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Do We Need Popular Music?

Is it possible to compare a pop song and a classical piece of music? Do they share common values or at least have enough in common in terms of inner structure or way of thinking to an extent that such a comparison may be relevant? These and similar questions have been and are getting more and more necessary to pose for musicians belonging to the Western classical tradition. This is also reflected in excellent, thought-provoking studies written since the millennium which are the proofs that raising such questions are noteworthy. Among others, I am referring to two such books, both of them dealing with similar kinds of issues.

From the classical musicians' part, there are at least two possible attitudes toward the question.

In his book *Who Needs Classical Music?,* Julian Johnson argues that pieces written in the classical tradition have certain distinctive values that most of the music flourishing in pop culture lacks. Suggesting that music is more than just 'a matter of taste', he claims that classical music is distinguished from popular music as it never serves as background noise, meaning that it requires work, attention and perseverance. In his view, because of the very richness and elaborated nature of classical artworks as objects convey metaphysical questions and stimulate us to exceed our limits. From the study it becomes obvious that – according to him – a technical comparison is possible to imagine. Contemplating on the tension between classical and popular music, regarding their attitudes toward the function of entertainment, he writes, that 'from the perspective of classical music, therefore, a pop ballad of the 1950s is perplexing not so much because of the simplicity of the musical materials, which *might be compared* in some respects to the simplicity of Schubert, but precisely because the ballad was written in the 1950s and not the 1820s'. (Johnson 2000:101) It is not the historical objections inherent in this statement what I find interesting but the very juxtaposition of these two genres as having something in common in a technical sense.

Not only is historical progression the only ground that might serve as a basis of comparison. Nicholas Cook's book, *Music – A Very Short Introduction* - which is less concerned with making similar objections, setting directly against these two ways, still less does he intend to suggest or sharpen classical music's superiority over popular (or other kinds of) music, being more pluralistic than Johnson in his approach – also contains elements that might serve as a basis of comparison. He claims that even in the Western tradition, where artworks are precisely

notated, composition takes place only in the act of performance, making the fact obvious that notation has its own limits and neglecting performers is more than misleading. Placing the idea of notation and the practice of pop, jazz or non-Western music together, he suggests that the main difference between them and classical music is that those are essentially performer-centred traditions, not based on the Western-like practice of notation and this statement is true as a *tendency*, even if we accept that jazz standards and a baroque basso continuo bears some similarities in their notations.

Whatever position do we find attractive, it seems to be obvious that popular music's characteristics are possible to describe with classical music's analytical terms - in technical level. According to some musicians the result of a technical comparative analysis does lead us to aesthetical conclusions, while others think that it does not.

Not only is Julian Johnson's study the only example that Schubert and popular music are placed side by side, Schubert's songs are often regarded even by popular music experts as ancestors of pop songs especially in a formal sense. Taking a look at Schubert's lied, *Auf den Wasser zu Singen* and, *mutatis mutandis*, Katy Perry's 2016 hit, *Rise* and listening to them successively we have the opportunity to shed light on some important aspects of them. Although we are able to examine their structures from several point of views, in the following I would like to focus on the phenomenon of *symmetry* with special regard to its connection with literacy.

Schubert's 3 and a half minutes long setting of Leopold Stolberg's poem, written in 1823, is a delicate and sensitive depiction of a small boat drifting on a calm lake. The speaker of the poem contemplates on the passing of time in the sunset, while the waves gently rock him back and forth.

Katy Parry's 2016 hit, *Rise* is a powerful and energetic electronic song with lyrical themes of victory and rising above one's opponents, used by NBC Sports during the 2016 Summer Olympics.

It is obvious at a glance that in terms of their macro structure both are relatively simple. In *Rise,* Perry sings a verse-prechorus-chorus structure twice (2xABC in classical terms) with a short extension of the final chorus at the end. In the Schubert setting, not counting the eight-bar piano introduction and a two-bar close, the composer applies strophic form, using the same musical material for each verse (AAA). If we have a closer look at the inner articulation (micro structure) of the main parts, one can assess that their attitude toward the concept of symmetry

is remarkably different. The Perry song – similarly to other pop songs – consists of 8 bar sections entirely, leaving no place for any asymmetry on the level of the articulation of bars. We can say that its symmetry is *total symmetry*. We can also notice a certain strive for symmetry, a legacy of the Viennese Classical formal thinking, in the Schubert lied, but in this case the articulation of the bar-pairs is often ambiguous and at times it is not always easy to decide whether a bar belongs to a bar-pair or another. Besides the fact that symmetry as a *principle* is present in Schubert's way of formal thinking, we can assess that this is impossible to imagine without the presence of asymmetry in his music.

