Narratology II: Focalization as a Narrative Technique

Laughing Mice and Grumpy Hedgehogs
Outline

1. Introduction
2. An example of focalization
3. Focalization in literary theory: Gérard Genette and Mieke Bal
4. What might focalization offer music analysis?
5. Hugh Macdonald on Janáček and programme music: the Balada blanická
6. Fred Maus on structure and meaning in the 1st movement of Janáček’s Concertino
7. Conclusion: some questions about Janáček’s First String Quartet and Tolstoy’s Kreutzer Sonata
1. Introduction

The concept of *focalization* was introduced to literary theory by Gérard Genette, principally in


It refers to the technique through which a narrative may be limited (focused) at any moment through the adoption of the point of view of one of its fictional characters.
Today I propose to outline some of its theoretical implications (which I won’t pursue further than seems useful), and use them to suggest an approach to some instrumental pieces by Janáček.

Before we think about these, a classic example of focalization from the literature may help to clarify what might be meant by it.
2. An example of focalization

The Dutch theorist Mieke Bal uses an example to explain her version of focalization, at the beginning of an article she wrote to answer one of her objectors:


This example is taken from a famous 7th-century bas-relief in southern India, depicting Arjuna’s penance (a Hindu myth concerned with the Flood and the creation of rivers across the earth), and it brings in the laughing mice of my title. The grumpy hedgehog will have to wait until later. Here is the bas-relief:
Mieke Bal writes:

“In southern India is what is said to be the largest bas-relief of the world, the 7th-century ‘Arjuna’s Penance’. At the upper left, the wise man Arjuna is depicted in a yoga position. At the bottom right is a cat in the same position. Around the cat are mice. The mice are laughing. The interpretation runs thus: Arjuna is meditating to win Lord Siva’s favour. The cat, impressed by the beauty of absolute calm, imitates Arjuna. The mice realize they are safe, and laugh. Without the interpretation there is no inter-relationship between the images. With the interpretation, involving focalization, there is a narrative.”

Here is her diagram demonstrating those relationships:
This example implies events, in a logical order, following Bal’s, or other possible, interpretations:
1. Arjuna adopts a penitential posture
2. the cat sees Arjuna and copies his penitential posture
3. the mice see the cat and laugh because its posture is inappropriate, and because they know they are safe (or because they wrongly think they are safe).

Each participant in the narrative has only partial understanding of the action: Arjuna is unaware of the cat; the cat sees Arjuna but is (perhaps) unaware of the mice; the mice see only the cat. None of them sees us looking at them.

But they interact formally, generating a narrative, and each act of seeing involves focalization.
3. Focalization in literary theory: Gérard Genette and Mieke Bal

Genette’s theory appeared most fully in Narrative Discourse (1972), in which he aimed for a structural account of narrative, to be understood non-referentially, in terms of the interaction of its elements.

In line with his formal concern, he invented new terminology for familiar concepts, so as to sideline unwanted psychological and realist implications. One such new term was focalization for “point of view”. Others include analepsis for “flashback”, diegesis for “telling”, mimesis for “showing”.

Genette distinguishes between
• narrative *voice* (referring to the one who *tells*) and
• narrative *perspective* (referring to the one who *sees*). These are not necessarily the same. This distinction was usually ignored by earlier writers.

Focalization measures narrative perspective: it is the point of view adopted by the narrator. “By focalization I [...] mean a restriction of ‘field’ – [...] that is, a selection of narrative information with respect to what was traditionally called *omniscience*”.

(Cf. the restriction of the fields of vision of the protagonists in Mieke Bal’s interpretation of Arjuna’s Penance.)
Genette distinguishes three kinds of focalization:

1. **Zero focalization**: The narrator knows more than the characters. He may know the facts about all of the protagonists, as well as their thoughts and gestures. This is the traditional “omniscient narrator”.

2. **Internal focalization**: The narrator knows as much as the focal character. This character filters the information provided by the narrator to the reader. He cannot report the thoughts of other characters.

3. **External focalization**: The narrator knows less than the characters. Like a camera, he follows the protagonists’ actions and gestures from the outside, and cannot guess their thoughts.
In 1978, a few years after the publication of *Narrative Discourse*, Mieke Bal extended Genette’s concept of focalization in her:

In the spirit of Genette, Bal wrote that focalization represented the most subtle technique available to an author for presenting a text to a reader, and the technique that is most difficult to spot.

