

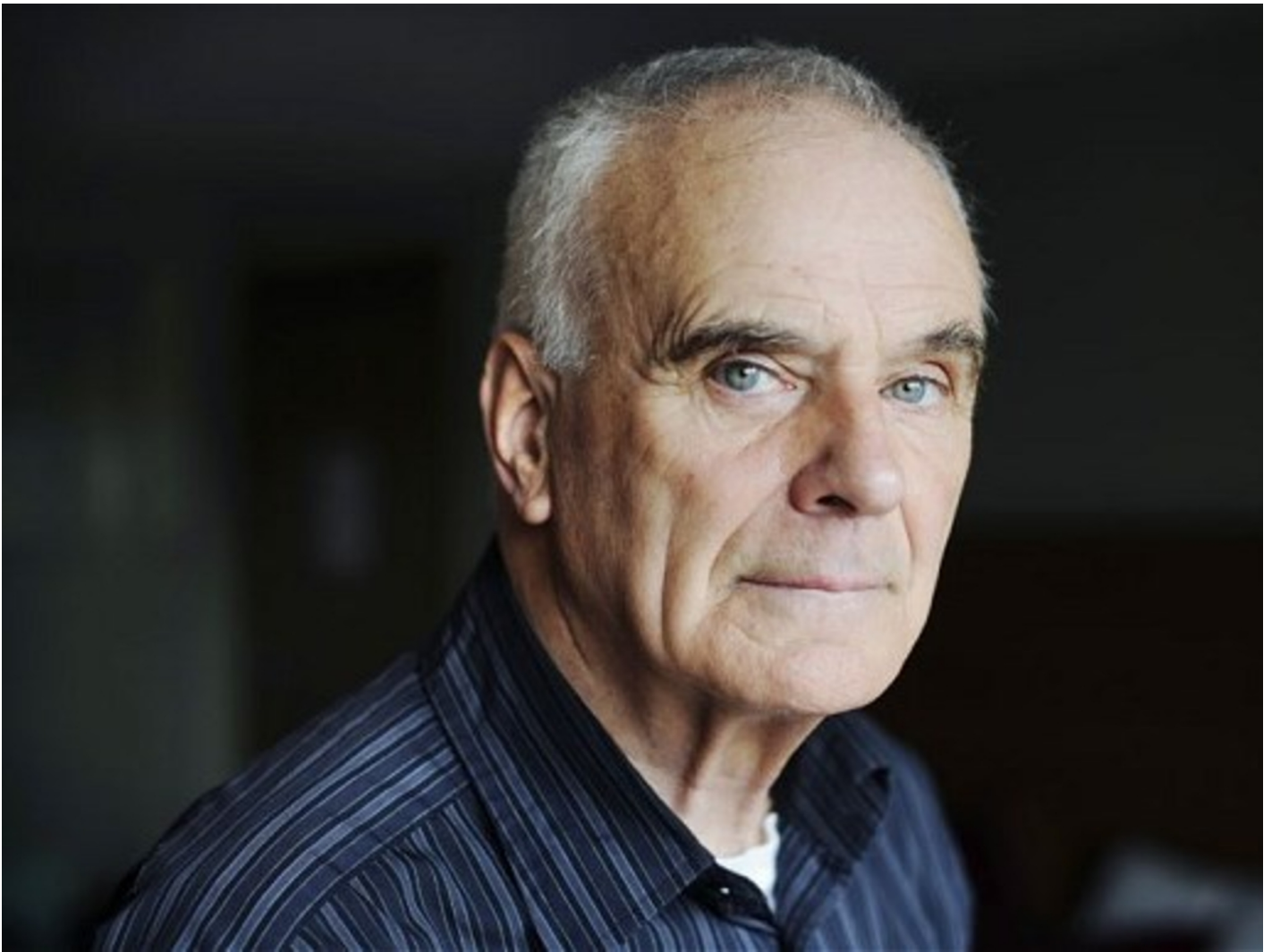


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Musical Morals and Moral Music: The artist and the environment

Transcript

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Musical Morals and Moral Music: The Artist and the Environment

by

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'Musical morals and moral music' - I hope I don't sound as if I am pontificating about these things as that is not my intention. I merely wish to open up some questions which have been of great concern to me over many years. Indeed, I think they have been of concern to me since my childhood, when I witnessed, from a long distance, through Alexander Worth's columns in what was then the Manchester Guardian, the reports from the 1948 to 1949 Committee of the Musicians Union of the Soviet Union, more or less banishing Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Myaskovsky, and Khachaturian. They were my heroes, if you like, and that marked the beginning of my understanding of the moral questions which can face composers, not only in extremis, as was their situation, but even today here, under different pressures. We also feel enormous moral implications in what we do or try to do, and these implications are 'moral', not in the narrow sense, but in the widest possible application.

