

New Mexico Quarterly

Volume 29 | Issue 2

Article 6

1959

Music-Its Motivation and Creation

John Donald Robb

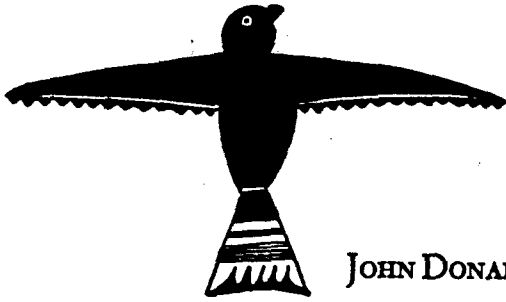
Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq>

Recommended Citation

Robb, John Donald. "Music-Its Motivation and Creation." *New Mexico Quarterly* 29, 2 (1959). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol29/iss2/6>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the University of New Mexico Press at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *New Mexico Quarterly* by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.

on composers
and composition



JOHN DONALD ROBB

Music—Its Motivation and Creation

The creative process in the arts starts with a man. The results of the creative process, the works of art, inevitably reflect the whole artist who is a man and a part of humanity. He has a heart and he has a brain. He has his opinions and he has his loyalties. He probably wants to leave the world a better place for the human family to live in. His art is the core of his life. It is not a mere game in which he tries to overcome technical problems and puzzles. It is the expression of what he most truly believes and feels expressed in the way in which he is professionally most competent to express it. The artist is a human being and the great artist is first of all a great human being. It is necessary that a work of art "say something." What that something is varies with the artist. It may be abstruse or as clear as crystal. But it must communicate human experience. Perhaps that is what Thornton Wilder meant when he once said that literature is merely the orchestration of platitudes.

I should like to quote here from another non-musician. On the occasion of its seventy-fifth anniversary celebration in 1942, Rutgers University published a volume of essays entitled *The Bases of Artistic Creation*. In one of these, the playwright, Maxwell Anderson says: ". . . no audience is satisfied with a play which doesn't take an attitude toward the world . . . the story of a play must be the story of

John Donald Robb, Dean Emeritus of the College of Fine Arts at the University of New Mexico, recently returned from attending the Twelfth Annual Conference of the International Folk Music Council held at Sinaia, Rumania. A collector of folk songs, Dean Robb is the author of Hispanic Folksongs of New Mexico (UNM Press, 1954). His own compositions include an opera, Little Jo, and a musical play, Joy Comes to Deadhorse. He was one of seventeen composers chosen to represent the Southwest at the Tenth Annual Institute of Contemporary American Music held in November 1958, at the University of Hartford, Connecticut.

what happens within the mind or heart of a man or woman . . . must be a conflict between the forces of good and evil within a single person . . . the protagonist of a play must represent good and must win . . . the purpose of the theatre is to find, and hold up to our regard, what is admirable in the human race . . ."

This conclusion may seem strange to students, immersed in the technique of their arts, or to the practicing artist himself. A composer hearing these words might ask himself "What moral values are involved in my selection of this or that note in writing a particular musical composition?" Well, you've heard of "wrong" notes. Every note is a right or wrong note and reveals whether a composer is devoted to truth and beauty or is a poseur or even a thief. Each note selected is a reflection, of the artist's total outlook on life. In surveying the lifework of any great composer, I think it should be possible in most cases to epitomize the composer's purpose and his work in a single sentence or even a phrase. Johann Sebastian Bach labored "To the greater glory of God"; Richard Wagner's principal theme was "Redemption through love."

We can often be more specific and characterize individual works as the expression of a purpose. There can be no doubt of what Beethoven was attempting to say in the *Eroica Symphony*, the opera *Fidelio*, and the *Ninth Symphony*. He has expressed his purpose in writing and the music is appropriate to that purpose. In the *Eroica*, with its cancelled dedication to Napoleon, he was expressing his faith in the upward struggle of man to freedom; in *Fidelio*, he was saying the same thing as well as paying his wistful tribute to married love; and in the finale of the *Ninth*, he transmitted into music the mood of Schiller's great *Ode To Joy*.

