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The Resurgence of Mendelssohn's Romanticism in a Korean Drama Soundtrack

With the advent of Netflix and subtitling in English for originally non-English shows and movies, the world has become a smaller place. Accessibility to cultures from all over the world has become possible because of this technological advancement. In this small world, Korean Dramas (K-Dramas) have massively expanded their viewership to a significantly large non-Korean audience through Netflix. One such K-Drama *Crash Landing on You* (2020) became a global favorite in a pandemic-ridden world. The universality of the feelings of love against all odds and loss and longing won over the hearts of billions. The soundtrack of the show has been praised for its poignance in reflecting love, longing and loss. The most striking track, a piano piece called *The Song for My Brother*, composed by Korean artists Nam Hye Seung and Park Sang Hee, is a piece in the show composed by the protagonist for his brother, played for the first and last time in Istelwald, Switzerland when the protagonist hears of his brother's demise back home in North Korea. This tonal piece of music represented love, loss and longing all at the same time. It is strongly reminiscent of the famous Western European musical tradition of Romanticism, bearing marked stylistic resemblance to Romantic compositions called *Venetian Gondellies* for the piano composed by Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy. In particular, the *Gondellied (Barcarolle) in A major: Allegretto non troppo* (1837) from Mendelssohn's book called *Songs Without Words*, is thematically similar to *The Song for My Brother* and most importantly, shares a strikingly similar emotive power despite its conception two centuries before in a different time and part

of the world. This essay proposes that both piano pieces be added to the Music Humanities repertoire in the lectures on the Romantic era. The goal of this would be to show continuity with the narrative of the expressiveness of the piano as early as a piano performance of Johann Sebastian Bach's *Fugue No. 2 in C minor* from *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, with Hector Berlioz's belief that Romantic music imitates nature in that both pieces, and to challenge Daniel Albright's view that Modernism rejects tonality. Ultimately, this essay propounds the adoption of the approach of pairing older pieces of a particular musical tradition with recent pieces from the same tradition to facilitate conversation on the power and scope of music.

While it is known that Johann Sebastian Bach composed his Preludes and Fugues in *The Well-Tempered Clavier* without access to a piano at the time, many later performances of his pieces, like the ones listened to in the course, have been on the piano. In listening to his *Fugue No. 2 in C minor*, two things are apparent: the emotive power of subtle tonal modulation as well as the expressiveness of the piano by itself. The tonic key of the Fugue, C minor, modulates to its relative major of E flat at 0:27, modulating back to minor mode and then ending with a Picardy third major chord, and both of these minor-to-major modulations, although brief, are the most expressive portions of the Fugue, because they serve as juxtaposition both melodically and emotionally to the overall minor mode and solemn melody. In the same vein, Mendelssohn's A Major *Gondellied (Barcarolle)* features subtle single-chord major-to-minor modulations at times 0:41, 0:58, 1:30, 2:10 through the use of accidentals, which make the beautiful major mode more expressively rich serving the role of juxtaposition once again. Similarly, in *The Song for My Brother*, there is modulation from the G major tonic key to G minor at 2:02, with a return to the tonic at 2:57. These changes of mode from major to minor (and vice versa) express dynamicity of emotion spanning a larger landscape of in-between emotions. Modulations would not be possible without the existence

of tonal modes, and richness through juxtaposition would be lost. Further, the piano is seen as a time-invariant power that is capable of evoking the same gamut of emotions in 1837 as in 2020 through rich, thick melodies played by both hands, rubato and timbre through dynamics. The 1837 *Gondellied (Barcarolle)* evokes feelings of peace and calm with the rubato and accidentals adding to a feeling of longing to reach a certain destination in the Gondola, just like the 2020 K-drama piece that reflects a feeling of longing to meet a loved one that was lost. In a different manner than Cage's prepared piano in the 20th century, but with the same idea, these pieces depict the completeness of the piano as a solo instrument rather than an accompanying instrument. Mendelssohn's *Gondellied (Barcarolle)* is from his book of piano pieces called *Songs Without Words*, whose title itself bolsters his belief that his Romantic emotions and longing could be captured by the piano itself, without words or other instruments that would take away from the piano's power – *The Song for My Brother* is an ode to and mourning of the K-drama's protagonist's deceased brother, and the bittersweet feelings of love and loss are combined most poignantly in a piano piece, more so than a written eulogy. The idea that music does not need words to convey meaning implies that music transcends language and construes meaning in itself, and this is showcased in both pieces, in continuity with Bach's music in his *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, thus, building on the notion of the vast scope of the piano as a solo instrument and the power of tonal music.

