

Beethoven in Musical Hell

As a child

Beethoven had a recurrent dream where he was buried alive
and what frightened him most was the howl
of black loneliness in his ears.
He awoke to pound it away
breaking strings and fingernails
becoming the beast virtuoso of the hammerklavier.

As a young man

Beethoven had a recurrent nightmare where he was buried alive in the blues;
he woke half-digested by depression
to kick over the unemptied chamber pot,
the moldering dinner plates,
the migraine of the Marcia Funebre drumming in his brain.

As a man Beethoven had a recurrent dream

of a beautiful nautaloid,
the perfect pearl coil oozing
oozing obscenely.
Beethoven woke his cochlea choked up forever,
spat
and shouted the Grosse Fugue at it.

And heard!

And heard
a violin burning,
the scream of a naked woman
impaled on electrified harp strings,
XXX sins played up a kid's spine,
black lizard events crawling into the ear of a great symphony.

Beethoven heard

whole musical continents to liberate,
picked up a gun,
blew the Parnassus inspirations away
and composed Niagaras of democracy.

The Faith of Bruckner

The magic number nine worked on Bruckner.
That number nine that had hung over European music like a nightmare cloud
that made even the stoutest composers sudden castrati.

For so many years Bruckner had said his prayers,
his careful Catholic prayers.
He kept a daily scorecard of his prayers --
today three Ave Marias, three Credos
five Salve Reginas, a single Lord's Prayer plus the rosary --
not included of course
were the prayers that that damned Hasnslick's mouth
be stuffed with his latest libelous slanderings.

For so many years
Bruckner had approached composition
the way he approached women --
chastely, purely, with ever a backwards glance,
in this permitted?
And just like the women he proposed to
the Viennese pack led by the mad dog Hanslick rebuffed him,
made him think ungodly thoughts --
why didn't they just leave him alone!
Or why didn't they sit down with him over some rich Austrian cuisine,
have a glass of pilsen
and discover he wasn't such a country bumpkin after all?
A good meal would do that Hanslick good!
He had too much of the look of the wolf about him,
with a grimace of distaste Bruckner prayed for him.

But no
they called his symphonies "workmanlike,"
they called his melodic lines "underdeveloped,"
they called his scherzos "little steam engines that couldn't,"
they claimed his adagios did not "transubstantiate"
and his finales, well they were "coarse"
just like his clothes
just like his suit pants.
When they were being kind they called him "Holy Fool
for his untutored habit of tipping the conductor --
once a taler,
another time forty-eight piping hot krapfen.

For so many years Bruckner had said his prayers
and believed Heaven was made in the image of his pre '48 Fatherland;

after all, if everyone knew God as he did there wouldn't be barricades
or this silly talk of revolution!

If everyone had viewed the disinterred remains of Schubert and Beethoven
as he had, how could they doubt that those Great Souls
were by God's side composing sweet lied for the angels?
Or the victims of the great fire at the Ringtheater
how could they doubt that the uncharred spirits of those victims
had risen to the bosom of God on wings of the Master's own Fire Music?
how could they doubt?
It was so simple.

Bruckner didn't doubt,
not the rebuffs of women or the catcalls of critics
could make Bruckner doubt
that when he lay down in the Valley of the Shadow
God would note his prayers and long faith,
his arduous path
and so dedicated his Ninth to 'Dear God'
and with Death on his left hand
a Hanslick stand-in
and the Savior on his right
layed the first notes of the nave,
then the megalithic blocks of leaping octaves to the clerestory
and the tremulous motive of lost souls in minor light
and up and up the act of faith by slow careful building --
before every note,
before every cadence.
a meditation on its place in an architecture of Divine Proportion
informed by a scherzo
where the Judgment trumps had pantocrator talons
to scream the doubter down
into the roseate adagio,
the lover lost come home at last
the great last movement
chopped off by death
because he saw the Apocalypse clock
with its hands inching toward Hitler fixed by God in the Finale
and died.

