

Chapter 5 of *Notes of an Underground Humanist*
On Music

Music is important to me. Especially classical. (*Old* classical.) I want to describe what this music means to me, but in our unmusical era it's hard to do that without sounding pretentious. I could say, perhaps, that music has helped me get through some hard times—that in college, when feeling blue I would go to the practice rooms in the music building and play Chopin's Nocturnes. (I found his Opus 27, No. 1, in C-sharp minor, particularly cathartic. Liszt's *Liebesträume* No. 3 was also effective.) But that doesn't *express* anything. It doesn't communicate an emotion; it just states a bare fact. So instead I'm going to rely, again, on parts of my journal. A lot of what follows refers to specific pieces of music; I apologize for that. But I encourage you to seek them out.

*

On orchestras.— The image of an orchestra playing the third movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony brings tears to one's eyes. Imagine a multitude of musicians playing in such exquisite synchronicity that they are *one being, one supra-human being*, composed of sounds as humans are composed of cells, a being that exists only in its self-expression, that vanishes when the instruments are put down but is vitally alive when they are picked up, that is the pure movement of a divine mind externalized. Imagine the *cooperation, the sensitivity, the feeling for the sublime* without which this being could not exist. Imagine the *discipline* necessary to submerge oneself so completely in collective harmony....

*

Ode to joy.— Johann Sebastian Bach¹ is first among the gods in the shrine of music. He is so imposing a figure that not even Beethoven, not even the Ninth Symphony, overshadows him. Nothing can. If God pointed to the Creation and said, "You didn't do *that!*", Bach could retort, "But I recreated it and made it intelligible—and I *never rested*, unlike you!" He's *perfect*, if only by virtue of his power. He stands at the head of the most remarkable two centuries in the history of music—and I can't think of a better herald of the Golden Age than a man who was more modern than modernity itself² yet more ancient than antiquity. His oeuvre is not only immortal; it is timeless.

*

No joy without sorrow.— The heights appear highest when you look at them from the depths. To test the truth of that hypothesis, I suggest you listen to pop music (in the

¹ His monumental human dignity demands that he be called by his whole name.

² He even has something for heavy metal, not to mention jazz.

'Britney Spears' sense) for a few minutes; then listen to Franz Liszt's piece *Les Préludes*. If you have a poetic soul, the sudden change from ingesting dirt to imbibing a vintage wine will intoxicate you. Your appetite for life will grow tremendously. You may not be able to contain your enthusiasm; your heart will leap to your throat and you'll start shouting senseless noises of jubilation. The finale of Liszt's piece may give you a heart attack: the notes rushing to their climax, pounding on your ears like drums, and then the single horn that blares a single note (—that note which is both a call to battle and a signal of victory!—) as the rest of the orchestra continues its climb to the final triumphant chords... You'll realize that pop music is redeemed by virtue of its function as a reminder of the muck that humans can and must rise above in order to achieve moments of immortality.

*

My gratitude to music.— Music has allowed me to maintain the illusion that my pain is beautiful.

*

Pop vs. classical.— The problem with most popular music is that once you hear it...you've heard it. It's all *right there*, in the open, buck-naked, indiscreet and immodest, lacking all subterranean methods of persuasion. It says, "Here I am! Take me or leave me, but be quick about it!" With the best classical music, on the other hand, when you hear it you've only *just begun* to hear it. There is a world beneath the sound. Secrets compounded on secrets, a tormented and profligate past, a creation of order out of chaos, an instinctive knowledge of mathematics that's tastefully hidden, rhetorical devices unknown to the listener but dominating him—all of which are concealed behind a simple and spontaneous idealism. In a sense it's more life-affirming than popular music.

*

A prerequisite for aesthetic appreciation.— Why do most people not like classical music? I've never understood it. I've even tried to imagine being another person just to imagine not liking Chopin. People say it's because such music is "boring," or because it's "too quiet." But this is precisely what I don't understand. Much of it, I admit, is indeed ponderous—Wagner comes to mind, and Richard Strauss, and some Brahms—but how can such pieces as Tchaikovsky's first piano concerto not thrill the listener, or such pieces as Chopin's Nocturne in D-flat (Op. 27, No. 2) not transport him to a realm of aristocratic delicacy of feeling, or such pieces as the first movement of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony not make him want to dance around the room? I suppose part of the answer is that, regarding *any* kind of music, you must first become "acclimated" to it through repeated contact before you know how to interpret it—before you're "open"

enough to it to allow it to govern the way you feel while listening. You have to have assimilated it. This is why I truly enjoy a piece of music only after I've heard it at least twice. I have to "orient" myself in it first; I have to have a vague idea of what's coming next, and where it's headed. During the first exposure I always feel "guarded" against it, as if I'm challenging it to impress me. "Do your best!" my mind says. "I'll find flaws! I'll find passages that feel forced." Only after it has convinced the skeptic inside me can I let down my defenses. Then, even the passages that I thought initially were awkward feel more and more natural, until finally the whole piece takes on an air of necessity. To change a single note would damage it. –The appreciation of *styles* of music operates by much the same principle. Currently I have an aversion to traditional Chinese music, but if I listened to it day after day for weeks I'd probably learn to enjoy it.

*

From a YouTube comment on Bach's "Art of the Fugue." – "It's amazing that one man could write this, another perform it, and yet a third could design cluster bombs disguised as children's toys to be dropped by the USAF in Iraq."

*

Ferruccio Busoni's piano transcriptions of Bach are magnificent, but Glenn Gould may have been right that they also represent corruptions of the original pristine structures, the musical-logical structures. They romanticize the music, sentimentalize it, aggrandize it, *exaggerate* it, thus depriving it of its pristine classical quality. I love Hélène Grimaud's version of the Chaconne (you can watch it on YouTube), but I almost feel as if I shouldn't love it. For what exactly do I love about it? The epicness, the emotionalness, the sublime besottedness—intoxicating. And the *loudness*. The dynamic contrasts; it's all about the dynamics. But that ain't Bach. Bach wasn't all about the dynamics, or thick, lush sound. The Chaconne is for solo violin! It's melodic, contrapuntal; but with Busoni, everything's harmonic. It's "Wagner meets Bach." Insofar as there is anguish in Bach's Chaconne, it is subtle and dignified. It's infinite anguish, which is to say it doesn't enjoy itself. (No self-reflection, no self-consciousness.) And then later there is infinite forgiveness and hope, which doesn't congratulate itself on its beauty. It simply expresses pure, elevated, melodic joy. There is no need for filling out its bare-boned structure with lush sound, with chords and arpeggios and huge crescendos and diminuendos to make everything *pretty* and *embellished*—and *obvious*. Nor is there any virtuosity for its own sake. It's just a clear voice from heaven.

