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PETR OSOLSOBĚ

**KIERKEGAARD'S AESTHETICS OF MUSIC:
A CONCEPT OF THE MUSICAL EROTIC**

*Little by little, hearing
became my favourite sense...*

KIERKEGAARD

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the article offered here is as modest as possible – to reconstruct and to provide a resumé of the plenitude of thoughts which Sören A. Kierkegaard (1813-1855) consecrated to the subject of music, namely to Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. The most important essay entitled *The Immediate Erotic Stages or the Musical Erotic* is part of the voluminous book of *Either/Or*¹, a complex and mystifying work, edited by the pseudonymous Victor Eremita, consisting of remarkably diverse yet profoundly unified papers. The first volume of it, supposedly written largely by a young man, designated „A”, who appears as an utterly sophisticated but melancholy aesthete, was intended to show the intensive pathos of pleasure-seeking. The whole book was first published in 1843 and made a great sensation in Copenhagen, partly because a short time before the publication Kierkegaard had broken off an engagement with Regina Olsen, and the book – in spite of its author's pseudonymity – had to be understood in that context. („I had either to throw myself into perdition and sensuality, or to choose the religious.”)

THE VIEWPOINT OF THE AUTHOR

Thus it becomes clear why above mentioned essay about the musical erotic is not written in the style of an „objective” scientific explanation. On the contrary, its fictive author wants to stay in wonder and humble admiration („Mozart is the greatest among classical composers and his *Don Giovanni* deserves the highest place among all classic works of art”, p. 76). He admits that he stays „outside music and observes from this standpoint. That this standpoint is very imperfect I freely admit... but

¹ K i e r k e g a a r d , S. A.: *Either /Or. A Fragment of Life*. London-New York, Penguin Books, 1992. All my quotations in the text are taken from this edition.

I still continue to hope that from my standpoint I too may be able to impart some odd piece of enlightenment on the subject although the initiated could do it much better – yes, to some extent even understand what I say better than I do myself” (p. 76). Elsewhere the difficulty in understanding music is transformed via *docta ignoratia* into advantage in a statement that can be considered as the sum of Kierkegaard's hermeneutics: „As regards Mozart's music, my soul knows no fear, my confidence no bounds. In part this is because what I have understood so far is so very little and there will always be enough left over hiding in the shadows of presentiment; partly because I am convinced that if Mozart became wholly comprehensible to me, he would for the first time become wholly incomprehensible to me” (p. 72).

AESTHETICS OF MUSIC: A PROJECT

All attempts at extracting from the poetic and philosophical works of Sören Kierkegaard any system of aesthetics would be in vain, if we were ignorant of the quite original status that Kierkegaard had given to the aesthetic itself in the frame of his philosophy as a whole. The word „aesthetic” designates in that context a „lower” mode of being, so called „aesthetic existence”, that is sharply distinguished from an ethical or religious attitude to life. Such an existence is in many ways represented in two archetypes. The first is the contemporary romantic Poet, a self-concentrated creature that prefers to live in the realm of Phantasy and Recollection and is unable to resolve and act on an ethical purpose. The second, as we shall see later, is the Seducer. So, the word „aesthetic” in this context preferably means a style of life, often cultivated and refined, even able to keep a relation to moral values, but only as a possibility (*in posse*). It is distinctive of the aesthetic life that it is chaotic and ill-proportioned, somehow meaningless in spite of endless intimation of meaning. The aesthete, according to Kierkegaard, resembles Hegel in a peculiar way, „mediating/obliterating” (*Aufhebung*) distinctions and alternative ways of life, not speculatively however, but in a „higher madness” („*holder Wahnsinn*” of the German romanticism). The ethical stage, on the other hand, means a permanent disjunctive choice (*either/or*) of existential alternatives, and a duty (Cf. *Pligt*, p. 545) to express what is universal in the life of man. Viewed extrinsically, it seems easy to define Kierkegaard's position in aesthetics as Platonic idealism (the conviction that in the nature of different arts are *ideas*). But there is a big difference. Beauty does not come from ideas themselves (or rather due to insight into their realm), but from the perfect unit of four factors: an idea, an appropriate device for its manifestation (medium), a subject-matter as a (quasi-) historical concretion of the idea and

eventually the appropriate formal structure of the manifestation. Such a perfect accord is required if a work should be „classic”.

