

The Meaning of Music

The Meaning of Music

Leo Samama

(translated by Dominy Clements)

AUP

First published as *De zin van muziek* (ISBN 978 90 8964 570 8)

© L. Samama / Amsterdam University Press B.V., Amsterdam, 2014

Translated by: Dominy Clements

Cover design: Sander Pinkse Boekproductie, Amsterdam

Lay-out: Crius Group, Hulshout

Amsterdam University Press English-language titles are distributed in the US and Canada by the University of Chicago Press.

ISBN 978 90 8964 979 9

e-ISBN 978 90 4852 892 9 (pdf)

e-ISBN 978 90 4852 893 6 (ePub)

NUR 663 | 665

© Leo Samama / Amsterdam University Press B.V., Amsterdam 2016

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this book may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the written permission of both the copyright owner and the author of the book.

Table of Contents

1. By way of a foreword 9

Part A

2. Looking over Franz Schubert's shoulder 17
3. What is music? 27
4. Where does music come from? 32
5. Music as imitation 37
6. Music as language 43

Part B

7. Bach: Prelude in C major 55
8. Music and communication 76
9. Music as notation 84
10. Music as a temporal art 91
11. Music and emotion 95
12. On depth and elevation 102

Part C

13. Beethoven: the Fifth 113
14. Classical music 125
15. Hearing, listening and remembering 131
16. On composing 135

Part D

17. Dvořák and the Bohemian overcoat 149
18. A memorable moment 156
19. The conductor 159
20. The performing artist 172

Part E

21. Lully: the King is dancing	185
22. As the ancients sang	194
23. The history of the history of music	204
24. By way of an epilogue: music now	222
Further Reading	234
Index of names	236
About the author	240

A few words of thanks

This book came about at the request of Maaïke Groot, who until 2014 was my enthusiastic publisher at Amsterdam University Press. The Dutch version was edited by Odilia Vermeulen and Ton Braas. Once again, they enabled me to write what I wanted and express what I had to say. I am also most thankful to my colleague Dominy Clements, who translated the text into English.

Voorburg, December 2013 (January 2015)

1. By way of a foreword

This is by no means a textbook, and at most a book to be read for pleasure. In it I have captured some of my experiences while exploring the wonderful world of music. These began when I was about six years old, and my parents gave me an old record player with a few 78 rpm discs. As far as I can remember, these were some Beethoven violin sonatas played by Yehudi and Hepzibah Menuhin, a few of Max Reger's sonatinas with the Dutch pianist Cor de Groot, and Safford Cape with the Belgian Pro Musica Antiqua performing works by Guillaume de Machaut. Apparently my parents were of the opinion that this was a good first selection for a child of six, and indeed, perhaps they unwittingly shaped part of my future. As a teenager I was allowed to sit next to Hepzibah Menuhin to turn pages for her, and as a student I did extensive research on Max Reger and his Dutch contacts for one of my final theses. To this day I am fascinated by developments in the performance of early music, even though my own expertise is based more around 1600 than 1350.

In the same year that I was given the record player and during a hot summer, our opposite neighbour died. She was Alice Heksch, a well-known pianist and one of the first Mozart specialists on the fortepiano, though I knew nothing about that at the time. As far as I was concerned, she was the mother of three somewhat older children, who were often in our house that summer. Their father was the violinist Nap de Klijn. The room in which Alice Heksch lay ill was shielded from the hot summer sun by a yellow curtain that moved gently in the breeze. That summer my parents also played me a long-playing record, *Mozart raconté aux enfants*, on which Mozart's life was narrated by Gérard Philipe, a famous French actor who had died at a young age. This told of Mozart's journey to Paris, where his mother died in 1778, the sad moment unfolding to the first part of Mozart's *Piano Sonata in A minor*. How heartbreaking could you make things for a child? That sonata, the death of Mozart's mother and that of the mother

of the neighbouring children behind that yellow curtain have remained inextricably linked in my mind ever since.

