

Concerto for Magic and Mysticism: Esotericism and Western Music

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On February 19, 1786, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart attended a masquerade ball in his adopted city of Vienna, dressed in the guise of a Hindu philosopher. Along with his turban and robes, Mozart also carried some leaflets which he distributed to the crowd, on which were written various "esoteric" puzzles and strange sayings, purported to be "Fragments of the Writings of Zoroaster." In Vienna that year, esoterica was all the rage. Freemasonry was popular, as were dark intrigues, like the secret Order of the **ILLuminati**, which combined rituals and initiations with radical politics. Indeed, the Baron Swieten, a patron of both Mozart and Beethoven and a collaborator with Haydn (also a Mason), was involved in an alleged Illuminati plot in 1791, the same year as Mozart's death. Many of Mozart's other friends and colleagues were possible members of the Illuminati. And although there is no evidence that Mozart himself was involved, he would certainly have found the egalitarian ideals of the society's founder, Adam Weishaupt, a worthy cause (Landon, *Mozart: The Golden Years*, 105 -22, 225 -36).

Mozart became a Mason in 1784, joining Lodge Benevolence in Vienna, which would later be renamed New Crowned Hope. Other members included "the Magnificent" Prince Nicolaus Esterhazy, Haydn's famous patron. Mozart was certainly not the first to combine an interest in music with a taste for esotericism. Christoph Gluck was a Mason, and his *Orpheus* contains many elements from the Craft. The earliest operas, like Jacopo Peri's *Eurydice*, dating from 1600, also deal with sacred themes, and Claudio Monteverdi, the new form's first major figure, was a practicing alchemist (Martin 12).

Indeed, the link between music and esotericism goes back at least as far as the sixth century BCE, when the Greek sage Pythagoras discovered the laws of harmony and developed a mystical brotherhood around them. But Mozart can surely stand as an archetype for an association that runs throughout Western music. In fact, as the musicologist Wilfrid Mellers (295) suggests, the central musical forms of the Classical and Romantic traditions, the sonata and symphony, are musical initiation journeys, sonic spiritual pilgrimages in which the hero-central theme-undergoes trials and challenges-variations-to arrive at a new level of integration-resolution. The symphony orchestra itself is an example of Masonic brotherhood, fellows "banding" together for a common cause.

Mozart took to Masonry with a passion, introducing Masonic elements into many of his works, and writing music specifically for Masonic affairs, like his moving *Masonic Funeral Music* (K. 477). His final three symphonies form a triptych of Masonic initiation symbolism (Mellers). But his greatest Masonic work is his opera *The Magic Flute* (1791), which centers on the archetypal struggle between Darkness and Light. Masonic, Egyptian, and hermetic elements crowd the work-too many to elucidate here-but by the time Mozart wrote it, Freemasonry was on the defensive. The Illuminati had been suppressed in Bavaria, and Mozart had to muffle his esoteric themes in the innocuous fabric of a fairy tale. Nevertheless, much of the message got through, and one wonders if it is just by chance that Prague, the city that loved Mozart most, was the age-old home of alchemists, Rosicrucians, astrologers, and esotericists?

In the next century, the Romantics, who followed Mozart and adopted him as a hero, were also keen on the link between music and magic. E. T. A. Hoffmann, best known for his story "The Nutcracker," on which Tchaikovsky based his ballet, was one of the most musical-minded geniuses of any age, who even took Amadeus as his name, in honor of Mozart. By day a respected juror and civil servant, at night Hoffmann plunged into the magical waters of Romanticism, writing weird, fantastic stories, brilliant musical criticism, and even composing music himself. His tales are full of alchemists, magicians, strange states of consciousness, and accounts of initiation. One collection, *The Serapion Brotherhood*, smacks of secret societies and magical orders. In it, one character speaks of the sun as "the triad from which the chords of the stars shower down at our feet to wrap us in the threads of their crystallized fire. A chrysalis in flames, we await Psyche to carry us on high to the sun!" (Godwin, *Music* 196).

As Joscelyn Godwin remarks in *Harmonies of Heaven and Earth* (61), in those few lines Hoffmann states the perennial doctrine of the soul's ascent through the starry spheres to its destined place in the sun. Like the ancients before him, he believed in music's power to transport us to another realm. In an essay on Beethoven, Hoffmann (96) wrote: "Music opens to man an unknown region, a world that has nothing in common with the world that surrounds him, in which he leaves behind all ordinary feeling to surrender himself to an inexpressible longing."

