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Music and Its Images as a Source of a Creative Myth

In an important passage from Book VIII of *Politics* (8.5, 1340a 18–42) – the book that focuses on an education worthy of a free citizen, considering the impact of the arts on the improvement of a man’s moral character – Aristotle developed the famous comparison of the mimetic and expressive capabilities of music and painting; a comparison which, when applied in widely varying contexts and theoretical configurations, still retains its validity. Bearing in mind music’s capability of affecting emotions, which was noted since at least the age of Damon the Pythagorean, and the mysterious affinity connecting rhythms and melodies with the “moral qualities” of the soul, Aristotle considered the impact of music on the development of the listener’s ethical stance to be superior – indeed unmatched. The reason for this was as follows: while “[...] the other objects of sensation contain no representation of character, for example the objects of touch and taste (though the objects of sight do so slightly, for there are forms that represent character, but only to a small extent, and not all men participate in visual perception of such qualities; also visual works of art are not representations of character but rather the forms and colours produced are mere indications of character”. Works of music, in contrast “[...] do actually contain in themselves imitations of character; and this is manifest, for even in the nature of mere melodies there are differences, so that people when hearing them are affected differently and have not the same feelings in regard to each of them [...]”.¹ Thus, music contains in itself “representations and imitations of character”, whose exceptional significance lies in the fact that they retain an essential similarity to ethical states, a similarity lying in their nature: “homoiómata tōn éthōn, mimémata tōn éthōn”.

Even a translation of the above passage proved to be difficult;² its interpretation is no less complicated. Aristotle certainly highlights the fact that

1 Aristotle, *Politics*, translated by H. Rackham, London–Cambridge MA, 1959.

2 In his translation, Halliwell substituted the concepts of “imitations” and “representations” with “mimetic equivalents” and “likenesses”; cf. S. Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis. Ancient Texts and Modern Problems*, Princeton–Oxford, 2002, p. 240.

the ethical influence of music is rooted in natural human experience: music (as well as the other mimetic arts) provides us with an opportunity for cognition, while the feeling for melody and rhythm as well as the entire instinct for imitation are innate to human beings (cf. *Poetics* 4.1448b 5–24, *Politics* 8.5, 1340b 17–18). Music may fulfill various cultural functions (hence the division into “ethical melodies, melodies of action and passionate melodies”) and should be practised with many beneficial goals in mind, these being spiritual purification (“katharsis”), entertainment (“paidia”), education (“paideia”), and, finally, “diagoge” – “a difficult term”, as was noted by Stephen Halliwell, the author of one of the most perceptive interpretations of Aristotle’s theory of art, “covering the cultured exercise of leisure in ways sufficiently serious to contribute to happiness”.³

Without delving into the various contentious issues regarding the explication of Aristotle’s theory of the ethical importance of a musical experience, we may repeat, after Halliwell, that musical “mimémata tōn éthōn” have the status of “representational-cum-expressive equivalents or correlates”, while “music possesses certain ‘ethical’ qualities because it makes ‘us’, as we hear it, recognize and (learn to) feel equivalent qualities ‘sympathetically’”.⁴ In the broader perspective of the conception of mimesis as the basis for the arts, Halliwell underlines the crucial complementary aspects of an artistic representation, “its status as created artefact, as the product of an artistic shaping of artistic materials, as well as its capacity to signify and ‘enact’ the patterns of supposed realities”.⁵ In this manner, Aristotle avoided the two theoretical extremes: reducing a work of art to the level of a surrogate for the perceived world, or bringing it to “aesthetic absolutisms of the contrary kind (aestheticism, formalism, the semiotics of the autonomous text)”.⁶

Regardless of the paths followed by the later theory of the meaning of music and musical expression, three issues are of fundamental importance here since they form the foundation for the theory of the art of sound, including the delineation of the areas of potential problems to be solved. These are, firstly, the indissoluble connection between the issue of musical expression and the issue of the meaning of music; secondly, the irremovable reference, through the feeling of pleasure or displeasure, to the ethical/emotional sphere; thirdly, the emphasis on the directness of a musical piece and its unsurpassed affective power. Even today, the issue of musical expression, though it is most often reduced to an analysis of expression in “pure” music, i.e. not linked directly with words and outside the pretensions of the so-called programmatic music, remains a challenge and a mystery to art theory and aesthetics. As a rule, it is underlined that any credible theory of musical expression

3 S. Halliwell, op. cit., p. 239.

4 Ibid., p. 241.

5 Ibid., p. 172.

6 Ibid., p. 174.

(a) must not treat a musical piece as a simple cause of a physiological/psychological nature or a pretext for the feeling, or the evocation, of emotions; (b) must consider the concrete presence of the piece, the listening to which is, ultimately, an aim in itself or is self-rewarding.⁷ These principles by no means aim at a reduction of the reception of a musical piece to the perception of the pure form. They do not mean an analysis of the pure sound structure, empty of all extramusical references (which was the approach of, for instance, Eduard Hanslick); nor do they mean that the experience of the musical piece should be narrowed to purely aesthetic qualities. As was already noted by Aristotle, art causes an extraordinary transformation to occur: objects that may be disgusting or unpleasant when seen in reality are enjoyable when their “accurate likenesses” are presented in a work of art (*Poetics* 1448b, 9–14). In his brilliant article, Jerrold Levinson analyses the typically Aristotelian issue of the presence of “negative emotions” in music and states:

By imaginatively identifying our state with that of the music, we derive from a suitably constructed composition a sense of mastery and control over – or at least accommodation with – emotions that in the extramusical setting are thoroughly upsetting, and over which we hope to be victorious when and if the time comes. And emotional response, it should be emphasized, seems necessary to reap this benefit.

Further on he emphasises that the act of experiencing these emotions is inherently rooted in experiencing the artistic sphere of the work, and concludes:

For it is manifest that one cannot categorize the emotion in a passage, hear one’s emotion transmuted in the course of a development section, or glory in the Power and richness of one’s expression of emotion in sound without attending explicitly to the musical matter of what is before one’s ears. The music is not just a means to an end which can be understood apart from it, but integrally involved in that end.⁸

According to Levinson, “enjoyment, understanding and self-assurance” are the three most important qualities which, from the point of view of the listeners, are inherent in music when expressing negative emotions (such as, for instance, sadness or melancholy); they constitute, at least to some extent, a reflection of the aims of listening to music as stated by Aristotle: as a combination of pleasure, cognition and improvement of the ethical character of the soul.⁹ They are essentially inseparable and cannot occur outside the context of the concrete experience of a musical piece.

7 Literature on the subject is vast; above all, see M. Budd, *Music and Emotions*, London, 1985.

8 J. Levinson, “Music and Negative Emotion” in: idem, *Music, Art & Metaphysics. Essays in Philosophical Aesthetics*, Ithaca–London, 1990, p. 330.

9 “Furthermore, in exercising our feeling capacities on music we might be said to tone them up, or get them into shape, thus readying ourselves for intenser and more focused reactions to situations in life” – Levinson, op. cit., p. 326.

It is not surprising that this synthesising power of a musical piece – which through its ideal (universal) structure which is based on a higher, absolute mathematical harmony unifies the feeling of pleasure, the cognitive aspect and the ethical potential, and which at the same time affects the listener's soul directly and with extraordinary strength – caused the Romantics to deem music an absolute art. Music was thus assigned the role of the formal and expressive model for all other arts, and its absolute status was to be the ultimate fulfilment of art's highest calling as the crowning achievement and absolute synthesis of all human cognitive and creative powers. The language of music was considered the purest, the most perfect and absolute because it had been the original language of the human race¹⁰ – a language which had not yet felt the split between sensuality, feeling and abstract thinking, and thus operated outside the artificial boundaries of concept and image, or which originated directly from the spiritual unity of human creative powers not yet touched by the fatal division into spheres of subject and object, of nature and culture; a division which alienated man from nature. Being an absolute art, music was also considered the expression of absolute freedom: a creation that exceeded, or perhaps outpaced, all the limitations of conceptual language and of imitation that separated art from nature. Novalis put it as follows:

Nirgends aber ist es auffallender, dass es nur **der Geist** ist, der die Gegenstände, die Veränderungen des Stoffs poetisiert, und dass das Schöne, der Gegenstand der Kunst uns nicht gegeben wird oder in den Erscheinungen schon fertig liegt – als in der Musik. [...] Der Musiker nimmt das Wesen seiner Kunst aus sich – auch nicht der leiseste Verdacht von Nachahmung kann ihn treffen. Dem Maler scheint die sichtbare Natur überall vorzuarbeiten, durchaus sein unerreichbares Muster zu sein. Eigentlich ist aber die Kunst des Malers so unabhängig, so ganz *a priori* entstanden, als die Kunst des Musikers. Der Maler bedient sich nur einer unendlich schwereren Zeichensprache als der Musiker; der Maler malt eigentlich mit dem Auge. Seine Kunst ist die Kunst, regelmässig und schön zu sehn. Sehn ist hier ganz aktiv, durchaus bildende Tätigkeit. Sein Bild ist nur seine Chiffre, sein Ausdruck, sein Werkzeug der Reproduktion. [...] Der Musiker hört eigentlich auch aktiv. Er hört heraus.¹¹

Music is thus an independent creation, a spiritual artefact that is ultimately capable of expressing everything while retaining its absolute, purely constructive character; in this it is an ideal language, like mathematics (cf. the famous *Monologue* of Novalis). Yet the artist does not create from nothing – “er hört

10 On this issue, cf. e.g. C. Rosen, *The Romantic Generation*, Cambridge MA, 1998, pp. 68–78, and J. Neubauer, *The Emancipation of Music from Language. Departure from Mimesis in Eighteenth-Century Aesthetics*, New Haven–London, 1986. More broadly on the genesis of language, cf. e.g. J. H. Stam, *Inquiries into the Origin of Language. The Fate of a Question*, New York, 1976.

