

# MODERN MUSIC

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## AN INQUIRY INTO MELODY

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HOW shall we define the meaning of what we now call "melody"? Melody today means something altogether different from what it did in the nineteenth century. Longer ago than that, the question of its meaning may not have been raised at all; most probably, one thought only of the quality of melody. There were musicians endowed with the gift of melody, and also those who lacked it. The problem as such not only was not discussed, it was not even considered.

Now the nineteenth century was a melodic century par excellence; today, on the contrary, a genuine, spontaneous melodic gift has become an incidental phenomenon, like a pleasant voice, and is treated accordingly. As a substantial part of art, melody is lost in modern music at large, and here we find a fundamental lack. Music has lost the ingredient of melody as poetry that of lyric expression. Neither melody in music, nor lyricism in poetry appears to be the main motive power any longer. These immaterial and elusive elements have been replaced by substantiality, a tangible materiality, something manufactured. Having served as the primary moving force and organic essence of art, melody and lyricism have been lately either unconditionally expelled from music and poetry, or merely tolerated, with the organizing principles taking their place. Musicians and poets of the vanguard have, until very recently, been ashamed of melody and of lyric moods. Of course I refer to spontaneous,

melodic and lyrical art and not to stylization. Many present-day composers who would not dare to write what is considered good melody according to the old masters, would willingly do so by the indirect way of stylization, thus avoiding individual participation, a personal connection with the melody so conceived.

I believe that this sense of shame may be explained by the fact that melody (any melody) is apt to reveal some intimate truth, the genuine psychological and spiritual substance of its maker. *Melody discloses the nature of the subject, not the object.*

This character of the melodic process has come into striking conflict with the impersonal esthetics and forcible objectivation that are the governing tendencies of our time. In practical modernism the conflict has been unfavorable to melody, which has thus been crowded to the background. Such was the situation that first prevailed when the modern musician still could choose between "melody" and "non-melody." The crowding out of melody had come as a reaction against the subjective, i. e. personal principle. The new esthetics was formally objective and impersonal. Let melody be submitted to objectivation as had been other musical elements. But if this were impossible, why, "so much the worse for melody". At any rate, an obvious tendency appeared to dispense with melody altogether rather than to admit it as a principle, disorganizing the impersonal forms towards which music strongly leaned. The melodic process, insofar as it had to be tolerated, was submitted to artificial deformation and mechanization and reduced, moreover, to strict subordination to other elements, particularly rhythm. Melody, the free element, was restrained by a new discipline, a sort of asceticism. This asceticism exacted an esthetic heroism from those who had something to give up, but, on the other hand, it enabled many to make music along the line of least resistance, for they had nothing to sacrifice. . . .

Even during that period, melody still existed, if only as a subterranean, unrevealed force, yet a force, none the less, nurturing the roots. But today the musical soil is dried up, exhausted, and we no longer speak of the impoverishment, but rather of the total disappearance of the living melodic process in new music. This is the logical consequence of the latest esthetic regime, and

it is probably due to undergo certain modifications, now that its impasse is so obviously manifest.



Let us consider melody in terms of ethics, rather than of formal music, as a simple virtue. Assuming that melody possesses the power of revealing the *truth*, and of disclosing a vital, and not an artificially created nature, i.e. reality—if the chief value of what we call melody in music resides in this, then it must be musical virtue first, and only after that, anything else. Accepting such a concept we must concede that there is some untruth in modernity. It is no accident surely that the very character of contemporary melody is grotesque, grimacing, compounded of irony and buffoonery. This is the result of a deflection of the melodic process from its function as a direct motive power; in other words, personal responsibility is evaded, is replaced by collective responsibility, or whatever name may be borrowed, be it “fashion,” or “the style of the epoch.”

Melody is, of course, not a moral, but an esthetic virtue, yet connected in some unaccountable manner with moral values. It discloses a unity at once of moral and esthetic order, which serves as that primary attribute by which it is judged. Melody is, as it were, the biological foundation of a musical work, but at the same time it is its moral conclusion. It is impossible to separate these two categories without destroying one of them. Or, let us make a parallel with another order of concepts, the three theological virtues, faith, hope and charity. Here morality taken by itself, and not as a consequence of truth, loses its living significance, and becomes only a form of conduct. It is probable that in our time we do not compose good melodies because we have become evil-minded. *Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh.* Our melodic gift is in direct ratio to our capacity for good, not in the sentimental but in the religious sense. An evil melody can have no existence at all. An evil melody is nonsense. An evil motif may exist, there may be motivation of an evil will (Wagner), but not an evil melody. Melody in itself is a primary good, a sort of purification through

