

**'Music as Art-Form: Paper for the Philosophy Cafe'**. ('The Grey Horse', 18 July 2012)

Music at the end of the eighteenth century was still the Cinderella of the Arts. With its twin functions centred on devotion and entertainment, in a hierarchical, class-obsessed society, music was the 'poor relation', with musicians being looked upon as menials who (after all) mostly worked 'with their hands'. The situation was compounded by the fact that, unlike painting, sculpture and literature, music had no 'classical' pedigree, no ancient models or texts having survived from Antiquity. In short, music was regarded as ephemeral and functional, and musicians as unworthy of posterity, an index of their anonymity being that music biography (like music history) hardly existed as a scholarly genre before the nineteenth century.

But of course, music existed away from the churches, courts, and salons of the *ancient regime*. It was ubiquitous in the fields, homes and taverns of the lower orders, with harvest songs, carols, reels making up what might be called the unrecorded 'scripture of the poor'. This music of the people, popular music, or 'folk-music', was mostly ignored until the latter decades of the eighteenth century when a process of rescue and retrieval it was begun mostly by British antiquarians.

The French Revolution and the subsequent political and social earthquake were to transform the place of music in culture and society as dynastic monarchies fell and a new radical and nationalist climate emerged across Europe. In culture the changes can be best summed up with the term 'Romanticism', a catch-all phrase it is true, but one that captured a new emphasis on the personal, the passionate, and the demotic surged through literature, art and music. At the risk of over-simplification, music secured a new importance in a time of revolution and war and began to be viewed as *canonical* like the other arts, a change that bred controversy as music became a site of cultural struggle.

This short paper will explore some of the debates that swirled within and around the musical world in the first half of the Romantic century.

One of the greatest controversies raged over the future of opera, potentially an influential form that reached out to audiences across the continent. In what came to be termed the 'battle of the operas' there was on one side Rossini, the young standard-bearer of Italian music; on the other, the German nationalist, Carl Maria von Weber.

Rossini, trained in the Bologna Accademia in the latest orchestral and operatic techniques of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, enjoyed spectacular success with a series of lucrative hits in the 1810s and 1820s (*The Barber of Seville* chief among them). To the novelist, Stendhal, he was a 'new conqueror', a 'Napoleon of music'; to Balzac, a 'romantic hero' to be compared to Byron; to the reactionary Austrian Chancellor Metternich, 'the god of harmony'. Politically, Rossini was a conservative cosmopolitan who enjoyed the patronage bestowed upon him at the restored dynastic courts of Europe, a *bon viveur* and society figure and who would have no truck with radical politics Italian national aspirations. For him it was enough to write works that pleased with their melodic beauty, orchestral refinement, emotional excitement and excellent production values; perhaps not so unlike the dishes he devised as an accomplished chef, his 'Tournedos Rossini' being the best known.

Yet to many Rossini's aesthetic threatened musical progress. Even in Italy Rossini eventually came under attack: the republican and nationalist revolutionary Mazzini for one, in his *Philosophy of Music* (1833), criticised his music as being 'mere amusement for an idle, sensual and corrupt generation', a shallow oeuvre that did nothing to advance a social ideal of 'national and religious education'. Many German musicians agreed with Mazzini that Rossini trivialized music with his crowd-pleasing effects and commercial priorities. The critic E. T. A. Hoffman thought his work 'contaminated' and worthy of being 'dispossessed by true artists'; while the composer Weber, around whom Germans hopes cohered, declared that music should be a 'divine revelation, a language of the soul requiring a devout approach from artist and audience alike'. Weber regarded Rossini as an obstacle to the development of an operatic tradition that would have a *German* sensibility and spirituality: an ideal that had already found expression in Beethoven's *Fidelio* (of 1814), a work about unjust imprisonment, love and liberation. The campaign for the future of opera thus began: Weber scored only one (partial success with *Der Freischütz* (of 1821); Schubert also tried, but failed to make a mark; while the ailing Beethoven was petitioned to write 'another *Fidelio*' (to no avail). Nothing it seems could stop 'Rossini Fever' as the *maestro's* followers, Bellini and Donizetti, took Italian operatic hegemony confidently into the 1830s and 1840s. Only at the mid-century did a champion emerge to turn the battle in Germany's favour: Richard Wagner.