But perhaps we should start with a very important and fundamental question: why do we write music? It is probable that only in recent musical history would we have even considered posing that question, because music had its perfectly recognisable and accepted place in ritual, religion, entertainment, dance, song and recitation to music - the real ancestor of opera - and it very clearly fulfilled a whole host of social functions. However, these days, for a thinking and reflective creator of music, I think it is impossible not to pose that question, 'Why do we write music?' and I think my first, very simple, answer would be a very serious one: we bear witness.

Thinking of three very straightforward and well-known examples of bearing witness in that sense, we might list: John Lennon's 'Working Class Hero'; Shostakovich's very last viola sonata; Benjamin Britten's very late work, 'A Time There Was'. Each one of those, in a very particular way, bore witness to what that composer had experienced in. In the case of the Lennon, his bearing witness is understandable to almost the whole world I would think, by this stage but the Shostakovich is understandable to a smaller audience of people, who are initiated into his language and who like chamber music, but the statement is still relevant and still vital and reflects his situation at the end of his life under the Communists. Benjamin Britten, 'A Time There Was', is a particular kind of English or British nostalgia, which I think we can particularly empathise with very easily.

A possible second answer to the question of why we write music is that we preserve memory by our record, by our witness, and I would like to cite three examples of this.

The first is Beethoven's 9th Symphony. I heard that only recently, in a very enthusiastic and wonderful performance by the Cambridge University Music Society. I listened to all that brotherhood of man stuff, the sheer confidence of that D Major ending and the extraordinary fall of the third on the word 'forgot before God'. I cannot identify with that, but, it is undoubted that he stated something there, probably as well and as exuberantly as could possibly be done, which was a stage in mankind's development and he certainly believed that. Although he was not a religious man, he had very strong convictions, humanist convictions probably, and out of that Schiller text he fashioned something which, as long as there is a civilised musical world, will resonate with the atmosphere, the creative flavour, the whole essence of that period, and it will be a witness, a record, without any parallel.

My second example here would be again Shostakovich and his 5th Symphony, which is a more complex case. It bears witness, but quite how it did this was, until recently, not all that clear, because he himself stated that it was his answer to 'just criticism' by the Communist Party - that is Stalin, who actually wrote an article in Pravda denouncing his opera 'Lady Macbeth', which he found absolutely incomprehensible, chaotic and dissonant. However, we have learnt recently, and some of us suspected for a long time before he died, that the last movement is a parody of happiness; of us all creating a wonderful new future in our collective farms. It is the jack-boots, in the three-note figure, that represents Stalin through so many of his works, and it is full of passionate hatred, but it was taken to be positive, and his attitude was always, on the surface, 'Oh yes, that's right - that is what it is.' However, although nobody could actually say it at the time when loved ones, friends and family were being taken away to the Gulag, the people who witnessed that first performance in the 1930s in the Soviet Union were all in tears at the slow movement. Nobody dared say why they were crying, it is clear that it was because it bore witness.

My third example is Carl Orff's 'Carmina Burana', a very popular piece. To what does it bear witness? I would like to quote a leading critic of sculpture, of the realist school of art under Hitler, called Kolber, when he spoke of Klimsch and Scheibe, two sculptures we do not know any more, 'we know that we owe to these masters the salvation of a strong German form in the

midst of decadence.' Carmina Burana is still the most popular and most often played work of the 20th Century, and it is an answer to Hitler of how to write the music of the Nazi period. It bears witness.

