

The Uncanny Kingdom—Perspectives on Classical Music as a (Wholesomely) Disturbing Experience

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The purpose of the present paper is to suggest an uncommon perspective on the artistic heritage usually called “classical music”. The large prestige of this repertoire, in fact, often goes along with a distorted perception of a number of very important features that tend to be underrated, discarded or not taken in the due consideration by the public. Only recently has musicology paid attention to the danger of this stereotyped vision of classical music, regarded as a sort of temple of seriousness, or as a kingdom where an alleged harmony reigns unchallenged. The topic of this article is precisely the other side of classical music, which also turns out to be a world torn by conflict and filled with artistic tension, where things do not always add up. To support this standpoint, a number of very well-known pieces are considered, paying attention to their less reassuring features. Thus, compositions that seemed to be familiar show a complex and disturbing expressive texture. As a result, a widespread listening attitude finds reasonable grounds for being changed: Instead of languidly leaning back into the armchair with closed eyes, the unbiased listener is requested by the music itself to keep its eyes wide open.

Keywords: music, music appreciation, musical interpretation, musical emotions

Introduction

Classical music is not a reassuring and gentle universe. To consider it “relaxing” is commonplace, but many things are relaxing: favourite clothes, a familiar situation, or the sound of a train. Lucio Battisti sang, “Molto spesso la saggezza è soltanto la prudenza più stagnante” (Very often, wisdom is simply the most stagnant prudence); all too often, relaxing is synonymous of reassuring, but also of tedious and trite. A poem by Montale (1939) conveys this sense of the limited horizons that emanate from day to day objects (among which we relax) very well:

...ma così sia. Un suono di cornetta
dialoga con gli sciami del querceto.
Nella valva che il vespero riflette
un vulcano dipinto fuma lieto.

La moneta incassata nella lava
brilla anch'essa sul tavolo e trattiene
pochi fogli. La vita che sembrava

vasta è più breve del tuo fazzoletto.

(... Well, be it so. The sounding of the horn
answers the bee-swarm in the grove of oaks.
On the seashell which takes the evening's gleam
a painted volcano gaily smokes.

In the lava paperweight, a coin, stuck fast,
gleams also on the table, and holds down a sheaf of papers.
Life, which had seemed so vast,
is a tinier thing than your handkerchief.) (Montale, 1965, p. 67)

Is this, comforting scene of painted volcanoes and preserved coins which remind us of “le buone cose di pessimo gusto (good things of bad taste)” that the Italian poet Guido Gozzano spoke of, what music offers us?

The question is an important one, because it looks closely at the habits and expectations linked to listening. In the author's experience, as a performer and a spectator the author has often observed the audience. When faced with names such as Stravinsky or Berg, which evoke the spirit of contemporary music (often composed the best part of one hundred years ago, but that is another discussion), the audience prepare themselves for a painful, or at the very least uncomfortable and awkward experience. Like a necessary evil repertoire that, not by chance, is usually set in the first part. However, when the longed-for “classical” part begins, (Mozart, Schubert, Schumann, and so on) the spectators savour the relaxation of their spirit and limbs, so much so, as to close their eyes and lose themselves in their theatre seats, cradled by the return to auditory harmony. Even today, the name which most instinctively triggers this reaction, almost like a natural reflex, is Chopin who as an encore creates a murmuring wave of shared acceptance.

And why not, you may ask. Because in this way the essentials are lost. The trinity of relaxing, reassuring and gentle covers the pieces we listen to with an overtone, altering and weakening them. What is worse, it warps our listening habits and our way of understanding the repertoire, forcing us to ignore an enhanced series of macroscopic exceptions, or to tame them.

Musical Monsters: Chopin, Piano Sonata Op. 35

It would be interesting to compile a list of pieces that could be put into a “classical” repertoire, which contradict the stereotype in discussion. Of pieces that were unsettling, enigmatic, provocative, torn asunder, grotesque even ... from Bach to Rachmaninov, there would be no shortage. It would be a fascinating story of musical monsters, of works that deviate from the harmonious and pacifistic canon. The first lesson that can be drawn from this is, for those near-sighted assurance seekers, there are many of these monsters, and the price paid to maintain this tamed image of classical music is to ignore a significant part of it.

