

One theory of Western civilization holds that events are shaped by a variety of factors that are beyond the influence of individuals, regardless of their stature or cultural significance. Another posits that civilization flows around great men and women like a river around a shoal; these cultural titans, precisely because of their far-reaching influence, bend future trends through the force of their personalities and by the scope of their work.

Igor Stravinsky based his assessment of the influence of Bach, Beethoven, Liszt and Schönberg on his belief that these four men altered the course of Western art music with their monumental output. By the end of his life, Bach had practically exhausted fugue in the same way that Beethoven was the acknowledged master of the symphonic form. Bach's late chromaticism and his highly emotional, deeply affective music, laid the groundwork for the Romanticism of the 19th century. It is true that near the end of his life Haydn's music became more and more emotionally demonstrative, so much so that a new term—*Sturm und Drang*—was coined. But it was Beethoven who benefited most from Bach's vision and endlessly imaginative use of counterpoint.

It is easy to imagine Beethoven with one artistic foot in the Classicism of the 18th century and the other in the burgeoning Romanticism of the 19th century. His early works are redolent of Mozart and Haydn while his late music bulges with abstract polyphony, such as the *Große Fuge*, tortured harmonies, as demonstrated in the String Quartets op. 131, and the expansive forms that became part and parcel for German Romantic composers. In the same way that Beethoven wove his musical fabric from the multitudinous threads drawn from Bach's spindle, so did Liszt take the whole cloth of Beethoven's musical legacy and fashion from it entirely new garments. Chief among these was the "Symphonic (or "Tone") Poem," but Liszt's inventiveness did not stop there. His unrivaled piano technique, extravagant orchestrations, along with the never-ending influence his many piano pupils wielded surely would guarantee his immortality.

I believe that Stravinsky included Liszt in his quartet of famous men, however, because of Liszt's groundbreaking use of tonality in the last decades of his life. It was so advanced, in fact, that his countryman, the great 20th-century composer Bela Bartók, concluded that that modern music began with Liszt: "For the future development of music, Liszt's oeuvre seems...of far greater importance than that of Strauss or even Wagner."

Liszt so obliterated traditional Western tonality that when Arnold Schönberg disposed of it entirely and replaced it with Dodecaphonic, or 12-tone, music, anyone familiar at all with Liszt's late work would have easily observed how Schönberg took the pattern that Liszt used to fashion his music and from it contrived an entirely new style so fresh that it was—and is still to many performers and listeners—shocking.

Schönberg started his career as a disciple of Gustav Mahler; indeed, his earliest compositions are indistinguishable from his mentor's work. After Schönberg's epiphany, however, he reacted violently to all things romantic and, along with his disciples Alban Berg and Anton Webern, joined the Expressionist painters of the time and left for us a depiction of the world as they knew it in the years between the two World Wars. Proper understanding of Schönberg's music requires a new aesthetic: neither his world nor his music was pretty.

Composing traditionally beautiful melodies with consonant harmonies would have been incongruous with the times in which he lived; indeed, doing so would have been artistically dishonest. If Art is to have any longevity whatsoever, it must accurately and—if necessary—brutally portray the Truths of the era in which the composer, or poet, or painter, or choreographer, lived and worked and died.

O Jesu Christ, mein Leben's Licht, BWV 118, (O Jesus Christ, my life's light) 1736–37

J.S. Bach

O Jesu Christ, mein Leben's Licht,
Mein Hort, mein Trost, mein Zuversicht,
Auf Erden bin ich nur ein Gast
Und drückt mich sehr der Sünden Last.

O Jesus Christ, my life's light,
my stronghold, my consolation, my confidence,
on earth I am only a guest
and weighed down by the burden of sin.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, death was companionable in a way that is unknown in modern times. Diseases that are today easily treated were then fatal. While no one among us can relate to Bach's genius, we can everyone share in his humanity, which was profound and, sometimes like us all, unlovely. He endured the most painful experience—burying a child—a dozen times. He returned from a trip to the Karlsbad spas with his employer, the Prince of Cöthen, only to discover that his first wife, Maria Barbara, was dead and had been buried for five weeks.

The Roman Catholic "Mass for the Dead" focused entirely on the deceased individual, whether by way of the hellfire and damnation of the sequence "Dies iræ" or the more gentle prayers for the eternal rest of the departed soul. Luther, who did not believe in Purgatory, and consequently saw no need to pray for the dead, crafted a liturgy that consoled those left behind, the still-living.

