Ideas:

MUSIC AND LITERATURE

Anthony Burgess is known to most Americans as the prolific English author of witty, sometimes scathing novels ranging from his futuristic satire *A Clockwork Orange* to his massive meditation on *Earthly Powers*. But Burgess also has a strong attachment to music, perhaps inherited from his mother, "the Beautiful Belle Burgess," a singer and dancer in the music halls of his native Manchester. After listening at age 12 to Debussy's *L'Après-midi d'un faune* on a homemade crystal radio, Burgess began to teach himself musical composition. Since then, in addition to 25 novels, he has composed almost 100 pieces of music, including three symphonies. Here Burgess considers some of the connections between the two arts.

by Anthony Burgess

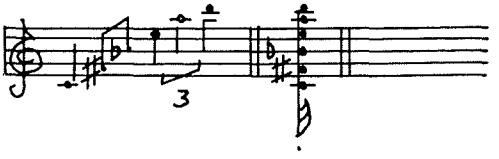
A quark is defined as "any of three hypothetical subatomic particles having electric charges of magnitude one-third or two-thirds that of the electron, proposed as the fundamental units of matter." The word is taken from James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, where the gulls are ironically hailing the impotent King Mark of the Tristan legend: "Three quarks for Muster Mark!" It is very nearly an arbitrary borrowing (the *three* qualifies total randomness). In Joyce the vocable is imitative, in physics it is a deliberately chosen counter whose phonetic content has nothing to do with what it defines. It is a typical word, in other words.

Saussure, the father of modern linguistics, emphasized the arbitrary nature of words. The iconic word, like *moon* or *little*, where the nature of the vowel suggests an imitation of what is described, is very rare in language. Words are overwhelmingly seen to be arbitrary bundles of phonemes, or speech sounds, to which meanings are attached—either by fiat (as with *quark*) or by historic or prehistoric tradition, as with the greater number

of words in the human vocabulary. These are the units of the most efficient system of communication mankind possesses.

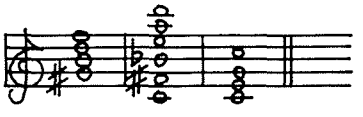
Does music have comparable units?

Evidently not. It has notes, and it has chords, and it has, in comparison with the number of words in even the smallest lexicon, very few of these. A note is atomic, like a phoneme. That word *quark* has, as a spoken unit, four phonemes for the British and five for the Americans, who pronounce r in it. To get the equivalent of a word in music you must choose a phrase of two or more notes; alternatively (an advantage language does not have and which literature envies) you can sound several notes simultaneously. Your basic musical unit can be extended in time or be virtually timeless:



That, as most readers will recognize, is the so-called mystic chord of Scriabin—an item in his musical vocabulary which had its own significance for the composer and has had rather less for his listeners.

Can a meaning—that is, a referent or item in the outside world—be attached to a musical phrase as it can be attached to a bundle of phonemes? The answer is yes, and the process can be quite as arbitrary as with *quark*. Wagner invented the principle of the leitmotif, and for his *Ring* he contrived a great number of musical phrases which have referents glued to them. I could follow his example and say: "I am about to make a statement on the keyboard. Here are the lexical items of the statement. The common chord of C means I, me, myself. The mystic chord of Scriabin means kill or kills. The diminished seventh, any diminished seventh, means my wife. What am I now saying?"



The statement will be understood, as will the other available orderings of the chords—I kill myself; I kill my wife; Kill I my wife?—but it is obvious that this is not the way music operates. The duration of a chord—crotchet, minim or semibreve—is of immense importance to a composer, but the duration of a word is a matter of mere rhetoric to the speaker: it is prosodic, or su-

prasegmental, and it cannot even be indicated in conventional script. Again, the first chord could be played pianissimo, the second mezzo piano, and the last fortissimo—mere devices of eccentric rhetoric in speech, but possessing a precise purpose in the statements of the musician.

