

The Grand Gesture: Romanticism in Music

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This lecture was given by Dr. Swartz at the Sixth Redlands Organ Festival

“In song and dance man expresses himself as a member of a higher community; he has forgotten how to walk and speak; he is about to take a dancing flight into the air. His very gestures bespeak enchantment. Just as the animals now talk, just as the earth yields milk and honey, so from him emanate supernatural sounds. He feels himself a god, he himself now walks about enchanted, in ecstasy, like to the gods whom he saw walking about in his dreams.” These are the words of Friedrich Nietzsche in the second half of the nineteenth century. He continued with two further points of interest: “I would believe only in a God that knew how to dance,” and the succinct, “Without music, life would be a mistake.”

What were these very “gestures” to which Nietzsche alluded, and how does music concur with his poetic observations? Music of the nineteenth century, that is “romantic music,” often has been neglected by scholars and academics. Perhaps this neglect is the result of fear of the subject or of a non-holistic approach to art within civilization. The music of the nineteenth century has its foundations in the last half of the eighteenth. Perhaps a brief look at the sources of romanticism and the world into which romantic music was brought will prove useful.

The world and the music of the nineteenth century inherited the eighteenth century euphoria built on the belief that man could manufacture his environment. Human beings had found that they could create a better world, a more comfortable world, and a world that began to provide the previously unattainable “free-time.” 1733 saw the invention of the flying shuttle in textile manufacture and 1769 saw the invention of the spinning frame. In 1769, James Watt patented the steam engine, and 1770 welcomed the invention of the spinning jenny followed shortly in 1779 by the spinning mule. Within forty-five years, one of the most necessary and time-consuming activities for the survival of civilization, that of making cloth, had become easy, fast and affordable. Textile mills were just a few years away, and their promises of leisure time, decent working wages and an upwardly mobile standard of living for all should have been civilization’s reprieve from drudgery and poverty. However, we know now of the horrors of the sweatshops and the abuses of

power that would interrupt such a glorious victory. This is but one of the dialectics that gave our “grand gesture” its impetus.

Thinkers of the eighteenth century showed how humans could create their own environment and living conditions. In 1762 Rousseau published his *Social Contract* that set about describing a new social order. His “noble savage” was very much at odds with polite society and the aristocracy. In 1776 Adam Smith wrote *The Wealth of Nations* which advocated a type of conservative capitalism based on supply-demand economics. In the 1780s Alexis de Tocqueville’s essays on the government experiment in America caught the attention of many thinking

people in Europe. The 1780s also saw the rise of the “Fourth Estate” in France, establishing conclusively the power of the press and of public opinion. Another dialectic was born: society could change itself, and, further, this change was inevitable. When one questioned traditional authority, one read Voltaire; in order to postulate new orders of society, one read Rousseau and Smith and de Tocqueville. These theories were borne out in reality with the American War of Independence from 1775 to 1783 and with the turbulent reign of Louis XVI of France from 1774 to 1792.

These two dialectics, utopian dreams vs. abuses of power and egalitarianism vs. traditional aristocracy, were two of the manifestations of the so-called Age of Enlightenment. This enlightened philosophy might be summarized by five important tenets. First accept that truth can be learned only by reason. The intellect and reasoning powers of the human mind are formidable. Empirical knowledge can fortify any reasoned notion, just as Watt’s steam engine proved the reasoned theorem that vapor has mass. In the second place realize that the universe is a machine affirming God’s inflexible laws which man cannot override. This postulate leads inexorably to the acceptance of the idea of universal truth. If independence works in America, it will work in France! Third, we must learn to not trust our emotions. The intellect is the only tool for a viable civilization. The Declaration of Independence begins with “When in the course of human events...,” and

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avoids the emotional beginning “Death to the Tyrant,” which a non-intellectual might have chosen. The fourth point is that nothing is unknown; in time everything will be understood. Benjamin Franklin showed the nature of lightning with his celebrated kite experiment. Finally we must reject the past, especially the middle ages. The mind set of the past was rooted in faith, and modern enlightened thought put the mind set into reason. It is curious that the enlightened mind put its faith in human reason, which is every bit as abstract as faith in God or faith in nature. If these five points sound like reflections of the great Greek thinkers including Aristotle, Plato, Ktesibios and the Roman Vitruvius, remember that the “Age of Enlightenment” was also the birth of neoclassicism. “There is nothing new under the sun

The quintessential enlightened man was Thomas Jefferson. He was a violinist, singer, dancer, architect and statesman. He designed his own magnificent home. His own library formed the nucleus for the Library of Congress. He was fluent in six languages. As an inventor he was responsible for the swivel chair, the dumb waiter and the four-way music stand. As a statesman he wrote the Declaration of Independence, was ambassador to France, was Vice-President and President of the United States, and worked for the Louisiana Purchase. Although he owned slaves, he worked for the abolishment of slavery: perhaps his own personal dialectic in this matter contributed to his innermost nature.