In his most serious compositions, Bach always wants to transcend sonority. Gould was right: Bach doesn't care about sonority, he cares about structure. He is reaching beyond, trying to communicate with God, literally. His works are about *transcendence*, transcendence of the immediate (emotions, matter, even sound-for-its-own-sake). Not

so with Busoni and much romantic music. Busoni is “pianistic,” as Gould would say. He is completely immersed in the piano, doesn’t try to reach beyond it. Ultimately this attitude is a sort of musical temptation (in the sense of sin), like the temptation to wallow in sorrow of which Dante and Oscar Wilde speak. Wallow in the immediate— aestheticism, which is a kind of hedonism, which is weakness.

It’s possible I’m being slightly unfair to Busoni. There are indeed otherworldly passages in his transcription(s). He was a genius, of course. But I still get the sense that he vulgarizes Bach a little by going for the *effect*. I don’t get this sense, for example, with Rachmaninoff’s transcription of the third partita for solo violin or with Liszt’s transcriptions. But it’s true that, from a Bachian or Gouldian perspective, the piano is an inherently risky instrument, since it’s so easy to lose oneself in its beautiful, textured sound.

*

Bach vs. Beethoven.— Glenn Gould was probably right that Bachian polyphony and contrapuntalism is on a higher spiritual (and intellectual) plane than later homophony, be it in Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, or whomever. It’s more pure, less emotional—less tainted by association with the earthly. Interweaving of melodic lines enjoyed for its own sake. “*Absolute*” music. “God’s thinking before he created the world,” to quote Goethe. Ethereal, *transparent* in some inexplicable way, *diaphanous*, it exercises your intellect and raises you above yourself. Beethoven is comparatively human. With his music you’re more uplifted, but you’re less *lifted up*.

*

On the proper way to listen to music.— The second movement of Beethoven’s Pastoral symphony, the passage from measures 86 to 90.³ It makes me think of Matthew 26: 36-46 and 75—not of the words but of the situation. The mortality of beauty. The sorrow of love, and the long sighs; yet the serenity—the serenity of forgiveness. But only if my headphones are of good quality: I’m pressing them hard against my ears, the volume on maximum; my teeth are clenched because I have never encountered anything quite so painful as this music. Repeating it ten times, twenty times. Crying, of course. The violins descending in broken thirds, the violas sympathizing with them, and the flutes and oboes agreeing pithily, and then the gentle pluck of the bass after its silence, conscious that the resonance of its contribution consists in its laconic authority; but the oboes and flutes are swept up in the current and, satisfied no longer with passive assent, converse together lyrically, the violins too murmuring trills, sweet and light; the bassoons and clarinets are aroused to song, exhorting their companions with their poetry, and as the bass is carried away by this love for all that is, all is submerged in a

³ Pierre Monteux’s interpretation.

purple cloud of harmony. A melody would disrupt the balance; harmony is everything, and there are no individuals.

*

999

the Prelude to
 a minor sadness
 guitar-strummed Bachishly
 in my wraith-like, waif-like soul
 that shudders on the major third
 after minutes of minor sadness
 and thinks of the virgin's quiver in her
 expectant naked lover's silent arms,
 the soundlessness of Venice at dawn,
 the flap of the butterfly's wing,
 the dying gasp of Jesus,
 the sweet surcease of strife
 and we are at one
 in the forlorn

999

*

Aufschwung

Schumann,
 like Icarus,
 flew too close to the sun;
 his sanity melted and he
 died young.

*

The death of a magnificent human being.— From a book of reminiscences on Tchaikovsky: "*Tolstoy says, 'Tchaikovsky's dead'—and two huge tears rolled down his great cheeks.*" (My italics.) I just listened to the Sixth Symphony, which was Tchaikovsky's farewell to the world. Without exaggeration, it's the most devastating piece I've ever heard. (Even on my miserable little headphones.) When I first heard it years ago I didn't like it, and it's taken me awhile to get used to it, but now that I have I love it. The first movement in particular affects me. The passage in the middle that starts with the epic crescendo on the timpani and continues on to the furious trombones and/or tubas—*dum duuuuum, dadaaaa!*—that passage is colossal. Paralyzing. I want to buy a stereo-system just to

listen to it. It sounds like the end of the world. And then the romantic melody with the glissando in the strings, after the world has ended.... And finally the plucked diatonic descent under the cadence in the brass and woodwinds, capacious as joy in sorrow....

The end of the last movement is quite shattering too. The dead pulses in the double bass, and the dark stabbings of life's last flickers, and the final four heartbeats, and then death. Those pulses sound like time, the tickings of mortality—death calling you....“*bump bump, bump bump, bump bump...*” The two lines in the music, the underworld tickings and the descending melody, are death and life, inevitability and the final hopeless succumbing to it. Those ticks really do sound like inevitability. They just keep going, undisturbed by the drama playing out above them, patiently waiting to claim their own.

Tchaikovsky knew life, and he knew death.

*

A note for historians.— The music of each era characterizes that era's attitude toward life. (Think of Baroque music, the most virile ever written. Handel's “Arrival of the Queen of the Sheba.” The magnificent vitality of the age is reflected in its music.)

*

Criteria for musical worth.— Just as I judge, broadly speaking, the degree of worthlessness of a pop song by the degree to which I can hear “Money!” (or “Kitsch!”) shouted through the music, so I consider the spiritual worth of a piece of classical music to be inversely proportional to the music's expression of boredom and aimlessness. There is no boredom in Beethoven; impressionism, by contrast, is saturated with it. The whole-tone scale is musical boredom, the lack of a *goal* toward which one strives. Anomie, ennui, a musical yawn. Satie's “Gymnopédie No. 1” is the listlessness of a Sunday afternoon in the middle of summer. In most Debussy you can hear the lassitude of fin-de-siècle France. Same with a lot of polytonality—the decadence—and, in different ways, serialism, neoclassicism, indeterminism *definitely*, and some Mahler and Strauss, and even a lot of Brahms and Liszt. The spirit of a society is expressed in its music.