The example which comes to my mind is right before the eyes (or the ears) of all those who frequent concert halls or music shops; chosen because it comes from the most misunderstood of composers, Chopin, a fact pointed out by Gide (1939). It is the Finale: Presto of Chopin's Piano Sonata No. 2 in B-flat minor Op. 35, one of the darkest and most impenetrable pieces that the traditions of the western world have ever produced, which the audience listens to without raising an eyebrow or being left perturbed, that is the proof of how much a composers name can blind the listener to the truth.

Listen to it, as though it were the first time, as though we were not aware of who had composed it. The first surprising aspect is monochrome: The piano's wide range of colours, often compared to a painter's palette, is reduced to ... greyscale, as in certain works by Alberto Burri. This consistency of the timbre is matched by that of the rhythm. There are no motifs, phrases, or anything that creates a decipherable message for the ears, and there is simply perpetual motion, a regular, rapid, continuous succession of notes. This technique can be used to create enjoyable and brilliant pieces, as by Mozart, but here it is the opposite that the uniformity is used as a way, so to speak, to conceal the sense, reminding one of Hegel's "night in which all cows are black", precluding articulation and interpretation of the musical movement. For the melody, things are no better: The piece is lacking points for the ear to latch on to. As far as harmony and form are concerned—aspects which professional musicologists are eager to discuss—well; as Belotti (1984) said the piece rebels against standard attempts at traditional analysis (p. 155).

It is highly likely that if the piece were listened to "in the dark", without knowledge of the composer, it would be attributed to some irksome composer of the dreaded "contemporary music". But it is Chopin! The poet of the grand piano, the writer of Waltzes, of the Barcarola, the Berceuse, and many more. Listened to without prejudice, this piece compels us to question ourselves and to think. The first strategy in order to find our bearings, after the sacrosanct disorientation caused by the music, is to position it in the context of the whole Sonata, tracing a thread that connects it in some way, to the three previous movements. Given that the heart of the Sonata, the third movement, is the celebrated Funeral March, for the finale the images are endless, from Lazzaro scratching his nails against his gravestone, to the winter wind whistling through the tombs of the cemetery, and so forth (Belotti, 1984, p. 156).

The need to find coherence in the piece's expression does not free us from the task of acknowledging the "linguistic shock" evoked by it. Undoubtedly, there is a deep-seeded link with what precedes (the alternative, which will not be discussed, is to think that Chopin was perhaps crazy, distracted or inebriated), but the game the music wants to play is precisely the coexistence of this hidden connection and a sudden change in modes of expression. We have suffered, excitedly, in the first movement, we are struck by the contrast in the second, and then we are moved when faced with the statuesque, funereal nobility of the third. (Forgive me, dear reader, for this crude scheme, which simply allows me to say that the linguistic and expressive intelligibility, and therefore the harmony with the listener, has thus far been an important characteristic of the Sonata). In the Finale, this harmony ceases, leaving the listener speechless. This, perhaps, is the key to the mystery, or at the least a clue to point us in the right direction. Rather than attempting to tame the beast, we would do well to recognize its radical diversity, the unbridgeable gap that separates it from all else: from the rest of the Sonata, from our expectations, from the traditions that surround the piece, and from our limited capacity for understanding.

Then, the passage reacquires the rocky and insurmountable consistency of a mountain that cannot be conquered, an object that cannot be schematized, in other words, and an enigma. This helps one to understand how threatening and hostile that emanates from these notes can be. Colli (1975) reminds us that in Ancient Greece the form of an enigma brought with it a tremendous amount of hostility. A similar feeling, kept at a safe distance, is certainly part of the untamed experience of this Finale. It is an enigma, yet, also energy: not that bridled by the homo faber ruler of the world through rational calculations, but a dark energy that inhabits the under soil of the matter, to paraphrase Lyotard (1971). It is a borderline case of energy, almost without form, that does not allow for recognition, classification or memory.

Facing Moloch: Michelangeli and Ashkenazy Play Chopin's Op. 35

The thorny character of the finale does not only affect the listener, but also the performer when handling this proverbial tough nut to crack. Here we shall limit ourselves to consider two greatly differing interpretations, those of Michelangeli¹ and Ashkenazy (1975-1985).

