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978-0-521-29902-2 - Music and Language: The Rise of Western Music as Exemplified in Settings of the Mass

Thrasybulos Georgiades

Excerpt

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1 · Introduction

This book addresses itself to those who are attracted by music, to the friends of music: amateurs as well as professionals. It attempts to focus attention on certain characteristics of the cultural–intellectual sphere which we call music.

If we proceed from our own experience and ask ourselves what we think of as music today, we find that our approach is different from that of our ancestors. For until a short time ago, up to the time of Beethoven or Schubert, the general public's awareness of music was concentrated almost exclusively on contemporary or recently composed works. Since then, however, things have become different; following the Viennese classical period the situation changed abruptly. Mendelssohn, Schumann and Brahms, Berlioz, Liszt and Wagner, and later Richard Strauss – all of these composers did not represent for the public of their own time the musical scene in its entirety. They themselves dedicated a part of their efforts to the interpretation of the music of the past. From that time on it became customary to consider older works just as valid a part of the contemporary scene as those newly composed, and to transmit them accordingly. Thus musical activity in the late nineteenth century was already strongly affected by the past. In the course of the twentieth century the situation has changed ever further to the advantage of older works. Nor does this apply only to the concert hall: activities such as the Youth Movement (*Jugendbewegung*) and the cultivation of folk song and of amateur chamber-music groups have worked in this direction. And certainly the pursuit of historical research in music has contributed its share. So it is that in the course of the last century and a quarter a fundamental change has occurred in the public consciousness with regard to music; a transformation has taken place in the very concept of music. For the musician and the music-lover of today – even for the composer – new creative work represents only a minor part of what we would call the current musical scene. For in our time works of the past claim the right to be performed; they take their stance as an effective force. The desire to incorporate the music of the past into the consciousness of the present has become so strong that it is no longer possible to speak of an eclectic relationship to certain periods or of the arbitrary singling-

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out of specific major composers and famous works, or even of a simple longing for that which is past. Our goal is higher: we want to understand music in its entirety as a unified whole – all of the music which lives within us, which has the right to live within us. This, however, is *our* music, that of our own past and present. We are no longer content to accept only those random portions which are readily available to us. It is our ambition to restore all of the components without any gaps and to comprehend the resulting sequence as growth and change. In this totality, this genetically formed unit, we would like to see the very essence of music. In earlier periods music was, for the individual, in a certain sense accidentally determined: it consisted of works currently composed. The concept of music was static; it did not embrace the dimension of growth, of time. It is thus understandable that anyone who reflected on the nature of music, while taking as his point of departure its current and thus accidentally provided segment, soon abandoned this, and with it historical fact in general, to tread the path of pure speculation, as philosopher, in his search for the essence of the musical phenomenon.

How differently is the musical awareness of the present determined! Because music is now understood as a genetic sequence, as an entity, it has taken on the dimension of time. It is no longer possible to ignore this now essential factor. From now on we can make vital observations about music only by pursuing the singular relationship between the permanent and the changing. We soon discover that substance and growth are more closely intertwined than could have been imagined by those of an earlier, more naive and, if one will, more felicitous epoch; that they are inextricably bound one to the other. We perceive that the substance harbors within itself much more of the historical than was formerly suspected, that music can in fact be interpreted only as growth, as change.

It is possible to observe the formation of the music of Western civilization from various angles. Two mutually exclusive viewpoints represent this music (a) as an isolated, aesthetically autonomous phenomenon, as sound, (b) as something rooted in the universal concept of the human–intellectual. The first interpretation can be pursued when attention is focused on the structure of the musical substance. Access to the second is best obtained through an explanation of the relationship between music and language. In this book we propose to do both. We will represent the formation of Western music as the problem of the constant confrontation of music with

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language; at the same time, however, we will also view music as an autonomous means of expression and will accordingly examine the formation of musical structure.

In a certain sense language stands above art, that is, above poetry or music: as a result of the meaning which it conveys, it expressly points beyond the sphere of the purely aesthetic. It also, however, points to the sound as something constant, as something immutable in its significance. It thus provides a link with the permanent, from which we can measure the changing. Drawing upon language allows the assurance that we can examine change without losing sight of unity.

