

FROM THE EDITORS

MUSIC AND ETHOS

The impact of music on human emotions has always been unquestionable and we might well suppose that even prehistoric man was capable of affecting his kinsmen by means of the sound of a shell or a primitive pipe. In the case of any culture, various forms of sound have been used to incite the desired emotions or to silence the unwelcome ones, in particular during religious or funeral rites, parades of all kinds, or sporting events. However, the impact of music on the moral condition of man and on the moral attitudes approved by particular individuals, groups or whole societies, remains debatable. The issue, addressed both by philosophers and by musicologists,¹ is abundantly exemplified by literary works. Authors frequently point out that listening to classical music shapes one's moral sensitivity, in particular by initiating contact with the good through beauty. Out of the many literary instances of insight into this problem, we shall scrutinize two chosen ones: both of them demonstrate that apart from having a 'civilizing effect,' music may also lead the listener towards the state which renders the norms regulating human conduct meaningless.

Posdnicheff, the protagonist of Leo Tolstoi's "Kreutzer Sonata," is the son of a rich gentleman of the steppes and an old marshal of the nobility. He suspects that his wife might have an affair with a violinist, a friend of the family. Posdnicheff believes that, among the people of his rank, music, which is otherwise considered as the noblest of all arts, turns out the direct cause of most cases of adultery. In his opinion, music is "the most refined form of sensual voluptuousness."² He even attributes a somewhat demonic power to it, "They say that music stirs the soul. Stupidity! A lie! It acts, it acts frightfully ... but not in an ennobling way. It acts neither in an ennobling nor a debasing way, but in an irritating way ... Music makes me forget my real situation. It transports me into a state which is not my own. Under the influence of music I really seem to feel what I do not feel, to understand what I do not understand, to have powers

¹ See e.g. Anna K o s z e w s k a, "Muzyka i etyka. Przegląd wybranych publikacji i stanowisk," *Miscellanea Anthropologica et Sociologica* 16, no. 3 (2015): 13–38.

² *Ibidem*, 123.

which I cannot have.”³ Posdnicheff seeks for the reasons of the phenomenon he criticizes so bitterly in the fact that a person listening to music becomes immediately transported into “the condition of soul in which he who wrote the music found himself at that time,”⁴ which, however, is detached from the original causes of that condition, as well as from the actual actions it inspired. Therefore, Posdnicheff concludes, becoming confounded with the successive states of the soul of the composer is meaningless. Military marches, dance music, and religious music serve specific purposes and, as such, are justified. Classical pieces, performed purely for their aesthetic value, merely provoke excitement which is not brought to a conclusion and may thus have pernicious effects. And indeed, it so happens in the case of the protagonist of the novella, whose affects—jealousy rather than physical passion, though—become uncontrolled as he is listening to the first movement of Beethoven’s *Kreutzer Sonata* performed by his wife and her alleged lover. While the protagonist’s jealousy steadily dies down replaced by “new sentiments,”⁵ as he gradually yields to the charm of the piece, it returns soon afterwards and ultimately drives him to crime.

In Thomas Mann’s novella “The Blood of the Walsungs,”⁶ twin siblings, meaningfully named Siegmund and Sieglinde, commit an act of incest after seeing Wagner’s *Walküre* at the opera. The youngsters, children of a well-off bourgeois family, whose daily life is superficial and focused on merely formal side of things to the point that there is “no time for a resolve, how much less then for a deed,”⁷ nevertheless yield to the profound impact of the musical drama. Siegmund realizes that Wagner’s opera—as well as any artistic creation—is “born of passion”⁸ and “reshaped anew as passion.”⁹ Following the plot, he grasps that what he can see on ‘top,’ so to speak, what can be seen on the stage, on the level of words and images, and what exudes the air of the sublime, ‘below,’ on the level of the orchestra and the music it plays, manifests a strong sensual power. Just like Posdnicheff, Siegmund shares in sentiments he has never experienced before. In his case, however, they assume the shape of “the burning, the drawing anguish”¹⁰ which, while leading to an undefined end, is nevertheless “sweet.”¹¹ Still, the prevailing emotion the twins expe-

³ Ibidem, 118.

⁴ Ibidem, 119.

⁵ Ibidem, 120.

⁶ See Thomas Mann, “The Blood of the Walsungs,” in Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice; And Seven Other Stories*, translated by Helen Tracy Lowe-Porter (Vintage International, 1989, Kindle Edition), 289–316.

⁷ Ibidem, 300.

⁸ Ibidem, 310.

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ Ibidem.

rience is heated rapture inspired by “that extravagant and stormily passionate world” of the *Walküre*, which “worked upon them with its magic power to draw them to itself.”¹² In the face of the rapture engulfing them, the twins remain vulnerable: their daily lifestyle, based on a distant approach to anything that goes beyond the superficial or, alternatively, beyond critique, or cynicism, turns out inadequate and useless in the situation of change they experience.