This has helped give prominence to Genette’s ideas and to extend the role of focalization in analysing narratives outside the literary sphere, including film.
Controversially, she distinguished between the subject who “focalizes” and the object that is “focalized”, and gave what she calls the “focalizer” an autonomous role. Accordingly she required the following questions to be answered:

- *What* does the character focalize: what is it aimed at? (She held that any object or element can be focalized.)
- *How* does it do this, with what attitude does it view things?
- *Who* focalizes it: whose focalized object is it?
Genette himself criticized her ideas almost immediately in a second volume:


Specifically he challenged her concept of the "focalizer": "Bal introduces ideas (*focalizer, focalized*) [...] [which] are incompatible with my conception [...] For me, there is no focalizing or focalized character: *focalized* can be applied only to the narrative itself."

Evidently, Genette’s concept of focalization is fuzzier than Bal’s, though this may prove an advantage for us.
4. What might focalization offer music analysis?

If focalization is taken into account, two very different components paradoxically come together, in what may be a useful way:

- a (non-referential, systematic) abstract formalism, allowing one to differentiate between component elements in a text, and then to interpret it in terms of the mutual relationships between those elements, in a classically structuralist or semiotic manner;

- a (potentially referential, maybe unsystematic) attentiveness to the “point of view” implied by individual component elements of texts.
This may suggest a link with an established analytical method in music, Kofi Agawu’s *topical analysis*, which I mentioned last week:

• The abstract model, defined formally in terms of the inter-relation of structural elements, may correspond to Agawu’s *introversive semiosis* (for Agawu, this is provided by Schenkerian theory);

• The referential model, defined in terms of differing points of view, may correspond to his *extroversive semiosis* (for Agawu, this is provided by the “topics” of Classic/Romantic music, referring to martial music, the pastoral, “learned” counterpoint, etc).
Focalization may be a useful way of generalizing Agawu’s approach, for any repertory in which contrasted gestures, topics or affects co-exist close together. Perhaps it is particularly useful for music like Janáček’s, Debussy’s, Messiaen’s or Stravinsky’s, where expressive gestures are often violently juxtaposed, like those of Arjuna and the cat. (The Janáček literature describes this as “montage”, as in film – cutting between images to generate meaning.)

So I’d like to look at a couple of analyses of instrumental pieces by Janáček, which are related in some way to literary models, and are in some way programmatic, so inviting a “narratological” approach.
5. Hugh Macdonald on Janáček and programme music: the *Balada blanická*

Macdonald outlines some problems in Janáček’s approach to programme music:


He discusses three symphonic poems by Janáček from the years just before and after the First World War, *Šumařovo dítě* (The Fiddler’s Child, 1914), *Taras Bulba* (1915-18) and *Balada blanická* (The Ballad of Blaník, 1919).
None of these is a text setting, but all three have programmes based on literary texts with continuous narratives, and Macdonald follows through the ways in which the music might be said to parallel the narratives in each of the texts.

He concludes each time that the relationship between the music and the texts is very loose. Janáček, he says, composed “music designed to further a larger, more idealistic artistic purpose than the mere illustration of a literary text”.

The third of his examples, The Ballad of Blaník, is based on a poem by Jaroslav Vrchlický.
A well-known Czech legend says that an army of Czech knights, led by St Wenceslas, sleeps under the hill of Velký Blaník, ready to march out to victory in the hour of the country’s need. Writing in 1885, Vrchlický makes this a narrative of the nation’s passion and resurrection. A village peasant strays into Blaník, which is open every Good Friday, while the Passion is being read in church. He finds the armed warriors, is shut into the hill, falls asleep, and wakes in amazement to find he has slept for 100 years, and a Resurrection has taken place in which the warriors’ weapons have become agricultural tools, and the nation is working in the fields with a skylark singing above.

For Janáček, this is a prophecy come true, as Czechoslovakia was founded in 1918.
As Macdonald comments, this is a story with good potential for pictorial illustration, as if through mickey-mousing, in music: “there is the Passion Hymn sung on Good Friday, the murmuring of the forest as [the peasant] wanders out, the atmosphere of the dark mountain passage, the sudden revelation of the warriors, [...] the clang of the rock door closing, the peasant falling asleep [...] and the song of the skylarks in the final line.”

Most commentators, including Vogel, Janáček’s biographer, seem to believe that the music depends directly on the programme.

But it is hard to make it fit as an illustrative soundtrack.
Some vague parallels are, perhaps, possible. A distorted chorale (bars 28ff) might be the Passion Hymn:

Violent music (bars 46ff) might be the peasant’s flight:
But formally, says Macdonald, the piece is related to sonata form, with exposition (two sections), development and recapitulation.

