The Opening Theme of Beethoven’s “Ghost” Trio: 
A Discourse in Semiotic Method

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The Piano Trio in D Major, opus 70, nº1, was composed in 1809. Its minor-mode slow movement, Largo assai ed espressive, is filled with such chromaticism and tremolos that Czerny (1970: 97) associated it with the scene from Shakespeare where Hamlet encounters the ghost of his father. William Kinderman (1995: 134) notes that the uncanny attribution is literally warranted, but the connection is not with Hamlet but with Macbeth. In 1808 Beethoven was sketching ideas for an opera based on a Macbeth libretto by Heinrich von Collin, and entries for the abandoned opera project are found interspersed with ideas for the slow movement of the trio. If a semiotic approach to musical meaning depended on such programmatic suggestions, I might well have chosen the slow movement for a demonstration of semiotic method. But it is to the decidedly less gloomy first movement that I wish to direct attention, specifically to the opening theme complex. I plan to demonstrate how we can come to a deeper understanding of the expressive meaning of this opening by pursuing evidence from a variety of perspectives, and that this process, both hermeneutic and structuralist, will help us understand not only what, but how the music means. In the course of my presentation, I hope to demonstrate the breadth of a semiotic approach properly conceived – not as an alternative to other forms of analysis, but as a means of interpreting the kinds of evidence that they provide, and perhaps finding other kinds of evidence they might overlook.
A characterization of this theme complex, from the opening up to the counterstatement launching the transition at m. 21, might sound something like this:

“With an energetic burst akin to the opening of the Piano Sonata, opus 10, nº3, the unison opening motive, X, sequences upward before breaking off with a surprise shift to F-natural. Sustained in the cello like a written-out fermata, this F-natural is then supported by a consonant Bb in the piano, before moving to an F# above a cadential 6/4 and the elided beginning in the cello of a more lyrical first theme, Y.”

At least, this is what one might observe from a rather traditional point of view, which I have expanded to embrace such expressive terms as “energetic” and “surprise.” An even closer analysis, perhaps inspired by Schenkerian voice-leading insights, would recognize that the Bb-F consonant fifth implies an unstable German augmented-sixth, which resolves in contrary motion by half-steps to a cadential 6/4, and thus the whole opening is one briefly interrupted expansion of the tonic-to-dominant key-defining progression. Students of Leonard Meyer might note the delayed realization of the implied F#, or the thematic arrival in m. 7 is not congruent with the proper arrival of the tonic in the bass, which does not occur until m. 11. And devotees of Rudolph Réti might have noted the derivation of the cello melody, Y, from the opening X motive, as an augmented inversion.

Historians might pursue E. T. A. Hoffmann’s instructive review of 1813 (in Charlton 1989: 300-324), and learn that he considers what I call motives X and Y to be the first and second themes of the movement, although he is apparently unaware of their inversive relationship. Hoffmann’s review of the opus 70 piano trios, along with his more famous review of the Fifth Symphony, may be credited with demonstrating the organic, motivic generational process through which Beethoven develops his larger heroic-period forms. Hoffmann concentrates on the “ingenious, contrapuntal texture” of the development, which he presents in full score (not otherwise available for study in this form at the time of his article). He also mentions crucial modulations and even provides a figured bass reduction of the rewritten transition in the recapitulation – a forerunner of a Schenkerian linear Zug analysis. Hoffmann is also willing to comment on the character of my theme Y, noting that it “expresses a genial serenity, a cheerful, confident awareness of its own strength and substance.” I think we might be in general agreement with his assessment, although he offers us no particular reasoning to support it.
Well, what more needs to be said? We have historical warrant for both our theoretical analysis and expressive interpretation of the passage, and we have mined its secrets with respect to the implied German augmented sixth in m. 6, the non-congruence of thematic and tonal arrivals in mm. 7 and 11, respectively, and even the clever derivation of Y from X. What more could semiotics offer, assuming we’ve done our homework thus far?

