Societal Views of Music and Composers, 1685-1827

by Scott McLetchie

Not only did the 18th century see great and sweeping changes in the forms and types of music, but it also saw a change in the role and function of the composer. The first half of the century saw the continued development and perfection of the baroque period, largely under the guiding hand of Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750). The baroque was followed by the classical period, brought to fulfillment by perhaps the greatest composer and musician who ever lived, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791). The century ended with Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) shattering the constraints of the classical forms to effect the transition between the classical and romantic periods.

In a similar fashion, these three men exemplify the shift in duties, responsibilities and esteem of the composer of music. In Bach's day, survival as a composer depended absolutely upon receiving some form of patronage, generally from the church or from the aristocracy. Mozart's example demonstrates this need very dramatically - although the best musician and composer of his day, he was reduced to pauperism because of his own alienation of possible patrons. Beethoven, on the other hand, did for composers what he did for music, breaking the traditional conceptions of the role a composer "ought" to play in society and increasing the measure of respect awarded to such artists.

The baroque period (1600-1750) <1> was characterized by a shift from the medieval concepts of modes (certain set, limited patterns of musical composition) to the division of major and minor tonalities; for example, with the advent of the baroque the key of a work was indicated in the title *(Mass in B Major, Toccata and Fugue in D Minor).* Tempo -- adagio, *allegro* -- and dynamics -- forte, *pianissimo* -- began to be indicated regularly.

Improvisation became an extremely important discipline. The composer would indicate a rough "skeleton" theme in the score that the performer would embellish in performance by extemporaneous ornaments and harmonies. Harmonic counterpoint ("texture consisting of two or more independent melodic lines" <2>), one of Bach's specialties, was a standard, as was the prominent use of the bass as the voice of the lowest theme, *basso continuo.*

The baroque also saw the development of the modern musical forms of opera, cantata and oratorio in vocal music, and sonata, suite and concerto in instrumental music. <3> Pervasive throughout all was the fugue, a style similar to the canon, in which a theme is introduced, played against itself, diminished, augmented, inverted, and built up to a grand finale of excitement and emotion. <4>

In all, the baroque reflected the artistic and intellectual changes of the period in history -- the post-Reformation, revolutions in science and philosophy, new styles in art and literature and especially the rising interest in and patronage of music and musicians by the aristocracy. This had the ultimate effect of allowing the musicians and composers greater freedom of emotional expression than they had enjoyed previously. <5>

Johann Sebastian Bach was born into the baroque period on March 21, 1685, in Eisenach, Germany, the eighth child of Johann Ambrosius Bach and not the last in a long line of musical Bachs. Johann Sebastian once traced the musical line back to Veit Bach, a German-Hungarian baker who died in 1619. Harold C. Schonberg writes:

The family was industriously fertile, and for over 200 years bred true, producing one respected musician after another. There were musical Bachs in Arnstadt and Eisenach, in Ohrdruf, Hamburg and Luneburg, in Berlin, Schweinfurt and Halle, in Dresden, Gotha. Weimar, Jena, Mulhausen, Minden and Leipzig. <6>

If music permeated the Bach family in general, and Johann Sebastian in particular, then so, too, did Lutheranism. Many of Bach's relatives were employed (such as his father and older brother) as church organists. From the beginning of his life, Lutheran theological and musical views bombarded Bach, exerting a long-lasting influence over the man and his music. Jan Chiapusso stresses the importance of Lutheranism in Bach's life:

The roots of its theological doctrine had grown deep and formed the only key lie had to the riddles of the universe. Throughout his life he pursued the objective of a career devoted to church music . . . he frequently wrote music for secular occasions, but even this eventually found its way into one of the church cantatas, or other religious pieces. <7>

Bach himself once said that "the aim and final reason . . . of all music , should be none else but the Glory of God and the recreation of the mind." <8>

Bach studied organ under his father, the organist at Eisenach, and later under his older brother Johann Christoph, organist at Luneburg and former student of Pachelbel, and it was on the organ that Bach first began composing. He received a job in 1703 at Arnstadt as organist, remaining until 1707 when he took a similar post at Mulhausen, where he remained for a year. In 1708 he became court organist in the chapel of the Duke of Weimar and was later appointed concertmaster. He remained in the duke's service until 1717 when he became music director at Prince Leopold's court in Cothen, staying until 1723.

