

Random thoughts on musical hope

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Hope is an “in-between” state of mind. It’s not “there” yet, wherever “there” might be. Perhaps one of the profoundest statements of hope, deeply psychological, comes from St Paul, who writes about

... hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for? But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it. – Romans 8:24-25 (KJV)

This quotation gets at the tension necessarily underlying hope. You might, of course, hope for something that you can see but which you don’t yet have. Who knows, however, whether you will be as happy as you hope to be if you get what you hope for? Keeping to the religious slant, Oscar Wilde wrote that “when the Gods wish to punish us, they answer our prayers.” This quotation is not merely witty, our laughter is uneasy because we know from bitter-sweet experience how true this can be.

Hope is also automatically linked with desire. French psychoanalysis is very articulate about how desire is never fulfilled, it always remains, even after its apparent object has been attained, it is never at rest; and so, ironically and often painfully, desire can at one time provide the propulsion towards a particular object, but at another time can propel the same subject away from that same object, tired, sated, always seeking a new object. How many times as a couple psychotherapist have I worked with partners who desired each other, hoped for a life together, were so happy to have achieved these dreams, only for them to turn sour as their desire refuses to lie down, as they now become tormented by that same desire, the desire for someone else, something different and new!

Desire is not a synonym for hope. Indeed, in just this kind of scenario, it’s common for hope and desire to be in conflict. Desire is frequently for something forbidden, like a new sexual partner, and is frequently set against hope, the hope that the marriage, say, can weather the storm, that the relationship can contain it, though wounded, and achieve, through reparation, a deeper union.

Lurking behind all this is depression. Maybe personal depression in just this kind of couple situation, very common, but profound, nonetheless. But perhaps depression in a larger, more societal or political and economic sense, as in “the Great Depression”, in which of course it was – and is – not just an economy which is depressed, but countless groups and individuals.

And then massive depression, as in those who despair and turn toward suicide, and as in those who face utter calamity, as in the terrible contemporary experiences of Covid and war. In these situations even desire will often be quenched, at least consciously. One of the symptoms of the extremity of the crisis is that it may be impossible even to imagine what could possibly help, what one might desire. It may be at these rock bottom times, under the aegis of despair, that hope may sometimes be revealed as particularly potent, somehow – and perhaps only sometimes – living on and just occasionally making its presence felt, despite everything. Not always even appreciated: one can feel a kind of peace in despair, whereas hope can propel one to start fighting again for life, perhaps reawakening massive discomfort and danger. This probably really is hope in a very naked sense, merely a sense of hope, not for a particular thing, as Paul would say, but just hope. The hope that lay at the bottom of Pandora's infamous box of horrors, only revealed after they had all been released. And all one then has is patience. Bion, who knew a thing or two about complete personal and social and political and economic misery, emphasised the paramount importance of patience. And, what he would have called the penumbra of meanings around the word patience, includes both its Latin root of suffering but also a sense of peace and hope.

We are in the realm of paradox, concerning incredibly complex, sensitive, delicate, brutally powerful, shifting and colliding emotions and drives. It's so important to try to find words for these states of mind, particularly to be able to think and talk about them with our patients, but also just for our own sakes. But maybe music is for many a necessary link. In despair, for example, I might not be capable of verbal thought – indeed its collapse is probably part of my despair. Also, I might turn away from verbal expression because it can feel just too definite, when what I feel is so fluid – not in a good way – shifting, and indescribable. I might, though, find in myself a flicker of a response towards music, precisely because music seems to operate so naturally in just this kind of territory. Strangely, not just in times of despair, either. There are also times of heightened emotion around a wonderful feeling, the possibility of love, say, or the possibility of a wonderful occasion. Note how I am drawn to imagining possibilities, rather than more definite items, such as the attainment of love or another achievement. It's particularly when hope is beating its wings – over and against the dark bird of prey of despair, which is also never quite absent – that music has an amazing capacity to articulate complex, shifting emotional situations.

