

The Lyre and the Drum: Dionysus and Apollo throughout Music History

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“Know thyself and never leave the middle ¹” is the famous advice given to Socrates by the Pythia, the greatest oracle of the ancient world (Broad 64). This important philosophical maxim was inscribed on the walls between statues of two gods at Delphi, a site of prophecy, pilgrimage, and ritual. Dionysus and Apollo, at first glance, might seem an unlikely pair to share a temple, since Apollo, god of elegance and grace associated with the virtues of civilization and the *polis*, is in many ways the exact opposite of the raw, chthonic power of the dismembered and thrice-born Dionysus. Yet legends tell us that each was a god of music, and that these two half-siblings took turns presiding over Delphi, with Apollo in residence during the summer months and Dionysus arriving for the winter (Landels 158). Some scholars argue that they were two faces of one god (Blount 41). They were also two faces of music, radically different from one another. Just as Apollo was “the luminous one through and through [. . .] god of sun and light who reveals himself in brilliance. Beauty is his element” (Nietzsche 120), so too, his music was marked by moderation, measurement, elegance, a major key mode, order, and logic. Dionysus, the wild, suffering, dismembered god who lived in the nocturnal realm of woods and underworld, had music that was full of “excess unveiled as truth” (Nietzsche 128) and “intoxication of feeling” (137) and expressed both the tragic and the ecstatic.

The history of western music is mirrored in that inscription in the hall at Delphi: a long journey towards self-knowledge which has spiraled over and over to a Hegelian synthesis through repeated swings between the two principles that each god represents. The tensions between the ethos of the Dionysian and Apollonian music reached their greatest climax in the twentieth century with Schoenberg and Stravinsky. Nietzsche was remarkably prescient when he predicted that before a sense of true, emotional drama could resurface in the world, the pathway

¹ Other scholars have translated this prophecy as “Know thyself and all things in moderation.”

towards the detached, cerebral aesthetic would have to be followed to its inevitable dead end. He wrote in *The Birth of Tragedy* in 1870, “There is an eternal struggle between the theoretical and the tragic views of the world. Only when the spirit of science has been carried to its limits and its claim to universal validity negated by the demonstration of these limits might one hope for a rebirth of tragedy” (82).

To understand the arc of this unfolding drama, and to appreciate how the ultimate expressions of the Apollonian and Dionysian ethos emerged almost simultaneously (but in precisely the opposite order Nietzsche predicted) , it will be necessary to briefly trace the pendulum swings of Apollonian and Dionysian principles of music in instrumentation, mode, and rhythm throughout music history.

The music for Apollo was formally ordered, harmonically predictable, rhythmically regular, of moderate tempo and dynamic range, and elevated the values of simplicity and uniformity. It was elegant and graceful, in a “sunny” major mode played on stringed instruments: lyre and kithara. Dionysus, in contrast, had music that was rhythmically irregular and unpredictable, in a minor key mode, in tempos that were very fast or very slow, evoking either a Bacchanalian frenzy or a hypnotic and mystical trance. Dionysus’ music was played on percussion (drums, tambourines) and woodwinds (*aulos*) and celebrated complexity in melody and harmony (Landels 82).

The musical principles of both of these gods were revered in music of the Baroque era, a period of music which began with the birth of opera in 1600 as composers sought to recapture the power and transformative potential of Greek tragedy. Operas were written honoring both Apollo (Handel’s *Apollo e Dafne*) and Dionysus (Marcello’s *Ariana*, which celebrated the arrival of Dionysus on Naxos). The most popular subject for an opera was Orpheus, that Greek mythic figure who begins as the son of Apollo and yet becomes the priest of Dionysus². Baroque music

² The first three surviving operas (by Peri, Caccini and Monteverdi) are about Orpheus. From the 1600s at least 26 operas survive that are based on this mythological theme, with varied endings—some happy and others tragic (Abraham).

maintained a balance between Apollonian order and control (seen in the intellectual intricacies of such strict forms such as fugues, chaconnes, ricercars) and Dionysian intuition and freedom (as a performer was expected to embellish the music with their own individualized ornamentation on repeats, spontaneously create melodies over figured bass patterns, and even improvise entire “preludes” as a tonal introduction to the performance of dance suites).

