

DREAM AT TWILIGHT

PAUL BEKKER

Scene of action: the Berlin Tiergarten, between the restaurant Zelten and the goldfish-pool (as in Busoni's *Brautwahl*). Beside the pool is the Haydn-Mozart-Beethoven monument—three busts surrounded by dancing figures—one of the most dreadful of Berlin monuments.

“WHAT did you mean when you spoke before of the need to establish historical archives of mechanical music?”

“I wished to say that all your instrumental music will soon be gone to the devil. It will be useful then to have reliable reconstructions for the purpose of giving lessons by actual examples. But pay attention”—we had just crossed the plaza in front of the Zelten in the Tiergarten and turned into a dimly lighted side road—“here we are strolling on the path of E. T. A. Hoffman and soon the knight Gluck will be stalking along beside us.”

“So much the better, he’s just the one we could use, he would be a welcome figure at our discussion.”

At this moment, a mighty shadow pushed between our shadows, so that we were involuntarily forced apart. It was a broad-shouldered man with old-fashioned cape-coat and wide-brimmed hat, such as artists used to wear. Not much could be seen of his face except that he had an imperial and wore a pince-nez on a ribbon. He crossed his hands behind his back, glanced at us quickly and somewhat mockingly and went on, softly whistling.

I recovered first. “Now that was certainly not the knight Gluck.” My companion was still a little disturbed. “Didn’t you think that he looked like Beethoven?”

“Nonsense. With an imperial and nose glasses?”

“But the arms crossed behind, and the cane, and the sharp, piercing glance. And that peculiar pushing walk.”

“I have never met Beethoven, but it seems to me that the Tiergarten romanticism has upset your wits. It is especially

dangerous this year and our conversations have disturbed your senses."

"Quite possibly, after your talk about the mechanical archives, and then your disrespectful remarks about instrumental music. Not at all surprising if the ghost of Beethoven should walk."

"I assume that he has more important concerns than promenading in the Tiergarten and frightening people. And furthermore, I am sure that he would agree with me if he were here."

"You certainly don't mean to apply what you said about instrumental music to Beethoven's symphonies and other classical works?"

"To them indeed, first of all, because everything else follows from them."

"But you were talking about mechanical music. I thought you meant records and radio. Are you stretching the term to include our great classical instrumental music art?"

"Certainly. It is the foundation of all mechanization, since it has transformed the mechanical apparatus into the performing subject. How this apparatus is used, whether by man or by a technically controllable mechanical force, is a side-issue. Today the creative will is concentrated on the instrument and its possibilities. When this road was first taken, it was inevitable that music's next halting place should be the period of mechanization. Every development from then to the present day can only be regarded as a gradual ascent in the one direction. This would not have been so bad if the expansion of instrumental music in Germany had not led people further and further astray from the naturalness of musical inspiration and encouraged them in speculation."

"You mean to say that the great masters of German instrumental music, Haydn, possibly even Bach, started German music on the path to mechanization?"

"I don't say so, it is so. The minute they made the instrument the master, (whether we call it organ, piano or orchestra,) they enrolled themselves and their art under the law of the machine, which, gaining an ever wider sphere of power, finally, at the dictate of the laws of the material, became the law of all artistic creation. Thus we arrived at a complete mechanization of musi-

cal feeling, emotion, thought, impression, without being aware of it. The mechanization of today is only the last and least harmful stage of a condition prevailing for two hundred years. This condition may be characterized as the crowding out of man from music and the substitution of the mechanical apparatus for the natural musical sound, the singing voice."

"Then you do not believe in a further development of musical art on a basis such as it had in the eighteenth century? You not only consider the developments of the last decades as missteps, but apply your criticism to the whole classical period?"

"I am not talking about missteps. These so-called missteps are only the logical conclusion of what you call the noble classical age. I do not presume to criticize. I merely wish to point out that here the foundation was laid and the laws set up for what we today call the mechanization of music. To break loose from it I see only one possibility, complete abandonment of the instrument as the vehicle of our musical thought and form."

"And you really believe that other people will share this view?"

"You ask if I believe it. Don't you see that this has happened and that a new vocal music is growing up all about us. Not in your public concerts, it is true. You can hardly say, about what takes place there and is called musical life, that this purely historical repetitive demonstration has anything to do with the forces which are working at the innermost creation of our music today. Don't misunderstand me. I have nothing against this form of instruction. We all need it and only those who have mastered the past can conquer the present and future. But that this is all over, that our task now is to gain freedom from this past, that we are face to face with a change such as we have not seen for two hundred years, seems certain to me. This knowledge must become a living thing in us."

"And you see this new direction in the abandonment of instrumental art?"

"I see it in the departure from the principle of mechanization, which is inextricably bound up with the leadership of the instrument. The instrument must serve again, and the singing voice must lead. The voice is the man, the instrument is the

machine. Don't you see that everything happening today is working in this direction? Don't you notice that interest in the instrument is rapidly disappearing, confining itself more and more to historical reminiscence? Truly, we are only at the beginning. The fact that our music has become technical and mechanical is only a symptom of the spiritual impotence of the age; we have been overwhelmed by the machine and have imitated it in every field. But we must learn to set up man again in opposition to the machine. How could it be better and more effectively done than with song? This is the direction along which our young, our true composers are moving. They cannot be entirely successful yet; fragments from the shell of the egg of instrumental music are still clinging to them. But believe me, this instrumental period is drawing to a close. It must yield to a new age of vocal music, which will become the foundation of a new musical culture, of a new musical understanding."

"Your fantasy is running away with you, we are still in the year 1934," my companion impatiently interrupted. For some time he had shown signs of discomfort. "Remember where you are."

I looked up. We stood by the goldfish pool near the Haydn-Mozart-Beethoven monument. "Great masters," I said, "you know that I hold you more in reverence than those who always mouth your praises. But I believe that the horoscope of art towards the end of the second Christian millenium is unfavorable because it has set the tool above man. Give me a sign, let me see that you do not consider my idea blasphemous." I swayed in ecstasy, the hour of decision appeared at hand. "Spirit of this noble monument," I cried, "indicate what you think of yourself and of my words."

A wonder came to pass. The monument rose in the air, we stared amazed and saw it suddenly turn upside down. Then it dived headfirst into the goldfish pool.

"Get up, sir," someone said nudging me. "This is forbidden here. Furthermore, it is too cold." Waking up I saw a friendly policeman nearby who was gently rousing me. I gave the monument of the Viennese classicists a stealthy glance. It was still standing, and the figures on the roof seemed to be dancing a mocking round-dance. What a shame, I thought, that at least the conclusion of this dream had not come to pass.



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A Portrait by
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