

WRITERS ON WRITING

Before a Rendezvous With the Muse, First Select the Music

By Edmund White

I've never willingly written a word without listening to music of some sort. Right now I'm listening to Debussy's Sonata for Cello and Piano. When pushed by deadlines I've sometimes been obliged to work in silence, on a train or plane or in a cafe. (A Walkman I don't like, since its penetrating sound, piped directly into the cranial bones, is too aggressive and inescapable: booming aural earmuffs.)

Virgil Thomson, recognized my condition right away. There are two kinds of writers, he said. Those who demand absolute silence and those, like you, who need to hear music, the better to concentrate.

Perhaps he put his finger on the underlying psychological process, but I have never felt I was blocking out music the better to focus my thoughts. Admittedly I sometimes recognize that at a certain moment during the last 10 minutes I must have stopped paying attention to the music filling the room, but more often than not I experience music as a landscape unscrolling just outside the window whenever I look up, or as a human drama unfolding across the courtyard when I peek out, or as a separate but beloved presence, an intimate friend sitting in a matching chair, thinking and feeling. Music for me is a companion during the lonely (and why not admit it? the boring) hours of writing.

Music is also in stark contrast to writing. Music is already perfect, sure-footed, whereas I'm struggling to remember a word, frame a description, invent an action. If for me music is the secret sharer, it is a friend who has no needs and encourages me to trust that beauty can be achieved in this life, at least theoretically.

Music is always living out its own vivid, highly marked adventure, which is continuous and uninterrupted. It exists as a superior way of transcribing emotions, or rather of notating shifting balances, repeating motifs, accumulating tensions, deferred resolutions and elaborated variations. As the composer Roger Sessions once put it, music communicates in a marvelously vivid and exact way the dynamics and the abstract qualities of emotion, but any specific emotional content must be supplied from without, by the listening writer in this case.

Like fiction, music is an art that exists in time. Like fiction, music is always promising an imminent conclusion and then introducing complications. Like fiction, music can be plain to the point of plainsong or as intricate as counterpoint, and both extremes can be satisfying. Just as the novelist must keep all his strategies aloft and not allow the reader to forget a character or lose sight of the house, the ha-ha or the wilderness beyond, or skip over a crucial turn in the plot, in the same way

the composer must teach the listener to recognize the key themes, the shifts in harmonic progression and the division of the composition into parts.

Of course there are also signal differences between fiction and music. In music the blocks of sound are so insubstantial to the listener (I dare say even to the composer) that repetition of some sort, even a full, literal recapitulation, is always welcome, whereas the reader of fiction can tolerate variations on themes but never straight-out repetition. Fiction includes a large admixture of journalism: anecdotes, scandals, novelties, those gruesome daily horrors the French call *faits divers*. Music, on the other hand, imitates no external reality and is closer to mathematics than is any other art.

Unlike fiction, music is not about mothers-in-law or failed marriages. Of course opera and ballet and program music can be narrative but only because they are adulterated by literature, the libretto or the scenario.

In the 19th century music had so obviously leapt ahead of all the other arts that poetry, especially, aspired to the condition of music, i.e. toward abstraction, though a verbal art made up entirely of signifiers can never be abstract by definition, even if the French poet Mallarmé made memorable attempts to violate the fundamental nature of language.

Perhaps the German philosopher Schopenhauer explained the difference best. He said that music was entirely independent of the phenomenal world, ignored it altogether, could to a certain extent exist if there were no world at all, which cannot be said of the other arts. For Schopenhauer the other arts, including literature, imitate reality, whereas music has a status as valid and independent as reality itself. Music and reality are parallel lines that never converge.

In the morning I might listen to Ian Bostridge singing Bach's "Christ unser Herr zum Jordan kam" in order to dig spurs of rectitude into my sloth or to lighten my gloom. In the afternoon if I put on "Parsifal," it means I'm in for the long haul. I want to stay at my desk and be accompanied and challenged by a masterpiece that is as elevating and demanding as it is long. Sometimes I program my moods: a bit of "Wiener Blut" to bring a smile to the lips, Stravinsky's "Agon" to introduce rigor into the composing process, Chopin's Nocturnes to make me more introspective after a jarring conversation.

Sometimes the music even has a direct effect. In my novels and stories I love brisk, dry conclusions, the feeling that once the last peg has fallen into place, there's no reason to linger, a taste I learned from the logical, dedramatizing late Stravinsky. Editors invariably ask me to rewrite and pad out my brisk codas, as if they had been conditioned by late Romantic bombast. The Russian scholar Simon Karlinsky, who has the distinction of being both a composer and a literary critic, once paid me the compliment of spotting the exact piece of music on which I'd based a literary strategy (a Brahms Intermezzo).

I seldom listen to pop music because it's too monotonous rhythmically and too coarse harmonically to interest me for long; it depresses me and fails to connect me to a better, nobler society. When I write, I want to feel I could belong, at least in my dreams, to a world in which art must be puzzled out, a realm that believes that beauty is difficult. Of course this limitation on my part is doubtless a function of the generation I belong to.

I was born in 1940 and grew up in a house flooded after dark with music. My father was a misanthrope who worked all night at his desk and slept by day in order to avoid contact with people other than family members.

When I wasn't in school or working a summer job, I'd sit in his office at home and listen to the 78-r.p.m. records he liked to play on his old blond mahogany Meisener: Beethoven chamber music, "La Mer" of Debussy, the Brahms Double Concerto, Kathleen Ferrier singing Bach, the violinist Fritz Kreisler playing his own "Liebeslied." Dad disliked opera and rejected most 20th-century music, but he did respect the Stravinsky of "The Fire Bird," and he loved Mahler. I can well remember the stack of 12 heavy records that represented the Mahler "Resurrection" Symphony. During those long, idle nights I first started writing as my father swiveled from his desk to his calculating machine to his file cards. He was making money, and I was writing stories, but we were both living – richly, constantly, invisibly – a second life, the life of unremitting and transporting music.