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## My Favorite Classics

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### Abstract

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Let me begin with the standard stupid question: if I were allowed to take only one piece of music to a lone island, which one this would be? For decades, my answer has been the same: Arnold Schoenberg's *Gurrelieder*. What makes *Gurrelieder* really unique is a mirroring between its musical line and the history of music itself: the shift from the late-romantic Wagnerian heavy pathos to atonal *Sprechgesang* is rendered in the very progress of the piece.

Otherwise, my tastes are classical, and definitely "Eurocentric", with a preference for chamber music... Seriously? How to bring this together with my total dedication to *Gurrelieder*, which demands around 600 musicians for its proper performance? Schoenberg's preference for chamber music is well-known: in a nice swipe at American vulgarity, he once said that everything in music can be told with a maximum of five or six instruments – we only need orchestras so that Americans get it... How, then, to account for *Gurrelieder*, which demands soloists, a full orchestra and three choruses? In the notes to his recording, Simon Rattle proposed a wonderful formula: *Gurrelieder* is a chamber-music piece for orchestra and chorus – this, effectively, is how one should approach it.

So here we go with Bach: while I cannot follow any of his *Passions* without yawning, I find his solo violin and cello sonatas irresistible. Take the second movement (fugue) of Bach's *Three Sonatas for Solo Violin*, in which the entire polyphonic structure is condensed in one instrumental line, so that, although we "effectively" hear only one violin line, in our imagination we automatically supplement it with other unheard implicit melodic lines, and seem to hear the multitude of melodic lines in their interaction. However, the actual condensation into one single line is thereby by no means simply suspended: the key element of the artistic effect is that we are all the time aware of how we effectively hear only one line – it is for that reason that the transcriptions of Bach's solo sonatas for organ or string trio or quartet, even when they are of the highest quality, retain an element of

“vulgarity”, obscenity even, as if, when we “hear it all”, some constitutive void is filled in, which is the elementary definition of kitsch.

With Mozart, it's similar: my first choice is his string quintets and, among his operas, *Così fan tutte*. I love Peter Sellars's video version of *Così*, which takes place in the present (a US naval base, with Despina as a local bar owner, and the two gentlemen – naval officers – returning not as “Albanians”, but as violet-and-yellow-haired punks). The main premise is that the only true passionate love is that between the philosopher Alfonso and Despina, who experiment with two young couples in order to act out the impasse of their own desperate love. This reading hits the very heart of the Mozartean *irony* which is to be opposed to cynicism. If, to simplify to the utmost, a cynic fakes a belief that he privately mocks (preaching sacrifice for the fatherland, say, while privately amassing profits...), an ironist takes things more seriously than he appears to – he secretly believes in what he publicly mocks. Alfonso and Despina, the cold philosophical experimenter and the corrupt, dissolute servant girl, are the true passionate lovers using the two pathetic couples and their ridiculous erotic *imbroglio* as instruments to confront their traumatic attachment. And it is only today, in our postmodern age, allegedly full of irony and lacking all belief, that Mozartean irony reaches its full actuality, confronting us with the embarrassing fact that – not in our interior lives, but in our acts themselves, in our social practice – we believe much more than we are aware of.

With Beethoven, things change – for personal reasons, *Fidelio* is my choice. This was the first opera I listened to in its entirety in my early teens and it impressed me deeply – even now, over half a century later, I shiver at the simple but sublime beauty of the moment when the trumpet announces the Minister's arrival at the very point when Leonora puts her life at stake to save Florestan... I also think that the usual suspects for Beethoven's greatest achievement - the late string quartets, inclusive of the *Great Fugue* – are grossly overrated. (The only great thing about the *Great Fugue* is that it seems to announce Bernard Herrmann's Hitchcock music.) From an immanent musical standpoint, Beethoven's late piano sonatas are much superior...