Alongside and away from the celebrity of the Italian 'musical millionaire' many progressive musicians sought inspiration and guidance in the life and works of Beethoven, an artist whose life was perceived as one of neglect, suffering and rejection of convention, yet whose art was at the cutting edge of musical and spiritual development. Although in the decades after his death in 1827, Beethoven was *the* talisman of musical romanticism his legacy was a matter of debate. For so-called 'classical romantics' (like Schubert and

Mendelssohn), Beethoven was a radical who nevertheless wrote in received forms (sonatas, string quartets, symphonies), works that epitomised form and structure in music, a 'pure' and absolute' ideal, and a discourse independent of all others. While for others such as Berlioz and Liszt he was above all a counter-cultural hero whose music challenged others to strive to pursue a quest (as he put it), "to tell the truth about everything". Berlioz in particular was committed to a closer relationship between music, language and literature, a fusion he explored in his programmatic *Symphony Fantastique* (1830), a work that takes its audience on a nightmarish journey alongside a distracted lover with movements entitled 'A Ball', 'March to the Scaffold' and 'A Witches' Sabbath'. Liszt too seized upon the potential of programmatic works, evolving a new form, the symphonic poem, in which the music was not only fired by a poetic idea (as for example in his *Orpheus* and *Hamlet*) but also by a written programme to provide the ordinary listener with an approach to the music. Altogether Liszt wrote twelve symphonic poems, some on subjects evocative of his progressive politics.

By 1850, Liszt had become a leading proponent of what came to be called the 'music of the future', and a leading protagonist in what came to be called the 'war of the romantics'. *Avant-garde* Lisztians affiliated themselves to the (newly-christened) 'New German School' (or 'New Weimar School') based in and around Liszt's own headquarters at Weimar ably supported in print by journalists like Richard Pohl and Franz Brendel.

Many felt that he was going too far and too fast in pursuit of musical renewal and reform, many too felt bullied by those who welcomed the 'music of the future'. They instead looked to the followers of the late Mendelssohn (d. 1847) and the composer Robert Schumann, his pianist wife Clara, and eventually the young Brahms, a faction that upheld the primacy of form and the autonomy of sonically moving forms. The great protagonist for 'absolute music' in print was the music critic, Eduard Hanslick, who set out his aesthetic in his influential volume *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* [*On the Beautiful in Music*, 1854], a landmark work of musical aesthetics. Hanslick propounded the view that music could not 'represent anything' beyond itself, and that composers who thought otherwise (most especially Liszt and Wagner) marketed mere 'vision-peddling medicine'. Composers he declared should abjure the notion of *Philosophie-Componist* only 'think and work' in sound. For Hanslick, Brahms was the apogee of absolute music.

In this context it is rather depressing to recall that the debates surrounding the future of music were taking a more parochial tone in Britain. John Ruskin, that proto-environmentalist and sometime evangelical Christian for one, feared that music might even be an agency of chaos rather than order, as he warned in 1869:

*Of all the arts music is the most directly ethical in origin [...]. Music is in her health the teacher of perfect order, the voice of the obedience of angels [...] in her depravity she is also the teacher of perfect disorder and disobedience, and the 'Gloria in Excelsis' becomes the 'Marseillaise'.*

The debate over the usefulness of established forms (like the sonata), over the merits of 'programme music' (inspired by pictorial or literary ideas) *versus* 'absolute music' (that had no extra-musical reference points) raged on for the rest of the century. Of course for many musicians, programmatic music was a striking development in a democratic direction in that it made music accessible to wider audiences.

Alongside the debates swirling around the future of opera and the relative merits of 'absolute' as opposed to 'programme-music' a handful of composers began to explore the possibilities of incorporating 'folk' (or 'national') elements – and thereby politically 'nationalist' overtones - into Art-Music. Eastern Europe led the way with Glinka and Chopin pioneers in this regard, soon to be joined by Liszt in Hungarian mode. It should be recalled that philosophies of nationalism were relatively new and highly divisive in the 1830s and 1840s: for many conservatives nationalism represented a threat to the old dynastic order; while for liberals it was perceived as a force that could help precipitate political and social progress. One of the earliest and most assertive works of this nationalist school was Liszt's set of *Hungarian Rhapsodies* for piano (1853), which were intended, as the composer declared as an '*epic folk work of a united Hungarian people*'. Composers soon incorporated national music into their aesthetic with varying degrees of commitment: in Russia (Borodin, Moussorgsky), the Czech lands (Smetana, Dvořák), Norway (Grieg), and so many others.

So how did the above debates play out in the later nineteenth century? As for opera, Wagner's impact ensured that even Italian composers (Verdi chief among them) pursued an aesthetic more serious, more socially and politically committed, more emotionally elevated. Of course comic operas continued to be written, but opera as pure unalloyed entertainment was relegated to operetta – where huge fortunes were made by Rossini's self-appointed heirs and successors. As for a 'music of the future' composers of absolute and programme-music quickly learned to coexist with each other proponents of national music in a rapidly changing musical landscape. A musical world that had begun the century with some discord had at last found a measure of harmony: until that is the advent of modernism.

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