

ON PERFORMANCE: The Passion Beneath the Wigs: Emotional Impact in the Classical Period of Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven and Schubert

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Much has been said and much has been written about the Classical Period in Western Art Music. So much so that “classical music” has become, especially for the uninitiated, a convenient, shorthand label for an entire tradition extending from Gregorian chant to the music of Elliott Carter. One year ago, my wife, Anne, and I were visiting the museum dedicated to the life and music of reggae legend Bob Marley in Kingston, Jamaica when, totally unannounced, Rita Marley, Bob Marley’s widow and founding member of his back up singing group, the *I Threes*, emerged from an office on the premises. Excitedly, we introduced ourselves as fellow musicians . . . but classical. Without missing a beat, and in a most gracious tone, Rita responded, “Bob’s music is classic too.” In that instant it hit me – different hairstyle, same passion – hence, the title of my discourse, “The Passion Beneath the Wigs: Emotional Impact in the Classical Period of Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven and Schubert.” Whether music is performed under the umbrella of flapping dreadlocks or the constraint of powdered wigs, whether it is viscerally generated or it springs from interpreting the hieroglyphics of a meticulously crafted score, whether it is written down or not, what’s the difference, really? All that is classic achieves implicitly two of our deepest yearnings as human beings – to be understood and to be remembered.

In a pre-concert interview on October 29, 2008, I heard the contemporary British composer James Dillon say that the difference between popular music, his first love, and classical music, is that the latter is written down. It was not until he heard Igor Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre du Printemps* for the first time at age 19 that he wanted to know how such affecting musical ideas could be committed to paper. Immediately following his comments, Japanese pianist Noriko Kawai performed the North American premiere of his 90 minute-long work, *The Book of Elements*, and I thought, “This might as well have been created on the spot.”

Perhaps this is the highest praise for the classical performer, when notated music strikes the listener as an improvisation. The opening movement, although atonal, seemed to hover around the note E-flat. In principle, this feature as well as the movement’s improvisatory nature reminded me of precisely the same E-flat with which I began the opening cadenza of the Beethoven *Piano Concerto No. 5* in a performance less than three weeks prior. Despite the more than two centuries separating Beethoven and Dillon, one elemental truth remains – the impassioned performer still has the power to break the hermetic seal of musical notation, thus revealing the composer’s emotional intention.

In *Piano Concerto No. 5*, Beethoven appears to subvert the rising Romantic ethos by supplying his own cadenza for the work along with the now famous admonition: *Non si fa una Cadenza, ma s’attacca subito il seguente*. In the 1812 Vienna premiere, Beethoven permitted his student, Carl Czerny, to play an improvisatory passage at the customary moment displaying his piano virtuosity, but with the composer’s blueprint as the impetus. The monumental figure of

Beethoven, standing at the crossroads between the Classical and Romantic periods, instructed, "Instead of a cadenza, tackle immediately the following." Even the spontaneous moment needed to be governed by formal restraint – the essential embalming agent of emotion. Without notation, that is, emotional containment through concrete formalisation, I never would have met Beethoven, and Stravinsky never would have fascinated James Dillon with the possibility of memorializing his own creative passions.

In Chapter One of his book entitled *Critical Entertainments*, Charles Rosen presents a rather cynical view on "The Aesthetics of Stage Fright." He characterizes the composer as an invisible puppeteer and envisions an unconsciously cruel audience, not listening attentively in silence, but watching in a dead hush as the performer moves unsteadily like a "tight-rope walker poised over his perilous space." With so many ropes and strings attached, the performer teeters in fear between Apollo and Dionysus, textual scholarship and pianistic virtuosity, sense and sensibility, playing from memory and playing by heart. I submit that this perceived pitfall is the performer's platform spanning the chasm between the dead hush of a written score and live musical performance on-stage. It is in the seamless transitions between knowing and feeling that great art is made; and the classical style's efficacy lies not so much in restraining emotion as in managing contrasts, balancing thought and action. The written and the performed become one.

Commitment to direct statement and proportional integrity may be appropriate to the classical tradition, but *empfindsamkeit* is by no means dead. The artist must infuse the artifact, the musical score, with emotional life unfettered by permanent engravings such as

bar lines and dynamic markings. Ever so often, piano students are instructed to paste expressive devices onto their performances as a substitute for emotional insecurity. This is not what I am advocating. Rather, as Leopold Mozart (1719-1787) stated in his *Treatise on Violin Playing*, "One must know how to change from piano to forte without directions and of one's own accord, each at the right time." Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg (1718-1795) elaborates:

The rapidity with which the emotions change is common knowledge, for they are nothing but motion and restlessness. All musical expression has as its basis an affect or feeling. A philosopher who explains or demonstrates seeks to bring light to our understanding, to bring clarity and order to it. But the orator, poet, musician seek more to inflame than enlighten. With the philosopher there are combustible materials, which merely glow or give off a modest restrained warmth. Here, however, there is but the distilled essence of this material, the finest of it, which gives off thousands of the most beautiful flames, but always with great speed, often with violence. The musician must therefore play a thousand different roles; he must assume a thousand characters as dictated by the composer. To what unusual undertakings the passions lead us! He who is fortunate, in any respect, to capture the enthusiasm that makes great people of poets, orators, artists will know how precipitately and variously our soul reacts when it is abandoned to the emotions. A musician must therefore possess the greatest sensitivity and the happiest powers of divination to execute correctly every piece that is placed before him.

Extract from: Marpurg's *Der Critischer Musicus an der Spree*, Sept. 2, 1749. Quoted as a footnote in: Mitchell, William J., *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments* by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, trans. & ed. WJ Mitchell, Cassell And Company, Ltd., London, 1951, p.81.

Even classical music needs to live and breathe. The emotional flame must burn beneath the glow of enlightenment if the composer's message is to be fully understood, taken to heart and remembered.

France's first lady, Carla Bruni, who was in New York City in November 2008 promoting her latest CD in the popular genre, reminded NBC *Today Show's* Matt Lauer that the sensual pleasures of passion are preceded by its original meaning: suffering! Haydn mitigates that suffering with humor, Beethoven struggles in frustration then resigns in sublimity, Schubert works out his own salvation in wanderings of heavenly length. And Mozart? "Wigs off, ladies and gentlemen, a seamless genius!"

Regardless of history – oral, recorded or personal; regardless of culture, genre or style; we all endure suffering, and therefore share the capacity to understand, contain and communicate its full range of emotions. Moreover, the passion in our DNA is constantly resurrecting and immortalizing the human spirit in daily pro-creative acts as miraculous as childbirth and as complex as composition and performance. Do not be fooled by the generally accepted guises of fashion, status and decorum. Let us remember always, that beneath the wigs, beneath the musical figures and their forms, human suffering is weaving an emotive style unique to each composer and indeed, specific to each piece. As instruments of human understanding and remembrance, shouldn't Paul and Anne Shaw's role, Rita Marley's role, James Dillon's and Noriko Kawai's role, and indeed, the role of every single composer, performer, artist teacher and educator be *con passione a piacere s'attaccar il seguente?*

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