Although he never composed a Requiem, German or otherwise, Bach did write a number of pieces for use in funeral rites, among them *O Jesu Christ, mein Lebens Licht* (O Jesus Christ, my life's light), BWV 118. The first incarnation of the work, performed tonight, was intended to process the mourners from the Thomaskirche to the cemetery. Accordingly, Bach scored it for instruments capable of mobility, such as the now-unknown "Lituus," which was a valve-less horn pitched in high B-flat, and the Cornetto, an oboe-like instrument capable of greater volume, and the ubiquitous trombone. A second, later version scored for strings and other stationary instruments was obviously intended for indoor performance.

Bach crafts the simple chorale melody into a work of quiet beauty, wherein the imitative lines written for the Altos, Tenors and Basses take their melodic shape from the chorale, sung unadorned by the treble boys. (As is the case today, Bach's choir consisted solely of students from the Thomas school; consequently, no singer was older than nineteen.) The Lituii, played here by Flügelhorns, pulse gently above the walking bass of the tuba. The piccolo trumpet, playing the Cornetto part, weaves a melody from the motives Bach distills from the chorale tune, alternately doubling the trebles and soaring upward into its highest tessitura.

This late work was written first in 1736–37, then revised in 1746–49, just a few years before Bach's own death. Its subdued chromaticism and ascending lines demonstrate his mastery of the Doctrine of the Affects (*Affektenlehre*), an aesthetic based on the premise that music could invoke in listeners a particular emotion—it could "affect" them in a predetermined way based on the tonality or mode, instrumentation, text, and tempo. In *O Jesu Christ*, Bach manifests the Beatitudes of Jesus, "Blessed are they that mourn, for they will be comforted." Many of the most sublime examples of masterful compositions are understated and eloquent; they show us the composer's humanity, which is, finally, as close as we may ever come to realizing the emotional message that is always imbedded in every great work of Art.

Opferlied, op. 121b (Sacrificial Song), 1824

Ludwig van Beethoven

Die Flamme lodert, milder Schein Durchglänzt den
düstern Eichenhain und Weihrauchdüfte wallen.
O neig' ein gnädig Ohr zu mir, und laß des Jünglings
Opfer dir, du Höchster, wohlgefallen!
Sei stets der Freiheit Wehr und Schild!
Dein Lebensgeist durchathme mild
Luft, Erde, Feu'r und Fluthen!
Gib mir als Jüngling und als Greis am väterlichen Heerd,
O Zeus, das Schöne zu dem Guten!
O gib mir das Schöne zu dem Guten!

The flame blazes, soft light shines through the dusky grove
of oaks and sacramental fumes pour forth their scents,
O incline to me a gracious ear and receive with pleasure,
O highest one, a young man's offering.
Be always the shield and defender of freedom!
May your life spirit breathe gently through
air, earth, fire and flood!
Grant me, in youth and old age, at the paternal hearth,
O Zeus, both the fair and the good!
O give me both the fair and the good!

Written just three years before Beethoven's death, this charming work is scored for soprano solo, chorus, clarinets, bassoons, horns, and strings; it is set in Beethoven's "religious, contemplative" key of E major (others in this mood are slow movement of *Razumovsky* quartet no. 2, variation theme from Op.109, *Sehnsucht* WoO146 and *Abenlied unterm gestirnten Himmel* WoO150). Beethoven was much drawn to Friedrich von Matthisson's (1761-1831) poem *Opferlied* (Sacrificial song) and set it several times (1822 for Soprano, alto, tenor soloists, chorus, clarinets, horns & strings & in 1794, revised 1801 for piano and voice. He also used the closing words for two canons of 1823 and 1825. It is a perfect example of Beethoven's habit of returning again and again to the same theme—in this case twenty-five years. The evocation of a religious mood is obvious in the hymn-like setting, and the intensity of expression required is emphasized by Beethoven's initial performance indication *Langsam mit innigster Andacht* (Slowly with profound devotion). *Opferlied* is but one of the many introspective works of Beethoven's last years.

Ossa arida (Dry bones), 1879

Franz Liszt

Ossa arida, audite verbum Deum!

Dry bones, hear God's word!

In the final decades of his life Liszt blazed utterly unprecedented harmonic trails, clearing the path for such worthies as Claude Debussy, Maurice Ravel, Richard Strauss, and Gustav Mahler. His dissolution of traditional tonality laid the groundwork for Arnold Schönberg's total rejection of the hierarchy of tonality. *Ossa arida*, a virtual catalog of novelty, is scored for unison men's choir and organ, four-hands: an exceedingly rare occurrence in the literature. Liszt takes his text from Ezekiel, where the prophet exhorts the bones in the desert to rise up and hear the word of God. The opening chords are constructed of thirds piled atop one another; eventually, every note of the diatonic scale sounds simultaneously. There is a dramatic crescendo as both organists sound block chords in each hand; thick and powerful, this sonority underpins the men's fortissimo entrance. Liszt paints the text *audite* ironically, shifting from the loud opening to a short, quiet transition into a fortissimo statement of *verbum Domini*. The austerity of Liszt's late, contemplative style is represented by the frequent use of octaves in the organ, the unison choral part, which is redolent of plainsong, simple block harmonies and a monophonic texture. This spartan aesthetic was a sharp reaction to the excess that dominated Catholic sacred music at the time. Liszt embraced the Cæcilian Movement and its desire to reform contemporaneous church music and adjusted his style accordingly.