In fact, the basic materials of the musical vocabulary are the purely suprasegmental ones of speech. Matters of speed, vocalic prolongation and, to a large extent, of intonation are not fundamental to the communication of verbal meaning, but it is out of these elements that music is made. A musician, too, would totally reject the notion that meanings can be attached arbitrarily to notes, as they are to words. He might accept that the personal pronoun, as representing the firm center from which the world is surveyed, the one item in the universe whose existence we cannot doubt, finds a correlative in a major triad. The major triad, being made of the lower harmonics of any given note, is a fact of nature, a basic reality. The diminished seventh, as used to designate "my wife," suggests dubiety, since it is a chord which could belong to any one of eight keys and, being homeless until resolved, it has connotations of anxiety. It cannot *denote* "my wife," but it can suggest an attitude to her. The Scriabin chord is an undoubted discord, and it might well serve to symbolize violent dissolution, but it is probably, especially nowadays, not violent enough. What the composer would certainly strongly reject would be the arbitrary use of the major triad to mean "kill," but he might not object to it as a correlative of death, so long as the death were both peaceful and desired by the dying.

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It is perhaps because the composer knows, through instinct and experience, what phrases and what chords can be used in the setting of words in song and opera, that he ascribes to such musical components meanings that do not need to be particularized by words. Before music became capable of the kind of instrumental independence which could produce a symphony, it relied, for its longer structures, on the setting of words, secular or sacred, and it learned a sort of consonance of phrase, or

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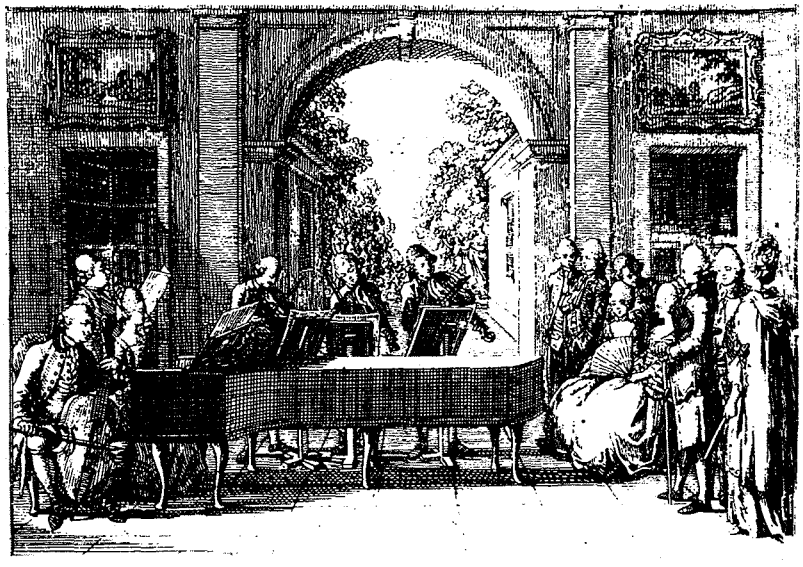

In 1717, Johann Sebastian Bach served as Kappelmeister *of the chamber music group installed in the court of Leopold von Köthen. Instrumental music of the time was free of literary themes.*

chord, and verbal meaning. Take away the words, an easier process than setting them, and the verbal meaning remains, but it seems now to be purely a musical meaning. Out of this is bred the romantic arrogance of Berlioz and Strauss, which holds that musical language can replace verbal language and the art of music can take over the art of literature.

The arrogance of romanticism was encouraged by the growth of musical resources in the romantic period. The verbal resources of the great poets of the past, from Homer to Shakespeare, do not seem to us to be inferior to our own, but, in Homer's time, music hardly existed except as modal monody, and, in Shakespeare's, it is hard to think of a Byrd or a Weelkes being able to match the intensity and complexity, as well as violence, of *Hamlet* or *King Lear*. It is, as we all know, highly dangerous to speak of the *progress* of music in the historical period, since art does not progress, the limitations of his material are never a source of frustration to the artist, and every age believes it has achieved the highest conceivable pinnacle of art.

