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Thinking About Music

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Exploring the Dynamics and Origins of Musical Genius

The concept of the creative and performing arts has long been tied to some otherworldly or divine explanation. Being a pioneer in artistic expression and producing exceptional works of art was often associated with either being possessed by malevolent forces or chosen by some higher power. In modern times, this perception has evolved, and individuals with this ability are now referred to as geniuses. This introduces biases in how we view artists and the art they produce. However, the notion of possession still persists as we recognize “being in the zone” as a form of artistic transcendence. In order to understand the concept of artistic genius, we must explore the evolution and competing versions of genius, and consider how our assumptions about genius shape our perception of individual artists. The shifting notions of creativity and genius have a profound impact on how we perceive individual artists, shaping our understanding of their unique contributions to the world.

Historical Notions of Artistic Genius

Regardless of cultural differences, the origin of music has long been associated with notions of the divine and supernatural. From a segment published in *The Musical Quarterly*, Clement Harris describes how music became intertwined with deities and religious contexts:

[the] arts came about in the period when myths, and the more mythical element in scriptures, had their origin, that not only music in the abstract, but the mechanical means

of producing it, instruments, were regarded in many instances as of divine origin. This phenomenon is most conspicuous among the Hindoos, Egyptians and Greeks.
(Harris 1922: 70-71)

This quote suggests that music and religion is not just an association formed by one culture, but it spans across multiple cultures, time periods, and civilizations. Additionally, it is not only the music itself that is divine, but the actual instruments as well. This raises the question, can anyone, by simply picking up an instrument, become a vessel for the divine? The connection between music and divinity reflects a profound human desire to explain the unexplainable and often this meant using religion as a form of justifying the unexplainable. Harris seems to think that music coming from the divine is a notion that we had in the past; something that the Hindoos, Egyptians, and Greeks believed in and that it is no longer a prevalent idea. However, musicologists explore this concept which illustrates that this is a much more intrinsically linked concept. In another attempt to explain the phenomenon of music, musicologist Bruno Nettl describes how music is seen from European myths of artistic creativity by telling the Myth of Beaver and summarizing its significance “Music reflects and contains supernatural power.” and mentioning “the musician, often a strangely behaving person who can perform incredible feats, is in league with the devil” (Nettl 2005: 1454-1455). Nettl’s explanation of music from this point of view illustrates that music as a vessel for the divine is not a relic of history, but continues to shape our understanding of music in various ways. It serves as a reminder that the mystical and transcendental qualities of music persist, enduring throughout time.

Competing Perspectives on Genius

The link between the arts, divinity, and genius is also evident in writer Peter Kivy’s book, *The Possessor and the Possessed*, in which different perspectives on genius describe the paradox of what it means to be a genius. Kivy explains this link between the arts, divinity, and genius, by

stating the conclusion that Socrates reaches in the *Ion*: “ ‘This is not an art in you, whereby you speak well on Homer, but a divine power which moves you like that in a stone Euripides named a magnet....’ In other words, Ion is ‘possessed’ ” (Kivy 2001: 4). Here, we encounter our first (Platonic) perspective on genius in which the nature of genius is seen as a force beyond human control and not skill or talent. In this case, genius is defined as a form of transcending the ordinary human experience. Contrastingly, Kivy also explains the second (Longinian) perspective on Genius from *On the Sublime*: “Genius, *roughly*, is the ability to achieve sublimity in writing” (Kivy 2001: 14). “For Longinus genius must seize the day; for Socrates the day must seize the genius” (Kivy 2001: 17).

Mozart and Beethoven: Platonic vs Longinian Genius

Nettl elaborates this idea when he explains the myths of Mozart and Beethoven. He mentions how Mozart is able to compose effortlessly and the music to his mind whereas Beethoven had to work hard to compose (Nettl 2005: 1456). This starts to expose the fundamental question associated with genius that has been inherent in each reading: Is genius simply the application of a possessed skill or talent or is genius the result of hard work? From the perspectives of both Nettl and Kivy, Mozart would more so fit the Platonic version of genius, being possessed by the music and having the music come to him in his mind, whereas Beethoven would more so fit the Longinian version of genius, having to work hard to compose. This brings us to the intersection of both perspectives and paradoxes of genius.

