

## THE PARADOX OF THE SYMPHONIC SUBLIME

Eighteenth-century writers on music, journalistic critics and authors of systematic treatises alike (and often, these were the same persons) devoted much attention to differentiating between musical genres. During the nineteenth century, this preoccupation with genre was gradually attenuated, the emphasis falling rather on technical discussions of musical form. In part, this had to do with the rise of the academy. In Adolf Bernhard Marx's *Lehre von der musikalischen Komposition*, published during the 1830s and 40s, types of compositions have been arranged according to their sectional and tonal plans, in order of increasing formal complexity, culminating in sonata form. Remarks on how sonata form may be differently handled in string quartets, solo sonatas, or symphonies tend to be *ad hoc*. Marx, who held the first chair in musicology at the University of Berlin, surely organized the treatise for pedagogical convenience.

By way of comparison, consider a treatise written published in the 1780s and 90s by Heinrich Christoph Koch, the *Versuch einer Anleitung zur Composition*. Here, compositions are arranged according to genres: solo sonata, symphony, aria, rondo, and so on. Unlike Marx, Koch emphasizes the textural, expressive, even ethical distinctions between these genres, and it is almost as an aside that he adds such remarks as, "the external arrangement of the sonata...need not be examined in particular here, for the sonata assumes all the forms which have already been described before in connection with the symphony." Citing the philosopher Johann Georg Sulzer, Koch associates the symphony with the sublime. The contrast he draws between the sonata and the symphony clearly depends on distinctions between the beautiful and sublime that had emerged in the wake of Boileau's translation of Longinus. Thus, the form of a sonata is demarcated by clear and frequent phrase endings, while in the symphony, formal clarity is obscured by sudden transitions, modulations to foreign keys, and the "forceful" linking of phrase by means of elided endings (*Takterstickung* is Koch's striking image). The sonata is characterized as "refined" and "pleasant," the symphony as "grand" and "passionate."

Koch's description suggests that the symphony makes greater cognitive demands on the listener. By now, the sublime had long transcended its original, narrow association with grand rhetorical style; it had become a psychological effect, arousing a cognitive loss of one's bearings. The gendered qualities

implicit in Koch's description of the two genres were also well established. Koch's treatise is but one instance among many of an eighteenth-century musician attempting to classify musical genres according to the aesthetic state they elicit, be it the beautiful, the sublime, or off shoots like the picturesque, the wondrous, and the pathetic. Of all musical genres, the one perhaps most consistently associated with the sublime was the symphony, no doubt initially because of the comparatively large forces involved. By the 1790s, discussions of the sublime in music generally and in the symphony in particular had a particular urgency, for philosophers found in Kant's *Analytic of the Sublime* a way to rescue music from his dismissive verdict on music "mehr Genuss als Kultur" — and on the philosopher's own terms.

Examples that Kant gives of free beauty, beauty that does not presuppose a concept of what the thing is to be, include wall paper with foliage *à la greque*, ornaments, and instrumental music. Kant, however, thought little of wall paper, rococo fashion, or music: his own tastes were firmly allied with neoclassicists like Mengs and Winkelmann. It was up to Kantians, like Schiller's friend Christian Gottfried Körner or Fichte's student Christian Friedrich Michaelis, to rescue music from the company of rococo ornament. In a 1795 essay "On the Representation of Character in Music," Körner describes human nature in language drawn from the *Critique of Practical Judgment*: "Nothing is infinite in human nature but freedom, freedom which operates on a unique scale and with unique power, freedom from the external world and all the tempestuous internal world of emotions, and which is embodied for us in the representation of character." Later, alluding to one of the Kantian antinomies, he adds "through self-awareness, we distinguish within ourselves both dependency and independence from the outer world." In short, as Kant would put it, we do not content ourselves with the immediate deliverances of our sense experiences: we theorize about how things *might be* in the realm of nature, and we postulate how things *ought to be* in the realm of morality. In doing so, we let ourselves be guided by ideas of reason, such as the categorical imperative, ideas not empirically given, nor demonstrable, but necessary as regulative principals for knowledge. Körner's question then becomes: how might music enhance our receptivity to ideas. One of his arguments is that ethos may be represented by the striving of music towards a home tonic, with increasing pain as the tonic becomes more remote, and compensating pleasure at the point of

arrival. Körner suggests that musical experience can be a sublime one, in which we overcome pain occasioned by a dissonance not merely musical but cognitive.

