

The Classical Beat

By Stephen Dankner

THROUGHOUT HISTORY MUSIC HAS EMULATED NATURE

Sometimes, in reading a novel or a short story, a phrase will jump out at you, and with the clarity of instant insight, will spark an idea. Such a thing happened to me as I was reading “The Name of the Rose,” by Umberto Eco. This is a great book: a 14th century medieval murder whodunit, replete with characters out of Arthur Conan Doyle. Who is murdering the monks in a remote northern Italian abbey, and why? The cloister is renowned for its great library within a labyrinth, and for the supreme artistry of the copyists, illuminators and rubricators who labor there. The protagonist, Sir William of Baskerville (viz. “The Hound of the Baskervilles”), a Franciscan monk and former Church Inquisitor is asked to solve the mystery.

Sir William is a learned man and a lover of books. In examining the works-in-progress in the ‘scriptorium,’ he happens upon an especially humorous and fanciful illumination by the most imaginative artisan among the monks. “The pope as a fox; the archbishop as a monkey.” Sir William is bemused by the audacious brilliance of the illumination inscribed on parchment. Then, the telling line: “Art is nature’s ape,” he exclaims.

How much does music mimic nature? As I think of it, more often than we realize. Each successive musical age, starting around 1700, has generated new stylistic means to accomplish just that idea. From Vivaldi’s “Four Seasons” to Haydn’s “The Seasons”; from the “Pastoral” symphony of Beethoven to Schumann’s “Spring” Symphony No. 1, evolving musical styles made the depiction of nature the ideal for many composers.

From Mendelssohn (“The Hebrides”) to Liszt (“Forest Murmurs”), Wagner (the “Prelude to Das Rheingold”) and Strauss (“An Alpine Symphony”) the Romantics were obsessed with nature as a manifestation of the sublime. Their veneration assumed a worshipful stance, not unlike religion. And in that sense, it bordered on the mystical. The American College Dictionary defines mysticism as “the doctrine of an immediate spiritual intuition of truths believed to transcend ordinary understanding.” What better medium

than music – the most abstract of the arts – to attempt reconciliation between mind and matter, the subjective and objective worlds?

Perhaps no composer was more attuned to nature than Debussy. Think of “La Mer,” “Jardines sous la pluie” (Gardens in the Rain,) L'Après-midi d'un faune (“The Afternoon of a Faun”) and so much else of the French master’s oeuvre. As styles evolved over the centuries with ever-increasing harmonic complexity, musical representations of rapture and awe became common. By 1890, the evolution of the modern orchestra, with its power to overwhelm, made it possible to recreate in the listener’s mind the glory of spring, the sea, the forest, mountains - even worlds beyond our own (Holst’s “The Planets”). The orchestra, for composers the prime tool to accomplish these ambitious schemes, became an end in itself, not simply the medium to clothe the standard classical forms of sonata, rondo and variation.

These were the optimistic and high-flown objectives of composers: in one way or another to express the ineffable - to take tangible reality and remove it to the spiritual plane. Mahler in his youth was a great lover of nature and an avid mountaineer before his heart condition made such strenuous activity impossible. Exhausted after climbing an Alpine peak, he cried out to his hiking buddy, “I don’t have to do this; I wrote this!”

In the 20th century, no composer was more enthralled by nature as a manifestation of his religious beliefs than Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992.) He experienced synaesthesia, the ability to perceive colors in musical tones, and once said "It's probable that in the artistic hierarchy birds are the greatest musicians existing on our planet." A devout Catholic mystic, he was the inheritor of Wagner’s love of musically portraying transcendent sublimity. Messiaen’s great 12-movement “Des Canyons aux étoiles...” (“From the Canyons to the Stars...”) from 1974 was composed after he witnessed the awe-inspiring panorama of the American Southwest: Bryce Canyon, Zion and Cedar Breaks National Parks and the Grand Canyon.

In the 20th century, there have been composers who purposefully have turned away from naturalistic themes. The archetype is Edgard Varese (1883-1965,) described by Henry Miller as “the stratospheric colossus of sound.” Regarded by musicians as the “father of electronic music,” Varese hated all attempts to depict nature, believing that the “machine” was proof of humanity’s genius in the on-going struggle to consciously evolve beyond mere emulation of the constraining tethers of the natural world. If he were

alive, Varese might well reconstruct Eco's phrase to say: "Art is the computer's ape."

We live today in a shrunken world where the "machine" rules. Though we watch episodes of "Survivor" and "Lost" and journey passively in tandem with the half-starved, frenzied jocks of both sexes "going native" in prime time to the few remaining remote corners of the globe, we easily and conveniently forget there's a TV camera crew with satellite and other hi-tech gear filming it all. Ensnared on our La-Z-Boy recliners with powered leg extenders, we watch, sated with beer and chips, on our megabucks wide-screen home theatre systems. Hey, don't get me wrong; I like it, too.

It's hard to artistically emulate nature anymore when the mystery is gone, and the adventure has become manufactured and processed. To do so would seem to require an ingenuous, child-like naïveté, like that of the painter Henri Rousseau, "Le Douanier" ("The Sleeping Gypsy.")

When we colonize the Moon, Mars and explore the aqueous or methane seas of Titan – one of Saturn's moons and the second largest in the solar system – maybe then composers will once again become inspired by extraterrestrial nature to compose works for a symphony of computers, massed cell phones with ambient ring tones and holographic images of the cosmos projected onto our virtual reality headsets. Varese would be enthralled and in his element.

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