

Thoughts on “Classical” versus “Romantic” Music, and Related Subjects

Ian Brinkley

4/22/18

I have not engaged in a detailed study of the distinctions between “classical” and “romantic” music which are currently accepted as part of the conventional wisdom of musicology. Therefore, should what I say below seem to be out of correspondence with those distinctions, no charges of imprudence need be made against me. This paper, like the one preceding it on FindingPrometheus.com, is an expression of some of the thoughts I have developed since the class given by John Sigerson as a part of the LaRouchePAC class series on “The New Paradigm”.

In an earlier paper on the subject of aesthetics and architecture, I put forward some thoughts I had respecting the basic features of successful art. This included a discussion of music. In that discussion, it was emphasized that music which can be said to be of legitimate artistic value must meet the artistic requirements of all other forms of art. Some of the most essential of all of these requirements were identified as *aesthetical continuity*, and *development*, or *progression*.

A recapitulation of what was discussed there is as follows: The mind seeks to identify distinguishable unities out of the variegated phenomena which it experiences. In the experience of a piece of art, many different phenomenal elements are encountered; various musical notes for example. The initial task of the artist is to identify how the basic elements of their art can be organized in such a way that the experience of them in the mind of the observer will elicit a process of recognition, or conceptualization, of a unity which subsumes the parts. The next task is to create unities of effect the experience of which is accompanied by pleasures of a type which are otherwise not generally accessible to the observer by other means. The next task of the artist is to create multiple such unities of effect which are ordered in a way which might be termed *coherent*. Coherence means, ideally, that every unity of effect contained in the composition contributes to the final recognition of the piece of art as a whole as itself a unity, the recognition of which is, in turn, accompanied by a unique quality of intellectual or spiritual pleasure.

In music, the distinct unities of effect mentioned above can be referred to as “musical statements”. Much like the statements made in speaking-language, the recognition of musical statements by the observer can be accompanied by all varieties of emotional content, intended meaning, and intellectual significance. Further, as statements in language, musical statements can (and must be) ordered so as to lead the observer of them to a distinct recognition of the necessary reason respecting the presence and ordering of those statements- a recognition which is supposed to be accompanied by the experience of aesthetic pleasure.

However, it might be said that in both classical and romantic music, the musical statements made are supposed to correspond to the general requirements listed above. The quality of effect is perhaps where the difference lies. This raises the question: What is the purpose of each kind of music? What is the purpose of romantic music? Perhaps it can be said to be the maximization of emotional experience. Consistent with this purpose, we find that many composers categorized as romantic make use of musical statements the perception of which is accompanied by the experience of extraordinarily powerful emotions. However, the use of such effects is not what makes a composer romantic. For, just as with other effects, these emotional effects can be integrated into a composition which fulfills a higher purpose than mere emotional indulgence.

Because some emotional effects can make a strong impression upon the observer, there can be a risky tendency to draw out those emotional effects to a point where the necessary continuity of development is lost in a sort of sentimental mush. A piece of music might have a number of successive episodes of such emotional indulgence, even ones ordered according to some sort of plan aimed at maximizing emotional effect, but the apprehension of continuity consistent with lawful progression is lost, as the whole is essentially nothing more than a sequence of sentimental episodes.

It seems, then, that a certain challenge faced by the composer who wishes to make use of such powerful emotional effects is to ensure that those effects are given enough place to be appreciated as effects (within the context of the whole), while not being given so much place as to pull the observer out of their concentration on the sense of continuity of progression necessary to successful music, and into sentimental mush. Brahms, for example, invokes extremely powerful emotions in his music. This has led some to categorize Brahms as a romantic. Lyndon LaRouche once said that, while Brahms represented a continuation of the classical tradition, he, along with Verdi, also contributed to a trend in music-culture toward romanticism.¹ However, Brahms does not allow his audience to indulge in those powerful emotions which he invokes in his music; rather, he pushes the listener along as he introduces new things to be considered. It seems improper, then to classify him as romantic. Emotional effects prone to sentimental indulgence can be skillfully integrated into a well composed piece of music to the production of more important results than could otherwise be achieved without them. They are similar, in this sense, to harmonic dissonances. Thus, we can liken the musical failure of atonal music, in which dissonances are improperly employed, to the failure of romantic music, in which powerful emotional effects are improperly employed. (This is not to say that a composer seeking to use such emotional effect in a classical mode, might not, by mistake, employ those effects in such a

¹ It is unclear that LaRouche would still hold that position.

way as to tend to lead the audience into the mush of sentimental indulgence, and away from concentration on development/progression.)

