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Music and Economy. Ideas and Practices from Enlightenment to Romanticism

The most important economic transformation of musical practices that shaped the history of music can be described as a change from the situation in which composers were serving their wealthy patrons (whether ecclesiastical or secular) whose responsibility was to assure them a steady income to the situation in which composers’ finances depended on their success on the anonymous market. While this change was happening, two other revolutions of musical practices took place: the idea of art that creatively manipulated its traditional means and contents was replaced by the idea of art that expresses the depths of artist’s psyche; and still at the very same time the paradigm of music changed from mimesis to abstraction.

It is thought-provoking that all three changes appeared roughly at the same period of music history. The turn from mimesis to abstraction accords well with the change in the concept of art. One can argue that abstract art is better suited to serve the expression of artist’s inner life. It hides from view the stories suggested by texts and programmatic titles that can be easily misinterpreted. Instead, it prefers a mystery heavy with hidden meanings. On the one hand, its personal aspect asks for an equally subjective answer from the listener thus opening the way for the value that since Alexander Baumgarten has been called “aesthetic.” On the other hand, the existence of music on the artistic market calls for values that can be attributed to it more objectively. Among them is the exchange value theorized within the discourse of political economy begun by Adam Smith. Faced with the necessity to earn money on the anonymous market, composers had to learn how to separate the two kinds of value. They had to accept the incommensurability of the market price with the meaning that they attached to their works. Anonymity of the listener guaranteed the creative autonomy they sought as children of enlightenment. However, it was not long before they discovered that being dependent on anonymous forces can be much more difficult than dependence on a well-known patron. Losing faith in the possibility of achieving full autonomy resulted in a set of anti-enlightenment reactions that we usually call romanticism. Dependent on the market, composers begun to search for the autonomy by escaping into abstraction and covering with mystery the true content of their works. They were offering their works for sale and attaching a price to them. However, they were doing so with an often bitter conviction that the renumeration received for their works was in no way commensurable with the amount of work needed to produce them, or for that matter, their artistic value.
To better understand the transformation described above I begin with considering the circumstances that resulted in the birth of the two sibling discourses: aesthetics and political economy. Although at the beginning both of them were trying to answer the same philosophical questions, their consequent development separated them for good. This is why the relation of music and economy can be seen only within the sphere of musical meanings and not in the aesthetic moment of experiencing music. Therefore, I develop the ideological map proposed by Karol Berger in *Beyond Reason: Wagner contra Nietzsche* by introducing within his framework the idea of market as it was theorized by Adam Smith. Its place is on the side of the enlightenment and Georg Friedrich Hegel whose *Philosophy of Law* gains many insights from Smith’s philosophy when it comes to the matters of civic society and market. However, it also resembles in some important aspects two of the romantic ideas described by Berger: Herder’s idea of cultural community and Schopenhauer’s concept of the will. Only the third prominent romantic concept that Berger placed on the ideological map among the anti-enlightenment currents cannot be reconciled with the idea of market. It is the Marxian notion of history inevitably heading towards the only possible end. The Marx’s interpretation of history includes an inherent critique of capitalism and private propriety that characterizes Marx’s departure from the path marked by Hegel’s footsteps. We tend to speak well of market and criticize capitalism. Market is valued positively, capitalism – negatively.

In the remaining part of the first chapter I turn to the patterns of attitudes characterizing members of capitalistic societies. Max Weber’s analysis of the connection between protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism is the starting point of the dialogue between the sociologist and Richard Wagner, the fiercest critic of capitalism among composers. Wagner points our attention to Gioacchino Rossini and describes him as the musical apologist for the market. In the ideological landscape of *Oper und Drama*, Rossini plays the same role that Benjamin Franklin plays in Weber’s essay. Following musicologists Nicholas Mathew and Benjamin Walton as well as sociologist Colin Campbell I describe the close relation and mutual dependence of the two variants of the worldview represented by Rossini and Wagner, or, put differently, the two attitudes towards life governed by protestant and romantic ethic — the spirit of capitalism and the spirit of modern consumerism. To approach the practical consequences of the idea of the market from the perspective of the enlightenment I then turn to the various ways that music featured in the life and works of Benjamin Franklin. I propose to see his views and inventions in parallel with the texts and works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. This is where I find the light side of capitalistic ethos that can be characterized by entrepreneurship, inventiveness and pragmatism. This set of attitudes is what, in analogy to the term coined by Weber, I propose to call the spirit of market.
The discussion of ideas and life attitudes corresponding to them forms the first part of my thesis and should be understood as a preparation for the discussion of composers’ works and practices in the second part. I begin with Italian opera, describing the eighteenth-century tradition of opera buffa that stages the backstage context of opera production. The chapter ends with interpretation of The Barber of Seville that situates Rossini’s opera within the context of over a century-long tradition of reflecting about opera production in librettos and scores. In this reading, the main protagonists of Rossini’s opera — Figaro, Almaviva and Rosina — bear features of the stock characters of meta-operatic stories who represent the main actors in the system of opera production managed by impresarios: the impresario, the patron and the primadonna.