Michelangeli uses the pianistic gifts that made him famous in his interpretation: clarity of articulation, steadiness, uniformity, and even an unmistakable luminosity of sound which, here, sounds like an automatic trait which cannot be separated from his style of execution. Rattalino (1983) defined the sound of some of his performances as “stylistically paradoxical” (p. 347) and there is something similar here too. The paradox occurs when these traits are applied to a piece that would typically refuse them. Michelangeli gives form to the formless, articulates and unravels musical knots, and brings light to darkness. The result is admirable, as so often the case for this great pianist, but in part contradictory. The sonority of the piano that is transformed into a cold drone is highly effective, but missing something. When required to stay within certain boundaries, the enigma recoils, and the perfection leaves in its wake a vacuum that can of course be construed as a deserved “nihilistic” crowning of the Sonata, but also as an aesthetic inappropriateness: bringing into focus what is blurred, adding splendor to a vortex of shadows. These are titanic battles that rarely conclude in outright victory.

Ashkenazy takes an alternative road: Rather than illuminating the piece with unvarying light, as Michelangeli does, he saddles up and takes it by the reins, accentuating its curves, intricacies, and irregularities. The result is surprising: The piece becomes expressive; a series of echoes appears, of melodic fragments, and connections between the notes that make it almost cantabile. Even the most frustrating aspect for the listener, the uniform, inexpressive style, in parts takes on movements of late romantic ballades, as if the music were trying to tell us something, becoming, for an instant, a poem or tale (Rosen, 1995). And here, it seems, Ashkenazy, pays the price. As beguiling as this arrangement is, it conveys something far-fetched and somewhat distorted. The rich and expressive sound created by the performer contrasts with the hardy human, almost mineral texture of the piece. Played this way, this sort of “testament betrayed” (the quote comes from Kundera) loses its indomitable otherness and ends up looking like one of the *Études-Tableaux* by Rachmaninov, suffused by the moving sense of decadence typical of Late Romanticism. The effect is beautiful, but the listener can get the feeling that the target once again was missed.

Is it even possible that this is Chopin, the darling of the people, the most performed, absorbed and assimilated of the pianists? Is it possible that he displays such a facet that two performers of this level have difficulty providing a wholly convincing solution? Chopin is also this, and it is exactly the coexistence of such a piece and of the widely loved Nocturnes on the same horizon—the work of Chopin—that demands a change in perspective. We must broaden this horizon to include the incomprehensible, the enigmatic and the unsettling. If the Finale of the Sonata is the work of the same artistic intelligence which produced Nocturnes, then there are two possible hypotheses. Either Chopin's work is the product of a schizophrenic (a hypothesis that, again, we will discard), or even in Nocturnes and in Chopin's other, “comforting” compositions there lies much more than is believed. Continuing down this road, one may be likely to come to notice that the art of Chopin, the most “popular” of the educated composers, is inspired by an enigmatic and elusive Muse, even where it seems

¹ Recorded in Città del Vaticano (1977).

understandable. This, however, is a joyous endeavor that we will leave to the reader, until dedicated words can be put to paper about such an argument.

Language Experimentation: The Classical Style

The Finale of Opus 35 is an example of a piece which offers a plethora of reasons to not tame it, to not declaw this tiger. One may object that there are a limited number of cases that pieces of this nature are few, but that would be incorrect. This track is part of a large body of work spanning the history of music, which we could call linguistic experimentation. As Stravinsky observed, the great composers did not consider tradition as an inheritance to squander, but as a patrimony to be reinvested and made the most of. The significance of this is that the musical language did not remain unaltered in their hands; rather, it was an open field of opportunity in which they invested their creativity (Ferrari, 1999). This problematic and experimental perspective can appear far from evident to non specialists, those accustomed to thinking of Mozart or Schumann as homogenous and complete universes, yet a piece such as the Finale of Opus 35 is absolutely the result of this intense, hidden and incessant, activity.

Let us take the “Classical period”, the language of which was developed in the second half of the 18th century by Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. Rosen (1971) noted that, although today its coming appears to have been a natural and inevitable event, at that time nothing could have seemed less logical; the period of time from 1750 to 1775 was characterized by eccentricity and experimentation that was sometimes an end to itself, the results of which are pieces of work that to this day are difficult to accept due to their peculiarity. So, more monsters. Remaining in the realm of a standard pianist’s repertoire, more can be named: the last, formidable movement of Sonata Op. 106 “Hammerklavier” by Beethoven, or, in a later period, the aphoristic meditations of the late Liszt, such as *La lugubre gondola* or *Nuages Gris*, hosts to a pristine and spectral silence (Campanella, 2011, p. 64). These pieces do not fit into a domesticated or soporific view of classical music.

