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Describing the indescribable

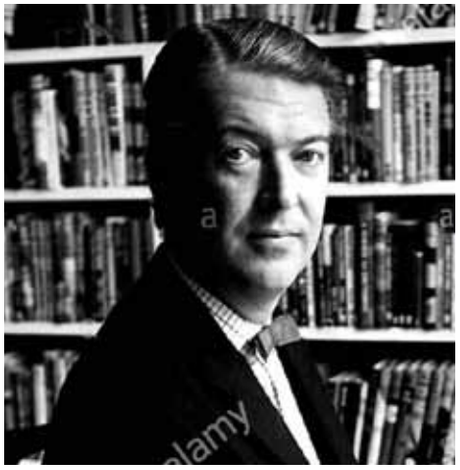
Few of even the greatest writers have managed to capture the emotional, elusive, essence of music

If writing about music is hard, and it is, writing about writing about music is even more so. The root of the problem with both is the absence in music of anything tangible to hold on to, as compared with (say) a book or a picture. The cases of opera and programme music (defined as music which tells a story of a non-musical nature) are the exceptions that prove the rule. The writer can take refuge in externals, be they the sensual clarinets depicting the amorous dreams of the sisters in *Così fan tutte*, or the sword-thrust which sees off Don Juan in the tone poem by Richard Strauss. For the rest, Oliver Sacks wrote the truth when he said in *Musicophilia* that music "has no concepts, makes no propositions; it lacks images, symbols, the stuff of language. It has no power of representation. It has no necessary relation to the world."

Music in its pure form means nothing except itself. That of course is its appeal. It is why Schopenhauer placed it at the zenith of the arts, describing it as standing apart from all the others, inasmuch as they all "speak of shadows while music speaks of the essence". The fact that he said this in pursuit of a dodgy quest to identify the Will as the fundamental metaphysical reality does not invalidate his award of the laurel crown among the arts to music; for music alone "does not express this or that sorrow or pain or exaltation or cheerfulness or peace of mind, but rather [these states of mind] as such *in themselves*". And yet how to describe the way in which this is achieved?

The pitfalls of trying to communicate musical truths in words—and the paradoxical urge to do so—were borne in on me when I was about 10. A seemingly ancient man with a white beard came to my school one summer day, holding us truculently indoors when the cricket field beckoned. He pounded the piano for an hour or so and repeatedly groaned the single Latin word *"Accende!"*, a spectacle sufficiently amusing to us schoolboys for it to engender a brief imitative craze after he had left. Then we all forgot about it, and him. Twenty years later, attending a live performance of Mahler's eighth symphony for the first time, I was bodily hurled back in my seat by the choir's dramatic unison shout in E major at what turned out to be bar 262 of the first movement. Simultaneously there came back in a flash the memory of the old man (Sir Charles Groves, it was) at the piano. This was the musical moment he had attempted to share with 200 indifferent children on a June afternoon in the 1960s. How doomed of him to seek to convey it. How inevitable that he should try.

Kingsley Amis has a touching aperçu in his novel *Girl, 20*, when the priapic conductor-composer Sir Roy Vandervane tries to share the beauties of a piece of classical music with his daughter. "Listen to this bit," he urges, as we have all done. The narrator observes how faintly comic, yet not undignified, it is that even now his friend has not arrived at the sad fact that listening to music can never be anything other than a solitary experience. The younger Amis preferred to keep his love of music in disguise. Thus, the hung-over hero of *Lucky Jim*, staying for the weekend



with the professor supervising his postgraduate thesis, is deprived of necessary access to the bathroom by its occupant breaking into song: "Dixon recognised the piece as some skein of untiring facetiousness by filthy Mozart." He even has a tune which he associates with the professor, and to which he has set mildly obscene lyrics, in retaliation for the former making him listen to records of "some boring piano concerto". (The tune is the finale of Beethoven's Op 15 concerto.)

The difficulty of writing about music, in the sense of describing it at any length, is strongly implied by the smallness of the number of novelists who have done the job well. We can set on one side those few who have written well of imaginary pieces. The Vinteuil sonata in Proust is a distinguished example, but the very fact that musicians debate hotly, between Saint-Saëns, Franck, Fauré and others, what original the author had in mind indicates that something different is at stake here. To write well of a piece which the reader knows as well as the author is the supreme test. Many fail and should be discouraged by something equivalent to the annual Bad Sex in Fiction award. Granted that such judgments are subjective, we may single out as an unquestionable turkey E.M. Forster's description of Beethoven's fifth symphony in *Howard's End*, which actually contains the sentence, "For as if things were going too far, Beethoven took hold of the goblins and made them do what he wanted." We are admittedly listening to the piece through the ears of an ingenuous young woman, but even so this will not do.

Among musicians, the palm for the best piece of writing about a known masterpiece is generally awarded to Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus*, where Kretschmar describes Beethoven's Op 111 piano sonata in a way that somehow rises to the level of the original. Among many felicities, Mann notices that the last time we hear the simple arietta theme, a C sharp is interpolated, and the effect "is the most moving, consolatory [and] reconciling thing in the world. It is like having one's hair or cheek stroked, lovingly, understandingly, like a deep and silent farewell look. It blesses the listener with overpowering humanity, and lies in parting so gently on the hearer's heart as an eternal valediction that it brings tears to the eyes." The mutual enhancement of Mann and Beethoven is as good as walking among the Tintorettos in the Scuola San Rocco with Ruskin's descriptions of the paintings in one's hand.

Another of the deepest utterances of third-period Beethoven, the slow movement of the Op 132 quartet, brought out the best of Aldous Huxley in *Point Counter Point*:

> The music began again. But something new and marvellous had happened, in its Lydian heaven. The speed of the slow melody was doubled; its outlines became clearer and more definite; an inner part began to harp insistently on a throbbing phrase. It was as though heaven had suddenly and impossibly become more heavenly, had passed from achieved perfection into perfection yet deeper and more absolute. The ineffable peace persisted; but it was no longer the peace of convalescence and passivity. It quivered, it was alive, it seemed to grow and intensify itself, it became an active calm, an almost passionate serenity. The miraculous paradox of external life and eternal repose was musically realised.

Again, if you know the music, you will realise that Huxley has dared to effect here a profoundly successful synthesis—against the odds. There may be other examples of this quality, but they are surely few. The fact that we all go on trying, in Roger Scruton's phrase, to eff the ineffable shows the power of music in compelling us to conscript mere words to express that which by definition is beyond them.

Music

Kingsley Amis: "Listen to this bit," he urges