

Musical Development in the History

by

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Music has strongly affected human beings from ancient times till now. Music reveals something of the world that lies behind the senses, the world that has often been called by thinkers and poets the “home of the soul” and in reality we feel this expression to be truth. People of earlier ages had a different relationship to this world and present, not as something visionary and beyond. They had a knowledge of it just as directly as we to-day have a knowledge of the physical world.

The realm of music in ancient times bears little resemblance to the realm of music of to-day and further we recede into the past the more does the dissimilarity with our music appear. On the other hand, ancient records tell us of the deep influence exercised by music, not only on the souls of the people but even upon their physical conditions. In Plutarch we read that the Greeks were able to means of music to arouse flaming enthusiasm and, by the same means, to calm and soothe wild, turbulent passions. This is all the more remarkable when we realize that these striking effects were obtained by music of a very simple nature, a music that did not have at its disposal even a scale of seven tones.

Now the question justifiably arises, how has it happened that a music of such simplicity has evolved to the ripeness and complexity of the music of our day, while at the same time it seems to have lost its powers to influence human being?

Let us try to recognize the outstanding features of the music of to-day, leaving the ultra-modern out of account because it is of little importance for the purpose of this article, In listening to Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, we feel the outstanding character of their music to consist of the personal, subjective element, which they bring into form and expression. The way in which they make use of major and minor, the blending of the times as they bring their harmonies to their melodies, brings a mood of joy or sorrow to the soul of the listener. Individual feeling and experience in invoked.

The musical agent used to achieve this effect is the interval of the third. It is changes in the third that makes the common chord either major or minor, the third is the interval which corresponds so beautifully with what is taking place in our own inner soul-life. How closely we are connected to-day with the experience of the third can be illustrated by the following example :-- If someone is singing a simple tune or folk-song and we attempt to accompany it with another voice or instrument, we find that in every case this is done by making use of the interval of the third. Our common chords and seventh chords are chiefly built up from thirds or successions of thirds. By this means we get an insight into the fact mankind to-day has acquired a real understanding through his musical feeling for that which the interval of the third can give or mean in music.

We only need to go back a few hundred years to find quite different conditions prevalent in musical life. The interval of the third was not then the most predominant one, this position was shared by the fourth and the fifth. In old musical tractates of the thirteenth century we find the third referred to as the imperfect consonance. The outstanding fact is that at that time man took pleasure in singing and in listening to songs and tunes in which the interval of the fifth was a prominent feature. To modern ears such harmonies would sound hollow and empty, nevertheless, we find them all religious music of that period. We must therefore conclude that the fifth played the same part in the moods of medieval man that the third does for us to-day.

It is possible for us to realize with any degree of precision just how the people of the thirteenth century experienced music by mean of the fifth? Lest us try to ascertain if it is possible to be conscious of what is taking place within ourselves when we listen to music to-day. Careful observers will notice that in listening to a Beethoven Symphony, for instance, the rhythm of breathing changes in accord with tempo of the Adagio movement will be quickened when listening to the Allegro.

The slow swing of the pendulum to and fro is reflected in the pulsation of the soul as in floats in the waves of the in-breathing and out-breathing in its connection with the body. This stimulation of the breathing through music is something quite personal. Each listener at a concert receives his own personal impressions and experiences his own effects though the music is the same for all.

How was it in the period during which the fifth exercised an agreeable, pleasure-giving effect upon the mood of the human being? Though we to-day feel the fifth to be empty and hollow we have no right to jump to the conclusion that the people of the thirteenth century experienced it in the same way. A mere glance at the spiritual development of European humanity in medieval times will indicate that the conditions of soul life then were quite different from what they are to-day. When, in a mood of religious devotion, the looked to the spiritual world they were able to have a real experience that something was directly revealed to them, that is to say, they did not experience a mere subject feeling but they realized the divine outside themselves to be in union with their own souls. The vision of the spiritual world was like a breathing of the soul, it can be pictured as something coming into contact with the human soul from without but not yet penetrating into the innermost being of the soul. The spiritual permeation of the inner recesses of the soul has only come about in our time. The former condition was reflected in the experience of the fifth. Each such musical experience was quite objective, not subjective, it revealed a spiritual world outside and independent from man.. To-day it is quite impossible for us to receive from the fifth this identical spiritual imagination and this is why it appears to us as empty and void. These pictures have become dark to our inward eye and quite new experiences must be expressed in and received from the music of to-day.

The experience of the fifth in the Middles Ages was of this nature because the process of in-breathing and out-breathing was then completely understood by man. To-day we are confronted with the task of understanding how the breath process in man finds its way into the deeper recesses of the human organism. To some extent this has already been accomplished.

Retracing our steps still farther back in history we arrive at a remarkable phenomenon. In the first centuries of our era music was still greater simplicity, but if we could for a moment relinquish our pride in modern development and give up regarding earlier peoples as quite primitive and, therefore, easily satisfied with such simple music, we should be in the mood to consider the possibility that we may have lost contact with that invisible, inner world that was revealed to these early peoples through their simple tunes.

