

\* Zen and Op. 111

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THEODORE ADORNO has forcefully supported the idea that social content can be read in a piece of music; that is, that immanent in the structure of a composer's work is the conceptual framework of the society in which he lived and his reaction to it. Yet a man's mind is not exhausted by his social being, and equally derivable from his music are his relations to nature, to art, and to himself. If the possibility of synthesis between the individual and society can be observed in the form of, e. g., Beethoven's Op. 74 quartet, surely more personal meaning can be read in his more introverted, less public, late sonatas. The extent to which a man feels life is something to be resigned to, to conquer, or to love, will be perceivable in his most original work.

In the field of literature, R. H. Blyth has undertaken a similar and no less rewarding task. In Zen and English Literature, he has analyzed passages of poetry and prose to reveal insights that Western authors have shared with the Zen masters of Japan and China. Though certainly Shakespeare knew nothing about Zen as a historical religious movement, the principles of Zen are inherent in the human mind, and therefore universal. Through Blyth's method one can realize how much a poet or novelist has understood of Zen, and therefore of art, religion, and life.

Given that a composer's understanding of life is revealed in the structure, technique, and syntax of his music: if many of the greatest authors of Western culture have shown insight into the principles of

Zen, it is more than probable that examples exist in our musical literature as well. As Blyth says that

beauty is in dustbins and butcher's shops as well,  
but it is more visible in the moon and flowers,

so Zen is in all works of art, but much more visible in some than others. Many musicologists have spoken vaguely of a religious quality in Beethoven's late music, without specifying the elements or techniques in which this quality inheres. Barford, in The Beethoven Companion, uses the Buddhist terms sansara and nirvana to characterize the Piano Sonata Op. 111; and indeed, the second movement of this work strikes the present writer as the richest example of Zen in 19th century European music before Satie. In his analysis, Barford feels it best to observe silence with regard to the second movement. This probably wise course will not be followed here.

THE TWO MOVEMENTS of Op. 111 present such an extreme contrast that questions have been raised about the unity of the work. Barford's analysis of the thematic relationships between the movements is perfectly adequate for this discussion. Only two unifying features need be pointed out here. One is the basic melodic cell consisting of the third, first, and seventh scale degrees, and a related cell (the inversion) based on the fifth, seventh, and first degrees. The other, not mentioned by Barford, is the pervasive use in both movements of decorative figurations using neighbor and passing tones. The highly different functions of these figurations in the two movements will be discussed later. Suffice it to say that the two movements present

similar melodic material and similar decorative techniques under very different aspects. The first aspect is that of teleological striving and accomplishment; the second, that of spontaneity and acceptance - Zen. We will begin by seeing how these aspects affect the use of the smallest units.

A central motif in Blyth's book is the Zen truth expressed by Shakespeare in

there is nothing good or bad but thinking makes it so.

This can be restated by saying that everything has an absolute value, independent of the relative value we place on it. There is no more value in a church than in a garbage heap, or in a tree than in a rusty tin can, except in our arbitrary and constantly changing judgment. In a chapter entitled "Poetry is Everyday Life", Blyth praises Wordsworth for his use of mundane subjects, but chides him for saying that the poet must make these interesting; not realizing that for the well attuned and realistic mind, everything the world can offer is already fascinating. As Cage says, "if only we had ears to hear, there would be no need for concert halls."

In the music of Beethoven's time, the commonest sounds, the ones most deprived of their intrinsic meaning by constant use, were the tonic and dominant triads. The most dissonant and colorful chords admitted by the contemporary theory were the dominant ninth chord and its subset, the diminished seventh chord. The first movement of Op. 111 abounds in the latter kind of chord, giving the entire movement a very strong "emotional coloring", Blyth's term for what he objects

to in romantic poetry. Beethoven even goes beyond the conventional dissonances, since he begins at the most dissonant level:



Beethoven's use of the diminished seventh chord in this movement is not in accord with Zen for two reasons. First, the tendency is set up at the beginning of the piece that every dissonance implies its resolving consonance, and that the consonance occurs more because the dissonance requires it than for its own sake. Both consonance and dissonance are postulated in relation to each other, and each robbed of its absolute value. (Or rather, attention is drawn away from its absolute value. Not that this technique is unusual in 19th century music; but the entire harmonic technique of Romantic music runs counter to Zen.)