A taste for linguistic experimentation can be motivated by expressive reasons, by the need to lend music some special emotional impact. Stuckenschmidt (1951) observed that many innovations in instrumental music in the 1900s were occasionally foreshadowed by the history of opera. One such example is the twelve-tone serialism used by Mozart towards the end of *Don Giovanni*, for the words of the Commendatore “Non sipasce di cibomortale/chi sipasce di cibo celeste” (He who dines on heavenly food has no need of mortal sustenance). Mozart probably asked himself how the statue of a dead man who had returned from the heavens to ask for justice for his own assassin would speak—that is, sing. And he must have answered, completely unlike the living. If the living sing on a scale based on seven notes, then the soul of the deceased will sing on a scale of 12. In doing so, he invented the twelve-tone technique with which, more than a century later, Schoenberg changed the history of music. Does that mean Mozart is the father of dodecaphony? No, let us not get carried away; it is simply a borderline case, fueled by an expressive need for a unique theatrical situation.

There is one more element which has driven the production of eccentric linguistic experimentation throughout the history of music—humor. Stuckenschmidt observed that innovations were introduced at times, with a humoristic tone, which otherwise none would have been brave enough to try. They were passed off as jokes, as grotesque diversions from the right path, for amusing naughtiness, the apparent absurdity of which however, derived from consistent thought. Once again Mozart is a case in point, as in the cadenza of the *Adagio*

of his *Musikalischer Spass* K 522, to simulate the complete incompetence of the violinist, he trusts in an anomalous scale of whole tones, the same scale which, in around 1900, took on great importance for Debussy. So, a phenomenon which could only be interpreted as a joke in 1787 became a technique of musical impressionism one hundred years later, where it collaborated to arouse mystic exaltations.

Music as a Place for the Unexpected: Mozart, Piano Concerto Kv 482

Linguistic experimentation is only one of the reasons to listen to music with eyes wide open and without the ill-omened presumptions of being put at ease, having our expectations met or even being encouraged to relax. A further reason to free ourselves from this habit is the presence, in the art form of music, of unexpectedly emotional situations. Strengthening the standard repertoire of the so-called great music (Dahlhaus, Eggebrecht, 1985) has an effect that we would do well to mistrust, as it tends to give the impression of a granite-like patrimony with well-known and predictable characteristics. We stand to attention to listen to Beethoven, we admire Bach's chilly omniscience, and we savor the harmonious proportions and lightness of Mozart, and so forth. The relevance of these common occurrences is not what interests us, but their role in the inhibition of an essential ability to appreciate, the ability to be amazed. Admiring concert-hall goers, and 20-somethings that are uninterested in an assumed archeology of music, both move unknowingly in a documented world. Herein lies the potential for change, the possibility to unveil the truth: music can reveal itself to be a land of surprises. Amongst the qualities of the great composers, rarely has the author heard it said: Their music caught us off guard.

The Andante of Piano Concerto No.22 in E flat major K. 482 is a piece with extraordinary expressive variety. The starting theme is serious, a type of elegant minuet, but dark like a Tombeau, a funerary homage. After that, it is a series of variations in which Mozart demonstrates his ability to convey different genres in a single musical organism: This begins with a "spoken" recitative on the piano, there follows a moment which resembles a serenade for wind instruments, then again the piano makes the recitative airy. A pastoral moment follows, with a flute that whistles to imitate a bird in dialogue with a bassoon that is full of homely calm. It does not stop there: In spectacular contrast, the successive variation has the austere gravity of a baroque overture, littered with waves of heartbreak that no authentic baroque overture would ever express.