In the next chapter the consideration of The Barber of Seville continues. Now, it is juxtaposed against Richard Wagner’s Der Ring des Nibelungen to look into the expression of the opposite ideas of market and capitalism described in the first chapter. I compare the scenes of making a contract between Figaro and Almaviva (Gioacchino Rossini, The Barber of Seville, Act I, no 4) and the scene of forging a sword by Siegfried and brewing a sleeping potion by Mime (Richard Wagner, Siegfried, first act finale), showing their structural similarities and ideological differences when it comes to the impact of pecuniary motivations on creative activities. The character of Figaro expresses the affirmation of market, whereas the dwarf characters that inhabit the world of Wagner’s tetralogy — Alberich, Mime and Hagen — can be seen in turn as expressing the critique of capitalism. Thus, having described the opposite poles of artistic attitudes towards money, I turn to less obvious ethics that can be found in characters from Beethoven’s Fidelio and Albert Lortzing’s Der Wildschütz. Rocco and Baculus are examples of people who, caring for their well-being, try to weigh costs and benefits on the scale of morality. They do not unambiguously reject capitalism and do not uncritically affirm market. However, they cannot refrain from considering the possibilities offered by a certain amount of money. Their compromises can be described as something between the reluctant tolerance of market and the permissive critique of capitalism. After stating this differences, I describe the circumstances of composing each of the operas as well as the career paths of their composers, trying to show how their resonate with the attitudes of the operas’ protagonists. The last part of this chapter is devoted to Franz Schubert who, with some necessary qualifications, can be said to be the first composer who lived almost exclusively out of the money earned by selling rights to publish his works. Listening to his Winterreise in the context of a congenial poetic cycle by Stanisław Barańczak written to accompany Schubert melodies, I trace the anxiety of the freelancer working on the market for musical works. Barańczak wrote new poems to the melodies composed by Schubert (only one of them is a translation from Wilhelm Müller). The
imagery of his poetry is rooted in our own modern world but one can hear in them distinct echoes of Müller’s texts. What is particularly interesting in this context is Barańczak’s use of the financial metaphor. He describes a human existential contract as a kind of a cheque given to us by some transcendent power. The reference to banking system emphasizes the man’s solitude in his relation to the transcendence. Müller used a similar metaphor of an empty plate lying before the hurdy-gurdy man. I interpret it as pointing to the solitude of a freelance composer in the society.

The anxiety of Schubert, who throughout his short career could always count on the help of his friends, can be felt also in the works of the next generation of composers. The last chapter is therefore devoted to the market strategies of the three romantics, whose composing activity is connected with the piano: Robert Schumann, Franz Liszt and Fryderyk Chopin. Their strategies were directed towards three, to some extent related, but nevertheless separate spheres of musical life of the first half of the nineteenth century: private home, public concert and semiprivate salon. Each of the spheres combines in different proportions and relations the two cultures or spirits described by Colin Campbell: the spirit of capitalism (including its positive side emphasized in the first chapter of the book – the spirit of market) and the spirit of modern consumerism, or, in other words, the culture of capitalistic subordination of life to work and the culture of hedonistic cultivation of imagination. The strategy of Schumann developed during his marriage with Clara, can be called *Hausmusik* (after Anthony Newcomb) and described as the domestication of romanticism well-known from the first period of Schumann’s compositional career exclusively devoted to the piano. Liszt can be seen as an example of virtuoso who lets himself be seen by the broad audience thirsty of experience and only when viewed by the concert-going public transcends the technical perfection achieved after countless hours devoted to exercises into a short moment of romantic exaltation. The case of Chopin gives us insight into the difficulties that appear when a composer is trying to compromise between an aristocratic unwillingness to handle the money and the necessity to work for his living by teaching, selling rights to his works and giving public concerts. I describe his creative transformation of such experiences as the sublimation of the gainful hustle and bustle. Such a narrative allows us to reconstruct the economic strategies of the composers, notice their impact on the composed works and sketch the map of attitudes characterizing the relation of artists towards market that can give a point of reference for our own choices, especially when it comes to the ways in which we hear music created by the composers of the first half of the nineteenth century and form our private canon of the past masters.