Life at the Bachs'

First thing you notice
is that there are babies everywhere.
Johann Christian in diapers is crawling behind an easy chair
 chirping a precocious fugue;
Johann Christoph toddles through tooting on a toddler sized clarinet;
there are kids marching though beating on drums, fifeing on fifes,
there is a chorus of them dressed up as angels
 practicing cantatas for tots,
there are teen agers busy inventing instruments then playing them
 no one has seen the like of them or since.
Not only are their kids on the ground, in the chairs, on the stairs
there are also their doubles in the air --
 only you and I can see them though.
Flocks of putti flit from one drapery to another;
there are rainbow nest of them in the shaded corners of the room,
there are larger, eagle-sized cherubim sitting on the beams
 preening in the brilliant sun coming in through the window.
There is angel dung on everything.
No attempt has been made to protect things,
no polyester covers on the furniture
no drop cloths for the silver or the fine oak cabinets.
The precious scats are everywhere
looking suspiciously like scribbled-upon sheet music,
 little compositions tantalizingly begun
 but left temptingly undone like puzzles.
All over the house the children pick them up and hum them melodies,
 jig them through,
 waltz them in,
or play them -- pin the coda on the sonatina.
Children! children!
 With cheeks like rondels,
 with mouths like rounds,
their squeaks, their chirps, their laughter
a multipart fugue even the Master himself could not unscramble into discreet voices.

Mrs. Bach,
 her face flushed rosy with constant glad tidings,
her eyes bright with megawatt Annunciation light
walks through like the tenderest maestro,
 her hooped skirts flouncy Magnificats of her mood;
her presence a serene melody in the cacophony.
Like a superb conductor
 she stops and listens briefly to each child,

each child the star soloist of the orchestra,
 first chair player of her heart.
She asks for a little more cat's foot pizzicato here,
 a touch more rubato there,
a little more maestoso from the older kids to set an example.
She wipes the chin of one warbling cherub
then briefly joins
 in a circle dance formed by the five middle kids,
her mouth an exploded rose of laughter.
She looks madly abandoned and completely composed,
lifts one tiny child toward the ceiling
 where an invisible wet nurse cloud forms
 suckles it for an instant with concerti dreams
 for toy pianos and stuffed jaguar.

Just then the old man walks in,
 plops himself down in a chair
his white wig askew.
 One of the kids puts a coin in the player harpsichord.
It plays a Bach lullaby
 one of Heaven and Hell's Greatest Hits
an uncanny proportion of which are Bach's --
this one hasn't been released yet,
 the kids think it will be a smash at the parish.
As soon as the Master has an empty lap to offer
there are fifteen kids clambering to sit in it.
Bach indulges them all in turn,
 pays each a precious grace note of complete attention
while he rests
recovering
 from a hard day of pedal point at the loft,
plus trying to convince the dumkoph church fathers
they could use a little more oomph!
 in the choir,
enough to get a Passion in the air.
The little sky children
flutter down and hover about him
place musical seeds in his ears
 that will send out shoots in his dreams.
Bach hums a new motif in his gruff tenor voice
 a girl child asleep on his chest

I have never seen such "domestic bliss,"
 I did not know such happiness existed on this our "fallen" planet
but then
 what else could produce such music?

It is as though the Bachs were trying to single handedly
sire and dam an entire new human species,
an evolutionary jump of octave proportions,
a variety of musically attuned humans
to move among us
and "tune" us,
adjust our vibrations,
evolve us through dance and song,
the "music of the spheres."
The happiness here
is the strongest drink I have ever had.
For a moment I have to turn away and look out my son's window
to blink back the tears.

There, outside
in the sunlit yard
beneath an enormous, ancient oak tree
complete with clerestory of branches of epic verdancy
is the most beautiful animal I have ever seen.
A huge black bull
lying a mighty fortress in the grass.
The power rippling beneath its hide is awesome
awake,
ready to be utilized.
There is an easy alertness about him
like Bach's fingers poised above the keyboard
ready to charge a full tilt toccata and fugue down the nave.
It is power at rest,
at idle --
it is the power of supremely confident gentleness.
The great bull lies beneath the tree
like some cosmic Ferdinand
a butterfly could lead.
My daughter is yanking his tail.
The great beast nods its head indulgently
horns golden in the sunlight.
As it sniffs the perfumed air
it closes its eyes in ecstasy
because it knows I will someday see
whose house this is
and drive the aliens out.

Composer Poems -- Life at the Bachs'

In a C Major mood

Brahms went to the cafe where he had played as a child;
the notorious madam asked him to play,
"Professor, a little dance music if you please!"

Brahms went grandly to the battered upright
and there beneath the garish light and swill of smoke
Improvised the ending of the C Minor Symphony
releasing the Infant terrible in everybody there
including himself.