

Projective identification, musical interpretation and the self

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ABSTRACT: This article proposes that the psychoanalytic concept of projective identification may be useful for articulating, and hence better understanding and defining, the relationship that some listeners and players may develop between themselves and the musical works of the classical repertoires they are interpreting. It is proposed that through interpreting, we essentially create objects of fantasy through our engagement with musical texts to which we bring a deep sense of self. Eero Tarasti calls this “actoriality”, and considers it to represent “all that by which listeners project themselves into”. Anthony Storr called it projective identification – where a person “imagines himself to be inside some object external to himself” – because “over and above a passive enjoyment of sounds, music makes us participate actively in the working of a creative mind”.

Projective identification usually describes aspects of the relationship between two people (that is, it describes the dynamics of their relatedness), but it could offer other ways of understanding relationships between musical interpreters and works: in terms of 1) the evacuation of feelings; 2) the music being about those feelings; and 3) the music being a container for feelings. Given the deep sense of self brought to the interpretative process, we could perhaps posit 4) that the developing processes of music cause aspects of the self to change as well. This awareness of projective identification could contribute to the musical learning process in terms of more active and focused musical- and self-awareness and hence to psychological well-being through self-knowledge.

KEYWORDS: Feedback, contextual interference, observation, self-control, music education, psychoanalysis

Introduction: speaking of you, through you

If you question the masters of an earlier epoch with perseverance and conviction you become the medium of their replies: they speak of you through you. (Boulez, 1971, p. 19)

Musical material operates in a domain of non-verbal information, whether we believe it to be divorced from, or an essential part of, a social fabric of being. Its meanings may remain personal and unarticulated in any kind of verbal form, whether it be interpreted through listening, analysis or performance. Interpreting, in the broadest sense, allows all listeners, performers and other contemplators of music to place themselves inside aspects of the musical material; it is our way of participating in it (and essentially defines what interpretation is). For example, in Chapter 3 of E.M. Forster's *A Room with a View*, entitled "Music, Violets and the letter 'S'", the narrative focuses on the effects produced by engaging deeply with and performing music. Lucy Honeychurch's choice of repertoire is set up from the beginning as unusual because she chooses the late sonatas of Beethoven, rather than the drawing-room music more appropriate to a young woman of her class. Lucy,

who found daily life rather chaotic, entered a more solid world when she opened the piano.... She was no dazzling *exécutive*; her runs were not at all like strings of pearls, and she struck no more right notes than was suitable for one of her age and situation. Nor was she the passionate young lady, who performs so tragically on a summer's evening with the window open. Passion was there, but it could not be easily labelled; it slipped between love and hatred and jealousy, and all the furniture of the pictorial style. And she was tragical only in the sense that she was great, for she loved to play on the side of Victory. Victory of what and over what—that is more than the words of daily life can tell us. But that some sonatas of Beethoven are written tragic no one can gainsay; yet they can triumph or despair as the player decides, and Lucy had decided that they should triumph. (Forster, 1990, p. 50)

Mr Beebe observes that "If Miss Honeychurch ever takes to live as she plays, it will be very exciting both for us and for her." Tellingly, Lucy responds:

"Once, you know, I said to [my mother] that *I liked my own playing better than any one's*. She has never got over it. Of course, I didn't mean that I played well; I only meant –"

"Of course," said [Mr Beebe], wondering why she bothered to explain. [Emphasis added.] (Forster, 1990, p. 52)

At the end of this chapter, Lucy wilfully decides to go around the town on the tram, on the platform next to the driver – an act of defiance to which Mr Beebe responds "She oughtn't really to go at all... and she knows it. I put it down to too much Beethoven." (Ibid, p. 59).