repentance. It translates the unadulterated essence of what is, and not the inventions of the author. The quality of a melody is thus dependent exclusively upon the categories of moral and esthetic unity, and on nothing else. Even erotic melody, though of a lower order, is conceived only in the presence of great and absorbing passions. Perhaps this is the reason why the single branch of music in which melody is active and alive in our day is dance and street music. Insofar as it is not manufactured professionally, it personifies a living emotion and a reality of our existence. Without attempting any evaluation, we must admit that contemporary lyricism and melody find the most adequate expression in this lower order of dance and street art whither it has departed from higher planes. Melody is a virtue, organically connected with the three theological virtues, and, therefore, its highest achievement is incontestably in religious music, e.g. prayer. Melody is not accessible to the logic of our conscious self (as harmony and rhythm are); our intellect stands helpless before it, it is always irrational in its essence.



The primacy of melody over rhythm in music is indisputable. Rhythm is organization of musical space and time, i.e. a relative entity. Melody is a liberation in spirit from the chains of spatial and temporal limitations. Melody creates a sensation of musical being; it abolishes, as it were, the conditions of space and time. Hence the feeling of musical beatitude which melody inspires. Melody is an illusively suspended moment. The metaphysical irrationality of music, which, in all the history of art, has seldom been disputed, rests chiefly on this ability of melody to disrupt the sense of spatial and temporal causality of earthly life.

The decline of melody in new music has been due to the excessive development of rhythm. A similar overgrowth of harmony was characteristic of the beginning of the twentieth century (from Wagner's chromaticism to impressionism). The disintegration of the rhythmical principle, particularly notable in the impressionistic movement, was a result of this regeneration of harmony. Renewed interest in the problems of rhythm

was one of the chief agents in the defeat of impressionism. The concern with rhythm is in line with the general development of modern civilization. At present an infatuation, it has assumed such proportions that rhythm is today the chief substratum in composition, and all other elements have been subordinated to it. To cite an example, one of the most characteristic works of this genre, Stravinsky's *Les Noces*, is so constructed as to prevent the hearing of the music itself. No matter how many times one may hear this composition, the same thing occurs; one is unable to perceive it, so strongly is the listener held under the constant physical influence of rhythm which lies at the foundation of the work. In reading the score it is necessary to ignore the rhythm in order to distinguish the music beneath it. Here rhythm is driven to the maximum of its development and action; melody is totally submerged. It is based only on certain motifs and serves as the "motivation" of the rhythmical construction.

There is, strictly speaking, and excluding certain individual examples, no appearance of true melodic process in the two outstanding modern schools. The musicians whose works are built on the direct rhythmical basis reveal, instead of melody, a motivation based almost invariably on the design of rhythmic figuration. Then there are the German and Austrian expressionists who also use motivation, which in their case is based on the intoning of the dramatic and psychological gesture. In the first group this motivation is involuntary for it is determined by the conditions of form and rhythm. In the second the motivation is entirely arbitrary, unrestrained by anything save psychological configuration and individual inclinations, even if these inclinations are reduced to certain "norms". In either case, melody as a free element does not appear.



Melody has always been hailed as the "soul of music". But how define its esthetic aspect? A motif, a theme, a melody, all these revolve around the same center, and yet all are different in their meaning. The traditional theory, even today, does not regard anything but the upper voice of a musical composition



as a melody. This is clearly an error. Let us consider the various conceptions, and try to put them in order.

First of all, what is a theme, or a motif? It is a progression of sounds, which must lead to a certain action. A motif or a theme have no meaning if they are not connected with action. The distinction between a motif and a theme lies in the fact that a motif is always an illustration of the parallel musical action, whereas in works based on thematic development the musical action itself discloses the meaning and the content of the theme,—in other words, assists in the consumption of the musical energy contained in the theme. The motif and the theme thus appear in inverse relationship to each other. Both the motif and the theme are directly connected with the melody, but this connection is based on different principles. A motif is, as it were, an undeveloped melody. It is a melodic organism, interrupted at a certain stage of its growth and maturation. A theme is, on the other hand, a sort of regenerated melody, i.e. a melody which has already passed through the second stage of its development. The fugue is the best example of a composition in which musical behavior is utterly incomprehensible without motivation which constantly recurs the moment it weakens in the memory. The leader of the eighteenth century fugue reflects the highest development of the motif in this role. The sonata and symphony of the nineteenth century offer a similar instance of thematic development. There is, of course, no lack of compositions where the roles are confused, where the theme attempts to assume the role of the motif, and vice versa. The twentieth century is responsible for this mix-up; thus we see “motivated” sonatas and “thematic” figures.

