THE IMAGINARY MUSEUM OF MUSICAL WORKS

An Essay in the Philosophy of Music

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After 1800: The Beethoven Paradigm

Franz Liszt thought he had found the perfect way to treat the temporal art of music as a truly fine art. He declared in 1835:

> In the name of all musicians, of art, and of social progress, we require: . . . the foundation of an assembly to be held every five years for religious, dramatic, and symphonic music, by which all the works that are considered best in these three categories shall be ceremonially performed every day for a whole month in the Louvre, being afterwards purchased by the government, and published at their expense.

In other words, he continued, 'we require the foundation of a musical Museum'.[1]

Liszt's proclamation had precedents. In 1802, Forkel wrote that 'the most efficacious means of preserving in lasting vigour musical works of art is undoubtedly the public execution of them before a numerous audience.' Public performance of Bach's works (for it was those he was writing about) would 'raise a worthy monument to German art', as well as 'furnish the true Artist with a gallery of the most instructive models'. In 1809 Carl Maria von Weber remarked on the recent foundation of a Museum in Stuttgart. He described it as a meeting-place for professional and amateur artists, which 'seemed to promise well for the development of artistic taste'. Unfortunately, he then added, the Museum had already been reduced in Stuttgart to a 'Reading Society'.[2]

That was in Stuttgart. In other places, works of music had begun to be performed, not every day over a limited period of time, but every so often over a longer period of time. Ideally, it was hoped, these works would be played every so often—forever. In a musical museum replicating the conditions of a museum for the plastic arts, works did not need to be heard every day, as Liszt suggested; it was sufficient that they be on semi-permanent display. They could be heard in

[1] 'On the Position of Artists and their Place in Society', in Walker, *Franz Liszt*, 159–60.

[2] David and Mendel (eds.), *The Bach Reader*, 296 and 298; Weber, *Writings on Music*, tr. M. Cooper, ed. J. Warrack (Cambridge, 1981), 34. The term 'museum' was also used to refer to private musical societies.

performances by respectful members of a musical meeting just as often as paintings and sculptures were viewed by gallery visitors. Otherwise they would be stored away, but always under the condition of readiness for exhibition.

Still, Liszt was justified in reiterating a demand for the establishment of a musical museum, for conditions of practice did not change overnight. Weber had already pointed that out. Most of the changes that fostered the emergence of the regulative work-concept spanned many decades. Things had begun to change in significant ways in the 1770s (if not before), numerous changes occurred around 1800, and many if not all the changes stabilized during the course of the nineteenth century. All these changes shared a common aim. They marked a transition in practice, away from seeing music as a means to seeing it as an end. More specifically, they marked a move away from thinking about musical production as comparable to the extra-musical use of a general language that does not presuppose self-sufficiency, uniqueness, or ownership of any given expression. In place of that, musical production was now seen as the use of musical material resulting in complete and discrete, original and fixed, personally owned units. The units were musical works.[3]

I

A crucially important change concerned the social status of composers. As the eighteenth century drew to a close, musicians were no longer thought about predominantly as in service to extra-musical institutions. Like their musical compositions, they were fast being liberated from the traditional power and restraint of ecclesiastical and aristocratic dignitaries. They were also being freed from the demand that they engage, if they could, in theoretical speculation as philosopher-scientists. Instead, musicians—especially the composers amongst them—were sharing in the revolutionary freedom claimed by a rising professional middle class, and gradually, through their liberation, were coming to be seen as independent masters and creators of their art.

[3] Charles Rosen employs a similar metaphor when he contrasts artistic and pragmatic uses of language. In art, he notes, we are interested in what is exceptional, not what is normal. Each work sets out on its own to be judged according to its own peculiar merits. 'Individual statement provides the norm and takes precedence over general usage' (*The Classical Style*, 21–2).