But to return again to the main question 'Why do we write music?' A third possible answer might be: to defy death. Ivan Klima, the Czech writer, in 'Literature and Memory' wrote:

'The struggle to transcend our own death is quintessentially human. The feeling that death should not be the end of everything is one of the basic existential feelings. By resisting death, we resist forgetting, and vice versa, by resisting forgetting, we resist death. One form this resistance can take is the act of creation: because I create, I resist death.'

You needn't have a Christian or any other kind of faith to understand what he means here. There is a certain kind of immortality, a death-defying element, in writing something down which will bear witness for the future, and I think our craving for some kind of immortality, even those who do not have a faith, it is a very strong motivation.

In all the arts at the beginning of the 20th Century, old values were questioned and overthrown. Tonality and rhythm in music went through convulsions. The disappearance of the tonic, if I can be technical, in music and the fracture of rhythm caused great concern, and I think we are very familiar with Stalin's and with Hitler's response to the convolutions that happened in the early part of the Century. Just to recapitulate, briefly, the story of tonality in music: in modulation (the possibility of going from a tonic key to a key a fifth above, the dominant) there are already the seeds of the destruction of tonality within that very move. As soon as you begin modulation, you can think to go a fifth above that, or a fifth below, to the sub-dominant, and eventually, in the 19th Century, composers modulated more and more, so that by late Liszt and some of late Wagner, you do not really know what key you are in for quite a time, until Schoenberg, in the early years of the 20th Century, wrote music which had no key at all. This meant that the audiences actually got rather lost, and were out of touch with what was happening in the forefront of musical development.

In rhythm, the same kind of thing happened. If we take, for instance, a piece by Bach for solo cello or violin, you can write one line down, and in that one line, there is a whole rhythmic world, which is not stated but it is implied. With our imaginations, which we have from previous encounters with tonal music, we fill in the harmonies and the underlying rhythms which support that line in Bach. There is the rhythm of the notes on the page. There is the number of beats which we hear in the bar. In each bar, no matter how many notes are in it, we hear that underlying group of notes. We hear the harmonic rhythm, the rate of change of harmony, be it two or four or one bars which a particular harmony holds, the change of rhythm there. It is all implied in the one line of a Bach suite. In each bar, or small group of bars, we hear upbeats going to the beat and the after-beat, so that there is always that arc going on, an undulation, a wave shape, and then - and here we start to touch architecture - there are four, eight, and 16-bar structures, sometimes modified to five or seven, or 17, but they are the additions of each of these small groups of bars, based on these rhythms, and they are all there in the one line.

Here we come onto architecture in music as we are getting into the larger structure. When you think that the tonic of that key is holding everything together, it is acting just as the vanishing point in architecture, and when you take that away, as happened in the early 20th Century, and you fracture the rhythm, then we have crisis time.

Just as an aside, I remember, very early on, reading the programme notes to Offenbach by E. T. A. Hoffmann, who most people know for his tales but who also wrote some wonderful of criticisms of Beethoven first performances. In his programme notes he actually gave musical examples, and I remember when I was a boy, going to Halle concerts, there were also musical examples in the programmes. Would that we could take it for granted that that happened now. But what has happened? I still long for, with well-known works like the 'Prague Symphony' of Mozart, that one would have, in a programme note, some well-articulated musical discussion about, for instance, the thematic unity of the first movement, the introduction and the allegro, and the function of the inversion in holding the whole structure together, the architecture, or, in that same symphony, in the slow movement, the psychology of the three tonalities, in ascending order, of the development section, the slow movement, in relation to the extraordinary three operating throughout the Magic Flute, and what this might mean in psychological terms. Also, I would love to see a long discussion of the function of that key, D Minor, in Mozart's work in relation to Don Giovanni, the Requiem, and all his other work in D Minor. There is a whole area of musical journalism there just waiting to be investigated and would that we had the musical journalists to enter into those regions and keep me entertained, and I hope bring a lot of other informed people along, but no, they do not do it.

Olivier Messiaen, in his 'Technique de mon Langage Musical', he has a chapter on rhythm. It is extraordinarily short. He talks about little cells of rhythm and you can add or you can take a slight rhythm off, and these have a life of their own - they can

expand or contract, according to principles which he announces. These principles are very simple, probably too simple, and after what I have said about the rhythms implied in one Bach line, I think that the simplicity proves, more or less completely, that composers such as Messiaen, when they threw old style rhythm out, did not quite understand what they were throwing out and certainly not the actual complexity of it and its deep-rootedness in musical experience.