Major and minor keys were both used extensively, and chamber music featured both the Dionysian-inspired flute and *oboe d’amore* and the Apollonian strings of violin, cello, and viola da gamba. Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750), the last and greatest of the Baroque composers, wrote *The Well Tempered Clavier Books I and II*, a veritable encyclopedia of forms, moods, and techniques for the keyboard which include a pairing of Prelude (a quasi- improvisational and “free” form) and Fugue (rigorously rule-bound compositions) in every single key, 24 major key pairs and 24 minor key pairs. While some of Bach’s compositions (for example, the *Brandenburg Concerti* and the *Secular Cantatas*) are evocations of Apollonian brilliance, light, and balance, other works clearly express the darkest sense of pathos and tragedy befitting Dionysus. For example, the *Chaconne in D minor* for solo violin was written immediately after the death of Bach’s first wife and the *Passions* were performed in Leipzig during Good Friday to commemorate Christ’s suffering on the cross.

In contrast to this balance, during the Classical era (the Age of Enlightenment, whose very name clearly evokes Apollo), major keys account for the vast majority of pieces composed. Of the 27 piano concertos that Mozart wrote, only two are in a minor key; of 41 symphonies, 40 are written in a major key. Of the 108 symphonies by Haydn, 100 are written in major keys and only eight are in a minor key. Complexity and emotional intensity fell out of esteem³ in favor of easy elegance, clarity of line, and harmonic and melodic simplicity. The most oft-created pieces were written in the Sonata-Allegro form, an intellectual formula which is dependent on regularity, predictability, and symmetry. Rhythms are clear and proportional, almost always

³ Two of Bach’s four *Passions* were sold for their value in paper; the others languished without a single performance for 100 years until Felix Mendelssohn bought them at an auction and launched the “Bach Revival.”

avoid syncopation and irregularity, and the most popular instrumental combinations comprise only stringed instruments.⁴ Mozart's first opera, written at the age of 12, was *Apollo and Hyacinthus*. Even his darkest opera, *Don Giovanni*, while it deals with a main figure who shares some of the excesses of womanizing that are associated with Bacchus (the Romanized form of Dionysus), is considered an *opera buffa* rather than a tragedy, and it concludes with a happy, major key chorus.

The use of minor keys became far more pronounced in the Romantic period. Almost all of the masterpieces of the Romantic piano concerto literature (Chopin, Schumann, Grieg, Rachmaninoff) are in minor keys.⁵ Cadences are interrupted or subverted, creating a sense of Dionysian "surprise" and sudden disappearance.⁶ Rhythms in music from this period are far more complex, with an even accompaniment pattern (in groups of four) but with a melody line apt to have grouped patterns of 3, 5, 7, 9, 11 or 13 notes, leading to syncopation between the two hands. This lack of order, balance, and evenness between the hands can be seen as a form of rhythmic *dismemberment*. Even the new musical terms which proliferate in this era imply an anti-Apollonian spirit: *morendo* (dying away), *rubato* (stealing or robbing time), *ritardando* (slowing down), all aspects which violate the centrality of a steady, predictable beat that is a hallmark of Apollonian music. While some composers (notably, Brahms) maintained the Sonata-Allegro form in their music, other Romantics were inspired to create less rule-bound, more improvisatory forms. The very names of these new forms (*Impromptu*, *Intermezzi*, *Fantasy*, *Elegie*, *Humoreske* and *Nocturne*) conjure the unpredictable realm of Dionysus, located in nighttime and filled with both the tragic and the comedic. The name "Romantic" itself comes from "roman," the French word for "novel," and song cycles and solo instrumental works often depended upon storytelling, evoking characters and plots which vividly bring to life the

⁴ The string quartet dominated chamber music during this period: most Haydn and even Mozart symphonies and concertos can be performed with only stringed instruments or with only a very few woodwinds.

⁵ The one exception to this, Brahms' *Piano Concerto No. 2 in Bb Major*, has a second movement "Allegro appassionato" in D minor, and both the first and last movements of the work contain large developmental sections in turbulent minor keys as well.

⁶ For example, in some of the *Kinderszenen* and *Dichterliebe* of Schumann, the music remains suspended on the dominant seventh chord, without a sense of resolving to the tonic.

Dionysian realms of the supernatural, the bizarre, and the emotionally intense. For example, Schumann's *Carnival* is a collection of miniature piano pieces which evoke the characters of the festival preceding Lent in Germany, which retained its Bacchanalian roots through wild carousing, costumes, and masks.