It is important that Forster gives Lucy Beethoven to play. Beethoven's music appears to have meaning, whatever that might be; classically structured, tonal music, after all, oper-

ates through a vocabulary that is well understood by listener and performer. As the romantic symbol of the unfathomable genius, he has probably borne the weight of more authorial fantasies than any other composer. It is highly significant that Beethoven gives every impression of resolving the issues he exposes in his works. The musical forms he employs are overwhelmingly articulated by the statement, development and resolution of difficult material, the sonatas being archetypes of this pattern. In this regard, they follow the classic formulation for narrative structures articulated by William Labov: abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, result or resolution, coda (see Ryan, 2004, p. 9). It may be important for those who are willing to be as closely involved with the music as Lucy that Beethoven resolves his material so satisfactorily, as we shall see. Even so, Lucy is playing Beethoven's last piano sonata. Here, the qualities of the Classical style were not only strained to the limit of what they could reasonably bear, but there are also sections of the music that constitute, in the words of Maynard Solomon (1996), "unprecedented ways of representing states of being that flourish beyond the boundaries of ordinary experience" (p. 2).

Mr Beebe ascribes Lucy's bizarre behaviour on the tram to "too much Beethoven", thus suggesting that the music has been an agency of a particular behaviour. Lucy herself talks about the Beethoven sonata in different terms. For her, it seems that the music is not an agency of behaviour, but material in which her deepest self is contained – perhaps even material from which her deepest self is inseparable. This is probably what lies behind her liking her "own playing better than any one's" and why she feels she has instantly to go on to clarify that this has nothing to do with playing well – an awareness of what music can be that she does not need to explain to the recipient of her comments. Lucy also plays on her own, and thus has full control over her internal representation of the music. However adept she may or may not be at actually expressing her interpretation with full technical control, what goes on inside her head makes up for any deficiencies. My argument here will be that in their ways, both Mr Beebe and Lucy are right; music can act as an agency for new types of behaviour, but only where a deep sense of self is given to the process. Here, "music" refers to Western art-music works of the common-practice era and "performance" to that on which the mainstream work-tradition depends (see Goehr, 1994, Chapter 4).

From Actoriality to Projective Identification

Eero Tarasti describes an anthropomorphic side of music as "actoriality". Music derives its coherence, he argues, from a deep level of meaning from which all signification emanates, but meaning manifests itself through actors:

In the European classical-romantic style, [actoriality] is normally identified with a theme and with thematicism, but in a broader sense it represents all that by which a listener projects him- or herself into.... It is hard to imagine any music without a hint of it. (Tarasti, 2004, p. 295)

Any interpreter of a musical text may stand in place of Lucy Honeychurch here: anyone who brings aspects of the self, consciously or unconsciously, to music. Whether through performance, deep listening, or analysis – any form of musical interpretation – to engage meaningfully with a piece of music is to create a relationship with an object of fantasy to which

aspects of the self may be brought. I say an object of “fantasy” because it is widely accepted that music cannot deal in fixed meanings; whatever your personal engagement with the musical work might be, it almost certainly takes some hermeneutic dimension into account. The interpreter develops an essentially personal relationship with the music; for performer and analyst, this may be made public through publication or performance, and in this particular way, performance and analysis are closely related. Musicology also offers a public way of expanding in detail meanings in the music that are not expressible through the dimension of performance; bound as it necessarily is to time, the interpreter is allowed only the instant of sounding itself with which to imbue thoughts about the music. In cases where performance proves inadequate as means of expression, that is surely why we write about it, a duality eloquently exemplified by Jonathan Dunsby (1995). But performing offers the subject something over and above a developing relationship with a score in the capacity of interpreter. The act of performing involves the body in making movements which become the music. Indeed, performers may sense that they “are” the music as they are performing, since the performer’s body is directly responsible for producing the music. The more bodily familiar the performer is with a work, the more this is so. In this regard, it may feel as if a complex piece is better known when it has been practised more, since a set of motor activities connect the performer’s body intimately with his or her mental knowledge of what the work means as the interpretation evolves during the practice process. The performer is also directly in charge, in real time, of actualizing the music through his or her interpretation. This, it seems to me, is what Lucy means when she says that she likes her “own playing better than any one’s”. A bodily and musical assimilation takes place, and a sense that the performer knows what s/he thinks the music means and is expressing it through performance. José Bowen (1999) observed that “there seems to be a connection between what you think the piece means and how you play it” (p. 450), and Anthony Kemp (1996) also noted that the performer needs to build up a “strong internal representation of the music” before anything can be expressed (p. 44). We might draw upon another piano-playing fictional character to exemplify the opposite of Lucy. If there is no strong internal representation of the music, then the performer is no better than Rosamond in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*. Rosamond plays the piano beautifully, but she can only copy her teacher’s imaginative playing and invests nothing of herself; though a “hidden soul” seems to be flowing from her fingers, it is not her own (Weliver, 2000, pp. 209-210). In his 1928 poem “Among Schoolchildren”, W. B. Yeats could not “separate the dancer from the dance”; in the performing musician’s mind, music is equally indivisible from the body as it is produced.