Variety and Emotional Modulation

I wish to briefly discuss the question of emotional modulation as an element of variety to be incorporated in a musical composition.

I can remember some of my reactions to classical music when I first began to listen to it. It came at a time in my life when I had been listening to a large amount of heavy-metal music. One of the things which then bothered me about classical music was the modulation from minor to major within a piece which seemed as if it should be in the minor mode in its entirety. It is clear to me now why this bothered me so much at that time: heavy metal music is highly romantic. There is very little intelligence, complexity or variety in heavy metal- the songs being usually nothing more than a few guitar riffs, repeated over and over again, while a fellow with a very unfortunate pair of vocal chords yells at you. Because essentially all metal music is in the minor mode, I had come to think that the minor mode was the only mode of music which I could appreciate. Thus, I began seeking out classical pieces which were in minor keys. But, as mentioned, I was often upset when, within a piece which was in a minor key, I found that a shift into the major mode would take place. I became upset in this way because I had been trained, by listening to metal, to stay in the minor mode and sentimentally indulge in it indefinitely.

It seems to me that, just as modulations from one key to another can be made for the purpose of introducing variety into a piece of music, so too can emotional modulation be introduced. This is not to say that a piece of music is inferior if it does not have such modulations. Such modulations might not always be warranted, just as modulations of key might not be warranted for a certain piece.

Another interesting capability provided by emotional modulations is that of creating emotional tension. For example, sometimes, it is not clear as to which basic emotional mode -minor or major- a piece has entered into. This ambiguity creates an effect of *tension* in the mind. Such an effect can be of very significant artistic import. In the Kyrie movement of the Mozart Requiem, for example, we find both emotional modulation from minor to major, and, at some parts, minor-major ambiguity (and the tension associated with it).

Social Engineering and Romanticism

Briefly (because it is getting late where I am) I wish to touch upon the question of the implications of Romanticism for the practice of social engineering.

As romanticism promotes emotional/sentimental indulgence, it deteriorates the capability of the individual to break free of emotional states into which they may be put.² As mentioned above, music can quickly bring the observer of it into a certain emotional state. If the music is crafted in a certain way -that is, romantically- the effect on the (romantically inclined) observer will be to impel them to indefinitely indulge in the emotional state into which the music is crafted to put them.

An individual habituated to emotional indulgence of this type is much more highly susceptible to forms of thought conditioning which utilize such musical devices of emotional entrapment.

Under conditions of emotional indulgence, the observer is highly suggestible. For example, if an individual who has been induced into an indulgence in a very negative emotion by music can be exposed to images or motion pictures of certain situations or things, there is a much greater likelihood that the person will develop negative associations about those pictured things than if they had not been in the emotional state when they were exposed to them. The same can be said for positive associations. This, of course, is not a great secret. As every advertiser, government propagandist, Hollywood filmmaker, or middle-school aged YouTube poster could tell you, music crafted to specific emotional effects is an essential element of successful attempts at modifying the beliefs of the audience targeted by such efforts.

Thus, it follows from all this, that the preponderance of preference for romantic music in a society will be a determining factor in the susceptibility of the population of that society to thought conditioning which is based upon the methods just described.

Similarly, the frequency of absurd attributions of importance to unworthy things in a society will be positively influenced by the prevalence of romanticism. For, since the individuals in the society will be more readily entrapped into emotional states by the musical methods described, they will be more susceptible to come to attribute importance to the things which they are exposed to during such emotional states. For example, look at the effect of Hollywood movies, or television soap operas, on the notions which people in our society have respecting what is important in personal relationships. Most of these notions are absurdly infantile, but they are made to hold a place in the minds of many persons because of the inability of those persons to

² This, of course, would tend to have certain obvious cultural effects which we will not discuss here.

break out of the emotional state into which they were put while being trained to believe that such notions were valid- that is, because of their problem with romanticism.