

The Happy Medium

By

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(from *The Joy of Music*, © 1959, Simon and Schuster)

Ever since I can remember I have talked about music with friends, colleagues, teachers, students, and just plain, simple citizens. But in the last few years I have found myself talking about it publicly, thus joining the long line of well-meaning, but generally doomed, folk who have tried to explain the unique phenomenon of human reaction to organized sound. It is almost like trying to explain a freak of nature (whatever *that* may be). Ultimately, one must simply accept the loving fact that people enjoy listening to organized sound (*certain* organized sounds, anyway); that this enjoyment can take the form of all kinds of responses from animal excitement to spiritual exaltation; and that people who can organize sounds so as to evoke the most exalted responses are commonly called geniuses. These axioms can neither be denied nor explained. But, in the great tradition of man burrowing through the darkness with his mind, hitting his head on cave walls, and sometimes perceiving a pinpoint of light, we can at last try to explain; in fact, there's no stopping us.

There have been more words written about the *Eroica* symphony than there are notes in it; in fact, I should imagine that the proportion of words to notes, if anyone could get an accurate count, would be flabbergasting. And yet, has anyone ever successfully "explained" the *Eroica*? Can anyone explain in mere prose the wonder of one note following or coinciding with another so that we feel that it's exactly how those notes *had* to be? Of course not. No matter what rationalists we may profess to be, we are stopped cold at the border of this mystic area. It is not too much to say *mystic* or even *magic*: no art lover can be an agnostic when the chips are down. If you love music, you are a believer, however dialectically you try to wriggle out of it.

The most rational minds in history have always yielded to a slight mystic haze when the subject of music has been broached, recognizing the beautiful and utterly satisfying combination of mathematics and magic that music is. Plato and Socrates knew that the study of music is one of the finest disciplines for the adolescent mind, and insisted on it as a *sine qua non* of education: and just for those reasons of its combined scientific and "spiritual" qualities. Yet when Plato speaks of music – scientific as he is about almost everything else – he wanders into vague generalizations about harmony, love, rhythm, and those deities who could presumably carry a tune. But he knew that there was nothing like piped music to carry soldiers inspired into battle – and everyone else knows it too. And that certain Greek modes were better than others for love or war or wine festivals or crowning an athlete. Just as the Hindus, with their most mathematically complicated scales, rhythms and "ragas," knew that certain ones had to be for morning hours, or sunset, or Siva festivals, or marching, or windy days. And no amount of mathematics could or can explain that.

We are still, in our own day, faced with this magical block. We try to be scientific about it, in our bumbling way – to employ principles of physics, acoustics, mathematics, and formal logic. We employ philosophical devices like empiricism and teleological method. But what does it accomplish for us? The “magic” questions are still unanswered. For example, we can try to explain the “shape” of a theme from a Beethoven quartet by saying that it follows the formal principle of synthesis: that there is a short statement (thesis), followed by a “questioning answer” (antithesis), followed by a development arising out of the conflict of the two (synthesis). The Germans call this form “*Stollen*.” Others say “syllogistic.” Words, words, words. Why is the theme beautiful? There’s the rub. We can find a hundred themes shaped in this way, or based on variants of this principle; but only one or two will be *beautiful*.

When I was at Harvard, Professor Birkhoff had just published a system of aesthetic *measure* – actually trying to evolve a mathematical system whereby any object of art could be awarded a beauty-rating on a given continuum of aesthetic worth. It was a noble effort; but when all is said and done, it comes to a dead end. The five human senses are capable of measuring objects up to a certain point (the eye can decide that “X” is twice as long as “Y”; the ear can guess that one trombone is playing twice as loud as the other); but can the senses’ own aesthetic responses be measured? How far is the smell of pork from the smell of beans? What beans? Cooked how? Raw? In what climate? If the *Eroica* earns a grade of 3.2, what mark do you give *Tristan*? Or a one-page Bach prelude?

