

# It's Not A Sonata:

A new theory of the classical origins of John Lennon's *Because*.

by Mark Mitchell, D.M.A.

Like about a billion other people on the planet, I have long cherished the music of the Beatles. I am captivated by the appeal of the music, the wit and variety so astonishingly frequent, the eclectic influences, yet readily identifiable style of the songwriters. Obviously, these were musician's musicians, truly driven to experience anything 'good' regardless of the genre, to absorb what they heard and to re-express it through the filter of their own musical voices. In the view of classically trained musicians, they were naïve, having no formal training or theory. In my view, they may not have known a half-diminished 7<sup>th</sup> from a common-tone modulation, but they studied and mastered their craft nonetheless, developing considerable depth and technique. Consider Yoko's take on John's theoretical knowledge:

Well, you know, in classical music, chords are nothing really... you know, we know all the chords -- let's put it that way. But in rock, knowing some chord progressions means a lot. So that's the kind of thing I learned. I said, "so you mean you don't know all the chords?" It's very interesting... but John knew a lot. Not only that, but you see, when I did *Double Fantasy* with him, I had to realize yet again how much he knew. He was like a living dictionary about all the little licks and this and that, just everything. It was amazing.

Being a composer, I have a special interest in the creative genius of Lennon and McCartney. One of my passions is mining for hints of information about their compositional process, collecting them like little sparkling jewels. The Beatles have a special affinity with me, because I also developed first as a self-taught composer, only learning the rules of harmony in my teens. Of course, I'm no Paul or John, but that only increases my respect for what they accomplished.

## The story of *Because*

A fascinating window into John Lennon's creative process is track 8 from "Abbey Road", his masterpiece *Because*. In an April 1969 interview with the *New Musical Express* he revealed:

[Yoko] trained as a classical musician. I didn't know that until this morning. In college she majored in classical composition. Now we stimulate each other like crazy. This morning I wrote this song called *Because*. Yoko was playing some classical bit, and I said "Play that backwards," and we had a tune.<sup>2</sup>

What was the 'classical bit' in question? Yoko herself was not quite certain:

I was playing *Moonlight Sonata*, **I think**, and John said, "its beautiful, beautiful - ah, could we just hear the chords, and could we play it from this end, and all that, you know, sort of backwards". And he used the chord progression... from the back on. It worked... well, it wasn't quite the reverse, I mean, it wasn't exact or anything -- that was the inspiration.<sup>3</sup>  
[emphasis added]

This quote suggests to me that sometime after John's first statement in April 1969 (on the very day of composition!) the *Moonlight Sonata*<sup>4</sup> suggested itself as the 'classical bit' Yoko was playing, and the idea stuck.<sup>5</sup> Ever thereafter it has been taken by everyone at face value. Six years later John said in an interview with *Playboy*:

I was lying on the sofa in our house, listening to Yoko play Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* on the piano. Suddenly, I said, 'Can you play those chords backward?' She did, and I wrote *Because* around them. The song sounds like *Moonlight Sonata*, too.<sup>6</sup>

And so, ever since, writers and analysts have been desperately trying to squeeze *Because* from a stubbornly resistant *Moonlight*. The conclusions, when the theorists emerge gasping from their

exertions, range from, “Well, the two pieces *are* in the same key ... and they both have D-major chords! ... and *both have arpeggios!*”,<sup>7</sup> to, “Lennon erroneously claimed that *Because* is based on playing Beethoven’s chords in reverse ... he is incapable of knowing what he is doing.”<sup>8</sup> (John’s claim, “I’ve always needed a drug to survive. The others, too, but I always had more: more pills, more of everything (because I’m more crazy, probably).”<sup>9</sup> tends to give some weight to the second view.) Another scholar sees a similarity with the ‘Second Movement’ (Adagio Molto — *Ubiachi Dormienti*) of the Autumn section of the ‘Seasons’ by Vivaldi,<sup>10</sup> (it has sustained minor harmonies with a slow harpsichord arpeggiation) although no explanation is proffered as to how Vivaldi got into John’s song, other than maybe their producer, George Martin, suggested it, which seems a stretch.

### Origins of *Because* revisited

I propose a new theory: John wasn’t incompetent, he just remembered the ‘classical bit’ wrong. And I’m guessing that as far as he was concerned, ‘backwards’ could mean inversion just as well as retrograde. He was probably about as much concerned with such details as he was with the make and construction techniques of the couch he was lying on.