Serialism came along, with its sets or cycles of notes, even sets of rhythmic values and colours, and this brings us the question of whether it is possible to hear music atonally, just as is it possible to actually see a painting purely abstractly? Don't we, because we are trained to listen from the base up to harmonies, start to project into music some kind of relationship between the pitches which is not abstract, and hear points of harmonic arrival and departure, just as, when we look at an abstract painting so often, because of the different colours, we begin to project dimensions into that? I am not going to answer this, but it is certainly something one should consider.

As lovely footnote concerning how we listen, I would just like to mention the general reaction of most people to the premiere of 'Verklarte Nacht' in 1905 in Vienna. People always say, "Oh, wasn't it awful that when Schoenberg did that unusual, unprepared dissonance in 'Verklarte Nacht', the audience hissed?" Would that audiences would recognise an unprepared dissonance and hiss! I am afraid that, with the assault on the ears of so much new music, where one does not even begin to listen to the harmony, to try to understand what is going on, we have taken it too much for granted that we can listen to the various elements of musical. I think we cannot take it for granted that one could expect people to be capable of listening density, dynamic, high and low notes and to fast and slow, on anything but a superficial level. And if we examine that seriously, after the music of the early part of the second part of the 20th Century, we begin to realise that the composer has here a dreadful moral predicament: what to do in the face of ears that are not working? And this is a concern not just among audiences, because it is a worry sometimes among players as well, and sometimes also among people who should actually be listening, whom I will not mention!

I remember William of Auxerre wrote: 'Concerning perfection in form, in people, form, and in art, and of course in music,' which was very important for the medieval mind, 'quad-constat,' and I think that probably means that which possesses a consistency of its own as a perceptible form, 'quad-congruit,' which here means, though these things are very difficult to translate, is adapted to human faculties, 'quad-discerned, through the union of the constat and the congruit is cognisable by the intellect,' and the intellect is something which I wanted to mention because I fear it is often very much underestimated and not called upon to do its work.

In the early-20th Century, there were loud calls for the destruction of museums and art galleries, for instance by the Italian futurists and the Dada. In the mid-20th Century, there was a huge denial among composers, and a lot of performers, of the validity of earlier music. This had political reasons in many instances, in Germany and Austria particularly but also in Italy. The Nazis and the Fascists had favoured people like Richard Strauss, and they had banned Mahler, but they had also liked Mozart and Beethoven, and Hitler even made it known that he wanted the slow movement from Bruckner's seventh symphony at his funeral. So, all the composers whom I met at Darmstadt in the early 1950s, the only composer they would recognise was Anton von Webern, and everything else was thrown out. I remember even Boulez at that time saying that opera houses should be destroyed, for which recently he was arrested as a terrorist in Switzerland, but let off when they learnt that he was actually conducting these days in opera houses. Even then in Germany, in those very early days, I thought these people are cultivating a high art which I refuse to contemplate: the high art of forgetting. For me, the idea of denying Beethoven, Mozart and Bach, which did not interest them at all, was rather like denying one's own parents. They were my musical parents. My thought was that these people writing this music in the 'Darmstadt' style was rather like plucking a flower and putting it in a vase; it will be fine for three or four days, but then it will wilt, and that will be the end of that, which is more or less what happened.

I would like to quote Ivan Klima again, the Czech writer, who survived the Nazi concentration camps:

'I did not conclude from the fact of my survival that it was my duty to write realistic works about the War and the camps, and in fact, I wrote very little about that. Memory is not expressed only through a dutiful recording of a certain experience. It is, rather, a responsibility that flows from an awareness of a continuity with everything that went before with all those who came before; that is, a responsibility for what must not be forgotten if we are to avoid ending up in a vacuum.'

That, coming from somebody who survived Nazi and Communist dictatorships where forgetting was a very important part of surviving, I think is an important reminder.

There is an Aristotelian and medieval principle concerning musical harmony in relation to the harmony of the soul. Harmony of

course had a meaning which was not ours, but it consisted of memory, intelligence and love in due proportion to each other, and I think that is something a composer might remember with great inspiration. I remember Lao Tzu, who stated that: 'You can tell the state of a man's mind by the way he touches a bell.' I think that has great musical resonance.

