

BUSONI FERRUCCIO

SKETCH OF A
NEW ESTHETIC
OF MUSIC

Ferruccio Busoni

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SKETCH OF A NEW ESTHETIC OF MUSIC

“What seek you? Say! And what do you expect?” —
“I know not what; the Unknown I would have!
What's known to me, is endless; I would go
Beyond the end: The last word still is wanting.”

[“*Der mächtige Zauberer.*”]

Loosely joined together as regards literary form, the following notes are, in reality, the outcome of convictions long held and slowly matured.

In them a problem of the first magnitude is formulated with apparent simplicity, without giving the key to its final solution; for the problem cannot be solved for generations – if at all.

But it involves an innumerable series of lesser problems, which I present to the consideration of those whom they may concern. For it is a long time since any one has devoted himself to earnest musical research.

It is true, that admirable works of genius arise in every period, and I have always taken my stand in the front rank of those who joyfully acclaimed the passing standard-bearers; and still it seems to me that of all these beautiful paths leading so far afield – none lead *upward*.

The spirit of an art-work, the measure of emotion, of humanity, that is in it – these remain unchanged in value through changing years; the form which these three assumed, the manner of their expression, and the flavor of the epoch which gave them birth, are transient, and age rapidly.

Spirit and emotion retain their essence, in the art-work as in man himself; we admire technical achievements, yet they are outstripped, or cloy the taste and are discarded.

Its ephemeral qualities give a work the stamp of “modernity;” its unchangeable essence hinders it from becoming “obsolete.” Among both “modern” and “old” works we find good and bad, genuine and spurious. There is nothing properly modern – only things which have come into being earlier or later; longer in bloom, or sooner withered. The Modern and the Old have always been.

CHARACTERIZATION OF THE ARTS

Art-forms are the more lasting, the more closely they adhere to the nature of their individual species of art, the purer they keep their essential means and ends.

Sculpture relinquishes the expression of the human pupil, and effects of color; painting degenerates, when it forsakes the flat surface in depiction and takes on complexity in theatrical decoration or panoramic portrayal.

Architecture has its fundamental form, growth from below upward, prescribed by static necessity; window and roof necessarily provide the intermediate and finishing configuration; these are eternal and inviolable requirements of the art.

Poetry commands the abstract thought, which it clothes in words. More independent than the others, it reaches the furthest bounds.

But all arts, resources and forms ever aim at the one end, namely, the imitation of nature and the interpretation of human feelings.

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Architecture, sculpture, poetry and painting are old and mature arts; their conceptions are established and their objects assured; they have found the way through uncounted centuries, and, like the planets, describe their regular orbits.¹

Music, compared with them, is a child that has learned to walk, but must still be led. It is a virgin art, without experience in life and suffering.

It is all unconscious as yet of what garb is becoming, of its own advantages, its unawakened capacities. And again, it is a child-marvel that is already able to dispense much of beauty, that has already brought joy to many, and whose gifts are commonly held to have attained full maturity.

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Music as an art, our so-called occidental music, is hardly four hundred years old; its state is one of development, perhaps the very first stage of a development beyond present conception, and we – we talk of “classics” and “hallowed traditions”! And we have talked of them for a long time!²

We have formulated rules, stated principles, laid down laws; – we apply laws made for maturity to a child that knows nothing of responsibility!

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Young as it is, this child, we already recognize that it possesses one radiant attribute which signalizes it beyond all its elder sisters. And the lawgivers will not see this marvelous attribute, lest their laws should be thrown to the winds. This child – it *floats on air*! It touches not the earth with its feet. It knows no law of gravitation. It is wellnigh incorporeal. Its material is transparent. It is sonorous air. It is almost Nature herself. It is – free.

¹ None the less, in these arts, taste and individuality can and will unceasingly find refreshment and rejuvenation.

² Tradition is a plaster mask taken from life, which, in the course of many years, and after passing through the hands of innumerable artisans, leaves its resemblance to the original largely a matter of imagination.

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But freedom is something that mankind have never wholly comprehended, never realized to the full. They can neither recognize nor acknowledge it.

They disavow the mission of this child; they hang weights upon it. This buoyant creature must walk decently, like anybody else. It may scarcely be allowed to leap – when it were its joy to follow the line of the rainbow, and to break sunbeams with the clouds.