To put it bluntly, Beethoven's music undoubtedly often verges on kitsch – suffice it to mention the over-repetitive exploitation of the “beautiful” main motif in the 1st movement of

his *Violin Concerto*, or the rather tasteless climactic moments of the *Leonore 3* Overture. How vulgar are the climactic moments of *Leonore 3* (and 2 its even worse utterly boring version) in comparison with Mozart's overture to *The Magic Flute*, where Mozart still retains what one cannot but call a proper sense of musical *decency*, interrupting the melodic line before it reaches the full orchestra climactic repetition and, instead, jumping directly to the final staccatos! Perhaps, Beethoven himself sensed it, writing another, final overture, the *Fidelio*-Overture – brief and concise, sharp, the very opposite of *Leonore 2* and 3. (The true pearl, however, is the undeservedly underestimated *Leonore 1*, Op. 138, whose very date is not sure – it is Beethoven at his best, with the beautiful rise to a climax without any embarrassing excesses).

Is, then, Wagner really the kitsch-extension of what is worst in Beethoven?

No: Wagner's true achievement was precisely to provide *a proper artistic form for what, in Beethoven, functions as a kitschy excess*. (This is exemplary in *Rhinegold*, THE key Wagner opera, the zero-level "music drama", which clears the slate and thus renders possible the return of "transubstantiated" operatic elements from *Walküre* onwards (already in Act 1), which culminates in the revenge-trio of *The Twilight*.) *Rhinegold* is the first and only pure music drama, the first and only work that fully follows the precepts of the music drama (no free melodic improvisations, the music closely following the drama, etc.).

This brings us to the great duo: Schubert and Schumann. The first movement of Schubert's *Piano Sonata No. 18* in G major (D 894) is a piece I am ready to listen to again and again (which I am also doing in real life, never getting tired of it). As for *Winterreise*, yes, who can resist it, but it is crucial to listen to it in its entirety and not just privilege popular hits like "Der Leiermann". I've downloaded around 50 versions of *Winterreise* and my secret wish is to write a kind of history of the shifts in the European ideological mood in the last century as reflected in these versions – for example, Hans Hotter's outstanding 1942 recording of Schubert's *Winterreise* seems to call for an intentionally anachronistic reading: it is easy to imagine German officers and soldiers listening to this recording in the Stalingrad trenches in the cold Winter of 42/43. Does the topic of *Winterreise* not evoke a unique consonance with the historical moment? Was not the whole campaign to Stalingrad a gigantic *Winterreise*, where each German soldier can say for himself the very first lines of the cycle: "I came here a stranger, / As a stranger I depart"? Do the following lines not

render their basic experience: "Now the world is so gloomy, / The road shrouded in snow. / I cannot choose the time / To begin my journey, / Must find my own way / In this darkness".

As for Schumann, I am almost pathologically obsessed by his piano masterpieces – I've written extensively about Humoresque, which is not a simple piano piece but a song without the vocal line, with the vocal line reduced to silence, so that all we effectively hear is the piano accompaniment. This disappearance of the voice is strictly equivalent to the "death of man", and what is crucial here is not to confuse man ("person") with the subject: the Lacanian subject qua \$ is the very outcome of the "death of man". In clear contrast to Foucault, for Lacan, humanism is something which emerged in the Renaissance, and was disposed of with the Kantian break in philosophy – and, we might add, with Schumann in music. This is how one should read the famous "inner voice" (*innere Stimme*) added by Schumann (in the written score) as a third line between the two piano lines, higher and lower: as the vocal melodic line which remains a non-vocalized "inner voice", a kind of musical equivalent to the Heidegger-Derridean "crossed-out" Being. What we actually hear is thus a "variation, but not on a theme", a series of variations without the theme, accompaniment without the main melodic line (which exists only as *Augenmusik*, music for the eyes only, in the guise of written notes): No wonder that Schumann composed a *Concerto without orchestra* [revised by Schumann in 1853 and published as *Piano Sonata No. 3 in f-moll, op.14, A/D*], a kind of counterpoint to Bartok's *Concerto for orchestra*, Sz. 116. This absent melody is to be reconstructed on the basis of the fact that the first and third levels (the right and the left hand piano lines) do not relate to each other directly, i.e. their relationship is not that of an immediate mirroring: in order to account for their interconnection, one is thus compelled to (re)construct a third, "virtual" intermediate level (melodic line) which, for structural reasons, cannot be played. Its status is that of an impossible-real which can exist only in the guise of a writing, i.e. physical presence would annihilate the two melodic lines we effectively hear in reality (as in Freud's 'A child is being beaten', in which the middle fantasy scene was never conscious and has to be reconstructed as the missing link between the first and the last scenes). Schuman brings this procedure of absent melody to an apparently absurd self-reference when, later in the same fragment of *Humoresque*, he repeats the same two effectively played melodic lines,

yet this time the score contains no third absent melodic line, no inner voice – what is absent here is the absent melody, i.e. absence itself.