1795 also saw the publication of Michaelis's *The Spirit of Music in Light of Kant's Critique of Judgment*. And a few years later, for the *Berlinische musikalische Zeitung*, he contributed an essay on the musical sublime in which he singled out the symphonies of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven—this in 1805, five years before the celebrated essay in which ETA Hoffman named this triumvirate as the creators of Romantic music. Michaelis distinguishes the musically beautiful from the musical sublime in language that recalls Koch's distinction between the symphony and the sonata: "The beautiful relates to form, outline, limitation...the easily apprehended melody...gentle harmonic and rhythmic play...." He ties musical beauty to an easily acquired cognitive mastery of the object. The musical sublime, however, arises when "the listener's imagination is severely taxed in an effort to grasp the whole, so that it feels in fact as if it is poised over a bottomless chasm." The sublime opens up, in short, a rift between mind and object. How might a musical piece succeed in evoking sublime experience? Michaelis mentions the use of "unconventional, surprising, powerfully startling, or striking harmonic progressions." Again, a tortuous path to the tonic might simulate, and stimulate, a cognitive path towards the suprasensible ideas of reason that the sublime suggests by analogy.

Here we arrive at the first paradox of the symphonic sublime: How in fact is a tonal piece of music, one with a clear beginning and ending in the same key, supposed to suggest the openness, the *Formlösigkeit* of the sublime? If the composition is a bounded whole, then is sublime tonal music actually possible? Literally, it isn't, for the simple reason that sublimity is not an ontological property of any object. The sublimity we ascribe to objects actually arises within us as a consequence of our activity of judging. What is this judgment for Kant? Judgment is a faculty that operates according to the concept of purposiveness. Purposiveness legislates for our faculty of feeling (pleasure and pain) and is applied specifically to art but also to nature, in so far as we construe it as having an order far in excess of what we can know theoretically according to the pure concepts of understanding. Although Kant's famous dictum *Zweckmässigkeit ohne Zweck* has been construed anachronistically as a manifesto of *l'art*

*pour l'art*, what he really says is that we develop theories without empirical knowledge of any ultimate ends: we build them on moveable piles in shifting sand, to borrow an image from Quine.

For Kant there are two types of judgment. In a determinate judgment, the movement is from the general concept to the particular. The general concept is given and applied as a rule of synthesis. In a reflective judgment, the opposite obtains. One tries to find a general term when only particulars are given. The definition of the reflective judgment clarifies why the Third Critique is not just a critique of aesthetic judgment but also a critique of the natural sciences. Scientists work under the assumption that reflective judgments are possible, that nature can be ordered. The mediating concept of judgment is not really foundational, yet it is suffused with optimism. This is not naive optimism about our powers but a regulative principle that we have to adopt if we are to even set about doing our task. The scientist begins with an aesthetic awareness of the purposiveness of nature, a cognitive faith, as it were. This general purposiveness — we have no grounds to speak of distinctly known purposes — is a subjective intuition of the unity of a manifold; it induces the expectation that the complex will yield to the effort of reflective judgments.

For Kant, the attunement of mind and world is a *regulative*, not a *constitutive* principal; in no way can we have actual knowledge of the universe as a whole, much less of ourselves as part of it. The impossibility of reconciling our finite subjectivity with the infinite — the opening up of a cognitive abyss — can be a source of pain, a pain that the sublime mirrors. Yet, in failing to reveal the infinite, the sublime reveals ourselves to ourselves as in some sense infinite, in so far as our minds can transcend the deliverances of our senses. The sublime thus calls us to our higher faculties. With the beautiful, the *Einbildung*, as the German word for imagination suggests, builds a single big picture, creating a bounded whole out of a manifold — an activity that merges with the understanding. The boundlessness of the sublime, on the other hand means that the totality can only be thought; here, we have an activity that merges with reason. Although Kant sets strong strictures on the ability of reason to give us knowledge, reason can create ideas. We can't *know* them because they are not given in experience, but we use them to evaluate, transform, and order experience.