Fast forward to another living room, not in New York, but in Aylmer, Quebec, ca. 2002. And it’s not Yoko practicing the classical bit, but my daughter Jacqui. And I’m not lying on the sofa, but standing in my kitchen doing the dishes. And I’m certainly not John Lennon. But, like John, I do hear something in the music. Jacqui is practicing the left hand of the opening of the famous Chopin *Fantaisie Impromptu in C-sharp minor*<sup>11</sup> very slowly. “What is that? It sounds so familiar!” I think to myself. Then it comes to me, and I start humming the melody to *Because*. This impromptu accompaniment does not share just a similar turn, or mood. It’s almost the exact notes!

On further investigation, I came up with the following simple transformation of the first four measures of the Chopin piece (starting after the 4-bar introduction). First, here is the accompaniment of *Because*:

Ex. 1 – *Because*, accompaniment



And here is the left hand of the Chopin Impromptu:

Ex. 2 – Chopin *Impromptu*, left hand accompaniment



Note that the Chopin pattern divides into half-bar groups. What if, instead of actually playing it backwards, we turn every other half-bar group upside down:

Ex. 3 – *Impromptu*, Transformation 1: last half of each bar inverted



One difference with *Because* remains, that is to convert the triplets to straight eighth notes:

Ex. 4 – *Impromptu*, Transformation 2: converted from triplets to eighths



Compare this with the first four bars of *Because*:



This transformation – two simple processes – gives us the exact Lennon accompaniment, save for some variations of chord inversion in bars 3 and 4. I have prepared an audio illustration of the transformation in the accompanying file: <[Because Impromptu VoiceOver.mp3](#)>. The simplicity of this solution compared with the analytical gymnastics of previous attempts to unravel the origins of *Because* is striking.

Another interesting intersection between *Because* and the *Impromptu* involves an unusual (for the Beatles) vocal line. In the upper harmony at the end of the first phrase the voices hold the last word over the ii $\bar{7}$  to V7 progression, and there is a beautiful falsetto line that reaches up and then descends through a five-note scale. It's a lovely line, but uncharacteristically classical for the Beatles' vocal harmony style. Here again, I note a direct link with the Chopin piece.

Ex. 5 – *Impromptu* right hand figure compared to highest backup vocal line in *Because*

Although the quote is not exact and half the speed (what we call 'augmented'), it shares the same gesture over the same harmony in the same part of the measure (peaking on beat 3), and shares most of the pitches as well. (Lennon's voice leading results in parallel fifths with the melody, which is an issue in classical harmony but not for the Beatles' pop harmony.) Here then is yet another strong link between the two pieces.

I'd love to know if the Chopin *Impromptu* was part of Yoko's repertoire at the time. That would seal the deal, I think.

## **Because: an analysis**

[Author's Note: If you have no grounding or interest in music theory, this section will likely put you to sleep – feel free to enjoy the actual song on your device of choice as you skip to the conclusion!]

As illustration of Lennon's erudition, let me offer my harmonic analysis of the song. Lennon may have lifted the first four bars from Chopin, but it's where he departs from Chopin that we see his genius shine in a complex progression worthy of a 19<sup>th</sup> century master.

### Ex. 6 – *Because*, harmonic reduction

The harmonic reduction for the first four bars of "Because" in C# minor is as follows:

c#: i ii7 V VI i VI7 (i) IV# V5 - 6 - 5

iv = f#: [V7 - 6] VI ii 4/3 o7 (v2) I#

Lennon moves from V to VI, A major, and then turns the A into an A7, tonicizing flat II (D). But D is not a tonic here, but becomes VI in f# minor. Many analysts have noted the prominence of the D major harmony in the *Moonlight Sonata* and related it to this modulation in *Because*, but this D is not a Neapolitan 6<sup>th</sup> as in the *Moonlight*, which is a chromatic substitute for ii in minor keys and is almost always in first inversion. The diminished chord after the D can thus be heard as ii in the closely related key of iv, f# minor, except that we never make it to the tonic. Instead the move to the dominant, which would be C# major is replaced with minor v in f#, which of course is c# minor, our home tonic. This abrupt modulation can be seen as a common-tone modulation, where the G# is retained and the other two voices move down chromatically.

The unusual harmonic movement from D to c# minor through this gradual chromatic slithering is also supported by the melody: A-G-F#-E-D, B-A-G#-[F#]-E. Note that the expected repetition of the five-note descent (B to E) is embellished, but the end of the phrase on E (not E# which we might expect in f# minor) is prepared by this motivic repetition.