A great deal more. Because what I have presented thus far is only analogous to parsing a poem, analyzing its syntax, and offering a subjective impression of one of its moods. Unless we blithely accept Schenker’s insistence that pitch structure, with a little metric interpretation thrown in, reveals the “true content” of music (as Schenker implies in the title to one of his Meisterwerk essays, “Beethovens 3. Sinfonie zum erstenmal in ihren wahren Inhalt dargestellt” [my italics]), I think we need to keep asking ourselves how the structures we have discovered might be based on typical meanings in the style, and how they might be creating unique kinds of meanings within the constraints of that style. In my work on Beethoven (Hatten, 1994), I call the first kind of meaning a stylistic correlation, and it is based upon the generalization of types; the second kind of meaning I term a stylistic interpretation, and it is based upon the creation of tokens. One way to explore these meanings is to investigate structural oppositions, which take on an asymmetrical character of marked vs. unmarked, and which allow us to map an opposition in musical structure more rigorously to an opposition in musical meaning. An example will be helpful.

In mm. 6-7 I earlier analyzed the partial augmented-sixth chord as resolving to a cadential 6/4. But my impression of that chord is not cadential; rather, it constitutes a very strong arrival. Hence, my coining of the term “arrival 6/4” in my book. Other examples may be found in the slow movement of the Hammerklavier (m. 14), as well as the coda to the first movement of opus 101 (m. 90). Notice the rhetorical effect of resolution as well as arrival is more telling at the moment the 6/4 occurs than it is at the actual cadence. Indeed, when I hear the lyrical “y” theme above the ongoing dominant pedal, I do not hear it as unstable, as with the dominant pedal points underlying the second themes of the piano sonatas opus 2, n°1; opus 13; or opus 31, n°2; but rather as remarkably stable – both presentational and as though the presentation were on a pedestal. Now why should that be? Partly, I think, because of the context of this pedal, which resolves the implied instability of our partial augmented-sixth as well as enunciating the first periodically stable thematic statement. Not only does poignant lowered-6 resolve to 5 in the bass, but
crucially the questioning lowered-3 is pulled up to raised-3 in the upper voice. The positive, Picardy-third effect offers its resolitional stability through the following measures. And the glowing consonance of a major 6/4 chord, which was once recognized (by Helmholtz) as acoustically more consonant than the root position major triad, offers perceptual affordance to this interpretation.

I have just given several reasons for a slight reinterpretation of a particular chord, and now I should like to explain how that reinterpretation might be understood semiotically. In terms of markedness, the opposition between minor and major (exemplified in the opposition between mm. 5-6 on the one hand, and mm. 1-4 and 7 on the other) can be quite powerful. In m. 5 it clouds an otherwise positive emotional state with uncertainty that is potentially poignant or even a forewarning of the tragic. In m. 7, its suspended uncertainty is resolved rather gloriously into the arrival 6/4, thus encapsulating the potentially negative within the larger embrace of the positive.

In stylistic terms, minor is marked within major, and thus m.5 marks the first expressive crux of a movement that begins with a rather general positive energy (topically, a mix of the heroic and hunt-based pastoral, but beginning with such helter-skelter energy as to potentially be setting up a comic reversal). The marked term of an opposition correlates with a narrower realm of meaning (here, the mutated third scale degree disrupts with a strong stylistic correlation, interpretable here as a hint of the poignant, or potentially tragic). But when major in turn reverses (and resolves) minor, as in m. 7, it draws on the marked status of the Picardy third within the realm of minor. Thus, m. 7 may be heard as the second expressive crux of the movement, and its almost premature, positive resolution of the brief moment of poignant uncertainty also puts its stamp on the expressive genre of the movement as a whole. We can be fairly certain that this movement will have a non-tragic outcome (though the issue of F-natural and Bb will have its own consequences thematically).

It would be a misunderstanding to assume that a particular musical event is either marked or unmarked; rather, it may entail a number of oppositional relationships, each of which contributes something to the overall interpretation of the event. Thus, the minor mode in mm. 5-6 is both marked with respect to the previous major, and unmarked with respect to the following major. Furthermore, markedness values may actually reverse as styles grow or change. For example, the cadential 6/4 is marked as unstable relative to its syntactical role in a cadence. As an arrival 6/4, however, it may be marked as stable relative to its resolution of
a German augmented-sixth (or other dissonant chord), especially when in conjunction with a strong thematic arrival. The pedal point on a dominant is marked as unstable in most environments, but it may be marked as stable when arising from an arrival 6/4. This historical style change, which might more neutrally be described as the contextual migration of a cadential 6/4, is ratified to rhetorical excess by Franz Liszt in what has been dubbed a “salvation 6/4.” Richard Cohn (personal communication) brought my attention to a written account by Gustav Jenner of his composition lessons with Brahms (Frisch 1990: 185-204), in which Brahms cautioned against overuse of this kind of 6/4: “As excellent as the effect of this chord can be – naturally I am referring only to cadential six-four chords – it is often nothing but the symptom and in its flabbiness the true reflection of a completely lame and exhausted imagination” (198).

