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About music, philosophy and science...

ABSTRACT: The text attempts to answer the question whether musicians need a philosophy of music. The answer to the question of what music contributes to philosophy – a question superordinate in relation to the investigations of the links between philosophy and music – can be formulated clearly, since we find it in the texts of the most prominent representatives of European philosophical thought, including Schopenhauer, whose ideas are discussed in the paper. These issues are also discussed in literature which explores philosophical issues, by such classics of the genre as Thomas Mann and Herman Hesse, whose profound descriptions bring us closer to an understanding of that which music does directly, by expressing spheres beyond words that cannot be expressed otherwise than through music. Karl Popper regards polyphony as the greatest discovery of European culture, and provides evidence of the closeness of science and philosophy. These three levels of approaching the relationship between philosophy and music lead to demonstrating the axiological essence of music, revealed by performers, who make it possible for music to exist to the full in its sonority, unveiling its metaphysical perfection to its listeners.

KEYWORDS: philosophy of music, subjectivism, objectivism, authenticity, perfection, mass culture, higher values.

The works of Albert Einstein and Thomas Mann, representing some of the greatest achievements of science and art, are rooted in a significant trend of European thought, which examines the links between music and philosophy. This association, which originated in ancient Greece, has accompanied reflection on music and philosophy for more than two and a half thousand years. Albert Einstein, the author of the theory of relativity and co-ordinator of quantum theory and statistical physics, turns for support to music in his admirable reflections on the perfect structure of the not-fully-knowable universe. Music, with its power of intuition, brings us closer to that which eludes reason. Music “enchants by mystery”. And this feeling – for Einstein the most beautiful thing that we can experience - is at the source of true art and true science. Einstein, who played violin and piano very well, was inspired by music and “charmed by its mystery” particularly when he played the works of his favourite composers: Mozart and Bach. He sought consola-

tion in Mozart's music. "The distinct constructions" of Bach's pieces helped him in improvisation.¹ The music of Schubert he appreciated for its ability to express feelings, but he was not fond of Beethoven. Einstein was not an admirer of the great Viennese composer's works as their dramatic and personal charge was too strong; this influenced the composer's attitude to the musical form, which was different from that represented by Bach and Mozart, whose works delighted Einstein so much.

In what sense did the originator of the theory of relativity link music with philosophy? He found in the art of sound a philosophical category, presenting, or rather expressing in a direct way, that which cannot be conveyed in words. Einstein finds in music the irrational, different from rational, possibilities of perceiving those aspects of reality that the intellect cannot capture. In unifying music and philosophy Einstein is close to Schopenhauer, a philosopher whom he held in high regard. For Schopenhauer, music occupied a special position; he claimed that philosophy would be a complete, true science if it were able to explain and repeat notionally that which can be expressed by music. In this interpretation, music is an element of perceiving reality, complementing intellectual cognition. Reasoning supported by intuition ceases to be imperfect, while intuition gains from being supported by reasoning. How frequently it happens that music, more than science, "enchants by mystery" - the cognitive state so important to Einstein.

Thomas Mann, who in his philosophical-musical writing followed the theses of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, described the sphere of meanings carried by music as "expressed inexpressibility". This sphere appeals straight to the heart and in this is superior to reason. The basis of "inexpressibility" is the fact that music can express emotional, religious and metaphysical states. Woefulness, the expressive voice of the soul, present in music since its beginnings, assumes a "heartbreakingly painful" form in the twentieth century's *The Lament of Doctor Faustus*, the symphonic cantata of Adrian Leverkühn, the hero of the philosophical musical novel *Doctor Faustus*. Mann equated the fate of the composer and creator of a new compositional technique, close to dodecaphony, to the history of the German nation. Leverkühn sold his soul to the devil. He gave up love to gain power and creative invention. *Lament*, a work of pure calculation, speaks with a clear expression, in spite of, or perhaps because of, the fact that the placing of each note results from an extremely precise formal structure, and no note is allowed to follow from the heart. The *Lament's* Finale, a symphonic *Adagio*, is a variational complaint in form and an inversion of the finale of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*. Instead of the vocal rapture of Schiller's *Ode to Joy*, there is an instrumental fading away, a time of despair, preceded by a bizarre

¹ See Alice Calaprice (ed.), *Einstein w cytatach* [The quotable Einstein], trans. Marek Krośniak (Warszawa, 1997).

dance of twentieth-century “descent into hell”. The expectations of creating beautiful humanity have failed. The hopes pinned on art, on its power to build a harmonious mankind, have failed as well. And yet this does not preclude a belief in the power of the rejection of evil.