But enough of heavy theory – let's return to our chronology and confront my biggest love, Richard Wagner, my obsession from my early teens. Even today, my secret dream is to be invited to stage *Tristan* or *Parsifal* in Bayreuth or another great opera house. Imagine, along these lines, – my private dream - a *Parsifal* taking place in a modern megalopolis, with Klingsor as an impotent pimp running a whorehouse; he uses Kundry to seduce members of the “Grail” circle, a rival drug gang. “Grail” is run by the wounded Amfortas whose father Titurel is in a constant delirium induced by too much drugs; Amfortas is under a terrible pressure from the members of his gang to “perform the ritual”, i.e., deliver the daily portion of drugs to them. He was “wounded” (infected by AIDS) through Kundry, his penis bitten while Kundry was giving him fellatio. Parsifal is a young inexperienced son of a single homeless mother who does not get the point of drugs; he “feels the pain” and rejects Kundry's advances while she is performing fellatio on him. When Parsifal takes over the “Grail” gang, he establishes a new rule for his community: the free distribution of drugs...

It took me years to move from the fascination with Wagner's big hits to his true greatness which is most clearly discernible in the second acts of his works (*Lohengrin*, *Walküre*, *Twilight of the Gods*...). Act II of the *Twilight* is musically infinitely superior to the much more popular Acts I and III. (The exception is *Tristan* where the absolute masterpiece is Act III.) But it takes years, decades even, to really penetrate a Wagner opera – even now I cannot really relate to his *Meistersinger*...

And Verdi, Wagner's great counterpart? I don't exclude him completely – I am quite fond of some of the operas from his late-middle period like *Don Carlos* where, for example, the big confrontation between the King and the Great Inquisitor is superb. The third name to be mentioned here is Mussorgsky whose *Khovanshchina* is for me something absolutely unique. Already in *Boris Godunov*, Mussorgsky sees “people” as the impenetrable Real that a human agent/hero tries in vain to penetrate and master — no matter how decisively we act, “all around is darkness and impenetrable gloom”, as Boris Godunov sings in his great monologue in the opera which ends with the Simpleton evoking

this same darkness: "Let bitter tears flow. / Weep. . . weep. . . unhappy soul! / The enemy here shall come. / So much blood shall flow. / And the fire shall destroy. . . . Oh, terror! oh, terror! . . . Allow thy tears to flow, / Wretched people!" So what if "People" doesn't exist as a single agent with a collective Will but is precisely the name for the chaotic density of humanity that thwarts all plans for liberation imposed on it by human agents, the chaotic density which can actualize itself only in the guise of self-destructive fury? *Khovanshchina* brings this insight to its logical extreme, concluding with a collective suicide as the only imaginable act of redemption...

Now comes a bad surprise for most of my readers: no Mahler, no Richard Strauss, in my universe (I agree with the old Viennese saying "When Richard, then Wagner; when Strauss, then Johann"). My ultimate anti-Adornian sin: I prefer Sibelius's *Fourth Symphony* to all of Mahler. And, in the same confessional mode, I have to admit some further guilty pleasures: Shostakovich's *Symphonies No. 8, 10, 14*, and his first *Violin Concerto*, plus SOME of his string quartets (*No. 3* with its wonderfully Hitchcockian third movement, but NOT the vastly overrated *No. 8* which is too close to kitsch), Prokofiev's first *Violin Sonata* plus his film music (*Aleksandr Nevsky, Ivan the Terrible*), and, why not, Rossini's *Cenerentola* and Donizetti's *L'elisir d'amore*, a love potion that again clearly functions as the Lacanian *objet a*. There are many other wonderful moments in this Donizetti's masterpiece – say, towards the end of Act 1 there is a passage that exemplifies in a musical way the basic thrust of the Hegelian *Aufhebung* ("sublation", or retroactive re-positioning). It is basically a trio sustained by a chorus; the love triangle is composed of Adina, a beautiful and wealthy farm owner, Nemorino, a simpleton who deeply loves her, and Belcore, an arrogant and boasting sergeant who also wants to marry Adina. Upon hearing the news that Adina is ready to marry Belcore the same evening, Nemorino entreats her to postpone the marriage, and Belcore brutally tells him to fuck off: "Thank heaven dolt, that you are mad / or drunk with wine. / I would choke you, reduce you to shreds / If at this moment you were yourself. / So that I can keep my hands under control / Go away, fool, hide from me". The magic, of course, resides in how this simple exchange is put into music: the most impressionable phrase – "*va via, buffone, ti ascondi a me*" (to be translated as "*casse toi, pauvre con*" or "fuck off, jerk") is first sung in an aggressive mode, but is later re-positioned as the background of the predominant love duet.