11 All quotations after: Novalis, *Die Christenheit oder Europa und andere philosophische Schriften*, hrsg. von Rolf Toman, Köln, 1996, pp. 200–201.

heraus" but, instead, in accordance with the logic of *ordo inversus*,¹² he concentrates on his own inner side, because at the deepest point of his own spirituality he discovers the primordial unity with the universe of nature. Novalis realises that the absolute subjectivity and spontaneity of artistic creation cannot be based on Fichte's pre-reflective "Selbstsetzung des Ichs". Fichte's "Tathandlung" must be replaced by what Novalis called the "Urhandlung": a unity of action (also artistic action) and thinking which, in essence, comes before any subject-object relation. Novalis occasionally termed this primeval, indissoluble unity of existence and cognition "Gefühl", since it could not be conceptually expressed in all its fullness and concreteness. This could be done only by art; hence to Novalis, poetry and music were always a "return home", a journey to the spiritual homeland. In his view, a true creator is obedient to the language of art as much as he controls it: "Über die allgemeine Sprache der Musik. Der Geist wird frei, unbestimmt angeregt; das tut ihm so wohl, das dünkt ihm so bekannt, so vaterländisch, er ist auf diese kurzen Augenblicke in seiner indischen Heimat".¹³

Music's extraordinary, exceptional mission results from the mysterious amalgamation of the exact, mathematical structure,¹⁴ the key to which is provided by combinatorics itself,¹⁵ with the power of expression that is rooted in nature. Yet the creator of music does not imitate the sounds of the external world but transforms them into meaningful, ideal structures: "Alle Töne, die die Natur hervorbringt, sind rauh und geistlos – nur der musikalischen Seele dünkt oft das Rauschen des Waldes, das Pfeifen des Windes, der Gesang der Nachtigall, das Plätschern des Bachs melodisch und bedeutsam".¹⁶ Music is the most emphatic confirmation of the truth of the *ordo inversus*: that the senses perceive as much as the inner light of the soul allows them to. "Der Mensch ist eine Sonne, seine Sinne sind seine Planeten", affirms Novalis in one of his most splendid passages.

It is, therefore, not at all surprising that music is perceived as a mythological projection of the future state of perfection, which would be a return to what has been lost. "Unsere Sprache war zu Anfang viel musikalischer, und hat sich nur nach gerade so prosaisiert, so enttönt. Es ist jetzt mehr **Schallen**

12 On this issue, see chiefly Manfred Frank, Gerhard Kurz, *Ordo inversus. Zu einer Reflexionsfigur bei Novalis, Hölderlin, Kleist und Kafka*, in: *Geist und Zeichen. Festschrift Arthur Henkel*, hrsg. von Herbert Anton, Bernhard Gajek und Peter Pfaff, Heidelberg, 1977, pp. 75–92; also Friedrich Strack, *Im Schatten der Neugier. Christliche Tradition und kritische Philosophie im Werk Friedrich von Hardenbergs*, Tübingen, 1982.

13 Novalis, op. cit., p. 206.

14 "In der Musik erscheint sie förmlich als Offenbarung, als schaffender Idealismus. Hier legitimiert sie sich als himmlische Gesandtin, *kat anthron*" – Novalis, op. cit., p. 234. Cf. B. Naumann, "Musikalisches Ideen-Instrument". *Das Musikalische in Poetik und Sprachtheorie der Frühromantik*, Stuttgart, 1990.

15 Novalis, op. cit., p. 290.

16 Ibid., p. 201.

geworden, **Laut**, wenn man dieses schöne Wort so erniedrigen will. Sie muß wieder **Gesang** werden”.¹⁷

Only in poetry can language regain this power of musical expression and beauty of musical order; hence Novalis made frequent use of metaphors referring to areas associated with music.¹⁸ Impressions, thoughts and feelings create a harmonious whole, they are “consonances”, if they are illuminated by spiritual energy, the fullness of awareness may then be said to be a “Gesang, bloße Modulation der Stimmungen”. True poetry that is worthy of this name, i.e. symbolic poetry, is a magnified language; it is a language intensified to the ultimate boundaries of expression and reference, a language which in its meaningful form is as condensed as a musical piece, where segregation of content, form and emotion is an illusory segregation. Such a language is a language of myths; for Novalis, it is a language of fairy tales:¹⁹

[...] und gehört in die Hieroglyphistik der zweiten Potenz, in die Ton- und Schriftbildersprache. Sie hat poetische Verdienste und ist nicht rhetorisch, subaltern, wenn sie ein vollkommener Ausdruck, wenn sie euphonisch, richtig und präzise ist, wenn sie gleichsam ein Ausdruck, mit dem der Ausdruck willens ist, wenn sie wenigstens nicht als Mittel erscheint, sondern an sich selbst eine von vollkommener Produktion des höheren Sprachvermögens ist.²⁰

17 Ibid., p. 206. Cf. W. Janke, *Enttönter Gesang – Sprache und Wahrheit in der Fichte-Studien des Novalis*, in: *Erneuerung der Transzendentalphilosophie im Anschluß an Kant und Fichte*, hrsg. von Klaus Hammacher und Albert Mues, Stuttgart–Bad Cannstatt, 1979, pp. 168–203.