*

Leonard Bernstein on the history of modern music.— Watching videos on YouTube of Bernstein's Norton Lectures in 1973. Excursions into music theory, history, and appreciation. He makes a lot of good points in the first lecture—for example, that the reason for *twelve* notes in the chromatic scale is that the circle of fifths, which arises out of the harmonic series (overtones—you play C, there's a G overtone, etc.), gives you twelve tones. (C, G, D, A, E, B, G-flat, D-flat, A-flat, E-flat, B-flat, F.) It's fascinating that both the diachronic and the chromatic—and of course the pentatonic—scales have their

source in the nature of the harmonic series. Bernstein is right that, just as humans have a Universal Grammar, so they have something like a Universal Musical Grammar, so to speak, which can be expressed in different “languages” (different types of music, types of scales, modes, harmonies). Obviously the parallel with language isn’t perfect, but it’s suggestive.

In the succeeding lectures, Bernstein takes the analogy with language too far. Goes into Chomskyan linguistics, tries to apply it to music, and things get a little silly. And it goes on with his incredibly extensive application of literary devices—metaphor, alliteration, anaphora, repetition, etc.—to music. Everywhere he sees “transformations,” as in deletions, augmentations, inversions, and so on—and those certainly do exist, indeed are of the essence of good music, but to call them “Chomskyan” transformations is a stretch. He is right, though, to place repetition at the foundation of music.

He gives a fascinating and probably true explanation of why minor modes sound sad or disturbing. You know that when you play the tonic, implicit in the note are its overtones—the fifth, the major third, etc. The *minor* third is also an overtone, but a distant one: the eighteenth. So when you explicitly play the minor third, thus changing the mode from major to minor, you’re introducing an “interference” (of frequencies), or a sort of nearly imperceptible dissonance, since the major third, being one of the first overtones, is strongly (implicitly) present (in the tonic) as well. You’re playing the major and minor thirds at the same time, as it were. The human brain hears this interference, this dissonance, as expressing an unsettled, unsettling mood. Major modes sound “happy” because there is no interference of frequencies; there is relative harmony. That is, the implicit first few overtones are also being *explicitly* played, pleasantly “reinforcing” the already present. (That last part is from me, not Bernstein.)

Bernstein also makes much of the “delights and dangers of ambiguity.” He sees *ambiguity* as key to *expressivity*. Syntactic, semantic, and phonological ambiguity. Reads from “The Leaden Echo” by Gerard Manley Hopkins, a poem with sublime ambiguities that delights in gorgeous sounds for their own sake. E.g.: “How to keep—is there any any, is there none such, nowhere known some, bow or / brooch or braid or brace, lace, latch or catch or key to keep / Back beauty, keep it, beauty, beauty, beauty...from vanishing away?” Etc. Syntactically and somewhat semantically ambiguous. Hence extremely expressive (although that isn’t the only reason). Music, too, he thinks can be “syntactically,” “semantically,” and “phonologically” ambiguous—and, to an extent, the more it is, the more expressive it is. Think of Chopin’s ambiguous and wonderfully expressive chromaticism, his playing around with tonality so that sometimes you don’t know what key you’re in, you’re “suspended.” Or Schumann’s rhythmic ambiguities, his syncopations and the like. Or the ambiguities of certain transitions in Beethoven, such as the transition between the third and fourth movements in the fifth symphony and that between the third and fourth movements in the Hammerklavier sonata. All intensely expressive. And the opening of Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*, even more

ambiguous⁴ and hence expressive. So ambiguous in its chromaticism as to stretch tonality to its limits—thus making itself the “crisis work of the nineteenth century,” pointing directly to the musical crisis of the early twentieth.

After his performance of the beginning and end of *Tristan*, Bernstein eloquently sums up the history: “And so music can never be the same again [after *Tristan und Isolde*]. The gates of chromaticism have been flung open, those golden gates of the golden age, which were the outer limits of ambiguity, standing firm in diatonic majesty. But now that they’re open, now that Berlioz and Chopin and Schumann and Wagner have pushed them open, we’re in new tonal fields that are apparently limitless. We’re bounding and leaping from one ambiguity to the other—from Berlioz to Wagner to Bruckner and Mahler to Debussy and Scriabin and Stravinsky. It’s a dizzying adventure, this romantic romp, shedding one inhibition after another, indulging in newer and ever more illicit ambiguities, piling them on, stringing them out, daring them to take over for nearly a whole century. But how ambiguous can you get before the clarity of musical meaning is lost altogether? How far can music romp through these new chromatic fields without finding itself in uncharted terrain, in a wild forest of sharps and flats? Are there no further gates of containment? Perhaps not ‘golden’ ones, perhaps only dry stone walls or rude fences? Well of course there are, or rather were, until they began to crumble under the attack of the new century. These tonal fences, these walls of formality, somehow managed to contain the rampage of chromaticism even through the crises of *Tristan und Isolde* and of *Pelléas et Mélisande* and of *The Rite of Spring*. But ultimately a supreme crisis did arrive, a crisis that remains unresolved to this day and is over half a century old...” He leaves us guessing at this point, dallying instead in the dreamlike chromaticism of Debussy. Thoughtful analysis of *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*.

He’s right about how *ambiguous* art became in the late nineteenth century, profoundly expressive in its profound ambiguity. Baudelaire, Mallarmé, the Impressionists in painting and music, Symbolism.... So much of it became *spiritual, dreamlike, extra-terrestrial. Abstract*. Things tend to get abstract, you know, when a culture is approaching its demise. Think of Plato’s idealism and the even greater sophistication of Aristotle, near the end of classical Athens. In its youth, as in that of an individual, a culture is directed to the concrete and immediate, the naïve and spontaneous; as it proceeds into adulthood and old age, intellectualism sets in, symbolism sets in, the gaze turns toward the transcendent, irony and cynicism and boredom appear as the individual is made more aware of himself in opposition to

⁴ “Phonologically”—‘What key are we in?’—and “syntactically”—‘What’s the meter? Where’s the first beat?’ And “semantically” too, I guess. But I wouldn’t take these linguistic terms too seriously.

others. Chromaticism can express all this wonderfully; hence its widespread use in the late nineteenth century.