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ABSOLUTE MUSIC

Music was born free; and to win freedom is its destiny. It will become the most complete of all reflexes of Nature by reason of its untrammelled immateriality. Even the poetic word ranks lower in point of incorporeality. It can gather together and disperse, can be motionless repose or wildest tempestuousity; it has the extremest heights perceptible to man – what other art has these? – and its emotion seizes the human heart with that intensity which is independent of the “idea.”

It realizes a temperament, *without* describing it, with the mobility of the soul, with the swiftness of consecutive moments; and this, where painter or sculptor can represent only one side or one moment, and the poet tardily *communicates* a temperament and its manifestations by words.

Therefore, representation and description are not the nature of music; herewith we declare the invalidity of program-music, and arrive at the question: What are the aims of music?

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Absolute Music! What the lawgivers mean by this, is perhaps remotest of all from the Absolute in music. “Absolute music” is a form-play without poetic program, in which the form is intended to have the leading part. But Form, in itself, is the opposite pole of absolute music, on which was bestowed the divine prerogative of buoyancy, of freedom from the limitations of matter. In a picture, the illustration of a sunset ends with the frame; the limitless natural phenomenon is enclosed in quadrilateral bounds; the cloud-form chosen for depiction remains unchanging for ever. Music can grow brighter or darker, shift hither or yon, and finally fade away like the sunset glow itself; and instinct leads the creative musician to employ the tones that press the same key within the human breast, and awaken the same response, as the processes in Nature.

Per contra, “absolute music” is something very sober, which reminds one of music-desks in orderly rows, of the relation of Tonic to Dominant, of Developments and Codas.

THE FETISH OF FORM

Methinks I hear the second violin struggling, a fourth below, to emulate the more dexterous first, and contending in needless contest merely to arrive at the starting-point. This sort of music ought rather to be called the “architectonic,” or “symmetric,” or “sectional,” and derives from the circumstance that certain composers poured *their* spirit and *their* emotion into just this mould as lying nearest them or their time. Our lawgivers have identified the spirit and emotion, the individuality of these composers and their time, with “symmetric” music, and finally, being powerless to recreate either the spirit, or the emotion, or the time, have retained the Form as a symbol, and made it into a fetish, a religion. The composers sought and found this form as the aptest vehicle for communicating *their* ideas; their souls took flight – and the lawgivers discover and cherish the garments Euphorion left behind on earth.

A lucky find! 'Twas now or never;
The flame is gone, it's true – however,
No need to pity mankind now.
Enough is left for many a poet's tiring,
Or to breed envy high and low;
And though I have no talents here for hiring,
I'll hire the robe out, anyhow.

Is it not singular, to demand of a composer originality in all things, and to forbid it as regards form? No wonder that, once he becomes original, he is accused of “formlessness.” Mozart! the seeker and the finder, the great man with the childlike heart – it is he we marvel at, to whom we are devoted; but not his Tonic and Dominant, his Developments and Codas.

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Such lust of liberation filled Beethoven, the romantic revolutionary, that he ascended one short step on the way leading music back to its loftier self: – a short step in the great task, a wide step in his own path. He did not quite reach absolute music, but in certain moments he divined it, as in the introduction to the fugue of the Sonata for Hammerclavier. Indeed, all composers have drawn nearest the true nature of music in preparatory and intermediary passages (preludes and transitions), where they felt at liberty to disregard symmetrical proportions, and unconsciously drew free breath. Even a Schumann (of so much lower stature) is seized, in such passages, by some feeling of the boundlessness of this pan-art (recall the transition to the last movement of the D-minor Symphony); and the same may be asserted of Brahms in the introduction to the Finale of his First Symphony.

But, the moment they cross the threshold of the *Principal Subject*, their attitude becomes stiff and conventional, like that of a man entering some bureau of high officialdom.

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BACH, BEETHOVEN, WAGNER

Next to Beethoven, Bach bears closest affinity to “infinite music.”³ His Organ Fantasias (but not the Fugues) have indubitably a strong dash of what might be overwritten “Man and Nature.”⁴ In him it appears most ingenuous because he had no reverence for his predecessors (although he esteemed and made use of them), and because the still novel acquisition of equal temperament opened a vista of – for the time being – endless new possibilities.

Therefore, Bach and Beethoven⁵ are to be conceived as a *beginning*, and not as unsurpassable finalities. In spirit and emotion they will probably remain unexcelled; and this, again, confirms the remark at the beginning of these lines: That spirit and emotion remain unchanged in value through changing years, and that he who mounts to their uttermost heights will always tower above the crowd.