But the fact is that music has always depended, while literature has not, on technical innovation, and the 19th-century composers were the beneficiaries of immense advances in both the linguistic and instrumental resources of their art.

When we play the *Well-Tempered Clavier* of Bach, we are made to realize how comparatively novel are the blessings of the tempered scale. As a boy, I thought "well-tempered" was a whimsical epithet for a keyboard that did not fight back at the performer, and it was only slowly that I realized that the scale in nature was not the same as the scale on the piano in the living room. By a cunning flattening of fifths, our instruments have been made to accommodate an entire cycle of keys impossible to the virginals that Shakespeare's mistress played. The sonatas of Beethoven are adventures that range through all the keys and exploit devices of modulation that could have had no meaning for John Bull or Orlando Gibbons. In nature G flat and F sharp are different notes: in the tempered scale they are the same, and they permit movement from one key to another by means of auditory puns. The dominant seventh of D flat changes its G flat to F sharp (a pure matter of notation) and becomes the augmented sixth, whereby we land at once into the distant key of C major. The diminished seventh provides access to any one of four major or four minor keys: Samuel Butler called it the Clapham Junction of the keyboard.

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The pianoforte for which Beethoven composed was one of the great technical innovations of the Napoleonic age, and it was Beethoven who, using a valved horn in his Ninth Symphony, prefigured the revolution in the orchestra. The classical horns and trumpets were confined to the bugle calls of the harmonic series, but, with the provision of valves, they had the chromatic scale at their disposal. What the possibilities of the romantic orchestra are we begin to see, spectacularly, in the *Symphonie Fantastique* of Hector Berlioz, composed only a few years after the death of Beethoven, but those possibilities are forced into fulfillment by the pressure of imposed literary programs, not by the inner urgings of musical inspiration alone.

The *Symphonie Fantastique* uses all the devices of Beethovenian language, leaps about the entire terrain of the keys, exploits the mimetic possibilities of the instruments—*ranz des vaches* on English horn, multiple kettledrums for thunder, eight harps for a ballroom scene, drumrolls before the blade of the guillotine falls, squeak of an E flat clarinet at the witches' sabbath, tolling bells while trombones and tubas intone the *Dies Irae*—and all in the service of the story of a young artist who has lost his mistress and sees her apparition through opium clouds. The occasional clumsiness of the music, which all the commentators admit, is excused by the daring of the conception. It is as

if a novelist, in despair at the inadequacy of words to convey his vision, has taken a crash course in music because music is the only other available outlet. This is precisely what Berlioz intends to demonstrate: the superiority of music to literature as a literary medium.

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The conviction that the romantic orchestra and the resources of the post-Beethovenian vocabulary were eloquent enough to absorb the materials of literature was corroborated by the new French view of Shakespeare. Berlioz, like Dumas, was overwhelmed in the 1830s by the performances of Shakespeare given by a visiting English company in Paris. (In the company was a young Irish actress, a Miss Smithson, with whom Berlioz fell symphonically nay fantastically in love.) It seemed to many that the greatness of Shakespeare was impaired by the theatrical conventions forced upon him by his own era. The situations were magnificent, the psychology profound, the speeches sublime, but what Shakespeare had really wished to write was not plays but novels. The romantic novel not existing in his time, only the picaresque, he was compelled to waste the wealth of his imagination on a far inferior form. It was a pity, but it was possible for Berlioz to put everything right by translating Shakespeare into music. And so he composed *Roméo et Juliette*, using words where it seemed necessary to call on a chorus, but handing over Mercutio's Queen Mab speech to the orchestra, and turning Romeo and Juliet into respectively a clarinet and an oboe.