The music lessons I had in elementary school turned out to be no less important in my journey through music. We had a teacher who, with a great deal of understanding and attentiveness, introduced us to what music is and, more especially, how we could participate. With her guidance, we performed a children's opera by the Dutch composer Tera de Marez Oyens: *De koning zoekt een liedje* (*The king searches for a song*), and it was thanks to this teacher that I took my first active steps in music. As a result of my recorder lessons with her I was swiftly paired up with her son so that we could play duets together. He was the same age as me, and we soon discovered a wealth of old and new pieces for two recorders. Her name is Marijke Ferguson, and her son is the renowned author Willem Jan Otten. Since those childhood years, my interest in and love for music has always remained.

When I was about thirteen, my younger sister and I took the train every week from Hilversum to Utrecht, where, in the former Institute for Musicology on the Rijnkade, the newly established local Jeunesse Musicale or 'Youth and Music' department had a youth orchestra directed by the young Dutch composer Bernard van Beurden. Here we played tiny 'children's symphonies' that were indeed tiny in every regard, but one day Van Beurden had a surprise for us. He had set up a large blackboard in front of our chairs, on which he had written a series of twelve different tones in musical notation. The intention was that we would improvise with these twelve tones. One of us had to play the whole series, the other only a part. We were free in our choice of tempo, and in the duration of each individual note. Van Beurden led us step by step through this intransigent material, so that after about an hour we began to discover something in what we were doing: a story, our story – and music: twelve-tone music. Ever since that afternoon, contemporary music has been a source of endless fascination for me, even when I haven't always liked what I've heard or played. The path towards writing my own music was paved.

One day, in the sixth class of high school, I was asked by the headmaster to take over the music lessons of the first class. The music teacher was ill, and it might be some time before he returned. I had just been given a beautiful book by my parents, *The Joy of Music* by Leonard Bernstein, and I had also recently seen a few of his *Young People's Concerts* on TV. In short, I knew what to do. I can't remember whether I succeeded, but the experience certainly gave me a taste for teaching, and not long after I started giving Sunday afternoon readings in the Rosa Spier Huis, an exclusive care home for elderly artists and intellectuals in Laren, near Amsterdam. The pick of the Dutch intelligentsia sat opposite me in the small hall, and they took the greatest of glee in rapping me over the knuckles at every opportunity. This was apparently no deterrent, however; on the contrary. As soon as I was given the chance to teach I grabbed it with both hands, and I can now look back on forty years of educational involvement in numerous institutes.

Many of the subjects that have been important to me over the years and the insights I have acquired through doing, reading and learning – sometimes with only a week or two's advantage over my students in the beginning, but later with a little more ease and perspicuity – have found their way into numerous articles and lectures, and also, to a certain extent, into this book. This is therefore above all a personal account, and not an attempt to dish up absolute truths, should they even be said to exist at all. There are few certainties in music. There is, of course, an ever-increasing stockpile of information about the lives of composers and their music. We have endless quantities of scores, and there are many documents about composers and their work that have survived from their own time – documents with reactions, evaluations, theoretical reflections and analyses – but truths? These are rarely to be found.

There are no definitive answers, nor do we have a definitive history. Kant was certainly often right in his in-depth reflections on music, but he also got it wrong. The same goes for Saint Augustine, Schopenhauer and Adorno. Mozart and Beethoven

cannot be qualified in absolute terms as the greatest composers who ever lived, and not even Bach can be described as such. They are the greatest in our culture and in our times, and will be for as long as we continue to relate to music in the way we have for the last few centuries. This book does not provide the ultimate answers to so many questions. It contains possible answers, and in many cases no more than my personal answers.

We live in a labyrinthine world; a world in which monocultures barely exist. Mutual influences and fusions increasingly characterise our existence and our ways of thinking. The majority of subjects in this book therefore provide space for a variety of perspectives. In the case of music, the lack of unique or final interpretations is even greater than with the visual arts or in literature. For this reason, I will make no attempt to tell balanced and orderly stories. That would suggest that there is such a thing as a single history of music, and only one view with regard to this most intangible of subjects.

