

**Anton Borkowsky, “A musical fantasy,” *Der Humorist* (21 July 1842)**

There I was, sitting in a boring village and tied up by official duties, and I come to the understanding that for a sanguine German the *dolce far niente* [carefree idleness] of the Italians is the most boring of all.

So I take up my pen with a mind to write down some remarks about music.

As I am pondering the subject I have given myself, completely transported out of prosaic everyday life, and in my mind I am rhapsodizing through the unpredictable domain of music, my flight of thought suddenly hits a barrier, due to the question that imposes itself upon me: “Why do depictions of classical music so seldom correspond to the desired result, both in relation to the performers as well as the listeners?”

Torn from the trajectory of my flight of fantasy by this contrary thought, my plumage gradually settles down, and still half intoxicated by the musical spheres examined in higher regions I suddenly find myself stretched out on my old divan, wrapped in the aromatic clouds of my tobacco pipe, comfortably gulping down the scent of the coffee next door with my nose raised – but to my disgust I become aware of a gigantic specter through the veil of the clouds I had generated, its mocking gaze directed at me, and in answer to my question above pointing with index finger at his magnificent harlequin jacket!

It was the spirit of the time!

I followed the direction of his finger, and glimpsed in the folds of his checkered clothes violin variations sung by a soprano or tenor voice; then solos for all instruments, nothing but cloudbursts of 64th notes – a kind of blaring spectacle of harmony, but with clashing trumpet, worthless piccolo, grim, large drum, and all the other Turkish, toneless noise instruments in the main roles – I also caught sight of operas arranged *without text* for the piano – for two flutes – for a recorder, and so on! – After this most edifying meditation the monster disappeared, leaving behind a smell with which infernal spirits usually tend to regulate us poor mortals.

After I had recovered somewhat from the fright, I began to think about the manifestation, and finally had to admit that the good zeitgeist was unfortunately absolutely right.

When it comes to awakening musical enjoyment among the majority of participants, the composer must above all take care to astonish, he must make unheard-of levels of difficulty and tightrope walks of all kinds the order of the day, where not only the performer’s hair stands on end, but also the listener’s, and so both parts, clenched and sweating, look forward with true soulful anxiety to the happy denouement of the neck-breaking action.

In a word, people just want a feast for the ears, the sort of thing that cannot penetrate deeper down to the heart, it is directly against the spirit of the times, and therefore boring.

According to this assumption, it is quite clear on a daily basis that classical-dramatic vocal music, and classical instrumental music even more so, is currently out of place for the public.

To be fair, however, it would be more than unreasonable, even pedantically bold, to ask someone who is completely uninitiated in the art of sound to find a special taste for a piece of music where the thread of the melody wanders between four or five instruments like a labyrinth, resembles a conversation of interrelated ghostly voices, whispering among themselves that they may claim the chosen theme according to the differences in their individuality, yet always with equal right, and only bid farewell to the listener intimately united after several exchanges at the conclusion of their conversation.

This is of course a pleasure, and after dramatic singing even the most exquisite one that can only be expected from instrumental music; even the nimble ear needs some years to understand this sweet language. – Yes, there are some so-called virtuosos who will never learn it, because such note-gobblers only perform heroically, accustomed to fiddling down everything around them, and they are too absorbed by their own excellence to let someone else get also in a word edgewise. – These heroes of the 64th note, on average completely unfamiliar with the enthusiasm for real art, are basically just musical craftsmen [*Handwerker*], and, because they are so completely intoxicated by their divine ego, they are also absolutely useless in classical music, because an indispensable duty of every ensemble musician when they are performing is restraint [*Verzichtleistung*] and absolutism!

But enough of these musical bogeymen, whose soulless swarm of variations so confounds the world, and whose mere recollection makes my blood freeze; we prefer to take a look at a selected dinner party where the man of the house is eager to bring a number of invited guests, alongside a well-stocked table, an exquisite treat as yet achieved by means of performing good musical works.

Is there indeed a more touching sight than seeing the poor, tolerant listeners sitting next to each other in their grief and dejection, and how they hardly dare to breathe during the enjoyment of the art on offer, out of concern for irritating the sensibility of the host, and only every now and then raise a furtive glance toward the ceiling, in which the quiet complaint about their unearned hard lot can be recognized. – They would surely one and all fall into some dangerous nervous state, if it were not for the gaming tables already covered with chips for the elders, and the cakes prominently displayed, and the prospect of a subsequent dance giving the younger portion of society strength to persevere. – Or let's look at the flip side of the picture!

Some years ago I often played music with one of my acquaintances, who was generally recognized as an awesome [*grausamer*] virtuoso, and anyone who was able to attend his productions counted themselves fortunate.

This man, incidentally a good soul at peace with the whole world, was nevertheless somewhat at odds with the musical-rhythmic movement which we common people tend to call meter, and at his performances it pleased him far more to spurn the traditional confines in that unbounded free flight of fancy where no devil could follow him, much less we poor companions; regardless – once he was underway, paying no mind to melody and harmony most cruelly [*grausamste*] at loggerheads, and unmoved by the most clamorous dissonances as submissive witnesses of the horribly dismembered composition processed his part with the greatest of ease, – after

completing this yeoman's labor while looking around with smug glances, he forced the heroes bathed in sweat from participation in the musical battle just delivered, with the question: "Can you believe it! wasn't that magnificent?" to the unanimous assurance that nothing could be nicer.

The personnel listening also sincerely agree in this favorable judgment, because, look! – it is unbelievable, and yet true – they had only envisaged the virtuoso's tremendous dexterity, and had completely ignored what was being imposed on the ear in ghastly disharmony.

Although there are honorable exceptions even among many lay people who without the aid of art are already gifted by nature with the right feeling for the true beauty of music, in general however I come to the conclusion:

It is more than cruel [*grausam*] to reveal the charms of the most beautiful muse before the eyes of the crowd, charms for which the poor can only be expected to exhibit derision, or senseless chatter about the zeitgeist and the unstoppable progress (?) of art!

Therefore, and until nobler tastes have gained the victory over Italian frivolity (an era that may not be so distant anymore), at the risk of an otherwise bilious fever it is quite advisable for one and all during performances of classical music with like-minded acquaintances to block the snail in his shell. Because, is there anything more irritating than to despise seeing what one loves?