Berlioz similarly remade part of Byron's *Childe Harold*—an act of arrogance wholly justified, since the concerto-symphony *Harold in Italy* (the old genres are certainly dying) is superior as art to the poem. He also remade Virgil in *Les Troyens*, one of the great operatic achievements of the century. There seems to be a romantic perverseness here, with an English dramatist turned into a symphonic novelist and a Roman epic poet converted into a dramatist.

But the division between post-Gluckian opera and symphonic fiction is not so great as it appears. The words on the stage are a mere pretext for the psychological complexities proceeding in the orchestra. We cannot doubt that the orchestra is discoursing particularities about human relationships, because the words up there on the stage are telling us so, if we can hear the words. The orchestra may, as in Wagner and Strauss, drown the words, but we can look up the words in the printed libretto. The words are a pretext for the sounds, which are the true state-

This 1863 caricature shows Richard Wagner's Tannhäuser *asking to see his little brother,* The Trojans, *held in the fatherly embrace of Hector Berlioz. Epic and legend provided themes for the music of both composers.*

ment, and as the statement is analytical there is little room on the stage for the dramatic action which denies the need for analysis. Eventually it will be unnecessary for Tristan and Isolde to do more than repeat each other's name, while the avowals of love, and indeed love's physical fulfillment, are left, with a certainty of eloquence that no mere words could encompass, to the players in the pit. It does not matter whether you hire a theater or a concert hall. The declamations of the singers and the printed declaration of the content of the *Symphonie Fantastique* share the same pretextual function. One word will be enough to call the music down from the sky of generality to the wrist of the particular.

The arrogance of Berlioz led to the greater arrogance of Strauss—meaning Germanic as opposed to merely Gallic. There comes a point in his opera *Salome* where it is clear that sung words have no further function. Salome gets the shorn head of John the Baptist and kisses the lips which are no longer living flesh but mere morphology. Her words are redundant: the huge orchestra is perfectly capable of dealing with all that pseudo-biblical imagery. Ring down the curtain. The orchestra will tell us when the soldiers are crushing Salome to death under their

shields. The orchestra can tell us everything. We have entered the world of the symphonic poem.

The symphonic poem represents the inevitable terminus of the development of the Beethoven symphony. Artistic unity, no longer to be fulfilled in the rococo manner through a mere selection of genres, has to be found in a literary program, and the symphonic poem may be said to begin with the "Eroica." Franz Liszt saw very clearly the direction the symphony had to take—a three-movement work like the *Faust Symphony* and a tone poem like *Les Préludes* differ only in the commitment of the one to the depiction of character and the other to the expression of (rather banal) poeticisms—but Richard Strauss consumed the possibilities of the new form in the huge *Ein Heldenleben*.

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This is, however much we may cry out against the excessive orchestral forces, the vulgarity, and the rampant egoism, a very great work. We have all reached the point of being able to take in the music as character and narrative without having to consult the program notes. It is genuine epic and genuine autobiography. It is the complete vindication of the new form, but very little can be done after it.

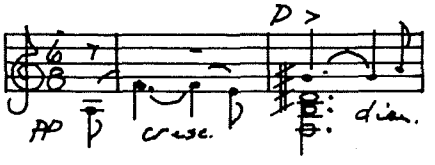
Don Quixote is successful in a different way. The concept is brilliant—fantastic variations on a theme of knightly character, as Strauss himself puts it in the subsidiary title—but the significance of the enterprise for the composer seems to be the extent to which the world of solid objects can be absorbed into music. It is not just a matter of making eight muted horns mimic the bleating of sheep but rather an implied declaration that music can give us the Platonic ideal of the bleating of sheep. The representative arts are usually humble in relation to their referents. Art, after all, is inferior to nature. But music is the mind of God, or Strauss, and the outside world is transfigured once it is transformed into organized sound.

Strauss was arrogant enough (or perhaps it was ironic arrogance) to assert that anything could be represented in music, and hence transfigured to a higher order of reality. It should be possible to represent a glass of lager, and to make it clear who the brewer is; to set knives and forks on the table of the musical imagination and show them to be either silver or pewter.