The only certainty that I would dare to advance is that music plays an irreplaceable role for virtually the whole of humanity. We can't do without it. As an expression of what we do and think as people, music, just like painting, literature and philosophy, represents who we are. These things define us as people, and give us an identity. As a wordless language, music is better placed than other forms of expression as a means of communication that can break down boundaries. More than any other form of art, music can also touch us physically with the immediacy and power of pure sound. At the same time, music is more abstract than every other form of human expression, with the exception of certain facets of mathematics and philosophy.

Despite all of the emotions that we undergo when listening, music demands of its participants – composers, performing musicians and listeners – that in the first instance they engage their brains, in order subsequently and on that basis to be able to offer space to their emotions. Music is transformed into such a remarkable phenomenon through a combination of faculties:

the mathematical qualities of an architect, the abstract thought of the philosopher and the communicative gifts of an orator. At its best, music is visionary, earthy and physical, exceptionally complex and deeply contemplative, but it is also very direct. We can listen to it mindlessly and have it hit us with an unforgettable intensity, and in its aftermath become equally fascinated by the logic with which the master builder has erected his structure in sound. For many music is like a belief or a ritual, and for others it offers relaxation. It opens up far horizons and dream worlds, can elevate us from the everyday and, through its directness, also bring us back to the present with both feet firmly on the ground.

In recent decades, complaints have been made about the elitist character of what is popularly referred to as classical music, or the higher art of music. Fortunately a substantial amount of music *is* elitist, in the sense that we look up to it; it occupies an exalted plane above us. It is expressly this exalted, transcendental side of music (indeed, of all great art and all higher thought, both secular and religious) that points the way upwards for us, consciously and unconsciously. Is it not the case that humanity strives to follow an upward path? The more people who feel this desire, and who seek out and act upon it, the fewer there will be who perceive this objective as elitist. It is precisely the task of art as a cultural product to reach as many people as possible and take them along on this upward journey. There can be no concession or compromise. Let the best music remain elitist and let us all, composers, musicians, artistic directors and radio programmers, expose as many people as possible to its exceptional qualities: something to which I hope this book will also make its own contribution.

Part A

2. Looking over Franz Schubert's shoulder

There is a painting of Franz Schubert at work. He sits in his dressing gown, a quill in his right hand. His head rests against his left hand, and there is a pair of slippers on his feet. A lamp shines onto the tabletop, and the shadow cast onto the wall next to him seems like an apparition. Schubert is composing, and there begins the mystery. Composing: how is it done? Cesare Bacchi painted his canvas a hundred years after the composer's death.



1. Cesare Bacchi, *Schubert at work* (1929).

Then, and now, but also in Schubert's own time, the composer's craft was surrounded by riddles: more so than that of the painter, the sculptor, the writer or the choreographer.

Even though Schubert's friends described his work routine in plain language, the questions remained as to exactly how he arrived at those notes, those melodies and harmonies. Did he hear the whole orchestra or the singers singing in his head, or could he feel the piano under his fingers even though there was no piano to be found in his room, at most a guitar? 'Schubert sat at his work desk at six o'clock every morning,' wrote Anselm Hüttenbrenner, 'and composed until one o'clock in the afternoon. During this period a number of pipes were smoked. In the afternoon he went to the coffee house to drink, to smoke, and to read the newspapers for a few hours.'

Schubert didn't use an instrument to compose. Now and again he would check something on a piano elsewhere, and sometimes he might try a few chords on his guitar. He chose to work in absolute silence, as the sound of an instrument would only disturb his thoughts. He would occasionally play his tabletop like a dummy keyboard, just to feel a passage in his fingers, but even if there was noise from outside he would continue undisturbed. The clattering sounds of the street, people talking or children playing, even cold and damp conditions or bad light: nothing could distract him or prevent him from working.