The movement to the subdominant (f# minor), which is hinted at in the verse, actually happens in the bridge (Love is old, love is new ...), but instead of f# minor, Lennon gives us the mixed-mode major IV, F# major, a tender change in mood to complement the text. The return to c# minor is signaled by the neighbor note motion on the second chord, G# major (V in the home key) between D# and E (not the major mode E#). The use of the lowered 6<sup>th</sup> degree of the minor mode prepares a return to c# minor, and the cycle begins once again.

Let me point out the chromatic line which is threaded through the harmony. This is identified in Ex. 5 by the stemmed notes. If you listen carefully to the song, you can hear how this descending chromatic motion is highlighted in the music, for example in the melody at the end of the first phrase, or in the accompaniment just before the return to the beginning. Even the chromatic neighbor noted near the end of the bridge can be seen as an extension of this chromatic line. I'm quite sure that Lennon would not have been consciously aware of these superstructural details (any more than the great classical composers were aware of similar structures which theorists demonstrate in their music), but I think of it as the type of tight structure which good composers feel intuitively as their ear guides them through the composition of new music. This song demonstrates an unusually rich palette for a Lennon composition, but he proves himself a gifted and imaginative musician when the right inspiration strikes.

The complex harmony is beautifully juxtaposed with exceptionally sparse, yet meaning-laden lyrics, based on characteristically witty puns. John must be thinking of Yoko in this love song, who is present in the classical origins of the accompaniment, and who he thought of as one who heightened his appreciation of life and the world around him. "Because the world is round it turns me on; because the wind is high it blows my mind; because the sky is blue it makes me cry: Love is old, love is new; Love is all, love is you..." And the song is left on the unresolved diminished chord at the end of the main harmonic cycle, suggesting that it will continue on without end.

## PostScript

There is one aspect of *Because* which could relate to the *Moonlight Sonata* directly, and that is the melody. If you invert Beethoven's triplet figure you get something very close to the opening melody ("Because the world is round it turns me on"). Even the melodic movement to A can be found in the Beethoven, although in the *Moonlight* it comes with the A major chord (VI) and in *Because* it falls on the d# half-diminished 7<sup>th</sup> (ii7). Maybe *Moonlight* was involved in the inspiration of the melody of *Because*, but the idea that it was somehow the source of the song's harmony or accompaniment texture is a very long stretch indeed, especially when such a convincing alternative exists.

Anybody have Yoko's email?

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<sup>1</sup> Yoko Ono, *The Beatles In Their Own Words*, CD3 27.0

<sup>2</sup> Lennon to the *New Musical Express*, April 1969 as quoted in Peter Dogget's 1998 *Classic Rock Albums: Abbey Road/Let It Be*

<sup>3</sup> Yoko Ono, *The Beatles In Their Own Words*, CD3 27.0

<sup>4</sup> Ludwig Van Beethoven, *Piano Sonata No.14 "Quasi una fantasia"* in C-sharp minor Op. 27 No. 2, first movement, Adagio Sostenuto, composed 1801

<sup>5</sup> George Harrison made an interesting comment on *Because* in an interview just after Abbey Road was released, "John wrote the song, and the backing is a bit like Beethoven." *Rolling Stone* 44, October 18, 1969

<sup>6</sup> *Playboy Magazine*, Jan. 1981, interview from Dec 23, 1975

<sup>7</sup> see for example, Terence O'Grady, *The Beatles. A Musical Evolution*, 1983: 161-162

<sup>8</sup> Ian MacDonald, quoted in Ian Hammond's excellent online resource, *Beethoven: Studying the Beatles, Songs/Because*, [www.beethoven.com](http://www.beethoven.com) (1999). Hammond continues:

Lennon just says it was "some classical bit", which he later referred as the *Moonlight* (and once as "Beethoven's Fifth"). Yoko Ono *thinks* it was the *Moonlight*. While the arpeggios and general mood of the piece point to the *Moonlight*, but a doubt remains.

*Backwards* was a code word Lennon used when saying he had adapted someone else's music (just as he described any assistance on a song as "helping out with the middle eight").

<sup>9</sup> *Playboy Magazine*, Jan. 1981, interview from Dec 23, 1975

<sup>10</sup> Ger Tillekens, *Baroque and folk and ... John Lennon: Some folk and classical elements in the songs of John Lennon*, *Soundscapes*, Vol.1, September 1998, [www.icce.rug.nl/~soundscapes/VOLUME01/Baroque\\_Folk\\_Lennon.html](http://www.icce.rug.nl/~soundscapes/VOLUME01/Baroque_Folk_Lennon.html)

<sup>11</sup> Frédéric Chopin, *Fantaisie Impromptu* in C-sharp minor, Op.66 (posthumous), composed 1835