For all of these interesting features that led civilization into the nineteenth century, music was still profoundly unaffected! Nowhere in the output of K.P.E. Bach or Johann Quantz was there the slightest reflection of the churning of the contemporary world. We must look back to the works of François Couperin to find any kind of political or social commentary! Music at the time of the late eighteenth century was elegant with a touch of polite *sturm und drang*. It was what Jane Austen described when she wrote, “For I consider music as a very innocent diversion, and perfectly compatible with the profession of a clergyman.” What was needed in the course of musical development to make Ralph Waldo Emerson write many years after Jane Austen, “So is music an asylum. It takes us out of the actual and whispers to us dim secrets that startle our wonder as to who we are, and for what, whence and whereto. All the great interrogatories, like questioning

angels, float in on its waves of sound?” What was needed was Johann Wolfgang von Goethe!

Goethe was a young man in his twenties looking for his first major work as an author toward the end of the eighteenth century. He had already made successful attempts at poetry and short stories, but his first major work would be a rather short two part novella *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. As a young man himself, and one who had already experienced the pains of unrequited love and the suicide of a friend, Goethe established quite by accident a new form of literature. This new form consisted of a collection of letters from a fictional character named Werther. The preface to the collection praised the “noble soul” of the writer of the letters (consider Rousseau). As letters, they were very

frank and personal; the validity of the individual and of the personal perspective was enhanced through such representation. This view of the importance of the individual was a fundamental concept to the age of enlightenment: through egalitarianism every viewpoint was valid, and

the most secret and intimate viewpoints were perhaps the most honest (consider the Marquis de Sade). In the letters, Werther wrote about an outmoded concept of nobility. In his job as a civil servant, he was able to see the selfish abuses of power in government. He was, as it were, the “noble savage” in the bureaucracy. Suffering from a nervous breakdown of some sort, he went to a resort town to recover. There he fell in love, from a distance, with the beautiful Lotte. At one point he gathered his courage to tell her of his feelings, but she was already involved with someone else. Did he move on with his life and with his attentions? NO!!! He wallowed in a mire of impossible and unrequited love. As an enlightened man he was a perfect dilettante. He sketched a little, played the piano a little, wrote verse a little, did many things “a little” but could not concentrate enough to master any of these arts. He described the personal hell in which he lived, and finally, on Christmas Eve, he committed suicide. His funeral was unattended except by the necessary clergy.

Goethe’s work was immediately translated into several languages. It became the best seller for an entire generation at the end of the eighteenth century. People imitated Werther and Lotte: men wore the yellow waistcoats described in the novella, and women wore the blue dresses and bonnets of Lotte. It is curious that blue had been for centuries associated with the virgin Mary! Porcelain dishes and tea cups displayed many of the scenes from the novella, and figurines were very popular in all fashionable drawing rooms. Ballets and

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even operas were written on the subject. Suicide in Europe rose a staggering amount for twenty years following the publication of the book. Malaise was in fashion, and the suffering, misunderstood, sensitive person became the established mode for an entire century of creative individuals! Later in his life, Goethe wrote that, "...this work is dangerous in that it portrayed weakness as strength." The die had been cast, however, and society and art inherited *Werther's* dialectic.

Goethe's little novella had given the impetus to a whole new direction in the arts. Individual perception of a situation was important. The sensitive individual would be misunderstood. The individual had ultimate control over his destiny, and such control included suicide. Suicide was clearly outside the norms of the establishment and the powerful church. Yet pure, unconsummated love was a powerful and noble feeling. Secret thoughts, as in personal letters, were important journals; however, public reading of such personal journals in a published novella, looking over the shoulder of the author as it were, an invasion of privacy, was permitted and condoned if we, the public, could be made sympathetic to the views of the author. Goethe inured the reader to accept voyeurism in the same way as a marine biologist accepts the view into a fish tank. We become viewers of the situation, and our comments on the process or outcome are irrelevant to the suffering and agony of the author. There is no moral judgment on the scene, no hypothetical premise; we view the tragedy only as outsiders. In a sense it is Greek drama involving the νεμεσος without an understanding of the ηψβρις.