The first movement of the F.A.E. Sonata for Violin and Piano, written by Schumann’s student, Dietrich, provides ample illustration of the arrival 6/4’s rhetorical abuse through overuse.

For an example of its noble/heroic usage in Beethoven, consider the second theme from the first movement of the last piano sonata, opus 111 (mm. 50ff.) Here, an arrival 6/4 (m. 50) links positive resolution of the thematized diminished-seventh chord (m. 49) with the initiation of a noble theme, and the nobility is cued by dotted rhythms. The theme would be unstable only to a Schenkerian; phenomenologically, it is exquisitely stable – as though presented on a pedestal – and only its brevity and parenthetical appearance between two appearances of a diminished seventh chord attest to its still-illusory status in the expressive drama of the movement. The tragedy of the first movement manages at best to hint at this more positive realm, ending with a Picardy third resolution at the end of the coda, where a somewhat resignational emphasis on the minor subdominant leads to a final resolution of the thematized diminished-seventh as viio7 to I. The unfinished character of this resolution leads us to expect a more profound transformation, which Beethoven provides with the transcendent, C major final movement.

The next three examples illustrate an interesting growth process with respect to the arrival 6/4 as a type in Beethoven’s style, with extension to Schubert. In the coda to the finale of Beethoven’s Sonata for Piano and Cello in A Major, opus 69, a subito piano marks a rhetorical arrival 6/4 on the subdominant in the piano (m. 195). Note, however, the pedal fifth of the IV chord is already present, and thus the pedal effect is already in place in the piano part. Instead of the lowered third (F-natural) which would occur with the German augmented-sixth (not appropriate as an
elaboration of the subdominant), Beethoven resolves an augmented dominant of IV, written with a raised second (E#). Note also that the cello has the bass, emphasizing the resolution of E# to F#, and producing in effect an arrival 6/3 on the subdominant.

In Beethoven’s Sonata for Piano and Cello in D Major, opus 102, no.2, the coda to the first movement features the arrival 6/3 on the tonic chord (m. 143), logically appearing in this inversion because of its proper voice-leading resolution of an inverted German augmented-sixth chord (m. 142) with the lowered-3 in the bass. The sense of a “breakthrough” as arrival (or return, in this case) is perhaps even stronger because of the unusual inversion. Clearly, Beethoven is expanding his use of this effect, and the arrival 6/3 is an example of style growth of a type.

Finally, in Schubert’s Piano Sonata in A Major, D. 959, the last statement of the rondo theme in the finale is broken by rhetorical pauses and a reinterpretation over a German augmented sixth (m. 342). But rather than resolve “properly” with an arrival 6/4, Schubert instead continues the theme where he left off, which happens to be on a 16/3 (m. 344). The effect is rhetorically and resolutionally that of the arrival 6/4, and the warmth of the return to an unambiguous A major is enhanced by the turn figure in the melody. What this example demonstrates is that rhetorical resolution can take priority even over proper syntactical voice-leading resolution, a telling instance of style growth in Schubert, and more evidence for the importance of expressive as opposed to formalist motivations for meaning in music.

Returning to the “Ghost” trio, the further interpretation of the Y theme’s arrival 6/4 as positive would also take into account the lyrical character of the cello line and the hint of pastoral in the parallel thirds of the piano accompaniment. These have their own familiar stylistic correlations, which contribute to the total effect. Another, more strategic mode of interpretation considers the thematic opposition between motives X and Y. Indeed, Beethoven sets up that opposition as a compositional premise to be worked out through the movement. For example, the transition section uses a rhythmically ironed-out diminution of the Y theme for its “liquidation” of the counterstatement, bringing Y in closer relation to the eighth-notes of X. The development section juxtaposes and mixes the two motives in contrapuntally complex arguments that also touch on the tonal implications of the Bb. And the recapitulation further juxtaposes the two themes, with the X motive in D minor interrupting the return of Y. We have no comparably significant motive for the second key group of this rather compact exposition, and the closing motives lead to a
motivic melodic cadence that recalls the Y motive. Thus, the “discourse” of the movement, its enacted drama, concerns the relationship of the two motives introduced at the outset, as pursued in E. T. A. Hoffmann’s analysis.