18 In one of the passages, for instance, he combined musical metaphors with comparisons referring to physiology in order to describe spiritual cognition: “Die Betrachtung der Welt fängt im unendlichen, absoluten Diskant, im Mittelpunkt an, und steigt die Skala herunter; die Betrachtung unsrer selbst fängt mit dem unendlichen, absoluten Baß an, der Peripherie, und steigt die Skala aufwärts. Absolute Vereinigung des Basses und Diskants. Dies ist die Systole und Diastole des göttlichen Lebens” – Novalis, op. cit., p. 205. The coexistence of the two spheres of reality, expressed through metaphor, is at the same time underlined as the absolute necessity of the unification of various areas of experience.

19 “Ein Märchen ist wie ein Traumbild, ohne Zusammenhang. Ein Ensemble wunderbarer Dinge und Begebenheiten, z.B. eine musikalische Phantasie, die harmonischen Folgen einer Äolsharfe, die Natur selbst” – Novalis, op. cit., p. 270. According to Novalis, a true fairy tale was at the same time a prophecy and an ideal representation, an absolutely necessary one. A fairy tale, as a story that acquired the rank of a myth, needed the sensitivity of a child and the audacity of a bard prophesying the future. A myth explained the past and foretold the future; a true story would, in time, become a fairy tale – a myth. The world of a myth was a total contradiction of the world of the truth, and yet was as close to it as chaos was close to the finished creation.

20 Novalis, op. cit., p. 207. Cf. H.-J. Mähl, *Verfremdung und Transparenz. Zur theoretischen Begründung der “Tropen und Räthselsprache” bei Novalis*, “Jahrbuch des freien deutschen Hochstifts” 1992, pp. 161–182; also L. Stockinger, “Tropen und Räthselsprache”. *Esoterik und Öffentlichkeit bei Friedrich von Hardenberg (Novalis)*, in: *Geschichtlichkeit und Aktualität. Festschrift Hans-Joachim Mähl zum 65. Geburtstag*, hrsg. von Klaus-Detlef

It would, however, be a mistake to see the “expression” and “mood” of this language of mythological poetry as expounded by Novalis to be identical with the vulgarised form of the Romantic vision of art as the creation of indistinct images expressing the personality of their creator. If poetry was to be a revival of the mythological unity of creation and cognition – of the acts of creating the world and perceiving the world in the pure, non-mediated fullness of sensual nature – then its beginning had to lie in the “depersonalisation” of art: a true poet must, in a sense, possess the ability to become everything:

Der Dichter muß die Fähigkeit haben, sich andre Gedanken vorzustellen, auch Gedanken in allen Arten der Folge und in den mannichfaltigsten Ausdrücken darzustellen. Wie ein Tonkünstler verschiedene Töne und Instrumente in seinem Innern sich vergegenwärtigen, sie vor sich bewegen lassen und sie auf mancherlei Weise verbinden kann, so daß er gleichsam der Lebensgeist dieser Klänge und Melodien wird, wie gleichfalls ein Maler, als Meister und Erfinder farbiger Gestalten, diese nach seinem Gefallen zu verändern, gegeneinander und nebeneinander zu stellen, und zu vervielfachen, und alle mögliche Arten und einzelne hervorzubringen versteht, so muß der Dichter den reddened Geist aller Dinge und Handlungen in seinen unterschiedlichen Trachten sich vorzubilden, und alle Gattungen von Spracharbeiten zu fertigen, und mit besonderm, eigentümlichen Sinn zu beseelen vermögend sein.²¹

By being an ultimate synthesis, an image of the primeval unity and wholeness, poetry also constituted an absolute reality: “Die Poesie ist das echt absolut Reelle.[...] Je poetischer, je wahrer”.²² Even though divided by impassable boundaries, various arts permeate one another;²³ this is because our sensual modalities not only have no clearly defined boundaries, but also are constantly modified and broadened by contact with the works. To Novalis, this was a vital aspect: art, similarly to philosophy, was an ultimate revelation of the truth, but not only in the sphere of ideal meanings; it always remained a non-reducible, living entity: “Dichten ist zeugen. Alles Gedichtete muß ein lebendiges Individuum sein”. Hence contact with a work of art, which was aimed at the revelation of truth in the sensual form, resulted, above all, in the enrichment of one’s sensuality. What is more, the poetry of the future was to

Müller, Gerhard Pasternack, Wulf Segebrecht und Ludwig Stockinger, Tübingen, 1988, pp. 182–206.

