

The Sublime as a *Topos* in Nineteenth-Century Piano Music

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Abstract: The article examines the topical signification of the sublime within nineteenth-century piano music. While later Romantic aesthetics asserted that music was inherently sublime because of its perceived ability to reconcile the Kantian divisions of infinite and finite, noumenal and phenomenal, the possibility of topical signification suggests instead that music may *signify* the sublime as a discursive subject. Although this may be problematic for some genres, the article argues that the piano music of the nineteenth century offers the potential for signifying the sublime topically. It analyses works by Beethoven, Chopin and Liszt, identifying a specific gesture that functions as a conventionalized indexical signifier across different stylistic contexts: a “pianistic topic” of the sublime.

Keywords: aesthetics, sublime, semiotics, topics, Beethoven, Kant

Over the last two decades, several studies (Bonds 1997, 2006; Brown 1996; Sisman 1993; Webster 2005, 1997) have discussed the relationship between music and the sublime in pre-Romantic aesthetics, examining the evocation of the sublime in the music of the late eighteenth century.¹ These writers have naturally focused on the two most influential conceptions of the sublime within that cultural context, those of Edmund Burke (*A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, 1757) and Immanuel Kant (*Critique of Judgment*, 1790). The Burkean sublime begins with “whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror” (Burke 1757: 39). Such terrible objects produce in the observer the effects of mingled terror (or pain) and pleasure: terror arising from the apprehension of the immeasurably large and powerful; pleasure at observing this from a place of safety. A storm at sea is therefore sublime, but only if one is not actually involved with it at the time. The Burkean sublime thus involves a certain aestheticizing contemplation of the great and terrible in order to produce its effect, which implicitly suggests that the locus of the sublime resides in the conception of the observer, rather than in the sublime object itself; the sublime is a quality of mind, not of objects.

The Kantian sublime explicitly develops this notion. The sublime for Kant is to be found in a “formless object” (1790: 98), an object whose form is of such magnitude that it exceeds our powers of perception. Crucially, this formlessness, which he terms “unboundedness,” is always accompanied by a “thought of totality” (ibid.), that is, a

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conception of the mind that allows reason to comprehend the magnitude of the unbounded, even if the imagination cannot perceive it. Kant refines his definition by distinguishing the *mathematical* from the *dynamic* sublime. In the mathematical sublime, the imagination is overwhelmed by temporal or spatial magnitude: the experience is too great to be taken in at once (it is unbounded and formless); we cannot perceive infinite size. The dynamic sublime, in contrast, is evoked by overwhelming or infinite power, in the face of which we are rendered helpless: volcanoes, hurricanes, “the boundless ocean”; “compared to the might of any of these, our ability to resist becomes an insignificant trifle” (ibid.: 120). We experience again the mixed pleasure and pain familiar from Burke.

In both instances though, the central point of Kant’s conception is that the sublime is not a quality of the object itself; rather, it is an attribute of the reason of the observer. It arises only after an initial check to the perceptions and imagination by the mathematical or dynamic; there is a frustration when the inability to perceive or overcome the infinite is encountered. However, this frustration is supplanted by the sublime moment when the power of reason overcomes this: we are unable to perceive the infinitely large, but we are able to conceive of infinity as an Idea (the “thought of totality”); we are unable to overcome infinite power, but we are able to assert our rational moral freedom in the face of it. The source of the sublime thus resides explicitly in the discovery of the transcendence of reason over the inadequacy of perception and our finiteness; it is the discovery of the infinite within.

On Music and the Evocation of the Sublime

Neither Burke nor Kant explicitly discusses the relationship between the sublime and music: in Burke’s case, there is a clear implication that the Beautiful was the proper aesthetic category of music, whilst Kant says little about the relationships between the sublime and any art.² However, Kant’s aesthetics in general, and his conception of the sublime in particular, had a significant effect on the way in which music was perceived and

² Throughout the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant consistently draws examples of both the beautiful and the sublime from nature rather than from art, a preference that he makes explicit at times. However, he undertakes an extensive demonstration that the aesthetic judgment of beauty is the same in nature and in art, intrinsically linking them within the extended discourse on fine art and the necessary conditions for its creation. Natural and artistic beauty are effectively equated there by the proposal that nature “gives the rule to art” through artistic genius; genius is the product of nature (the genius is “one of nature’s elect”), and thus the intentional creation of beauty by genius is, in a sense, still a type of “natural” beauty (and, as such, does not violate the principle that there is no concept of beauty). Kant, however, does not undertake this process for the sublime. In part, this may be due to the continual emphasis that sublimity does not inhere in objects, but rather in “a faculty of mind transcending every standard of the senses” (§25: 250); as such, art objects cannot be termed “sublime” any more than natural objects. Similarly, although the sublime can be “represented” or stimulated by nature through limitless objects (ibid.: 245) (which highlight the inadequacy of perception, thus engendering the transcendence of reason), this possibility seems incompatible with Kant’s definition of art as something that is evidently formed: a formed work cannot, it seems, be limitless or formless. Despite these difficulties, Kant, nevertheless, does seem to suggest the possibility of sublime art, albeit an artistic sublime that is “always restricted by the conditions of an agreement with nature” (ibid.). The absence of a discussion of sublime art is one of the many well-documented difficulties with the third *Critique*; that it remains unresolved perhaps accounts for the difficulty that subsequent writers encountered in attempting to define how the sublime functions in art.

understood. This begins with the substantial problems that his philosophy, including the conception of the sublime, presented for the Early Romantic poets and philosophers. On the one hand, it reveals the transcendental dimensions of experience, the capacity of the individual to exceed unbounded nature; in so doing, however, it also separates him irrevocably from the phenomenal world. This disjunction between the noumenal and the phenomenal, or rational and sensuous, within oneself inevitably results in an unending yearning for reconciliation, the “infinite longing” that E.T.A. Hoffmann described as the essence of Romanticism (1810: 238).

The solution that writers such as the Schlegel brothers, Schelling, Wackenroder and Tieck proposed was to be found in the arts: in art, the Ideal and the Real, the infinite and finite are reunited; in art we experience a perceptible manifestation of the Ideal. This privileged role was first proposed by Schiller: his *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794) argues that it is only through artistic beauty that the reconciliation of the sensuous (phenomenal) and rational (noumenal or Ideal) is possible.

Since in the enjoyment of beauty or *aesthetical unity* a real union and interchange of matter with form and of passivity with activity takes place, so is proven thereby the *compatibility* of both natures [sensuous and rational], the practicability of the infinite in finiteness, hence the possibility of the most sublime humanity. (1794 [1985]: 316)³

For the early Romantics, music held a new place in the much-discussed hierarchy of the arts: unlike the other arts, music was considered to be non-representational and even incorporeal, it was “ideal in its essence” (A.W. Schlegel, qtd. in Bonds, 2006, p. 21), and thus uniquely placed to reunite the noumenal and phenomenal. Schelling, for example, considered that

Musical form is a process whereby the infinite is embodied in the finite; hence the forms of music are inevitably forms of things in themselves. In other words, they are forms of ideas exclusively under a phenomenal guise [...] music brings before us in rhythm and harmony the [platonic] form of the motions of physical bodies; it is, in other words, pure form, liberated from any object or from matter. (1802/3: 280)⁴

Since music alone could truly manifest the Ideal in the Real, the result was that for the Romantics the goal of music must be to create such an explicit manifestation of the infinite. Crucially, this emphasis on music as an intuition of the infinite inevitably aligns it with the aesthetics of the sublime; the apprehension of the infinite is at the heart of Kant’s conception. The early-Romantic aesthetic of music, in other words, was that rather than

³ Kant considers the sensuous and the rational ultimately irreconcilable; the sensuous nature must be subject to the rational nature by means of the categorical imperative – only then can humans act morally— but the fundamental division remains. For Schiller, the *Spieltrieb*—synonymous with artistic beauty— forms a type of dialectical synthesis (prefiguring Hegel) between the two aspects separated by Kant: morality arises through the union of the sensuous with the rational, and thus aesthetic education is the path to the highest—hence sublime—state of humanity.

⁴ Like all systematic aesthetics, Schelling’s *Philosophy of Art*, deals with music in the abstract, rather than considering any individual work. The “forms of music” that he outlines here are really the “formedness” of music itself, rather than any individual formal type; he evidently considers this formedness as phenomenal existence, rather than conceptual schema. It is important to note both the distinction between this and Platonic, Ideal forms, and the manner in which his aesthetics draws this phenomenal (musical) formedness and Ideal, noumenal forms together.

being able to express or signify the sublime, music was placed in the unenviable position of actually having to *be* sublime, to create or evoke the effect of the sublime within the listener.