Art became more ambiguous then (as I see it) because *life* was becoming more ambiguous. Culture, like society, was on the road to nihilism. Finally in the one came Dadaism and the like (I'd say atonalism too, which is supremely "ambiguous"), while in the other came World War I. And on into the 1920s, various literary, musical, and artistic expressions of decadence, of ennui, experimentation everywhere. *Then*, finally, a sort of rupture: the Great Depression, fascism, and World War II. Afterwards the mature, liberal democratic consolidation of corporate capitalism and mass consumerism, a more stable order—but still despair and alienation in much high art and philosophy, such as existentialism. New expressions of old alienated impulses, because, in effect, a semi-new society. Then a new eruption against middle-class alienation in the 1960s, a real social idealism throughout much of the world (in most countries, incidentally, not merely "middle-class" but more elemental)...but inevitable failure, and again a partial renewal of individualism, materialism, ennui (drug-taking, hedonism), and more "nihilistic" art in the 1970s and '80s. And so it goes.

To return. Bernstein observes that Debussy's whole-tone scale is in fact atonal, since it lacks a dominant and subdominant. No circle of fifths is possible, and no traditional modulations are possible. Thus, Debussy's invention was "the first organized atonal material ever to appear in musical history." It was also, perforce, the most "ambiguous." In the *Faun* he followed the old masters in containing his chromaticism and ambiguity with at least *some* diatonicism, but it was clear by that time that the diatonic containment of ambiguity (or of chromaticism and/or near-atonality) was about ready to burst.

It did so in 1908, with Schoenberg's Opus 11—and even more, later, with Opus 21 (or 23; I forget)—the atonality of which was no longer at all contained by any vestiges of tonality. So a divide opened up in the succeeding years and decades between composers, led by Stravinsky, who still tried to remain in the framework of tonality and others, led by Schoenberg, who abandoned it. Both camps, however, had the same motivation: to increase expressive power. Schoenberg eventually invented his serial method because, having abandoned tonality, he needed a new framework by which to structure music. Otherwise atonal compositions would simply be too *free*, unconstrained by anything. Certain composers seized on his new method, and it (has) lasted for many decades. —I think it's revealing, however, that Schoenberg himself said he had continually been pulled back toward tonality, and late in life he even wrote a tonal work for orchestra. This shows the power of tonality, its greater *human* significance (and *physical, nature-al* significance) than something as formalistic, forced, "external," "intellectual," and "artificial" as serialism.

Bernstein observes tellingly that no matter what a composer does with music, as long as he is using the twelve notes of the chromatic scale he cannot totally escape

tonality. Schoenberg himself said that—he repudiated the word “atonality” because he thought it was impossible. Tonality is implicitly present in the notes, such that even serialist composers are semi-rooted in it, despite themselves. And of course they weren’t the first to assay non-tonality; Bach sometimes did, Beethoven, even Mozart, and Liszt, and many others. They would play around the edges of tonality, bring rootlessness to bear on rootedness.

Of all the serialist composers, Alban Berg was the most successful at writing music that could appeal to people. He sometimes managed, unlike Schoenberg and the others, to reconcile or fuse the twelve-tone system with tonality (tonal intervals, regular rhythms, etc.) in such a way that his music could be emotionally compelling to at least a fraction of the public. It helped that he had a greater dramatic sense than other composers, as manifested in *Wozzeck* and his violin concerto.

Bernstein’s thoughts on Mahler are typically illuminating. I’ll quote only a few. “...I had hoped to reach the essence of the tonal crisis through examining [Mahler’s] non-resolution of tensions [in the 9th symphony], his reluctant attempts to let go of tonality—all of which does shed further light on the inevitable split that was to occur between Schoenberg and Stravinsky. And so I picked up the score again after some years away from it, filled with the sense of Mahler’s torture at knowing he was the end of the line, the last point in the great symphonic arc that began with Haydn and Mozart and finished with him.... But while re-studying this work, especially the final movement, I found more answers than I’d expected, as we always do when we return to the study of a great work. And the most startling answer, the most important one because it illuminates our whole century from then to now, is this—that ours is the *century of death*, and Mahler is its musical prophet....” Great eloquence follows on the tragedy of the 20th century. And Mahler, he thinks, hypersensitive Mahler, instinctively foresaw it all.

But to return to Schoenberg vs. Stravinsky. “While Schoenberg was dedicating himself to saving music by continuing that great subjective tradition, the chromatic, romantic tradition, Stravinsky was presiding over a wholly new movement heralding a brilliant new group of composers.... What the great Igor did over that forty-some-year period was to keep tonality fresh by one means or another.” In particular, he reacted against the “almost morbid subjectivism” of German romantic music from Wagner to Schoenberg by embracing a sort of classical “objectivism,” “a cleaner, cooler, slightly refrigerated kind of expression which was the result of placing the creative self at a respectful distance from the created object, taking a more removed perspective on music.” This objective expressivity was already “in the air” when Stravinsky took up his pen, being a reaction, again, to German romanticism. Paris, not Vienna, was the central locus of this new music. For example, already in 1898 Erik Satie was “purposefully avoiding what was then known as self-expression” in his simple, *detached* pieces. This sort of “anti-art” attitude—“anti-sincere,” anti-subjective—was also

emerging in painting (Picasso, etc.) and literature. Eventually it would culminate in Dada. But Stravinsky managed to use it to produce beautiful music. Instead of projecting his own feelings and inner conflicts into music, he imagined, for example, “the dreamworld of a pagan Russia” and recorded in *The Rite of Spring* what it expressed to *him*. This, incidentally, is why Theodor Adorno, whom Bernstein discusses briefly, detested Stravinsky—because a sincere artist, a sincere composer, “should express his emotions directly, subjectively,” like Schubert, Wagner, and Schoenberg. (Schoenberg? Atonalism?? Expressing *emotions*?? Maybe in some sense—but usually not effectively, since it only alienates audiences.) Stravinsky was the great artificer; hence Adorno’s aversion. But, as Bernstein says, all art involves artifice to some degree, and it isn’t necessarily insincere or inauthentic on that account. Actually, Adorno’s perspective on modern music was as absolutist and half-simpleminded as his perspectives often were. And you know he was such a crazy elitist, hating popular music, hating film, hating almost anything most people liked.