In terms of phrase construction, the X motive is introductory. While clearly grouping in two beat units, it is metrically ambiguous as to which beat is the downbeat. Furthermore, the sequencing of the motive evades clear periodicity (a stylistic expectation for thematic material); the rhythmic and modal interruption of X forces us to wait for Y in order for a Satz, or sentence, to begin. The periodic Satz from mm. 7-21 is nevertheless built mosaically out of the two-bar motive, compressed to one-bar sequential extensions, with a more brilliant, almost cadenza-like flourish in the piano to expand the cadence. Its structure is 4 plus 11 bars, due to the additive (hence developmental) extensions. It is a single sentence in terms of overall harmonic progression, however, since the first four bars are dedicated to the arrival 6/4's becoming dominant and then stepping up to tonic.

Thus, both motives are parts of something larger to which they contribute; Y is not merely a resolution of the phrase-structural instabilities of X. I noted earlier that Y shares its contour with X. Beethoven brings about an integration of the dual perspectives of both X and Y, both contrapuntally (in the development) and with rhetorical juxtapositions (in the recapitulation. Where does this lead us? First, to the question of agency. Often a dramatic contrast at the opening of a movement is used dialectically (McClary 1986, Eckelmeyer 1986). With this movement I experience a single agency, and I think that the above analysis indicates why. Motives X and Y, while direct contrasts on the surface, are dual perspectives from a single vantage point, that of the implied agency of the work. Notice that what I mean by agency goes beyond the triple agency of three performers, or three contrapuntal lines, as in the familiar metaphor of a chamber work being a conversation among equals. Granted, this concept of singular agency embracing different instruments, voices, and thematic contrasts may appear a bit vague. Carolyn Abbate (1991) and more recently Scott Burnham (1995) have spoken in terms of “voice” or “presence.” Burnham notes that in Beethoven’s heroic period works (although he doesn’t address the trios) we hear the agency of heroic struggle, and we tend to project ourselves as enactors of that struggle. But even within such a model, there would be cases when a sudden loud chord might suggest an external agency, threatening the “pilgrim’s progress” of the central, or internal agency with which we might identify. I
would argue that the sudden shift to minor in m. 5, suspended rhetorically in m. 6, is instead an internal shift, as the protagonist-agent is caught up short, pauses to ponder, and then is re-engaged in m. 7 with a transformed kind of energy that bespeaks not necessarily heroic effort, but assured insight.

Does this appear to be a big interpretive jump on my part? Let’s review E. T. A. Hoffmann’s account. Remember his characterization of this theme: “genial serenity, confident awareness of its own strength and substance.” We typically read and accept such descriptions without any real qualms – or else ignore them as mere platitude or sentimentalizing. Isn’t it interesting how Hoffmann’s words take on fresh significance given a more exhaustive semiotic interpretation? Hoffmann was hearing sensitively and musically (despite his incomplete formal analysis), but he simply had no theory to account for the more poetic side of his interpretation. Nevertheless, the literary Hoffmann often emphasized the poetic and the romantic aspects of music. In his short story “Ritter Gluck” (1972 [1809]: 8) he refers to the tonic and dominant (scale degrees) as giant colossi and the Tierce (third scale degree) as a soft youth with a sweet voice, an interesting confirmation of my own characterization of start open fifth versus sweet third in my discussion of unusual tonic triad doublings in Beethoven (1994: 50-56).

There is another reason to argue for agency that goes beyond a theme’s “self-awareness,” and in this case, to argue for a single agency in these opening bars. It has to do with performance, and with the gestural interpretations to which performers must commit themselves. Listen to the opening eight bars, perhaps comparing more than one performance.