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What still remains to be surpassed, is their form of expression and their freedom. Wagner, a Germanic Titan, who touched our earthly horizon in orchestral tone-effect, who intensified the form of expression, but fashioned it into a *system* (music-drama, declamation, leading-motive), is on this account incapable of further intensification. His category begins and ends with himself; first, because he carried it to the highest perfection and finish; secondly, because his self-imposed task was of such a nature, that it could be achieved by one man alone.⁶ The paths opened by Beethoven can be followed to their end only through generations. They – like all things in creation – may form only a circle; but a circle of such dimensions, that the portion visible to us seems like a straight line. Wagner's circle we can view in its entirety – a circle within the great circle.

³ “Die Ur-Musik,” is the author's happy phrase. But as this music *never has been*, our English terms like “primitive,” “original,” etc., would involve a *non sequitur* which is avoided, at least, by “infinite.”

⁴ In the recitatives of his Passions we hear “human speech”; *not* “correct declamation.”

⁵ As characteristic traits of Beethoven's individuality I would mention the poetic fire, the strong human feeling (whence springs his revolutionary temper), and a portent of modern nervousness. These traits are certainly opposed to those of a “classic.” Moreover, Beethoven is no “master,” as the term applies to Mozart or the later Wagner, just because his art foreshadows a greater, as yet incomplete. (Compare the section next-following.)

⁶ “Together with the problem, it gives us the solution,” as I once said of Mozart.

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PROGRAM AND MOTIVE

The name of Wagner leads to program-music. This has been set up as a contrast to so-called “absolute” music, and these concepts have become so petrified that even persons of intelligence hold one or the other dogma, without recognition for a third possibility beyond and above the other two. In reality, program-music is precisely as one-sided and limited as that which is called absolute. In place of architectonic and symmetric formulas, instead of the relation of Tonic to Dominant, it has bound itself in the staves of a connecting poetic – sometimes even philosophic – program.

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Every motive – so it seems to me – contains, like a seed, its life-germ within itself. From the different plant-seeds grow different families of plants, dissimilar in form, foliage, blossom, fruit, growth and color.⁷

Even each individual plant belonging to one and the same species assumes, in size, form and strength, a growth peculiar to itself. And so, in each motive, there lies the embryo of its fully developed form; each one must unfold itself differently, yet each obediently follows the law of eternal harmony. *This form is imperishable, though each be unlike every other.*

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The motive in a composition with program bears within itself the same natural necessity; but it must, even in its earliest phase of development, renounce *its own proper mode of growth* to mould – or, rather, twist – itself to fit the needs of the program. Thus turned aside, at the outset, from the path traced by nature, it finally arrives at a wholly unexpected climax, whither it has been led, not by its own organization, but by the way laid down in the program, or the action, or the philosophical idea.

And how primitive must this art remain! True, there are unequivocal descriptive effects of tone-painting (from these the entire principle took its rise), but these means of expression are few and trivial, covering but a very small section of musical art. Begin with the most self-evident of all, the debasement of Tone to Noise in imitating the sounds of Nature – the rolling of thunder, the roar of forests, the cries of animals; then those somewhat less evident, symbolic – imitations of visual

⁷ “... Beethoven, dont les esquisses *thématiques ou élémentaires* sont innombrables, mais qui, sitôt les thèmes trouvés, semble par cela même en avoir établi tout le développement ...” [Vincent d’Indy, in “César Franck.”]

impressions, like the lightning-flash, springing movement, the flight of birds; again, those intelligible only through the mediation of the reflective brain, such as the trumpet-call as a warlike symbol, the shawm to betoken ruralism, march-rhythm to signify measured strides, the chorale as vehicle for religious feeling. Add to the above the characterization of nationalities – national instruments and airs – and we have a complete inventory of the arsenal of program-music. Movement and repose, minor and major, high and low, in their customary significance, round out the list. – These are auxiliaries, of which good use can be made upon a broad canvas, but which, taken by themselves, are no more to be called music than wax figures may pass for monuments.

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And, after all, what can the presentation of a little happening upon this earth, the report concerning an annoying neighbor – no matter whether in the next room or in an adjoining quarter of the globe – have in common with that music which pervades the universe?

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