This sort of thing can, in fact, be done and ought to be done. Strauss demonstrated his method in the dinner music for *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* (used as the prelude to and justification of *Ariadne auf Naxos*—the most brilliant of Hofmannsthal's confections). When Rhine salmon is served, we hear Wagner's

Rhine leitmotif; the roast lamb comes from that flock in *Don Quixote*. It has to be extra-musical or quasi-literary unless a label is directly attached to the representation. In William Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast* we are told which gods the Babylonians are praising, and the gods are carried in procession—strokes on the anvil for the God of Iron, slapstick for the God of Stone, xylophone for the God of Wood (more etymology than sound), brass for the God of Brass, woodwind for the God of Silver. A slapstick is not made of stone, nor are flutes and oboes silver, though a metaphor will make their tones silvery. Musical images thus demand a diversity of method—the literal, the associative, the metaphorical—but there is no referent which defeats them, so long as words are somewhere around.

We ought to note that practically all the developments in romantic and post-romantic music spring out of attempts to represent, or interpret, phenomena traditionally left to the other arts. A great deal has been written, including whole books, on the chord which opens the Prelude to *Tristan*:



Here we have a prophecy of the collapse of traditional tonality. Though that chord could be glossed as an ordinary secondary seventh in the key of F sharp or G flat major (notated differently, of course), it is revealed as not belonging to any recognizable key. The love of Tristan and Isolde is compounded of elements which deny traditional fealty and even the life-enhancing ends of the sexual relationship. In *Finnegans Wake* the seagulls may mock King Mark with their quark, but here the situation is tragic because disruptive of social order. Wagner is impelled to the formulation of a harmonic system which denies a fixed center, and he opens the door for Schönberg and atonalism.

Romanticism, after fulfilling itself grandiosely in Strauss, had either to be denied by Paris or broken down and remade into a new system by Vienna. Debussy could not compose music without employing extra-musical referents, whether derived from literature, the pictorial arts, or nature herself. In his two volumes of *Préludes* he is prepared to represent Mr. Pickwick or General Levine or seaside minstrels or a girl with flaxen hair, but his mode of representing them denies their humanity and

converts them into impersonal objects, like heather or fog or the west wind or the perfumes of night invoked by Baudelaire.

The musical language has to deny the hierarchy of the diatonic scale and its harmonies, since we are not in a world where social values apply. A chord is a block of sound followed by identical blocks of sound further up or lower down the scale: there is none of the old syntax which deferred to a tonal centre. New scales have to be manufactured or imported—like the wholetone scale of Java—and the old modes are revived. But the new language is not there to serve a self-referring art. Debussy is just another post-rococo composer, like Berlioz, claiming to absorb the external world into music.

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The atonal revolution of Schönberg derives ultimately from *Tristan*, but it was when studying the score of *Salome* in 1907—an opera which presents the final breakdown of order—that he observed for the first time harmonies whose roots could not be defined and a mere pretense of coherent language. It could be said that Schönberg's democratization of the chromatic scale, with every one of the twelve semitones equal to each other, was a denial not merely of the hierarchy by which the Austro-Hungarian Empire of Haydn and Mozart had subsisted, but a rejection of nature herself, since nature does not recognize a scale artificially tempered to equal intervals. It is certain, I think, that atonal music, even when structured according to the rules of serialism, has referents of breakdown—not only in society but in the individual psyche itself.

The test for evaluating music, ever since the death of Beethoven and perhaps even before his death, has been the degree of fidelity with which it has interpreted an extra-musical subject matter. There was a period of roughly a century and a half when instrumental music could subsist in a kind of self-referential purity—the period of the baroque and the rococo. Certain assumptions about God and human society permitted the production of a kind of music—whether a fugue, a passacaglia or a symphony—which was an image of accepted order.

With the coming of Beethoven there was an attempt to continue this tradition, but it depended on a view of social stability which could not last. The new philosophy found its center in the individual, and the new music was a mirror of this. The workings of the individual psyche are best presented in literature, and it was to literature that the new musicians went for their themes and structures.