To go back to my original claim of what music is about or why we write it, the bearing of witness, by those artists who foreshadowed and lived through the cataclysms of the early-20th Century. Whether they lived through the First World War, the Russian Revolution and Civil War, the rise of fascism in Germany, Italy, Spain and the Balkans, they thought that they were destroying their legacy.

Case one: the abolition of repetition by Schoenberg in 'Erwartung' of 1909. He set out to not repeat any material so it would be continuously developing music. In fact, there is enough of the romantic style left for memory to function, and it is as if one had memories of music outside the work, but these helped one through that particular piece, and it made musical sense. It was witness to what had gone before, but the composer perhaps did not realise how much it was witness. He was not a real revolutionary.

In a second case, Stravinsky fractured rhythm in a completely new way, and everybody said he had destroyed rhythm - it is dead forever, but we have seen how so many composers, on those really complex rhythms, have created, in all kinds of music, new kinds of rhythm. Schoenberg invented serialism, 12-tone music. However, when we listen to his Variations for Orchestra, from 1927-28, the memory functions all the time, and romantic vocabulary reigns. He even quotes the German musical letters, B, A, C, H, and makes a big meal of that. Particularly interesting is that the witness bearers of German/Austrian expressionism, were banned by the Nazis. I am thinking of Heckel, Trakl, Klimsch, and so on. Here, I come to the simplistic reactions by people who took a very high moral ground on this. To quote Hitler in 'Mein Kampf', which is quoted in an excellent book by Peter Adam on music in the Third Reich:

'For it is an affair of the state to prevent people from being driven into the arms of spiritual lunacy, for on the day that this kind of art were actually to correspond to the general conception, one of the most severe changes of mankind would have begun - the backward development of the human brain.'

Of course they had, in 1937, the exhibition of 'decedent' art in Munich, where they threw out Archipenko, Braque, Chagall, Delaunay, Van Gogh, Kandinsky, Matisse, Picasso, Vlaminck, and a hundred others. Adolph Ziegler opened the exhibition, and in his speech, he said these very memorable words:

'The people trust, as in all things, the judgment of one man, our Führer. He knows which way German art must go in order to fulfil its task as the expression of German character. What you are seeing here are the crippled products of madness, impertinence and lack of talent. I would need several freight trains to clear our galleries of all this rubbish.'

We all remember the burning of books in Berlin, but on March 20th 1939, over 1,000 works of art from that exhibition were burned. But in June 1939, thank goodness, the Fischer Gallery in Lucerne organised a huge international sale of some of the works, from which the Nazis pocketed the money.

I come back to Carl Orff, 'Carmina Burana', the most popular work of the 20th Century, in this country as in a lot of others. I would like to add a footnote to this, a part of a poem, by Rilke concerning Orpheus. This is from the 'Sonnets to Orpheus' of 1922, in a translation is by Stephen Mitchell, and we are dealing here with Orpheus as musician, teacher and composer, and it reflects so strongly what was about to burst, ten years later, onto the scene in Germany, and sums up a thinking man's state of mind under that moral dilemma:

But will you tell me how a man can penetrate through the lyre's strings? Our mind is split and at the shadowed crossing of heart-roads, there is no temple for Apollo.

Song, as you have taught it, is not desire, no wooing any grace that can be achieved; song is reality. Simple, for a god. But when can we be real? When does he pour the earth, the stars, into us?

I would like to mention one moral dilemma of an artist, Emil Nolde, who, in the 1920s, was very enthusiastic about the Nazi Party and supported them very actively. In 1928, he did a series of pictures of monsters, and the most extraordinary one shows a small figure tied by his foot to this extraordinary threatening creature which is hovering above and over this poor little creature, probably himself. He obviously had some perception of what was going to happen, as had Rilke, and the irony is that, when the

Nazis came to power, Emil Nolde's wonderful paintings were forbidden. He was actually forbidden to paint, and I do not think he ever understood why. He tried to conform, but failed miserably. It is a very sad dilemma.