And the symphonic development seems unrelated to the story. The pacifist sense of the poem (as Macdonald reads it) is lost, as the piece ends with a recapitulation in which “a calm return to the opening” is “followed by the knights’ music in its first warlike form, full of nostalgic longing with a big Mahlerian cadence in D flat major, as if that was the true image of the Blaník warriors”.
Macdonald’s criticism is well taken, but some of it is beside the point. There is a dimension to this piece of which he was unaware. The piece was performed at a celebration of President Masaryk’s 70th birthday, and Janáček had written it as a tribute. In his Česká otázka [“The Czech Question”], a well-known extended essay, Masaryk had in 1895 published his views about

- the Czech national identity, which Masaryk hoped would fuse the warrior mentality and the martyr mentality in a higher unity of pacifism;

- Czech national music, which Masaryk hoped would overcome old rigid formalism and old inflated romanticism.
Janáček drafted a speech for the celebration, in which he implied that his piece conformed to Masaryk’s artistic and political programme. (However, his draft speech shows he misunderstood Masaryk, thinking not of the integration of two opposed national types, but merely of a simple opposition between them.)

In any case psychological realism is more important to Janáček than narrative illustration (this is the impetus behind his study of speech melodies). So in his *Balada blanická* he seems more interested in Masaryk’s psychological contrast between warrior and pacifist than in the successive “pictorial” events in Vrchlický’s poem, even though he refers the piece to Vrchlický.
The piece juxtaposes conventional Romantic harmony with a harmonic language more like Janáček’s late style. So perhaps we can interpret the musical opposition in terms of the opposed “points of view” of Masaryk’s national types, in other words through focalization, although the opposition is not sharply drawn and so little narrative content is generated in this instance, perhaps.

The piece does, though, illustrate Janáček’s general approach to narrative, which (to quote Beethoven) is “mehr Ausdruck der Empfindung als Malerey”, more an expression of psychology than simple tone-painting.
6. Fred Maus on structure and meaning in the 1st movement of Janáček’s *Concertino*

Fred Maus provided a paper for Michael Beckerman’s 1988 Janáček conference in which he applied some of the insights of the (then allegedly new) hermeneutic approach to analysis:

The Concertino, a much later piece than the *Balada blanická*, has an arguably more complex narrative, for which focalization may be more directly relevant, though the piece apparently lacks any literary model. It seems vaguely programmatic, like the *Balada blanická*, but is not “pictorial”.

Here is the movement which Maus analyses.
Moderato \( \text{\textit{d}} \cdot 104 \)

Klášterní part buděj hrán zpaměti\(^*\) (L. Janáček).

Der Klavierpart ist auswendig zu spielen\(^*\) (L. Janáček).

The piano part is to be memoried\(^*\) (L. Janáček).
Piu` mosso (d = 152)
Più mosso, rubato

Un poco più mosso

\( \text{\textcopyright\textregistered} \text{\textregistered} \text{\textcopyright\textregistered} \)
Tempo I.

Vivo
Maus takes as his starting-point the brief analysis of the movement by Jaroslav Vogel, in the biography of the composer which was standard until the publication of John Tyrrell’s biography a couple of years ago:


Vogel as usual draws on very elementary *Formenlehre*, drawing comparisons with sonata form understood primarily in terms of contrasted thematic sections.
This is what Vogel says about the formal structure of the movement (pp. 306-7):

“The first movement, which hints at sonata form, begins calmly with this motif in the piano followed by the horn’s echoing of the last three notes but one:
“The Allegro proper begins with a quickened version of the same motif after which the bracketed ‘echo’ motif above is developed into what could be called the second subject:

and, later, into this waltz-like motif which, together with the original three-note motif, serves as the development section:

which is followed by the recapitulation in a reversed order, with the introductory bars returning at the end.”
Vogel’s analysis is like a programme-note: a rough mapping of traditional categories on to this movement, focusing on

- formal divisions, in which contrasted themes rather than keys mark off separate sections;
- suggestions of genre (sonata, waltz);
- motivic development, which is invoked to explain the relationships between these different sections;

– even though only one motif is identified, and is not claimed to be the generating motif for the whole movement.
Maus first reworks this crude formal analysis, arguing that sonata form is important as a point of reference in the movement, and that the tonal centres set up during its course are related by virtue of the tonal material they share, as are related keys in traditionally tonal music.

He then goes on to quote a brief article on the subject written by Janáček himself, in the journal *Pult und Taktstock*, vol. 4 (May/June 1927), p. 63.
Janáček writes:

“First Movement

One spring day we prevented a hedgehog from getting to his lair lined with dry leaves in an old lime tree.

He was cross but he toiled in vain.