Symbolizing the Sublime: Portrayal vs. Evocation

Although short-lived (it is essentially an early-Romantic viewpoint), this understanding of music's ontology had a pervasive effect on aesthetics and criticism, persisting through much of the nineteenth century: music as transcendent, otherworldly, and sublime became a familiar cliché.⁵ The metaphysical implications of this viewpoint, however, tend to obscure the underlying assumptions concerning the manner in which music can be called sublime: the tacit acceptance that music must actually create an overwhelming effect in order to express the sublime. This assumption is seen clearly even in the writing of those who tended to eschew the Romantic reaction to Kant. Christian Michaelis, who was one of the earliest and most musically perceptive Post-Kantians, considered that music may “seek to arouse the feeling of sublimity through an inner structure that is independent of any emotional experience” (Michaelis 1805: 289). In which case, “something analogous to an imitation of the external impact of sublime nature is being aimed at, the idea being to affect us in the same way as nature does, to intensify our imagination and to arouse in us ideas of the infinitely great” (ibid.). For Michaelis, music arouses the sublime by recreating its *effects*: the vastness of the music overwhelms, or its difficulty creates incommensurability, thus arousing the effect of the sublime in the listener. Broadly speaking, this approach corresponds to the Romantic viewpoint outlined above, albeit without recourse to the metaphysical outcomes.

Michaelis, however, moves beyond this notion of evoking the sublime, contrasting it with the possibility of *portraying* sublimity instead. In this case, music does not create a sublime effect, but rather portrays “the state of mind aroused by such a feeling” (ibid.), which creates a crucial distinction: “in the first case [evocation] the music can objectively be called *sublime*, like untamed nature, which arouses sublime emotions; in the second case, the music portrays what is pathetically sublime” (ibid.). The portrayal of the sublime arises from musical “expression” (ibid.), in other words, from symbolic function: the music

⁵ Kiene Brillenburg Wurth's extensive survey, *Musically Sublime* (2009), traces much of this history through the Romantic to the post-modern sublime. She makes a significant distinction (following Seidl and Lyotard) between the sublime *of* music and the sublime *in* music (p. 19), reinterpreting the sublime not as a single object (*the* sublime), but rather as a historically evolving idea. Sublimity is not limited to the “narrative law” – the movement from the static point of the rest to disruption (the great, the terrible) to transcendence (rational) – that she traces through Burke and Kant, but rather becomes increasingly associated with liminality. In place of transcendence, she argues, the Romantic sublime (and later, the post-modern sublime) are seen in indeterminacy and infinity (p. 16ff) and it is here that sublimity overlaps with “musicality”, a term that she also reinterprets, conceiving of it as the indeterminacy of the “empty sign”. The result is that, at times, sublimity and musicality appear almost synonymous; hence the sublime *of* music, or music *as* sublimity. This current paper, however, is focused precisely on the opposite pole from Brillenburg Wurth's formulation; the occurrence of the sublime *in* music as topical signifier, rather than as evocation of sublime affect.

passes beyond evoking the sublime, instead symbolizing it.⁶ This notion is closer to a Pre-Romantic aesthetic, which recognizes music's symbolic function, its ability to signify firmly within the realm of the phenomenal (albeit often dependent on the notion of mimesis). This represents an important change of emphasis because the possibility of portrayal suggests, contra Romanticism, that rather than having to create the effect of the sublime—rather than aiming to *be* sublime—music may *signify* the sublime as a subject of its discourse.

The notion of symbolizing the sublime musically grounds the process firmly within the social and conventional—the prerequisites for symbolic function—and it is this that in more recent studies has raised the possibility of a topical approach to the sublime. The works by Bonds, Brown, Sisman, and Webster highlighted above have each drawn upon writers such as Michaelis (as well as others, including Sulzer and Crotch), in order to establish characteristics that were used to symbolize the sublime, largely within the music of Haydn and Mozart. Through this approach, these authors gravitate more or less explicitly toward the notion of such a topical signification; their studies essentially raise the question of whether the sublime can occur as a musical topic.

However, in each case, the musical signifiers of the sublime, or even sublime “styles” that are suggested, still essentially aim to create the effect of the sublime. Webster, for example, identifies various types of contrast that he argues Haydn uses to create sublime effects: contrasts of dynamics, register, rhythm, and harmony. He adds that devices such as “gestural shocks” (sudden, unexpected contrasts), tonal or generic incongruities, and certain types of musical climaxes can all be used to create the effect of the “incommensurable,” which he associates with the sublime (Webster 1997: 70). This means that these writers inevitably tend toward evocation, rather than portrayal; the various effects highlighted still rely on creating a state of incommensurability, or even an overwhelming effect, in order to signify the sublime. Each writer, in other words, runs into (in Peircean terms) the issue of the indexicality, or even iconicity, of musical symbols, an issue that is particularly troubling for the notion of a musical symbol of the sublime. A topic of the sublime will necessarily involve some existential connection—some shared phenomenal characteristic—to the sublime as the sign-object. This tends to suggest that Michaelis's separation of arousing and portraying the sublime cannot easily be maintained; it appears as though a musical symbol of the sublime must, paradoxically, create the effect of the sublime itself to function as a sign.

This issue is central to Wye Jamieson Allanbrook's assertion that the sublime cannot function as a topic in music (2010). Her argument centers on the problems inherent with identifying a stable signifier for the musical sublime; there are no conventional figures that invariably and recognizably evoke the sublime as a topic. Instead, she argues, descriptions of sublimity in music are consistently associated with excesses of what Leonard Meyer termed “secondary parameters”—dynamics, forces, range, etc. (1996, p. 14-16). Such

⁶ Michaelis's comments on evoking and portraying the sublime take place within the context of a more general discussion of musical signification and sign-function, in which he distinguishes musical structure and form from musical symbols: the former please without reference to any symbolic function; the latter express “moods, emotions or states of mind” (288). His discussion of the sublime is then clearly set up to mirror this distinction, the implication being that in the “pathetically sublime” it is not a sublime effect that is created, but an Idea of the sublime that is portrayed, through the use of musical symbols. Moreover, this portrayal of the sublime is not a representation of sublime objects, but rather of sublime perception; it is the representation of our own facility for the infinite, a conception that possesses distinct (and deliberate) Kantian overtones.

excess is essentially a quantitative marker, which inevitably raises the issue of how much musical excess is required to suggest the infinite, or to produce shock and awe. This is compounded by developmental issues; what might once have been considered as shocking, sudden, or sublime quickly becomes normalized and therefore loses the ability to create an overpowering effect. The evocation of the musical sublime frequently is thus reduced to a question of degree, thereby becoming unquantifiable and subjective, and hardly suited to topical signification.

The objections that Allanbrook raises, and indeed the wider issues of signifying the sublime topically, are particularly true of instrumental genres such as the symphony: the expansion of orchestral forces through the nineteenth century alone means that the quantitative indicators that Allanbrook highlights were also subject to a corresponding expansion. Essentially, ever greater forces would thus be required to produce overwhelming effects, and this continual inflationary pressure makes the identification of a stable, conventionalized signifier within symphonic music highly problematic. However, I would argue that the piano music of the nineteenth century does offer the potential for signifying the sublime topically. The increasing significance of the piano repertoire, particularly in the first half of the century, produced a distinctive musical context with its own characteristic topics and signifiers. I will consider the manner in which one specifically pianistic gesture functions, at the least, as a “prototopic” (Monelle 2000: 17) of the sublime, tracing its development into an indexical signifier of the incommensurable.

The Sublime as a Pianistic Topic

The simultaneous (or near-simultaneous) sounding of the extreme registers of the instrument creates an emergent musical meaning that consistently signifies extremes of magnitude. This correlation relies on the pervasive conceptual metaphor that maps vertical pitch movement to physical space; simultaneous high and low pitch will invariably correlate with simultaneous “up and down,” i.e. with a physical space (or perhaps object) that is extremely large.⁷ Often, this combines with extremes of dynamic, texture, and virtuosity to produce a correlation with extreme force. Within the aesthetic context of the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century the emergent meaning of overwhelming size and power produced by this gesture suggests an obvious correlation with the extremes

⁷ On the metaphorical mapping of musical “space” and bodily gesture see McKee (2007: 26–32). Sheinberg (1995), however, argues that this mapping is not simply metaphorical (i.e. based on learned competency), but is rooted in human biology, physiology and psychology. Her conceptual mapping of vocal range as a “normal” human musical space suggests that sounds outside of this range are “distant and/or inhuman” (p. 46); moreover, she highlights the culturally determined associations of pitch verticality with emotional and ethical judgements. The implications for the topic that I identify here are interesting: each example analysed below occurs outside of this “normal” human sphere (i.e. in the “inhuman” registers); each could therefore be correlated simultaneously with both euphoric and dysphoric connotations. This combination of contrasting meanings is highly suggestive of the paradoxical experience of the sublime.