Yet there are not merely individual artists, but whole generations of artists who get lost in the forest of the techniques of their art. In the volume of essays mentioned above, Joseph Sloane, speaking about the graphic artists of our own century, commented that many of them turned to the formal qualities and techniques of their craft and he added that in their preoccupation with these matters, content and meaning played a decreasingly important part, and in some instances it was omitted altogether.

A similar thought with respect to music in our century was expressed in another of these essays by the music critic Oscar Thompson. He had heard a composer speaking for the proposition that music must be an expression of life and he said that he found this very heartening because we had been through a period in which new ideas in workman-

ship, new ideas in the way of saying something whether that something got back to humanity or not, seemed to dominate our musical thought. He speculated that this might be the reason that this music never got far beyond the circle of its creators.

In my view the artist who finds technique or novelty to be an end in itself (and there seem to be plenty of these) has not graduated from the status of student. Until he goes beyond this he is not really a composer, no matter how talented he may be. Unless he is first a man with convictions about life which he expresses through his art, he can never be more than a dilettante.

You may say that is very well for the literary artist, but ask how an artist dealing with less definite means of communication like painting or music can take sides and express his convictions through his art. Let us take a relatively easy case, but one which illustrates that there is sometimes, if not always, a difficulty of communication to be overcome.

A few years ago I visited the Museum of Modern Art where one room was devoted to paintings by Rouault. The subject matter of these paintings fell into three categories, dissipated French magistrates, prostitutes, and Christ on the Cross portrayed in various agonized postures. The manner of treatment of these subjects was such that I was filled with disgust toward the painter for putting so much ugliness into his paintings. As I was leaving, a guided tour was starting through the same gallery, so I joined the group. The lecturer stated that Rouault was a deeply religious man whose paintings represented his disgust and loathing for the evil things which he saw about him in life. Subjects which he loathed especially were the corruption which was rampant in the world, moral evils symbolized by the prostitutes whom he painted, and the world's repudiation of Christ, which he represented in his portraits of the crucifixion. It is apparent that I had received the impression of disgust which he had intended, although my disgust had been directed at the artist rather than at the evils which he was attacking.

This raised a moral question for me to solve. Was my disgust at the artist based on unwillingness to face the ugly aspects of life or was it, as I felt at the time, based on the feeling that the artist by painting these things was somehow justifying them. Once the artist's motivation was clear to me, I felt a kinship for him and Rouault's paintings will always have a claim on me that they never had before. I feel in thinking of this incident that what Anderson has said about the theater applies to the other arts as well.

If you don't believe me, let the artists speak for themselves. Here is Richard Wagner: "Art is intimately connected with life." Walt Whitman said, "This is not a book. Who touches it touches a human being."

Mozart, quoted by Frederick Dorian in *The Musical Workshop* (Secker and Warburg, London, 1947), explains how an aria in one of his operas characterizes the emotional state of anxious love. He says,

It is the heartbeat of love which must be expressed . . . the breast heaves and sighs, which is expressed through a crescendo; one hears whispers and sighs which is expressed through the first violins with mutes and a flute in unison.

The things that a composer expresses in his music are not all serious. Composers have often expressed a lively sense of humor in their music. Haydn once set the Ten Commandments to music in the form of ten canons. In setting the Seventh—Thou shalt not steal—he used a melody stolen from another composer. One of Mozart's most delicious scores is *Ein Musikalischer Spass* (a musical joke) in which he pokes fun at the incompetent composers of his time and their silly tunes, labored cadenzas, anti-climaxes, and trite fugues which go nowhere. Another such work is Saint Saens' *Carnival of Animals* in which amid the lion, the jackass, the swan, and other animals, he inserts a section headed "pianists" in which two pianists play scales like students in a conservatory.

Even the personal relationships of composers sometimes enter into their music. Wagner's love for Mathilde Wesendonck found expression in the song *Traume* (dreams) and other songs composed to poems written by Mathilde and these were later incorporated in the opera *Tristan and Isolde*. And the young Mozart, at the age of twenty-one, wrote his opera, *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, under the spell of his love for his fiancée, Constanze. The abducted bride in the opera is named Constanze. Later he writes affectionately to his wife who is away on a trip that even his work gives him no pleasure, because he is accustomed to stop working now and then to exchange a few words with her.