Beethoven, too, lived in an atmosphere charged with esotericism. Christian Gottlob Neefe, a composer, organist, and conductor, was Beethoven's composition instructor in Bonn from 1781 to 1792. Neefe nurtured Beethoven's genius. It is also possible that he steered Beethoven's thoughts toward the esoteric. Neefe was a Mason and, perhaps more important, had been involved in a branch of the Illuminati (Solomon 194). Neefe encouraged Beethoven's interest in Enlightenment ideas of freedom and brotherhood, which would occupy Beethoven throughout his life and achieve their most powerful expression in the magnificent Ninth Symphony. In the famous "Ode to Joy"-adapted from Friedrich Schiller's poem-the chorus sings: "Joy, thou source of light immortal, Daughter of Elysium," suggesting Eleusis, an earlier portal to "another world." Like Mozart, Beethoven had other links to the Masons and dedicated his Piano Sonata Op. 28 to a leading Freemason, Joseph von Sonnenfels.

Beethoven developed an interest in "oriental mysteries" through reading the Idealist philosophers Schelling and Schlegel, both of whom were heavily influenced by mythology. When he came across an inscription in *The Paintings of Egypt*, by J. F. Champollion (who decoded the Rosetta Stone), Beethoven copied it, had it framed, and hung it over his desk. It read: "I am that which is. I am everything that was and is and shall be. No mortal has raised my veil. HE is himself alone, and to this Only One all things owe their existence." Later these verses found their way into Masonic ritual (Solomon 350).

In a diary for 1816, Beethoven wrote about the "Indian literature" he had been reading, which prompted him to add the comment that "God is immaterial and transcends every conception," an idea reminiscent of the Hindu doctrine of *neti-neti*, "not this, not that." This transcendent God became a central theme for Beethoven. While working on his great *Missa Solemnis* (1819 -23), which has its fair share of Masonic influence, a friend remarked that Beethoven appeared "oblivious to everything worldly." "There is nothing higher than to approach more nearly to the Godhead," Beethoven told the Archduke Rudolf, something he did in his late string quartets and, perhaps most spectacularly, in the stellar *Hammerklavier* Sonata (1817), in which he employs his favorite "Godhead key," D major (Mellers 298).

After Beethoven, Romanticism erupted across Europe, spreading magical and esoteric ideas. In 1830, witchcraft arrived in Hector Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*. But it was Richard Wagner who forged the next major link between the musical and the mystical. Wagner's mammoth *Ring Cycle*, composed over a period of many years, as well as his other music dramas like *Tristan und Isolde* and *Parsifal*, created a new musical mysticism and have since proved happy hunting grounds for Jungian and other esoteric interpreters-Robert Donington's *Wagner's Ring and Its Symbols* being the classic in the field. With its tale of the fall of the old gods and the rise of the new, Wagner's Ring Cycle presaged the evolutionary themes that would occupy Theosophists like Madame Blavatsky and Anthroposophists like Rudolf Steiner. By the 1880s, Wagner himself was espousing ideas remarkably similar to Madame Blavatsky's. He spoke of "universal currents of Divine Thought," a "vibrating ether," and the "great cosmic law" that "Imagination creates reality" (Godwin, *Music* 238). Wagner wanted to create a "trance state" in his audience, effecting a kind of "musical clairvoyance" that would transcend the critical mind and release unconscious energies. Wagner was successful; hardly a thinker of note escaped his influence. His fruitful plundering of the Grail legend and Norse mythology provided the closest thing to Mystery dramas since the ancient Greek festivals, and performances of his works made Bayreuth a nineteenth-century Delphi. Wagner's music too, had moved beyond the sonata form, opening up new areas of spiritual expression, which would eventually lead to our own "dissonant" sonic landscape.

Perhaps his influence was too great. By the 1900s, Romanticism had faded into decadence. Esotericism saturated the cultural capitals of Europe, with major occult revivals in London and Paris. Russia was no exception. One of the central works of modernism, Igor Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*-first premiered in Paris in 1913-was charged with pagan mysticism and primitivism. Stravinsky's ballet grew out of the fascination with prehistoric Russia that raged across fin-de-siecle Moscow and St. Petersburg. Along with the saintly Nijinsky-whose *Diary* is one of the great spiritual works of the twentieth century-Stravinsky's other collaborator on *Le Sacre du Printemps* was Nicholas Roerich, who designed the sets and was even said to have suggested the idea for the ballet itself. A painter, writer, and later campaigner for world peace, Roerich was obsessed with ancient Russia; he also recorded one of the earliest accounts of a UFO sighting, during an expedition to the Himalayas. Roerich later devoted himself to Tibetan mysticism and developed a spiritual teaching based on a coming new age of enlightenment, the era of Shambhala.