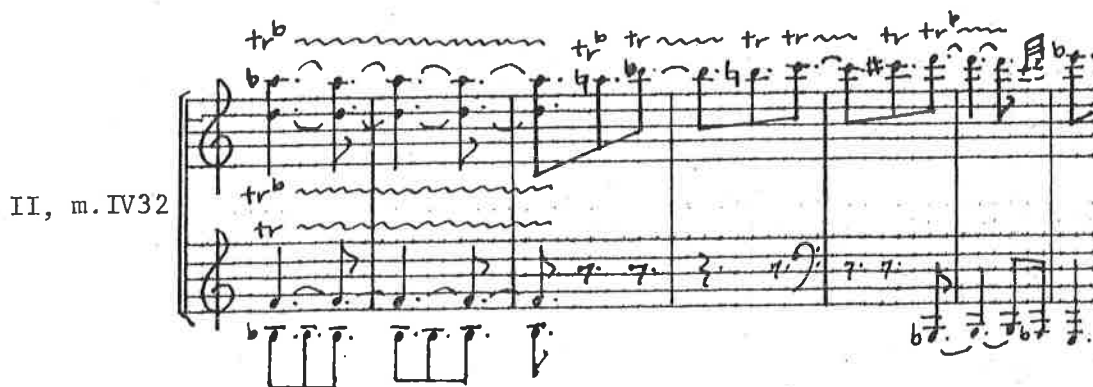
The other reason is the Zen view of emotion; not that it is unreal, but that emotions are transient and unstable phenomena, like the weather, which are to be observed and accepted, but neither controlled nor identified with. Yet here, it is the very need for resolution of these "emotionally colored" chords which propells the movement onward. And the ever-recurring resolution to the major triad, especially in a larger sense, can be heard as an attempt on the part of the musical subject (of which more later) to control the emotion by channelling it into an affirmation of the tonality. In other words, a duality is created between the controller and the controlled which Zen sees as an illusion - an attempt by the personality to cut itself in half.

In the second movement, everything is different. The theme consists mainly of harmonies that were commonplace in Sammartini (although

certainly not in this registral disposition.) Moreover, the slowing down of the harmonic rhythm works against the need for resolution and often makes the resolution seem like an arbitrary second thought. Later in the movement, this technique is expanded to the point that a dissonance can be repeated over and over. This repetition asserts the absolute value of the chord and denies the need for resolution:



(Notice that here, as in many other discussions of Zen, it is difficult to talk about it from a Western standpoint without the concept of denial. The resolution is so much assumed in Beethoven that he has to go out of his way to deny something that has no natural reason for being there. Zen deliberately does away with all such presuppositions.) The technique is brought to a climax in a  $B^b7$  chord ( $B^b D E^b F G A^b$  counting the trilled notes) held for so long that its sonority, its absolute value, replaces its function, its relative value, which latter is only weakly and belatedly fulfilled after a succession of meaningless-sounding trills (meaningless having a negative connotation in common Western thought and a positive one in Zen):



Dissonance without some kind of resolution was simply incompre-

hensible in Beethoven's vocabulary. Within the classical syntax, this is about as far as Beethoven could have gone in the direction of absolute value. His method resembles that of Gertrude Stein in "Tender Buttons":

A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing  
strange a single hurt color and an arrangement in a  
system to pointing.

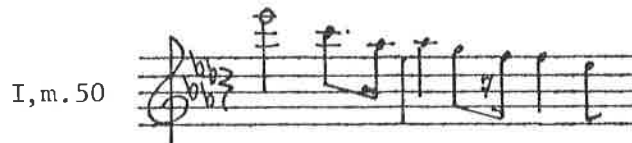
Certain patterns common in English speech are retained, but enough syntax is denied so that the emphasis shifts to the words themselves rather than their relationships.

