

On music and time

By Gregers Brinch

I once had a piano student who started learning the instrument at the end of his A-level studies. In the space of a year he reached a considerable fluency and capacity for expression on the piano. At the age of 18 the time was right for him to discover some gold nuggets in the form of masterpieces he could technically manage, if not quite master yet... and this made him an easy student to teach. He had been fired up by the works of composers, whose time for living was long past, but whose works can be forever resurrected, like the rubbing of the lamp that brings forth the genie within, again and again. His discovery was exciting and he encountered subtle differences and nuances in the use of the basic musical elements of rhythm and harmony and melody that sets the music of one composer apart from that of another.

We stand to gain deep insights, that can hardly be put into words, when we immerse ourselves into the musical language of different composers, especially of course that of the great Masters such as Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Wagner, Mahler, and Schoenberg to name some obvious ones. It takes time before we can absorb and genuinely experience the nuances that separate one composer from another. And even when we have come to recognize their different 'styles', it is altogether a different matter to come to an imaginative understanding of their music, as each piece in turn has a unique journey to offer the listener.

At a later point my student (who has resumed lessons after taking a couple of years to do business studies) came across a piece by Chopin on Youtube. A short video of Wladimir Horowitz playing the Valse Brillante (Opus 34 no.1) live in front of a distinguished audience at the White House on Feb 26 1978. The playing is superior and the music spellbinds the audience. The piece is by no means a tour de force of virtuosic bravura. Horowitz, aged 79, who could have played it in his sleep, steps back from the role of world famous performer and allows the power of the music to render the audience as equals. The music is intimate in its restless melancholy, simple and yet forceful. Containing an almost naïve expression of mourning the loss an age gone by, an age of classical beauty and immaculate proportion vanished, forfeited for ever to make way to an age of corruption and selfishness (1831).

Perhaps in some ways poignant to the historical moment in 1978....the era of Kennedy, Luther King and Hammerskjold surely gone for good! Some masters seem to have been able to tune into the mood of their time to such a degree that they are able to lend the 'world soul' a voice, with which to lament or otherwise express itself. But, although the historical dates may

more or less coincide, for a Beethoven, at the end of his chaotic life and frenzied career, the experience of that Weltschmerz is different, to such an experience of a Chopin at the beginning of his career. The combination of this empathy with the 'world soul', the artists' own biographical moment, and the actual historical period, gives rise to a particular musical expression. This is then later classified as a style, a label given by musicologists – keen to bring order their subject. 'Styles', however, very often overlap and are really the mutual influences of striving individuals, who recognize and benefit from each others' achievements at their common workplace, music. The emergence of a new style is always an intense moment of creativity in an individual, where leaps are performed. and yet the metamorphose from an older mode of expression can be clearly perceived, although the familiar is no longer present to the usual extent. What is it that enables the individual to make these leaps, but an intimate working with the mystery of time...? My student was now keenly learning the notes of the Valse Brillante and grapple with the combination of musical-technical challenges that a piece such as this poses. This is where we truly have a chance to learn about the nature of time. - Music is a vessel for the experience of time. It sculpts feelings within the human soul through the medium of the outer acoustic phenomena we call sound. It moulds time through apparent special qualities such as pitch (i.e. high and low), contraction and expansion, slow and fast, and light and dark, none of which are truly acoustic phenomena. Music takes us through journeys that simulate the pure feeling content of a situation without giving us a reference to any specific context. It is elevated above the actual and brings us into a realm of the archetypal, thus being at the same time universal and intimate in its adaptability to every life situation of every listener who devotes their attention to it. Music becomes a kind of time/culture machine...we become time and culture travellers when we perform and listen to music with utmost attention. The performer, as well as the composer of music is up against the enigma of time almost constantly, as the nature of his inner dialogue with the music has a direct effect on the way the music unfolds, as well as the way he is able to perform and indeed compose. I should add the middle realm that lies between and connects these two activities, which often separate composers from musicians...the act of 'playing' – of improvising! Improvising is indeed the ultimate confrontation with time and its' properties to both the composer and the musician.

We normally conceive time in its threefold dimension: of past, present and future. We prefer to understand time in terms of a linear progression, as we move from a present that soon belongs to the past and is thereby set in stone and irreversible, into a present in the future, which is still open and subservient to our will and choosing. Music has the very uncanny knack of teaching us that the very opposite is true. Through music we must learn that the future wishes to determine the present. It guides our listening to such an extent, that we learn to inwardly anticipate, even create the future event

before it has become audible, and indeed, what comes into present out of the future, has the possibility of changing the quality and meaning even of what was in the past. So the performing of music in such a mode must be an event, a happening that is unfolding before the listener as if for the first time. This challenges the performer to play the music in an improvisatory way. Experiences of such 'free' performances are indeed rare and to be cherished.

The performers who practice this way of music-making learn to step into the very centre of the moment, where the streams of time past and future are concurrent. They are indeed capable of creating time to such an extent that we, as listeners feel ourselves transported into a state, where time is no longer relevant as a means of measurement; time becomes more like a space. In this situation our soul is taken through a process, so real that it can indeed heal itself of traumas and imbalances. This in turn has a beneficial effect on the whole physical/spiritual organism of the human being.