Goethe supplied later in his life one additional impetus for the music of the nineteenth century. In his setting of the legend of *Faust*, Goethe explored the realm of the supernatural and the after life. Dr. Faust, it would seem, was able to bargain with the ultimate force of death. Through his reason, he could create a better existence for himself: there was nothing he could not accomplish, and he was, he thought, a true equal with God! This was the ultimate life for the enlightened man. The supernatural could be reasoned with, and even death could be negotiated. Again, Goethe's work inspired other drama, painting, figurines, opera and music throughout the entire century.

Gounod, Boito and Busoni each wrote grand operas on the subject. Earlier than these three monumental works, E.T.A. Hoffmann wrote an opera *Undine*, and Ludwig Spohr wrote an opera *Faust*. Finally Carl Maria von Weber's 1821 Berlin production of his thrilling opera *Der Freischütz* established Romantic opera. Everything was in place for The Grand Gesture: man could barter with the gods, and through his cunning and ingenuity could fashion a better life. The devil would be cheated in the end, and the enlightened man outwitted all fate and circumstance. Listen to this recording of the bullet forging scene from *Der Freischütz*. You will hear each magic bullet being formed in a secret place deep in the woods at midnight. Of course a fierce storm is raging during the scene as the devil and the human forge their unholy alliance.

Tape example 1 Weber: *Kugelszene* from *Freischütz*

That was a Grand Gesture. It inherited its spirit from the literature of Goethe, and Goethe had simply posited the logical extension of the enlightenment which had been influencing civilization in every possible way. The orchestra in this scene was greatly augmented for the first time with extra wind and percussion instruments. Virtuoso playing was demanded of the orchestra, and the singers had to sing with a new force and volume. Stage directions included special lighting effects and the invention of some awe-inspiring stage machinery. The whole effect must have frightened the Berlin audience in 1821!

One of Weber's teachers had been the organist Georg Joseph Vogler (1749-1814). Vogler, besides playing the organ, was an organ builder, acoustical theorist and opera composer. He invented a traveling pipe organ that could be loaded and unloaded onto a wagon and taken from place to place for performances. With his traveling instrument, he was probably the first Virgil Fox! His theories of pipe organ design and pipe function were revolutionary yet very scientific. His performances were hailed as colorful and virtuoso, and he always seemed to stretch the tonal palette of the pipe organ. He invented new ranks of pipes, for example free reeds, and used them in combinations previously thought impossible. He looked for effect, for the grand gesture, rather than for traditional rules and norms. One of his other students was Meyerbeer, who would establish a fabulous career as composer and director of the new public opera in Paris. Listen to this example of masterful drama through sound from Act I of Meyerbeer's opera *Le Prophete*. Notice the color in the orchestration and the power of the delivery.

Tape example 2 Meyerbeer, Act I of *Le Prophet*

Vogler's experiments in organ design and creating new performance venues had been forced on him by social and artistic changes. Architectural activities had changed dramatically in the eighteenth century; palaces and public buildings were needed for the new enlightened civilization. The rococo style of the mid eighteenth century yielded to the simpler and plain Biedermeier style by 1800. By 1803 the Hapsburgs had dissolved many of the existing monasteries, and organs had been removed or destroyed. During the French Revolution, up to 1815, the churches were taken by the people and used for patriotic and humanistic purposes. Organ pipes were melted down to make cannon balls, and organ lofts were set on fire. Traditional organs were no longer being built and installed in traditional churches. Vogler had to invent a new instrument to be played in unconventional spaces. It had to have louder louds and softer softs; it could not be too large, but needed the flexibility for extravagant color and tonal changes. It needed to make a new kind of statement, a new gesture, to a new civilization that was becoming increasingly unchurched. It needed improved bellows to support large registrations. Vogler flew in the face of traditional registration practices dating back to Schlick by drawing multiple stops of the same pitch level. Furthermore, he enhanced the grand gesture of his music with frequent registration changes in the manner of Meyerbeer and Weber operas. The swell box created a thrilling crescendo and decrescendo. He called this new organ he designed an "orchestration," probably trying to validate the new notion with a Greek-sounding word. It really was conceived as a one man orchestra: one manual was the string section, another was the woodwind section, and the third was the brass. Orchestral tone of 1800 was thicker and heavier than that of the baroque period, inspiring Vogler to design an *Hauptwerk* for a Munich instrument comprising a Principal 16, Principal 8, Nasard 5-1/3, Tierce 3-1/5, Principal 2, and Quinte 1-1/3. His swell mechanism enhanced the effects of his playing, and a typical program of his consisted of "Allegro -- Swiss Cow-Song, in the Lydian Mode," and "Rondo - Chinese Air, deciphered by G.J.V. from the original notes of a missionary" (Munich recital in 1806); "Sea Combat, complete