As for the affective aspect of the harmony, diminished seventh chords are frequent again in the second movement; but several factors conspire to make their resolution less urgent: arpeggiation, rhythmic placement, and repetition without resolution. Perhaps the main factor, though, is that the tonality is so firmly grounded in C Major that there is no danger of its identity becoming obscured through chromaticism.

A problem closely related to relative value is goal-orientation. A common Zen critique of the average life is that it is a travelling between meaningful points, the points between which have no meaning. In our hurry to get from the house to the concert hall, the sights on the road are lost on us. We are oriented towards the future entirely, since when we arrive we are usually already thinking about where we are going next. We accumulate wealth not to enjoy it, but to be able to go on accumulating. Considering the lilies of the field and the birds of the air, Zen tells us that beauty and meaning must exist for us at whatever now we are located, if we are to have meaning and beauty

at all.

The first movement is nothing if not goal-oriented, and that in such a hectic way that often the resolution of each chord already implies another resolution. Scales and arpeggios here are just unimportant notes between teleological endpoints. On a larger scale, the second theme

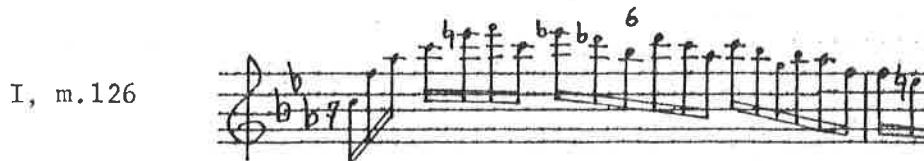


has an air of arrival, the arrival of the long-awaited transformation into major. But even though the phrase is repeated, the significant moment cannot be held onto, and the music immediately crashes down an arpeggio and runs back up a scale in a great hurry to the next structural point.

The second movement does everything Beethoven could to avoid teleology. Often when one thinks one has moved, one comes right back to the same spot:



The same decorative figures that merely decorated a line between two points in the first movement



float aimlessly and for their own sake in the second:



II, m. IV18



To someone who can only understand life in terms of goals and tangible accomplishments, this wandering, like the goal-denying music of Cage and Feldman, is certainly a "tale told by an idiot...signifying nothing." To the mind attuned to nature it has the same feeling as the trees blowing in the wind.

AN IMPORTANT PRECEPT in the Zen life is the avoidance of karma, that is, actions that arise from desire and demand a result. Such actions always require future actions and therefore limit freedom and rob the now moment of its absolute quality. In Crime and Punishment, Raskolnikov's murder determines all his actions for the rest of the book. Thoreau, understanding the principle, threw away his three pieces of limestone when he realized they would require dusting.

One of the most important and innovative features of Beethoven's music is the idea that the course of the entire piece is a result of the tendencies of the theme. In Op. 111, the first four measures already propel the tonality towards the subdominant. This action creates karma on two levels of Beethoven's structure: 1. the tonality must return to c minor for the statement of the first theme and again at the end of the movement, and 2. the subdominant area must be dealt with and justified in relation to the tonic. In much of Beethoven's earlier music, these objectives are persuasively accomplished. Here, as so often in life, the act of grasping almost destroys

the grasper; on the last page of the movement, the tonality is barely saved from moving to the subdominant altogether.

The weakened functional ties between the chords of the theme of the second movement keep the changing harmonies from propelling the tonality in any direction. It is firmly set in C major, secure enough to leave C major without needing to. The A minor part of the theme does not require any large scale move to A to justify it. When the music does begin to modulate, it is without structural purpose or goal: E<sup>b</sup>, c, A<sup>b</sup>, G. Blyth says that

freedom of the mind, freedom of the will, consists in following one's instincts, disdaining all causes and effects, all rationalizing, to act like life itself which lives the life of life,

and praises Don Quixote for "running mad without the least constraint or necessity." In this modulating passage, each key resembles a fleeting emotion that passes over consciousness. One could think of Baba Ram Dass:

Emotions are like waves. Watch them disappear in the distance on the vast calm ocean.

No tension arises from these modulations. They do not arise from karma, are not necessitated by a previous tendency. They just happen spontaneously: Beethoven the improviser.

