REVIEW

The Rhythms of Tonal Music
by Joel Lester
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Robert O. Gjerdingen

Joel Lester the theorist and Joel Lester the performer have cowritten an extended study on the durational aspects of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century concert music. The theorist presents an assured persona capable of dispatching the most fearsome problems with one or two quick thrusts. The performer, by contrast, shows a more diffident temperament. Like a Eusebius to the theorist's Florestan, the performer is wont to muse on the elusive nature of truth and true principles. Where the theorist charges ahead sure of victory, the performer bids caution and tolerance. Where the theorist takes the citadel and hoists the colors, the performer looks upward as well but sees instead a profusion of clouds—so many indistinct shapes, so many ineffable hues and textures, such infinite variety. Through nine
chapters lavishly illustrated with musical examples these two vie for the reader’s allegiance and sympathy. Many will no doubt find the dashing theorist the more appealing. But I found myself rooting for Eusebius.

Definitions are clearly the province of the theorist. Take for instance the definition of accent, a definition touted as a way out of those terminological thickets that have ensnared so many previous writers:

An accent is a point of emphasis. In order for a point in musical time to be accented, something must occur to mark that point. It is the beginning of a musical event that marks off accented points in time. Accents are, therefore, points of initiation. (p. 16)

Here we see the slashing swordplay of the syllogism: major premise (thrust), minor premises (parry and counterthrust), and conclusion (the coup de grâce). The syllogism, that climax in the dialectical mode of discourse, is nevertheless difficult to manage successfully. It can easily conceal problems of logical form while at the same time making bold conjectures sound like the unproblematical operands of a numerical equation.

Lester’s definition of accent has a complex logical form that allows for various interpretations. On the one hand, it might reduce to simplified versions of the third and fourth statements. That is, “All musical beginnings are accents, therefore all accents are beginnings.” The form is fine, though the ideas of emphasis and marking are left out. If, on the other hand, one includes them, then a third statement is necessary. A well-formed syllogism could equate “emphasis” with “marking” and then link “marking” with “beginning”: “All accents are marked points of musical time; all marked points of musical time are beginnings of musical events; therefore all accents are beginnings of musical events.” This results in a very strong claim for beginnings. In fact it implies that the set of beginnings could be larger than the set of marked points of musical time, which itself could be larger than the set of accents. There might thus be marked points of musical time that were beginnings but not accents and beginnings that were not marked points of musical time. One must resist the temptation to reverse the middle premise so as to make the equally plausible claim: “All accents are marked points of musical time; all beginnings of musical events are marked points of musical time; therefore all accents are beginnings of musical events.” This would lead to a fallacy revealed by the formally equivalent statement, “All geese are waterfowl; all ducks are waterfowl; therefore all geese are ducks.”

Doubts about the definition are first raised by the performer. In regard to the claim that “for a point in musical time to be accented, something must occur to mark that point,” the performer gently reminds the theorist that “a metric accent, after all, can occur on a rest; no event need mark it off” (p. 16). And even if one grants the many cases where the beginning of
a musical event does mark off an accented point in time, the existence of unaccented, unmarked beginnings further complicates the issue. Richard Stolzman, the famed clarinetist, can begin a tone so softly that the listener is unable to discern the moment when it becomes audible. Such a tone begins, but its beginning is not marked and carries no accent.

In the hands of a gifted performer the clarinet has, of course, an unusual ability to suppress a tone's attack. Yet other, quite ordinary examples spring to mind that would seem to contradict the notion of accent as initiation tout court. What about an upbeat? An upbeat must perforce begin. But by merely beginning does it necessarily become accented? Certainly the claim that "the beginning of a pattern or motive is accented in relation... to the continuation of that pattern" (p. 16) will puzzle the thousands of singers who gather each Christmas to exclaim "Hal-le-lu-jah! Hal-le-lu-jah! Hal-le-lu-jah!" And what of the millions of Javanese whose exquisite metrical hierarchies depend on the notion of accent as culmination? They count one-two-three-four. For them, an event can occur at no weaker a time than on the initial beat of a rhythmic cycle. We should be unwilling to assert, in the absence of any proof to the contrary, that musical accent is a fundamentally different phenomenon for the Javanese than it is for the Viennese. Defining accent as initiation hence seems to leave the terminological thickets just as thorny as they were thirty years ago when Cooper and Meyer admitted that "one cannot at present state unequivocally what makes one tone seem accented and another not."3