Then came what Bach considered to be the crowning achievement of his career, his appointment as cantor of St. Thomas' school and music director in Leipzig, positions he held until his death in 1750 at the age of 65. <9>

It is in Bach's capacity as cantor that the role of the composer/musician of the day can be seen. The city council of Protestant cities were the direct employers of many musicians and composers. Chiapusso states that the city council of Leipzig looked upon Bach's "musical performances and compositions only as one of his duties" as musical director for Leipzig. <10>

There were other duties, and they were numerous. In his application to the post of cantor in 1723 Bach promised to: set the boys (in the choirs) "a shining example of an honest,

retiring manner of life"; see to the arrangement and conducting of music in all four of the city's churches; demonstrate to the "Honorable and Most Wise Council" respect and obedience, as well as to the "Honorable Inspectors and Directors of the School;" instruct the boys in vocal and instrumental music both, to save the city money; "arrange the music that it shall not last too long;" and in general, to submit to the council in all matters musical. <11>

Also, he was required to compose and conduct a cantata every week and to provide Passion music for Good Friday services. Additional income was derived from providing wedding and funeral music, and music for city festivals. As Schonberg points out, these duties were typical of any cantor's post. <12> Similar duties were affixed to similar posts *(Kapellmeister,* music director, etc.) in aristocratic courts.

Music was generally composed and performed specifically for some event. It was also regarded as an intellectual exercise, a profession or craft. Relatively little attention was paid to music as an "art." For example, when Bach visited the court of Frederick the Great in Prussia in May 1747, the king (who fancied himself something of a musician) gave to Bach a theme that the composer proceeded to extemporize into a six-part fugue, which is no small feat; the king was duly impressed by Bach's intellectual grasp of music.

When Bach returned to Leipzig, he wrote a piece titled the *Musical Offering,* containing 10 canons. He dedicated it to Frederick, but left the endings to each canon unwritten so that the king could puzzle them out on his own. <13> This is indicative of the attitude with which many noblemen and patrons, as well as composers, approached the craft of music in this time.

Moreover, composers could not be sure, indeed did not expect, that their music would survive to be played again and again. Manuscripts were generally not published; many of Bach's pieces survive only because his sons saved them. Schonberg vividly demonstrates this.

[Bach] lived before the romantic notion of art for art's sake, of music composed for eternity. . . . Like all composers of his day. he regarded himself as a working professional, one who ordinarily wrote to fill a specific need. . . . [B]y and large he fully expected the bulk of his music to disappear after his death. When he became cantor in Leipzig, he disposed of all his predecessor's music, and he knew that his successor would just as summarily get rid of whatever Bach manuscripts were around. <14>

If Bach represented the consummate baroque musician and composer, then Mozart represented the pinnacle of the classical. The three basic changes which characterize the classical period in music (1750-1820) as opposed to the baroque were: the replacement of counterpoint with homophony, the elimination of the *basso continuo* and the introduction of new instruments.

Homophony ("a texture consisting of a single melodic line with subordinate accompaniment" <15>) pervades all aspects of classical music, as polyphonic

counterpoint had dominated the baroque. Harmonies were less complex; improvisation virtually disappeared. "Absolute music" was preferred, music for music's sake, not meant to represent anything other than itself (as opposed to program music, which attempted to portray something non-musical, e.g. Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons).* The classical symphony reached perfection of form under Haydn. <16>

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was born on Jan. 27, 1756, the son of Leopold Mozart, a court musician employed by the archbishop of Salzburg. An accomplished musician himself, Leopold began instructing his son in music and Wolfgang proved to be, as was his older sister Maria Anna, a child prodigy. As Schonberg points out, it soon became evident that "there was literally nothing in music that he could not do better than anybody else." <17>

Mozart's mind was phenomenal. He could write down one piece of music while composing another in his head. His sight-reading was perfect as was his ear -- he could tell if an instrument was the least bit out of tune. He could play back or even write out any piece note for note -- and even improve on it -- having heard it just once. Consequently, his mind soaked up music of all types from the time he was very small. There was no instrument that he was not competent on, and no musical form in which he did not write brilliant music.