Paradoxes of Genius and Misfortune

When examining genius and madness, it is difficult to delineate or determine a “turning point” in which someone’s genius drives them to madness or if this madness is a precondition to genius. From the Wackenroder reading, we learn about Joseph Berglinger, an *imaginary* genius,

who has an out of body experience during a music performance at a church and describes the “possession” and hold the music had over him (Wackenroder 2014: 1063). Berglinger’s experience with music further complicates the ability to delineate between both genius and madness. The different mentalities or states of consciousness that he experiences allows for an insight into the tolls that extreme artistic fervor takes on an artist. The way Wackenroder writes about Berglinger’s life coming to an end makes us question whether or not this was fate or if it could have been avoided.

But after he had performed the oratorio in the cathedral on Easter Sunday, straining himself to the utmost feverish agitation, he felt faint and exhausted. Like an unhealthy dew, a nervous weakness attacked all his fibers; he was ill for a time and died not long afterwards, in the bloom of his years.
(Wackenroder 2014: 1071)

In this case, one could argue that he was driven mad by trying to please other people and trying to get others to have this same out of body experience, he was trying to be the Possessor and have others be the Possessed. This act of driving yourself mad by working to obtain your genius would be the Longinian perspective.

In the film *Amadeus*, we see the intersection of both perspectives of genius in the depiction of Mozart. We see two different ways in which genius manifests. On one hand, we see Salieri’s Longinian version of genius manifest from devotion to obsession to madness to genius (although in the film it seems he never reached this). For example, in the beginning of the film, Salieri is able to listen to the notes as he reads the sheet music, yet towards the end of the film, Salieri is unable to comprehend the music Mozart is composing while he is transcribing (Video Example 1, [2:37:00-2:42:00] (<https://vimeo.com/508121109>)). On the other hand, we see Mozart who is born with the ability to effortlessly compose. This ease allows one to view Mozart as the Platonic version of genius, yet the film also portrays Mozart as subscribing to the Longinus

version when he works himself to death. It is interesting to note that the reason Mozart feels the need to overwork himself is because of the many issues caused by Salieri and himself in his personal life, yet these issues subscribe to what one might expect from a genius. Nettl elaborates upon our preconceived notions of genius in saying:

Genius must suffer. There is conflict between inspiration and labor and between consistency and innovation. The great composer has supernatural connections or is a stranger. (Nettl 2005: 1456-1457)

This idea of a genius and misfortune or suffering is still around today whether you think of someone such as Stephen Hawking or Beethoven. In one way or another, there is this stigma that there is a price to pay for being a genius.

The Paradox of Anti-Genius

The main contradiction with being a genius in the case of Mozart in *Amadeus*, was that despite his intellect and musical capabilities, he failed to realize that Salieri was the reason for his unemployment and Salieri was not someone he could trust. Throughout the film, we see Mozart's childlike behavior impede his ability to read social cues or "read the room", which raises the question, how could such a genius not see that Salieri was out to get him? This use of dramatic irony is a large plot point in *Amadeus* and it is this idea of being such a genius in one aspect that you lack abilities in another that gives rise to the idea of anti-genius.

In conclusion, our exploration of the dynamics and origins of musical genius reveals the complex and evolving nature of this concept throughout history. The intertwining of art, divinity, and genius has deep roots in human culture, spanning across civilizations and time periods. While historical perspectives saw genius as a divine force beyond our control, present views encompass both innate talent and hard work, leading to the paradoxes and intersection of genius and madness, as depicted by the story of Joseph Berglinger and Mozart in *Amadeus*. The

paradoxes reinforce the notion that genius comes at a price. Furthermore, the notion of anti-genius challenges the assumption that talent in one area translates to knowledge in all aspects of life and with that, ease in life. Ultimately, the study of musical genius represents the human desire to try to define the source of abstract thought and ideas of art and artistic ability.

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