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Music As Thought

by Dave Kaczynski

Scarcely any student of music will deny that Beethoven is the most cerebral of composers, the most philosophical, even if all efforts to explicate his thinking thus far have resorted to feeble clichés, hollow and unsatisfying, because inadequate. The problem remains: what is the nature of a musical thought? In what sense is art, per se, philosophical in its nature?—In one sense, at least, that it aims toward a radical disclosure of the world. So far as the intention of an art-work is radical, which is to say, so far as it endeavors to give voice to the world, we err badly as soon as we aim to shape our understanding according to references or statements. It would be a mistake to assert the philosophical substance of Beethoven, for instance, by erecting asses-bridges to "faith," "courage," "freedom," "joy," "affirmation," or any other such platitudes. Rather, it is most fitting to let the work speak for itself. But this is not to say we must only respond emotionally. For in order to hear anything at all, much less the truth, we must first become acquainted with the manner in which the work speaks. So the priority of a single question is established: what is the nature of a musical thought? As the purest and strongest musical thinker, Beethoven above all others may be able to provide us with some clue to thinking through this mystery.

But we have set our question already within the framework of an assumption: that the essence of art, from which music derives, aims toward a radical disclosure of the world. This assumption derives inescapably from the accessibility of art-works. Speaking at once determines and invokes a world. Speaking, of its essence, (as opposed to statements and references, which merely inhere within a determination already spoken), asserts the world as an issue. The accessibility of an art-work gathers the work into our world. Conversely, our appropriation of an art-work for the purposes of thought answers an appeal which the work has spoken to us to enter into its world. Such pure reciprocity as this alone constitutes a world adequate to our rich experience, unconstrained by any parochial views. Modern science and sociology, for instance, shape history according to their own rather narrow devices. On the other hand, as soon as we listen to Homer speaking, providing we listen according to the manner in which the speaking develops itself, a world arises to account for the artist's being able to speak to us at all. Nothing can account for this ability but a world which responds to Homer's speaking as an invocation of itself. Any other understanding of the world only conceals the truth of the work. Given this exalted significance ascribed to art, it is not surprising that art-works alone pass unblemished through history, inexhaustible and pertinent to every age.

So in order to hear Beethoven's ideas, we must first acknowledge that he dwells within the same place as other artists, and discloses the same world. Since this is a world comprehending history, we must infer that the place where artists dwell is eternal. If we notice that Beethoven occupies a place in the developmental history of music, the observation is no doubt musicologically accurate, yet much less helping us to hear Beethoven speak it actually distracts us from the significance of the artist as a significance derived from eternity. We have no progress in art comparable to progress in the sciences. Whereas today a gifted schoolboy may surpass Galileo, the beauty of an Athenian tragedy, for instance, remains the effulgence of an enduring mystery. Artists succeeding the Greeks through history were neither better nor more comprehensive as artists.

So Beethoven as artist speaks an invocation of the world. The world speaks to us through Beethoven. Yet Beethoven, the acknowledged master, is not just any artist. Moreover, the body of his work displays, as obvious, development toward what is quintessentially artistic, also toward what is most cerebral. In retrospect of the late quartets and piano sonatas, earlier works assume the character of a painter. As we inquire into the nature of musical thought, we come face to face with a life-work which evolves as a process of thought. It is evidently the thought which makes the artist a master. We are also keeping in mind that artistic thought is what constitutes the world, and in so doing establishes the eternity where artists dwell together.

But somehow the word "master," though familiar enough, must give us pause. Mastery typically suggests domination: the office of command. Yet we have already seen that artists disclose the world by a process of invocation. An invocation is a kind of prayer, and prayer suggests rather an attitude of humility. How can one who beseeches the world to appear also command it to do so? Artists are often described as creators, but what is creation if not the quintessential function of the gods? Then who or what does the artist beseech, and to what end?

In that we have surmised the nature of musical thought is identical, in essence, to the nature of artistic thought per se, it may prove helpful to draw comparisons between Beethoven and one of his peers in another field of art. We would need to seek, for this purpose, a master-artist who is equally the quintessential thinker. Who else, then, but Shakespeare is comparable to Beethoven? The resemblance between these two great artists is striking, for together they mark one epoch in art's self-revelation: the decisive emergence of art from aesthetic craftwork to thought. No longer, after Shakespeare and Beethoven, can we conceive of art and thought as independent approaches to truth. This is not to say there were no true artists before Shakespeare. Only that our sensibility is indebted to Shakespeare for our discovery of his predecessors. And here, too, we discover the hidden meaning of the word "master": one who establishes command by virtue of asserting his freedom. But "freedom" is a word we must take up considerably. It does not mean in this case a defiance of rules and conventions, nor even an elevation of the ego above its surroundings. Beethoven, the supposed rebel, for instance, was much indebted to his predecessors, and consciously so. Freedom may mean the ability to think. Or, remembering the kinship between art and truth, it may consist in acknowledging that when man loses art he has to start lying to himself. Of Beethoven and Shakespeare we can at last assert that their freedom as artists arose from discovering the inner element of art and answering to all of its essentials. And the process by which they answered essentials was thought.

But nor can we ignore a suggestion of challenge and recklessness. A vying with the gods. If Shakespeare portrayed the artist classically as Prospero, he also did so romantically as Hamlet, and the latter portrayal is clearly the more developed. Prospero is a master of a world within the world, whereas Hamlet's classical world is bounded within the world, whereas Hamlet's nutshell debouches upon infinite space. Prospero's world is a dream, whereas Hamlet's dream is a world, ever mindful of the world as world: "There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." Curiously, perhaps, Hamlet's freedom and fatality are one, and derive from his living out the ramifications of this thought.

It is with similar fascination and consternation that we endeavor to follow the thought-process developed by Beethoven over his long career. It is perhaps inevitable that we submit to a single moment now and then. But just as inevitably we are pointed toward the end. It probably does not matter whether Beethoven is possessed or possessing, and more than it matters whether Hamlet is mad or only pretending to be. What shapes the master is his access to the essence of art. From this place the distinction between creation and discovery is rethought in a radical manner, becoming on one hand synthesis, and on the other hand the dizzying freedom of the artist.

So we are thrust back upon our original question. What is the nature of a musical thought? As artistic thought, it represents an invocation of the world. But this confronts us with a curious problem. For we have long believed we understood how visual and verbal arts set about to represent the world. A picture is referred to a visual reality, and a word to some corresponding tangible entity. In fact, it was scarcely more than a reflex on Plato's part to vilify artists for distorting truth when it grew apparent such references and correspondences are habitually weak. Nowadays we hold fast to the same misconception about art's nature by ascribing to artists a subjective vision or an idiosyncratic emotional structure. By this interpretation, Van Gough's sunflowers belong to himself alone. And no matter how loudly we acclaim the masterpiece as a celebration of romantic individualism, in effect we've relegated art to the status of a cathartic, and our cheers drown out the invocation of world which the artist spoke. Furthermore, we subject the muses to the indignity of psychological examinations. We fail to account for the universality of art and for the artist's being able to speak to us. Worse yet, we've concealed from ourselves the manner in which the artist speaks. And by disposing of art from the substance of experience, we create the necessity of forever after having to lie to ourselves.

But if words and pictures are said to represent the world, it was never possible to think of music in these terms. If literature and painting invoke the world by some other method than representation, then perhaps we had best look to music for a clue to understanding the capacity of all arts to think, and by thinking to disclose the world. Here the necessity arises to listen closely to an exemplary piece of music, such as Beethoven's last piano sonata. Doing so entails the task of rethinking what we understand by the world. In what manner is the world present here? As "gold beat to airy thinness."