What were these artifices that Stravinsky used? How did he succeed in reinvigorating tonality? Through such means as extending triads into sevenths, ninths, elevenths, and thirteenths, thus producing a new sort of dissonance, and through the new concepts of bitonality and polytonality (using two or more tonalities at once). Also, extreme *rhythmic* ambiguities, irregular meters, rhythmic “dissonances.” He even used *polyrhythms*, two or more rhythms at once. And all sorts of musical vernaculars from ancient and modern cultures—all to inject “fresh air” into a “stuffy post-Victorian room.” All tools for revivifying tonality. And of course they all caught on, spreading like wildfire across the West.

But all this rampant modernist exuberance, all this vitality and humor and irony and folkloric borrowings that spread musically across continents to Milhaud and Kurt Weiss and Copland and innumerable others, was sort of chaotic. How could it be contained? How could it be structured so as not to degenerate into real musical chaos? Stravinsky’s answer: neoclassicism. There had already been a revival of interest in such classical figures as Bach, Mozart, and Haydn, as manifested for instance in Busoni’s transcriptions (which were really rather romantic) and in some Strauss and Prokofiev and others. But Stravinsky tied it all together. Bernstein compares him to T.S. Eliot, the master in whom preceding (and succeeding) developments in poetry, anti-romantic, anti-“sincere” and -“subjective” developments (E. E. Cummings, William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, etc.), found their culmination. The 20th century *had* to turn away from direct emotional expression because it was so *insecure*. It had to hide itself, its true feelings, because it was embarrassed by too much sincerity. It was too self-conscious and self-doubting. The new century had to speak through a mask, “a more elegant and disguising mask than any previous age has ever used. And it’s the *obliquity* of expression that is now semantically paramount. Aesthetic perceptions are registered at a remove; they are, so to speak, heard around a corner.” *Objective expression*, in short,

became necessary. Neoclassicism (as in Eliot) was a “security blanket for the whole literary [and musical] world to clutch at in its sudden death-ridden distress.”

“Hiding behind the mask of *once* directly expressed emotion—that is the beginning and essential meaning of neoclassicism.” Emotion once directly expressed by John Donne or Mozart or Shakespeare; now we adopt their forms and make allusions to them, to their (comparatively) directly expressed emotions—we hide ourselves behind them, and indirectly express ourselves through them. Example: “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” And Ezra Pound, and W. H. Auden, and *Ulysses*, and a whole galaxy of poets using classical forms. “They speak for all of us frightened children grasping for security in the past.” “But doesn’t it betoken an impoverishment of our resources,” Bernstein asks, “that we must have recourse to the past? On the contrary, it reaffirms our links with the past, our traditions and roots; only we disguise that relationship by coating it in our tough, cool vernacular. But it’s a thin veneer. And when the underlying emotion does shine through, then it hits us with *double* force, precisely because of our shy, frightened attempts to hide it. —Again we’re faced with the ultimate ambiguity: living and partly living, rooted and partly rooted. Remember, just as we found in the last lecture with Schoenberg [i.e., his partial rootedness in tonality]? And so it is with Stravinsky too, in his utterly different way. The one, Schoenberg, tried to control the tonal chaos of modernism through his twelve-tone method; the other, Stravinsky, through the decorum of neoclassicism, exactly like Eliot.” Decorum, yes; but also, like a lot of modern poets, incessant borrowings from the past. In Stravinsky—to simplify—“the personal statement is made via quotes from the past, by alluding to the classics, by a limitless new *eclecticism*. This is the essence of Stravinsky’s neoclassicism. He is now the great eclectic, the thieving magpie....unashamedly borrowing and stealing from every musical museum.” Not always *direct quotes*, but at least stylistic references to past figures.

Throughout all this, of necessity, there is also *humor*. All this semi-plagiarism, it’s all *funny* too. But humor, of course, can “bite deep” and doesn’t have to be frivolous. All of Stravinsky’s mis-matchings and incongruities are funny, but many of them are also intensely serious and poignant. “In the most serious sense, humor in one form or another is the lifeblood of his neoclassicism.” *Irony* is frequently present in Stravinsky, in all his crazy incongruities.

It’s true that eclecticism is usually considered a cardinal sin in artists. But Bernstein defends Stravinsky’s use of it. Adorno “refused to acknowledge the extraordinary power of dramatic irony that could be generated by those egregiously ill-matched components [in Stravinsky, such as his setting a sublime Latin text to machine-like music].... We are *grabbed* by [Stravinsky’s] music, there’s no *escape* from it. As for Adorno, he simply failed to perceive it at all, seeing it only as cleverness, showbiz, theatrical know-how—which was also true, in a way—but not seeing the *real* meaning, which is the amazing proximity of comedy to tragedy in our time. He completely

missed the joke!—the big existentialist joke which is at the center of most major 20th-century works of art, namely *the sense of the absurd*.”

Having watched these lectures, I understand Schoenberg a little better than before. And Stravinsky too, and all modern music. I still maintain, however, that extreme elitism is a flaw in art. I don't need “prettiness,” but I do ask for something that can *compel* me without requiring that I first devote years of study to it just to understand it and to *partially* reconcile myself to it. Music in particular should....among other things, should be the “quicken art,” as Kant said, should quicken the heartbeat, quicken life, quicken the emotions and the self's loss of itself. It's fine for it to shock, but, after all, you have to draw the line somewhere. When does “ugliness” (etc.) in music become a flaw? Some people draw the line before aleatory music, others before serialism; I'm more of a traditionalist, attached to relatively traditional tonality, and so have more restrictive standards. It's fine to express “absurdity” in music, or to pursue one's personal path of self-expression at the expense of popular approbation, but that doesn't have to be done in *really ugly, boring, almost wholly intellectual* ways. When it isn't only “much of the public” but *almost everyone* who rejects one's art even fifty or a hundred years after its introduction, something is wrong. (I'm referring first of all to Schoenberg and those inspired by him, but also to any artist to the extent that his work, many decades later, remains an object of general disdain or revulsion even among the intelligent, educated public.)⁵

Nor do I think it would have been terribly “inauthentic” or inexcusably plagiaristic or hopelessly naïve to write works in styles similar to those of Beethoven or Bach or Schubert or Chopin or Tchaikovsky or even the late Mozart in the 20th century. (Slightly modernized, of course.) Such art is timeless and can express whatever thoughts and feelings you want it to express.