I have focused deliberately on performance here because although the experience of other types of musical interpretation is not to be denigrated, those interpretations are distinct in important ways. It is true that the act of performing also involves the deepest listening, after all, and listeners of all types always have the option of reacting to different interpretations of musical works very strongly; the existence that pieces of music may enjoy in mental representation, as personal ideas in the minds of listeners, allows those listeners a type of mental ownership of the music that in some ways equals that of the performer, musicologist or analyst (and performers, after all, need this kind of mental representation as part of their ongoing engagement with the music). However, only through performance is the object of fantasy brought into reality through sounding, and only through performance does the interpreter become directly associated with the work’s instantiation. Thus I

suggest that performers may develop a particularly intense connection between musical works and their sense of self. Interestingly, since Merleau-Ponty's seminal 1962 work *Phenomenology of Perception*, there has been a wealth of studies analysing the performing body in the contribution it makes to perceptions of the performance: recent studies include Hallgjerd, 2001; Fisher and Lochhead, 2002; Davidson, 2005; Gritten and King, 2006; Ouzonian, 2006; Corness, 2008. There has however been no work which analyses neurological differences between performer and listener as performance takes place.

Moving now from Lucy's fictional world, I propose here a framework for understanding the relationship between the musically-interpreting self and the creation of meaning inseparable from the self, a framework that has its foundations in hints from several sources. Tarasti speaks of projection in his concept of actoriality, but the psychiatrist and psychotherapist Anthony Storr perhaps came closer to the mark in proposing that when we listen to or play music, we are engaging in a form of projective identification. With the purpose of demonstrating that the structures of music can teach a mind to be ordered, Storr quoted Stravinsky, who considered that over and above a "passive" enjoyment of sounds was music "that will make us participate actively in the working of a mind that orders, gives life, and creates" (Stravinsky, 1947, p. 24). Storr (1993) went on to suggest that,

Psychoanalysts refer to this participation as "projective identification": the process by which a person imagines himself to be inside some object external to himself. (p. 106)

Storr's comment was offered in a rather throwaway manner; by "identifying ourselves with those more gifted, we can actually improve our own capacities" (ibid.) He confines himself specifically to considering what music can "teach" us in the way of mental and motor organization, and also equates musical processes with the mind that created them. But his statement has further-reaching implications than perhaps he considered. Projectively identifying with music would mean not only that the music teaches the subject something, but also that the external object takes on the characteristics projected by the subject. Storr refers to listeners and performers, but only performers are in a position to actualize a process in which the musical external object can take on new characteristics. An imagined rendition of a listener would remain essentially private in that listener's mind.