In order to evoke the sublime, then, a piece of music has to elicit a movement of the mind in which a flooding of our cognitive capacities unleashes an epiphany. Though the work is ultimately bounded, individual passages can temporarily cast us adrift. Some recent analytical studies of music around 1800, of symphonies and other large-format works in particular, have aimed to specify, to a greater extent than Körner and Michealis were inclined to do, just what compositional techniques might suggest the sublime. For instance, Elaine Sisman finds in the contrapuntal virtuosity of the coda to the last movement of Mozart's Jupiter Symphony an enactment of Kant's mathematical sublime. James Webster, in a study of Haydn's late works for orchestra and chorus, analyzes dynamical sublime effects created by the disruption of structural cadences: in effect, large-scale harmonic *peripateia*.

We could go even further, interpreting the history of musical genres in the late eighteenth century according to the ways in which sublime characteristics gradually invaded the genres most commonly associated with the beautiful. Consider the rondo, a genre characterized by German critics as "artless and naive," even feminine. The popularity of the instrumental rondo spread rapidly in the mid 1770s, from France into the rest of Europe. Mozart, among others, began incorporating rondo finales in his large-scale compositions. At first, these rondos, like their French models, consisted in closed formal patterns, with recurring subjects that maintained a fixed, discrete identity. In presenting a simulacrum of a closed, perfect, rationally-ordered Leibnizian cosmos, they evoked the beautiful. It was not long, however, before Mozart began creating *sui generis* amalgamations of rondo, concerto, symphony, and fugue. In such finales, the combination of traditionally closed formal types with an array of open, heterogeneous elements might suggest something of the supersensible totality that the sublime is meant to suggest.

EXAMPLE: talk through the finale of Mozart's Piano Concerto in B Flat, K. 456.

[We'll hear a rondo tune stated first by the piano, then the orchestra. Then, a purely orchestral passage serves to close off the tune and lead to a strong tonic cadence. I'll refer to this latter passage as the "closing group," and the entire thematic complex so far as a first ritornello—a section that returns, like a refrain. {PLAY}]

Next, a new tune in the solo part will dissolve into a modulatory passage that prepares the key of the fifth, or dominant. In rondo terminology, we will be hearing a transition to a dominant episode. {PLAY}]

Now, when Mozart later recapitulates the material we have heard so far, the little rondo tune swerves unexpectedly from B-flat major to the remote key of B minor, which we have to understand as a convenient respelling of C-flat minor, there being no such thing as a sharp tonic. It will be a little while before Mozart returns to the home key and to the point where he left off, before wandering into these obscure regions. From the cognitive point of view, Mozart asks us to hear *through* this disruption—to realize that ultimately this was a large-scale interpolation *within* the original tonic material. Moreover, the content of this disruption—the abrupt shift to the minor mode and the urgent yearning of the solo subject—evokes the pathetic, an aesthetic subcategory often assimilated to the sublime.]

In the typical rondo finales of the day, we usually sense a certain static, tectonic quality in the deployment of the form: tutti and solo alike state a ritornello theme that remains for the most part a discrete, unchanging entity. It is as if the limits of subjectivity were clear, the place of the individual well-defined, the social order pre-established. In some of Mozart's concertos, however, as in the movement we just heard, the pathetic solo subject, lyrical and yearning, stands out against an implacable tutti background much like the human figures foregrounded in the landscapes of Caspar Friedrich. Mozart seems to present a musical analogy to that moment in eighteenth-century thought suspended between a dogmatic definition of reason as a faculty that merely traces, however imperfectly, a pre-established order, and the Kantian idea of reason as a *critical* faculty that opens up to us not that which *is*, but that which *could be*. Mozart's rondos bespeak a new conception of subjectivity, one in which man has become the measure of the world.