As might be expected, the theorist takes the initiative in the book's first chapters. But as the discussion progresses the performer begins to assert himself. When early in chapter 3 the theorist declares that beats mark off functionally equivalent spans of time, the performer slowly, tactfully, begins to present evidence restricting that bald statement. First the performer notes that even if one grants the subsidiary claim that "subdivision of a longer value can establish a pulse" (p. 53; "pulse" and "beat" are used interchangeably), there are cases such as in a French overture where the listener cannot be sure what fraction of the long note is taken by the short note (p. 55, n. 3). Then a few pages later the performer offers an explanation for why some pieces "do not project a clear sense of pulse at their openings" (p. 58). In the case of Beethoven's String Quartet op. 59, no. 3, i, "the opening chords are widely separated in time; with no articulated duration during these spans, it is difficult to gather even a precise sense of how long they are." And in the case of the first movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony "there is a notated unit of counting in the [sixteenth-note] sextuplets. But the indistinction in this figure in most performances and the lack of coordination with the thirty-second upbeats precludes a clear sense of the sextuplet pulse."

The performer, in recognizing that the time between beats should be neither too long nor too short, has intuited what psychologists term "natural
pace.” Humans apparently seem most comfortable with a tempo giusto somewhere between 80 and 100 beats/minute. To be sure, considerable cultural and personal diversity will be found in measurements of natural pace. There is nothing “unnatural” about an adagio at 44 beats/min., nor is there anything psychologically “supernatural” about the notions of allegro held by a Glenn Gould or a Vladimir Horowitz. Yet listeners encountering a waltz at 300 beats/min. will generally prefer to follow the half-note pulse at 100 beats/min., and listeners hearing a grave at a notated 16 beats/min. will likely subdivide in order to find a pulse within a more comfortable range.

The performer’s intuition that the perception of a recurring pulse or beat is limited to a narrow time frame doubtless played a part in leading the theorist not only to reject any but the most restricted instances of hypermeter but also to question the utility of metrically oriented retoolings of Heinrich Schenker’s methods of analysis. In a review of his colleagues’ work on high-level meter, Lester points out several shortcomings and contradictions in their results. The reader is made to realize that while the mathematics of meter knows no upper limit, the perception of meter surely does: “At some level, units simply become too long to be perceived as single pulses awaiting a higher level of grouping” (p. 168). Because of Lester’s stature in the field of linear analysis, his verdict on high-level meter will carry considerable weight, and his arguments will receive the close reading they deserve.

Lester the performer is a sensitive listener who fills the text with a number of perceptive comments. When speaking of a dynamic accent, for example, he reminds the reader of the importance of context. “Were a violin or flute to play a legato passage with the dynamics produced by a piano, the result would be anything but legato. As with so many other aspects of accent, it is the relative strength of the accent in relation to other accents in that context that will determine the presence of a dynamic accent” (p. 36). The theorist, on the other hand, tends toward inflexible dicta: “In the absence of other accentuations, dynamic stresses are incapable of projecting a metric grouping” (p. 64). But surely dynamic stress is one of the easiest ways to project a metric grouping. Any child with a stick can project a metric grouping. Lester compounds the problem with more swordplay: “Probably the most telling rebuttal of any meter-producing role of dynamic stresses is the fact that they are totally unnecessary on instruments that are incapable of producing a dynamic stress. The meter of a given piece is just as easily projected on a harpsichord or organ as it is on a piano” (p. 64).