I use the term literature loosely. I mean by it the representa-

tion of human thought, feeling and action—biographical or fictional—preferably in words but acceptably in media where the verbal element is minimal or even non-existent. In the sense that ballet, which is wordless, and film, which can be wordless, are art forms derived from the drama—traditionally a branch of literature—and depend on character and action, they are literary enough and, when music is applied to them, demand what may be called literary music.

Thus, music treats film as it treated drama: it tries to convert it into a kind of novel. Film is a popular art form which uses music to underline setting and action and to suggest unspoken currents of thought and feeling, but, unlike Wagnerian music drama, it cannot permit the narrative to be absorbed into the music. It is far closer to the literal melodrama (not necessarily the debased form which made the term pejorative) of the Victorian age.

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In listening to the music of the cinema, we gain a diluted and popular idea of the vocabulary now available to the not absolutely serious composer. I have written a little film music myself, and know that the exigencies of the medium will not permit music to be too original or even too interesting. It must not intrude. It is permitted very few complete statements. Like a diffident speaker in the presence of an arrogant one, it must be prepared to be cut off in the middle of a sentence. It can rarely use an accepted form, like fugue or passacaglia. But it has an eclectic language, and this never, except in historical films where the music becomes part of the action, evokes the age of stability. Background music in the manner of Haydn or Mozart must always draw attention to itself as primary and not ancillary art. The sounds required are those of "literary" music.

We can particularize and say that the harmonic language of film music is mostly that of early Debussy—*The Blessed Damozel* rather than *Jeux*. There are plenty of secondary sevenths, and a sequence of these will be suitable for any meditative passage. Atonalism is to be admitted only when there are visual images of alienation. In composing the music for an Italian documentary called *The Eyes of New York*, I was drawn to the abandonment of a key center when the film showed the poor and outcast, the young drugged, or the sculpture of George Segal. But visions of skyscrapers call for major tonalities with added notes (seconds, sixths, sevenths, ninths) and the kind of melodic nobility which owes more to Rachmaninov than to Beethoven.

There is, despite its contrived functionalism, a certain hon-

esty in this kind of music. It represents what the ordinary listener can accept as intelligible language, and no composer can cut in and justify extravagances on the grounds of some new theory. An affirmation (Manhattan; the Rockies; a man satisfying thirst) cannot be accompanied by that Scriabin chord: a major triad is called for.

When composing film music, the musicians of our age are compelled to use an eclectic language which they must regard as old-fashioned. Writing "seriously" they have to abandon eclecticism; they are forced into making a choice which excludes old-fashioned tonality and uses a loose atonality or a serialism derived from Schönberg or Messiaen. There is also a view of music which sees composition as an exploration of the nature of sounds or, with John Cage, denies a distinction between the structured sounds of music and the noises of the external world. There is no generally accepted aesthetic of music, and this can do the art no good.

I have tried, for my own enlightenment, to use most of the musical idioms available today, from the Broadway show song to the rarefactions of Boulez, and I am disturbed by the lack of a synthesis. Music is no longer sure of itself. In the 19th century an attempt was made by Johannes Brahms to restore the old symphonic vision of stability, just as, in Edwardian England, Edward Elgar fixed an image of imperial serenity (though more scarred and hysterical than many suspect) before the darkness set in. But the real currents of musical development lay elsewhere. Music might have pretended, with Berlioz and Strauss, to absorb literature, but in fact it had turned itself into an adjunct to literature—critical, illustrative. Mozart was the last of the great composers.

It was, I suppose, a doubt about the capacity of music to provide me with a language that drove me to the craft of the novel, where there are solidities of character and *récit* and corresponding semantic and syntactical solidities. But, if literature has done so much for music, it may well be that music can do things for literature which only the musically trained *littérateur* is capable of envisaging. We can at least speculate about this.