There is a very unpleasant aftermath of revolution in politics and the arts: the French Revolution was followed by bloodbath; the Russian Revolution by a Gulag system worse than the Tsarist era which preceded it; the Chinese Communist Revolution was followed by the cultural revolution, in which millions of people died; and Pol Pot's Cambodian Communist Revolution was followed by the 'killing fields'. In all instances, censorship was developed in order to restrict or obliterate memory.

In music, in post-War Europe, in 1945 and so on, the situation in the musical world, as far as composers was concerned, basically swung between total serialisation and total Aleatoricism: total serialisation as in Boulez, 'Structures', for two pianos; or total Aleatoricism as in John Cage. Was this musical experiment or did it become dogma? Was the political equivalent social experiment or did it become dogma?

The revolution of circa 1900 to the 1940s gave way to a situation where the organisation of music and other experimental phenomena in the arts resembled and paralleled certain political organisations.

George Orwell, 'Animal Farm': 'Some are more equal than others.' It is interesting to reflect on this with regards to 20th century composition. Which composers of the latter half of the 20th Century will be played in future? Already, the likes of Shostakovich, Britten, Bernstein and John Williams have gained huge audiences, as well as smaller ones for their chamber works. I will not mention those who have fallen by the wayside and are not played, but I am very pleased that, in Scotland, we have a resurgence of composers who really do connect with the public without compromise, and I would just like to mention McMillan, Weir, Beamish and Nicholson, who, for me, represent real hope. I suspect that 20th Century music will shortly undergo quite a lot of revision.

With Hitler and Stalin, the lines were clearly drawn. They took the arts very seriously, and artists and the public suffered. At the beginning of our century, the lines are less clearly drawn. Our leaders could not care less. The arts are under attack not by despotism, but by marginalisation. Think of the trivia of all influential television or think of reality shows - these are more real than real. Or think of the cutbacks in education in Thatcher's time. Audiences find it hard to recruit young people for serious music, in some instances. I talked to Stephen Cleobury, of the Cambridge University Music Society, who conducts King's College Chapel, just recently, and he said he is already feeling those cuts by Thatcher, in that to get tenor and bass recruits into his two choruses is becoming more and more difficult because choral singing was cut out of schools. It is quite clear that we are in danger because of cuts in education. We are in danger of losing our whole heritage of choral music, particularly amateur choral music.

I am not going to talk about musical education. I think I have talked about that often enough. I would just like to say that musical literacy is essential if we are not going to deprive young people of their rightful inheritance of music. It is inverted snobbery of those who deny the young the opportunity to read music, and it cuts off their memory just as absolutely as failing to teach them to read would cut off their access to any literature whatever.

If we are denied the keys to our own inheritance and our own culture, memory is obliterated. You will remember that I mentioned memory as one of the real reasons we create music. It is for this reason that we write music so as to stand up against the whole of our culture being reduced to decorative irrelevance, as civilisation succumbs to consumerist unthinking. The commercial powers on composers, on all of us, not to think, to go the easy way, are very strong. I think a philosophy for a lot of people would not be 'I think, therefore I am,' of Descartes, but 'I consume, therefore I am.'

I would like just to quote something else of Rilke, very quickly, from the second Duino Elegy:

But if the archangel now, perilous, from behind the stars took even one step down toward us: our own heart, beating higher and higher, would beat us to death. It is really quite a thought. That could be the net result of unthinking succumbing to commercialism.

In 1970, I retreated to Orkney, and I took a house with no mains water and no road. I used driftwood and cut peat for fuel. This was very largely a result of my experience in the United States, on a Harkness Foundation Scholarship, where I had been so horrified by the commercial inroads and the consumerism. On the back of that, I determined that I would live as if that civilisation had come to an end, which it could well do in the future.

Each work that I created in the 28 years that I lived in that house was a celebration of that place, at the time still unspoilt. But

even there, there came an invasion of tourists, so I moved to one of the northern islands of Orkney. It was extraordinary that I moved to Sanday, in Orkney, which coincided with my writing an Antarctic Symphony, commissioned by the Antarctic Survey people in Cambridge and the Philharmonia Orchestra, and I had to go to Antarctica. From the scientists there, I learned all about climate change. I learnt that, on Sanday, climate change will eventually flood and destroy my house, which is right on the shore. Only recently, I wrote a violin concerto, whose subtitle is 'Fiddler on the Shore', from the fact that it came out of a walk along that shore with a local fiddler, playing traditional music. This is going to be first performed in the Gewandhaus Leipzig with Daniel Hope, and I shall be conducting it there and then at the Proms here. The threat is two-fold: to the traditional music the fiddler is playing; and to the whole environment of the island.

