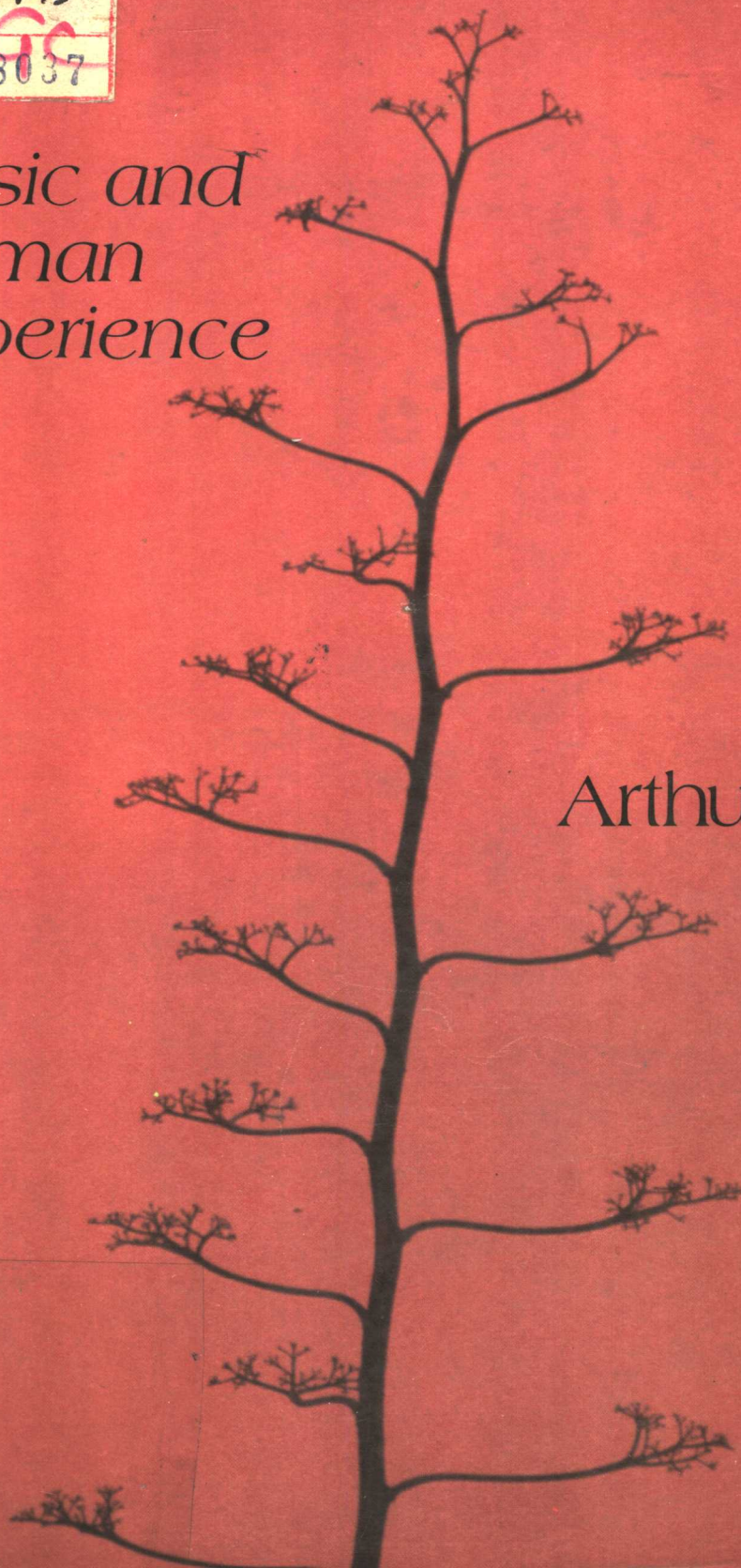




*Music and
Human
Experience*

Arthur Komar



MUSIC AND HUMAN EXPERIENCE

ARTHUR
KOMAR

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*To my children—
Ned, Nicholas, and Oliver*

INTRODUCTION

Music communicates!