that characterize the well-established “cultural unit” (Eco 1977) of the sublime.⁸ However, it is significant that this gesture seems inherently to highlight the limits of perception. Playing the extreme registers of the instrument pushes toward the limits of the audible spectrum. Beyond these points, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish distinct pitches; it is also difficult to hear individual melodies so far apart, to hold both in the mind’s ear at the same time. Moreover, this gesture frequently exposes the limitations of the instrument; its use pushes toward the extremes of the possible and, in some instances, almost beyond them.⁹ Thus, its more obvious connotations also point inextricably toward the limits of the listener, the instrument, and indeed even of music itself. In so doing, it does not simply denote extremes of magnitude or force, but also connotes the boundary between the finite (what Paul Crowther calls “the limits imposed by embodiment” [1989: 147]) and the infinite, the same liminal confrontation that characterizes sublimity.¹⁰

Thus, although this gesture depends upon Meyer’s “secondary parameters” of dynamic, texture, and range, the accretion of these individual parameters results in a characteristic, recognizable signifier, whose function is more-or-less invariable, correlated with a complex range of denotative and connotative meanings. This signifier initially appears to function as an icon (in Peircean terms a sign that resembles its object, in this case the immeasurably large and powerful); as such, it might be considered as an instance of “pictorialism” in Ratner’s terms (1980: 25). However, this “iconicity” is already itself based on conventionally-defined sign-functions—the metaphorical correlation of pitch with direction—and, from this viewpoint, the sign-function already moves much closer to the *arbitrary* semiosis of the Peircean symbol.¹¹ More importantly, the object of this sign is not simply the large and powerful but, rather, its indexical correlation with the transcendence of the sublime; in other words, the apparent iconicity of the gesture is itself a signifier of the sublime through its contiguity.¹² This sign therefore represents an instance of what Raymond Monelle describes as the “indexicality of the object,”¹³ the first prerequisite he uses to identify a musical topic (Monelle 2000: 80; see also 2006: 26-18);

⁸ Robert Hatten also briefly associates the extreme upper registers of the piano with the sublime in his discussion of Beethoven’s *Ghost* Trio, Op. 70 no. 1 (Hatten 2004: 32). William Kinderman makes a similar point concerning the “astonishing disjunction in pitch” that marks the transition from the Credo to the Benedictus in the *Missa Solemnis*: there the high registers in particular “evoke celestial regions that transcend earthly existence; their symbolic importance is unmistakable” (Kinderman 2009: 277–78).

⁹ The instances of this gesture in Beethoven’s *Hammerklavier* sonata are perhaps the best-known example of this straining at the limits of the instrument.

¹⁰ In other words, the very nature of the gesture perhaps suggests something of the incommensurable. It does not create incommensurability, as such, but the manner in which this gesture pushes toward the limits of the possible on the instrument can produce a type of iconic signification.

¹¹ As Monelle notes, “emic features always seem the most “natural” parts of a language” (2000: 72); the metaphorical association of up/down with high/low has been so thoroughly naturalized that its arbitrary nature is often overlooked; the sign-function has become transparent. See also Eco’s (1980) discussion of the problems of iconicity.

¹² Other aspects, such as extremes of dynamic and virtuosity, also seem iconic; they seem to resemble the excesses that characterize the sublime. Again, however, the object of the sign is indexical: it does not signify “speed” or “power,” but rather the correlation of these with the sublime.

¹³ Crucially, this understanding of the indexical function of this sign mirrors the nature of the Kantian sublime itself: it is not the object—the immeasurably large and powerful—that is sublime but, rather, the transcendent faculty of reason. In a sense, then, the objects that Kant identifies as sublime are themselves indexical signifiers.

it is a relatively stable, conventionalized index that I would suggest functions, in Michaelis's terms, as a portrayal of the sublime, rather than an evocation.

Some Nineteenth-Century Examples

The following pianistic symbol of the sublime does not really arise in the earlier repertoire, largely because of developmental issues: it does not seem to occur in the keyboard music of Mozart or Haydn, for example.¹⁴ However, it can be found prominently in Beethoven's piano sonatas, particularly the late works, where it produces a striking and unusual effect. As the piano literature developed through the nineteenth century, this gesture became more common, and the basic connotations were retained even into the twentieth century.¹⁵ In the music of Chopin, Liszt, and even Ravel its use is almost invariably dysphoric in connotation, with a tendency to emphasize the marked minor mode (frequently with dissonance and chromaticism), as well as excesses of texture and virtuosity. Such a combination of dysphoric elements tends to produce a correlation of this symbol with the negative extremes that characterize Burke's conception of the sublime—the mingling of terror and pleasure.

The opening of Chopin's Etude in A minor op. 25 number 11 (Example 1), for example, produces a troping of the sublime with the topical allusions created by the slow march theme that begins the piece. This main theme, with its slow tempo, anapaest rhythm and plangent semitone, evokes a funeral march on its first appearance; when it is subsequently harmonized (initially in the relative major, turning towards the tonic minor on the last chord) a more elegiac variant of the topic results. This is contrasted immediately with the symbol described above: extremes of dynamic, register, and virtuosic figuration signify a sudden moment of overwhelming force.¹⁶ The striking appearance of this gesture creates a relatively straightforward signification of sublime force, overwhelmingly dysphoric in nature because of the unequivocal minor key. When this is troped with the march topic, however, a more complex signification arises, transforming the character of the theme from pathos to heroism (Samson 1985: 72); the combination of the sublime and military aspects perhaps suggests the sublimity of war.¹⁷

¹⁴ This is not to suggest that the sublime does not occur in Mozart or Haydn—*Don Giovanni* and *The Creation* are archetypal examples—only that this gesture is not a feature of their keyboard works.

¹⁵ This gesture may be found in prominent locations within, for example, Chopin's *Etude*, Op. 25 nos. 10 and 11, Liszt's *Chasse Neige*, *Sposalizio*, and *Après une lecture du Dante* and Brahms' 1st and 3rd Piano Sonatas; it is even found amongst character sketches such as Burgmüller's *L'Orage*. Twentieth-century works that feature this gesture include Ravel's "Ondine" from *Gaspard de la Nuit*, Prokofiev's *Suggestion diabolique*, Op. 4 no. 4 and the 3rd Piano Sonata, and even Debussy's *Feux D'artifice*. This represents only a very selective sampling of the significant number of works in which this gesture may be found.

¹⁶ It could be argued that this juxtaposition creates a gestural shock of the type that Webster suggested, and that this contributes an evocation of the sublime. However, the signification of the gesture itself produces the signification of sublimity, independently of the juxtaposition.

¹⁷ Although this brief analysis focuses on the topical allusions of the march theme in interpreting its troping with the "sublime" topic, it is worth considering the alternative imagery evoked by the title that is often appended to this piece; the "Winter Wind" is itself a source either of the Burkean sublime or Kant's dynamical sublime.

Example 1 Chopin Op. 25 no. 11, bars 1–8¹⁸

The musical score for Chopin's Op. 25 no. 11, bars 1–8, is presented in three systems. The first system, marked *Lento* and *p*, shows a melodic line in the right hand and a sustained chord in the left hand. The second system, marked *Allegro con brio* and *f risoluto*, features a rapid sixteenth-note melody in the right hand and a rhythmic accompaniment in the left hand. The third system, marked *dimin.*, shows the melody decaying. Pedal markings and asterisks are present throughout the score.

The manner in which Liszt's *Après une lecture du Dante* uses the symbol reveals the same fundamental signification. The extremes of the keyboard are used in numerous places throughout this piece, frequently resulting in the type of dysphoric effects seen in the Chopin example. In the first sustained climax of the piece (Example 2, bar 103ff.), however, the dysphoria associated with the opening theme is transformed, its tritone is replaced by open fifths and harmonized by major harmony, eventually reaching the mediant major (F#) as it gives way to the slow movement of the melodic line. This is harmonized as colossal chords, “filled in” with the virtuosity of the precipitous octaves at the dynamic extremes of the instrument. The combination of these elements within the essentially euphoric context of the major key signifies an overwhelming moment of power that is perhaps great or splendid, rather than terrible. The programmatic associations of the use of this sublime symbol are obvious; it is used unequivocally to signify both the overwhelming, sublime terror and the splendor of Dante's vision.¹⁹

¹⁸ All musical examples reproduced by kind permission of Peters Edition Limited, London.

¹⁹ However, the title of the work, which Liszt borrows from the eponymous poem by Victor Hugo, suggests that this is not just a programmatic evocation of Dante, but rather of the effect of Dante on a subject. The sublimity of this moment then is not just that of Dante's work, but rather a portrayal of the “sublime” response of the reader—it symbolizes the *pathetically* sublime, in Michaelis's terms.