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with drum-rolls, movement of ships, engaging of the enemy, cannons, cries of the wounded" (London recital in 1790); "Pastorale Symphony with storm, rejoicings after it, and echoes" (Stockholm recital in 1796). Such programming and his reputed exciting virtuoso playing must have been a grand gesture. He may have been extreme with his flamboyant performances, but he was responding to the emerging aesthetic of the nineteenth century. His efforts must have had some effect on the more traditional builders of his time like Moser, Walcker and Sauer. Had he not designed and played in his way, perhaps this organ of 1827 in north Germany would not have had these specifications: *Hauptwerk* 16,16,8,8,8,8,4,4,2,8 (reed); *Oberwerk* 8, 8, 8, 4, 4, 8 (reed); and *Pedal* 16, 8, 8, 4, 16 (reed). This organ shows us clearly the desire to emulate the rich 8' sound of the romantic orchestra. Here is an example of this kind of orchestral tonal design; in this recording Max Reger played his Prelude in F major, opus 85 number 3. Notice the extravagant use of the swell box, the frequent manual changes employing various chorus registrations and the emphasis on the 8' pitch level. Reger experimented with the mixture stops only at certain carefully planned places in his performances, and nowhere used mutations to any kind of "baroque" effect. His registration changes were built on the architecture of the piece, and his careful use of rubato and general pacing were designed to make his musical gestures clear to the listener.

Tape Example 3 Reger, *Präludium F dur*, op. 85/3

As the nineteenth century continued to unfold, some of the promises of the enlightenment seemed to come to be realized. With an even more rigorous application of science to technology, the industrial revolution gripped England and spread to the rest of Europe. The social and political ideologies of France became identified as liberalism, socialism and nationalism, and most of Europe could not help but to feel these influences. Growing nationalistic awareness and pride had touched each country in Europe by 1850, and competition was fierce among nations for the most advanced technologies, the best orchestras and the highest standards of living. Schools for Engineers were developed to ensure the finest technology possible. In 1815 the safety lamp was invented for coal mining: much coal was needed for the new facto-

ries and the homes, and it had to be mined quickly and in great quantity. In 1831 Michael Faraday invented the dynamo, and in 1840 Liebig successfully analyzed the chemistry of plants and produced the first effective fertilizer. Yes, it would seem that man by 1850 could really do anything. Europe experienced rapid growth in population, greater agricultural productivity, improvement in transportation and communication, the opening of Asia and Africa, and greater industrial technology. Finally in 1856 Bessemer and in 1865 Siemens developed techniques for the mass production of steel. Architects could now make an even more grand gesture than ever before with taller and larger buildings. Music had to measure up with bigger organs, larger orchestras and better developed instruments.

Every instrument was made louder and more capable of virtuoso performance during the nineteenth century. The bridge, bow and strings of the violin evolved into a brilliant responsive instrument. Brass instruments acquired valves to permit them to play in all keys. Woodwinds received a new virtuoso fingering system enabling them to play louder and faster than ever before. Even the tympani developed a simple pedal tuning system that would permit previously unplayable chromatics and glissandi by the time Carl Nielsen wrote his *Fourth Symphony*.

The organ, too, received the benefits of this advanced technology.

For the first time, a pipe organ had virtually no size limitation. It could be built to any massive proportion, limited only by the financial resources of the buyer. Cavaillé-Coll built from 1857 to 1862 the largest organ in the world at St. Sulpice in Paris. Such a huge instrument was possible only by newly designed bellows and chests and a new playing mechanism called the Barker Lever. Elsewhere, less expensive prefabricated organs were being installed with some standardized specification and mass produced steel or cast-iron organ cases. The organ was not, for the first time in the history of the world, the instrument that could produce the loudest, highest and lowest sounds. The factories were making more noise than ever thought imaginable, and the relative noise levels in the increasingly overpopulated cities were rising at an alarming rate. If the organ were to retain its impressive nature, it would have to out-shout the factories and the streets. The unison pitch was further strengthened, harmonic pipes were used for timbre and for volume, and the desire to build huge affordable instruments was great. The gesture in the nineteenth century was not reticent;

the gesture was grand to catch the attention of the public.

Meanwhile, by 1850 there was a revival of Christianity. This was good news for organists and for organ builders. The public style was still demanding sound that could, as it were, move heaven and earth. Christianity received its new attention from three directions, each of which proved to be an outgrowth of the enlightenment. In the first place Christianity was seen as a conservative reaction against the humanism that produced the French Revolution. Much wealth was lost by the Second Estate in the revolution, and there was still some seething sentiment against the unwashed masses who took that wealth and power. Second, Chateaubriand wrote the very popular pamphlet *The Genius of Christianity* early in the nineteenth century. He was able to give religious belief a sort of intellectual respectability. After all, the enlightened individual must still be an intellectual. Finally the writers Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard stirred up an evangelical movement in England and on the continent. Here that age old dialectic of faith and reason, of intellect and belief caused society to examine itself.

