

EPILOG TO PART 1: MUSIC PLAYS YOU

In *An Anthropologist on Mars*, the Oliver Sacks book we have already mentioned, the author writes about the solidity of great art to circumstances and repetition. Let's quote from a paragraph about Helmholtz and color vision: "Color constancy - the way in which the color of objects are preserved and we always know what they are in spite of great fluctuations in the light illuminating them - is a special example of the way in which we achieve constancy generally, and make a stable perceptual world from a chaotic sensory flux, by very high powers of interpretation and judgment."

Same can be said about art in general and music in particular. Great art is resistant to circumstances: you can listen to Edith Piaf on a terrible reproduction system and have goose-bumps all the same. You can hear a sublime slow movement by Mozart on an old vinyl record with annoying surface noise and still be absolutely transfixed and oblivious to the annoyance - unless the interpretation itself is bad, in which case the magical phenomenon doesn't happen; we'll see why in a moment. You can see a Picasso canvas exposed in the wrong place, under a bad light and surrounded by a noisy crowd, and it still strikes you with extraordinary power. Genius is unstoppable.

Great art is also resistant to repetition: you can watch the ending of Chaplin's *City Lights* 1000 times and cry 1000 times in a row - here is what Marlon Brando says about this scene in his autobiography: "The moment is magical, one that reaches into the audience's unconscious, which only the best acting can do. Chaplin knew exactly and instinctively what the audience would experience."

Last but not least, the greatest mystery of all: great music is resistant to amnesia. At the end of this paragraph, we will include some remarkable lines from another Oliver Sacks piece, an article he wrote for the *New Yorker* about Clive Wearing, a musician stricken by the worst case of amnesia ever recorded - his short-term memory is pretty much nonexistent and he can't remember more than a couple of sentences in a row - and yet has retained most of his musical abilities, including the ability to play or conduct an extended piece of music whose length exceeds by far his short term memory span.

Great art is resistant to many other things: the circumstances of its creation itself - Chaplin's notorious feud with his leading *City Lights* actress, whom he

strongly disliked, didn't prevent the sublime from happening. Another trial with another actress he was very fond of turned out to be a disaster, with zero chemistry.

Great art is resistant to the artist's personality itself - some creators of profound artistic beauty were notorious for their shady, even villainous behavior, and some great bands were associations of people who had nothing to do with - or even disliked - each other. Love in real life won't make people play well together, while personal dislike won't prevent it from happening.

To go even further, great art goes beyond the emotion which the artist feels while he is creating. Some of my greatest musical memories were moments where I felt almost detached, nonexistent. Stravinsky went as far as criticizing the role of emotion in music in strong words ("Most people like music because it gives them certain emotions such as joy, grief, sadness, and image of nature, a subject for daydreams or - still better - oblivion from "everyday life." They want a drug - dope -.... Music would not be worth much if it were reduced to such an end. When people have learned to love music for itself, when they listen with other ears, their enjoyment will be of a far higher and more potent order, and they will be able to judge it on a higher plane and realize its intrinsic value.).

All this illustrates the fact that art is resistant to the real world and evolving in a different realm, supremely sensual yet gravitating in another universe, somehow separated from the "real" universe yet so close to it. Separation, parallel universes, the universe once again...

Nobody has a real explanation here, but my personal intuition tells me that what seems to be at play in art is the transmutation of sensory information into pure feeling - from the artist's senses to his art, and then back, from his art to the outside world, to other people's senses, again transmuted into pure feeling - like a magical receiver / emitter.

The reason why we are talking about this is intimately related to the purpose of this book. What we are striving for here is craftsmanship of feeling. "It bugs me when people try to analyze jazz as an intellectual theorem. It's not. It's feeling." (Bill Evans). Bill Evans also noted that his music was better perceived by non-specialists, Stravinsky said exactly the same thing in one of his most famous quotes: My music is best understood by children and animals. And Goethe, who was one of the greatest poets of all time, was no scientist and yet found a theory of colors which was closer to the truth than anything the "experts"

of the time were able to think of or even imagine. He was also, like Picasso, a gold mine of brilliant quotes, sometimes simple, even naive in appearance, but strikingly true and to the point:

"All the knowledge I possess everyone else can acquire, but my heart is all my own."

"All theory, dear friend, is gray, but the golden tree of life springs ever green."

"Beauty is a manifestation of secret natural laws, which otherwise would have been hidden from us forever."

And a last one central to this book:

"We are shaped and fashioned by what we love."

What music means to me has to do with the perception of the whole as opposed to the expression of successive moments (hence its amnesia-proofness). ...the organic unity of music, where each part leads on to the next, every part has reference to the rest. It cannot usually be perceived, or remembered, in part - they are perceived and remembered as wholes (Sacks). This reminds us also of Einstein's space-time, this object that is impossible to imagine through common human perception, which can only "see" it through the flow of time. Or of a CD or a DVD which, even though the information is all there, means nothing to the human eye or mind until decrypted by a CD or DVD player. A DVD of Chaplin's *City Lights* contains the magic, but you need the transcription to feel it. Its raw content is beyond human perception, but technology makes it accessible and time allows its transmutation into emotion and feeling.

Likewise, art is beyond the artist. When inspiration is there, it is not about playing anymore, it is about receiving. Being plunged in the indescribable, in the incomprehensible, in the inevitable, and expressing it for others to feel. Keeping out of the way of it and ceasing to exist as a human being. Becoming the medium through which it flows and goes. "It just went through me." (Stravinsky about *Rite of Spring*).

In these moments, music plays you, not the reverse. "I don't paint, painting does what it wants with me." (Picasso). In the case of classical music for example, I believe a great interpreter is someone who doesn't play the music but instead, submits himself to it and lets himself be played by it, in order to express something that transcends the written page and gives life to what the composer put on paper. Such players give the act of composing all its sense, by recreating and reinventing - not reproducing, which is impossible - the composer's feeling

and projecting his magic.

Looking for the magic, and without knowing when it is going to happen, or why. There is no why and you don't know, period. "Good artists borrow, great artists steal." (Picasso). To paraphrase the beloved master: "Good artists know what they are doing, great artists don't."

Music doesn't belong to you after the act of creation, nor - and especially not - during it. It was there before, it will be there after, and you are at its service at the moment you are expressing it. You are the instrument of music, not the piano or the saxophone or the drums or whatever tool you are using to produce sound.

In short:

The "madness" is about being an instrument of art, where what you receive and express goes far beyond common perception and common sense. It is the opposite of Cartesianism: I make music therefore I am not.

This requires: I will be music instead of I will play music. I will be aware, awake, ready, open, offering no resistance of any kind to my art because of who I am or who I am not. The "most like myself" channel will be the conduit through which music will flow and flourish.

Such a state can only be achieved through real craftsmanship of feeling, which is an ability requiring a patient, organic growth by means of a true dedication over the course of a lifetime. It goes beyond time and efforts, even though it requires a great deal of both. To be music, you have to live by its terms, every moment of your life. And as you change and evolve, the music will always be there, changing and evolving as well but also untouched and untouchable. The water will flow, always different, but the river will always be there.

Now let's set to work.