THE CLASSIC WORK

It is rather surprising that Kierkegaard, who is usually ranked among the philosophers of German romanticism, underlines the feature of „classicality” to the extent that it makes from it the point of departure for the following implications. Needless to say, that his concept of the classic work differs from its traditional meaning that it conceives as a result of a perfect balance between subject-matter and form. Kierkegaard denies such superficial definition of the classic because, when taken as a point of departure for a classification, the definition leads us repeatedly into confusion. The reason is that the word „classic” is incorrectly predicated collectively to many works, but it is more than evident that these works had nothing essential in common. „Thus, to ground a classification on the different nature of the subject-matter would immediately involve one in a misunderstanding which in its wider implications would end in the rescinding the whole concept of the classic.” (p. 65) The subject-matter is an essential factor, but it is not the absolute. „since it is indeed just one factor”. The certain kinds of classic in a sense have no subject-matter (architecture, sculpture, music), whereas with others the subject-matter plays such an important part (poetry, novel, drama). But the classification based on a registration of the presence/absence of subject-matter would inevitably fail. „Strictly speaking, one would be urging the opposite of what one really intended, as always happens when one operates abstractly in dialectical categories, where it is not just that we say one thing and mean another but we say the other; we say not what we think we are saying but the opposite.(...) In talking about this, we talk about something quite different, namely the formative activity”. (p. 65) And on the contrary: if we proceed from the formative activity, the *Gestaltung* in the sense coined by Hegel², and stress only that, we suffer the same fate, i. e., it creates a subject-matter after all, while in others it receives it, here again, „even though we think we are talking about the formative activity, we are really talking about the subject-matter and in fact using that as the basis of our classification. It is never possible, therefore, to use just one of them as an ordering principle, it will always be too essential to provide sufficient contingency, to accidental to provide an essential ordering. (p. 66)” It is – among many others – Hegel's *Aesthetics* that seems to suffer from such a defect, although on the other hand Kierkegaard appreciated Hegel very

² In *Either/Or*, the reference is made to Christian H. Weisse, author of *System der Aesthetik* (Leipzig, 1830), who paradoxically enough, one-sidedly highlighted the formal-activity. „Hegel brought back the subject-matter, the idea in its proper right, and thereby banished all these ephemeral classic.”

much, because he „brought back the subject-matter, the idea in its proper right, and thereby banished all these ephemeral classics”. (p. 67)

That is why Kierkegaard assumes a classification that seems to have its validity „precisely because it is altogether contingent.” (p. 67) The classification suggested by Kierkegaard, however, (in spite of the author's humble irony) is not contingent at all. He takes into consideration the factor of time, and the fact, that meaning of any work of art comes into existence (*Tilblivelse*) in the mind of the receiver. That is why it is based on the possibility and probability of repetition of any idea, or – to say it in the up-to-date jargon of deconstruction – on an *iterabilité* of any meaning. „The more abstract and hence impoverished the idea is, and the more abstract and hence impoverished the medium, the greater the probability that no repetition is conceivable, the greater the probability that having found its expression it has acquired it once and for all. On the other hand and hence richer the idea, and similarly with the medium, the greater the probability of a repetition.” (p. 68) The word repetition, however, does not mean any objective quality of a given artefact, but the fact that a given meaning comes into existence in the Instant (in Danish, *Øjeblikket*) in the mind of a concrete human being (*Enkelte*, an individual in the sense of Kierkegaard) that receives it, recognises it as a recurrence of the same (because a radical novelty cannot be taken for repetition) and freely anticipates its new return. Let us come back to the Kierkegaard's conception of the classic work which we find comprised in the following sentence: „*Don Giovanni* is the best opera... [because of its] absolute relation between idea, form, subject-matter and medium.” (p. 82)

KIERKEGAARD'S THEORY OF MEDIA

Between ideas and media there is a web of correspondences, which were first profoundly investigated by G. E. Lessing in his famous treatise about *Laokoon* and the differences between painting, sculpture and poetry. Kierkegaard was a great admirer of Lessing³. He overtakes many of his thoughts concerning the character of the different media and render them even more radical. In sculpture, architecture and painting, the idea is bound up with the medium that is dumb and unable to develop its subject in time. In sculpture, architecture or painting the sensual plays an important role; to ignore it means to completely rescind its beauty.. Here the idea „neither reduce the medium to the level of mere instrument, nor constantly negates it, is as it were an expression of fact that the medium cannot speak.” (p. 78)

The nature of music as a medium is defined in comparison with language. „A medium which is spiritually determined is essentially language.

