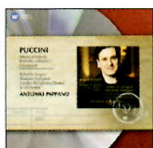




MARGARET THROSBY'S TOP THREE TINGLES



Pearl Fishers Duet
Jussi Björling and Robert Merrill
RCA 010000245072X



Puccini
Crisantemi
Antonio Pappano
WARNER 4333012



Strange Fruit
Billy Holiday
JAZZ STORY CD

“THE SHUDDER OF AWE IS HUMANITY'S HIGHEST FACULTY” Goethe

In his book *Emotion and Meaning* (1956), the American music theorist and philosopher Leonard Meyer approached this “shudder” as it relates to music in some depth. He argues that when our anticipation of a musical resolution is delayed or interrupted we experience a build-up of emotional tension which, when finally released through the eventual musical resolution, results in a greater satisfaction for the listener (hence a potential frisson experience) than if the music had followed the formerly anticipated (i.e. more predictable) course. Meyer concludes that “In music, the state of suspense involves an awareness of the powerlessness of man in the face of the unknown.”

“O JUPITER, FOR I KNOW NOTHING OF THEE BUT THY NAME...” Euripides/Plutarch

Fanciful as it may sound, Meyer’s creating a parallel between life and music via the idea of suspended circumstances is not illogical, as we shall see. Moreover, drawing philosophical conclusions from relatively self-evident experiences is what, for better or worse, has always lent shape to our existence.

So might emotional tension provide a common thread for all frisson experiences? Certainly an element of tension appears to be a psychological feature common to many aesthetic chills, and could therefore be considered a factor underlying such sensations. However Meyer’s notion of anticipatory suspense on the part of the listener as to what comes next is problematic. For instance, frisson may also be experienced on the basis of sound quality alone. I personally get chills every time I hear the exquisite violin octave unisons in the slow movement of Debussy’s String Quartet – or indeed, following a precisely anticipated or likewise familiar resolution or pattern, such as the stunning *Laudate* coda in Stravinsky’s *Symphony of Psalms*, which would contradict Meyer’s claim.

THE ART OF OBSERVATION

If we reflect upon Goethe’s observation it becomes apparent that the aesthetic shudder is at once a half-sought, half-involuntary act of surrender that cannot merely be willed. One might easily draw a parallel here with the terms of purely sexual arousal – and it’s highly likely that the two are psychologically connected. But we have to be cautious. The assumed parallel may all too easily introduce the same complacent errors of judgement to which we are ever susceptible; namely the medical diagnosis fallacy outlined by James.

The nature of sexual arousal by no means necessarily explains away the nature of the aesthetic frisson. Yet the connection definitely strikes a chord, and so somehow we’re going to have to find a way to distinguish what it is that makes frisson such a unique experience.

Given that delving into the very roots of our being seems a precondition for anyone who wishes to lend

their insight into frisson some weight, it might be useful to quote the following passage from an earlier piece I wrote on symmetry as it provides some background to what – for the chill of it – I’d like to posit.

Some things are so overwhelmingly self-evident that we often fail to take them into proper account. For instance, although our physicality as human beings appears to be one of balanced proportion and seems symmetrical – or approaches symmetry – we are fundamentally asymmetrical in design. You may be sure that not a single person, past or present, has a face one side of which precisely reflects the other.

Yet if this seeming imperfection appears to be one of nature’s regrettable aspects, you might consider this: a snowflake is an exquisitely proportioned thing. But no snowflake is perfectly symmetrical – and still we find it beautiful. Why? Because despite its possessing the appearance of symmetry, we, being also designed by nature, intuit that its dimensions are asymmetric.

Hence, a situation of extreme tension is created. Our perceptual faculties are caught between identifying with the snowflake’s sensed asymmetry and by the visual evidence to the contrary. This moment of tension, which plays upon our sensibilities, is what lends a snowflake its extraordinary power of attractiveness.

This has some very interesting implications. For instance, truth – in relation to this example – amounts to identifying with (or trusting in) the deception of appearances. Moreover, it signifies that beauty offers exquisite degrees of sustained tension (although chances are you already knew this). But particularly telling is the idea that between our effort to distinguish an object’s seemingly perfect proportions from an unattainable symmetry, a situation of high tension is created which, in turn, lends an object its beauty.

So, it’s asymmetry that causes frisson? Not quite – I’ll get there. Firstly, these terms – by which I mean specifically our a priori intuition that seeks an aesthetically balanced tension through nature – are presumably also involved in relation to music.

“WE CREATE AFTER NATURE” Béla Bartók

We need only substitute the term ‘symmetry’ for ‘perfection’, due to the potentially misleading compositional connotations of the former (and despite the fact that symmetry and perfection are closely interrelated terms). For instance, Mozart’s *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* may sound like perfection, but in musical terms its craft may never exceed the exquisite yet always less-than-perfect proportions of a snowflake.

In short, a work of art promises something that ultimately must exceed the sum of its own parts. It may satisfy the terms of compositional and/or motivic structure, but to assume that our responses will be necessarily proportioned to a work’s craft is to imply that they cancel themselves out at every instant; we would register nothing. In truth, we are not empty vessels that simply process, and a work may often ignite a response that exceeds its own parameters.