Projective Identification: definitions

The terms "projection" and "identification", both classic Freudian mechanisms of defence, have infiltrated general understanding. The man who walks into a room and thinks that everyone around him is looking miserable is unconsciously projecting an aspect of himself onto others, and in the process denying it is an aspect of himself. The woman who identifies with her mother assimilates her own characteristics with those of her mother, and in the process becomes even more like her mother. Projective identification is a more complex process, and in the present-day psychoanalytic context, evokes a set of meanings that have gone rather beyond the original usage as posited by Melanie Klein. In Klein's (1946) original formulation, projective identification is an infant's fantasy in which parts of the self are split off from the rest of the self and projected *into* – not *onto* – another object; thus, the object

takes on aspects of that self and “becomes” those parts of the self. This external object then becomes possessed by those projected parts, as well as being controlled by them and identified with them, as Segal (1973) articulated (p. 27). Robert Waska added that “besides the elements that Segal clarifies, I think of projective identification as an unconscious fantasy of ... feelings being *evacuated* into the internal and external object” [emphasis added] (1999, pp. 155-161). The process is a dynamic one. The attributes of the projected thoughts, feelings and beliefs do not reside solely within the subject, but instead are actually taken on by the external object.

The post-Kleinian extensions to the concept of projective identification are expressed through a substantial literature. This pertains mostly to its management in therapeutic situations (e.g. Ogden, 1979; Grotstein, 1981; Sandler, 1987; Spillius, 1988), but nevertheless defines complexities inherent in the original concept that are of interest here. Nancy McWilliams (1994) observes that in clinical situations, there may in some cases be evidence of an “observing ego” on the part of the subject in which the subject can see that fantasy might not conform to reality. In other cases, the subject may experience from the external object what he or she feels to be an accurate depiction of the external object’s state of mind. There may be “a fusion of cognitive, affective and behavioral dimensions...discernible here” (p. 111). Projective identification, McWilliams argues, is a “self-fulfilling prophecy”. The subject’s way of perceiving reality is such that s/he can induce behaviours in the external object which s/he already believes to be attributes of the object.

There is a clear connection here with the relationship between an interpreter and the attributes of a piece of music which appear wholly to match those projected into it by the subject. Since this process may be unconscious, there are particular ramifications for helping musicians understand how music may work on them, as well as understanding the processes by which they imbue music with meaning in what is often a condition of unawareness. The process of projective identification may be unconscious to both subject and external object, or unconscious to one or other party and conscious to the other.

Projection into an external object allows the subject control over the object. Musical interpreters develop a sense of ownership of pieces through the increasing levels of “understanding” what the music “means”. I place these terms, so commonly and casually used in the music world, in quotes, because the exact relationship between text and reader, between the “masters of earlier epochs” of Boulez’s (1971) quote and the “you”, is seldom critically examined. If some forms of interpretation are a projective identification of the interpreter’s own psychological processes into the music, then the musical work performed becomes in effect a narrative of the self (or, I should say, one of many possible narratives of the self). The interpreter is initially attracted to something in the music – and could, to be fully aware of what happens during the process of interpretation, critically examine what that is – but is in a position to take increasing control over the way the musical work becomes idealized. Students have often indeed spoken to me of wishing to “conquer” a work, and though this is usually in the context of technical complexity, it is nevertheless a revealing comment. It is precisely because pieces of music do not have to have concrete, definitive programmes that they are able to act as the objects for projective identification. In fact, it is only because meaning is created in objects by subjects that those objects can bear the weight of so much latitude in possible meaning.

Projective identification, for Klein, was an aggressive act in which infants expel un-

wanted parts of themselves into other people, usually their mothers, for defensive and protective reasons. The recipient of those unwanted feelings can be perceived to possess those characteristics and may become hated as a result. Klein did not originally conceive of projective identification as a transaction involving more than the self alone. In other words, the active participation of the object was not required. By proposing a dynamic aspect to projective identification and suggesting that the object must be affected by the fantasy, later psychoanalysts added depth to Klein's original formulation. This means that the term can, in current psychoanalytic theory, describe three distinct processes. In the formulation of Anthony Bateman and Jeremy Holmes (1995), these are: first, that the recipient may be induced to act in ways that originate with the projector, in which case the process may originate in both subject (projector) and object (recipient); second, that projective identification "can be a mutual process in which projector and recipient interact with one another at an unconscious level"; and third, as Klein's analysand Wilfred Bion proposed, that there can be a positive form of projective identification in which unmanageable feelings are split off and projected into an object which "detoxifies" them and returns them in a benign form (p. 38-39 and 82-87). In this way, projective identification becomes a way of controlling parts of the self. As Thomas Ogden (1979) sums up,