We bumble. We imitate scientific method in our attempts to explain magic phenomena by fact, forces, mass, energy. But we simply can’t explain human reaction to these phenomena. Science can “explain” thunderstorms, but can it “explain” the fear with which people react to them? And even if it can, in psychology’s admittedly unsatisfactory terminology, how does science explain the sense of *glory* we feel in a thunderstorm, break down this sense of glory into its parts? Three parts electrical stimulation, one part aural excitement, one part visual excitement, four parts identification-feelings with the beyond, two parts adoration of almighty forces – an impossible cocktail.

But some people have “explained” the glory of a thunderstorm – now and then, with varying degrees of success – and such people are called poets. Only artists can explain magic; only art can substitute for nature. By the same token, only art can substitute for art. And so the only way one can really say anything about music is to write music.

Still we go on trying to shed some light on the mystery. There is a human urge to clarify, rationalize, justify, analyze, limit, describe. There is also a great urge to “sell” music, arising out of the transformation of music in the last 200 years into an industry. Suddenly there are mass markets, a tremendous recording industry, professional careerists, civic competitiveness, music chambers of commerce. And out of this has come something called “Music Appreciation” – once felicitously called by Virgil Thomson the “Music Appreciation Racket.” It is, in the main, a racket, because it is in the main specious and

commercial. It uses every device to sell music – cajoling, coyness, flattery, oversimplification, irrelevant entertainment, tall tales – all in order to keep the music business humming. And in so doing it has itself become a business. The next step is obviously a new parasitic development – music appreciation appreciation.

The “racket” operates in two styles, depending on the audience involved; and one is duller than the other. Type A is the birds-bees-and-rivulets variety, which invokes anything at all under the sun as long as it is extra-musical. It turns every note or phrase or chord into a cloud or crag or Cossack. It tells homey tales about the great composers, either spurious or irrelevant. It abounds in anecdotes, quotes from famous performers, indulges itself in bad jokes and unutterable puns, teases the hearer, and tells us nothing about music. I have used such devices myself: everyone who speaks about music at all must do it sometime or other. But I hope that I have done it always and only when the anecdote, the analogy, or the figure of speech makes the music clearer, more simply accessible, and not just to entertain or – much worse – to take the listener’s mind *off* the music, as the Racket does.

Type B is concerned with analysis – a laudable serious endeavor, but it is as dull as Type A is coy. It is the now-comes-the-theme-upside-down-in-the-second-oboe variety. A guaranteed soporific. What it does, ultimately, is to supply you with a road map of themes, a kind of Baedeker to the bare geography of a composition; but again it tells us nothing about music except those superficial geographical facts.

Luckily all talk about music is not restricted to the level of music appreciation. There are writers in the learned journals who make sense, but only to other musicians, or to the cultivated amateur. The musical layman is harder put to find intelligent talk about music. But every once in a while, a non-musician has appeared who has been able to give the layman some insight into music, if only into a cadence, or a melodic contour, or a single harmonic progression. Such people are rare and invaluable. Plato had some moments, as did Shakespeare. Certain critics can be perceptive and at the same time intelligible to the layman – men like Sullivan and Newman and Thomson. Certain novelists, like Mann and Huxley, have turned out memorable paragraphs, or even chapters, on musical matters. But most novelists, and writers in general, tend to put their feet in their mouths whenever they part lips to speak of music. And they do it often. For some reason literary minds seem magnetized by musical terminology – probably because they are awe-struck by the abstractness of it all. Nothing can be more different from the representational literary mind, with its literal conceptuality, than the non-objective musical mind, with its concentration on shapes, lines, and sonorous intensities. And this fascinates the writer – makes him even a little envious, I have found – so that he longs for some participation in that strange, foreign medium. As a result, when he reaches for the elusive *mot juste*, he often winds up with *glissando* or *crescendo* to express (usually wrongly) what he means – precisely *because* the musical word seems so elusive. Besides, it’s so *pretty*! What chic and grace those Italian words carry with them! *Scherzo. Vivace. Andantino. Crescendo.* We are constantly running across the word *crescendo* in literature, almost always used synonymously with *climax*. “The storm rose to a great crescendo.” “As they kissed, their hearts reached a crescendo of pounding passion.” Nonsense.