I can't imagine a more perfect image for the lonely creative artist: a man, a quill, a sheet of paper, a lamp, and that shadow on the wall. This is where it all happened, though Schubert also composed while walking around town or in the country, or even while in the pub: always in his head, and therefore invisible to outsiders. A good symbol had been found for this hundreds of years earlier: the dove on Pope Gregory I's shoulder, which gave him inspiration for his ecclesiastical chants. This was what the faithful sought, the Holy Spirit whispering divine melodies into the ear of the Pope. Many people still have this image in mind when it comes to inspiration and creativity: it has to come from somewhere.

There has never been a composer who focused alone on the act of creating, not even Schubert. When a work is ready, it has to be turned into sound: it must be performed, by the composer himself or by others. Ultimately the piece only really exists at that moment, when the musical work of art becomes a listening experience, also for the composer. Very few people are able to read a music score as they would a novel, and therefore have that physical experience, or at least be able to imagine sounds from the page alone. The actual experience can only happen in the reality of the sound, and this is why the practice of music almost always consists of an unbreakable triangle: composing, performing and listening. Each of these has its own rituals, functions, history, position and points of view.

Every one of these three fundamental principles of musical practice also leads to further division and reflection, and in the end to the question as to how we, as creative, transformative and receptive people, can experience music in such an intensive and all-encompassing way, without truly understanding how or why. The mystery remains, whether one composes, performs or listens. Music is almost ubiquitous in people's lives, and probably has been for many tens of thousands of years. We experience the power of music individually and collectively, in concert halls or churches, at a pop concert or dance event, on the football field.

With this, we inevitably arrive at another aspect, namely the function music has in society. After all, as soon as music begins to sound, there are participants in this event. First of all the composer, as the supplier, then the performing musicians and the listeners, and sometimes also the composer as the performer of his own notes. None of these is involved in the performance in a disinterested way; not even the casual passer-by, the unexpected guest or the person who doesn't want to listen at all. Once you hear music there is almost no way of avoiding it. This has to do with what music is, beyond its mere sound. It is what music represents, what listeners make of it individually or collectively, and what music can do with or for us. Music is a social phenomenon.

Let us return briefly to the painting of Franz Schubert at his work desk, since the romantic image of the artist depicted here is a deceptive one. For us, Schubert is still the prototype of the 'free young man' with a great talent. He lived for music. As he said himself, 'I was born to compose and for no other purpose.' Schubert is seen as the bard of country life, of unrequited love, of the desires of the common man, of the beautiful miller's daughter, of winter wanderings: in short, Schubert the dreamer. But is this the truth? Did he really stand so far outside of society?

We do know a few things for sure. During his short life, Schubert did in fact pursue the security of a permanent post. To this end he had studied at one of the best schools in Vienna and with one of the best teachers, Antonio Salieri. His father didn't see a life in music as suitable, however, as the chance of earning a decent living was minimal. He had the career of a schoolmaster in mind for his son, just like himself. The young Schubert was determined to be a musician however, and applied here and there for work, but to no avail. A position at the Opera, to which he presented numerous (not entirely successful) operas, or at the Court chapel: none of these were granted. So it was with reluctance that he became a 'free young man', and while he enjoyed that freedom to the full for as long as his friends were able to maintain him, this was never his aim.

Schubert was never a social outsider, as the image of the 'wandering' composer suggested. He was a social climber. His father had come to Vienna from the Silesian part of Moravia, and his mother was of Bohemian descent. Schubert's parents settled in the northern suburb of Lichtental in the Himmelfortgrund district. More than three thousand people, the majority of them immigrants, lived there in some eighty new apartment buildings, all of which lacked on-site sanitation. After several years working as a teacher in Lichtental, Schubert's father was fortunate enough to be able to buy his own house and provide his youngest son with a decent musical education. Schubert was well aware of how far he would have to scale the social ladder, given his talent and social background.

Around the age of twenty, Schubert joined the literary clubs of kindred spirits in Vienna and Linz, introduced by friends such as the poets Franz von Schober and Johann Mayrhofer. These were places in which the most recent novels and poems were read. The ideals of the mostly youthful membership were freedom, fatherland and friendship, at a time in which freedom of thought was a scarce commodity under the Metternich regime. In the first half of the nineteenth century, reading clubs were not only in favour as an intellectual pastime, but also as a place where people could meet relatively undisturbed under the guise of art and culture (and a little entertainment), without such meetings being classified as dangerous to the state and therefore forbidden.