While some composers of symphonies clung to the Sonata-Allegro form, they did so in increasingly grandiose ways. The moderately scaled string orchestra of Mozart and Haydn was doubled by the end of Beethoven's lifetime, and woodwinds, percussion, and brass (the instruments associated with Dionysus) began to appear in ever more critical roles throughout the 19th century. The most revolutionary symphony of the romantic era, Berlioz' *Symphony Fantastique*, more vividly than any other piece illustrates the shift to the Dionysian. Rather than merely a formal, abstract and intellectual development of beautiful melodies, Berlioz tried to create a sense of an unfolding tragedy in his symphony with a "program" or story. In the first movement, the protagonist falls in love with a beautiful woman. In the second, he finds himself obsessed with thoughts of his beloved wherever he goes, at a ball or in nature. In the third, he is increasingly beset by fits of jealousy while in the countryside. In the fourth movement, convinced that he is spurned, the artist poisons himself through an overdose of opium. He falls into a coma where he dreams that he has murdered his beloved and is led to the guillotine where he is beheaded. In the final movement, he dreams that he comes upon a hideous gathering where he sees his beloved transformed into a grotesque witch, participating in a diabolical orgy. Obsession, intoxication of love, jealousy, death, dismemberment, the grotesque and the bizarre, rituals at nighttime: could anything be more evocative of the Dionysian ethos?

Even the lives of the romantic generation of composers reflect the Dionysian spirit of emotional intensity, fascination with the supernatural, madness, and dismemberment. Berlioz wrote the *Symphonie Fantastique* in the throes of obsessive love with the Shakespearean actress Harriet Smithson, who hastily agreed to marry him after he threatened suicide if she would not. Franz Liszt swung between the extremes of sexual scandal and monastic yearnings. In his youth,

he sought to become a priest. Dissuaded by his family, he created an uproar throughout Europe by seducing other men's wives, only to end his days as a Franciscan abbe who performed exorcisms. Clara Wieck Schumann became the first concert artist to perform "by heart," and her own fascinating and peculiar life included a childhood where she did not speak until the age of seven. Robert Schumann's career as a concert pianist ended when he dismembered the tendons of his right hand; he published his writings as a split personality, one named "Eusebius" and the other "Florestan." After hearing voices which he feared would lead him to murder, Schumann attempted suicide and spent the remainder of his life in an asylum. Even Chopin, the composer most inclined to Apollonian elegance in the Romantic era, left instructions on his deathbed for his heart to be cut out and returned to Warsaw while the rest of his body was buried in Paris. Despite Nietzsche's lament that his own culture's emphasis on science, logic, and theory diminished the spirit of the tragic, the early nineteenth century was not a time of Apollonian moderation, balance, reason, and cool detachment for composers: it was a time of darkness and plumbing the depths of emotional experience.

In the years immediately following the publication of *The Birth of Tragedy*, late Romanticism reached its ultimate expression in the works of Gustav Mahler, who first came to prominence as a conductor renowned for his interpretations of Wagner's operas—the very works that inspired Nietzsche's philosophical musings. The Dionysian ethos of his work is obvious in not just Mahler's music, but also in his comments about his own compositions. Mahler wrote about the *Third Symphony* that it is "the most farcical and at the same time the most tragic piece that ever existed [. . .] It is as though all nature is making faces and sticking out its tongue " (De la Grange 179).

Paradox, percussion, and extremism—those hallmarks of the Dionysian spirit—are obvious in the *Symphony No. 8*. Nicknamed "The Symphony of a Thousand," it requires for performance a full string orchestra, two piccolos, four flutes, four oboes, a *cor anglais*, at least six clarinets, four bassoons, a contrabassoon, eight horns, four trumpets, four trombones and a

tuba (plus a separate off-stage ensemble consisting of four trumpets and three trombones) three sets of timpani, cymbals, tamtam, triangle and bells, glockenspiel, organ, harmonium, piano, two harps, celesta, mandolin, two full SATB choirs, a children's choir, and eight vocal soloists. In an annihilation of boundaries, it fuses the forms of sonata, symphony, motet, cantata, and oratorio and takes for its texts two wholly contradictory poems: the Latin Catholic hymn for Pentecost, *Veni Creator Spiritu,s* and the closing of Goethe's *Faust*, a poem which celebrates the redeeming power of erotic love and the "Eternal Feminine."