If, with this in mind, we look for a point of entry into Western music, we find nothing more appropriate than the Mass. With the Mass is linked an entire procession, to this day unbroken, of musical settings of the same text. We are not, however, simply confronted with the connection to language in the strict sense of the word. We are obliged to view music as rooted in the universal domain of the human—historical—intellectual. We touch upon the question of the relationship between idea and music, between event and music. For the language of the Mass is the conveyor of an idea, of an event. By posing the question in this manner we are pursuing as our goal not so much the music itself as the language, the idea, the event as sound. Only when we have succeeded in reversing our point of view, when we have become vitally aware of the secondary position of music with regard to the universal—intellectual on the one hand, while confronting it with the autonomy of musical structure, with the independence of the musical vehicle of meaning on the other — only then can we measure the span between these two cornerstones of musical reality. Only this puts us in a position to understand the phenomenon of music as realized in the formation of Western music in a really comprehensive way.

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If we want to understand historical music as a unified whole, we must include antiquity. For present purposes, however, we shall touch only upon those aspects which are necessary in pointing out

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what it is that connects antiquity and Western civilization and what separates them.

For the ancient Greeks, music existed primarily as verse. The Greek verse line was a linguistic and simultaneously a musical reality. The connecting element, common to both language and music, was rhythm. A verse line in a modern Western language – German, for example – can, to be sure, establish an order in the succession of accents which, proceeding from language, is also binding for the music:

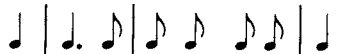
Das Wándern íst des Müllers Lúst.

It cannot, however, by itself determine all aspects of the musical rhythm. For this Western verse line is not a musical but rather a linguistic form. For that reason it can be set to music in various ways:

e.g. $\frac{2}{4}$ 
Das Wandern ist des Müllers Lust

or $\frac{3}{4}$ 

or $\frac{2}{4}$ 

or $\frac{2}{4}$ 

The ancient Greek verse line behaved differently. Here the musical rhythm was contained within the language itself. The musical–rhythmic structure was completely determined by the language. There was no room for an independent musical–rhythmic setting; nothing could be added or changed.

Ἄριστον μὲν ὑδῶρ, ὃ δὲ χρυσοῦς αἰθόμενον πῦρ


(Pindar, Olympian Ode I, 1)

The ancient Greek word comprised within itself a firm musical component. It had an intrinsic musical will. The individual syllables could be neither extended nor abbreviated. They were by nature long or short. The speaker was obliged to perceive them as stable, inflexible elements. This substantive, concrete aspect of the ancient Greek language was its musically conceived rhythm, and it is precisely this which is missing from modern Western languages.

The essential characteristic of this so-called *quantitative* rhythm

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lies in the organization of time not by means of the material measure but rather through the utilization of longs and shorts, as they were already contained in the Greek language (see the example above). Time is realized primarily through the almost substantive dimensions of these elements. The demarcation and thus the measurement of time is here the simple result of quantity, of duration. The individual elements do not comply with a pre-existent pattern, with an already organized system of time; rather it is they who, entering as independent quantities, fill in and thus at the same time subdivide the span of time that until then was wholly unarticulated. The rhythmic principle of antiquity is based not on the distinction between the organization of time (the measure, system of accents) and its filling-in (with various note values) but rather on intrinsically filled-in time. This quantitative rhythm was determined by the language; it was a characteristic of the Greek language.

This applies, however, only to the Greek of the ancients. By about the fourth century B.C. a singular process had set in, which can be viewed as the shrinkage of the musical component. This stood in a reciprocal relationship to the modification of the intellectual-cultural outlook of the ancient world. The language became increasingly uncertain in its handling of the musical-rhythmic component, the musical substance became ever less distinct until it vanished altogether. This process was completed during the first centuries of Christendom. But what had become of the firmly structured verse line of ancient Greek? Had it perhaps, after the loss of its musical-rhythmic component, been turned into the kind of verse we know today? By no means. For the verse line of Greek antiquity did not contain even the rudiments of a systematic arrangement of accents; it thus lacked the prerequisite to the formation of the verse of modern Western languages. After the loss of that quality which was essential to the verse, namely its firm rhythmic-musical contour, there remained only a rhythmically amorphous mass. There emerged what we call prose. A reading of the line which we have quoted above without its formerly intrinsic musical rhythm results not in a verse line of the modern Western kind but rather in genuine prose with fortuitous distribution of the accented and unaccented syllables:

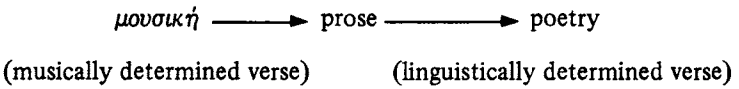
Ἄριστον μὲν ὕδωρ, ὃ δὲ χρυσὸς αἰθόμενον πῦρ