Among Schubert's friends in these clubs were supporters of the war of liberation in Greece and opponents of the reactionary and restrictive government in Vienna. Together they read newspaper articles about politics, devoured the latest collections of poetry, and discussed the meanings of these texts in the light of their ideals. With this in mind, we can place many a poem from this period (and even the previous decades) in a context other than the exclusively poetic. There was enthusiastic praise for the freedom of the wanderer in nature, of itinerant singers or street musicians. For this alone, Heinrich Heine was one of the most beloved poets amongst the youth of his time, wandering through nature to express his resistance to the autocratic regime.

People were also still reading the poets of the previous aristocratic era, such as Christian Schubart, whose *Die Forelle*, through Schubert's music, remains a symbol for rural life and romantic charm to the present day. Schubart's poem can also be seen as a warning, however: the freedom of the trout in the stream is short-lived once the fisherman has him on his hook. Neither should we overlook the last lines of the poem, which were ignored by Schubert, in which the trout suddenly becomes symbolic of a young girl, and 'Ruthe' becomes not only a fishhook, but also a rod. Was Schubart talking about dissolute boys who wanted

to entrap girls, or might this even be the 'jus primae noctis' to which Mozart also refers in *Le nozze di Figaro*?

We are dealing here with possible underlying meanings, reading between the lines, and perhaps even listening behind the notes. It is precisely this oft-hidden meaning in a work of art that can expose its deeper layers and explain its creation from a variety of viewpoints and extra dimensions. Did Schubert merely write pleasant, folksong-like works in a rural setting, or did he want to point to something that would have been understood by his 'target group' at the time, but that now eludes us?

This applies not only to Schubert and his music: one could say that our perception of the many signals in the works of Machaut, Josquin des Prez, Monteverdi, Purcell, Mozart, Beethoven, Verdi, Bruckner or Tchaikovsky hardly exists today. We are often ignorant of the sources to which they allude. Equally, we do not have the knowledge that would have allowed listeners of the time to understand to what the composer was referring. We no longer have the ears to distinguish the nuances that would then have seemed obvious. We are, for instance, no longer shocked by dissonance, even when it occurs in the 'wrong' place, such as at the beginning of Beethoven's *First Symphony*. Works of art from the past have been removed from their original context, and to us have become more abstract than the composer might ever have imagined.

Are some of Schubert's songs indeed simply the romantic scenes that we like to recognise? Is the *Moonlight Sonata* by Beethoven really a sonata about a loving couple under the light of the moon, or rather an ode to death? After all, between his sketches, Beethoven copied a fragment from the Commendatore's death scene in Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni*: the same triplets, the same lingering pace... And do we have sufficient knowledge and understanding of the melodies of the Church of Rome and their many variants to be able to recognise the references to numerous religious chants in the polyphony of Josquin, Lassus or Palestrina, and thereby to give them their correct meaning?

Are the symphonies of Brahms or Bruckner as absolute and autonomous as we think, or have we become deaf to the secret (melodic or other) messages woven into them, precisely because we want so much to understand the music of these composers as absolute and autonomous? Do we have enough insight into the complex web of textual associations and musical references in the songs, chamber music and symphonies of Schubert to understand them properly, without always associating them with that romantic bard and his delightful, folksong-like melodies?

As I have already said, Schubert's world was much wider than that of the average whistling songsmith. He was well-read, curious, widely orientated, ambitious and especially well grounded. Mozart and Beethoven were both idols of his, and at the same time he had sufficient knowledge of harmony, counterpoint and every important instrument to be able to write a song, a work for piano, a string quartet, a symphony or an opera with equal ease. In the later 19th and first half of the 20th century, his genius was predominantly recognised as that of a composer of songs. Beethoven was his superior in every other genre. The same was true of Schumann, for whom only the great works for piano were above criticism. Neither Schubert nor Schumann sought to compete with Beethoven, however. Of course they wanted to learn from Beethoven, but not to compose as Beethoven, whose aesthetic was not theirs. Where Beethoven thought in terms of tragedy and of ancient drama, the world of Schubert and Schumann was that of the novel, the fairy-tale, the narration of fantasy. This was also the case in their music, and they were looking for other narrative solutions. Both had to shake themselves free of Beethoven in order to become his equal.