Moving to the largest level, the form of each movement is a clear expression of the Zen-non-Zen duality. The first movement is a clear sonata-allegro. Adorno considers the sonata-allegro

the process through which the musical subject demonstrates

its self-generated powers as it "goes out", in dialectical terms, from itself into the generalizing world of Other or object, through which it demonstrates its freedom in objective reality.

A primary feature of this dialectic is the reassertion of the self (the subject) in the recapitulation

for it is through the recapitulation that the subject demonstrates its power to return to itself, no matter how vigorously and far it has traveled into the world of object.

For Adorno, the sonata-allegro idea implies a subject-object duality and the ability (even necessity) for the subject to exercise free will in the tonal area. For Zen, this duality is an illusion created by the mind, as is free will (and determinism).

The subject-object duality is easy to analyse in a novel about a person and the situations he encounters. In music, one must determine wherein the subject and object consist. Adorno's view, consistent with his dialectical Hegelianism, is that the melody, or theme is the subject (as it is often called), and the tonality the objective world which partially determines it and which it helps determine. Barford's more striking view, consistent with his interest in mysticism and the transcendence of the ego, is that the subject is the tonality which defines itself throughout the piece. Instead of the subject being the foreground against a background of objects, the subject is consciousness itself, the background in which all events take place. This second view is more consistent with Zen psychology. Still both conceptualizations provide a standpoint for a Zen critique of Op. 111.

In the first movement, Adorno's subject, the theme, propels itself onward by figuration into a world of contrapuntal lines in which the theme periodically reasserts itself in one form or another. There is a clear distinction between the theme and the lines which accompany it. In the second movement, however, the theme-subject does not move outward from itself, but stays centered. In fact, the variation form seems particularly appropriate for an expression of Zen, for it denies (at least here, if not always) a sense of accumulative accomplishment by its constant return. The theme is like Camus' Sisyphus, reaching the top of the mountain only to start over again, and the Existentialist agrees with the devotee of Zen that "we must imagine Sisyphus happy." Here, considering the variations to be upon the entire group of four voices that constitutes the theme, it is impossible to make a distinction between what is the theme and what isn't. Not only is the development of the theme non-goal-oriented, but the subject-object duality does not exist.

Likewise, if we take Barford's view that the subject here is the key of C, the first movement appears as a struggle to establish and maintain the subject's identity. A duality is created between C and not-C, the most dangerous element of the latter being the F minor into which the movement nearly collapses in its final measures. For Zen, this I, not-I distinction is a dangerous illusion. As Watts says, my skin is what joins me to the outside air as much as what separates me from it. Once self-assertion and identification are replaced with an identification with the universe, modulation can take place without tension, which is what happens in the second movement. Here the C major tonality does not assert and

define itself, because it cannot lose itself; it contains all other tonalities. The lack of urgency in resolving the dissonances of this movement and the almost pan-diatonic treatment of harmony are akin to the true mystic state which is identification with the universe.

IT IS FRANKLY admitted that the analogies drawn here are imperfect. There are elements of goal orientation in the Arietta, and it is perhaps possible to see the modulating section as a brief development, followed by a recapitulating variation; this superimposition of forms is common in late Beethoven. But one cannot expect Beethoven to step out of his place in history and geography and write the "Trois Morceau en Forme de Poire". Whatever truly religious insights Beethoven had had to be expressed in the musical language that he and his contemporaries understood. The hierarchically structured English language sometimes seems as badly suited for expressing Zen as does Classical tonality.

The most obvious difference between the Zen and non-Zen states of mind, however, does not suffer from the violence of the musical language: the contrast between the constant anxiety of the self-clinging life and the unshakeable calm, the peace of God which fills the life in harmony with natural processes, that shares Nietzsche's "love of fate", and that alone constitutes true wisdom. Regarding the second movement of Op. 111, Beethoven can say with Hui-Neng, the sixth Buddhist patriarch,

calmness and wisdom are the foundations of my method. Do not be deceived into thinking that the two are different. They are one substance and not two. Calmness is the substance of wisdom and wisdom is the function of calmness.