Nature has always inspired composers to try to express in music something of what they have felt in its presence. Haydn once said, "Sometimes I copy a tree, a bird or a cloud." Smetana writes an orchestral tone poem called the *Moldau* after the river which traverses Bohemia and which represents to Bohemians something like what our own "Old Man River" means to us. Delius hears the cuckoo and writes

in 1913 his beautiful orchestral tone poem called "On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring." Birds, particularly the cuckoo, have inspired hosts of musical compositions. Janequin in the Sixteenth Century wrote his famous madrigal, *The Song of the Birds*. One of the first, if not first, canon which history records is the famous English canon, "Sumer is Icomen in Lud Sing Cuckoo."

Music has played perhaps a greater part than any of the other arts in expressing the feelings of men, even of entire nations, in their great historic experiences. There is hardly an important historical movement without a musical counterpart. Apart from the national anthems, let us consider a few examples. During the Italian Risorgimento, Verdi's operas came to represent the desire of Italians for independence, and Viva Verdi became a secret revolutionary slogan as the letters of his name were the initials of the words Vittorio Emanuele, Rey d'Italia. A century ago, during one of Hungary's struggles for independence, the Rakocsy march of Berlioz created wild outbursts of revolutionary feeling. The idea of Finnish independence and *The Finlandia Overture* of Sibelius have become virtually synonymous. *The 1812 Overture* of Tschaikowsky was written to commemorate Napoleon's defeat by the Russians. This list could be extended indefinitely, and into our own day.

Composers have created a literature almost as rich and varied as the literature of words. They have expressed meanings and shades of meanings as subtle as those of poetry, or as obvious as some of the examples I have quoted. They range from the most introspective expression, for instance, the *Pathetique Symphony* of Tschaikowsky, to the most objective kind of utterance. But, whatever the piece, there is a man behind it and it is the expression of that man, his thoughts and his emotions.

Wrong as I feel the Soviet Government to be in dictating what sort of music its composers must write, nevertheless, it is right in recognizing that music is not mere entertainment, but a serious concomitant of human life, and that content as well as form is essential to music. Unless the composer can pour a content of beauty or truth into his music, unless he can stir the human heart with it, his forms are cold and lifeless.

In fact, the depiction of man's innermost feelings is music's special field of excellence. There have been great commentaries on life in words. But even so great an utterance as Abraham Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address* has its counterparts in great works of music such as the funeral

march of Chopin and the funeral march from the *Eroica* symphony of Beethoven.

The other arts, too, are capable of expressing the deepest depths of man's feelings. Goya's great picture of the firing squad rivals anything which could be said in words or music.

I have said enough, I think, to establish that the composer is a man who, like the painter and writer, observes the world around him and has something to say about it. If what he sees is beautiful, he seeks to rescue its beauty from oblivion in the way he knows best—through his music. If he is oppressed by what he sees and turns to God for consolation, he lifts up his soul to the Lord in music, his form of prayer.

Do not misunderstand me. I am not arguing that music must tell a story. Even if there were nothing else to relate art to life, there would remain the "great and noble struggle for perfection that is inherent in every artistic endeavor," as Frederick Dorian puts it. But the great works of art have something else. It is a hard and lonely struggle to find that something else and only the best of the artists find it. But the study of great music reveals that it is there and that when it is heard it breathes its life-giving spirit into an audience.

The composition of serious music should be more than a mere striving of the composer for a kind of personal euthanasia. This viewpoint is expressed by some composers in the formula "I compose for myself." If worthy of the name, music should be capable of transmitting an exalting emotion to at least a segment of the audience. The great masterworks all achieve this. Much of contemporary music fails in this. Audiences are compelled by the vogues of today to sit through hours of music which is incapable of stirring and ennobling. It taxes one's credulity to believe that the conductors and performers who select and present it feel anything of the sort. The contemporary compositions which do have this quality are tabooed as romantic or old-fashioned. The contemporary composer is constantly tempted to join these pattern makers in order to have his music performed. Perhaps it is more than mere cynicism to suggest that some conductors assume music to be great because it is beyond them—ergo it must be profound. We need new and honest musical leadership—new musical ideals—or perhaps a return to old ideals, for essentially ideals never change. Cleverness and opportunism cannot create good music.