Mann, under the influence of Theodor W. Adorno, with whom he consulted on musical and technical aspects of the novel, introduces the element of hope, “the light in the night,” more cautiously than he intended. Hope appears in the finale of the apocalyptic *Lament*. The music, existing only in the writer’s imagination yet evoked so suggestively, helps out the words by communicating beyond reason. After consecutive groups of instruments die away, the piece ends with the high G of a cello, “the last word, the last airy sound” dispersing in silence. This sound brings hope like “a light in the night.”²

How was philosophy to express this sound of hope which is sought by a soul filled with despair? Not having the means to do so, it finds them in music and directs the human being sensitive to the beauty of sound towards music. We thus see that music, on the one hand, reaches the depths of the world of feelings, and, on the other, the structure of a musical composition reflects the structure of the universe.

This attribute of music is discussed by Karl Popper, regarded as one of the outstanding philosophers of the last century. For the author of *The open society and its enemies*, music constitutes a source of scientific inspiration. Like Einstein, he underlines the closeness between great science and great music. The image of the universe in music is polyphony. It is at the same time an image of the universe, harmony and order, which accords with the notions encompassed by the Greek term “cosmos”. Popper is an admirer of polyphony as the model of creating the order which inspires creative invention. He describes polyphony as the absolutely original, wonderful and unprecedented achievement of our Western Civilization, not excluding science.³ It was the rules of polyphony that influenced the logic of scientific discovery formulated by Popper, and served him in his reinterpretation of Kant’s thought.

Popper, like Einstein, was an excellent violinist and pianist. As part of his doctorate degree he passed an exam in music history. He tried his hand at composition, yet, being a true expert in music, he did not overestimate his achievements in this field. He belonged to the Society of Private Concerts whose aim was to promote the music of Arnold Schönberg, the chairman of

² Thomas Mann, *Doktor Faustus. Żywoł niemieckiego kompozytora Adriana Leverkühna, opowiedziany przez jego przyjaciela* [Doctor Faustus. The Life of the German Composer Adrian Leverkühn As Told by a Friend], trans. Maria Kurecka and Witold Wirp-sza, (Warszawa, 2001), 639.

³ Karl Popper, *Nieustanne poszukiwania. Autobiografia intelektualna* [Unended quest. An intellectual autobiography], trans. Adam Chmielewski, (Kraków, 1997), 76.

the group, as well as his musician friends. However, he did not become a promoter of dodecaphony, being an admirer of the “old fashioned” works of Anton Bruckner.

Popper was in favour of an objectivist relationship between art and feelings, which found its unattainable Platonic model in the works of Bach. That genius of polyphony regulated by the principles of the minor-major harmony focussed on solving compositional problems and not on expressing feelings. A musical composition does not acquire value and significance because it expresses the composer’s personality and experiences, but because of what it is like in itself and the quality of its sound. The objectivist theory does not deny music its emotional effect but it ascribes such influence to the musical piece and not the composer’s experiences. After all, great experiences don’t have to translate into great works. Subjective music which gives preference to the artist’s experiences, and thus puts the artist before the work, is linked to the desire to compose something original. Popper judges such attitude negatively. According to him, the aim of a true creative artist is the perfection of the work. Originality is a gift of the gods, and cannot be acquired on demand or found through experiments. The desire to be original, to stand out, to express one’s personality must disturb what might be described as the integrity of a work of art.⁴

When considering the relationship between music and philosophy, we come to the point when it is philosophy that supports music. Namely, it helps to define in what the value of music consists. That is all it can do – help because in fact, the gift of artistic creation remains a mystery which cannot be captured by scientific description. Undoubtedly, the pursuit of originality and novelty, usually linked to a desire to emphasize one’s personal originality, does not lead to a perfect work of art, especially when the aim of the creator is an avant-garde piece, being ahead of one’s time and being understood only by a chosen few. The compulsion to be ahead of one’s epoch, the main slogan of the avant-garde, became during the last century a kind of permanent revolution, which is today denied by its most enthusiastic followers with the passion equal to that which drove them when they were joining that movement. Popper does not blame the artist for trying to say something new. However, he does blame contemporary musicians for their inability to love great music – the great masters and their works, perhaps the greatest that man created.⁵

A similar attitude towards the masterpieces of music, “perhaps the greatest that man created” is adopted by Hermann Hesse, the fourth hero of the twentieth century’s musical-philosophical quartet. In the symbolic picture of the history of European spirituality sketched by Hesse, music, in its practical and theoretical dimension, constitutes, alongside mathematics, the basis of

⁴ Ibid., 86.