*

Art and beauty.— Franz Schubert, the melodist *par excellence*, was incredible for another reason besides his melodies: his later pieces change keys more often than those of any other composer. He was, indeed, an ancestor of the atonalists. The difference between him and them is that his concern throughout was to create beauty, while theirs was to

⁵ To sum up, art should generally not be *alienating*. It should, to a great extent, be democratic—as should everything in life, because “democratic” means “human.” The elitism of most 20th-century classical composers was related to the elitism of modern bourgeois society, the economic, social, political, cultural, and intellectual schisms and fragmentation. “Bubbles,” such as the academic bubble, the political bubble, the Wall Street bubble....all sorts of elitist bubbles, including in cultural life. Whereas Beethoven's music tended to be democratic due to the relative *integration* of his society, modern artists have tended to be elitist due to their society's relative disintegration.

create something intellectually interesting. He was guided by instinct; they were guided, to a great extent, by self-consciousness. Ironically, this fact in itself makes their music less interesting than his. For in his we hear something unconscious speaking to us: phrases are organically interconnected, growing out of one another almost as steps in a mathematical proof grow out of one another. (Bach's music is an even better example.) A world beyond our ken speaks to us, a mathematical and physical world. With atonalism, on the other hand, there is not the same inner order; there is instead a stitching-together, a self-conscious patching of phrases onto one another. We hear a composer trying to rouse us from musical complacency, to expand our musical horizons. We *don't* hear a composer's subconscious instinctively following the dictates of beauty, of profound and rewarding sound. Beauty is instinctual, ugliness is self-conscious. Music, like life, should be beautiful and instinctual.

*

A soldier speaks on Schubert.— Under a YouTube video of the Andante from Schubert's Piano Trio D. 898 is this comment (from a Scandinavian): "i suffer from post traumatic stress disorder and the only thing that calmes me is schuberts music, no joke it's... yes it's the best. it's my medication... my friends would die laughing seeing this comment but God bless you and may you rest in 'piece' you chuppy little austrian fella!" I can well imagine that this piece, this piece of divinity, would soothe someone with PTSD. One of the most soothing pieces in music caressing away a soldier's pain.

*

Listening, for example, to the 4th movement of Beethoven's 5th symphony, it occurs to you that what makes Beethoven Beethoven is the *naïveté* of his enthusiasm for life. The *childlike sincerity*, the *directness*, of his enthusiasm for life. It is this that speaks to billions of people. It is this that keeps the music perpetually fresh. Or, rather, the music's freshness is synonymous with its childlike sincerity; and Beethoven's whole art consists in the attempt never to let anything hackneyed or didactic or formulaic get in the way of the direct and spontaneous expression of emotion and thought. Most timeless art, in fact, has this "naïve" and "spontaneous" quality, but none more so than Beethoven's. How he managed to convey it through the manipulation of sounds is a mystery, because music itself is a mystery. But it is clear that even the music's "flaws," such as its occasional coarseness, vulgarity, and orchestral imbalances, contribute to its childlike vitality and hence its power.

*

Zerlina's aria "Vedrai, carino" is one of my favorites in *Don Giovanni*. For most of the song she sings coquettishly about her magical salve for Masetto's pains, a medicine that will surely cure him, hinting at its power and effectiveness, and you're *convinced*

she's referring to sex. Thus, you listen to the enchanting music with an amused grin, charmed by its translation of a lover's flirtatiousness into the most sublime beauty. Yet there remains a *slight* doubt in your mind as to whether you've guessed the remedy correctly, and you wait for the libretto to confirm it somehow. But suddenly there's a pause in the music, followed by a pulsating cello that heralds an event of excruciating serenity. A flute is fused with it, *pianissimo* and *legatissimo*, whetting your anticipation. Gently Zerlina places Masetto's hand on her chest and says to him "Feel it [i.e., the medicine] beating" — and you realize you were wrong; she was referring not to sex but to her love, her heart. In an instant the aria has been transformed from a fetching exercise in innuendo to a pure expression of undying love.

*

Against postmodernism. — If you want a simple criterion for artistic greatness, here it is: the artist who manifests longevity in both popular and critical approbation is truly great. — That excludes most postmodernists, who don't appeal even to *educated* popular audiences, only to super-educated, or super-indoctrinated, "critical" ones.

*

After hearing Berio's "Sinfonia." — The problem with much (not all) postmodern or "avant-garde" art, whether in music, drama, literature or the plastic arts, is that its self-consciousness doesn't extend far enough. This is all the more artistically damaging in that its chief merit, its most distinctive feature, is supposed to be its self-consciousness. From Beckett to Berio to Cage and beyond, postmodern artists have set themselves in opposition to un-selfconscious artistic dogmas, to every un-selfconscious commonplace about art — such as the exaltation of naïve "beauty," the idea that artists should work within certain boundaries, even the idea that art itself constitutes a separate and lofty category of experience. These artists have taken as their starting-point the self-consciousness of modern society, its universal doubt and relativism, and have explored all its permutations through art. They have, therefore, prided themselves on two qualities: their artistic freedom (adventurousness) and their artistic self-consciousness.

It's interesting to note that Romantic artists were, like their later antipodes the postmodernists, very self-conscious and concerned with artistic freedom. Art is self-expression, they thought, heroic and beautiful self-expression. Let the artistic genius go his own way, forge a path for others to follow! Life is tragic, full of suffering; the artist, though, *creates* out of his suffering, creates new worlds freely and spontaneously! He is the vanguard of humanity! — The problem with this creed was that it focused on the *pathos* in life and ignored the *comic*. It *forgot* the comic; life consisted only of pathos and tragedy. The Kierkegaardian and Nietzschean critiques of Romanticism can, perhaps, be distilled into that claim: the self-consciousness of the Romantics was not self-

conscious enough, for it exaggerated one side of life at the expense of another equally important side. In other words, it criticized life but not itself.