Example 2 Liszt, *Après une Lecture du Dante*, bars 100–107

The recurrence of this symbol in similar situations across a number of individual works such as these suggests a process of topical semiosis, at least in terms of many of the theorists who have followed Ratner’s original conception. Monelle, for example, considered “a level of conventionality in the sign” (2000: 80) as the second criteria for identifying topics: under such a definition, the conventionalized use of an indexical signifier such as this can be understood, in short, as a topic of the sublime. However, where Monelle emphasizes the issues of indexicality and conventionality, Danuta Mirka also identifies the importance of context, arguing that topics are best defined as transcontextualized genres and styles.²⁰ This point is implicit in Ratner’s original

²⁰ Under the definition that Mirka proposes, the symbol that I identify might not strictly be considered a topic; it is not a style or genre as such. It is, however, closer to the “figures” that Ratner proposes within his original definition of topics (1980: 9), and Mirka’s reasons for excluding such “figures” from the definition of topics is not immediately apparent. It also runs contrary to some well-established topical figures such as Monelle’s *piano* or Noble Horse, Noske’s anapaest rhythms, and some of the dance figures that Allanbrook identifies. Her definition, however, does allow for “pictorial” effects and imitations of non-musical sounds such as sigh gestures to function as topics, provided that they find a home within musical styles such as *Sturm und Drang* and *Empfindsamkeit*; the transcontextualization of these styles then functions as a topic. In this case, although she argues that such styles were not recognized during their time, she nevertheless insists that it is the style that forms the topic, rather than the figures themselves by which the style is recognized. Following this rather circular argument, she acknowledges that such “styles” are topical in nature, “even if their topical status is different—and, admittedly, more fragile—than that of the sarabande, the minuet, or the march” (Mirka 2014: 37). I would argue that the sign that I identify functions in this way: this “sublime” topic originates in the imitation of size/power as an index of sublimity. Taken out of its “proper context”—in orchestral music and in Beethoven’s late sonatas—and used in another genre by other composers, the “sublime” style of orchestral writing leads to the topic of the pianistic sublime.

conception, and indeed in the notion of “conventionality,” but Mirka suggests that it is central in defining topics, as distinct from other types of musical signifier. It is important, therefore, to consider that the examples drawn from Chopin and Liszt, which are typical of the significant number of occurrences in nineteenth-century pianism, may be understood as the abstraction of a sign that occurs earlier in Beethoven’s late sonatas; as noted, these late works contain perhaps the earliest instances of this symbol of the sublime. However, whereas the correlation with the sublime arises as an emergent meaning in Beethoven’s works (its signification rests upon conventionally established oppositions), the work of Romantic composers draws on this *context*, transferring this indexical sign into new contexts; this suggests that, by the time of Chopin, Liszt, et al., it functions as a conventional, transcontextualized topical signifier.

Beethoven and the Kantian Sublime

In order to explore the sublimity of the earlier context in Beethoven’s works the following analyses focus on the finales of both the Piano Sonata in E major, Op. 109 and the A \flat major Sonata, Op. 110. These works were composed consecutively in 1820–21, and the parallelism in their overall structures, as well as the proximity of their composition, suggests that they can be understood as a related pair. Both are three-movement sonatas, with an unconventional distribution of movements: moderato opening movements followed by fast, scherzo middle movements, and then substantial finales. As so often in Beethoven’s late works, the finales are the most significant movements, functioning as the focus of the entire sonatas and creating a clear, end-weighted teleology in each. More importantly, the climactic point of both finales involves the topic of the sublime outlined above; both use extremes of register, texture, and dynamic, connoting the sublime. However, in contrast to the later Romantic uses of this topic, which tend to produce Burkean overtones, I would suggest that these earlier instances center instead on the Kantian sublime; in these works, Beethoven portrays not the sublime aesthetic terror of Burke, but the transcendental apprehension that is the locus of Kant’s conception.²¹

Interpreting Beethoven’s music in relation to the sublime is an approach firmly established in the critical literature: Dahlhaus, Taruskin, and Kinderman,²² for example, have drawn upon this aesthetic context, while others—including Berger, Solomon,

²¹ This is not to suggest that Beethoven does not draw on other forms of sublimity at times: as discussed below, his choral and orchestral works relate to the sublime style of Handel and Haydn, and there is certainly something Burkean about the *Appassionata* sonata.

²² Dahlhaus (1991: 67–80) relates Beethoven’s symphonic style to the sublime, comparing it to the Pindaric Ode and the “monumental” style of Schulz. Taruskin (1989: 249ff.) compares the Ninth Symphony, particularly the *Schreckenfanfare*, to the Burkean sublime. Kinderman places discussion of the sublime at the center of the “Overture” that begins his *Beethoven*, drawing on both Kant and Schiller (2009: 6–15). The association of Beethoven’s work with sublimity, however, can be traced back at least as far as Hoffmann’s review of the fifth symphony—the dialectic of the sublime and the beautiful is clearly encoded there. It is intriguing that, as early as 1793, Fischenich remarks, in a letter to Schiller no less, that the young Beethoven was “wholly devoted to the great and the sublime” (Solomon 1988: 206).

Lockwood, and Mathew²³—have read his works specifically within the context of Kantian and post-Kantian thought. Stephen Rumph concisely outlines the historical assumption underlying this latter correlation. He argues that, since Beethoven was surrounded by avid Kantians during his time in Bonn in the early 1790s, “it would be astounding if [he] were not exposed to at least the rudiments of critical philosophy . . . there is every likelihood that he absorbed some notion of the moral law, the distinction between noumena and phenomena, and perhaps even the idealist basis of aesthetics” (Rumph 2004: 45). His reading of the fourth of the *Six Gellert Songs*, Op. 48 proceeds on the basis that, although the evidence is circumstantial, it “lends plausibility to a comparison between a song marked *erhaben* and Kant’s theory of *das Erhabene*” (ibid.).²⁴

Kinderman’s analysis (1985) of a “symbol for the deity” in the *Missa Solemnis* and Ninth Symphony focuses specifically on the much-discussed inscription within Beethoven’s conversation book from early 1820: “‘The moral law within us, and the starry heavens above us’ Kant!!!.” He observes that this entry occurs during the early sketching of the Mass, thus providing a basis for considering the symbol—a particular chordal sonority used consistently as a “spatial metaphor for the heavens” (Kinderman 1985: 118)—as a mixture of Kantian and Christian imagery: “The Kantian vision of the heavens is thus absorbed, in the Mass and symphony, into a transcendental symbol, secular in its naturalism yet sacred in its role as a focus for the awe and devotion of mankind” (ibid.). It is notable, however, that consideration of the sublime is absent from Kinderman’s discussion, all the more so because Beethoven’s quotation conspicuously summarizes both facets of Kant’s conception—mathematical (starry heavens) and dynamic (moral law). In other words, this quotation provides evidence, not only for a humanistic conception of divinity, but also for a Kantian understanding of the sublime.

A similar relationship can be inferred from the three Egyptian inscriptions—copied from Schiller’s *Die Sendung Moses*—that, according to Schindler (1860 [1966]: 365), the composer kept framed under glass on his reading desk:

I am, that which is.
I am everything that is, that was, and that will be. No mortal man has raised my veil.
He is One, self-existent, and to that One all things owe their existence.²⁵

²³ Solomon and Lockwood both highlight the “common intellectual heritage” of “Kantian conceptions of morality, religion and art” (Solomon 1988: 211; see also Lockwood 2003: 10–11) shared by Beethoven and Schiller. However, both also make more specific connections between individual works and Kantian thought. Solomon considers the images of the “starry skies” in some of the lieder and in the second Razumovsky Quartet, Op. 59, in relation to both the Burkean and Kantian sublime (2003: 52–57); Lockwood specifically relates the close of the final piano sonata Op. 111 to Kantian thought. Berger and Mathew give more detailed analytical engagement. Berger associates shifts in ontological level in many of Beethoven’s piano sonatas with Kant’s conception of the aesthetic experience, i.e. as an analogue of the noumenal and phenomenal (1999: 38–44); Mathew (2009) discusses the relationship between Beethoven’s choral works and the “Handelian” and “choral” sublime, before arguing that the distinction between this and the “authentic” Kantian sublime of human freedom seen in the symphonic works cannot easily be maintained.

²⁴ Rumph observes that this fourth song is the only movement that Beethoven actually marked “*erhaben*” (Rumph 2004: 36); the title provides a context for analyzing the song in these terms, but does not suggest, as Rumph seems to imply, that this basis is lacking elsewhere.

²⁵ “Ich bin alles, was ist, was war und was sein wird, kein sterblicher Mensch hat meinen Schleier aufgehoben . . . Er ist einzig und von ihm selbst, und diesem Einzigem sind alle Dinge ihr Dasein schuldig.” Translation adapted from Jolly (1966) and Döring (1900).