So much for motivation.

The creative process itself is in some respects as plain as the nose on your face. In other respects it is veiled in mystery. The first aspect is

the domain of technique. The second is the domain of inspiration.

Given a good technique an artist will produce a competent workmanlike job, like thousands of others. Most of the world's music is like that. Given technique plus inspiration a man may produce a masterpiece.

Let us consider inspiration first. I have said that it is a mystery and so in the last analysis it is. But men of genius have tried to bring it down to earth. This was perhaps what Thomas Carlyle meant when he said that genius (read inspiration) is an infinite capacity for taking pains, a remark which has been bitterly attacked by those who feel genius should be defined as synonymous with inspiration.

There are, according to Frederick Dorian, whom I have quoted earlier, two opinions as to the origins of great music. One opinion holds that inspiration occurs in a creative trance, that this is the source of music, that it is an inexplicable divine utterance, that in exalted moments of inspiration the musician . . . envisions beautiful forms—perhaps even a whole work in one single lightning flash. On the other hand, he says, the scientific composer believes that a work springs from inventive skill and technique alone. Throughout history, he says, one of the two opposing principles, inspiration or craft, has dominated the musician's pursuit of composition. But there is no pure approach, he adds. Great art never stems exclusively from either inspiration or craft alone. It is impossible without both.

Great men have ranged themselves on opposing sides of this argument, he says. In 1869, writing to Camille du Locle, Giuseppe Verdi said, "I believe in inspiration; you people believe in construction . . . my backbone isn't pliable enough for me to give way and deny my convictions, which are profound and deeply rooted in me."

But listen to a somewhat different view.

Igor Stravinsky, probably the greatest living composer, in his book, *Poetics of Music* (Harvard University Press, 1947), refers to the common belief that what sets the composer's creative imagination in motion is an emotive disturbance called inspiration.

He concedes that inspiration plays an outstanding role in the generative process but maintains that inspiration is in no way a prescribed condition of the creative act, but rather a manifestation that is chronologically secondary. His conclusion is that this emotion is merely a reaction on the part of the creator grappling with that unknown entity which is still only the object of his creating and which is to become a work of art.

Again, Aaron Copland, in his book *What to Listen for in Music* (McGraw-Hill), remarks that the composer, confronted with the question of inspiration, does not say to himself: "Do I feel inspired?" If he feels like composing, he does. After he has finished composing, he hopes that everyone will recognize the thing he has written as having been inspired. But that, he says, is really an idea tacked on at the end.

A similar opinion is expressed by Oscar Hammerstein, who, in his particular field of musical comedy librettos, has enriched our century, in his volume entitled *Lyrics* (Simon and Schuster). He says that a term like "inspiration" annoys a professional author because it implies that ideas and words are born in his brain as gifts from heaven and without effort, that all who write know that writing is very, very hard work, and that nobody waits to be inspired.

One could multiply these quotations indefinitely. The argument seems to turn on the question whether inspiration is really cause or merely an effect.

My own view is that the humblest persons may have moments of inspiration. Joan of Arc was a humble shepherdess. Inspiration is not therefore a seizure which sets men of genius apart from mankind. A moment of ecstasy, of inspiration, can happen to anyone. Falling in love is such a moment. Like other kinds of inspiration, it may be a matter of months or years rather than of moments. But inspiration may evaporate, leaving no one changed but the one who experienced it.

However, it is the artist who portrays it, "fixes" it in words, paint, notes, or a soaring building and so his inspiration may change the entire world. More than one artist has done so—as David the King did, as Michelangelo did, as Johann Sebastian Bach did.