21 Novalis, op. cit., pp. 262–263. And elsewhere: “Egoist darf der Dichter durchaus nicht erscheinen. Er muß sich selbst Erscheinung sein” – Ibid., p. 292. In the end, poetry was a synthesis of cognition and a measure of the universalisation of an experience, leading directly to the perfection of humanity: “Der vollendete Mensch muß gleichsam zugleich an mehreren Orten und un mehreren Menschen leben – ihn müssen beständig ein weiter Kreis und mannichfache Begebenheiten gegenwärtig sein. Hier bildet sich dann die wahre, großartige Gegenwart des Geistes, die den Menschen zum eigentlichen Weltbürger macht [...]” – Ibid., p. 222.

22 Ibid., p. 284.

23 “Nichts ist poetischer, als alle Übergänge und heterogene Mischungen” – Ibid., p. 286.

help the human race develop entirely new, never before envisaged organs of sensual perception. In this view, the goal of true art was, to put it succinctly, to renew the world and to invigorate human cognitive powers.²⁴ “Die Welt muß romantisiert werden. So findet man des ursprünglichen Sinn wieder”, Novalis famously exhorted.

The concept of a synthesis and mutual correspondence of the arts, so often cited as a characteristic feature of the Romantic mindset, certainly played a considerable role. Before it was inseparably linked with Wagner, the concept of “Gesamtkunstwerk” functioned as an important component of the Romantic theory of art as proposed by Friedrich Schlegel. Yet the conviction that the more fully a given work of art realises the potentialities of its medium and resists translation into categories of another branch of art, the more perfect it is, may be justifiably put forward as a counterpoise to the postulate of a synthesis of the arts originating from either the associationist and synaesthetic psychology or from the assumption that the source of creative power lies in the imagination. It seems more valid here to point to mutual inspirations and interdependences which were not limited to making use of analogies or to applying the metaphorical mode of describing a work of art, but originated from what Karl Kroeber very aptly termed the “coherence of alternatives”.²⁵ In this sense the issue was not only to modify the features of one medium up to the point when it achieved impression- and representation-generating effects typical of a different order of experiencing art (which, in fact, had long been required with regard to the ekphrases of works of art by the postulate known in the Greek theory of rhetoric as *energeia*). Nor was it necessary to seek ways to envisage music in the structure of a painting, to show Delacroix’s “music of painting”, i.e. to discover the formal and perceptual equivalents of particular arts, which, after all, was one of the main currents in Romantic and Modernist art theory;²⁶ all the way to the desire of painting a fugue.²⁷ It was possible to choose another way: to pose the problem of mutual relations between arts as cultural forms and forms of life in the perspective of the complementation of meanings at the juncture point between myth and history. In this approach, the metamorphosis of, for instance, the meaning of a musical piece into a poet’s statement constituted neither a weakness of perception and a lack of understanding for the form (as the formalists would have it) nor a manifestation, dictated by envy, of the concept of a *paragone* of arts. By referring to figures and works from the universe of music or painting,

24 “Alle Poesie unterbricht den gewöhnlichen Zustand, das gemeine Leben, fast wie der Schlummer, um uns zu erneuern, und so unser Lebensgefühl immer rege zu halten”.

25 K. Kroeber, *Romantic Landscape Vision: Constable and Wordsworth*, Madison, 1975, p. 9.

26 On this issue, cf. classic, model works: R. L. Stein, *The Ritual of Interpretation. The Fine Arts as Literature in Ruskin, Rossetti, and Pater*, Cambridge MA–London, 1975; E. K. Hel-singer, *Ruskin and the Art of Beholder*, Cambridge MA–London, 1982.

27 Cf. the recent, large monograph by P. Vergo, *The Music of Painting. Music, Modernism and the Visual Arts from the Romantics to John Cage*, London, 2010, esp. pp. 206–235.

the poet investigated the status of his own work (and, more broadly, of art as such) in a world that had relegated art's cognitive qualities to the margins of "beautiful fiction", invention and aesthetic pleasure. The evocation of history through the personage of an authentic or imagined painter or composer transcended the convention of providing a purely thematic pretext and aggregating meanings through representational and historical associations. The stakes were much higher: a dialogue with the past, conducted in the sphere of an actual experience of that past achieved by means of the presence of an artistic form.