It is significant that Kant himself highlighted the second of these in the third *Critique*, where he states that “Perhaps nothing more sublime has ever been said, or a thought ever been expressed more sublimely” (Kant 1790 [1987]: 185). This statement is strikingly mirrored by Schiller: “Nothing is more sublime than the simple grandeur with which they spoke of the Creator” (Schiller 1790 [1995]: 322). Although sometimes considered as evidence for Beethoven’s interest in Eastern religion or Masonic ritual, these inscriptions can thus also be linked to a Kantian conception of the sublime. Indeed, Schiller approaches them in precisely that way: in his essay, the Deistic divinity is conceived of in explicitly Kantian terms, as “a concept of Reason” (ibid.: 316). These inscriptions thus form an expression of religion *as enlightenment*, their sublimity residing in the transcendence of reason over superstition and polytheism. Indeed, more widely, Schiller’s aesthetics form another potential point of contact for Beethoven: his philosophical writing, particularly *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, developed directly from Kant’s *Critiques*, and it is all but impossible to understand Schiller without reference to Kant.²⁶ This relationship is even more pronounced in Schiller’s own influential writing on the sublime, which is informed throughout by Kant’s definitions:

We delight in the sensuous–infinite because we can think what the senses no longer grasp and the understanding no longer comprehends. We are inspired by the terrible, because we are able to will what the instincts abhor, and reject what they desire. (Schiller 1801 [1990]: 217)

The prominence with which Beethoven displayed these inscriptions clearly implies their importance to him; together with the conversation book entry, this suggests some awareness of a Kantian conception of the sublime, even if this is filtered through Schiller, around the time of the composition of the *Missa Solemnis*. Thus, the implication of the quotation and inscriptions for Kinderman’s analysis is that the admixture of humanistic and religious connotations in the Mass functions within the wider context of the aesthetics of sublimity.

The relevance of these quotations to the larger public works perhaps seems more immediately obvious: substantial choral works, particularly the oratorios of Handel and Haydn, functioned as traditional vehicles of musical sublimity.²⁷ However, we should not ignore the significance for the late sonatas: in particular, the appearance of the Kantian sublime in the conversation books coincides not only with the composition of the *Missa Solemnis*, but also with that of the two sonatas considered here. Thus, the wider aesthetic context of Beethoven’s formative years, the influence of Schiller and the evidence of the inscriptions and quotations suggest that he was preoccupied with humanist conceptions at precisely the time that these piano sonatas were composed. The analysis of these two movements therefore begins from the same point as Rumph, Kinderman, et al. Although the precise aesthetic context of these works cannot ever be fully reconstructed, there is, at least, a strong basis for suggesting that the “prototopic” of the sublime seen within them can be read in Kantian terms.

²⁶ Schiller makes this connection explicitly at the beginning of the first letter: “I will not conceal from you that it is in greatest part Kantian principles upon which the subsequent assertions will rest” (1794 [1985]: 258).

²⁷ See, for example, Webster (2005) and Sisman (2013).

The Piano Sonata in A \flat major, Op. 110

This assertion ultimately rests on the music itself, and particularly on the relationship between the sublimity of the climactic points of each movement and the music that precedes them. In each case, the power of the climaxes derives not simply from the gesture itself, but also from the cumulative force of the music that precedes it. Crucially, in both cases, the emerging topic of the sublime arises from a long process of accretion that involves overt topical signification.²⁸ The E major sonata Op. 109 comprises a variation movement in which the variations of its chorale theme involve not simply the normative processes of melodic, textural, and harmonic alteration, but also contrast of topic. Op. 110, by comparison, is constructed as a clear opposition of two entirely contrasting topics, which are juxtaposed into four sections with a transformative coda. In this movement, Beethoven uses topical signification in an overt way, drawing not on conventional forms, but conventional signifiers, to create the unconventional structure of the movement.

The two topics that he uses could hardly be more opposed. The first part of the movement comprises an aria topic (Example 3), preceded by a recitative, both of which also evoke Ratner's *Empfindsamkeit* topic (Ratner 1980: 22). After the aria has run its course, it is opposed directly to a second topic, that of the learned style, which is clearly evoked through the use of fugue (Example 4).

Example 3 Beethoven Op. 110, 3rd movement, bars 9–12

(Klagender Gesang)
Arioso dolente



Example 4 Beethoven Op. 110, 3rd movement, bars 24–46

Fuga
Allegro, ma non troppo

(legatissimo)

p *sempre p*

cresc. *f*



²⁸ Although Op. 111 was also composed in close proximity to Op. 109 and 110, it is far less reliant on topical signification. Like the *Hammerklavier*, it is more abstract, largely because of the importance of counterpoint as a structural aspect of the sonata from the beginning; this contrasts markedly with the other late sonatas, where counterpoint tends to be used topically, as an evocation of the learned or high style.

This opposition operates on several levels, the first of which is a basic contrast of dysphoric and euphoric significations. The aria is unremittingly tragic in its expression (it is in a minor key and comprises overwhelmingly descending lines with a strong emphasis on the descending semitone), and this is contrasted with the more positive assertion of the fugal theme (in a major key, with an ascending line that moves by ascending leaps of a fourth; even the 6/8 meter might be considered to evoke something of the pastoral). More importantly, this juxtaposition creates an explicit opposition between the significations of the topics themselves. In drawing on the aria topic (a transcontextualization of an inherently vocal form), Beethoven overtly invokes the individuality and expressionism of that operatic form as part of the “meaning” of the finale²⁹; the pathos of the *Empfindsamkeit* style heightens the intensely emotive, individualistic quality of the section. The use of the learned style, in contrast, gestures toward compositional artifice, appealing explicitly to the intellect.³⁰ Indeed, this can be taken further, by suggesting that the use of strict counterpoint evokes the notion of compositional order, of complex compositional thought: the learned style signifies, in part, the reason of a compositional mind. This opposition of topics thus creates an explicit contrast between the emotions and the mind, and this fundamental dialectic produces a narrative trajectory across the movement as the topics interact and develop.³¹

The course of this narrative is important in understanding the sublimity of the coda, which arrives at the climax of a long process. The learned style topic initially is presented as the antithesis of the overt emotionalism of the aria; reason is asserted strongly against tragedy and emotionalism. After the initial juxtaposition of the topics, however, an intensified version of the aria returns, its melodic line continually fragmented, punctuated by rests so frequently that it resembles a voice struggling through excess emotion (Example 5). This coincides with a harmonic disjunction as the music is wrenched into the remote key of G minor.

Example 5 Beethoven Op. 110, 3rd movement, bars 116–119

(Ermattet klagend)
Perdendo le forze, dolente

The musical score for Example 5 consists of two systems of piano and bass staves. The first system shows a melodic line in the right hand with a 'p' dynamic and a 'dim.' dynamic. The second system shows a 'cresc.' dynamic in the right hand and a 'p' dynamic in the left hand.

²⁹ Kofi Agawu discusses the use of aria as a topic, demonstrating its occurrence elsewhere in Beethoven’s instrumental music, particularly the *Pathétique* Sonata and the A minor quartet Op. 132 (see Agawu 1991), 28–30, 44, 114.

³⁰ On the relationship between the learned style and the intellect see Sisman (1993), 70–71.

³¹ It is also noteworthy that, in addition to the main opposition considered here, the individuality of the vocal expression of the aria is also opposed to the plurality of voices inherent within a fugue. There is a sense then in which the opposition of the two topics in this movement thus functions on several levels: emotionalism vs. the intellect, individuality vs. community, the galant style vs. the strict style, etc. This plurality of oppositions indicates something of the wide range of connotations present in individual topics, highlighting the semantic richness of the universe of topical signification.

This intensification of the aria transforms the subsequent return of the fugal section: the theme is inverted, removing the assertion of the original, and this is compounded by the ambiguous tonality, which, although ostensibly in G major, is inflected with the dysphoric minor throughout (Example 6). As the fugue develops, this turns increasingly toward the minor, coinciding with a marked increase in contrapuntal complexity as stretto entries of the original thematic contour combine with simultaneous diminution and augmentation. This process culminates in the dissolution of the fugue as the tightening entries produce rhythmic saturation: what emerges over the strong minor entry in the bass (bar 160f) is a thematic fragment, doubled in thirds and sixths, which eventually is reduced simply to alternating fourths. In this way, the intensified aria seems to affect the “reason” of the learned style topic; it inverts and becomes increasingly dysphoric, before the very contrapuntal techniques that define it all but exhaust themselves. Thus, despite the increase in rhythmic vitality (heralded in the *Nach und nach wieder auflebend* marking) there is almost a breakdown of the “reason” of the learned style topic.