However, there was a price to pay for such genius. Leopold Mozart exploited his son's talents (and those of his daughter as well) to no end. Mozart's youth from 1762-1777 was spent mostly on the road, performing for everyone important in Europe: Munich, Passau, Linz, Vienna and Pessburg in 1762; Heidelberg, Augsburg, Schweitzingen, Mainz, Frankfurt, Coblenz, the Austrian Netherlands and Paris in 1763; London for all of 1764 and part of 1765; Ghent, Rotterdam, Antwerp, the Hague, Lyons, Geneva, Berne and Zurich in 1766; Bern, Moravia and 15 months in Vienna from 1767 to 1769; Innsbruck, Verona, Milan, Bologna, Parma, Florence, Rome, Naples and Venice in 1770-1771; and general tours around Germany and Austria from 1771-1777. <18> Nonetheless, despite large audiences everywhere, the touring did not turn out to be as lucrative an undertaking as Leopold would have liked.

This extensive touring was a double-edged sword -- although it allowed Mozart to hear virtually every important composer, musician, and singer in Europe (and they to hear Mozart), it increased Mozart's dependence on his father, to say nothing of bolstering his ego to enormous proportions. This was to cost him, for he developed a tactless and abrasive nature, and, once out of his father's strict supervision, he became arrogant and undisciplined. <19> Consequently, he made few real friends in the musical world and never managed to land a lucrative post.

Musically Mozart matured when he moved permanently to Vienna in 1781. His first few years there were reasonably successful -- his operas received numerous performances, he had many pupils and he received a great number of commissions for public and private works and performances. Then, however, his luck took a turn for the worst. As Donald Grout points out, due to a number of factors, "the fickle public deserted him,

commissions were few, family expenses mounted, his health declined, and, worst of all, no permanent position with a steady income came his way, except for a trifling honorary appointment in 1787 as Chamber Music Composer to the Emperor." <20>

This decline in success was due in no small part to the ease with which this smug young man made enemies, enemies who often actively blocked his way to success. Both Schonberg and Stanley Sadie mention the case of Antonio Salieri, court composer to Joseph II, who jealously guarded all the important musical contacts in Vienna from Mozart. <21> His reputed wild lifestyle did him no good either.

So it was that the most brilliant and gifted composer of his day died a pauper in December 1791 at the age of 36, on the eve of the musical revolution from the classical to the romantic period.

Hugh Miller expresses the romantic-classic dichotomy in a series of opposites, romanticism being the first of the terms in each set: "pathos-ethos, subjectivity-objectivity, emotionalism-rationalism." <22> Program music became preferred, as music came to be more generally associated with art and literature. Nationalism entered into musical composition, as it did into all aspects of European life at this time.

Greater freedom of expression was allowed, greater latitude in the use of musical forms; e.g. dissonance entered widely into the musical composition. Experimentation was encouraged. In the search for greater emotional expression, forms were lengthened and shortened, sizes of orchestras varied greatly, texture and sonority increased in richness. Form was subordinated to content; music became very individualistic. <23> And it was Beethoven, one of the most powerful individuals in the history of music, who effected these changes.

The exact birth date of Ludwig van Beethoven is not known; he was baptized, however, on Dec. 17, 1770. As were Bach and Mozart before him, he was born into a musical family. His father, Johann, was a court tenor, and his grandfather was a bass singer and the *Kapellmeister* in the electoral court of Cologne in Bonn.

Early on Beethoven manifested a deep reverence for his grandfather (who also bore his name) that bordered on hero-worship and which led to Beethoven's desire to study music. <24> As was Mozart, he was something of a *Wunderkind,* but without Mozart's extraordinary compositional abilities. Johann van Beethoven recognized his son's innate musical talent and severely trained his son; Beethoven's later compositions are in some ways a reaction to the rules that his father imposed upon him. <25>

As Beethoven grew older, he grew more difficult to teach. "He was too confident of his own genius," Schonberg writes. "Once he made up his mind about something, he *knew* it was right." <26> He had a very strong personality and force of will, which, when coupled with his genius and given the time into which he was born, made him unstoppable. Grout notes the timeliness of Beethoven's maturity as a composer and musician:

He inherited from Haydn and Mozart a style and certain musical forms which were well developed but still capable of further growth. He lived at a time when new and powerful forces were abroad in human society . . . . Through external circumstances and the force of his own genius lie transformed this heritage and became the source of much that was characteristic of the romantic period. But he himself is neither classic nor romantic; he is Beethoven, and his figure towers like a colossus astride the two centuries. <27>

Beethoven was a rule-breaker; this allowed him to open new doors. Unlike Mozart, Beethoven composed very slowly and painfully. His own harshest critic, he was constantly revising his music, seldom absolutely satisfied with he outcome. Much of Beethoven's life seems to be reflected in his music; this was unusual for the time. Beethoven uses traditional forms only so far as they let him express his feelings and his passions. If a rule did not work for him, he ignored it.