Now that we have raised the question of social order, we can approach a second paradox of the symphonic sublime. The symphony was the public genre *par excellence*, the genre associated with the public concerts that were creating a new, wider audience for art music. A burgeoning musical press did its share in publicizing these works: Hoffmann's celebrated review of Beethoven's Fifth symphony ends with a plug for the printed edition. Critics considered public concerts a way to establish a sense of community. Adolf Bernhard Marx saw his journalistic and professorial activities as a means of creating an audience. For him, the symphonic concert even became a vehicle for nation building; Marx was writing in the context, of course, of the Napoleonic wars. Descriptions of the symphony often stressed the communal implications of the genre: Koch wrote that the goal of the symphony is "the expression of

an entire multitude.” Programmatic analyses, like the one the French theorist Momigny published of Haydn’s Symphony No. 103, conjured up images of large folk gatherings, of *fêtes populaires*.

And yet, in eighteenth-century discourse, the sublime is tied to the lonely subject; it is the beautiful that is associated with community. For Burke, the beautiful is other-directed, while the sublime is a solitary experience, rooted in the desire for self-preservation. We might say that in the experience of the beautiful we feel cognitively at home in the world. Beautiful nature is an ordered whole, a dwelling in which people and things find their place. The beautiful, like the moral good, is there “for us.” Kant tells us that the experience of beauty gestures towards a healing of the rift between the moral and the natural realms that is the mark of our finitude. We interpret nature as ordered with regard to the purposes of humanity, and at the same time we feel confident that the effort to be moral is not in vain.

The sublime, in contrast, is fundamentally *unheimlich*, confronting us with a picture of nature in which we are not at home, into which we have merely been cast. It is inharmonious: whereas beauty seems preadapted to our understanding, the experience of the sublime presupposes a cognitive dissonance. It does violence to our imagination — we are incapable of forming an *Ein-bildung*. That the sublime should increasingly take center stage in the second half of the eighteenth century can be linked to the disintegration of a certain kind of communal order, one in which man has lost his place.

How then, does one reconcile the two aspects of the symphony: the symphony as sublime and the symphony as the expression of community? In a penetrating essay, the musicologist Mark Evan Bonds documents both of these eighteenth-century characterizations of the symphony. Yet he never opens a path from one to the other; they remain separate topics. What do we make of a musical genre whose performance casts people together while inviting them at the same time to turn inward, treating the aesthetic experience as a metaphor for the autonomous self?

In an essay for *The Spectator*, Addison hints at an approach: the cognitive blockage of sublime experience invites a compensatory movement of the mind: “The Mind of Man naturally hates every thing that looks like a Restraint upon it, and is apt to fancy itself under a sort of confinement, when the Sight is pent up in a narrow Compass....On the contrary, a spacious Horison is an Image of Liberty, where the Eye has Room to range abroad, to expatiate at large on the Immensity of its Views, and to lose itself amidst

the Variety of Objects that offer themselves to its Observation.” The sublime, then, is an image of liberty. Yes, it marks the disintegration of a certain communal order, but it gestures towards a new one established on radically different terms. The sublime is characteristic of a humanity come of age; Kant’s *Analytic of the Sublime* and his essay “What is Enlightenment?” belong together. We must renounce having the ideas of reason (truth, the good, political progress) guaranteed by knowledge, much less dictated by a supreme being or a theocracy: we must dare to be free, to think the unknowable. The “ought” to which we subscribe no longer exists outside us. We have to legislate it for ourselves. If we are to act in the world, we need to transcend the bounds of experience.

The *Critique of Pure Reason* gives us self-knowledge as constrained beings in the world; while the *Critique of Practical Reason* opens up the ethical dimension, in which goals can be set up and realized. As a paramount instance of the split between the natural and moral realms, consider the Other, a fashionable concept these days. We can recognize persons as such, but we can’t really get a hold of a person AS A PERSON empirically. The rift within the concept of person arises from Kant’s Third Antinomy, which might be summarized like this:

1. We are natural beings, objects in the world that science can investigate like any other science. Our desires too might be explained scientifically.
2. We are moral agents of whom science knows nothing.