Where there is no hope, we must hope. I am sure a lot of you know 'Either/Or' by Kierkegaard, and to the end of understanding that philosophy, I think that book helped me a great deal.

Hope can be betrayed by false messiahs, religious or political, as we have seen, in the desire for simple solutions. Here I think of the Weimar Republic dissolving into despair at inflation and despair and shame after World War I. The attitude was summed up by Albert Speer, Hitler's favoured architect, who wrote:

"Someone who thinks in a very simple way must appear today's thinking has become too complicated. The uneducated person, the peasant, as he is, would deal with all these problems in a much simpler fashion because he is not yet spoiled. He also has the strength to carry out his simple ideas."

Under Hitler, we saw the result in solutions as various as the final solution of the Jewish problem and the mass destruction of works of art and the burning of books.

In our world, where out of disillusion and disgust ever less people feel it meaningful to write, we feel the first stirrings of a chill breeze that could herald another age of easy solutions. The creation by bankers and politicians of legal conditions for themselves in which financial rape and pillage can be committed with impunity, whereas for a comparatively microscopic crime, we, you and I, will be jailed for a substantial period. This has created a sour scepticism, with awful implications for democracy. It is the age of King Stephen and Rufus again, of the robber barons, which took centuries of popular misery before any regulations.

However, Christians will tell us how one small act, a sacrifice, changed the whole of the Roman - and ultimately the Western - world forever. We, as a Christian nation, should have learned from our unchristian mistakes. The four medieval crusades, still taught as triumphs of Christian virtue over Muslim barbarity when I was a boy in the 1940s, should - and here I beat a drum, unashamedly - have alerted Bush/Blair on Iraq and Obama/Brown on Afghanistan to the consequences, through following centuries, of such action, for *any* stated reason.

When I was writing my third Naxos string quartet, the Iraq invasion happened. I had taken part leading one of the marches here in London against that. No one took any notice of those two million people. In this quartet, my sheer damned anger burst out, and it gets right to the core of that string quartet. You might say, "Why bother? Neither Bush nor Blair will ever listen to a string quartet, even by Haydn or Beethoven?!" But, I had to bear witness. The only witness I actually bore at the time, because nobody would interview me - I suppose they perhaps thought they'd better avoid the Master of the Queen's Music! - was to a French news programme, and I told them exactly what I thought: one, we bear witness; two, we preserve memory by our record, which could, or would, be obliterated; three, we defy death, not so much as an individual, but on behalf of all participants in our culture. These musical morals and moral music define our *raison d'être*.

I would like to conclude with a very brief poem, one of my favourites, by Michelangelo, and the circumstances of the poem are these: injury and shame in the text are direct criticisms, from safe exile in Rome, direct criticisms of his native Florence, where Duke Cosimo's tyrannical regime had trapped his statue of Night in the Medici Chapel. So he speaks as the statue there locked away in Florence:

Sleep is dear to me, and being of stone is dearer, as long as injury and shame endure. Not to see or hear is a great boon to me; therefore do not wake me. Pray, speak softly.

A poem of utter despair, yet he bore witness! He wrote that, and yet he went on to create his late sculptures, his masterpieces, as good as anything anybody has ever done, as enigmatic and brave and positive in their defiant starkness as anything ever created. These unfinished figures emerging from the stone are perhaps a perfect image of resurrection, of creation, of sheer bloody-minded determination by that artist to create something in the face of the despair that he felt!

A lovely footnote, perhaps a little irreverent, but the last time I sat for a couple of hours in the Academia in Florence with those sculptures, which are unfinished of course, an American couple sauntered by. I hope this does not imply disrespect for Americans in particular, but I think it does show how members of a culture, without information, without memory, with the kind of forgetfulness which is very convenient for governments who wish to rule autocratically. This lady turned to her husband and said, "Say George, what a pity that nobody ever came and finished those statues!" I think that that says so much.

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