Mahler wrote this monumental work in a breathtakingly rapid pace, all within a few months, and it bears few signs of the laborious revisions his other symphonies contain. He described seeing "the whole piece immediately before my eyes, and [I] only needed to write it down as though it were being dictated to me" (Mitchell 519). Those characteristics are reflective of Dionysus, who was known as the god who appears suddenly and is associated with intuitive, right-brain holistic creative processes (Shlain 238). Mahler considered the Eighth Symphony the grandest thing he had ever composed and felt assured of its revolutionary nature. He wrote, "Try to imagine the whole universe beginning to ring and resound. There are no longer human voices, but planets and suns revolving [. . .] it is a gift to the nation [. . .] a great joy-bringer" (Mitchell 519): the very kind of music that Nietzsche had in mind when he called for

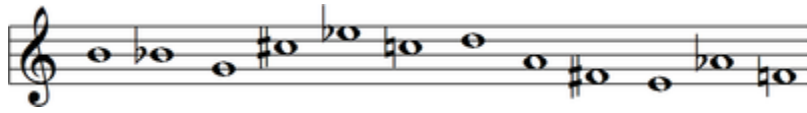
the power of sound to shake us to our very foundations, the unified stream of melody and the quite incomparable world of harmony. In the Dionysian dithyramb man is stimulated to the highest intensification of his symbolic powers: something that he had never felt before urgently demands to be expressed: the destruction of the veil of maya, one-ness as the genius of humankind, indeed, of nature itself. (21)

The two most influential composers after Mahler are also the ones who best exemplify the extremes of the Apollonian and the Dionysian within their work: Igor Stravinsky and Arnold Schoenberg. Schoenberg's early works bear all the hallmarks of Dionysian sensibilities.

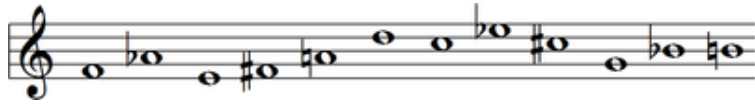
Verklacht Night ("Transfigured Night") is an impassioned, deeply dissonant composition which takes as its text a poem about two lovers who walk together through the forest in the moonlight.

The woman confesses a secret: she is carrying the child of another man. It is a piece redolent with chromaticism, and it broke the harmonic rules and boundaries of its time. Schoenberg's next great work, *Pierrot Lunaire*, caused him to be hailed as "the Liberator of Harmony" (Grout 851). Rather than be even loosely constrained by either a major or a minor key, *Pierrot Lunnaire* was penned in atonality ("without key"). Rhythmically, the indivisible numbers of 7 and 13 dominate. The orchestration prominently features bass clarinet and flute which, with the piano, are said to constitute a "melodrama." The text of *Pierrot* is clearly Dionysian: the 21 poems deal with the themes of love, sex, religion, and violence. In a case of cross-gender identity, the text, which is clearly about a male clown's experience in the first person, is narrated by a female in *Sprechstimme*, a vocal technique somewhere in between speech and song. *Pierrot Lunaire* is an absolute reflection of the Dionysian aesthetic: emotionally raw, rhythmically irregular, and unconcerned with beauty in its search for truth, abolishing even tonality in its quest for liberation (Grout 852).

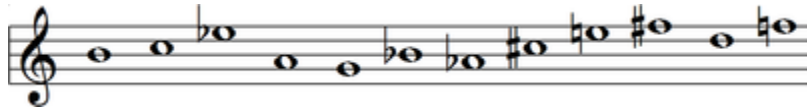
By 1921, however, Schoenberg's thirst for freedom had undergone a metamorphosis into its exact opposite: the development of serialism. In this compositional style, the uses of pitch are tightly prescribed and more rigidly bound than in even the most severely formalized fugue. Once a note is used, it may not be repeated until all other eleven pitches are sounded. Within twelve-tone theory, a composer is limited to a logical working out of the various mathematical permutations of the original twelve-tone row using analytical theory, which is characteristic of the Apollonian left brain (Shlain 22). Rather than expressive harmony or melody, what is most essential are clearly defined and plotted rows of pitches. The remainder of the piece must conform to the linearity of this line, either in its original form (Example 1), in retrograde where the prime series appears backwards (Example 2), in inversion where the prime series occurs with the intervals inverted (Example 3), or finally, the retrograde inversion, where the inverted series appears backwards (Example 4).



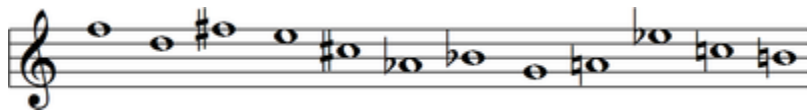
Example 1 Tone Row



Example 2 Retrograde



Example 3 Inversion



Example 4 Retrograde Inversion

These four methods of construction are all fixed and linear (Grout 855), evoking a uniformity and symmetry that calls to mind the precision and regularity of the columns of the *Stoa*, those buildings dedicated to Apollo. Calculated theory and the logic of the intellect have utterly replaced spontaneity and the dark emotions of the heart: in serialism, Apollo has decisively banished Dionysus to the underworld.