The act of singing in particular can give the singer a profound experience of creating time and losing the ability to think, as that which thinks, is wholly bound up with the act of singing. One loses an aspect of self and yet all the faculties that enable the selfless functioning of the individual are activated. In producing the sound that carries a song or co-creates a harmony, the singer is indeed touched by something of a spiritual nature, in another time dimension. On ending the activity of singing there is often a certain feeling of embarrassment or even shame, which is best held in silence. This feeling can also give rise to laughter or frivolity. As a result, one quite easily goes from the sublime to the ridiculous in music. Usually professional performers do not allow themselves to attempt such a free and intuitive mode of performing outlined above, as the risks encountered are too great. The danger is that the music starts to manifest a 'will of its own' to such an extent that the performer feels impelled to follow this will, this intention in the music. Thus the performer would need to relinquish their set and rehearsed interpretation of music. Taking such risks puts the performer under a great deal of strain, as the temptation is to evaluate what they are doing. Experiencing the music as a living being with its own intentionality provokes an excitement, which then easily prompts a retreat into a brain-bound reflection. This sets off the self-evaluation by the performer of their performing, the result of which is that the music start to fall apart like a house of cards! In addition the concert hall is hardly an intimate enough space, in which to include the audience in such a sacred journey, and the pressures of the touring schedule of the regular performers is too great to attempt such freshness night after night. When the performer knows exactly how they will perform, the tension created by the presence of an audience is challenge enough...to absorb the 'true being' of the music as well, is an almost superhuman task. Those who manage to accomplish this mode of

music-making are often drawn to improvisation, since there the player has the freedom to control the music even if it is starting to unfold such a life of its own. The improvising musician can balance their following of the music as it unfolds, with their bringing changes in mood, tempo, harmonic and melodic patterns etc. Jazz, as well as Indian Classical music, teaches the musician to deal with this experience of the music as a being. Paradoxically, the performer in the recording studio often experiences the greatest freedom to access the music in a spontaneous and intuitive way. They can play around more as the 'takes' are saved and can be edited later. When the right atmosphere is engendered by those present a new and deeper interpretation can at times be facilitated. Tension usually comes about, when the technique starts to unravel, as the performer is in danger of losing concentration as a result of stopping and starting continuously. If, however, the concentration can be sustained, and the individuals present are sensitive to the creative process unfolding before them, a truly remarkable union of performer with work of art can occur. The experience of time as outlined above is hard to achieve, let alone manage when achieved. It makes a master of the performer. Anyone of a lesser proficiency cannot handle the tension and energy generated, cannot create the inner vessel out of utmost attention, coupled with ease and tranquillity – even at the most exciting passages – to contain the music in all its otherness. They will either lose themselves in anticipation of the future, or see the future slip out of their reach as they dwell on the sweetness of the present a moment ago! A composer draws on different forces with which to sculpt time. Their challenge is to know time as it passes for the listener with such precision that they can gage how much time is needed for an element to find its target, ie, the deeper soul of the listener. Yet they must craft the musical material in such a refined way that it does not become tedious or over-repetitive, or indeed so changeable that the listener cannot follow and get a sense of the form of the music at all. The difficulty with composing is that in exploring a theme or figure or a passage of a particular mood or quality the composer goes through a process lasting some time days or weeks – yielding eventually 15 seconds of music. – The difference in time of the process experienced by the composer to the final experience offered to the listener, or indeed the performer is so extreme that it is a miracle the music can ever be performed as the composer imagines it. The composed piece of music is so highly compromised and condensed, so full of tension and experience, that it can take many years for the performer or listener to come to an understanding of the music in spite becoming familiar with it and/or the technical hurdles being long since tackled. The composer is also up against the experience of time if he starts to experience that the piece has a life of its own and is indeed inspired, rather than merely constructed. If the composer starts to recognize that there is a being indwelling the already composed music, despite its incompleteness, he has the choice whether or not he will adhere to the nature and intentionality of

that being. It may indeed demand passages that render the music more familiar to the listener, hence robbing the composer of his originality. Because the composer has the ultimate degree of control in a musical process, (the improvising performer knows he has to please the audience at least to a certain extent, and give them what they anticipate, so as not to lose them altogether) he is thereby tempted to hold on to that control at all costs. The temptation offers a sense of supreme originality, with possibility of never giving in to an impulse to craft a turn of a phrase that is reminiscent of any other work. The composer is free to craft his music in such a manner, that it is indeed like nothing anyone has ever heard! This freedom has been exercised in the past century in music to an unprecedented extent, so much so that the audience has shrunk to a very few and the premiere heard in the concert hall is more often performed in lip-service to the genre rather than by popular demand of the audience. We will suffer yet another onslaught of cacophonous shocks by a contemporary composer who we don't know and may soon forget one the concert is over if the conductor is great and the classical or romantic masterpiece which follows is one of our favourites. Has the composer lost the audience to his own peril? If no-one will listen, who will perform and what, in the end, is the purpose of composing at all...? Well, some of us just have to do it! The question is too burning: What is music and what are the beings we encounter through it. Beings who can bring the qualities of another culture or time so poignantly into our experience? How is it that music can seemingly be so universal and yet touch us so personally at the same time? If the stress, we all experience so strongly affecting our daily lives, is as bound up with our experience of time as we claim it is, surely music and the practice of it could contribute to a cure for our ailment. The least we can do is sing in the shower. But beware, singing in the shower wastes water, as we seem to take longer when we sing!