Years ago I wrote this:

I read Chateaubriand's *Atala* and *René* for my class. They were gorgeously written but exhausting to read. In fact, they were annoying. Such a shameless profusion of sentiment, such intemperate milking-of-sorrow-for-all-it's-worth, such enraptured pessimism—yes, life is suffering, now get over it! I grew deadened to feeling, immune to all but impatience. Romanticism is self-defeating, self-caricaturing.

Postmodernism tends to be guilty of the same lack of self-consciousness and self-criticism, though in a different way. Rather than exaggerating the tragic in life, it exaggerates the absurd—the senseless and the commonplace, and the solipsistic. It rejects old aesthetic standards because of their supposed artificiality; it embraces life's inherent contingency, the absolute freedom at its core. (It's significant that existentialism was virtually contemporaneous with the beginnings of postmodernism.) And absolute freedom amounts, in this context, to absolute absurdity—chaos—and ordinariness, to the irrelevance of norms of reason and beauty. Hence: Duchamp's *Fountain*, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Cage's *4'33''*, Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*, and Berio's *Sinfonia*. The logical conclusion of this philosophy is something like Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*, which was a 120-foot-long, 12-foot-high slab of rusted steel that reached across a popular plaza in Manhattan in the 1980s, obstructing the entrance to the federal building next to it and wrecking the public's enjoyment of the plaza. Serra, like many other contemporary artists, wanted to *challenge* his audience, to make a philosophical statement. In this case, as he explained during the hearings that ended in the removal of his sculpture, he wanted to "create a behavioral space in which the viewer interacts with the sculpture in its context... The arc divides space against itself... We can learn more about ourselves, about the nature of our social relations, and about the nature of the spaces we inhabit and depend upon by keeping *Tilted Arc*." A certain kind of artist has always tried to justify the ugliness or aesthetic unimpressiveness of his creations by means of such pseudo-philosophical arguments.

But the art is flawed in that it emphasizes one side of life—the nihilistic side—at the expense of another side, namely the rational and beautiful side. Franz Kafka's art suffers from the same deficiency (though it is also more profound and finely crafted than the typical postmodernist creation). Rather than portraying life's richness and thereby *affirming* life, it exaggerates the absurd and thereby *denies* life. Therefore, it is neither spiritually uplifting nor true to life.

Before I elaborate on that I want to point out another manifestation of postmodernism's lack of self-consciousness: like Romanticism, it under-appreciates the

comic element in life. This isn't to say that it doesn't laugh at life or make fun of it—for, indeed, this form of mockery is part of its *raison d'être*! However, it is far less adept at applying this mockery to itself—at recognizing that it itself is sometimes comical. It doesn't see that it's supremely pretentious, that, most of the time, it is a ridiculous self-parody. It takes itself *far too seriously*. For, in being defined by a rejection of conventional norms of beauty and rationality yet justifying itself through abstruse philosophical ideas (examples of which I gave above)—i.e., highly “rational” ideas—it contradicts itself. It justifies itself through reason, i.e., *norms* of reason, even as it rebels against all norms—i.e., as it proclaims its total freedom to do as it pleases. In short, there is a contradiction between its apparent simplicity, childishness, and its claims to sophistication (that is, its sophisticated self-justifications). This contradiction is essentially and necessarily comical, which is why people often laugh at postmodernism. They are laughing at its pretensions to sophistication, which are in such contrast to its often primitive or absurd appearance. By its very nature, such art cannot overcome this contradiction at its heart, and so it can never achieve the artistic dignity and merit of, say, Eugene O'Neill's greatest plays, or Tolstoy's novels, or Thomas Mann's works.

So, like much Romantic art, though in a different way, postmodernism tends to be a self-parody.⁶ In rebelling against what it considers the pretentiousness of traditional art, it succumbs to an even greater and more comical pretentiousness. This fact is damning enough, but, as I said above, postmodernism also tends to be guilty of exalting one aspect of experience (freedom, chaos, despair, confusion) and ignoring another aspect (reason, beauty, order, self-restraint). *Unlike* Romantic art, though, the aspect it ignores is the noble, uplifting, redeeming side of life, the humanistic side. So, while the Romantic artist is able to affirm life in spite of its tragedy, the postmodernist artist basically rejects life—mocks it, caricatures it, rebels against it (against the claims of taste, beauty, proportionality, reason, humanity, which are the most important and redeeming elements of life).

Another way of saying this is to say that postmodernism—or rather “avant-garde” art, including works called postmodern—especially in its later manifestations, appeals overwhelmingly to the *cognitive* mode of experience, while neglecting the *affective* mode. Atonalism, for example, doesn't “caress the emotions,” doesn't soothe sadness or stimulate joy; it is mainly an intellectual exercise—an exalting of the intellect at the expense of the affective mode, which shudders and turns away from it. But an art that has contempt for the affective response in humans rejects one of the main functions of art—arguably *the* main function. We have philosophy and science to satisfy the

⁶ Notice I wrote “*tends to...*” At its best, postmodernism can be extremely thought-provoking. Duchamp's *Fountain*, which at least *anticipated* postmodernism, is profound—not “in itself” but because of the social context in which it was produced. However, Minimalism in the 1970s or 1980s was not profound, because the social context had changed.

cognitive sphere; if art, too, concerns itself mainly with the cognitive, then what is left for the affective? This side of life will shrivel, and the human being will become stunted. The situation is all the more lamentable in that the affective mode has far more to do with mental health than the cognitive mode does. Life is about affection more than cognition.

It's ironic that, while the postmodern artist tends to pride himself on his appeal to the intellect over the emotions, his work is usually intellectually sterile. It is supposed to be a commentary on society or life or whatever, but its commentative value is nugatory. The commentary usually consists of vague, pseudo-philosophical trivialities, like Serra's argument quoted above. Berio, for example, might say that the nonsensical, fragmentary verbal texts spoken simultaneously (in different languages) by the singers in his *Sinfonia* have a thematic significance, perhaps as a commentary on the social divisions during the '60s, perhaps as implying that authentic communication between humans is impossible, perhaps as illustrating the fragmentary nature of the postmodern self. There is an indefinite number of possible "meanings." But each of these meanings is a platitude, uninteresting and uninformative. So what the audience is confronted with is an incoherent mass of ugly sound and senseless verbal utterances with no redeeming thematic significance. The listener, therefore, is impatient, annoyed, bored, and the art fails to connect with its audience. In the end, it is merely a testament to the composer's solipsistic self-indulgence.