As long as the musical-rhythmic principles of antiquity ruled, the accents were performed melodically rather than dynamically. Only after the musical substance had fallen away did they come into

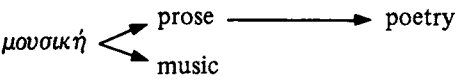
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the foreground, now transformed into dynamic accents. The succession of accents which resulted does not, however, in any way conform to the rhythmic verse line of antiquity; it is accidental. The verses of modern Western languages are only possible against the background of prose: through the introduction of a system of accents into this rhythmic – let us call it by name – chaos. This process can also be documented historically: whereas we encounter verse (the Homeric hexameter) at the beginning of the ancient Greek linguistic tradition, it is the new prose which we find at the inception of Western Christian history. It is in prose that Christianity is proclaimed, first in Greek, then in Latin; and prose forms the oldest component and the foundation of the Christian liturgy. Verses emerge from this base as a secondary and a later product, and they no longer contain the musical–rhythmic components which characterized the verse of Greek antiquity.

The ancient Greek verse line was a singular formation for which there is no analogy in Western Christian civilization. It was, if you will, music and poetry in one, and precisely because of this it could not be separated into music and poetry as two tangibly distinct components. For this particular vehicle of meaning the Greeks, however, had a special term: *μουσική* (*musiké*). We thus have the following pattern:



What, however, has become of the purely musical component of *musiké*, of the Greek verse line? It appears that in the process of the shrinkage of the linguistic–musical substance there remained, as it were, a musical shell which became autonomous, which became what we call music. We can thus supplement the above diagram as follows:



It is inaccurate to translate *musiké* as *music*, for these two terms designate two different things. *Musiké* cannot be translated; and yet the word lives on to the present time in its Western transformation as *music*, it is on everyone’s tongue: and so it is that the etymological identity points to the origin of our music, to the unity of antique

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and Western civilization, to the intellectual—cultural continuity from Homer to the present day. The change in meaning, however, points to the gulf which separates the two worlds.¹

From the original unity has resulted a duality; from *μουσική* have emerged poetry and music. Only now, only within the history of modern Western civilization, has it become possible to separate music and language definitively from one another. From now on there also exists, however, as a reminder, as it were, of their common historical roots, a longing of the one for the other, the tendency to complement each other. The various results of this combination, however, have nothing in common with the *musiké* of antiquity. For here we are confronted not with an entity which integrates music and language within itself, but rather with a Western language which is expressly set to music.

The tendency towards the combining of language and music is already present in the early Christian liturgy. The linguistic form is prose; it is defined, however, by the necessity to speak in terms of the Cult, in the language of the Christian—sacred community. The Word must sound forth. For within the community the Word exists only in its sounded and not in its written form. As the sacred Word it cannot, however, be made to sound in its natural form as subjectively colored speech. It demands a musically fixed performance. And this is the moment at which Western music is born. The liturgical text forms the portal through which music enters into the cultural history of the Western Christian world.

There begins a constant confrontation between music and the word as the original phenomenon of the intellectual—cultural sphere. This confrontation forms the basis of the history of Western music; it touches the very nerve of its existence.

And what a movement is thus begun! The steadfastness of this confrontation is one of the most impressive features of Western intellectual history. Century after century takes on this task without diminishing its force or interrupting its tradition. The products of the past are transformed, are differently interpreted, and the result is something new. It is within this confrontation that Western music has developed. Well into the seventeenth century, until Heinrich Schütz, the setting of language to music formed the main task of the great historical tradition of music. Only with Bach, in the first half of the eighteenth century, did the focus change. Not that the music which was bound to language now became less important. But in the person of Bach instrumentally conceived music, in a rise of scarcely

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conceivable rapidity and following approximately a century of preparation, exploited completely new intellectual domains. From this point on it becomes necessary to deal with it specifically, not just for its own sake but also as a means of grasping the new situation of music in general and its new relationship to language in particular.

It is helpful to distinguish among four different periods. The oldest lasts up until Carolingian times. The second begins with the decisive entrance of the Germanic nations into the intellectual-cultural history of the Christian West and ends with the sixteenth century, with the era of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, of the Council of Trent and the music of Palestrina. The third begins with Palestrina and ends with the Viennese classical composers, with the death of Beethoven (1827). The fourth extends up to the present time.

The history of Western music forms an entity. The extent to which the various nations participate at any given time within this history, however, varies frequently. For this reason it is necessary to view Europe as a whole and in the course of our representation to direct our gaze in each case to that particular region which calls attention to itself.