In one performance there is a noticeable break, due to bowing, between m. 6 and 7 in the cello. The tension of gestural continuity is broken, if only momentarily, and we hear an interpretation in which the F-natural dies away, to be displaced by the F-sharp. But if the move from F-natural to F-sharp is crucially motivic, and it is part of a larger dramatic scheme as outlined above, then we must hear instead a kind of transformation, that F-natural as it were melts into F-sharp, without losing the gestural tension that, if properly executed, will carry us over the suspended time of bars 5 and 6.

That F to F# is indeed motivic may be argued from more evidence than its clear use here as part of a structural juncture, or expressive crux, that marks the beginning of the lyric Y motive with such unforgettable magic. The end of the exposition has a curious overlapping of harmonies
that also blurs the final cadence in A, such that we focus more on the plagal close of IV to I. The potential perfect authentic cadence in mm. 62-63 is clouded by the move from a Vm9 to V7/IV, and the conflict between F-natural in the former (also viio7) vs. the F-sharp in the IV (anticipated by the trill) involves a similar transformation from tension (the diminished-seventh, dominant-ninth sonorities) to extremely relaxed consonance (the subdominant). While F to F# is pursued twice in the piano trills, and is echoed by G to G# to A for the elaborated plagal cadence, the cello has an equally telling move from G# to G-natural, undercutting the perfect authentic cadence in m. 62-63. This yielding reversal, in which a resignational pulling-down is more than compensated by the positive arrival on the subdominant, results in the trope of abnegation, or spiritual acceptance, that gives such appropriate expressive significance to this exquisitely subtle closural strategy. The piano trills allow an otherwise syntactically impossible concatenation of F-F# and G#-G to occur right at the point of negated syntactic closure, m. 63, and provide another expressive crux that sums up the goal of this expressive genre. When the tritone C#-G of violin and cello resolve in m. 64 to the subdominant, that effect is still further enhanced, and prolonged, by the analogous contrary motion by half-step. The expressive fulfillment is in the strings’ re-engagement of a more melodic gesture derived from γ, in m. 66, to close in the proper key of A major. Finally, the sublime character of extreme registers on the piano adds to the benediction of this substitutional plagal cadence, which has taken an expressive role analogous to the Picardy-third cadence in a minor-mode work.

I won’t attempt to defend these points with correlations and markedness of oppositions, although in principle one could do so (Hatten 1994: 59-63 and 281-6, where I argue that the abnegational move underwrites a new expressive genre in both literature and music). Returning to m. 6, the Bb-F that I have considered an incomplete German augmented sixth has its own implications, stemming from the other plausible interpretation of the chord as a root position Bb triad, or bVI in D major. Beethoven cannot resist playing with this potential, both glancingly in the development, and more decisively after the intrusion of the X motive in minor just after the start of the recapitulation. This time, F-natural appears in the piano as well as the cello, and resolves to the Y theme in Bb major.

Having contextualized the meaning of the theme in m. 7, both with respect to the opening dramatic gesture and with regard to the consequences of the thematized resolution of m. 6, what more might one say about its inherent expressiveness as a motive/theme? Its contour is simi-
lar to one used in m. 6 of the Cavatina of Beethoven’s String Quartet in Bb, opus 130, which I interpreted as a “tragic reversal” (1994: 213). But the context is quite different, and the result is affectively worlds apart. In the trio, the hopeful ascent is indeed reversed, but not negated, since the drop is enfolded within the harmony of V7 and is further resolved by step to complete a safely consonant triadic outline that could be reduced as 3-5-1. Yet the descending interval from 5 to 7 does have a certain yielding quality, like a graceful acceptance of boundaries, in its reversal of the initial ascent from 3 to 5. In turn, that tucked-in drop could be heard, in conjunction with the positive arrival 6/4 and pedestal dominant pedal, as somehow reassuring in its balanced motion. By comparison, nothing seems likely to stop the unbalanced additive sequencing of the X motive in the opening until it encounters the silence that anticipates a surprising and parenthetical F-natural.

Still other interpretations of the Y theme that might arise from chains of connotation or intermodally gestural considerations would include the trope that emerges from the “potential” character of the Y theme over a dominant pedal, as well as its “aliveness”—both are supported by the evolving treatment of the 2-bar motive, which, though closed in itself, is treated rather “openly” as far as phrase extension through imitation, sequence, and fragmentation.