Example 6 Beethoven Op. 110, 3rd movement, bars 136–147

Das gleiche Zeitmaß der Fuge, nach u. nach sich neu belebend
L'istesso tempo della Fuga, poi a poi di nuovo vivente

The image displays two systems of musical notation for Beethoven's Op. 110, 3rd movement, bars 136–147. The first system shows the treble and bass staves. The treble staff begins with a melodic line in G major, marked 'sempre una corda'. The bass staff is mostly silent, with a few notes appearing later. The second system shows the continuation of the piece, with the treble staff featuring a complex, rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes, and the bass staff showing a strong, rhythmic entry in G minor. The tempo marking 'L'istesso tempo della Fuga, poi a poi di nuovo vivente' is present above the first system. Below the first system, the text '(L'inversione della Fuga / Die Umkehrung der Fuge)' is written.

sempre una corda

(L'inversione della Fuga / Die Umkehrung der Fuge)

The breakdown of the fugue, however, serves a transitional function: after the harmonic dislocation created by the G minor aria, the alternating fourths finally arrive back on the dominant, triggering a faster transition passage based on a yet greater diminution of the fugal theme. Following this, the coda is announced by an emphatic restatement of the original fugal theme in the tonic, a powerful bass entry in octaves with fast, complex accompanying figuration. This return of the theme builds inexorably over 35 bars of music, continually ascending with the hands moving progressively further apart, out to the limits of the keyboard, combining the extremes of register with extremes of dynamic and texture to arrive at the final climactic passage of the entire sonata (Example 7).

Example 7 Beethoven Op. 110, 3rd movement, bars 200–213

It is this point in the finale that I argue gestures toward the sublime. The extremes of register, dynamic, and texture create an emergent meaning that invariably will be correlated with extremes of size and power. This climax arrives at the limits of music, and, in so doing, it arrives at the limits of the finite, the limits of perception. At its height, it transgresses the beautiful completely—the sound produced is pure power, at the limits of register, dynamic, and process. At this point, beauty is no longer an adequate aesthetic to understand the music; we turn toward the sublime instead. (That this moment of transcendence is brief is, perhaps, indicative of its sublime nature: the sublime is always fleeting; it is the thunderbolt that overwhelms, the flash of lightning, the moment of transcendental apprehension.)

Crucially, the arrival of this sublime climax is connected directly to the assertion of the fugal theme. Although the theme is transformed at this point,³² the association with the learned style topic is still retained; it is still a recognizable fugal theme, and it carries the memory of the earlier fugal treatment. This climax therefore produces a troping of the “reason” of the learned style—the dominance of the mind, rather than the emotions—with this sublime topic. The transcendent moment at the climax of the whole sonata is achieved not by overt, individualized emotionalism, but rather by musical reason. Beethoven is not engaged in simple mimesis—the representation of a sublime *object*—nor is he invoking a Burkean terror in the listener. Rather, in the troping of reason with the sublime the transformative climax of this movement is as close to a topical signification of the Kantian sublime as possible. Beethoven’s music here signifies an overwhelming power than reveals the limits of the finite, gesturing indexically toward the infinite. It presents a sophisticated

³² Hatten, for example, sees the transformation of the theme as the transcendence of “Classical lyricism and heroism” over the fugal style, its climax achieving “spiritual affirmation” (Hatten 2004: 254).

symbol, not just of a sublime object, but rather of the moment of the transcendental apprehension of the sublime, the ability of reason to grasp the idea of the infinite.

The Piano Sonata in E major, Op. 109

The positioning of this sublime transcendence within the finale of Op. 110 is important: it occurs at the moment of final resolution of the entire sonata. The prolongation of the tonic pedal throughout the entirety of the last fourteen bars extends the normal tonic prolongation at the end of a movement in a marked manner, foregrounding tonal stasis. The static harmony at this point echoes one of the characteristics that Michaelis identified as producing sublimity: “uniformity so great that it almost excludes variety: by the constant repetition of the same note or chord, for instance; by long, majestic, weighty or solemn notes, and hence by very slow movement” (Michaelis 1805: 290). The texture of the sonata here is far from uniform, but the effect of the extended pedal point produces the kind of static harmonic movement that is at the center of Michaelis’s assertion.³³ Moreover, the conjunction of the sublime gesture with this final tonic pedal suggests that the transcendence evoked by the topic is associated with a fixed state: it is essentially a stasis on the structural tonic of the movement, with nothing succeeding it—the transcendence of reason is the consummation of the movement.

This is in marked contrast to the way in which the gesture is used within the finale of the Op. 109 sonata. While the troping of topics is also seen at the climax of that movement, it functions not as the summation of the movement, but rather at the penultimate point. It arises from an accumulation process that runs across the coda. Starting with a restatement of the hymn-like theme, increasing momentum is generated by the compound subdivision of the beat. This rhythmic diminution eventually reaches saturation, a kind of “plenitude” of the type described by Hatten,³⁴ as the upper B pedal from the re-stated theme becomes a trill that essentially lasts through the whole of this final section. The rhythmic accretion finally leads to broken-chord figuration and scale passages in counterpoint with the main theme, this rapid figuration combining with loud dynamics and a drive toward the

³³ Michaelis considers this type of static harmonic movement to be sublime because of the seemingly overwhelming effect of the uniformity it produces: this prevents the imagination from integrating the music into a coherent whole, resulting in the incomprehensibility that ushers in the sublime (*ibid.*). Although I would not consider that this type of instance creates a sublime effect, i.e. it does not *evoke* the sublime, it can contribute to the accretion of signifiers in the topic I have identified—it can function as a signifier. The mathematically sublime in particular is invariably static—infinite size does not involve movement—and so markedly slow-moving harmony or repetitive gestures could be used to signify elements of this aspect of sublimity, in conjunction with the other aspects of the topic suggested above. This type of musical effect may be seen in many of the examples I have highlighted. In Chopin’s Op. 25 number 12 (the *Ocean Etude*), for example, the extreme registers of the piano are used (albeit never simultaneously, although the continual alternation from bass to treble produces a very similar effect) as a clear signification of extreme size. The combination of this with the slow harmonic rate and tonic pedal in the main theme of the piece produces a slow-moving, vast effect, which can be understood as a signification of the sublime. This slow rate of movement or even stasis is, however, not necessary in order to produce the signification of sublimity—it is possible for the topic to function without this element—and it should therefore be considered as a secondary parameter.

³⁴ On the idea of plenitude as a topic see Hatten 2004: 43–52.

extremes of the keyboard to create a sustained instance of the topic of the sublime. In this process, the hymn-like theme is transfigured in the highest register of the texture in a topical portrayal of transcendence (Example 8).

Example 8 Beethoven Op. 109, third movement, bars 175–195

The musical score for Example 8, Beethoven Op. 109, third movement, bars 175–195, is presented in seven systems. The key signature is G major (one sharp) and the time signature is 3/4. The score is written for piano and treble clef. The first system shows a complex texture with rapid sixteenth-note runs in the right hand and a steady eighth-note accompaniment in the left hand. The second system continues this texture, with the right hand moving to a higher register. The third system features a trill in the right hand and a more active left hand. The fourth system shows a trill in the right hand and a steady left hand. The fifth system begins with a trill in the right hand and a steady left hand. The sixth system features a trill in the right hand and a steady left hand, with dynamics markings 'dimin.' and 'tr. piu dimin.'. The seventh system concludes with a trill in the right hand and a steady left hand, with dynamics markings 'pp' and 'cantabile'.

The important difference between this climax and that of Op. 110 is underlined by the relationship to the fundamental harmonic structure. In this instance, the pedal point

created by the extended trills effectively produces, despite all the rhythmic movement, a harmonic stasis comparable to that of the A \flat major sonata; this again suggests a fixed, transcendent state.³⁵ Here, however, this prolongs the dominant, which fundamentally alters the significance of the passage: this realization of the sublime cannot be sustained, despite its splendor; resolution must follow. In other words, this movement does not just signify sublimity—it does not end with the transcendental motion—it moves beyond it, suggesting a *response*.

This turning away from the sublime is reflected in the dissolution of the climax: the final bars of the passage involve a reduction in dynamics and register as the right hand descends from the extremes of the keyboard through a dominant seventh back towards the center. This moment is crucial. The extended prolongation of the dominant that underpins the occurrence of the topic of the sublime is resolved not with a climactic arrival of the tonic, but rather by dissolving into an almost verbatim restatement of the chorale-like theme. Abandoning the extremes that characterize the sublime and returning to a “normal” register and dynamic may suggest a movement from the world of ideals into that of phenomena, a return from the overwhelming and infinite back towards the specifically finite and human.