This argument can be traced to Edward Cone who, in a source Lester cites frequently, said that in Baroque performance “our orientation within the measure should be effected more by the actual musical profile than by applied accentuation (which, after all, was unavailable on two of Bach’s favorite instruments).” Richard Taruskin says of this statement, “Harpsichordists and organists who have invested gallons of sweat and tears in
learning successfully to belie the concluding canard may smirk or wince at pleasure.” Furthermore, the argument itself is faulty. Does my ability to hop about on my left leg render my right leg superfluous? By the same token the ability of certain instrumentalists to simulate the effect of dynamic stress in no way negates the crucial meter-producing role that dynamic stress is so often called upon to play.

Relegating dynamic stress to the status of an incidental performance practice causes the theorist to see metric ambiguity where a listener might hear only metric clarity. Two full pages are spent discussing the 6/8 versus 3/4 ambiguity at the opening of the fifth of Bach’s Twelve Little Preludes (see Example 1). The reader is told that “there is little evidence here to argue decisively in favor of 6/8 or 3/4,” and that “the listener cannot know the meter signature or Bach’s intent.” Yet when I went to the record library and found Ralph Kirkpatrick’s performance of this work on the clavichord (ARC73165), I heard no ambiguity. Within just a few beats I knew the piece was in 3/4 time, because Kirkpatrick communicated that fact through dynamic stress. Above the music in Example 1 there is a wavy line that displays a trace in decibels of the sound intensity of Kirkpatrick’s performance. Note how in each of the three full measures the “and” of beat two is played more softly than beat two or beat three. This central feature of the 6/8 schema—the dynamic stress of the fourth eighth note—is carefully suppressed. By such simple means the performer ensures that his listeners will choose the 3/4 schema over the 6/8 schema. In the world of meter, dynamic stress performs too many vital functions to be summarily dismissed in a few sentences. As Descartes wrote at the cribside of modern science, there are reasons not “to condemn that method of philosophizing which others have hitherto devised, nor those weapons of the schoolmen, probable syllogisms, which are just made for controversies.” But “we would be well-advised not to mix any conjectures into the judgements we make about the truth of things.”

The treatment of rhythm in conjunction with form covers aspects of pacing and closure in various musical genres. “Pacing” may indeed be what most listeners have in mind when they think of the large-scale rhythmic qualities of a musical composition. Though pacing is never defined and fails even to find its way into the index, many of Lester’s observations on the subject are perceptive. He notes, for example, how “second theme groups . . . tend to begin with phrases or a period with extensions or elisions delaying the cadence of the consequent phrase. Later in the second theme group is usually a series of ever-shorter cadential phrases, each eliding with the next” (pp. 229–30). One might wish that European essays on these subjects had been incorporated into the discussion (the books of Friedrich Neumann and Erwin Ratz come to mind). But Lester’s chapter-long contribution will still provide students and performers with an easily approachable introduction to the subject.
Example 1
Over the course of the book the performer is continually forced to argue from an inferior position. The theorist has the greater strength of conviction and the heavy artillery of an axiomatized viewpoint. But the performer still defends himself effectively with the empirical evidence of actual music played and heard. A dialogue remains open and the reader is invited to join in. So many well-known pieces are presented that those familiar with the concert repertory will be reminded again and again of favorite performances and recordings. One finds oneself thinking, "Yes, I remember the first time I heard that," or "Szell really used to pounce on that beat!" Because there is so much more to rhythm than the schematization of strong versus weak beats or the taxonomy of accents, we must support every step that ventures beyond the limits of yesterday's dogma. Joel Lester—performer and theorist alike—has taken several such steps in The Rhythms of Tonal Music and deserves our thanks for issuing this report on his expeditions.

NOTES

1. I am assuming that there is a misprint where the definition has a singular "beginning" marking off plural "points in time."

2. A passing reference to "so-called primitive or non-Western musics" (p. 188) is unfortunate. Disparaging epithets lose none of their sting for being preceded by "so-called." Students reading that phrase may be unaware that compared to the rhythmic virtuosity of Asian or African musics, it is their own music that is often the more primitive.