Poets interpret the world in verbal configurations; painters depict the world in color, line, and texture. Composers are aural—rather than verbal or visual—artists who express the vast range of human experience in combinations of sounds. Instrumental and vocal tones comprise composers' palettes, the interrelation of these tones their syntax. A piece of music can be likened to an abstract poem or a nonobjective painting, for in none of these is everyday language the medium of expression. Limiting the discussion to music, its very abstraction constitutes a serious problem. Composers may "say" a lot, but what do they mean? Sending and receiving messages inexpressible in words, musicians appear to be isolated from the world surrounding them. I, the author of this book, am communicating with you, its reader, and you comprehend my meaning. If I had tried to express myself by composing tones instead of writing words, could you still understand me? Or would my music erect a communications barrier between us?

This suggests a certain remoteness in music. What is the purpose of purely musical expression? Wherein lies its value?

Think for a moment about the act of speaking. Try talking with words alone, with no facial expressions, hand gestures, or changes of voice pitch. The result? You sound and look like a zombie, more dead than alive. Words by themselves do not suffice. To get your ideas across you must inflect your words, speak with feeling. Right now, as you read these words, you are automatically adding inflective nuances to help me get my ideas across. Moreover, words cannot always be found to fit every situation; whole areas of human experience escape them. The more elusive the right word, the more reliant the speaker on visual gestures and oral inflections. Musical expression is related to these inflections and finds a way into cracks not penetrable by concrete words. A special virtue of music is to convey feelings—feelings that we often cannot identify or otherwise delineate verbally. Music remote? Certainly not!

But, if music is basic to the human experience, why do so many people find it hard to enjoy? Of course, folk and popular styles demand little of the listener, but *classical music* is something else again. Undoubtedly, it was of classical music Romain Rolland was thinking when he wrote: "Music perplexes those who have no feeling for it; it seems to them an incomprehensible art, beyond reasoning and having no connection with reality."¹ For much of the general populace classical music is more than perplexing; it is downright unpopular. Most people are content to leave the pleasure of music to the ears of a small band of musical connoisseurs. In so doing, they are depriving themselves of a rich and rewarding facet of human existence.

The aim of an introductory music course should be to remove the barriers preventing the musical newcomer from entering the world of classical music, to help direct the student toward an appreciation of masterpieces past and present. The approach presented in *Music and Human Experience* is to seek out and exploit a bond inherent in teacher, student, performer, and composer alike. All four share a single indisputable attribute: their common humanity. Each of them is born to enjoy and suffer, to work and play. Each knows the rewards and frustrations of love. Everyone has been exposed to, or is at least aware of, some form of religion. Great social, moral, and ethical issues confront us. We are sensitive to nature, and we fantasize about travel to foreign lands. Each of us has thought about death and has known someone who has died. Listener, performer, and composer, we are all intensely human and can share our humanity with one another. In this respect composers are especially important. As creative artists, they write down more than notes: they inscribe their experiences as human beings, for all to hear.

How did Beethoven deal with human experience in a piece like his *Symphony No. 5*? This is a tough question, one that aestheticians have long pondered with inconclusive results. It is one thing to argue that music sounds purposeful, that it seems to be about something, and another to specify precisely what that something is. On the other hand, we know what Beethoven's *Symphony No. 6* is about. Known as the *Pastoral*, this symphony was created with the explicit intention of registering, in artistic terms, the composer's observations and feelings about country scenes. (Note the qualification, *in artistic terms*; merely identifying the subject of a musical piece is not the same as being able to translate the music into words.) In the realm of orchestral music, Beethoven's "program symphony" was a novelty, establishing a precedent which composers enthusiastically adopted immediately after Beethoven's death (1827). Hector Berlioz' *Symphonie fantastique* (1830) portrays an unrequited opium-sated lover; Franz Liszt wrote a symphony about the philosopher Faust (1854); and Richard Strauss drew on German folklore for his tone poem, *Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks* (1895). The trend continued unabated into the twentieth century, with programmatic masterpieces such as Claude Debussy's *La Mer* (The Sea). Nor is descriptive music limited to orchestral works. Composers in the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries produced an abundance of program pieces for keyboard (William Byrd, François Couperin) and chamber ensembles (Antonio Vivaldi). The nineteenth century, with its *Scenes from Childhood* by Robert Schumann and *Songs Without Words* by Felix Mendelssohn, was a heyday of small-scale character pieces for piano. And in the twentieth century we have witnessed the unveiling of works like Charles Ives's *Concord Sonata* for piano and Arnold Schoenberg's *Transfigured Night* for strings. With all this instrumental music, one can respond to the extramusical content first, the purely musical elements second. In other words, one can first absorb oneself in the subjects of death, love, religion, society, and politics, and so on, as a transition to experiencing the music for its own sake.