Consider from a superficial aspect the music of this earlier time simple consisted of single notes with longer or shorter rhythms. The songs did not possess anything that we could describe as an agreeable or pleasant melody. The tunes were monotonous. It is evident that at this stage of musical development the single note or sound must have had quite a different and much deeper meaning to man at the time than we are able to grasp to-day. That this was so ancient records give witness.

Alfred the Great took a keen personal interest in the writings of Boetius, Chancellor of Theoderich the Great, King of the Visigoths. He ordered the translation of the five books on music by Boetius in which we find him saying that there are three kinds of music:--

1. The music of the Universe.
2. Human music.
3. Instrumental music.

By the first he means the music that resounds from movement of the stars, the music of the spheres, the great harmony of the macrocosm. This is no mere symbolism, Boetius really heard this music with an inner ear. He then mentions the music of the recurring seasons. In the budding and blossoming of plants, in the growth and ripening of fruits, in the growth and leafing of the trees he also saw and heard a musical process. The interweaving of the four elements of fire, air, water, and earth in the building up of the visible world, even this was regarded as music by Boetius.

By the second he does not merely imply the human voice, he regards the human physical form as created by celestial music. He reflects upon the human form and notes the harmony expressed in the proportions of the limbs, the beautiful articulation of hands and fingers, etc. Turning to the inner organs with their fluidic circulation he feels the harmony between the four elements of earth, water, air, and fire, and he hears the magnificent musical sequence which brings about the form and shape of the human body. This is both visible and audible music to him. Finally, he states that all the virtues, in their interaction, are sounding out the harmony of the human soul.

In the third case he describes the music of the human voice and the music played upon instruments of wind or strings as but a far-off echo of the sublime music of creation.

In order to arrive at a real understanding of the development of music in the history of mankind such consideration must be included, for they alone give access to an understanding of the musical art in olden times. Boetius, with this type of musical conception, stoop on the threshold of two worlds. With comprehensive grasp he drew together the various elements which the people of the earlier ages, before the beginning of our own times, included in their understanding of music. He recounts something of the art music as it existed in the sixth century B.C. Thus of the ages and to recognize that on the other side of the door the earlier peoples with their apparently simple music were able to glimpse with spiritual eyes and hear with spiritual ears something of the creative powers of the universe. The sun, moon, and stars produce the changing phenomena of the seasons by their rising and their setting and thereby effect the growth and ripening of the fruits of the earth and the experience of this lived as music in the souls of those earlier people. The work of the Gods on the earth was seen and their deeds were heard as music. Thus in ancient times musical tones were merely the vehicles human beings used in order to have the spiritual imagination that lay behind the tone. Rudolf Steiner, through his spiritual researches, has been able to tell us of even earlier periods in which mankind experienced not only the interval of the fifth, but also the seventh, but this was a time when man listening to and living in music was quite outside his physical body. If we try to follow the musical stream back to every ancient times we are forced to the conclusion that there must have been a time in human development when man did not need a physical sounding instrument in order to receive a musical experience, a time when he was united with the weaving forces of cosmos, a time when he was companion of the Gods.

So we find that music came down from heaven to earth, step by step nearer to the individual human being. Music was originally quite objective, it was not man that sang but God sang through him, though at this stage man was unconscious of this fact. Human progress in connection with music should carry with it an awareness that music came down to the human soul and entered each human ego, bringing to each of us a reflection of the splendour of the celestial creative powers. This is the reason why we are so affected by music. When listening to music we are really receiving a message from the home-land of our souls.

Orpheus knew this country, he himself was a descendant of the Gods, a son of Apollo. He was sent as exile to this earthly world, leaving Eurydice behind him, a symbol of that part of the human soul that is too pure and good ever to enter the earthly realm, and always remains in the heavens. There is something touching about this legend of Orpheus, the tragedy of the exiled human soul that longs to regain intercourse with Eurydice – the knowledge of the higher worlds.

So we may put our last question with regard to the development of music into the future : What would reunion with Euridice means in terms of musical expression?

The music which was originally spread in the heavenly heights has now entered into very human soul. In the experience of the intervals mankind descends from the heights of heaven -- as in the octave -- and is surrendered to the earth. Step by step we have experienced all the intervals coming down the scale and we shall be, in a not too distant future, at a point in human development when the single note will again appear significant. Then, again, we shall stand before a threshold behind which a world is waiting for us to recognize and know it. The single note becomes again, as Rudolf Steiner has said a portal which we can regain access to the spiritual world. The great cultural task of music in our day is to listen to the secrets that are enclosed in the single note. The single note will then reveal its mystery and out of this revelation new melodies will arise. Musicians who prepare their souls to receive with full consciousness the melodies that live and weave through the creative forces of the world will be able through their music to assure us of the real existence of a higher world. This the effect of the music upon human souls need no longer remain a vague subjective sensation. It can lead to a deep certain conviction of the fact that there is a spiritual world, not only experienced after death, but to say with St. John, open your inner eyes and ears , for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.