Back to more serious waters, although I think Ravel's big hits like *Bolero* should be publicly burned, I admire very much his chamber music (I shamelessly admit I discovered it through a film, *A Heart in Winter* from 1992), which should in no way be dismissed as an expression of the intense sense of privacy of the French bourgeoisie. I think that Ravel's chamber music is to be read in the same way as the piano pieces of Eric Satie – and one should bear in mind that, in early 1920s, the last years of his life, Satie was not only a member of the newly constituted French Communist Party, but even a member of its Central Committee – a fact that is absolutely not a mere personal idiosyncrasy or provocation. Recall that Ravel also rejected membership in the *Académie française* in protest against the way France treated the Soviet Union; he furthermore set to music North African protest songs against French colonial power. So what if, in order to get the most elementary idea of Communism, one should forget all about the extra-Romantic explosions of passion and imagine the clarity of a minimalist order sustained by a gentle freely-imposed discipline? Satie used the term “furniture music (*musique d'ameublement*)”, implying that some of his pieces should function as a mood-setting background music. Although this may seem to point forwards to the commercialized ambient music (“*Muzak*”), what Satie aims at is the exact opposite: a music that subverts the gap that separates the figure from the background – when one truly listens to Satie, one “hears the background”. This is egalitarian Communism in music: a music that refocuses the listener's attention from the big Theme to its invisible background, in the same way that Communist theory and politics refocuses our attention from big Heroes to the immense work and suffering of the invisible ordinary people.

This brings me finally back to my starting point: Schoenberg and the second Viennese school. I remain here an old Adornian Stalinist: class struggle in music – Schoenberg yes, Stravinsky no. For obvious Freudian reasons, I love *Erwartung*, the first great musical setting of feminine hysteria, but also the painfully-beautiful melodic line of his *Violin Concerto* (a proof, if one is needed, that Schoenberg was far from a cold rational manipulator), and the absolute mastery of his *Trio* [the *Trio for Violin, Viola and Cello* op. 45, A/D]. Of Schoenberg's pupils, one should absolutely insist on adding to the great two (Berg, Webern) Hanns Eisler, a great master of what I call (following Schelling) “spiritual corporeality”, the deployment of the spiritual dimension immanent to matter itself. The



supreme case is here his *Fourteen Ways of Describing the Rain*, Op. 70, a twelve-minute exercise in dodecaphony for flute, clarinet, string trio and piano, first written as a musical accompaniment to Joris Ivens's documentary *Regen* ("Rain", 1929), a portrayal of Amsterdam during a rainfall. Rewritten in 1941, this piece was premiered in 1944 at Arnold Schoenberg's home in Los Angeles as part of the celebration of his seventieth birthday, and was highly admired by Schoenberg and Adorno, who were otherwise opposed to Eisler's Communist political engagement. Two other pieces of Eisler's putatively belong to the same series: the six "Hölderlin Fragments" from his *Hollywood Songbook* (1942–44), characterized by Matthias Goerne as "the *Winterreise* of our times", and his last work, finished a couple of weeks before his death, *Serious Songs* (1962).

I have to admit this is my limit – I cannot really enjoy what comes after, with some exceptions like Olivier Messiaen, another master of spiritual corporeality whose religious chamber and solo music (*Visions de l'Amen, Vingt regards sur l'enfant-Jésus...*) is the closes one can get to what I call materialist theology.