³ K i e r k e g a a r d . S . . *Theses Possibly or Actually Attributable to Lessing*. In: *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Princeton Univ. Press. 1974, p. 67-113.

ge; then since music is spiritually determined, it has justly been called a language." (p. 77) But language is an *absolutely* spiritually qualified medium. „In language the sensual is, as medium, reduced to the level of mere instrument and constantly negated. The sensual is reduced to mere instrument and thus rescinded." (p. 78) „If when a man spoke one heard the movements of his tongue, etc., he would badly; of when he heard, the air vibrations instead of the words, he would hear badly; if when reading a book one constantly saw the individual letters, one would read badly. Language becomes the perfect medium just as the moment when everything sensual is negated in it. So also with music; what should really be heard constantly emancipates itself from the sensual." (p. 78) Music as a medium, however, does not stand „as high as language". Both, music and language adress themselves to the ear, which is the most spiritually determined of the senses. Language has a time as its element; all other media have space as their element. „Only music also takes place in time, but the fact that it takes place in time is again a negation of the sensual... Music exists only in the moment of its performance, for however skilful one may be at at reading notes and however lively one's imagination, it cannot be denied that it is only in an unreal sense that the music exists when read... This might seem to be an imperfection in this art as compared with the others, whose works constantly endure because they have their existence in the sensual. Yet it is not so. Rather it is a proof that music is a higher, a more spiritual art." (p. 79) Although music as well as language involves an element of time yet it does not lapse in time except in an unimportant sense. By music we cannot express is the historical in time⁴.

In music the aesthetic appears in its most elemental form, as the sheer delight of natural human existence. As a medium of feeling music is said to manifest as effervescent, passionate, on-rushing immediacy. By „immediacy" is meant a natural valuational response to the world – or even fantasy – without any alteration resulting from reflexive choice. Music furnishes essential aesthetic content for experience. Every art except music – poetry for example – employs a medium of symbols. In music lyric is not a representation.

The more language uses the devices of the poetic style the more as a medium it approaches music in its lyrical quality. Music always sets limits to language, in another words, where language stops it changes itself into music (interjections, child babbling, emphatic speech etc.). But it does not mean that music is a more perfect medium than language (*nota bene*: the author has no sympathy for „purified" absolute music, for it thinks of itself „as being above the words"). The differential aspect of music and language is in their relation to the *immediate*.

Now about the possibility of media to express what is immediate. „Music always expresses the immediate in its immediacy" (that is also

⁴ For the concept of „the historical" and „coming into existence" cf. Kierkegaard, S., *Philosophical Fragments*. Princeton Univ. Press. 1967, p. 93 ff.

why its relation to language language comes first and last). „In language there is a reflection and therefore language cannot express the immediate. Reflection kills the immediate and that is why it is impossible to express the musical in language; but this apparent poverty of language is precisely its wealth. For the immediate is the indeterminable and so language cannot apprehend it, but the fact it is indeterminable is not its perfection but a defect” (p. 80). But paradoxically, this determines the music's real potential to express the immediate in its immediacy.

IDEA OF MUSIC IN ITSELF: SENSUALITY

But what species of the immediate is according to Kierkegaard essentially music's object? It is not when the immediate, qualified spiritually, is ascendant to the realm of spirit, because then it is language that becomes more and the proper medium to express it, on the contrary: it is *the fall* outside (the spiritual (and accordingly outside language), but nevertheless the fall out of the spiritual that is qualified spiritually. „Naturally, music can express much else, but this is its absolute object” (p. 81). Its absolute objects is here called *the sensual genius*, (in Danish, *Sandselighed*; in Czech, *Smyslnost*).⁵ Its existing in a succession of moments indicates its epic character, „yet in stricter sense it is not an epic, for it has not reached the level of words” (p. 69-70). The *spirit of sensuality* moves constantly in an immediacy, for it cannot be represented in words, by poetry for instance. The most abstract medium that is able to represent it is just music. It is something absolutely lyrical, power, life movement, constant unrest, continual succession. But this unrest, this succession does not enrich the sensual genius; its spirit remains always the same. „Were I to characterize this lyrical quality with a single predicate, I might say: It sounds” (p. 81).

Ethically, music is neither good nor evil, but, as of all aesthetic content, one must finally despair of music in order to seek the good and the holy.

THE SUBJECT-MATTER: AN IMMEDIATE EROTIC STAGE

As we have already stated, Kierkegaard finds in Mozart's *Don Giovanni* the perfect correspondence between the idea of sensuality and medium,

⁵ There is a continual problem in translating the Danish *Sandselighed* in English. It covers both „sensuous” and „sensual” Czech language has the corresponding *Smyslnost*. The word „spirit” used here is an unperfect translation of the Danish *Genialitat*. One must be careful to distinguish this from „spirit” (*Aand*) in the sense that Kierkegaard sharply distinguishes from sensuality. See a note of Alastair Hannay in the mentioned edition of *Either/Or*. (p. 613)

because this idea is „absolutely and exceptionally musical” – the perfect unity constitutes the classicity and immortality of the work. Besides that it serves to Kierkegaard as an example for his theses concerning the significance of *the musical erotic*, or theses, that all the different sub-stages in the frame of the aesthetical share the property of being *immediately erotic* and at the same time all being *essentially musical*.