The Romantic composer, Mendelssohn, had something to say about this:

People often complain that music is too ambiguous, that what they should think when they hear it is so unclear, whereas everyone understands words. With me, it is exactly

the opposite, and not only with regard to an entire speech but also with individual words. These, too, seem to me so ambiguous, so vague, so easily misunderstood in comparison to genuine music, which fills the soul with a thousand things better than words. The thoughts which are expressed to me by music that I love are not too indefinite to be put into words, but on the contrary, too definite (Mendelssohn, 1842, p. 221)

We can really attend to this opinion, because it comes from someone who practised what he preached, meaning that Mendelssohn is famous for his uncanny – some would say miraculous – capacity to depict fleeting, effervescent, extremely light states of mind, here today and gone tomorrow or indeed much faster than that in their fleeting, shimmering alternating states. For me, that is a core feature of music, that it's here for an instant and then gone. Because in the West we have a tradition of writing music down, we often think of it as quite solid, like the other arts. But at one level, that is false, it's a chimera. It's part of its inherent, invariant identity that it is actually extremely variant, if not ephemeral. Even with written music, in performance you hear it, moment by moment, and it's gone. You, or someone else, might play it again in 10 minutes' time, but you will never repeat your performance identically, you are already a different person, and even if you were to play to the same hearers, they themselves are already emotionally changed. Much as we love to play recordings of music, there is something anti-musical about doing so. It's like trying to photograph a ghost, like trying to record a psychoanalytic session. We all know that, ultimately, it can't be done. The moment is ineffable. And it is this particular point – the ineffable emotionality of the moment, coupled with the ineffable emotional arc of which this moment is a part – which is the point of music, in my opinion.

It's like that at the start, when the baby is born, hears the music of the voice of its mother, and soon joins in, crying, making its own music. There are the points, and there is an arc, always different at the point of every birth. Hope and despair are the prime movers, whether the scenario takes place in a palace or a hovel, utterly depending upon all the different particular human circumstances, which are, always, different. No moment is ever repeated. I can generalise, and say that from that moment on, despite the ever-extending multiplicity and complexity of factors that obtain in any human life, or in the life of the family, the wider group, the society, the nation, internationally, the planet, there's never a time when there aren't emotional moments and arcs, with hope and despair as the drivers, pulling the strings, in conflict with each other. It's certainly possible to describe this in terms of words, I'm trying to do so myself, but I suspect that music will always have the upper hand in being able

to depict the complexity of the situation, its intensity, its changeableness, and its polyphony – the fact that quite different emotional songs, as it were, are being sung at quite different pitches and levels of the personality or of the body politic, all at the same time.

In Western classical music, operas perhaps give us the most obvious illustration of this phenomenon. The great set-piece ensembles of Mozart and Verdi are unrivalled demonstrations of groups of people with completely different motivations and in completely different states of mind all singing simultaneously as the plot crescendos towards a climax, usually dominated by hope and despair *in extremis*. These arcs and their particular moments are thrilling and vertiginous, because they truthfully represent a particular truth about the human condition, and seem to me unique amongst the arts in the aesthetic expression of this kind of social, emotional complexity and intensity.

Film music derives from opera. It's easy to think of music as the accompaniment of the plot, though of course when you attend an opera you usually know the plot. It holds no surprises for you, but what makes it come alive – if all goes well – is the music. In film, obviously attention is primarily on the moving image. Music provides the atmosphere. But, as in opera, sometimes music plays a significant role in the drama when it conveys something different from the words or even from the pictures. The sense of something erotic, for example, just beginning to emerge when it's not recognised by any other senses may be conveyed by music, or the beginnings of hatred, or suspicion, or betrayal – or, even, hope.