The polar swing from Dionysus back to Apollo is also readily apparent in a different way in the *oeuvre* of Igor Stravinsky, who first catapulted to notoriety in Paris in 1913 with *Le Sacre du Printemps* (*The Rite of Spring*). This ballet, which caused a riot at its premiere, is subtitled “Scenes of Pagan Russia” and depicts a festival in the wilds of nature in which a virgin is sacrificed. The music is highly chromatic and filled with dissonance; rhythmically complex and unpredictable, and filled with quickly shifting meters. The opening (featuring a bassoon playing in its highest tessitura) sounds remarkably like an *aulos*, and bears an uncanny resemblance to fragments of music from Greek tragedy which had not yet been discovered and reconstructed at

the time Stravinsky dreamt the melody:

Lento ♩=80 **tempo rubato** Igor Stravinsky

Bassoon

The image shows a musical score for Bassoon in Igor Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*. It consists of two staves. The first staff is marked '1' and the second '2'. The tempo is 'Lento' with a metronome marking of ♩=80 and the instruction 'tempo rubato'. The key signature is one flat (B-flat). The time signature is 3/4. The score features complex rhythms with many eighth and sixteenth notes, often beamed together. There are several triplets and a quintuplet. The first staff has two triplets. The second staff has a quintuplet followed by two triplets. The piece ends with a fermata over a whole note E.

Percussion instruments are featured prominently throughout *Le Sacre du Printemps*, particularly in the section entitled “Sacrificial Dance,” where the ferocious intensity evokes a truly Bacchanalian spirit:

The image shows a musical score for Percussion in Igor Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*. It consists of two staves, Treble and Bass clef. The time signature is 3/16. The score features complex rhythms with many eighth and sixteenth notes, often beamed together. The music is highly rhythmic and intense, characteristic of the 'Sacrificial Dance' section.

If ever a piece expressed the full totality of ritual ecstasy, tragedy, madness, and dismemberment, it is *Sacre*, and it has rightly taken its place as a towering achievement in the canon of Western music.

What happened next in Stravinsky’s development is perhaps equally shocking. After the unbridled, liberating tonal and rhythmic revolution he touched off in 1913, Stravinsky turned his gaze backwards to the inspiration of the Baroque composer Pergolesi to create *Pulcinella* in 1920, a ballet which, while depicting the *Comedia dell’Arte* tradition that is related to the Dionysian masked drama and ball, has music which is decidedly tonal, elegant, and graceful, dominated by bright and sunny major keys and stringed instruments (Grout and Palisca 839). Stravinsky embraced this Neo-Classical style even more fully in the ballet *Apollo Musegetes* (Apollo and the Muses), written in 1928 for string orchestra and revised in 1947. In his Norton

Lectures at Harvard University in 1940, Stravinsky had this to say about the tensions Nietzsche pointed to in *The Birth of Tragedy*:

The more art is controlled, limited, worked over, the more it is free [. . .]
The Dionysian elements which set the imagination of the artist in motion
[. . .] must be properly subjugated before they intoxicate us, and must
finally be made to submit to the law: Apollo demands it. (22)

And so, in the works of the former *enfant terrible* of Russia, we glimpse Apollo returning to Delphi once more. The thesis of “Rites” was followed by the anti-thesis of Stravinsky’s Neo Classical style. Would Hegel have seen the last works of Stravinsky’s life as a culminating synthesis? *The Requiem Canticle*, *Abraham and Isaac*, the *Variations* written as a memorial for Aldous Huxley, and the *Elegy* written for J.F. Kennedy all use Apollonian techniques of twelve-tone serialism to express dark Dionysian themes of death, sacrifice, and loss.

How Nietzsche would have responded to Stravinsky’s last opera, *The Rake’s Progress* (scored for an ensemble equally balanced between strings and woodwinds), whose plot ends with the central character dying in an insane asylum after a series of tragic, bizarre, and depraved adventures, is an intriguing speculation, as that was how Nietzsche ended his own life. The vicissitudes of the tension described so well in *The Birth of Tragedy* may be fated to be perpetually played out in a state of “eternal return,” with music continuing to undulate between the two impulses of the Apollonian and Dionysian. The Delphic imperative of integration—to bring forth creation from a place of “never leaving the middle”—is a challenge that each generation, and each composer, must address anew.

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