Christianity was again strong, but social issues became included in the teachings. Methodism was one of the new dimensions of this new Christianity. Anti-Christian doctrines never entirely died out during this period. Marx's dialectical materialism and Darwin's anthropological studies of primitive religions continued to cast doubts on organized Christianity. In spite of Marx or Darwin, church membership grew in the second half of the nineteenth century throughout Europe, because Christianity was suddenly fashionable and intellectual. Furthermore, church membership was a certain foil against the rising tide of anti-semitism during the second half of the century. Some families even changed their names to avoid being labeled Jews: Rimsky-Korsakov insisted on his full hyphenated name, because it labeled him the *Roman-Korsakov*!

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The nineteenth century was also the era of the big international expositions. With improved transportation and communication available, people could travel great distances to see and steal the latest technologies. Major cities throughout Europe hosted these events. Even organ builders were represented at these expositions. Schulze demonstrated his new wooden cylindrical pipes and his triangular pipes. Walcker showed his console of three manuals and two pedal boards. Cavaillé-Coll hired César Franck to write three pieces

and play them on a new organ at the Paris Exposition of 1878 to demonstrate some newly invented stops. Organists and builders noticed the trend in new instruments after 1850: many instruments included larger string divisions and used higher wind pressure and full length reeds. Harmonic stops were varied and plentiful. Free reeds were used a great deal in Germany. Possibilities of mass production could mean more instrument for the money. Major organ builders like Cavaillé-Coll, Walcker, Sauer, Willis, Rieger and Marcussen could be found in all countries, and they freely borrowed ideas from each other. Theoretical books concerning acoustics and pipe design were for the first time easily available. Again, it appeared that the human being could be capable of producing anything! The promise of the enlightenment had been fulfilled! Society could improve or at least change its own environment quickly and easily. A pipe organ was once a specific type of instrument built primarily of flues and designed to reinforce the natural harmonic series; this old instrument took many years to build and was probably the most expensive thing in any given town. Now, thanks to the industrial revolution and everything associated with it, the pipe organ could be constructed in absolutely any configuration, and could be made quickly and was more affordable. It was no longer the most impressive sound in the city, but this was no longer the year 1650!

Composers were challenged to rise to the more grand gestures required by the new society and the improved instruments. Here is an example of organ, orchestra and choral writing from the middle of the nineteenth century, the opening of the *Te Deum* by Berlioz. In this work, Berlioz indicated that the chorus and orchestra should be positioned in the front of the church and the organ should remain in the organ loft at the rear. The opening echo effect between full orchestra and full organ indicated the struggle between the church and state in 1849.

Tape Example 4 Berlioz, *Te Deum*

After 1860, organ performances were major events in the musical lives of most cities. Bostonians stood in line to hear the “Great Organ” in the Music Hall played by Buck, Thayer or Paine at the end of the century. Municipal organists like Lemare played to thousands in auditoriums in Portland, Chattanooga, Cleveland and San Francisco. Biggs, Fox and Dupré played to overflowing churches following World War II. Composers like Widor, Vierne, Reger and Dupré were writing organ music on a symphonic scale. These people all worked with the Grand Gesture. Miniature pieces could still be found in some works of Tournemire, Reger, Thayer and Lemare; however, it seemed to be the recital that focused on the Grand Gesture, that celebrated civilization’s exhilaration with itself that spoke to the people at the end of the century. The instruments were large and colorful, and the playing was full of imagination and technique.

The Sixth Annual Redlands Organ Festival will present opportunities to hear recordings of early twentieth century organ virtuosi playing repertoire and style that made them famous. We will hear works by some of the great nineteenth and twentieth century virtuoso composers and works written recently by American composers. On Wednesday students will perform, and we will see the high level that organ performance maintains today; also on Wednesday will be a panel involving performers, organ builders, publishers and artist representatives discussing the status of the organ profession.

Should we return to the excitement of the post-enlightened nineteenth century? I don’t think so. Perhaps a newer twentieth century gesture that rises from **this** very civilization would be worth investigating. Perhaps one could paraphrase a slogan from the Vietnam era: “What if they gave an organ recital and no one came?”

"WHAT IF THEY GAVE AN ORGAN RECITAL AND NO ONE CAME?"

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