Whilst Schumann and Brahms were able to work with some critical distance between themselves and Beethoven, for Schubert, this great figure was a living fellow citizen of Vienna with a huge reputation and a large number of supporters, amongst whom were Schubert's friends. Just imagine emerging from beneath that kind of pressure, an effort made all the more difficult because he

cherished infinite respect for the man. When Schubert began to compose seriously as a teenager in 1812, Beethoven was already widely known in Vienna as a great master, and ten years later he had acquired the status of a living legend. Until that time, Schubert had almost exclusively made his name through his many songs. He had also, it has to be said, created a unique place for himself in this way, even though the best-known of these were not at the time considered songs, but rather dramatic scenes.

While Schubert's main talent, at the age of 25, seemed to be writing songs for the drawing room and private circles, his ambition, as we have already indicated lay rather in the composing of operas, church music, symphonies and string quartets. It was a challenge for him to reach a wider audience alongside Beethoven, and to create his own market with a recognisable personal style and technique, not as a clone of Beethoven. However, for a number of reasons his efforts failed to take off around 1822. Schubert was already in difficulties with his life-threatening illness, for which he had been hospitalised several times. He had also failed to complete some of his most ambitious compositional plans, the famous example of which that immediately comes to mind being the *Symphony in B minor*, generally known as the *Unfinished*.

We have to ask ourselves whether the work was indeed unfinished, or did Schubert feel it was in fact complete with its two parts? Both theories can be defended, and there is also evidence for both. The evidence suggesting that the symphony was incomplete includes not only the preserved sketches for a scherzo, but also the unfinished state of various other works written at the same time as the symphony. Backing up the 'complete' theory, there is a text by Schubert in which he writes about a dream that addressed his complicated relationship with his father. In its structure and emotional shape, this text is similar to the two movements of the *Unfinished*. Could this be presentable as proof, or is it more a case of 'wishful thinking'? Either way, this symphony has established itself in our consciousness for 150 years as being in two parts. We know nothing other than that

it has two movements, and as a result we are unable to imagine the possibility of a four-movement version.

As a work of art, the *Symphony in B minor* exists, as does every composition, simply in the way it presents itself. The degree of completeness of the two existing movements is so perfect that we are simply unable to imagine an alternative version. With these two movements, Schubert arrived in a world that was not only entirely his own, but one that left its mark right up to the first decades of the 20th century, especially when viewed alongside the *Symphony in C major* from 1825/26, which was completed in a four-movement form. Without Schubert's 'endless' melodies, which are often so easy to sing and which he repeats in their entirety, smoothly modulating through the keys with numerous subtle differences, variations and harmonic nuances: without his gift for great romantic stories about longing for love and nature and about human shortcomings, much of the music of later great masters such as Brahms, Bruckner, Mahler, and even Schoenberg, Berg and Webern, would have been different. Only one other masterpiece had the same effect on the music of the 19th century, and that indeed came from the pen of his revered fellow townsman, Beethoven: his *Ninth Symphony*. This influence was felt not through the famous finale, however, but in those other three movements. Here again, we hear how Beethoven was the composer of tragedies, and Schubert of novels.

What Schubert achieved in the last five years of his life in two symphonies (the *Unfinished* in B minor and the *Great* in C major), in several piano sonatas, in the piano trios, his last string quartets, the *String Quintet in C major* and in the song cycle *Die schöne Müllerin*, is not only a uniquely personal musical language, but also the confirmation that he was capable of creating grand and sometimes extremely complex constructions in sound that are not inferior to those of Beethoven. From this point of view, he was not a composer of songs who did his best to write instrumental music of quality, but rather a master architect of musical structures that are unique expressions of bourgeois culture, and