This implacable symmetry is also evident in *Rise*'s harmonic level. The song, written in e flat minor uses three other chords besides the tonic: C-flat major, G-flat major and B-flat major. These four chords circle throughout the song, similarly to a kind of *chaconne* or *song on a grand*. Ryan Sargent, Social Media Manager for MakeMusic, Inc. writes that although the song's harmony is simple, it is powerful, and it is - according to him - the most successful component in the work. Schubert's song is also simple in harmonic sense (although it contains more than four chords), the chords are used in an asymmetric way, at times making a tension between the articulation of the micro-structure (bar-pairs) and the articulation of the harmony, creating two different and analogously unfolded dimensions.

We can detect different approaches toward the connection between time signature and the rhythm of the melody too. Schubert's song, written in 6/8, follows the rhythm of the text, while having every note on the proper beats, its flexibility derives directly, almost unnoticed from the meter (that is from the structure). Katy Parry's song is written in 4/4, in effect the only time signature being used by pop songs. Although the rhythm of the melody and its relation to the meter is an aspect when asymmetry appears, it does so in a very different way from Schubert's. In order to avoid an unbearable lack of flexibility, the notes of the melody and the beats of the time signature do not coincide with each other. The phenomenon that asymmetry is only able to appear as being related to a constant pulse sheds light on the songs roots in *improvisation*. Schubert's asymmetries on the level of micro structure have their roots in literacy, making design possible without being forced to constantly and directly refer to a ubiquitous pulse.

Regarding the relationship between the solo voice and the accompaniment we can see two different attitudes. In the Schubert song the piano part resembles an Impromptu, and while the two layers (voice and piano) constitute a coherent unity, the piano part would make sense even in itself. In the case of *Rise*, solo voice and accompaniment are less independent in themselves.

Paradoxically, the accompaniment, a layer of electronically created sounds – even as it seems the most complex, most composition-like element of the work (for a classically-trained composer) and it suggests rational and conscious planning – would hardly make sense in itself without the melody.

The effect of the structural influence of classical music in pop genres is obvious with regard to macro form. Pop music's no less important effect on certain contemporary classical composers is also undeniable. Even then popular music's influence on a classical composition is the most obvious have we the possibility to grasp the difference between them. Thomas Adès' *Ecstasio*, the third movement of his 'symphony-all-but-name' orchestral piece, *Asyla,* while being an allusion to a traditional symphony's third dance movement, at the same time its material is borrowed from the world of the discos of the 1990s. We can see that while the proportions of the material treatment of disco music (implacable bar-pairs) as a *tendency* is present, it is constantly overwritten and questioned by a more asymmetric formal thinking as Adès adds extra bars and plays with changing time signatures. It is true of the movement's macroform too. Its overall form, an enumeration-like formal plan, similar to the tracks played successively in a disco, while referring to this 'tradition', it creates cunning, almost unnoticed connection between the themes and creates a dramaturgy that makes even a recapitulation possible.

While I do not agree with his modernist approach, I agree with Julian Johnson that one of classical music's distinguished features is that it treats its material critically. Whatever material does it deal with, whatever influence does effect it, classical music always applies (whether consciously or not) the compositional imprinting, inherited from its tradition. When a classical composer uses materials inspired by popular music, he or she approaches this material critically by questioning it in light of the historical past.

This critical attitude is possible because of classical music's deep-seated roots in literacy. The asymmetries being present in classical music - even as a *tendency* toward symmetry exists (like in the Schubert song or in the Viennese Classics works) - are made possible exclusively by the practice of notation. Popular music's nature of asymmetry is different in the sense that even if asymmetries can be found in the melody or in the accompaniment (as we have seen in the case of Katy Pery's *Rise*), a constant pulsation is present and all the asymmetries are related to this meter. This suggests a tradition having its roots in improvisation, or as Nicholas Cook puts it, in an essentially performer-centred tradition.

In conclusion, I think the most decisive difference between Western classical music and popular music is technical in nature and possible to grasp with technical terms. This is confirmed by the fact that in other ways they are influenced by the same tendencies. In many respects, classical music – similarly to the Katy Perry song, which was written by a group of people apart from Katy – is getting more and more project-like and cooperation-centred. In many cases even contemporary classical composers are only one element of many and a commission depends on a manager's taste and intentions and the occasion for which the work is written - a tendency that is somewhat similar to the 18th century when composers were supported by courts and providing music for them.

As Richard Taruskin writes in the Introduction of his Oxford History of Western Music, the unifying foundation under classical canon's unbelievable heterogeneity, showing itself in its wonderful generic variety is literacy - the fact that these genres have been disseminated by the medium of writing. This medium makes all of classical music's treasures possible and enables it to assimilate the most diverse effects. *In theory in classical music everything is possible*. I think the Western classical tradition's critical thinking is the guarantee of its independence and relevancy. From this perspective studying and thinking about material and tendencies existing in pop music could be fruitful and inspiring for classical musicians.

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