

Transforming sound Necessary evolution at the piano

Scarlatti, Haydn, Glass. Traces along the avenues of musical history. The Baroque piano teacher trudges past. The classical Viennese composers are just around the corner. The old structures disperse again in minimalism. Everything seems so easy. Is it really?

To put it in the words of the poet – perhaps it is. Science sees European fantasy to a great extent as a complex network of relationships centred on Ovid. This appears to lie in his “Metamorphoses” dating from a few years after the birth of Christ, the origin of creative work up until the present day. Ovid’s only work in hexameters to be passed on, this unorthodox epos of classical mythology gets to the heart of the matter in fifteen books. All essence is in a constant state of change. Even the basic elements of earth, water, air and fire are no exceptions.

It is hardly surprising that Ovid’s collection of metamorphic tales about Jupiter, the father of the gods, Echo, the singing nymph, Niobe, Actaeon and all the names of mythological antiquity have become a kind of bible of traditions. August Wilhelm Schlegel even describes the “Metamorphoses” as a “mythical didactic poem”.

Reading, reading again, translating, illustrating, moralising, re-inventing: artistic activity became the occupation with and further development of that what already exists. Both antipodes of idea-seeking used to merge and still merge into one another: innovation instead of tradition becomes innovation out of tradition. This is a maxim that can be applied to all forms of art. The evolution of sound did not exclude piano music.

About the beginnings: Domenico Scarlatti lived all his life as a teacher in the milieu of ruling class families. From the service of the exiled Polish Queen Maria Sobieska he came to the Portuguese royal court in Lisbon in

1719. He moved to Madrid with his favourite pupil the Portuguese Infanta Maria Barbara. According to reports, in addition to the pleasant duties of court music teacher he enjoyed his love of the cembalo, which at that time was growing in popularity. While piano building attracted attention due to constant innovations, work genres also underwent permanent changes. Scarlatti joined individual dance movements together with Iberian folk music or fugues and thus started the metamorphosis towards the Sonata. The perceptible joy of playing and the love of improvisation of the world-renowned cembalist make his compositions timelessly interesting. Not in vain did legendary pianists such as Dinu Lipatti, Walter Gieseking and Vladimir Horowitz discover them for modern concert grands in the 20th century.

A similar “fate” to that of Scarlatti befell the classical Viennese composer Joseph Haydn. He was 29 years old when he became director of music in Count Karl Morzin’s household. The

following decades in the service of the Esterházy family became legendary. Undoubtedly the late triumphs in the concert halls of Europe enhanced the composer’s fame. However, it was not London, Vienna or Paris which was the birthplace of his increasingly sophisticated symphonies, of the progressive string quartets and the metamorphosis towards classical sonata form. He succeeded in achieving genuine innovations far from the big, wide world, far from the latest trends. It was the remoteness of the palaces in Eisenstadt and Fertöd and probably also the patient curiosity of his employers, which gave Haydn the inspiration to renew his artistic visions constantly. He still had this attitude towards the end of his life.

The kind of culmination of a life that was denied to Franz Schubert. He, the most Viennese of all composers, fought for recognition throughout his short life. He was looking for a way for people of his day to redefine Ludwig van Beethoven’s mighty legacy of works for the piano, of chamber music

and symphonic literature. In addition to this he succeeded quasi en passant in writing some of the most profound compositions for voice.

It appears ironic that Schubert, who was aware of his supposed technical shortcomings and wanted to put an end to them in an intensive course of study which he had planned to undertake with Antonio Salieri, ended up posthumously in the choppy waters of musical poetry. Even today, his work is greeted with smiles as being that of a naive person whose ideas simply came to him. It is doubtful whether the musical simplicity of his themes is really purely aleatoric in origin. Schubert intervenes in traditional forms again and again and this can be heard consciously. For example in his piano works – in each individual piece he created a narrative microcosm, which makes even today's listeners pensive.

Mutatas in nova corpora formas: In his "Metamorphoses" Ovid tells of figures which metamorphose into new bodies. Present understanding changes

the perception of this transformation due not only to recent pedagogical science. Development as change – change as development. One of the most natural and at the same time most impressive recurrent metamorphoses is the transformation from child to man or to woman. The phases of radical change, particularly crises in development, sustain the noticeable transformation. Isn't it, for example, its very bizarreness which makes Franz Kafka's story "The Metamorphosis" into an extremely comprehensible tale?

Kafka's tale also served Philip Glass as a source of inspiration. In 1988 the complex artist who, for simplicity's sake, is often described amongst experts as a minimalist, subsumed five pieces for piano in a Schubertian narrative tradition under the title "Metamorphosis".

The US composer with Jewish-Lithuanian roots used the repetitive cluster forms which he so likes once again. Continually recurring, insistent moments in an apparently suggested dis-

solution of form and structure make room for new avenues of expression.

Glass' compatriot David Lang also takes paths of change again and again. This search for transitional music in the widest sense has made the Pulitzer Prize winner an outstanding representative of lively, American contemporary music for decades. In 1992, in his "Memory Pieces" he overcame personal crises in his own life. A work for everyone, for sooner or later everyone will be confronted with the loss of a loved companion. Lang dedicated each of his Pieces to one of these people, whose loss he had to mourn personally. Here, the previously quoted personal crisis thus also becomes an element in humanitarian metamorphosis.

Transformation, cultivation, fresh start, radical change, evolution: geological, botanical, all physical and emotional, artistic and particularly musical innovations determine the kaleidoscope of secular development. The circle into antiquity is drawing

to close. Till this day references are made from Ovid back to the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus: πάντα ῥεῖ, "everything flows" gets right to the heart of the essence of metamorphosis.

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