He could not make it out. Neither could the horn in my first movement. All it could manage was this grumpy motif:

\[ \text{Music notation} \]

Should the hedgehog have stood up on his hind legs and sung a sorrowful song? The moment he stuck his nose out he had to pull it in again.”
This is not a “story” like those in the literary texts underlying the symphonic poems, but it is one that is arguably close to the heart of Janáček’s music.

Maus avoids arguing that the music “tells the story” outlined by Janáček, but finds an analogy to it:

“The first movement of the Concertino can be understood as presenting a story about the interaction of two characters; the piano part presents the behavior of one character, the horn part the behavior of the other. [...] The first movement of the Concertino creates, in its horn part, a dramatic character of animal-like simplicity and intensity, and displays its tense interaction with a somewhat more flexible character.”
Janáček’s article brings out the focalization in the piece, and Maus’s analogy comes close to recognizing this. Janáček’s narrator is an implied observer: “we” prevent the grumpy hedgehog from reaching his lair. But “we” also thereby set the narrative in motion. The hedgehog “cannot make out” what is happening: the “animal-like simplicity and intensity” of the horn part is a focalization, depending on a limitation of omniscience. And the relation between the horn and the piano parts depends on focalization rather as the relationship between Arjuna, his cat and his mice does.

In fact Janáček goes on to project the distance between the extent of the knowledge of his “characters” theatrically: the pianist is instructed to play from memory, while the horn player reads from music.
7. Conclusion: some questions about Janáček’s First String Quartet and Tolstoy’s *Kreutzer Sonata*

To conclude, I should say a few words about Janáček’s First String Quartet. Focalization seems very relevant to the piece and to its literary model; without offering anything approaching a complete analysis, perhaps I can make some interim comments.

The literary model on which this piece is based, Tolstoy’s “Kreutzer Sonata”, is, I think, far more complex than almost any other literary model drawn on by Janáček.
Tolstoy’s “Kreutzer Sonata” is a long short story, which is on the surface a misogynistic diatribe against marriage. It concerns an unhappily married couple: the wife befriends a violinist and plays the Beethoven Kreutzer sonata with him, rousing the husband to jealousy and murder, which are apparently caused directly by romantic love.

Not only did this story scandalize contemporary readers and censors; it also scandalizes American New Musicologists. Lawrence Kramer, for instance, thinks that “’The Kreutzer Sonata’ shows gender polarity in its most self-conscious and also its most reprehensible form’.”
Kramer says this in a book written rather like a sermon, if one ignores its New Licentiousness, even though he uses the Tolstoy story as a central point of reference. He is not primarily concerned with close literary reading, but hopes to change moral attitudes and create a better world:

In order to make his point as forcefully as possible, Kramer ignores the focalization of the narrative, conflating the misogynistic, cynical and apparently omniscient narrator with the author. There is some justification for this: Tolstoy wrote a “postface” to the story where he associates himself with the views of the narrator.

Yet Tolstoy’s narrative has very complicated levels of focalization. In a frame narration, the hero, or anti-hero, Pozdnyshev, tells the story to another narrator, and neither narrator is omniscient. Indeed Pozdnyshev is shown to be a classically unreliable narrator, even before he makes his outrageous demands (for example, that the entire human race should be chaste, abandon sex, and die out). And the story is told in a train, a classic location for unreliable texts.
So any study of Janáček‘s quartet has to start with a fairly sophisticated literary discussion. And, as usual, Janáček’s piece cannot be expected to reflect the nuances or even the broad outline of his model. His own writings suggest that it was the figure of the tyrannized woman that attracted him to the story – very possibly from repressed motives of sadism on his part – and that criticism of romantic love was very far from his mind.
A further complication is the use of Beethoven as a symbol of the evil power of music in Tolstoy’s story. Kramer is a ready guide to the evil influence of Beethoven on the gendering of music, but it’s possible that Tolstoy is saying something more complicated and interesting about his music.

Beethoven is an intertext for Janáček too: one of the main motifs in the First Quartet is taken from the second subject of the first movement of the Beethoven sonata.
But, as Arnold Whittall has said, the prime questions for Janáček analysis seem “less to do with fundamentals of material and form, and more to do with ways in which certain things are being said, in music”. To understand his music it seems vital to investigate his “uninhibitedly explicit tension between continuity and discontinuity”, his willingness (like that of the Stravinsky of the *Rite of Spring*) to put cries of terror and lullabies right next to one another.

Some sort of narratological analysis seems the way ahead, therefore – something that takes seriously the interface between literary and musical analysis. And not only for Janáček or his First Quartet.