Obviously *crescendo* can mean only “growing,” “increasing” – specifically, getting louder. So a crescendo can mean growing to a climax of storm or passion or anything you wish; but it can’t be what you grow *to*.

This digression is only by way of pointing up the rarity of intelligent musical talk, even among first-class writers. The Huxleys and the Manns of this world are few and far between. Huxley’s description of part of Beethoven’s Op. 132 in *Point Counterpoint* is unforgettable, as is his paragraph on a Mozart quintet in *Antic Hay*. Mann has some thrilling passages on music in *The Magic Mountain* and in *Dr. Faustus*. And because of people like these – who can sometimes evoke with words the quality of a piece of music, or some sense of its essential weight or thrust – because of them we musicians are encouraged to go on trying to elucidate, in the hope that, even if only here and there, we can shed a little light on that terrible bugaboo, musical meaning.

“Meaning” in music has preoccupied aestheticians, musicians, and philosophers for centuries. The treatises pile up, and usually succeed only in adding more words to an already obscure business. In all this mass of material we can discern four levels of meaning in music:

- 1) Narrative-literary meanings (Till Eulenspiegel, The Sorcerer’s Apprentice, etc.)
- 2) Atmospheric-pictorial meanings (La Mer, Pictures at an Exhibition, etc.)
- 3) Affective-reactive meanings such as triumph, pain, wistfulness, regret, cheerfulness, melancholy, apprehension – most typical of nineteenth-century romanticism.
- 4) Purely musical meanings.

Of these, the last is the only one worthy of musical analysis. The first three may involve associations which are good to know (if the composer intended them); otherwise they are concerned only with arbitrary justification, or prettifying for the commercial reasons mentioned before. If we are to try to “explain” music, we must explain the music, not the whole array of appreciators’ extra-musical notions, which have grown like parasites around it.

Which makes musical analysis for the layman extremely difficult. Obviously we can’t use musical terminology exclusively, or we will simply drive the victim away. We must have intermittent recourse to certain extra-musical ideas, like religion, or social factors, or historical forces, which may have influenced music. We don’t ever want to talk down; but how *up* can we talk without losing contact? There is a happy medium somewhere between the music-appreciation racket and purely technical discussion; it is hard to find, but it can be found.

It is with this certainty that it can be found that I have made so bold as to discuss music on television, on records, and in public lectures. Whenever I feel that I have done it successfully, it is because I may have found that happy medium. And finding it is impossible without the conviction that the public is *not* a great beast, but an intelligent

organism, more often than not longing for insight and knowledge. So that, wherever possible, I try to talk about music – the *notes* of music; and wherever extra-musical concepts are needed for referential or clarifying purposes, I try to choose concepts that are musically relevant, such as nationalistic tendencies, or spiritual development, which may even have been part of the composer's own thinking. For example, in explaining jazz, I have avoided the usual pseudo-historical discussions (up-the-river-from-New Orleans) and concentrated on those aspects of melody, harmony, rhythm, etc., which make jazz different from all other music. In talking of Bach I have had to make references to his religious and spiritual convictions, but always in terms of the notes he produced. In trying to convey the problem of section that confronts every composer, I have had recourse to actual rejected sketches for the first movement of Beethoven's *Fifth*. In other words, music appreciation doesn't *have* to be a racket. The extra-musical kind of reference can be useful if it is put in the service of explaining the notes; and the road-map variety can also be serviceable if it functions along with some central idea that can engage the intelligence of the listener. Therein lies the happy medium, which I humbly hope to have achieved in the pages that follow.