An enormous quantity of Western music, ancient and modern, is based on verbal texts. Solo vocal music may tell about anything under the sun. There are love songs, both happy and sad; songs about war and about peace; songs on nature, work, and adventure. Liturgical music is represented in anthems and motets for small vocal ensem-

bles and in cantatas and oratorios for large groups. And then there is the form that Samuel Johnson once described as “an extravagant and irrational entertainment”—opera. Many of the world’s greatest plays, myths, and national epics have been transformed into monumental grand operas. The Broadway musical is a special kind of modernized, popular opera. It derives from the nineteenth-century comic opera tradition of Gilbert and Sullivan, as well as from the operettas of Sullivan’s continental counterparts, Jacques Offenbach and Johann Strauss, Jr. The operetta form itself is a direct offshoot of grand opera. Still another genre, bridging vocal and symphonic music, is the vocal symphony, the progenitor of which is Beethoven’s *Symphony No. 9*, with its magnificent setting of Schiller’s *Ode to Joy*. In all these vocal genres, the composer communicates to us verbally as well as by purely musical means. We need not rely solely on the music to find out what the composer had in mind.

In the final analysis, the perception of extramusical content has little to do with appreciating great music, but it can facilitate one’s initial exposure to the masterworks. The key word here is *exposure*. The idea is for students to overcome their reluctance to discover the sounds of classical music, to sample a wide range of musical styles and genres. To this end, *Music and Human Experience* surveys a multitude of vocal and instrumental works relating to various aspects of the human condition. The general procedure is to combine assigned listening with just enough explanatory comment to allow the student to perceive the historical/structural content of the music. For example, in dealing with the nationalist movement in European music, the student first listens to relevant works by Smetana, Sibelius, Bartók, and Falla (Chapter 6) and then reads three interconnected general essays on this subject (Chapter 7). The acquiring of historical and technical information remains consistently subsidiary to the primary goal of intensive listening.

The book is divided into seven basic units and is further subdivided into thirty-three smaller chapters. Each unit deals with music associated with a single broad topic: (1) nature, (2) nationalism and foreign travel, (3) society, (4) philosophy, (5) worship, (6) emotion, and (7) death. The units are segmented into from three to seven chapters, providing descriptions of individual pieces and supplementary background readings. Some chapters consist exclusively of guides to specific compositions, with each assigned piece accompanied by a discussion of its expressive/humanistic content, and a mixture of biographical, historical, and stylistic data. Other chapters contain readings designed to clarify the assigned pieces, discuss particular issues, and/or broaden the student’s general understanding of music. Numerous chapters combine listening guides and brief background readings. Earlier units are longer than later ones, due to the necessity of introducing essential historical and technical information at an early stage.

From the outset the student is exposed to a variety of different styles. For example, in Unit 1 the listening assignments of Chapters 1 and 4 represent six major composers and four historical periods. The readings of Chapter 2 serve mainly to supplement the music of Chapter 1, introducing matters of general importance which will be amplified further in subsequent units. Chapter 3 comprises practical guides applicable to all listenings and readings. The supplementary essays of Chapter 5 are of lesser im-

portance, relating to issues raised for the most part only in Unit 1. Nevertheless, these optional readings may prove useful as a stimulus to extra listening. Of course, the final determination of essential and optional readings rests with the teacher.