As a defence, projective identification serves to create a sense of psychological distance from unwanted (often frightening) aspects of the self; as a mode of communication, projective identification is a process by which feelings congruent with one's own are induced in another person, thereby creating a sense of being "at one with" the other person. As a type of object relationship, projective identification constitutes a way of being with and relating to a partially separate object; and finally, as a pathway for psychological change, projective identification is a process by which feelings like those that one is struggling with, are psychologically processed by another person and made available for re-internalization in an altered form. (p. 362)

Projective Identification: from human object to musical object

Projective identification as defined above is about the relationship between subject and external human object. For musical interpreters, the relationships between subject and musical object can be as real and as mutable as those between themselves and other people. Storr's comment quoted above invites just such speculation about what musical interpreters understand music to be. By identifying how a process that otherwise refers to a relationship between two people can also explain a relationship between a person and a piece of music, he creates a bridge between a human external object, into which thoughts and feelings can be projected, and a creative work, which for him possesses characteristics of the mind that created it and is thus in some sense both human and alive. One might wish to refine this formulation in the light of all that reception theory has taught us about the creative relationship between reader and text and suggest a more dynamic process, a two-way process between subject and object, than Storr was proposing, and, in the process, bringing dynamics of interaction between subject and external object into the equation (which Storr did not consider). Robert Holub (1984), in summing up various ways in which responses to texts

have been classified, suggests that “subjectifying” texts (establishing a level of interaction with texts) allows subjects to connect texts with realities outside of those texts and in doing so, to establish reciprocal relationships with their environments. Thus, text-reader interaction becomes a form of communication, a joint activity between reader and text, in which the validity of the text consists of the experience of the reading process and in which the validity of the text is derived from the reading process (p. 107-120). Reception theory, therefore, looks at response and understanding as legitimate areas of study in themselves, and at meaning as an ongoing part of the history of responses. The connection with projective identification could not be clearer: in both formulations, meaning is created by projection of the self into external objects. To recap, projective identification offers several ways of understanding certain types of relationships between interpreter and musical work: feelings can be evacuated into music; it may simultaneously be believed that the music is actually about those feelings; the music is also a container for feelings.

Let us now add a fourth possibility: that the interpreter may feel not only that s/he understands the music, but that the music “understands” him or her, returning feelings in an altered, resolved form. For Jonathan Kramer (2004), contemplating a musical work can produce a “position shift” because the mysteries of a work never yield completely to one’s fantasies; there are always corners which remain dark. He suggests that

Music may indeed mirror the mind.... But again, let us also remember the darker side of music. Challenging music, unusual music, may force us beyond ourselves. It may help us to forge new selves. It may provoke us with disunion rather than welcome us with union. It may not mirror our minds as they are but rather suggest ways to expand our minds, ways to have new temporal experiences, ways to find new meanings, new personae. (p. xxi)

It is implicit in Kramer's idea that the interpreter must invest aspects of the self in the interpretative process. Otherwise, challenging or unusual music would not have the power to force us beyond ourselves (we would simply switch off). If music can cause us to discover a new persona, then, Kramer seems to be saying, the narrative of a piece of music can come to perform us: in developing musical material to which the interpreter has brought aspects of the self, the processes of the music cause those aspects of the self to develop as well. The music, in effect, has become invested with an unconsciously containing aspect of the interpreter, which s/he has unconsciously projected into the music, now relating to it (and feeling contained by it) as if by another person. (The questions remain: is this a narcissistic illusion, as it does not involve a different, separate psyche? Or does it involve a different mind, a notional “fantasy” mind, which controls the narrative of the music?) If music can perform us, then musical interpretation may have a therapeutically containing function – at least in situations such as Beethoven sonatas, where the music is perceived to resolve its own issues. In other words, interpreters might expel an unwelcome feeling from themselves by engaging with a particular piece that can actually act therapeutically. Because the tracts of music which interpreters identify with their feelings (and into which they have projected their feelings) eventually resolve, so might their feelings resolve with them. This may account for the sheer power of the feelings of triumph and joy that we may feel after experiencing some works... and those of despair that accompany others.