Sechs Stücke, op. 35, (Six Pieces) 1929

Arnold Schönberg

HEMMUNG

Ist ihnen die Sprache versagt?
Oder fühlen sie es nicht?
Haben sie nichts zu sagen?
Aber sie reden doch flüssiger,
je weniger ein Gedanke sie hemmt!
Wie schwer ist es, einen Gedanken zu sagen!
Und sie reden doch so flüssig,
wenn sie eine Absicht haben;
Wie oft muß man da staunen!

INHIBITIONS

Do words fail them?
or don't they feel it?
have they nothing to say?
After all, they talk more freely
as soon as they are inhibited by a thought!
it is difficult to put thoughts into words!
After all, they do talk freely
as soon as they want to get somewhere!
How often does that leave us speechless!

VERBUNDENHEIT

Man hilft zur Welt dir kommen;
Sei gesegnet!
man gräbt ein Grab für dich,
Ruhe sanft!
man flickt die Wunden dir im Spital,
Gute Bess' rung!
löscht dein Haus,
zieht dich aus dem Wasser.
Fürchte nichts!
Du hast selbst doch mit andern auch Mitleid!
Du bist nicht allein!

Du läßt den Greis nicht liegen,
fällst einst selbst so,
du hebst die Last des Schwachen,
ohne Lohn,
du hemmst im Laufe das scheue Pferd,
schonst dich selbst nicht,
wehrst dem Dieb, schütztst des Nachbarn Leben
ohne Zögern bringst du Hilfe:
leugne doch, daß du auch dazu gehörst!
bleibst nicht allein.

BOND

You are helped into this world,
Blessed you!
A grave is dug for you,
Rest in peace!
Your wounds are patched up in the hospital,
Get well soon!
The fire in your house is extinguished,
you are dragged out of the water,
Don't be afraid!
You yourself, after all, feel pity for others!
Help is coming, you are not alone!

You won't leave the old man behind,
you will die yourself,
You help the weak with their burden,
without a reward,
You stop and calm the runaway horse,
you don't spare yourself,
You fight off the thief, protect your neighbor's life
you bring help without hesitation:
Try and deny that you too are part of this!
you won't stay alone.

Schönberg's discovery of 12-tone music sent tremors through the artistic world that have not yet fully subsided. Initially outraged, musicians declared that the music was impossible to sing and play. Atonal music was greeted with almost universal condemnation and its proponents scorned in the press. The sound of 12-tone music was unsettling and offensive and seemed to rinse music of every last drop of its emotional content.

It is true that this music is not easily accessible and that it is highly intellectual. Its complex sequence of notes that appear random are in fact carefully hewed; but they are not discernable by the ear. Consequently, the mind, which requires order and repetition to make sense out of abstract sounds, interprets the intricate melodic shapes as well as the brittle dissonances as nothing more than babble.

Dodecaphonic music is almost always associated with tone rows: an ordering of the twelve chromatic notes of the Western scale with strict rules about their implementation. Complex matrices displayed the tone row in every imaginable configuration starting on any of the twelve notes: inverted, retrograde, and inverted retrograde. Although the music was perceived to be haphazard, in truth it was cerebral, exacting and exceedingly regulated, which undoubtedly contributed to its general rejection by the listening public.

Neither the first nor the last movement of Opus 35—"Hemmung" and "Verbundenheit"—is based on a tone row. The harmonies, many of which sound oddly familiar to the ear, are nevertheless sequenced untraditionally; the effect of hearing consonant chords moving in unexpected ways is inconsistent, furthering the general dismay about the style. Schönberg authored the texts as well as the music, and he is highly pictorial in "Hemmung." The text, which talks of restrained speech, has oddly mixed meters and displaced accents, contributing to the impression of halting speech. When the text begins to talk of speaking "fluently," there is a textual onslaught—a rapid fire of words.

"Verbundenheit," with its melodic and textual dialogue between one voice and the other three, seems melancholy and distant. The two stanzas of the text are set to identical music; the recapitulation, however, is retrograde. The effect is not obvious to the listener and demonstrates how this highly intellectual music can in fact contain a powerful emotional message. That Schönberg closes the piece on an unstable d-minor triad adds to the overall sense of longing that pervades his poem.