The poet who achieved absolute mastery in conversing with the ghosts of the past is, of course, Robert Browning. An entirely incurable enthusiast of Italy, he shared with many of his contemporaries a deep appreciation for the artistic achievements of the Renaissance.²⁸ The heroes of his best dramatic monologues – a genre in which Browning remains a past master²⁹ – are Fra Filippo Lippi and Andrea del Sarto. Yet he also received a thorough grounding in music and was fascinated with this art throughout his life. He derived topics from the history of music several times and, while drawing a captivating image of the bygone era, an image that unavoidably brings to mind the plasticity of description and the "imaginative reason" of Walter Pater or even Jacob Burckhardt, he always posed pertinent questions as to the place of art in modern society.³⁰

Browning may have owed much to the Romantics, but his vision of art was no longer Romantic. In his perception, the threat to the realness of the world and to the authenticity of existence was posed not by the dullness and banality of mundane life, which would require art to promise a "waking dream" in a gesture of romanticising the world, but by the confusion in the orders of understanding the world, which was due to the pretensions of science and the imbalanced relations of art and life. The historical scenery of Renaissance personas provided Browning with a perfect space in which to present those conflicts. He faultlessly presented, for instance in the superb monologue *Fra Filippo Lippi*, the Renaissance contrast of art and life on the example of an artist battling his own temperament which forces him to present the perceptible world in the fullness of its energy and power, without making allowances for abstract beauty or falsely envisioned spirituality. It would probably be quite justified to suspect that through his masterful use of colloquial, unpolished language, with all its hesitations and violent turns, Browning was powerfully expressing his protest against the aestheticised vision of Renaissance painting,

28 Cf. e.g. J. B. Bullen, *The Myth of the Renaissance in Nineteenth-Century Writers*, Oxford, 1994.

29 On this issue, cf. chiefly R. Langbaum, "The Dramatic Monologue: Sympathy versus Judgement", in: idem, *The Poetry of Experience. The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition*, New York, 1963, pp. 75–108.

30 Cf. D. J. DeLaura, "The Context of Browning's Painter Poems: Aesthetics, Polemics, Histories", *PMLA*, 1980, 95, pp. 367–388. Also M. E. Gibson, *History and the Prism of Art: Browning's Poetic Experiments*, Columbus OH, 1987.

and also against the unearthly, spiritual beauty of Renaissance figures being identified with an era of flawless faith which would, in a sense, guarantee access to this ideal beauty, excluding corporeality and sensuality as unworthy of that purified artistic vision. The tale is a confession; it is Fra Filippo's account of his own life which he is forced to tell to those who caught him during one of his many escapades to a bawdy-house:

[...] zooks, sir, flesh and blood,
That's all I'm made of! Into shreds it went,
Curtain and counterpane and coverlet,
All the bed-furniture – a dozen knots,
There was a ladder! Down I let myself,
Hands and feet, scrambling somehow, and so dropped,
And after them. I came up with the fun
Hard by Saint Laurence, hail fellow, well met [...].

Fra Filippo Lippi is here an artist whose oeuvre represents uncompromising realism. Yet it soon turns out that his realism finds no approval among the hierarchs, and not at all because Lippi has ruthlessly revealed their vices: what is found disturbing is the tremendous faithfulness of the representation, a realism bordering on illusion, and illusion bordering on magic – all quite contrary to the role ascribed to art in the teachings of the Church:

The Prior and the learned pulled a face
And stopped all that in no time. 'How? What's here?
Quite from the mark of painting, bless us all!
Faces, arms, legs and bodies like the true
As much as pea and pea! It's devil's game!
Your business is not to catch men with show,
With homage to the perishable clay,
But lift them over it, ignore it all,
Make them forget there's such a thing as flesh.
Your business is to paint the souls of men [...].

Browning's mastery lies in the fact that he did not construct a simple opposition between Lippi's style (and, after all, the style is the man) and the extra-artistic expectation imposed by the Church. From the point of view of art, the motives which stand behind the proposition to paint the soul and to morally elevate the observer are not empty; what is at issue is an alteration of the order of artistic formation. Lippi's adversary sees it in the concord of a vision open to the world and a vision turned inward, of the way of looking away from oneself and into oneself; the order of the world can be captured only by a soul that holds on to its own innate order. The debate concerning the real or ideal origin of beauty and the struggle between experience and the intellectual intuition of perfect forms seems to quiet down here, to lose its importance; beauty is of divine origin, but it owes its existence to the existence of a world of forms that are visible to the eye and audible to the ear:

“The world and life’s too big to pass for a dream”. The deeper the artist penetrates into the corporeal structure of reality, the closer he comes not to the allure of beauty, but to its meaning:

[...] This world’s no blot for us,
Nor blank; it means intensely, and means good:
To find its meaning is my meat and drink.

It is not the role of an artist to persuade people to piety; his role is to respect the real world, and thus to cancel the oppositions between spiritual and sensual art and between form and spirit. Appreciation for lines and colours does not turn one’s attention away from the glory of God; quite the opposite, the more perfect the art grows, the more it tells of the world. It might be said that the realism of the perceptible form opens up the perspective of the realism of the form in the ontological sense:

But why not do as well as say, – paint these
Just as they are, careless what comes of it?
God’s works – paint any one, and count it crime
To let a truth slip. Don’t object, ‘His works
Are here already; nature is complete:
Suppose you reproduce her – (which you can’t)
There’s no advantage! You must beat her, then’.
For, don’t you mark? We’re made so that we love
First when we see them painted, things we have passed
Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see;
And so they are better, painted – better to us,
Which is the same thing. Art was given for that;
God uses us to help each other so,
Lending our minds out.