This aspect of the projective-identification-as-interpretation would correspond to Bion's (1962) formulation, discussed above, in which the split-off part of the self can be returned in a benign form after being held by the therapist. The therapist "receives" difficult parts of the patient's psyche and contains them so that they lose their frightening or unbearable quality, feeding them back to the patient in a more acceptable form of words through interpretation (Spillius, 1988, p. 121). In the therapeutic setting, the patient's previously disturbing thoughts become more accessible to his or her psychologically healthy self through the therapist's intervention; the latter tolerates what seems intolerable so that the patient may come to accept those parts of him or herself. Similarly, an interpreter who evacuates aspects of the self into the music may find those aspects to be developed and changed through musical resolution, along with musical ideas. Ultimately, though the performer may take control over the way the musical work becomes idealized in performance, a musical work will still retain its essential identity. If this were not the case, feelings of conquest would not be induced by exerting control over it.

Projective-identification-as-interpretation is an act of control over musical material. This brings us to projective identification as psychic defence, as a means of "creating psychological distance from unwanted (often frightening) aspects of the self" (Ogden, 1979, p. 362). In such cases, I imagine this to relate to the initial instant of musical attraction, during which an aspect of the music is identified either consciously or unconsciously as providing an opportunity for the evacuation of feelings. By projecting an unacceptable aspect of the self into the music, the music can be seen to take on this unwanted characteristic in place of the self. Anthony Kemp (1996) suggests that "the study of music [might be] seen as an opportunity to unify and make whole a fragmented and vulnerable ego" (p. 251). If it is in some cases true that a work proceeds to a narratologically satisfying conclusion in which notes of anxiety, of aggression, of fear even, are brought to resolution (exactly as we might see in Beethoven), then it would not be too far-fetched to propose that such music can have a therapeutic role for the fragile ego, a role which allows the performer to become something stronger and more resilient through the act of performance itself.

Conclusion

Kemp (1996) has suggested that "musicians, as a group, are so profoundly committed to music that they find it difficult to separate their own personal identities from their musical ability" (p. 100), and that as a consequence, "untold psychological damage" is sometimes a feature of some musicians who invest large parts of themselves in music (p. 251). Since projective-identification-as-interpretation might be a conscious or unconscious process, awareness and articulation of how we bring parts of ourselves to particular tracts of music might allow us to avoid this damage. Melissa Dobson (2010) has more recently explored in detail the investment involved in "performing your self" concluding that;

In many cases, those who saw expression of identity as an integral part of performance in some way found that their work or training was detrimental to their well-being.... The current nature of conservatoire training [encourages] them to develop a strong and individual musical identity which can be expressed in performance. (pp. 52-3)

This article has not hypothesized projective-identification-as-interpretation to be a given in all cases of performance and interpretation, but rather offers it as a model for some modes of interaction with musical works in which psychological investment might be better understood and hence contained and managed. It remains now to explore practical applications that may arise from it in teaching and learning situations, where examining the processes of self-awareness might be of psychological benefit. Since what “happens” in music almost always concerns transformation of musical material, we must ask seriously what may then happen to those parts of the self that are brought to the musical agents we call thematic material. This is perhaps what an awareness of projective identification can contribute most. Whatever sense of narrative the interpreter makes of the musical material, essentially it may be the location of the self in that material that most helps to forge a meaningful engagement with what is happening. Boulez wishes us to “question the masters of an earlier epoch” so that we “become the medium of their replies”; in practice, it might be more fruitful, as well as more psychologically healthy, to interrogate ourselves.

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