The other Russian esoteric composer was Alexander Scriabin, a Theosophist who, in his brief, fiery life, was to carry on and-at least in his visions-exceed Wagner's grandiose designs. His interest in music was the exact opposite of Plato's. Deeply influenced by Pythagoras, Plato would allow only two musical modes into his Republic: the Phrygian and the Dorian. These, he said, would boost morale and instill prudence. Censored was all music that caused ecstasy or sorrow-all music that threatened rational self-control. (One wonders what he would have thought of rock and roll.) But for Scriabin, it was precisely the ecstatic, Dionysian powers of music that he conjured in his symphonic works like *Poem of Fire* (1909 -10) and *Poem of Ecstasy* (1917) that were of most importance. Scriabin developed a "mystic chord" of superimposed fourths and, like Wagner, believed in the "total art work." He saw music as a means of transforming humanity by hurrying on its spiritual evolution. His last years were spent in planning a gargantuan Mystery drama, combining music, dance, theatre, poetry, ritual, and even incense in an attempt to create a synthesis of the sensual and spiritual and inaugurate a New Age. Scriabin's "Mystery" was to be performed in a hemispherical temple in India, inducing a supreme ecstasy that would dissolve the physical plane and start a metaphysical chain reaction eventually enveloping the world. Scriabin introduced many Theosophical ideas into his compositions and also experimented with "synesthesia," the strange experience of "hearing colors" and "seeing music," going so far as to devise an organ that would project different colored lights that he associated hermetically with different notes and chords.

Other composers also looked to the mystical. In 1913, Gustav Holst was introduced to astrology by a friend. As his most famous work, *The Planets Suite*, clearly shows, Holst composed his own "music of the spheres," depicting a forceful, at times violent universe, much different from that envisioned by the ancients. Holst also studied Hindu philosophy, and taught himself Sanskrit in order to translate from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Rig Veda and composed several works based on these ancient Indian scriptures, among them the chamber opera *Savitri* (1908), based on a tale from the Mahabharata, and his *Hymns from the Rig Veda* (1909). A few years later, Holst's countryman, Arnold Bax, followed Wagner and turned toward the Grail. Moved by Arthurian legend, Bax in 1917 wrote his mystical tone poem *Tintagel*, named after the legendary home of the king.

Across the Channel, France produced its own esoteric musicians. Claude Debussy, that master of musical impressionism, was familiar with the occult circles of fin-de-siecle Paris and incorporated many esoteric ideas in his works (Orledge 46, 47, 49, 124 -7). Ethereal compositions like *Prélude À L'Après-midi d'un Faune* (1894) evoke the astral realm of nature spirits and elementals. Debussy wrote his opera *Pelleas et Melisande* (1902) based on the play by the Belgian symbolist and esotericist Maurice Maeterlinck, and used phi, the golden section-part of the canon of ancient sacred geometry-in his compositions. (Another composer who used the golden section was the Hungarian Bela Bartok.)

Claims for Debussy's occult pedigree run high. In his book *Music: Its Secret Influence throughout the Ages* (first published in 1933), Cyril Scott, a composer and Theosophist, remarked that Debussy was used by the "Higher Ones" to introduce ancient Atlantean music into the modern age. More recently, the authors of the best selling *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* (Baigent, Leigh, and Lincoln) claimed that Debussy was one of the "Grand Masters" of the mysterious esoteric society the Priory of Sion-coming in between Victor Hugo and Jean Cocteau. Erik Satie, Debussy's contemporary, was a member of the occultist JosÃ©phin PÃ©ladan's Salon de la Rose+Croix and Ordre de la Rose+Croix Catholique, and hob-nobbed at Edmond Bailly's occult bookshop, a famous rendezvous for Parisian esotericists at the turn of the last century.