Art is thus, above all, a way to condense reality, to show the realness of the world; it is also a process of concentrating one’s attention that is aided by memory; a memory which is devoid of the cultural awareness of history and which eliminates the mythological dimension of the past is a flawed memory. Hence, the Renaissance is not only a stage for passions, a struggle of unyielding temperaments, an *agon* of life and beauty; the perfection of the beauty of a Renaissance form, a form for its own sake, does not close the debate between life and art or the contention between nature’s creative impulse and the artist’s creative instinct:

[...] for it seemed, it was certain, to match man’s birth,
Nature in turn conceived, obeying an impulse as I;
And the emulous heaven yearned down, made effort to reach the earth,
As the earth had done her best, in my passion, to scale the sky:
Novel splendours burst forth, grew familiar and dwelt with mine,
Not a point nor peak but fund and fixed its wandering star

This is what Abt Vogler states. He is not a painter this time, but a composer, wishing to characterise his efforts. Significantly, it is in the poems whose heroes are the once-famous composers of the 18th century, Charles Avison or Baldassare Galuppi from Venice, that Browning focuses on a question which is fundamental from the point of view of the development of art and the transformation of forms. To him, the beauty of a Renaissance work did not have a timeless quality and hence could not be a set pattern for imitation. His feeling for historicity prevented Browning from sharing the Pre-Raphaelites' enthusiasm; a myth of beauty was only a myth, a fleeting form, when the faith that had once animated it was gone. As we read in *Parleyings with Avison*,

Soon shall fade and fall
Myth after myth – the husk-like lies I call
New truth's corolla-safeguard.

An artist's maturity is evidenced not only by his awareness that form is historically changeable, but also by the perception that the language of art, being subject to inflexible rules, is limited.

He who works in fresco, steals a hair-brush,
Curbs the liberal hand, subservient proudly,
Cramps his spirit, crowds its all in little,
Makes a strange art of an art familiar,
Fills his lady's missal-marge with flowerets.
He who blows thro' bronze, may breathe thro' silver,
Fitly serenade a slumberous princess.
He who writes, may write for once as I do

This is what we read in *One Word More*. Even music, which comes the closest to divine beauty and reflects its eternal and unchangeable order, is fleeting, as Abt Vogler notes: "Well, it is gone at last, the palace of music I reared". Yet the fleeting shape of music constitutes a paradoxical confirmation of the existence of a perfect and absolute Creator, the maker of "houses not made with hands". Silence presupposes and portends configurations of sounds imbued with meanings and emotions, a pause foretells a song that would flow again, dissonance heralds harmony. A tone in itself may be quiet or loud, but it is devoid of meaning; only when the power of thought brings it in harmony with other tones does it fill with expression and acquire the status of an image, a mirror of eternal order. In the end, therefore, art requires something that cannot be put into rules, something that, as Coleridge would have said, springs from the source of the "infinite I AM".

Instead of Coleridge's "esemplastic power of imagination", however, Browning has "the finger of God, a flash of the will". This is an important difference, because Browning is unwilling to absolutise art – "on the earth the broken arcs; in the heaven, a perfect round". The absolute reality of art does not lie in its power to bring independent, autarchic worlds into existence; its true might lies

in that it reveals the truth and invariability of the experiential order.³¹ What is more, it confirms this order in its temporal, procedural dimension: an image hides nothing, in poetry “effect proceeds from the cause”, whereas in music expression, form and meaning are the most fully amalgamated because music renders the entire dynamics of emotions with all their power, violence and sudden fluctuations.

The ultimate effect of a work of art is, however, a mystery. The language of music, subordinate to the rules of composition, has an immeasurable wealth of expression and remains in a natural relationship with the sphere of passions which is most indefinite and mysterious. Even such a great artist as Hugues of Saxe-Gotha, the master of the fugue, is very well aware that beauty and emotion do not necessarily yield to the strict principles of counterpoint and to the sequence of themes:

One dissertates, he is candid;
Two must discept, – has distinguished;
Three helps the coupe, if ever yet man did;
Four protests; Five makes a dart at the thing wished [...].

Art is thus always a sphere of *experimentum crucis*, the key to which is the constantly renewed experience of the artistic form in the mirror of nature, and whose criteria are truth and beauty:

Over our heads truth and nature –
Still our life's zigzags and dodges,
Ins and outs, weaving a new legislature –
God's gold Just shining its last where that lodges,
Palled beneath Man's usurpature.

Both Abt Vogler, the genius of extempore composition, and Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha, a man intimately familiar with the arcane mysteries of counterpoint, underscore their individuality, whose concentration conditions the concentration of form. Yet they constantly point to the creator's limitations: the dynamics of history³² and the unpredictability of the work's expression force an artist to maintain a distance towards his art:

31 As we read in *Abt Vogler*: “All we have willed or hoped or dreamed of good shall exist; / Not its semblance, but itself; no beauty, nor good, nor power / Whose voice has gone forth, but each survives for the melodist / When eternity affirms the conception of an hour. / The high that proved too high, the heroic for earth too hard, / The passion that left the ground to lose itself in the sky, / Are music sent up to God by the lover and the bard; enough that he heard it once: we shall hear it by-and-by”.