One can clearly see analogies between the two novellas. To the protagonists of both works, music appears to be a power born of passion and inspiring passion in the listener. Also, both Tolstoi and Mann seem to suggest that what the listener perceives as beautiful or sublime in the aesthetic layer of a musical piece may overpower him, or her, on the level of physical drives, which may result in violating the basic moral principles or fundamental social taboos.¹³

Precisely for that reason, Posdnicheff, the man who murdered his wife, while telling his story a man he accidentally meets on the train, claims that music should be subject to control by the State. “In China music is under the control of the State, and that is the way it ought to be. Is it admissible that the first comer should hypnotize one or more persons, and then do with them as he likes? And especially that the hypnotizer should be the first immoral individual who happens to come along?”¹⁴

Posdnicheff’s words seem to echo the ideas postulated by Plato, who considered music as a political issue significant to the polis as such and believed it bore direct influence on the legal system of the polis, as well as on the morality of its citizens. According to Plato, music also affects education of the citizens, „because rhythm and harmony most of all insinuate themselves into the inmost part of the soul.”¹⁵ Plato postulated “purging” the polis¹⁶ of all kinds of music which do not serve the purpose of rearing the young so that they become brave and thoughtful, or which do not help in developing in them desirable qualities, in particular when they are to perform significant social roles, for instance those of guardians or soldiers. In particular, he was wary about “a strange form of music,”¹⁷ which might threaten the polis, by causing a dangerous political change.¹⁸

¹² Ibidem, 311.

¹³ A similar case is described in a novel by Maria Kuncewiczowa which draws on a Celtic legend: César Franck’s symphony, as if love potion, awakens passion in the protagonists, leading to a violation of loyalty towards a friend on the one hand and to marital fidelity on the other. See Maria Kuncewiczowa, *Tristan 1946* (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1977).

¹⁴ Tolstoi, “Kreutzer Sonata,” 119.

¹⁵ *The Republic of Plato*, transl. by Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 401 d, 80.

¹⁶ See ibidem, 399 e, 78.

¹⁷ Ibidem, 424 c, 102.

¹⁸ See ibidem, 424 c–d, 102.

In both novellas music becomes an indirect source of rebellion against the accepted principles or, to be more precise, against the rules of conduct considered as absolute in the social circles in which the protagonists live. However, sexual desire is by no means the only drive to which the protagonists of “The Blood of the Walsungs” yield. In its concluding part, a remark about ‘revenge’ is made.¹⁹ Through their act of incest, the young Aarenholds take reprisal against their bourgeois lifestyle which has deprived Siegelinde of a possibility of marriage for love and made it impossible for Siegmund to develop his gift for art. Neither of them has had opportunity for an authentic, creative life. In “Kreutzer Sonata” the motif of the protagonist’s reprisal against his social sphere has not been put to the fore, but it seems obvious that, by stabbing his wife, Posdnicheff wants to violate the moral code of the nobility, which not only tolerates unrestraint, but is also conducive to it.

Ancient Greek philosophers attributed a specific ethos to particular musical rhythms and to musical scales, having believed that they significantly affect the human soul, in particular the character and the conduct of the human being. For that reason, Plato held that certain types of harmony (and, as a result, also some musical instruments) are harmful to the polis and, as such, should be removed from it. The theory of ethos created by Damon of Athens (apparently the teacher of Socrates) was developed by Plato and can be found also in the writings of Aristotle. In modern times, however, it has become anachronic, although it echoes (whilst in another shape) in the Christian thought. Also today the view that music is capable of building the morality of its listeners or, reversely, of engendering in them dispositions to morally deplorable behaviors, is not infrequent. Neither the view that music as such has a moral value (represented in Poland, for instance, by Krzysztof Lipka²⁰), nor the belief (held, for instance, by Roger Scruton²¹) that musical pieces may be subject to evaluation also in this particular respect have been generally rejected. However, the literary examples to which we have referred apparently confirm the insight which prompts that the (good or bad) influence of music on the attitudes of its listeners is a consequence of the way it is perceived rather than of its inner qualities: the moral nature of music appears only as it is being experienced by the listener. Both the “Kreutzer Sonata” and “The Blood of the Walsungs” in a way point to the existence of a specific emotional bridge between the composer and the listener: a morally significant structure which comes into being in the process of listening.

¹⁹ See M a n n, “The Blood of the Walsungs,” 315.

²⁰ See Krzysztof L i p k a, “W stronę nowoczesnej kalokagatii,” *Miscellanea Anthropologica et Sociologica* 16, no. 3 (2015): 162–170.

²¹ See Roger S c r u t o n, “Understanding Music: Music and Morality,” <https://www.roger-scruton.com/about/music/understanding-music/182-music-and-morality>.

*

The present volume of *Ethos* is in a way continuation of the previous one, which was entitled “On Hearing and Listening.” While the volume on hearing and listening comprised a general introduction to the study of the categories in question and aimed at their presentation in a broad context, the present issue comprises articles which scrutinize their chosen, particular aspects. The authors continue an insight into the theme of listening, but their areas of interest are primarily music and literary studies.

Mirosława Chuda

Translated by *Dorota Chabrajaska*