This emotive power of the two Romantic music pieces perfectly exemplifies the theory of expression or musical representation of emotions from Hector Berlioz's 1837 essay titled *On Imitation in Music*. Further, both pieces represent physical imitation and imitation by musical metaphor as characterized by Berlioz in the same essay. The compound duple (6/8) meter of the *Gondellied (Barcarolle)* and simple triple meter (3/4) meter of *The Song for My Brother* both are a physical imitation of the sound of a flowing river, with rubato and changed rhythms and tempos representing a freely flowing water body. In both pieces, a

strong left hand chordal pattern keeps the rhythm while the right hand carries the monophonic melody. In fact, from 1:12 to 3:22 it feels like *The Song for My Brother* is played in 6/8 meter like the Gondellied (Barcarolle), and both songs represent the natural scene of moving water. Coupled with this physical onomatopoeic imitation comes the imitation through musical metaphor of a gondola on a river. Even though the title *Gondellied (Barcarolle)* literally translates to a song sung by gondoliers and the scene of the K-Drama on the shore of the lake where the protagonist performs the piece, if one were to shut their eyes in the scene, the same image would be conjured in their heads – such is the power of musical metaphor, where the music itself represents the something perceived by another sense, like vision. Thus, the Romantic ideals of music and imitation defined by Berlioz are echoed similarly in both pieces, and they would serve as fitting examples to show the timelessness and universality of Romantic musical traditions and notions.

Up to this point, it has been shown how *The Song for My Brother* (2020) would depict continuity with some of the musical traditions tonality, solo piano pieces, and Romanticism as would the Mendelssohn's Romantic *Gondellied* (1837). Now, it will be illustrated how the former challenges the Modernist musical viewpoint of Daniel Albright which is the rejection of tonality as misrepresentative of human emotion. Albright, in *modernism and Music: An Anthology of Sources* (2004) states that “just as there are notes that dwell in the forbidden gaps of the scale, so there are feelings that hide in the cracks between such familiar and acceptable feelings as love, anger, rage, sadness and so forth” (8). This Modernist belief that emotional dissonance could be better captured by musical dissonance than tonality and consonance is immediately contested by *The Song for My Brother*. This piece had been composed by the protagonist in Switzerland for his older brother back in North Korea, but was never heard by the brother who was killed before he had the chance to listen to the song. The song was performed by the protagonist on the shore

of a lake in Istelwald, Switzerland, for the first and last time when he heard of his brother's demise, after which he quit playing the piano. What had been a song of love became a song of loss, and yet the piece was a celebration along with a mourning, an ode and a bereavement, immensely nostalgic piercingly painful. There could not be a more layered representation of emotions in between love and loss, as was depicted through the tonality and modulation in the piano piece. Thus, the emotional dissonance of the protagonist was best encapsulated by the tonal piece, directly opposing Albright's claim that musical dissonance best represents emotional discord.

Finally, the choice of a non-western (Korean) composition in the Music Humanities syllabus on Masterpieces of Western Music might at first seem to be out of scope, but the fact that it bears striking resemblances to a piece that epitomises a famous musical tradition two centuries later in a completely different socio-cultural context and geographical region, shows the vastness of the scope of Western music and its invariance through space, time and emotions. Also, discussing Western influences on non-Western compositions is an interesting inversion of the existing discussions of non-Western influences on Western compositions. In conclusion, thus, the choice of these pieces not only displays continuity and change with other musical narratives in the syllabus, but also provides a blueprint of pairing older and more recent pieces from the same musical tradition to facilitate dialogue on the power and scope of Western music as a whole, and its ability to transcend barriers of geography, time, culture and emotions.

Musical References

Proposed Pieces to Include:

1. *Gondellied (Barcarolle) in A major - Allegretto non troppo, BWV U 136* (1837):

Composed by Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, performed by Daniel Barenboim

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZB7z9Y1uJMA>

2. *The Song for My Brother* (2020): Composed by Nam Hye Seung, Park Sang Hee, ft.

JungHyuk, in *Crash Landing on You* Original Soundtrack

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aNlkXRuPR5s>

Readings:

1. *Fugue No. 2 in C minor BWV 847* (1738): Composed by Johann Sebastian Bach, performed on the piano (version uploaded for class on Courseworks)
2. *On Imitation in Music* (1837), Hector Berlioz
3. *modernism and Music: An Anthology of Sources* (2004), Daniel Albright