For instance, his Sixth Symphony consists of rive movements instead of the traditional four and is the first programmatic symphony; his Ninth Symphony, written when he was completely deaf, contains a choral movement, unheard of before Beethoven did it; most of his works were longer than was "standard." Emotion and feelings shift, often abruptly within the same work, from wildly frenetic and exuberant, to gloomy and desperate, to tender and sweet. <28> Nothing about Beethoven was predictable except that he would have his own way.

Perhaps Beethoven's greatest contribution to musical society, apart from his music itself, was that he brought the idea of art for art's sake into the musical realm. Music came to be accorded a status equal to that of painting, sculpture and literature. It became an outlet for emotional expression, not just an entertaining diversion for the aristocracy. As Schonberg puts it,

Beethoven looked upon himself as an artist, and he stood up for his rights as an artist. Where Mozart moved in the periphery of the aristocratic world, anxiously knocking on doors, never really admitted, Beethoven . . . kicked open doors, stormed in and made himself at home. He was all artist, a creator, and as such superior to kings and nobles. <29>

His genius and success made it such that he was largely able to make his way without patronage (although he did receive some financial assistance from admiring nobles); in any event, he paved the way for later composers to do without patronage. He became so respected and admired that he was able to dictate his own terms, something that Bach or Mozart had never been able to do. "People no longer come to an arrangement with me," he wrote to Franz Wegler in 1801. "I state my price and they pay." <30>

Beethoven's success as a musician and composer can be seen in terms of his funeral in Vienna on March 29, 1827, three days after his death. More than 10,000 Viennese lined the streets for the funeral procession; a funeral oration was written by Franz Grillparzer, Beethoven's biographer, and spoken by the famous actor Heinrich Anschutz; the composer was laid to rest in the parish cemetery to the accompaniment of a solemn

Miserere. <31> It was as if some great prince had died, not a composer. Compare that to Mozart's tiny funeral and burial in an unmarked common grave only 36 years before. Already the respect accorded musicians and composers as artists had increased greatly.

Notes

1 The dates for all three of these musical periods are general and somewhat arbitrary; certainly the breaks in style and forms were not as sharp as the dates suggest.

2 Hugh M. Miller, *History* of Music, 4th edition (1947. rpt. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1972), p. 211.

3 Miller, pp. 82-85.

4 Douglas R. Hofstadter, *Godel, Escher, Bach* (New York: Vintage. 1979), pp. 8-9.

5 Donald Jay Grout, A *History* of *Western Music* (1960; rev. New York: Norton, 1973), pp. 294-97.

6 Harold C. Schonberg, *Lives of the Great Composers* (New York: Norton, 1970), p. 17.

7 Jan Chiapusso, *Bach's World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), p. 58.

8 J. S. Bach, quoted in Schonberg, p. 25.

9 Grout, p. 417.

10 Chiapusso, p. 178.

11 J. S. Bach, quoted in Schonberg. pp. 19-20.

12 Schonberg, p. 20.

13 Hofstadter, pp. 4-8.

14 Schonberg, p. 18.

15 Miller, p. 212.

16 Miller, pp. 116-18.

17 Schonberg, p. 75.

18 Stanley Sadie, *Mozart* (New York: Grossman, 1965), pp. 7-30.

19 Schonberg, p. 77.

20 Grout, p. 504.

21 Sadie, p. 60.

22 Schonberg, p. 106.

23 Miller, p. 184.

24 Miller, pp. 184-85.

25 Maynard Solomon, *Beethoven* (New York: Macmillian. 1977), pp. 92.

26 Schonberg, p. 92. 27 Schonberg, p. 93.

28 Grout, p. 513.

29 Grout, pp. 513-18.

30 Schonberg, p. 91.

31 L. van Beethoven, quoted in Schonberg, p. 95.

32 Solomon, p. 293.

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