⁵ Ibid., 98.

the ability described by Hesse as playing the glass bead game, a game played by the chosen ones, equipped with spiritual and intellectual gifts of the highest nature. It is a play of ideas, of values of art and science, based on the cult of beauty and on meditation of a religious nature. This is a kind of *lingua sacra*, "a speech sacred and divine". A player of glass beads plays them like an organist playing the organ, penetrating the whole spiritual cosmos, creating polyphonic systems of ideas. Even beginners find parallels between, for example, classical music, harmonious personality and the formulas which express the principles of natural science. In a game of glass beads one could theoretically recreate the intellectual and spiritual content of the whole world, obviously from different points of view depending on the epoch and the person playing the game. The game is an art, a spiritual artistry, the expression of mental and emotional awareness, orienting the individual in the world of values, and is played in order to shape and enliven the sphere of the spirit. Moving around the world of values, synthesizing many ideas in a universal language, becomes a form of seeking perfection. When this perfection is directed "towards the very centre, towards existence" man becomes externally calmer, but has to be internally stronger, "has to be afire and burn".

In the contemporary world this striving for perfection is increasingly surrounded by the mass culture, which does not follow the ideals of perfection but the principles of demand and supply. Consumptionism has become god and deeper reflection is driven out by lack of time, time which comes to be furnished with ready-made models provided by the mass media. Narrow specialization, not based on spiritual values, becomes more widespread. The notion of "freedom" is confused with relativism of values. Venality and spiritual betrayal are of breathtaking, or perhaps terrifying, proportions. Our present began with an epoch called by Hesse the epoch of "columns," disseminated not only in the daily press, columns produced industrially, which "chat" even about scientific issues, simplifying everything possible to make it easily accessible. The favourite subject of articles became the private lives of eminent people, and eventually just those who became popular. Hesse gives examples of article titles: "Friedrich Nietzsche and women's fashions around 1870" or "The favourite dishes of the composer Rossini". The producers of these specialties were not only the editorial offices of periodicals, but also members of the academic community, including, as Hesse notes, famous university professors.⁶ We have to remember that Hesse completed "The Glass Bead Game" over sixty years ago; since then the standard of this kind of writ-

⁶ Hermann Hesse, *Gra szklanych paciorków. Próba opisu życia magistra ludi Józefa Knechta wraz z jego spuścizną pisarską* [Game of glass beads A tentative sketch of the life of Magister Ludi Joseph Knecht and his literary works], trans. Maria Kurecka, (Warszawa, 1999), 19.

ing and of musical compositions of this kind has become entirely subordinate to the tastes of the mass reader and mass listener.

The growing divergence between high culture and mass culture makes one think about the issue which had already been taken up by Thomas Mann, namely: do art and spiritual life influence the fate of the world? Mann and Hesse considered this issue during World War II, adding a question about the relationship between everyday life and general history versus art and spiritual life. Mann hoped to rebuild humanity. He expressed this hope with music, the famous note played on a cello. Hesse wondered whether "culture, spirit or soul" had their own history running in parallel to the brutal history of the world. Eventually he left the answers to these questions open, but emphasized that the world of values, together with the perfection which overarches them, should always be the point of reference in life and in art. Values give sense to life, and without them culture gives way to civilization. The significance and value of classical music, the art which is ranked so highly in the world of high values, will remain unchanged. Classical music, according to Hesse, is an extract and the most complete expression of our culture, its most distinct and most characteristic gesture and manifestation.⁷

And thus twentieth century thinkers take up the issues of the philosophy of music, finding in music "expressed inexpressibility", regarding it as *lingua sacra*, and describing its source as "enchantment by mystery", from which emerge such wonderful phenomena as polyphony, the totally original „achievement of our Western civilization". Music looks to philosophy for help in trying to name the essence of the value of a musical composition. And both fields of human spiritual activity meet in the sphere of philosophizing with sounds, whose links to the reality beyond music are considered by philosophers.

Are such deliberations of use to musicians? Are they useful in the process of teaching? We find a positive answer to this question in the writings of Karol Szymanowski, the rector of Warsaw University of Music in the 1930s, who could not imagine an authentic musician who would not be well acquainted with the world of values – the basis of philosophical thought. Szymanowski's views on music have a lot in common with the theories of the four of the most prominent twentieth-century thinkers discussed here. This closeness is particularly apparent when the composer talks about the essence of the value of music and its perfection. Szymanowski was the leader of a whole group of composers associated with Warsaw university who wrote about music and its relation to philosophical thought. Naturally, these issues were also taken up by the luminaries of Polish philosophy. At Warsaw university the audiences could listen to lectures by such professors as Władysław Tatarkiewicz, Roman Ingarden, Jerzy Pelc,

⁷ *Ibid.*, 47.

Leszek Kołakowski, Jacek J. Jadacki and Paweł Beylin, who taught philosophy to many generations of Polish musicians.

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