It is my own observation that a man of genius is distinguished from other men by the capacity to work harder. He thus achieves what to other men is the impossible. By doing so, he becomes to them a magician, a genius. Now there are men who never can hope to be geniuses. In fact, true inspiration is so rare that only a handful of men out of the billions who populate the earth possess it and they only at the height of their creative successes. So the work of the world is carried on by the rest of mankind and most of its music is written by men who are not geniuses.

The French musician, Nadia Boulanger, once said that composers are not creators. God is the only creator. But God permits a few chosen men to discover wonders. Among these men are the great composers.

Some composers have created only one or a few works of genius, out

of a very large output. And history records the achievements of men who have, without being inspired, written music without which the world would be poorer. In fact, there are in the world of music today composers of all gradations of skill from that of the genius to that of the hack writer of singing commercials, the lowest form of musical prostitution. It is a lonely climb up to the heights of Parnassus, but it is there to climb and some of every generation will reach it. If one were to make a chronological chart of the history of music, it would be easy to prove that in every generation for hundreds of years there have been not one but several living composers of genius.

One point, I think, should be stressed; even to some inspired geniuses, ideas are often achieved by very hard work and do not spring immediately into being. Beethoven's sketch book demonstrates that the answers did not come to him easily. He recorded as many as twenty-five different versions of the same melody with which he experimented until one satisfied him. A friend of Stravinsky once told me that Stravinsky had been stalled for approximately six weeks over one stubborn bar but that when he eventually found a satisfactory solution it was like a burst of sunlight.

Luckily for mankind, the creative process is not exclusive property of men of genius. Even children sometimes participate in the process. The practitioners of all the arts are engaged daily in this process. Therefore, we come to the subject of technique. Technique is the magic wand by which the dreams of the artist are transmuted into reality.

Unfortunately technique is a matter that cannot be "explained" in a paper like this. It takes years of concentrated systematic study of harmony, counterpoint, form and analysis, orchestration, score reading, one or more musical instruments and composition itself to acquire a technique. Ten years of concentrated study is not too long. So I can give here only a few hints about technique and its employment.

The composer sets out to compose a piece of music. How does he go about it?

There is nothing very specific to be said about when one writes music except to say that it should be a daily practice to devote a certain period of time. An opera will take most composers not less than a year—nearer to two years, including orchestration. A symphonic work will take several months. Smaller works take less time. When the work is done, it may be performed once and then forgotten. It takes *faith* to be a composer.

Where one writes is a personal matter. Some composers thrive on

confusion. The French composer, Darius Milhaud, has his apartment on the Boulevard de Clichy in Paris and he sits at an open window composing while outside his window the traffic of one of Paris' busiest streets goes by. In addition, there is often a travelling carnival in the street. By contrast, there are others who must have privacy, like the late Jean Sibelius, who rarely left his villa in the Finnish countryside and whose wife shielded him from noise and the outside world. A composer should have a hideout where he can go and compose without interruption. Some composers compose at the piano; others do not need an instrument. The method is unimportant; it is the result which counts. Stravinsky, it is said, has in his study a whole desk full of pens, T squares, erasers, India ink, knives, etc. Others have little else but a pen and black ink and some transparent blueprint paper with music staves ruled upon it. Most of us use this kind of paper today because extra copies can be made cheaply.

How does a composer go about his task?

The planning of a composition brings us close to architecture. Composers use the word *form* to designate the *plan* of a musical composition. Those forms known as fugue, symphony, minuet, rondo, invention, and the like are clear and complete, developed in past centuries and stored away in the composer's mind. He uses ideas derived from them modified by his personal experience for his new constructions. Occasionally a new form emerges. It has been said that music is fluid architecture and architecture is frozen music, and there are indeed similarities at least between the terminologies. The composer builds his work upon horizontal lines and at the same time considers its vertical aspects. The horizontal lines he calls melody (or counterpoint, if there is more than one melody) and the vertical aspect of the music is known as harmony. The horizontal aspect of music, which is the way it appears on a score and which might be compared to what the architects call elevations, represents a succession of notes following one another in time, whereas the vertical represents tones sounded simultaneously. When a composer says I will write a symphony, he has in mind a form as definite, I suppose, as that which an architect thinks of when he says I will build a library. And into that form the composer pours what he has to say.