There is plenty here to amaze, but the best has been saved for last. The expressive power of the piece creates a tension that reaches its peak in the stiffened forms of the pseudo-baroque overture. The poignancy is remarkable, but there is something left unexpressed that demands to be let out. Unexpectedly, the piano, after building elaborate phrases for the umpteenth time, arrives at a simple closing gesture. The tension melts away and the music finds, after a thousand ruses, a liberating and cantabile flow. But what "canto" is this? With a familiar accompaniment, um-pa, pa-pa, pa-pa, um-pa, pa-pa, pa-pa ... the clarinets start to sing out a falling melody, incongruous with the elaborate structure of the piece. These eight notes, repeated twice, seem to arrive from a universe unknown at the time of Mozart: the elementary accompaniment, the bittersweet taste of the melody, the orchestration that would today be defined as poetically circensian, the surreal atmosphere and general strangeness make the passage paradoxically close to the music of Nino Rota for the films of Federico Fellini.

More noticeably still, this apparent change in style sounds like the most genuine and credible conclusion for the piece, and certainly not like some conclusive oddity. There is something irreparable and seductive in this canto, something humanely bare, which seems to release the emotions that Mozart has caused the listener to feel,

in the rest of the piece, without describing them (the words that the author uses are not adapt for the period or the aesthetics of that time, but they are for our time). There is a combination of truth, poetry, and consciousness of human insufficiencies which reminds us, later listeners, of the use of signaling sounds and common materials by Mahler in his Symphonies. Immediately after, to more harrowing effect, we have the combination of the piano that plays the melody, and in doing so, purifies it of every hint of commonness and the bassoon, the mood of which is irremediably clunky when compared to the earlier pearly piano part.

The exceptionality of this moment cannot have been lost on Mozart, who concludes the piece with a tone that for him was extremely rare, narrative. The final phrase seems to comment on what has come before, about the past, almost saying “that’s how things went...”. This approach is in general not of this composer, who roots his music in the here and now of a present scene, rather than the other place, other time of a narrative, as the Romantics did (Ferrari, 2003). Never before has music been a place of such surprises.

Visionary Music

Along this itinerary, in search of musical monsters that cannot be tamed, it is worth looking at another branch, visionary music. This category is complex and cannot be easily defined. It has something to do with vision that is evidence for the senses, yet it borders the realm of imagination, of dreams, hallucinations and madness. Visionary, in an artistic sense, does not apply to those who create imaginary things, but to those who open pathways to new worlds. Worlds that are not necessarily populated by differing objects from daily life, so, many science fiction movies would not be considered visionary as they consider other far off planets. Visionary, alternatively, can be a perspective on things, on the way they are represented, and the atmosphere in which they are immersed.

With this definition El Greco and Matta in painting, Gaudi in architecture, Rodin in sculpture, Kubrick in cinema and Bill Viola in video art can be considered visionary. And in music? As always, with this art that neither speaks nor paints, things are more complicated. Music does not represent the world, it produces worlds itself. The great compositions are complete worlds with their own laws of physics (linguistic and aesthetic), their own emotional landscape (Ferrari, 2008) and their own time (their form). However, intuition tells us these worlds are linked to our own, that they are not monads without doors or windows as those of Leibniz; they offer themselves up to judgment and sensibilities, they allow us compare them and to trace their differences. If the atmosphere of a painting can be visionary, this expressive quality can undoubtedly be found in music.

For example, it is unlikely that anyone would define pieces such as Haydn’s Symphonies or Quartets as visionary. Their colloquial structure, rational attitude, the economy of sound and an overall sense of measure are palpable qualities that discourage such a definition. This is not true of Kreisleriana by Schumann: The exasperating contrasts, the cosmic afflatus, and the dreamlike qualities of the associations between ideas and sources of inspiration, as for a visionary writer like E.T.A. Hoffmann, justify the use of the term. Schumann himself wrote in his diary, “I wrote Kreisleriana in four days—completely new worlds were opened to me”. The urgency of expression and the elevated tones transport the listener to a world with all the features of a hallucination, a poetic and prophetic vision.

The final aspect of visionary art that the author wishes to call forward is its quality to instantaneously create sparks, somewhat revealing possible truths. Continuous efforts and analyses are not well suited to visionary art,

which tends to give itself over to the viewer or listener in a single go. Visionary art tends to take one unawares: A visionary piece is an image of the unexpected. It stands to reason that a piece by Schumann demands the same level of knowledge and control in the composer as a piece by Haydn, but what interests us here, is that which Nattiez (1987) called the esthetic level of the work of art, namely its relationship with the audience, but not the poetic relationship, that is its link to the creator. In other words, the way in which the music approaches us, or comes up behind us, rather than the way it was composed.

