

“Lebewohl”: A Musical Motif for Peace

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Abstract

Music for human rights and social justice is very often a vehicle for words which then carry the lion's share of the interpersonal and musical communication. Music for solo piano which heightens our awareness of human rights and social justice issues exists without words, relying on extra-musical representations and symbols to create a bridge between the music and our perception of it. The first movement of Ludwig van Beethoven's *Piano Sonata in E-flat Major, Op. 81a, "Das Lebewohl"*, will be discussed for its symbolism of grief and farewell over the Archduke Rudolph's forced exit from Vienna as Napoleon's troops advanced, as will the first movement of *Sonata "27 April 1945"* of Karl Amadeus Hartmann, which uses Beethoven's motif from the first movement of *Op. 81a* as a primary reference in his musical outpouring of grief towards the imminent deaths of "preventative detainees" from Dachau at the hands of the Nazis at the end of the Second World War. Through music's connection to our nonverbal layers, these musical compositions can connect with our core selves, hold a mirror to our own belief systems and, if we are fortunate, bring us closer to peace.

Keywords: Piano human rights "Lebewohl" motif Ludwig van Beethoven Karl Amadeus Hartmann

Introduction

Music is peace, or rather: it can be. Music carries within its melodies, harmonies, and rhythms the ability to stimulate or sedate, to soothe or to burden, to fuel anger or to dampen anguish. Music helps us know it will be all right by surrounding us with familiar sounds and palliative emotions. It can shield us from life when we turn up the volume or put on headphones, cutting off an outside world on the verge of becoming overwhelming. And it can surprise us, when we let it. It can lead us to new modes of understanding, can open us to change, and can transform our

beliefs. Writing on music and conflict transformation on the website of The Voice Project, Vanessa Contopulos has stated:

In the same way as art or beauty, music carries within it the potential to interrupt patterns of familiarity. It can create moments of transcendence during which we are able to view what we felt was known territory from a new and enlightening perspective. (Contopulos 2012)

Music, at its best, moves and educates us. Rather than becoming either a panacea or a provocation to violence, music has the capacity to reach us on non- and sub-verbal levels within the brain, to open our belief systems to the possibility of something else – something more. This paper will not address the numerous examples of music’s power to be a part of the pathway to healing for those who have been hurt; rather, it will address the specific non-verbal potential of certain compositions of solo piano music to awaken an understanding and heighten our awareness of human rights and social justice issues.

I.

Music for social justice is very often a vehicle for words which then carry the lion’s share of the interpersonal and musical communication. Music for solo piano which heightens our awareness of human rights and social justice issues exists without words, relying on extra-musical representations and symbols to create a bridge between the music and our perception of it. The more we recognize the significance of these extra-musical symbols, the greater the potential for what Contopulos referred to as “moments of transcendence”, in similar fashion to knowing the code behind the actual words in many African-American spirituals brings with it deeper understandings and meanings of the messages hidden within the text. The actual words and symbols, then, become part of the framework in which the meaning is imbedded and built.

The use of the piano conjures images of an elite class more interested in the sustenance of their hegemony than in social justice and human rights issues; however, the instrument was still in its formative stages when it became but one symbol of an emergent middle class during Europe’s Industrial Revolution of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The people who purchased a piano during that time were acting much as parents do today: wanting a better and more educated and affluent life for their children than they had themselves. Along with piano lessons were lessons in singing, perhaps a string instrument, general music to read and understand music, and dance.

As today, people sought to better themselves and their families through their talents, their work, their children, and their friends. When something happened to them as a person, a family, a people, or a nation, they

grieved. Some of them communicated such grief through the composition of music dedicated to those who had been wronged. One example of such a composition is the *Piano Sonata in E-flat Major, Op. 81a, "Das Lebewohl"* by Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827). A grumpy and cantankerous man by the time this sonata was written in 1809-1810, Beethoven nonetheless felt great suffering for his friend and patron the Archduke Rudolf of Vienna when the Archduke was forced to leave the city on May 21, 1809, as Napoleon's troops advanced upon it. A motif of three stately chords opens the movement. (Beethoven 1811) Heard twice within the *Adagio* introduction (mm. 1-16), it fails each time to cadence into E-flat, moving instead to c minor (m. 2) and to C-flat major (m. 8), never achieving a full cadence into E-flat major until the coda of the first movement. Over those three chords in their initial statement opening the piece Beethoven wrote "Le – be wohl", translating to "live well" but normally used as a salutation of farewell. At the time of the first movement's composition in 1809, Beethoven did not know how final that salutation would be.