What is interesting about this theme is that both its stability and instability can be interpreted positively in terms of affective meaning. This would appear impossible if the binarism I espoused were the kind that Lawrence Kramer condemns in his recent book, Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge (1995: 34ff.). In the so-called “logic of alterity,” which his postmodernist “new” musicology would deconstruct, the oppositions are between self and other, and that which is personally valued versus that which is excluded or defined by negation. Such oppositions are ideologically loaded, as we all know. I trust that the kinds of oppositions I have discussed here can be viewed in a different light, and it is from this standpoint that I would preserve the structuralist component, alongside the hermeneutic, in my model of music semiotics. While it is true that any opposition can be freighted with ideological baggage, we should nevertheless recognize that the mechanism of asymmetrical opposition is simply one of the fundamental ways in which cognition works. It is not an evil that must be rooted out, but rather a useful tool for helping us make those kinds of discriminations that move from perceptual categories to cognitive concepts.
In fairness to Lawrence Kramer, I share his regard for pluralism, if not complete eclecticism, in my theoretical approach. Our goals are quite different, however, despite what may appear on the surface to be a similar quest: to demonstrate how so-called extra-musical meaning is truly part of our musical understanding. As Kramer explains it, “What post-modern knowledge offers classical music is the chance to acknowledge and explore, to de- and reconstruct, its relationship to modern subjectivity, and in so doing to form a different relationship to the postmodern subjectivities that may now be in the making” (34). My goal, on the other hand, is to reconstruct the stylistic competency – cultural practice in the historical sense – that is presupposed by the musical work in its historical context. While recognizing that I can only do so from a present subjectivity, I nevertheless find that this kind of history is no more or less problematic than the kinds of history we have pursued in other arenas. We can never know with certainty, but we can come closer to stylistic understanding as a goal by pursuing a more rigorous course than Kramer would deem possible. His model of musical meaning is that of a communicative “economy” in which our own ideas have equal weight with the composer’s as we fill out the missing elements in music’s only “partly determinate subjectivity” (23). Under that regime, associations can float rather freely in unconstrained cultural contexts. In my approach, on the other hand, there is continual refinement of a model of style that serves to constrain my subjective interpretive fancies, or subject them to more compelling modes of argument and standards of evidence. Presumably, I am helping to build a basis for determining whether or not my own earlier interpretations are valid, while not limiting the potential for the kinds of personal and cultural free play that Kramer prizes as the goal of a more equal “dialogue” with music’s potential meanings. Thus, in one sense the condition of the knowledge I am elaborating is like that of the trial lawyer who must make a case by creating a plausible generalization or narrative that accounts for all the available evidence.

Postmodernist approaches may consider this to be mistaken or impossible from the start, but I have found the results to reward the effort. It is less a leap of faith for me to attempt to approach Beethoven’s meanings in this way than it is for me to accept some of the associative leaps I find in the new musicology, especially when they go beyond plausible intentions by historical individuals, to the unwitting psychological and cultural biases in which cultural subjects are somehow, inevitably trapped. I want to understand what Beethoven might have wanted to mean, not to psychoanalyze his efforts or to reduce him to a pawn of cultural forces.
beyond his control. Though my approach recognizes the stylistic and intertextual relationships that guarantee coherence of types and strategies from one work to the next, it also acknowledges the ways in which a composer can create works whose individuality lead to growth (or even change) of cultural values or meanings. I would not, however, dissolve the “autonomous” work into a mere node at the intersection of cultural practice, viewed through the peephole of present day subjectivity, but rather reconceive the individual work as emerging from a dialectic of stylistic and strategic motivations grounded in an historical context.

Thus, in pursuing my semiotic approach, I part company from at least this strain of the new musicology. I believe that one needs not only a plurality of evidence and method, but a unifying rigor that comes from a model of musical meaning. That model should help explain how meaning is coherent and consistent, and help lead us to reconstruct deeper levels of meaning that might not have passed through our untrained cultural filters. In turn, it will lead us to a consistency in our reconstruction, from which we can move more confidently toward further interpretations – continuing in dialectical fashion the productive interaction between a growing stylistic competency and an expanding sensitivity to interpretive nuance – between the generalization of the type and the subtleties of the token.

Bibliography