Another esoteric French composer, Olivier Messiaen, was like Scriabin deeply interested in the correspondences between color and music. But he needed no "color organ" to see them. Whenever he heard-or even read-music, Messiaen saw "ordered melodies and chords, familiar hues and forms" that opened into "a vortex, a dizzying interpretation of superhuman sounds and colors," a remark that seems to corroborate Rudolf Steiner's teaching about the astral and devachanic realms recorded in his lectures on "The Inner Nature of Music and the Experience of Tone," given in Berlin in 1906 (Hill 203 -19). Messiaen believed that this "dazzling"-the name he gave his synesthetic experiences-was like the effect of looking at stained glass in a Gothic cathedral, a spiritual "dizzying" that puts us in touch with another reality.

Messiaen's best-known composition, *Quartet for the End of Time*, written while he was a prisoner of war in 1941, takes its title from a section of the Book of Revelation, in which an angel appears and declares: "There shall be time no longer," thus announcing the "timeless" state familiar to lovers of music. Although steeped in Catholic spirituality, like Holst, Messiaen was open to Indian philosophies. His massive *Turangalila Symphony* (1946 -8) is based on the Tristan legend and, according to the notes on an Angel recording, is named after two Sanskrit words: *turanga*, meaning "flowing time," and *lila*, "love" or "play," thus expressing a superhuman joy, transcending all boundaries.

Messiaen's pantheistic love for the natural world, exemplified in his fascination with birdsong, also has esoteric resonances. His belief that birdsong is not mere noise or territorial marking, but actual music, is reminiscent of P. D. Ouspensky's remark in *Tertium Organum* that birdsong "may be the main function of the given species, the meaning of its existence" and that it contributes to "some general harmony of nature we only sometimes vaguely feel" (Ouspensky 141).

Even the new, disturbing atonal world, emerging out of Mozart's Vienna, had links to the esoteric. Arnold Schoenberg, high priest of atonality, was a deeply religious man, with a lasting interest in number mysticism. He was also a friend of the painter Wassily Kandinsky, a devotee of Theosophy. Schoenberg was influenced by the doctrines of the Scandinavian mystic Emmanuel Swedenborg, which he came upon by way of the French novelist Honore de Balzac. Balzac was a follower of Swedenborg, and Schoenberg became obsessed with his Swedenborgian novel *Seraphita* and its central figure, the androgynous angel, Seraphita/Seraphitus. In Schoenberg's unfinished oratorio *Jacob's Ladder*, the angel Gabriel announces: "Whether right, left, forward or backward, up or down-one has to go on without asking what lies before or behind us," paraphrasing Swedenborg's teaching that in heaven, all angels face God. Schoenberg developed an intricate system of angelology, based on his number mysticism. His fascination with number, however, manifested in other ways, among them a fear of the number 13. Strangely, Schoenberg was born on September 13, 1874, and died on Friday, July 13, 1951.

After Schoenberg, music moved into realms far stranger than any suspected by the Romantics. John Cage, one of the most influential avant-garde composers of the twentieth century, was a devotee of Zen, as well as a great believer in C. G. Jung's notion of synchronicity or "meaningful coincidence." Cage used the I Ching as a compositional tool, and reportedly threw the coins some 18,000 times throughout the writing of one work. The late Sir Michael Tippett, another student of Jung, sought to evoke the archetypes through his music; his most famous work, the oratorio *A Child of Our Time* (1939 -41), begun after a period of dream analysis, depicts the shadows of anti-Semitism and the dark realm of the Nazis. More recently, John Tavener's devotion to Greek Orthodox spirituality is well known, his music rising to prominence when it was used in one of the most spectacular rituals of modern times, the funeral of Princess Diana.

But perhaps the most "esoteric" composer of recent times is Karlheinz Stockhausen, who has gone on records saying that his birth place is the star Sirius, an important body in Egyptian mythology, long believed to have a special role in the Earth's destiny. Stockhausen's compositions-like *Sternklang* ("Starsound" 1971), *Tierkreis* ("Zodiac" 1975), and *Sirius* (1975)-put him in the same league as other composers whose music comes from "other worlds." But even more so does his belief that the purpose of music is to ask fundamental spiritual questions, deep existential queries like "Who am I, why am I alive, where do I want to go from here, and what happens when I die?" (Godwin, *Music* 291), metaphysical ponderings sorely lacking from our "post-everything" contemporary culture. Great music by itself can pose these questions powerfully. When it allies itself with some of the West's great inner traditions, to the discerning ear they are doubly insistent.

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