In cosmopolitan cities, composers were finding the most fruitful means to escape their former 'social tutelage'. Carl Maria von Weber identified the cosmopolitan composer's hopes, when he noticed, whilst in Prague, that complaints were being heard from resident artists about their circumstances. Such circumstances, he explained,

> make it difficult for them to achieve the mentality and the spirit which mark the artist who is a real cosmopolitan and therefore free. Every artist in Prague owes his existence to some noble family and bears the title 'Composer to His Excellency So-and-So.' His opinions are those of his patron, who in his turn champions his own composer against the rest. The result is an absence of the spirit that refuses to be content with merely earning a livelihood and longs to embark on the high seas of art in search of new discoveries.[4]

In these cities, composers believed that they should be able to live and function as free individuals, and that their productive activities should, if they should be subject to anything at all, be subject to the forces of an urban market for music. If they continued to receive patronage from church or court, they did so on the understanding that patrons were not to interfere with or control their creativity. As free persons, they could exercise choice over the form of their patronage, whether it be more or less demanding and restricting—or so they wanted to believe. Whatever social standing accorded most satisfactorily with their aspirations to sail on 'the high seas of art' was the standing they wanted freedom to adopt.

Though it was not until well into the nineteenth century that composers began to be fully accepted as independent persons, that was well after the expectation to act and be treated in this way had become firmly fixed in their minds.[5] Composers of the late eighteenth century, such as Mozart and Haydn, marked a transitionary phase. Weber and Beethoven requested much more explicitly than their immediate predecessors that their social status reflect the romantic descriptions of their new autonomous art.

It was Beethoven, more than any other composer, who set the example for future composers. Throughout his century, his actions had, intentionally and inadvertently, both negative and positive influence. Negatively, he provided others with eyes to see that the

[4] Weber, *Writings on Music*, 130.

[5] Cf. Alan Walker's remark that it was not until the 1840s that certain social barriers were broken down so that composers could act, and be fully accepted, as superior beings (*Franz Liszt*, 287).

discontent of the liberated composer could match that of the traditional court musician. Positively, he showed how composers could take artistic advantage of the autonomous art of music. Ultimately, he changed and was believed to have changed so many things having to do with how musicians thought about composition, performance, and reception, that the subsequent Beethoven mania, or the Beethoven Myth as it has come to be called, is justified, if such a thing is ever justified, on much more than aesthetical grounds alone.[6]

For present purposes, Beethoven showed his contemporaries and descendants that modern, liberated composers differed from their predecessors in having a choice as to the source of their livelihood and in being able (in theory at least) to make use of or exploit this choice in whatever ways they saw fit. Monteverdi, Bach, and numerous other composers of their times might have had desires for more independence, desires perhaps recognizable only by hindsight. But it was not until composers were conceptually freed from strict social dependence upon extra-musical bodies with predominantly extra-musical interests that the desire for independence could be both explicitly articulated and realized. What form did this realization take?

II

What seemed to matter most to composers was their freedom from worldly demands. Their romantic role willingly adopted, composers enjoyed describing themselves and each other as divinely inspired creators—even as God-like—whose sole task was to objectify in music something unique and personal and to express something transcendent. Bizet described Beethoven not as a human, but as a God. Samuel Wesley referred to Bach as a 'Saint', a 'Demi-God', and a 'Musical High Priest', and to his masterpieces as the 'Works of our Apollo'. Haydn's spirit was said to penetrate 'the sanctuary of heavenly wisdom'. He 'brought down fire from heaven, to warm and to illuminate . . . earthly hearts . . . to lead them to a sense of the Infinite'. Baini looked back to Palestrina as an early 'amanuensis of God'.[7] Each

[6] For discussion of Beethoven mania, see J. Horowitz, *Understanding Toscanini: How he Became an American Culture-God and Helped Create a New Audience for Old Music* (Minneapolis, 1987), 32 ff., Galkin, *History of Orchestral Conducting*, 350, and Dahlhaus, *The Idea of Absolute Music*, tr. R. Lustig (Chicago, 1989), chs. 1 and 8. Horowitz argues that the mania was generated among things partly by nationalist fervour and partly by musicians who owed musical debts to Beethoven.

[7] W. Salmen, 'Social Obligations of the Emancipated Musician in the 19th Century',