In the pre-Carolingian period we are concerned with that part of Europe which lies south of the Alps. Up until the third century the language of the liturgy was Greek, even in Rome, and only after that did Latin take its place. These two languages formed the basis of musical recitation, and they did so as prose, whether the texts resulted from translations (in some cases perhaps even of verse) or were newly written. The realization that it is basically prose which determines the liturgy is, as we have seen above, of primary importance. It indicates a fundamental alteration in the general intellectual-cultural outlook. Only within this new prose did it become possible in European history to differentiate between the poetic-perceptible reality of art on the one hand and religious content as truth on the other, to point to truths which are beyond the reach of sensory perception.

Prose envelops the secret of the transformation in Holy Communion, the center of the Mass. The sacramental words of Christ himself are simple prose, and the same holds true for the other texts which accrued to the liturgy of the Mass: passages from the New Testament, those from the Old Testament (for example psalms, translated as prose), newly written prayers and other texts. Even

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those chants which were not taken from the Holy Bible, which were new additions, are prose, as we can see in the oldest hymns such as the Gloria in excelsis Deo of the Mass. It is through the intonation of this prose that the sacramental event transpired.

Since Greek liturgical music has its own history as Byzantine church music and did not directly influence the emergence of Western music, we will leave it out of our consideration here. Within the tradition of Latin liturgical chant we do not find ourselves on firm ground until around A.D. 600 with the reign of Pope Gregory the Great, whose name lives on in the term “Gregorian chant.” There are, however, clues which make it possible to draw certain conclusions about the form of these chants in even earlier times.

We will take as the basis of our observations the text of the Mass. When we speak of “the Mass” in music, we mean the five chants Kyrie—Gloria—Credo—Sanctus—Agnus, whose texts recur unchanged in every Mass (they comprise the “Ordinary of the Mass”). The texts originated in the first centuries after Christ, but only in the subsequent period did all of these chants gradually become requisite parts of the Mass. To be sure, the history of their musical setting goes back to the origin of the texts, but the transmission of the melodies does not begin until later, until approximately the tenth century. The reason for this may well be the fact that the chants of the Mass belonged intrinsically to the sphere of popular or folk music and thus were not written down at first. For initially they were performed by the congregation, whose place was taken only gradually, towards the end of the first millennium, by the choir of priests and that of the singers.

It should prove helpful to call to mind the change in meaning which the term *choir* has undergone in the course of the centuries. In antiquity – in Homer or in Greek tragedy, for instance – *choir* meant a round-dance with song. In early Christianity it was transferred to the sphere of the celestial: we encounter the “choir of angels” and its earthly counterpart, the choir of priests. The section of the church which corresponds to the latter is known to this day as the “choir.” Of equal importance in determining all of these terms, moreover, are the concepts of vocal music on the one hand and of movement on the other. It is the idea of an event taking place in enclosed space. Subsequently the choir of singers disengaged itself from that of the clerics. This brings with it a restriction of the concept in that the idea of movement in space is dropped. Somewhat later the choir of singers even leaves the choir-section and proceeds

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to the opposite side of the church, to the gallery, thus emphasizing its lay character. Finally, we should mention the modern use of the word “choir” and its derivatives in such terms as “opera chorus” or “church choir.”

The liturgical chant of pre-Carolingian times is characterized by its monophonic setting. Although our main purpose is to investigate the emergence of polyphonic music, we will also find it necessary to form a clear idea of the relationship between music and the Latin language of monophonic chant. In so doing we will draw on examples from the chants of the Mass, even though they were not written down until after the Carolingian epoch, since we wish to lay the foundations on which we will later build. Older categories of liturgical chant, such as psalmody or the antiphons which surround it, exhibit the same basic approach to the musical setting of language.

Let us, therefore, examine a setting of the *Agnus Dei* (the *Agnus of Mass XVIII* in the *Editio Vaticana*): Ex. 1. In translation: “O lamb of God, who takest away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us” three times, with the ending *dona nobis pacem* – “grant us thy peace” – substituted for “have mercy upon us” the third time.

Ex. 1



This text is not declaimed in a natural tone of voice. Use is made instead of musical pitches. Judged from the standpoint of normal speaking, this intonation has something unreal about it. Normal speech, however, would not be appropriate, since the action which we are describing is not an everyday occurrence, serving practical purposes. And neither is the word in this case a mere tool of communication. As a result of the musical declamation, however, another aspect makes its appearance, namely the sacred aspect.

And yet this mode of recitation preserves the character of the spoken: the sentence can be recognized as a unit, as a meaningful combination of syntactic elements. We hear the invocation *Agnus*