The six remaining units alternate listening guides with a mixture of primary and secondary readings. Each unit covers limited material, but the totality of all seven units approaches comprehensiveness. Every historical period is touched on, each important Western nation is visited, the three major religions are examined, and so on. Aspects of theory are explored, genres surveyed, and terms defined. Most important, nearly all major composers (and some minor ones as well) are featured in at least one unit, if not in several units. To cite only the four composers represented in Chapter 1, the student encounters Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony* in Unit 1, his *Eroica Symphony* in Unit 3, *Symphony No. 9* in Unit 4, and the *String Quartet in A Minor*, Op. 132, in Unit 6. Debussy's music appears in Unit 1 (*La Mer*) and Unit 3 (*Children's Corner*). Vivaldi and Mendelssohn are featured in Unit 1 alone, although occasional references to their music crop up elsewhere in the text as well. This arrangement approximates the cumulative learning experience of the committed music student. For example, budding young pianists do not limit themselves to studying one composer at a time, taking up Mozart first, then dropping him in favor of Beethoven, and finally proceeding to Chopin to the exclusion of both Mozart and Beethoven. Rather, easier works by all three masters are selected at first, giving way gradually to more difficult works by these and other composers. Musicians switch continually from one composer to another, one period to another, and one genre to another, accumulating experience and knowledge little by little. The framework of *Music and Human Experience* follows the same line of approach. At the end of a semester's work, students will have encountered a large body of music and will have acquired much information concerning that music. Having absorbed the music in the meaningful associative context of extramusical topics of universal interest, they will have a good chance of enjoying and remembering a substantial amount of this voluminous material.

Music and Human Experience offers a number of helpful learning tools. Definitions and dates are stated and repeated frequently throughout the text. A list of concepts and terms is found at the conclusion of each unit, and a Glossary of Terms is provided in Appendix II. Thought-provoking and memory-stimulating questionnaires follow Units 2, 4, 6, and 7, and Unit 7 concludes with some general advice to the reader. Following the Table of Contents is an Index of Composers and Compositions, with works featured in listening guides listed in boldface print. Numerous musical examples illustrate the discussions. Although no previous musical training is expected of the reader, much useful information can be gleaned from these examples; to that end a brief guide to music notation is presented in Chapter 3. Chapter 3 also offers pointers in understanding titles and subheadings, using recordings for homework and independent research, and preparing listening reports.

A novelty of this book is its focus on literature. Our educational system introduces reading to the very young but postpones listening to serious music until much later, if not indefinitely. Literary references to music, drawn from fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and drama, help bring the student into closer contact with the world of music.

Some of this literary material deals with subject matter covered in selected musical works, while other items deal directly with music and musicians themselves. The student who enjoys modern fiction may develop a special feeling for Beethoven's "Holy Song of Thanks" (from the *String Quartet in A Minor*) in the context of Aldous Huxley's novel, *Point Counter Point* (see Chapter 27). Thomas Mann's stories help the reader to enjoy Wagner's music dramas (Chapters 29 and 33), whereas Mann's novel, *Doctor Faustus*, serves as an intriguing introduction to twelve-tone music (Chapter 22). An annotated version of Whit Burnett's charming story, "The Everlasting Quartet" (first published in the *Atlantic Monthly*), invites us into the intimate world of chamber music (Chapter 17). Poetry by Keats, Donne, and Shelley; prose excerpts by George Bernard Shaw, H. L. Mencken, and Elmer Davis; and fiction by Kleist, Hesse, Gide, Cather, Updike, and others—all are quoted or cited in connection with specific pieces or with music generally. Furthermore, many of the musical works considered are interpretations of outstanding poems and plays. For example, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is the subject of compositions by Berlioz, Tchaikovsky, Prokofiev, and Bernstein (Chapter 29). An appreciation of Shakespeare can greatly enhance one's enjoyment of the musical achievements of these four diverse composers.

Illustrations appearing throughout the book include original photographs and line drawings and reproductions of world-famous paintings. A folio of instruments and instrumentalists appears between Units 3 and 4.

Appendix I offers suggestions for student assignments outside the scope of daily homework. These projects range from short oral or written reports to extensive term papers, providing the teacher with ample material from which to judge the student's overall effort and accomplishment. The teacher can base course grades exclusively on these independent projects or on a combination of independent work and traditional written and/or listening exams. Most of the projects involve responding to live or recorded performances in connection with research into a particular aspect of music. The wide selection should allow every student the opportunity to pursue special interests that may arise during the semester. Many of the projects permit joint participation by a small group or even the entire class.