32 In a letter to his wife, Elisabeth Barrett Browning, Browning reflected, quoting the great composer Claude Le Jeune: “In Music, the Beau Idéal changes every thirty years’ – well, is not that true? The Idea, mind, changes, – the general standard [...] – next hundred years, who will be the Rossini?”; quoted after: *Robert Browning's Poetry*, ed. J. F. Loucks and A. M. Stauffer, New York–London, 2007, p. 203, note 3.

Est fuga, volvitur rota.

On we drift: where looms the dim port?

One, Two, Three, Four, Five contribute their quota;

Something is gained, if one caught but the import –

Show it us, Hugues of Saxe-Gotha!

This is aided by the form of the dramatic monologue, in which the relations between, on the one hand, the author, the narrator, the titular and postulated protagonist, and the fictitious personages shaping the space of the presented world by their absence, and, on the other hand, the reader, are undermined. The changing points of view, the effortless passages from inner reflections to external events, and the multiplication of references to the mirror images of the protagonist cause the reader to feel uncertain as to his position, while his perspective is constantly disrupted and called into question.

Thus the form of the dramatic monologue reveals one more key aspect of art's mission, in addition to revealing the truth of the order of experiencing the world; it is the task of contradicting the generally accepted practices, of questioning the generally assumed points of view. Exquisitely applying the inconsistency, picturesqueness and bluntness of colloquial speech, that "unpoetical material" that was so admired by T.S. Eliot, Browning exposes the unfounded pretensions of religious faith and science – the two fundamental, and violently conflicted, ways of understanding the world – and reveals their barrenness. This, of course, brings to mind Browning's masterpieces, such as *The Ring and the Book* or *Caliban upon Setebos*. In this contest, art may serve as a temporary arbitrator: by making beauty a reality it recreates the order of the created world, whereas by revealing the real, authentic experiential order in depicting passions it forces us to approach science's claim to presenting the only true image of the world with some detachment. Browning might repeat after Konrad Fiedler that artistic vision begins where science ends.

Music, too, makes us able to see; while listening to Galuppi's toccatas, the image of the halcyon days of Venice unfolds in our imagination. His music inspires reflection upon morality in history,³³ as long as the past provides us with certain mythological images, i.e. signposts without which it is simply impossible to obtain the bearings of our culture. Galuppi's interlocutor is well aware that, to use Plato's words, beauty is a difficult thing: "But although I take your meaning, 'tis with such a heavy mind!". But the Venetian master's toccatas are alive in as much as (and from the interlocutor's perspective it is "your old music") they evoke images of the city:

Ay, because the sea's street there; and 'tis arched by ...what you call...

Shylock's bridge with houses on it, where they kept the carnival:

I was never out of England – it's as if I saw it all.

33 Cf. S. Hawlin, "Browning's *A Toccata of Galuppi's*: How Venice Once Was Dear", *Review of English Studies*, 1990, 41, pp. 496–509.

Galuppi's music is admired, it brings purely sensual pleasure, it is the life's ornament and a sweeping expression of passion: "Brave Galuppi! That was music! good alike at grave and gay!". But this is only an illusion, because the pieces composed by Galuppi are much more than that: they symbolise a certain state of mind, a form of life, they convey meanings his contemporaries did not notice:

Then they left you for their pleasure: till in due time, one by one,
Some with lives that came to nothing, some with deeds as well undone,
Death stepped tacitly and took them where they never see the sun.

The fate of Venice ought to be a warning that, in the end, art and the cultural myth cannot serve as substitutes for reality:

As for Venice and her people, merely born to bloom and drop,
Here on earth they bore their fruitage, mirth and folly were the crop:
What of soul was left, I wonder, when the kissing had to stop?

The answer must be sought in Galuppi's music – because only art preserves the memory of experiences, in comparison with which our own ethical and intellectual order, cloaked in the mystery of artistic expression, can be defined anew.

(Translated by Klaudyna Michałowicz)

Abstract

Music was commonly regarded as one of the most powerful arts. In line with a very long tradition reaching back to the Pythagoreans and to Plato and Aristotle, it was its blend of mathematical structure and unusual power of "expression of affects" that was particularly highly regarded. Although music was initially considered as belonging to the circle of imitational arts, it gradually obtained the incomparable status of an absolute art. In particular, Music played an exceptional role in the early Romantic theories of art, when it was perceived as an epitome of artistic creation and the highest possible extension of human cognition through pure activity of the imagination. This article attempts to describe chosen aspects of the myth of music as a fulfilment of man's imaginary strivings by drawing on examples of Novalis (poetry and music as utopian arts of an *idealiter* construction) and of Robert Browning (music as a source of poetical imagination activated as a faculty of historical understanding).