I wrote, in a recent paper, how, interestingly, in the world of films, in which music apparently plays only an ancillary role, “only” accompanying the verbal text and images, one can come across a surprising – and, to my mind, enlightened – statement of the reverse. In the news magazine, *The Week*, of 17 July 2020, in an obituary of Ennio Morricone, the famous composer of film music, the director Sergio Leone was quoted as saying that he

would shoot scenes based on the music that Morricone had already written, and make them as long as the score dictated. For Leone, the music was critical. The dialogue counted for relatively little, he said; It was the music that underlined the mood, the feeling. Bernardo Bertolucci described it as “almost visible”. (Grier, 2021)

The sense of the importance of music for film, particularly as expressing hope, has been underlined by another recent obituary for another film composer, Vangelis. He wrote the music for the 1981 film *Chariots of Fire*. The *Guardian* obituary (by Adam Sweeting, 20 May, 2022) stated that

His theme for *Chariots of Fire*, mixing a formal classicism with the rhythmic and tonal possibilities of synthesisers and electronic percussion, reached No 12 in the UK and became a No 1 hit in the US in 1982, while the soundtrack album topped the Billboard chart. Vangelis, who played all the soundtrack instruments himself, won the 1982 Academy Award for best original score, and the fact that *Chariots of Fire* won the best picture Oscar probably owed much to the impact of Vangelis's music.

“My main inspiration was definitely the story itself,” he reflected. “The rest I did instinctively, without thinking about anything else other than to express my feelings, using the technological means that were available at the time.”

It was again performed at the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in London in 2012, by the London Symphony Orchestra and Simon Rattle.

I was interested in Vangelis' own words about his inspiration coming from the story itself. This is famously a story about hope and despair in the 1924 Olympics, with hope winning out. So this is both a wish fulfilment fantasy and something real – it really happened – which certainly fuels our hope. Vangelis must have very accurately found a way of expressing hope musically at an elemental level, for, whilst the film was very popular, I don't imagine that it was only recalling the film that people found so emotionally stirring when this music was played at the Olympics. The music is much more than an aide memoir. Indeed, somewhat along the same lines as my comments about opera plots, once you know the story of the film, it holds no surprises intrinsically. It may be it's the music which gets at something fundamental and essential about hope, and its sheer sense of muscle, its sense of propulsive drive. Like the writer of the obituary, we can wonder whether the impact of the film and its subsequent reception of an Oscar itself may derive largely from the powerful quality of the music.

Sometimes, perhaps particularly in times of peace, we may attend the theatre and concerts for a sublimated expression of hatred and despair. But in times of war, we may look for musical expressions of hope triumphing over despair. In WWII, audiences flocked to the Royal Albert Hall in London to hear Prom performances of Beethoven's symphonies, in just this spirit. I am at present working on a paper exploring how, in the same war, Benjamin Britten returned to war-torn London in 1942 from his exile in safe America, composed *A Ceremony of Carols* as he crossed the U-boat-strewn Atlantic Ocean, and how Olivier Messiaen wrote his

masterpiece, the *Quartet for the End of Time*, in a Polish prisoner-of-war camp in 1941. These radiant pieces and events and biographical details seem to show the immense power of hope even in the context of anxiety, dread, hostility and hatred, as these composers assert the primacy of hope in music which often seems to lift their technical and expressive skills to the highest levels, which clearly manages genuinely to reach audiences, who react accordingly, despite the ephemerality of the music, with hope triggered in their hearts.

Grier, F. (2021) “The Music of the Drives, and The Music of Perversion.” *Int. J. Psycho-Anal.*, 102 (3): 448-463.

Mendelssohn, F. (1842). Letter to Marc-André Souchay, [October 15, 1842](#), cited from *Briefe aus den Jahren 1830 bis 1847* (Leipzig: Hermann Mendelssohn, 1878) p. 221; translation from Felix Mendelssohn (ed. Gisella Selden-Goth) *Letters* (New York: Pantheon, 1945) pp. 313-14.

July 2022