>. 19 October 2014.
- Tovey, Donald Francis, and Barry Cooper. "Sonata in D Minor, Op. 31, No. 2." A *Companion to Beethoven's Pianoforte Sonatas: Bar-by-bar Analysis*. Revised Edition ed. London: Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music, 1998. 121-29.
- Turino, Thomas. "Introduction: Why Music Matters." *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.