In new music the melodic process is reduced mainly to the development of either melo-rhythmic or melo-psychic *motivation* at the expense of *thematicism*, which was the distinctive feature of the nineteenth century. Two tendencies characterized the music of that century. Romanticism introduced us to melodic pathos, which determined its specifically emotional nature; while rationalism and scepticism created the “thematization” of the growing melos, using that melos for the purpose of building the schematic musical forms of the period. Hence the entire

system of scholastic quasi-classicism of the nineteenth century, its symphonies, sonatas and variation. Schubert is an excellent example of these two tendencies, a marvelous melodic gift revealed within formal and conditional schemes. Chopin saved himself by leaving his music uncompleted, relying entirely on the supremacy of melody. What is *tempo rubato* if not music deliberately left unfinished? In the action connected with the motif we may observe the musical energy that would have transformed the motif into melody. The concentration of musical energy in melody is so strong that a short melody is frequently employed for the working-out of spatially extended compositions. This accounts, I believe, for the unquestionably stronger organic texture of musical action when it is connected with the motif rather than the theme. Action connected with a theme is a progression expressed not in direct development, but in a musical estimate of the subject. Insofar as a theme represents a problem, its solution lies not in direct action but in an act of reason.

The twentieth century, in the attempt to escape the rationalism of the nineteenth, has shown a distinct preference for direct action based on a motif, rather than for rational judgment connected with thematic structure. It has forgotten the fact that thematicism is not necessarily rational. Melody in itself is not connected with any action and does not lead to any action. It is a "thing in itself." The motif offers a justification for action, whereas the theme creates an opportunity for the development of reason.

Melody serves no purpose at all. It brings *liberation*. At any moment in the text of a musical composition, no matter how complicated the logical musical situation may be, the appearance of a melody may disrupt it and create a sense of freedom. The more significant the emerging melody, the greater is the ensuing liberation. Melody is one thing, and "music" is something quite different. In point of fact, there is "nothing to be done" about the melody. That is why it always has to be "developed," or "arranged" or simply "accompanied." Rarest of all is it composed. The best solution of the problem in the past is given not by Bach, but by Mozart. Mozart was rational in his methods of composition, but not in melody. He created "music"

and "melody" on two different grounds. He combined them lightly and freely, but the one never affected the other in his works. It is a mysterious and, at any rate, an altogether exceptional phenomenon.



For a purely formal definition of melody, we may offer the following: melody is a progression in which the function of the interval disappears. In this freedom lies the irrational quality of the melodic process. The more strongly it is expressed, the more significant is the melody. The selfsame sonorous progression grows into melody with one composer while it may not do so with another.

Debussy was the last melodist. His melody is a meteor, as it were, shattered to the tiniest bits in its fall to earth. Debussy's melody is fractional, fragmentary. But at the core all his music is melodic and melody is its main motive force. Yet in him we already see the beginning of melodic stylization, of the grotesque. After Debussy methods of stylization and organization became the rule. In our time even melodic eclecticism is rare, for want of suitable material. Instead, there emerges a new kind of eclecticism unknown heretofore—the eclecticism of stylization, and along with it, even a stylization imitating eclecticism.

Contemporaries are always inclined to consider their own period as less melodic than the previous one. Thus Beethoven was accused of being anti-melodic, as contrasted with Mozart or Haydn. Schubert, in turn, was opposed to Beethoven, Schumann to Schubert, etc. Utterances of this kind, of course, are not to be seriously reckoned with. The error of perspective is due to the inability of the contemporaries to understand the evolution of melos, which is parallel with the evolution of rhythm and harmony. Melos as a term is usually confused with melody. A composition may be utterly devoid of melody, but it cannot be without melos, for it would have no *raison d'être*, and could in no sense be considered a musical composition. Melos is the sonorous whole, the circulation in the musical organism. Even if the existence of an artificially created musical



composition without organic life could be conceived at all it would, *ipso facto*, exclude itself from the domain of musical art. Naturally the more artificial a musical composition is, the less tangible is its melos.

Nothing can be more incongruous than the question itself—whether melody is needed at all. However, the modern school has long and assiduously discussed it. The will to make music in modern times has been, to a large extent, a methodological struggle against the free element of melody which has become a stumbling block to musicians of this epoch. The conquest of melody has progressed under the sign of *constructivism*, that is, under the sign of building-up. Perhaps, the moment is at hand when that which the builders have set aside will again become their cornerstone. *Lapidem quem reprobaverunt edificantes, hic factus est in caput anguli.*