[play video recording of excerpts from Beethoven Op. 81a; c. 90 seconds]

In terms of the musical symbolism and weight of the movement (not to mention the time to play), the majority of the substance and significance from the "Lebewohl" motif occurs within the introduction (mm. 1-16) and coda (c. m. 146 – 255). (Biss 2013) As often happens in Beethoven's music, however, the melodic portion of a motif may be removed, leaving a rhythmic motif which may be manipulated on its own apart from its conjunction with the melody. (One need only think of the short-short-short-long rhythm found throughout Beethoven's *Symphony No. 5 in c minor, Op. 67* to realize the significance rhythmic motives play in his music.) The body of *Op. 81a* proper (that is, the exposition, development, and recapitulation between the introduction and coda) includes but one overt usage of the "Lebewohl" motif in the closing theme (mm. 50-56; mm. 142-148). The motif is found in inversion in the secondary theme (mm. 35-38; mm. 127-130), and many iterations of the short-short-long rhythm as eighth-eighth-quarter note may be found throughout the movement, discreetly unifying those moments during which the explicit use of the motif is not present. Such usage of the motif both rhythmically and melodically will become evident as well in an examination of the *Sonata "27 April 1945"* of Karl Amadeus Hartmann (1905-1963).

136 years after Beethoven mourned the departure of the Archduke Rudolf of Vienna, over a span of more than a day Karl Amadeus Hartmann watched at least 20,000 prisoners from Dachau being whipped along a road away from the approaching Allied forces and towards their deaths. He went that day to the piano in in his father-in-law's villa (Lebrecht 2005) in

Kempenhausen (Walker 2013) to memorialize his impressions of that moment and those prisoners in a piano sonata, inscribing upon the first page of the manuscript: “On 27 and 28 April 1945, a stream of people trudged past us, “preventative detainees” from Dachau –
endless was the stream –

endless was the misery –

endless was the suffering –”. (Hartmann 1945/1983)

Much may be inferred from the score and its performance: some hear the hobbling feet of the prisoners in the rhythm of the opening lines (Lebrecht 2005), some the “melismas of Jewish ritual music” (Krause 1945/1983) – the latter perhaps most specifically in the final recitative of the first movement (mm.50-65). It is the conscious use of the “Lebewohl” motif from Beethoven’s *Piano Sonata, Op. 81a*, however, that demonstrates not only his knowledge of Beethoven’s music and grief, but also binds the unknowing of return from Beethoven towards the Archduke to Hartmann and his distress for these “preventative detainees” of Dachau at the end of the Second World War.

The “Lebewohl” motif of Beethoven’s *Piano Sonata in E-flat Major, Op. 81a* permeates the first movement of Hartmann’s *Sonata “27 April 1945”* in three distinct ways: rhythm only (as short-short-long), single notes or dyads placed within a larger grouping of notes, and prominently as an intentional reference to the Beethoven motif from *Op. 81a*. Opening with an oblique reference to the motif in rhythm only, its first overt appearance comes in mm. 7-8, overlapping left to right hand – a suggestion of memoriam that is counterbalanced just before the closing recitative in mm. 48-49 by the same statement in a different key.

[play recording of Hartmann mm. 1-9; c. 15 seconds]

Between these two statements are found numerous iterations of all three permutations of Beethoven’s “Lebewohl” motif, which will be highlighted on the score as the video recording plays. The closing recitative has three phrases, each one longer than the preceding one, each ending with the “Lebewohl” motif inverted and in augmentation. The final phrase has an extension of the motif to close. Is it hope or resignation? Listen and watch Karl Amadeus Hartmann’s *Sonata “27 April 1945”*.

[play video recording of Hartmann *Sonata “27 April 1945”*, mvt. 1; c. 5 minutes]

Conclusion

Music for solo piano which heightens our awareness of human rights and/or social justice issues can be cathartic for composer, performer, researcher, and audience alike. From at least 1809 on, this music has taken its place within the canon of piano literature, though only recently has it been

highlighted as music for peace. Along with pianists who are dedicating their lives to music for peace, such as Davide Martello (the “peace pianist” of Taksim Square during the Gezi Park protests of 2013 and Paris right after its attack in 2015) (Bylund 2013), the discovery and performance of music composed in reaction to horrors against humanity can be greater than reminding us of the events that prompted a specific piece of music’s composition – it can enhance our empathy for those around us and around the world with lives different than our own. May we continue to find avenues, both musical and otherwise, to come together with a shared vision of humanity at peace.

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