*We* are Kant’s rift, acted upon by nature, yet also causative. We need a richer concept of experience to explain how we recognize persons as moral agents rather than merely as particularly complicated objects. If moral freedom is not an illusion, then we cannot reduce reality to what can be known. A necessary condition of the applicability of the categorical imperative is the recognition of persons, a recognition that the first critique cannot address. The *Analytic of the Sublime* steps into this rift.

The pleasure of the sublime is tied to the ability of the human being to transcend itself, to become a self-spectator, as it were. The sublime appears to us as the epiphany of human freedom and it elicits a feeling of respect. If Kant clings to the subjectivity of the sublime, it is because one can’t give an objective account of the human being that will command respect. With its admixture of pain and pleasure, the sublime “prepares us to treasure something even in opposition to our own sensuous interest.”

Thus, the sublime suggests the possibility of transcendence WITHIN immanence, that is, the possibility of intersubjectivity. It evokes the idea that our individual reason is also universal and belongs to humanity. To be enlightened is to make the interest of humanity one's project. It is in the *Analytic of the Sublime* that Kant's third critique swerves from the aesthetic to the ethical dimension. Art gives us an imaginative grasp of the enlightenment principle that we can change our world according to the ideas of reason.

The two-sided aspect of the symphony as sublime and as public marks it as a site at which this central problem of the late, critical phase of the Enlightenment, the mediation of private and public, could be negotiated. The symphonic space gestures towards a *sensus communis*, a free, intersubjective community of discourse. Symphonic concerts might be likened to the popular *fêtes*, praised by Rousseau in his *Lettre à d'Alembert*, that symbolized democracy during the revolutionary era. Like the fête, the symphony bears witness to what Mona Ozouf, a historian of the French revolution, has called "the transfer of sacrality to earth." That the sublime is put in play here suggests, however, that this *sensus communis* will remain speculative, a regulative idea of reason. As the philosopher Jean François Lyotard puts it, "the exercise of the reflective judgment awakens the sentiment of a community that is promised but always deferred." Lyotard points to why the post-modern, in its suspicion of totalizing discourses, has resurrected the sublime. When Lyotard writes "The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself," he poses the central aesthetic challenge raised by Kant's Third Critique. Ultimately, Lyotard ties this aesthetic challenge is to an imperative with social implications: "Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name."

Yet, and this is our final paradox, the sublime too can have a coercive side. On the one hand it is supposed to evoke democratic ideals by inviting us to transcend ourselves as monadic bundles of desires, to imagine ourselves instead as part of what Hume called "the party of humanity." On the other hand, in the reception history of the symphony, the aesthetic of the sublime becomes linked with the concept of original genius, distinguished by the complexity of its music. The difficult sublime becomes valorized over the more readily apprehended beautiful. In 1806, one music critic complained of the strategy by which Beethoven's admirers elevated even his most repugnant passages to "the broad sphere of

the grand and sublime.” The anonymous reviewer adds, “The path of the difficult, shrill, and singular is sure to lead away from beauty.” We can dismiss this reviewer as conservative, but he did hit on something, even if unawares: The cognitive movement that is supposed to enhance our receptivity to the ideas of reason — to the non-dogmatic regulative principles that make ethics possible in a democratic age — can easily fold back on to itself. The quest for the artistic sublime can degenerate into the quest for the merely interesting. The community towards which the symphonic sublime gestures can shrink to an avant-garde coterie. One might read the history of modern — or perhaps we should say modernist — music in light of this slippage from the sublime to the novel. As musicologists and theorists continue to debate about their heritage, we can expect that they, like their counterparts in continental philosophy and literary criticism, will return again and again to the two-fold legacy of the sublime as both a source of modernism and a vehicle for its immanent critique.