The Workshop of Madness: Lady Macbeth Sleepwalking

Macbeth is a decisive step in Verdi's evolution. De Van (1992) remarks that in this opera the clarity and coherence that characterize the emotions of previous operas are less evident. With Macbeth he shows a darker inner-being which the character discovers through a blend of fright and horror, as though at once his demons revealed themselves. The words, based on those of Shakespeare, move in the same direction with various spiritual apparitions, ghosts, and a scene of somnambulism. Verdi glorifies it all with an extravagant musical atmosphere, which is almost gothic and also permeates the "real" scenes, bestowing on them a hue ("tinta", in Verdi's words, something like "color") which transports the opera into a realm on the borders of hallucination and nightmare.

One example is when Macbeth recounts to his wife how he killed King Duncan, stabbing him in his sleep, in the duet "Fatal mia donna! Un murmure" (My fated lady, did you not hear murmuring, as I did?) in the first act. It is not a description of facts, but a confused mixture of sensations and perceptions which make it seem like the narrative of a dream. The mysterious murmurs heard from Macbeth, the owl that screeches in the night, and the prayers of the courtiers that provide a surreal backdrop to the intentions of the assassin, create an atmosphere in which the confines of reality become unclear. The music reinforces this idea by assuming the tones of a remorseful ballad in the first part, as though the events of this tale belong to a past that has long passed into legend.

This mix of reality and vision is one of the keys to this opera. By surrendering to their demons, Macbeth and his wife, become radically estranged from the others, they see what others cannot, and cannot see that which the others do. This is pointed out by a horrified doctor and the lady-in-waiting who are involved in the sleep-walking scene, when Lady Macbeth, despite holding a lamp in her hand and having her eyes open, cannot see (De Van, 1992). But this is not blindness, it is alternative vision. Closing off one sense, sight, opens the eyes to another dimension that is no less evident or three-dimensional than reality, even if it is communicable only in fragments. Indeed it seems like blindness has been obscurely linked to music since ancient times, as Fubini (1976) explains while talking about Demodoco, the singer, to whom the Muse gave a good gift and a bad gift: She took away his sight but she gave him a beautiful voice.

The game between a shared reality and a subjective vision that runs through Macbeth reaches its peak in the sleep-walking scene with Lady Macbeth. After trying to personify a cold rationality, far from the nightmares of her husband who is too exposed to remorse, Lady Macbeth finds herself, in her dreams, having to deal with the same nightmares, as though cursed. The scene (third and fourth of Act 4) is a summit of the opera, and as such, Verdi cares for it and prepares an appropriate pedestal for it. It begins with an orchestral Largo which is much broader than a simple introduction. The interesting aspect here is that this prelude to a visionary scene is

absolutely not visionary. To understand the reasons behind a similar choice one would do well to remember that, as in a good film, the “director” of a musical opera (the composer), can use varying points of view. In cinema, not every scene is shown to the audience through the eyes of the protagonist: The director can perfectly well alternate between shots that look at the scene from above, as an external viewer would see them, and other shots that more closely represent the experiences of the characters.

The same thing occurs here, and as always when music is involved it is slightly more sophisticated, seeing as everything plays out in the field of expression, a level that requires, as has been shown ... eyes wide open and ears more so. The prelude to scene, as stated, is not visionary; feelings are the key point, rather than atmosphere. After an initial phase of pauses and breaks, comes a theme characterized by five repeated notes. It is striking, but the heart of the piece comes in the second theme, a theme which was inconceivable before Beethoven: a cosmic and desolate view of human destiny. There is a deep and bitter pain, with elements of pietas, that generates an inescapable depressing feeling. It is an almost philosophical musical moment, one of mourning for human sadness, but not for that specific fate handed out to Lady Macbeth, which until now, let’s not forget, has done very little to rouse any sympathy. So, this is what the author was discussing: The point of view is not that of the protagonist, but from beyond the scene, it is contemplated with a backdrop, which is further-reaching, of the human propensity for evil.

After these concerned, musical reflections, our “frame of reference” tightens, but not in any hurry. Verdi, who loved to define himself as a man of the theatre before musician, knew full well that the climactic points needed careful preparation. This is why the scene does not open with Lady Macbeth, but with two secondary characters, the lady-in-waiting and the doctor, involved in a night vigil. We learn of the situation indirectly, putting it together through limited conversation but enough to send us in the right direction (Act IV, scene 3):

MEDICO: Vegliammo invan due notti.