In the third movement of the *Sinfonia* there are echoes of the scherzo from Mahler's second symphony. "If I were asked to explain the presence of Mahler's scherzo in *Sinfonia*," Berio has said, "the image that would naturally spring to mind would be that of a river running through a constantly changing landscape, disappearing from time to time underground, only to emerge later totally transformed. Its course is at times perfectly transparent, at others hard to perceive, sometimes it takes on a totally recognizable form, at others it is made up of a multitude of tiny details lost in the surrounding forest of musical presences." –Wow, that all sounds very lofty and philosophical. However, especially in contrast with the incoherent surface-structure of the piece, it is unbearably pretentious. And comical. An art that is in this way a self-parody fails as art.

In short, there are (or were) many problems with postmodernism. While it is indeed "art," it is rarely great art, for great art appeals to both the affective and the cognitive modes, and doesn't rely on philosophical clichés to justify its existence, and is true to life—it resonates with the average intelligent person's experience, with his spiritual strivings and doubts—and it isn't self-contradictory in such a way that it deteriorates into self-parody.

Nevertheless, it's good that art went through its postmodernist period, for now it can return to its earlier grandeur but on a higher, more self-conscious level. For there is a kernel of truth in every historical movement, as Hegel saw. Modernism and

postmodernism freed art from the naïve and dogmatic emphasis on beauty, pleasantness, conventionality. Postmodernism in particular remade art in the image of modern life, with its chaos, ugliness, self-doubt, exaggerations, thereby performing an invaluable historical service. That it amounted to a denial of most things that are good in life does not mitigate its importance. What is left to us now, though, is to transcend its implicit negativity—to synthesize (i.e., reconcile) the awareness of life’s absurdity with love of life, with *affirmation*.⁷ This synthesis is indeed possible: just look at the ancient Greeks, who carried it out on a more naïve level. (They reconciled the affirmative attitude with awareness of life’s *tragedy* rather than *absurdity*. Admittedly, tragedy is, in a sense, less “tragic” than absurdity, for it still maintains the dignity of man, his worth, while absurdity denies even this. Still, it is possible both to appreciate absurdity and to affirm life.)

So it’s time we left creative impotence behind and started loving life again. It’s time we became humanists—by adhering to a *self-conscious* and *rich* humanism, richer than that of the Enlightenment.

*

An artist who isn’t.— The typical postmodern artist (and critic) confuses greatness with the fostering of controversy. He seems to think that the purpose of art is to produce controversy—to be “original.” Originality, no matter how it’s manifested, is seen as an end in itself. In reality, though, it is only a means. Great artists have always understood this.

*

Susan Sontag against herself.— It’s significant that even someone like Susan Sontag, who for a while was adamant in her support of postmodernism and formalism, finally admitted that the postmodernist attitude contains the seeds of cultural destruction. In her famous book *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, published originally in the 1960s, she defended contemporary art against criticisms by Marxist, humanistic critics like Georg Lukács, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor Adorno. But when she published a new edition of her book in 1996, she added an Afterword in which she admitted that the humanists were partly right after all. She had scolded them for being “insensitive to most of the interesting and creative features of contemporary culture in non-socialist

⁷ Some postmodern artists might object that that is exactly what they saw themselves as doing. Many of them, after all, *rejoiced* in casting off old rules and effectively denying life’s meaningfulness. The nature of their work, however, belies their optimistic self-interpretation: insofar, e.g., as it exalts controversy for controversy’s sake, or is intentionally puerile and ridiculous, or is impenetrably solipsistic, the essence of their work is negative rather than positive. It bespeaks the despairing fragmentedness of its society.

countries”: they criticized most modern art as decadent, alienated, un-historical, allegorical, unrealistic, shallow, consumerist. They thought it was symptomatic of a culture in decline, while earlier realism was strong and vibrant, and morally uplifting. She argued, on the other hand, that they overemphasized the importance of “content” at the expense of “form.” But in the 1996 Afterword she admitted that “we live in a time which is experienced as the end—more exactly, just past the end—of every ideal. (And therefore of culture: there is no possibility of true culture without altruism.)... [Back in the Sixties, even, something was happening,] something that it would not be an exaggeration to call a sea-change in the whole culture, a transvaluation of values—for which there are many names. Barbarism is one name for what was taking over. Let’s use Nietzsche’s term: we had entered, really entered, the age of nihilism.” So in the end she agreed with the Marxist critics, who evidently had a keener sense of what was happening than she did. She even adopted their moralistic language, in direct opposition to her earlier self: “there is no possibility of true culture without altruism.”

*

The significance of art.— The overture to Beethoven's *Fidelio* would violate artistic principles in its shamelessly unsubtle glorification of life were such glorification not the most important principle of all.

*

The significance of music.— On the way home from work today, while I was on the subway, an Asian man standing near me broke into song. He just...started singing. A nicely dressed, normal-looking fellow. He was reading the words from a book; they were in a different language. It was weird at first. A man sitting next to him, a crotchety old guy with a surly expression seared onto his face, instantly covered his ears. His reaction, in fact, may have been stranger than the actual singing: he didn’t look surprised, he didn’t look puzzled, he didn’t look disgusted; after the first two notes he simply put his fingers into his ears and kept them there. Later he walked away. No one said anything for the duration of the (long) song; I observed everyone’s reaction, and it was, almost without exception, blank. The situation struck me as surreal. But after the first two minutes, in which my one thought was “What the hell?”, I started to enjoy it. The fellow had a good voice. This *a capella* performance on a subway where everyone else was silent, everyone in his own world, thinking his own thoughts—steered by music into a virtually preordained vein:—it was moving. We were all the same distant atoms as usual, but we were drawn together. I sensed the walls between us dissolving; I sensed my own quietness dissolving; and I wanted to sing myself, or at least speak to everyone as a brother. I realized...‘We’re just people...they’re just people...what’s the point of all this isolation?’ The meaning of the song was appropriate: in answer to a question, the man said it was a prayer, and that each day he prays as often as he can.