Music and Human Experience combines the innovative with the tried and true. It emphasizes texted and program music without sacrificing concrete historical/technical information as found in more traditional textbooks. The teacher may explore new pedagogical pathways; the student can become acclimated to classical music within a humanistic framework. Together, student and teacher can investigate music in a setting that underscores their mutual sharing of the human experience.

NOTE TO THE STUDENT

Society disperses laurels among its top creative artists, raising them up on pedestals, real or figurative. In the case of the great composers, many of us feel that we should love their music without reservation, but realistically no one can live up to this expectation at all times. In this regard, I wish to share a personal experience with the reader. One of Bach's best known cantatas is No. 106, "God's Time Is the Best Time." I originally encountered this music some twenty-five years ago, and it quickly became a favorite with me. Then somehow I did not hear the piece again until I began preparing this book. In the meantime, however, my love for Bach's choral music grew stronger and stronger. So, when I recently acquired a recording of *Cantata No. 106*, I looked forward to hearing it as one looks forward to meeting an old friend. This pleasurable feeling was heightened by praise from many outstanding musicians, who regard the work as one of Bach's finest. But, after placing the needle on the record, I was disappointed to find that the music was irritatingly unfamiliar. It seemed as if I had never heard it before, and my attention wandered instead of holding fast. It then occurred to me that I was experiencing what students might often experience in the course of studying this book; they too might find reputed masterpieces annoyingly strange and inaccessible. This was a sobering thought. In researching and writing this book I was drawing upon an enthusiasm stemming from years of studying, teaching, playing, and simply listening to music. How should I expect the musically inexperienced reader to keep pace?

Now in fact I do not expect you to delve into all the music discussed in this book. A voluminous amount of music is included, to offer flexibility of choice to both teacher and student; in all probability you will sample only a fraction of the pieces. In any case, I want to address myself to the problem of familiarizing oneself with individual pieces of music. Let us say that a work, such as *Cantata No. 106*, is universally admired by all who know it well. That means that the music must be beautiful, doesn't it? But, if, as the proverb says, beauty lies in the eye of the beholder, may it not also sometimes rest in the ear of the listener? A piece that one person loves may fall on the dead ears of another. If you are unfamiliar with a particular period, a particular composer, a particular genre, you may be incapable of enjoying a particular musical selection. Of course, this kind of standoff may only be temporary. After listening to a piece several times in succession, the beauty that others detect in it may begin to emerge for you as well. (But a warning: Overfamiliarity may spoil a piece, too.) Incidentally, it may not be necessary—or even desirable—to concentrate on a piece of music the first few times you hear it through; it may sink in more easily if you absorb it first as background.

This brings to mind an interesting essay, entitled *Bach*, by the noted writer, Gilbert Highet. Highet tells us that for the first twenty years of his musical lifetime he thought that Bach "was a dry old stick who had written some peculiarly difficult puz-

zles for the piano and organ, and some tediously monotonous religious utterances for the choir. Now I think he was the greatest composer who ever lived.”² What an extraordinary about-face! These words come from the pen of a noted Columbia University professor, the author of many books, and an outstanding radio lecturer on the arts, including music. If at first Highet could not succeed in liking Bach, then it is little wonder that others have those same feelings. Highet’s essay suggests ways of approaching Bach by learning to understand three ideals of Baroque music: tradition, symmetry, and control. Reading Highet, one may gain a better appreciation for Bach’s music, but there is no guarantee of loving it. In and of itself, no expository writing (and that includes the essays in this book) will convince you to love a piece of music. As I have indicated, many works can be appreciated from successive hearings, especially if your listening is separated by time intervals. If you find that you cannot initially respond positively to a particular piece, try another part of it or a different one, or go back to another you have enjoyed in the past. Later, give the difficult piece a second chance. Like Highet, you may eventually experience a change of heart about a work by Bach or some other master.

It is time to proceed. Think of the upcoming semester as an opportunity to meld your own life’s experiences with those of a broad spectrum of composers. Here is an opportunity to examine music mixed with humanity, to listen to music as the earnest and wonderful expression of mankind.

A.K.

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