DAMA: In questa apparirà.

MEDICO: Di che parlava
Nel sonno suo?

DAMA: Ridirlo
Non debbo ad uom che viva ... eccola.

(DOCTOR: We have waited in vain for two nights.

LADY: She will appear tonight.

DOCTOR: What was she talking about in her sleep?

LADY: I must not repeat it to any living man ... here she is!)

Preparation of the moment when our protagonist sings has been carefully measured. Firstly, there is the orchestra and the Largo. Secondly, there is this brief dialogue between two people waiting—a wait that once more represents an absence: No-one appears, but the fearful reticence of the lady-in-waiting, leads us to understand there is a terrible secret, something that cannot be confessed. Thirdly, Lady Macbeth enters but does not speak. She is described. She is a mute apparition. Her gestures speak for her, through the words of those who observe (Act IV, scene 4):

MEDICO: Un lume

Recasi in man?

DAMA: La lampada che sempre

Si tiene a canto al letto.
 MEDICO: Oh come gli occhi
 Spalanca!
 DAMA: Lavarsi crede!

 (DAMA: E pur non vede.
 DOCTOR: That lamp in her hand?
 LADY: It is the lamp which she keeps always beside her bed.
 DOCTOR: Oh, her eyes are wide open!
 LADY: Yet she cannot see.
 MEDICO: Perché terge la man?
 DAMA: Lavarsicrede!
 DOCTOR: Why is she rubbing her hands?
 LADY: She thinks that she's washing them.)

Therefore the effect of her entrance is amplified by the incredulous horror of the witnesses, who while talking between themselves seem to bewilderedly point out the enormity of the scene to the audience. The situation is so important that Verdi builds an outright “theater within the theater”; the audience watches them watching her. Both have the function of a *Sprecher*, a character who in certain Renaissance paintings looks from the inside at the outside observer trying to emotionally involve him. Finally everything is ready for the last phase: Lady Macbeth talks in her sleep. Due to the way this woman was presented, she has herself become an apparition, with an effect of delirious multiplication: She is a ghost who talks about the ghosts she sees.

So far there have been two points of view: the contemplation of evil in the *Largo* and the “lateral” vision of the scene by two witnesses. Now Verdi presents a third point of view, that of the main character who starts singing describing what she sees. The orchestra creates the auditory environment (The author would call it *imaginal*) in which Lady Macbeth is immersed with a double *ostinato*, persistently repeated by the strings and the woodwinds. The *ostinato* of the strings conveys the obsession which imprisons the character; it is ambiguous, enigmatic, without evolution. The *ostinato* of the woodwinds is a recurring moan, nearly an echo of the voice of those who died a violent death.

What is emotionally intolerable, as it is excruciating, is that in this woman's song there is something so childishly incredulous and disoriented which makes her nearly defenseless, as if the enormity of the evil she committed finds her helpless. The occasional interventions of the lady-in-waiting and the doctor do not alter the continuity of such an impressive monologue; on the contrary they show how deeply Verdi went on this descent to the underworld. The relation between visionary madness and reality is overturned; the reality, painted by the comments of the two witnesses, stays in the background, relegated to a few secondary interventions which do not possess the expressive strength of Lady Macbeth's voice, and which do not allow the audience to hold on to them in order to escape the magic circle of bloody visions. Verdi digs and forces us enter the workshop of madness, a visionary madness which is not an illness but a human demon par excellence, soaked in pain. The two witnesses, horrified, beg on all our behalves “Ah di lei, pietà, Signor!” (Lord, have mercy on her!)

Conclusion

Monsters, experiments, surprises, visions: One need only take classical music seriously and observe it up close to show how exorbitant it is, how far from that limited portion of the horizon, consisting of reassuring and

educated pastimes, in which we often place it. Music poses more questions than it answers, provokes more than it winks, and leaves matters unresolved. Whether it is as a look into the abyss or as a celestial vision, it is the same: it puts us face to face with inconsistencies, asymmetries, and limits. It is human to look for reassurances; however it should be acknowledged that if we look for them here, luckily, we are going down the wrong path. Art music offers far more, it is the possibility, after ascending to heaven or descending to hell, to look at ourselves and at the world with different eyes.

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