By the concept of *the fall into sensuality* (conceived spiritually in music) we proceed to Kierkegaard's anthropology of art and beauty firmly based on his conception of Christianity. His psychological-theological investigation of original sin is explained in *The Concept of the Dread*; here we cannot go into detail⁶. It is nevertheless important to highlight the constant regard Kierkegaard maintains towards the theological meaning of the idea of sensuality and its concretion in the figure of *Don Juan*.⁷ According to Kierkegaard, it was Christianity which has introduced sensuality to the world, or to quote Kierkegaard directly, „it was Christianity that first posited sensuality under the category of spirit” (p. 73). In Christianity, of course, the spirit is posited as the positive principle and the significance of the sensuality it, that it should be excluded (nevertheless it is considered under the category of spirit). Such a „competitive” relation between spirit and sensuality (to which in the opera of Mozart corresponds on the formal level the relation between language/words and music) is a *novum* thinkable only in the Christian era. Sensuality has indeed existed previously, but has not been defined spiritually. In ancient Greece, for instance, sensuality – Eros – was considered under the category of soul; in a beautiful individual sensuality is not an opposition or exclusion, but harmony, accord and stimulus; love was not there „based on sensuality but on qualities of soul”. (p. 74)

The entire opera is treated as an expression of the idea. Operatic figures are here subjected to brilliant if rather speculative analysis. The lowest sub-stage is here represented by the Page in *Figaro*; he is identified with an awaking sensuality, a kind of dream state, yet without a specific object of desire and involving a melancholy foreboding which is related to *dread*. Papageno in *The Magic Flute* symbolizes the second sub-stage in which desire quickens so that it finds actual objects of longing. These objects vanish in a moment, however, so that their disappearing is the only treasure which desire can cling to. (p. 89)

It is Don Juan who represents the culmination of the aesthetic awareness. In him the sensual genius specified as a seduction and takes the form of demoniacal intensity. According to Kierkegaard, Don Juan was not so much a person as sensuousness itself personified, i. e. the life of feeling. He cannot be a real person since he literally loves not many but

⁶ K i e r k e g a a r d , S., *The Concept of Dread*, Princeton Univ. Press. 1967, p. 53. „Sensuality is sinful; but it is not so in relation to the individual, before he himself by positing sin again makes sensuality sinful.”

⁷ While Kierkegaard refers to the opera as *Don Juan* our article adheres to the familiar Italian title. However, in discussing the traditional motif of the opera, it is necessary to use the original name of its hero.

all, and thus is the epitome of an ideal extreme of the aesthetic life, i. e. complete absorption in the experience of the moment. In dread he dances lightly over the abyss in a lust for life which would perish if he paused for reflection in tumult. The dancing music of the violins portrays just this. So it is not until Juan dies, when „the music comes to the end, that one sees only the despairing defiance which impotently casts its negative vote but can find no constituency, not even in musical sounds.” (p. 97)

The other feature providing the connection between the subject-matter, music and its form is the fact of *repetition* involved in seduction. (In this point the most typical is Leporello's second aria, that could be virtually endless.) It is because for Don Juan „to catch sight of her and to love her are the same thing, that is the moment; the very same moment everything is over, and the same endlessly repeats itself.” (p. 101) But one must be very cautious in qualifying Don Juan as a seducer. Being a seducer requires always a certain reflection and consciousness characterized by having the time ahead to lay his plans, and the time behind to become conscious of his act. Such a consciousness Don Giovanni lacks; he desires, and this desire acts seductively. That turn us back to the genius of sensual immediacy rendered perceptible in the medium of music.

Insofar as Don Juan was represented in the medium of language⁹ his seductive power has been transformed in the power of speech, automatically he became too reflexive and his behaviour directly fell under ethical categories. Likewise, it is impossible to interpret him in the form of ballet or sculpture.” This force in Don Giovanni, this omnipotence, this gaiety, only music can express”. (p. 107) Molière's dramatic attempt to interpret Don Juan comically, which Kierkegaard analysis in detail (p. 113-119) is not correct at all.