The topical connotations of the theme itself (Example 9) are particularly important in understanding both the complex signification of this moment and its relationship to the whole movement. As Kinderman notes, the second-beat emphasis, slow tempo, and serious character of the theme is characteristic of a sarabande (2009: 243), an archaic dance inherently associated with the high style.³⁶ Moreover, this theme seems specifically to evoke the ecclesiastical associations of the high style: the chorale-like homophony and specifically vocal registers lend it the hymn-like quality noted by Lockwood (2003: 386) among others; the *Gesangvoll* indication makes this signification explicit. Together, these connotations might seem rather contradictory because, as Allanbrook (1983: 22) argues, triple meters are generally located on the “terrestrial” (i.e. “human”) end of the spectrum of dance topics, rather than being associated with ecclesiastical music. However, using a sarabande as the basis for a variation movement suggests parallels with Bach’s *Goldberg Variations*, which implies that the theme evokes not only the “authoritativeness” of the high style, but more specifically the model of Bach’s music.³⁷

The combination of the high register, chorale-like texture, and musico-historic references can thus be interpreted as producing a topical evocation of a serious, archaic “authority,” with clear ecclesiastical connotations. The soft dynamic level, particularly the

³⁵ The fact that these pedal points only occur in this final variation produce a completely different harmonic basis from either the theme or any of the preceding variations; this tends to foreground this element of the signification.

³⁶ On the relationship of the sarabande to the high style see Ratner 1980: 11–12, and Allanbrook 1983: 37–38.

³⁷ The aria theme of the *Goldberg Variations* is a sarabande in the French style; indeed, Bach was a particularly prominent composer of such sarabandes. Lockwood suggests the possibility that Beethoven knew the *Goldberg* before 1817 (2003: 394); Hatten (2012: 102) has recently highlighted not only the evocation of the Variations in the cyclical return of the theme, but also the use of Baroque forms throughout the movement. More generally, the influence of Bach’s music throughout Beethoven’s compositional life—and particularly on the last decade—is widely attested; his descriptions of Bach as the “patriarch of harmony” and “the immortal god of harmony” (Letters 44 and 48 in Cooper 1991: 154) indicate something of the authoritative position that Bach held for him.

mezza voce indication, and the rather narrow, specifically vocal compass, moderate these topical connotations, directing the music “inward”—*mit innigster Empfindung*—indicating the intimate, personal nature of the expression: the music connotes an inner, individualistic authority, or even spirituality.

Example 9 Beethoven Op. 109, third movement, bars 1–8

Gesangvoll, mit innigster Empfindung
Andante, molto cantabile ed espressivo
mezza voce



The musical score shows the first eight bars of the third movement of Beethoven's Op. 109. It is written for piano and features a vocal line in the right hand and a piano accompaniment in the left hand. The key signature is G major (one sharp) and the time signature is 3/4. The tempo and mood are indicated as 'Andante, molto cantabile ed espressivo' with 'mezza voce' dynamics. The score includes markings for 'cresc.' and 'p'.

The variation process develops these topical connotations across the entire movement; explicit contrasts of topic produce a higher-level progression from the high style, through the galant, pastoral, and learned styles before finally returning to the high style, a movement that results ultimately in the transcendental motion toward the sublime. The first variation moves immediately from the high style toward the galant, transforming the hymn into an aria topic as the “inward” expressiveness of the theme becomes more overtly performative, the cantabile line extending both in range and rhythmic subdivision. The hocket-like transformation and fragmentation of the second variation continues this change in stylistic register: the contrapuntal texture introduced here is the free-contrapuntal effect of the galant style, rather than the strict counterpoint of the learned style.³⁸ This is cued even more explicitly in the overtly virtuosic, Mozartian *moto-perpetuo* third variation, which combines a quintessentially “classical” ascending theme (a type of “Mannheim rocket” terminating in an appoggiatura) with running semiquavers. Although the subsequent use of invertible counterpoint suggests a troping of “classical” elements with procedures that strongly evoke Bach’s presence,³⁹ nevertheless, the overall galant style of this variation is clear. This variation thus marks the point of furthest stylistic remove in the progressive movement away from the high style; its duple-meter and virtuosic, two-part texture contain no trace either of the inwardness or the authoritativeness of the theme.

The next two variations reverse this movement: the fourth introduces a clear allusion to the pastoral (indicated by the *piacevole* marking, the compound meter, slower tempo, and pedal harmonies in the opening few bars⁴⁰), which is troped with the learned style as

³⁸ This hocket texture is juxtaposed with a cantabile chordal texture, which recalls the previous aria, and this highlights the movement towards the galant; although this variation does not introduce as clear a topical evocation as the other variations (in that it does not introduce recognizable figures), both sections do clearly relate to the galant style. It also introduces important structural approaches that are developed later, particularly the combination of two opposed textures and topics.

³⁹ Indeed, Kinderman (2009: 244) considers this variation a clear evocation of Bach’s style; Lockwood, however, considers that the rehabilitation of Bach in Beethoven’s time coincides with a similar re-appraisal of Mozart (2003: 374). It may be that there is an overt linking of the two here: the Baroque reference of the contrapuntal texture is combined with the classical, Mozartian theme.

⁴⁰ The B that runs through bars 2–4 has a similar effect to a pedal, even though it changes parts; although this is no evocation of pastoral drones, it does echo that aspect of the topic.

the semiquaver thematic fragment is treated in strict imitation within the polyphonic texture. This results in an elevated, rather than rustic, pastoral, the high-style association of this troping echoing the “spiritual” connotations of the chorale-theme. This learned style topic is made explicit in the full-blown fugal fifth variation, which evokes a stricter, more archaic style than the preceding *piacevole* counterpoint. The subject outlines the paired descending thirds of the main theme, appearing in double counterpoint with its own inversion, an almost stretto-like treatment that arises before the subject has even been exposed properly. The dense, angular effect and the use of such obvious contrapuntal artifice perhaps suggests, as in Op. 110, that compositional reason is dominant throughout; indeed, this fifth variation does achieve a type of climax, pushing toward the extremes of the instrument. Unlike Op. 110, however, the learned style is not raised to the point of transcendence: the climax is weakened by a move toward the subdominant and then by the dissolution of the counterpoint. Rather, a pared-down version of the original chorale-theme at the opening of the final variation cues the dissolution of the variation process itself as the movement expands to encompass something more developmental and transformational—a movement from simplicity to the transcendence of the sublime. The presence of the chorale theme throughout the sustained climax, suggests, like the transformation of the fugal theme at the climax of Op. 110, a troping of the connotations of the theme with the sublime.

The removal of the final cadence of this transformed version of the theme makes this association explicit. Here, the final bar is extended, the dominant prolonged from one beat in the original form into a descending four-bar arpeggio (b. 191–194), so that, in contrast to every preceding variation, this penultimate variation never achieves closure. Instead, it merges into the beginning of the restatement of the theme; its resolution is the reappearance of the original form. Whereas, elsewhere in the movement, the different topics represented by each variation remain discrete, this vital difference in the harmonic structure generates a troping of the topics at this point. Here, both topics are present simultaneously in one functional location—the first beat of bar 195 is both a resolution and a beginning—and this fundamentally alters the relationship; the sublimity of the final variation becomes indissolubly related to the topical connotations of the re-stated hymn. In retrospect, the transcendental motion toward sublimity thus arises, through variation and development, from the original chorale-theme—the potential for the sublime was, in that sense, always already contained within the “inwardness” of the theme—and yet returns to it in an extended circular motion, the reappearance of the theme “resolving” the sublime. The point at which these topics are combined thus forms the focus of the entire movement: the moment when the end of the whole process is revealed as its beginning.

The differences in the final appearance of the chorale theme, though small, are therefore telling; the introduction of reinforced bass sonorities produces a more “profound” effect, an echo, as it were, of the preceding sublimity. Whilst this underlines the fact that the theme cannot be heard in the same way as the opening of the movement—it has passed through the different topics of the variation process and, through this, has been transformed—in this passing allusion the connotations of the topic of the sublime momentarily resonate within the complex signification of the theme. The fundamental relationship between the inwardness of the choral theme and the sublime is established, not just by the troping at the point of resolution; it becomes incorporated into its very substance.

The different connotations arising within the theme itself make interpreting this trope complex. On the one hand, the ecclesiastical connotations that arise from the chorale-like

setting and high style of the theme⁴¹ might suggest a topical cuing of a relationship between sublimity and “spirituality.” In context, this might be expected: discussion of the sublime within the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries frequently includes reference to God as its ultimate expression, even at times its ultimate source.⁴² We could thus read the movement from the sublime to the spiritual as an analogue of this relationship: the height of sublime transcendence leads to devotion, as a process of natural resolution. This interpretation, however, rather suppresses the other topical connotations of the theme, which tend to point away from the ecclesiastical toward the specifically “human.” The dance gestures of the sarabande, for example, signify the “terrestrial” and societal, rather than the divine or ecclesiastical, and the whole process of the movement through the galant, pastoral, and learned styles toward the high style seems to foreground the high style as the focus of the movement. Even the intimate scale of the theme—its inwardness and individuality—gestures toward the specifically human; its small-scale nature is specifically foregrounded here by comparison to the overwhelming climax that precedes it. It is, then, a relationship between the transcendent and sublime and the intimately human nature of the theme that is cued topically here; the overwhelming and infinite is juxtaposed with—and yet is necessarily related to—the intimate and finite.

