TRANSFIGURING EMOTIONS IN MUSIC

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In *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* Arthur Danto puts us a question that must give pause when reflecting on how representation may serve the arts. In a Socratic spirit he asks:

Who needs detached images of the sun, the stars, and the rest, when we can see these things already, and since nothing appears in the mirror which is not already there to be seen in the world without it?¹

But it is often because so much of what must be seen of an object *without* the mirror is not or cannot be seen *in* the mirror that the representational arts are able to interest us so much. Through them we may become acquainted with aspects of things that go unnoticed or are but barely appreciated in our ordinary experience of the world either because these features are not easily perceived or profoundly understood in the complex conditions of their common habitat, or because given pressing practical concerns they are not normally important enough to absorb our interest. The artist, however, is able to “transfigure the commonplace” as he has a vision of what he believes to be especially noteworthy qualities of the common things of the world. We, the audience, come to share the artist’s vision if we appreciate his representation, that is, adequately apprehend *what* is being represented and thereby enlarge our sense of its significance both in the work and in the world outside the work.

The *way* we come to share the artist’s vision through attending to the representation varies with the art form. Most simply, in fiction we entertain thoughts about the objects of the representation by reading descriptions supplied in the text and imagined as being given by the narrator. In painting we actually see in the canvas some of the qualities that we perceive to belong to the things pictured. Something

similar happens in drama where we see the characters and many of the events in their lives as we imagine their presence, or perceive qualities we imagine them to have, in the actual speech, visual appearance and behavior of the actors. But does music ever have representational and, more specifically, pictorial power? Is music ever “visionary” in the conveniently stipulated dual sense of being first a picture but, second, a picture that is important for the important things we can perceive in it? In what follows I shall try to show how music through picturing the expression of emotion can often acquaint us with significant qualities of emotional life which are given little thoughtful heed in daily life for being bound up so closely with the propositional content of our speech and the obvious objects of our actions. Consequently, music is able to bear a kind of insight into emotional life; that it can do so helps to distinguish the place of music among the representational arts. There may be other ways in which we may become acquainted with aspects of emotion through music, but I want to focus primarily on the pictorial means to such acquaintance.

I.

The claim that as it is presently constituted, music is able to picture the expression of emotion is a plausible one. Music not only has expressive qualities, but, frequently, we find these qualities arranged in it in a way which gives the appearance of or suggests manifest emotional life. Music is expressively dynamic, and often its variations of expressive quality suggest, in the sense of bearing an image of, a pattern of underlying “regional” emotional attitudes or moods displayed in subtly varied and dramatically interesting ways. Schubert’s F-minor Impromptu (Opus 142) opens in an angry mood, the expression of which appears first in an almost explosive leaping assault on the fifth of the tonic followed by a descending series of sharp evenly delivered but gradually relaxing and then reinforced short jabs of sound. Suddenly the anger gives way to a complaint that is more sorrowful than indignant, but this lasts only for a moment (barely two bars of the score) and the anger reasserts itself, this time with an enormous leap, writhing descent, and doubled vigor. The