FORM OF THE OPERA

It was not Kierkegaard's intention to examine Mozart's opera as a whole. Rather he highlights the distinctive features and important places. The genre of an opera seems to be quite appropriate for expressing the rapid forward movement of the central hero in excited rhythm. There is a great lyrical element, that would be a fault in a standard drama, which essentially tends to reflection rather than to creating a mood, but by no means in an opera. The very secret of the opera is „that its hero is also the force animating the other characters”. (p. 121) For the opera has a *tonality of mode*, here the tonality of the figure which inaugurates

⁹ Here, Kierkegaard gives many examples. Preferably to Molière's *Don Juan ou le festin de pierre*, first produced in 1665, and to Mausaëus interpretation of the novel written by J. L. Tieck. In: *Volksmärchen der Deutschen*, Gotha 1782-6.

the „absolute centrality of [its] musical life”. When, for example, Elvira sings her aria, we hear him though he is not there. The spectator feels that Don Giovanni himself resonates in Elvira. The only character from the outside of Don Giovanni's omnipresent mood is the Commendatore. Leporello, just on the contrary, is so close to Don Giovanni that he „almost becomes one of his functioning parts”. (p. 126) Besides the operatic figures and the web of their mutual relations, Kierkegaard also analyses the overture of the opera, the immortal masterpiece containing the whole essence of it. (p. 127-132)

Concerning the performance of Don Giovanni, Kierkegaard left us many useful instructions in a newspaper article, under the title *A Passing Comment on a Detail in Don Juan*⁹ that was occasioned by the opera to the stage. The only subject under consideration is the duet with Zerlina as a person. Her lines, admonish Kierkegaard, must not be sung with strong emphasis because she is befuddled, unlike Elvira incapable of understanding what it means either to be seduced or saved. She romances with Don Juan – a little, then comforts Masetto – a little. As in *Either/Or*, Don Juan is again interpreted not as a crafty seducer, appropriate to drama, but as *non-reflective immediate mood of sexuality*, a force of nature which can be portrayed only by the immediacy of music.

UNCONCLUDING CONCLUSION

It remains to raise a hypothetical question, if Kierkegaard's aesthetics views on music, especially the opinion that music is to be a sensual vehicle for spiritual content, i. e. the „idea” expressed through it, together with the accent he put on the idea of sensuality (*Sandselighed*) as a major subject-matter of music itself does not make of him „a perfect Wagnerite before Wagner” (why *Tristan* should not be understood in the same way?), an predecessor in the tendency toward „the Gesamtkunstwerk”, etc. And yet in the innermost sense Kierkegaard thought is altogether different. He would have been far remote from such a tendency, I guess, insisting carefully on the distinctions between *aesthetic*, *ethic* and *religious* spheres. In his works, Wagner aspired to create, successfully or not, a new kind of religious mythos interpreted in the medium of opera, while Kierkegaard constantly sees sensuality that awakens an aesthetic rapture as an anti-spiritual force relating to sinfulness. Perhaps *Tristan* would serve him as an example of the love from the soul (in the Platonic sense), that has „a continuation in time” and that involves no bound to spirit to be broken in the outburst of the

⁹ Kierkegaard, S. A., *Zběžná poznámka týkající se jedné jednotlivosti v Donu Juanovi* (A Passing Comment on a Detail in Don Juan) Translated by Fr. Frölich in: *Svět a divadlo*, n. 1-2, 1992, p. 109-115.

sensual and hence it is musically expressed by the Wagnerian *endless melody*. The immediate sensual love, on the other hand, as it is musically presented in Don Giovanni appears and disappears so that its prevailing form of expression is that of *repetition*.

Kierkegaard, as we already mentioned above, highly estimated Mozart's Don Giovanni among all classic works of art. „The happy feature of the classic work, what constitutes its classic nature and immortality, is the way two forces absolutely cohere.” These forces are: the most perfect epic subject-matter and force *to want it*. „To want it rightly is a great art, or rather, it is a gift. It is what is inexplicable and mysterious about genius, just like a divining rod, to which it never occurs to want except in the presence of what it wants.” For art, as Kierkegaard reminds us, is just the opposite of abstract understanding; „the later really thinks of wanting in respect of what is not, not in respect of what is.” (p. 63)

The experience provided by the work of art is not evil because it is pre-ethical. The ethical implications are that, far from trying to make music (or any art) moral, or religious, Kierkegaard understands art as a morally neutral expression of feeling. He insists that art has its natural limits and its unavoidable pathos, to be resolved only in religion.

No other conclusion. In fact, Kierkegaard himself argued that the merit of *Either/Or* is precisely that it does not lead to a conclusion (something philosophical or cognitive) but transforms „everything into inwardness”, in such a way that the reader is compelled to choose his own style of life.

NOTES

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