This movement from the transcendent to the profoundly human parallels the rational outcome of the Kantian sublime. Kant’s sublime obviates the need for God as its source because it arises entirely from the faculty of human reason. The transcendence of reason, however, requires moral action: we can comprehend the infinite and, in so doing, recognize the infinite freedom of our own reason, but the sublime power of reason requires morality, for to act immorally, according to the sensuous, is to act without reason. In a sense then, morality is the highest expression of the sublime in humankind; the two are inseparable, and there is a natural progression from the sublime, not to spirituality, but rather to rational morality.⁴³ Although it seems apparent that an abstraction such as “morality” cannot be denoted by musical signifiers—there is no topic that signifies morality—the chorale-like theme of this movement forms a complex signifier whose connotations (an inner, individualistic authority that gestures toward the spiritual) might suggest aspects of it.

⁴¹ On the relationship between the high style and ecclesiastical music see Hatten 1994: 76.

⁴² Beginning with Longinus’ *On the Sublime* (Longinus, 36), the association of the sublime with an apprehension of the divine can be traced through to the eighteenth century (see John Bailie 1747: 21 for example), and even Burke’s *Inquiry*, with its basis in the empiricism of Locke and Hume, relates the terror of the sublime explicitly to divine power (Burke 1757: 58).

⁴³ This relationship is seen most clearly in Kant’s General Remark following §29, which deals with the relationship of the moral to the aesthetic judgment of both the sublime and the beautiful: “It is in fact difficult to think of a feeling for the sublime in nature without connecting with it a mental attunement similar to that for moral feeling” (128). Kant later clarifies this, firstly by considering that moral good is best represented (i.e. determined by the subject) through the sublime because of the similarity of the function of the transcendence of reason over the sensible that occurs in both the sublime and in moral reasoning: “If we judge aesthetically the good that is intellectual and intrinsically purposive (the moral good), we must present it not so much as beautiful but rather as sublime For human nature does not of itself harmonize with that good; it [can be made to harmonize with it] only through the dominance that reason exerts over sensibility” (ibid.: 132). He then immediately takes this further, explicitly indicating that the transcendental motion of the sublime is inherently moral in nature: “Conversely, too, what we call sublime in nature outside us, or for that matter in nature within us (e.g. certain affects), becomes interesting only because we present it as a might of the mind to rise above certain obstacles of sensibility by means of moral principles” (ibid.).

Schiller, following Kant, also makes explicit the relationship between the sublime and morality: “We therefore experience through the feeling of the sublime, that the state of our mind does not necessarily conform to the state of the senses, that the laws of nature are not necessarily also those of ours, and that we have in us an independent principle, which is independent of all sensuous emotions” (1801: 217).

However, it is not just these topical connotations but, more importantly, the parallelism between the process of this movement and the Kantian sublime that prompts the interpretation of it as reflecting a moral imperative. The movement from the final variation to the return of the theme is analogous to that produced by the rational moral implications of the Kantian sublime: for Kant the height of sublimity leads inevitably to the moral; in Beethoven the sublime leads to the return of the theme as a process of natural resolution as the transcendent is troped with an intimate, “inward” authority. This process comes as close as possible to suggesting Kant’s sublime moral imperative, creating a topical gesture on a macro scale, an analogue of the fundamental relationship of the overwhelming and infinite to the finite and human.

The topic of the sublime that I have suggested above thus forms the most fundamental aspect of the expressive trajectory of the finale of this sonata, informing the whole process of the movement. In this regard, the similarity with Op. 110 is apparent; the same signification of the sublime forms the climactic point of both finales. However, the interaction with the significations of the other topics brings differing emphases in each, with the result that they connote different aspects of the sublime: where Op. 110 highlights the transcendence of reason, Op. 109 leads beyond this to signify its intrinsic association with the intimate and human—with the inner life of the individual. In other words, taken together they can be interpreted as portraying the two facets of the Kantian sublime inscribed in Beethoven’s conversation book in early 1820: they are a transcendent apprehension of both the moral law within us and the starry heavens over us.

The Topic of the Sublime: Contexts and Conventions

As Stephen Rumph (2004: 192) argues, however, Beethoven’s symbols are rarely straightforward. This is seen, for example, through the relationship between the sublime topic at the heart of both of these movements and the “symbol of the Deity” that Kinderman identifies in the *Missa Solemnis* and the Ninth Symphony. Although this symbol centers on a particular orchestral/choral sonority, it also involves a disjunction in pitch (Kinderman 2009: 277) and this aspect has parallels with the pianistic sublime suggested here; in both cases, extremes of pitch are used as an indexical signifier of transcendence. In its turn, however, Kinderman’s symbol is related to the wider context of the religious sublime commonly associated with the choral works of Handel and Haydn, where the use of extremes, particularly in the use of large orchestral and choral works is used to evoke the overwhelming effect of the sublime.

In the light of these wider associations, the pianistic sublime in Beethoven’s late works can be understood as a transcontextualization of certain characteristics of a sublime symphonic/choral style into the new context of the piano sonata. From this viewpoint, the finales of these sonatas “translate” elements of the orchestral sublime in pianistic terms: in particular, the use of virtuosity and extremes of texture are a concession to the nature of the instrument, replacing the ability of an orchestra to sustain extremes of pitch and dynamic simultaneously. This change of context, however, has an important effect. The *Missa Solemnis*—contemporaneous with the sonatas, at least in sketch form—has a specifically religious conception of the sublime (as indeed does the wider choral style); the

Deity is omnipresent, albeit through a curious mixture of Kantian humanism and Christianity.⁴⁴ The association of this sublimity (and thus that of Kinderman's symbol) with a specifically religious context rests, though, on the texted nature of the work, as well as the wider ecclesiastical associations of choral music; the sublimity of the music accompanies explicit textual references to the Deity. Lacking the specificity of a text, however, the religious connotations are largely removed within the context of the purely instrumental sonatas: here, it is sublimity itself that is signified; its transcendence is not specifically religious, but rather that of Enlightenment.

Thus, whilst the sign identified here might be considered a "figure" in Ratner's terms, it is related to aspects of the wider sublime style, not just of Handel or Haydn but of Beethoven's own late choral works.⁴⁵ The transcontextualization that this involves tends to support the assertion that this sign already functions as a "prototopic" even within Beethoven's works; in pianistic terms it is an emergent, idiolectic signifier certainly, but one that nevertheless functions within a wider, conventionalized context.⁴⁶ However, when taken up and moved to different contexts by Chopin or Liszt, Brahms or Burgmüller, it acquires a range of new connotations. In particular, the Kantian implications of Beethoven's works are most often replaced by the Romantic sublime, related far more often to the aesthetic terror of Burke (particularly when related to the macabre and Gothic), or to the quasi-religious. These later transcontextualizations, with their attendant accretion of new connotations, suggest that this sign functions as a topic in both Mirka and Monelle's terms: a conventionalized symbol of the incommensurable, an indexical signifier of sublimity.

Ultimately, such a topic represents only one way in which the music of the nineteenth century approached the sublime. This topic presents a sublimity that is delimited—it presents sublimity as a sign-object—and although (to paraphrase Allanbrook) the paradoxical notion of signifying the ineffable in such a way is perhaps inherently problematic, nevertheless, it is significant that this issue arises on precisely the grounds on which nineteenth-century musical aesthetics wrestled with the issue. This topic highlights the distinction, in Michaelis's terms, between portraying the sublime and evoking its effects. As such, it resonates with the contemporaneous aesthetic context of a range of nineteenth-century piano works; it allows for new interpretive critical approaches to such works, relating them to one of the most dominant concepts within post-Kantian and Romantic aesthetics.

⁴⁴ See Kinderman (1985) and Solomon (1988, especially pp. 226–27).

⁴⁵ Indeed, from this viewpoint, the unmistakable sublimity of the Mass (and indeed the Ninth Symphony) provides a context within which to view the late sonatas; it gives a hermeneutic basis for reading the finales of these works within the context of this aesthetic.

⁴⁶ Moreover, it is possible to argue that the way in which Beethoven uses this sign implies that it functions like a topic, even in these early occurrences. It occurs within the context of movements that draw heavily on topical signification; it thus seems reasonable to suggest that, since Beethoven seems to use it as a topic, we can consider it as such.

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