

"The Portrayal of Evil in Music"
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How sour sweet music is,
When time is broke, and no proportion kept!
So is it in the music of men's lives.

-Shakespeare, *Richard II.*

It is a pleasure to be part of this symposium on evil. Our time is limited, so I will keep my remarks brief, touching on some of the major issues.

Music, of itself, is morally neutral.
Tones themselves don't do anything right or wrong. \
They are in a world of their own.

yet, the Bard declares,

“music oft hath such a charm
To make bad good, and good provoke to harm.”

[Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure.*]

This underlying neutrality makes music a fertile platform for the abstract expression and reflection of emotional conditions such as love and hate, joy and sadness in particular, as well as the moral conditions of good and evil. The ancient philosophers and music theorists

provide an understanding of the basic connection of music with notions of good and evil.

The most important premise can be reduced to the cosmic pattern:
good equates with order,
evil equates with disorder or chaos.

Within the world of musical notes,
order means consonance
(purely tuned, harmonious, pleasing intervals and chords
–ordered musical sounds)

chaos means dissonance
(out of tune, clashing, jarring intervals and chords
–disordered musical sounds)

The basic paradigm therefore is
consonance equates with good; dissonance with evil.

(One can develop this polarity into a dialectic by suggesting that the synthesis or resolution of dissonance into consonance, produces musical art-works.)

The concepts of order and harmony are linked through the ancient Greek notion of *harmonia*, the harmonious relations that exist among created things: in particular, the perfect relationships that hold the planets in their orbits: the music of the spheres; the *musica mundana*. This is the domain of Apollo.

At the same time, we can remember the Dionysian aspects of music as seduction and the body—these can be connected with the ancient notion of *musica humana* (the music of the body and soul) and indeed of *musica instrumentalis*—audible music of voices and instruments.

These distinctions linger today in the separation of *musica theoretica* from *musica prattica*, the first which sets its sights upon knowledge of harmony, and the second which focusses on music as expression.

Purely tuned consonance is the foundation of the ancient Greek musical system. The diatonic scale, which we still use today, is, in its simplest form, created out of the replication of the most perfect intervals, perfect fifths; notes in a ratio of 3:2 with the given note.

This is still the way that a violinist tunes a violin.

The drama of music, and its potential for the depiction of both good and evil, rests upon the acoustical facts that as successive perfect fifths are added to one another, an increasing level dissonance begins to emerge.

[play example]

At the point where we reach the tritone, we have a recognizeably ugly sound—a sound that is close to being a perfect fifth, but not close enough—a seeming perversion of the natural order of intervals. The good has become bad. This is the point at which the Pythagorean scale stops. Music theory has traversed a spectrum from perfect order and unity to a recognizeable disorder--evil--which, if pursued, will continue into ever further realms of chaos. One might liken this chain to a cancerous growth which leads to death and dissolution.

Plato sympathized with Pythagorean notions of number theory as the basis of harmonic relations. He recognized the danger that music could excite “orgiastic effects”, one might say.

In *The Republic*, Plato uses musical relationships to suggest that a good city must limit the number of generations—one might say populations—limit its growth--in order to avoid the city decaying into strife and disharmony.

His musical illustration is based on the idea that the ratio 3:2—the perfect fifth--embodies the basic fertility of new tones. The cube of three

creates the full diatonic series—the Pythagorean scale, but also sets the limits at the tritone.

As Ernest McClain notes, “the generation of new notes leads to strife” (Ernest McClain, *The Pythagorean Plato* (1978) a detailed explanation of the number theory of the Republic, in connection with music theory.)

Socrates on the other hand held a positive view of music for ethics: the qualities of rhythm and harmony sink deep into the soul and reside there. The result is grace of body and mind; the development of good habits; of good *ethos*. This notion is lived out today in the practice of music therapy, for example.

I will quickly add here a second, connected theme concerning evil and music—that of seduction. Whether in the Judaeo-Christian terms of Eve and the Serpent “he beguiled me, and I did eat”, or in terms of Homer’s mythical Sirens: As the ship approaches Scylla and Charibdis, Odysseus is lashed to the mast so that he will be able to hear the enchanting music without being seduced by it to his destruction. In Homer the Sirens produce high-pitched, clear tones (the Greek *liguros*) (43, 183). This seductive power traditionally attached to woman runs as a counterpoint throughout music history. (Odyssey: 12-39 ff, 158 ff.)

Augustine of Hippo (NG 2), for example, in his *Confessions*, expresses remorse over the pleasure that music gives, suggesting that it can lead to seduction. Music has continued to play an abivalent role in the world of morality and ethics.

Plato’s sirens, on the other hand, are stationed on the eight celestial spheres, each singing one tone, the total a harmonia—the music of the spheres. This structure is most typically linked again with the Pythagorean scale. Interestingly, the Sirens were later connected with the music of Christian angels who guided souls to heaven—and played the harp—a symbol of musical purity. (But see Isaiah 13-21 and 34-13)

(NG II Sirens: vol 23, p. 446) [5]

Milton's words dramatize the connection of good with consonance and evil with dissonance, echoing the themes noted already:

Blest pair of Sirens, pledges of heav'n's joy,
Sphere-born harmonious sisters, Voice and Verse,
Wed your divine sounds, and mixed power employ
Dead things with inbreathed sense able to pierce,
 [And to our high-raised phantasy present
 That undisturbed song of pure concent,
 Aye sung before the sapphire-coloured throne
 To him that sits thereon,
 With saintly shout and solemn jubilee,
 Where the bright Seraphim in burning row
 Their loud uplifted angel-trumpets blow,
 And the Cherubic host in thousand quires
 Touch their immortal harps of golden wires,
 With those just spirits that wera victorious palms,
 Hymns devout and holy psalms
 Singing everlastingly;]

That we on earth with undiscording voice
May rightly answer that melodious noise
As once we did, till disproportioned sin
Jarred against Nature's chime, and with harsh din
Broke the fair music that all creatures made
To their great Lord, whose love their motion swayed
In perfect diapason, whilst they stood
In first obedience and their state of good.
O may we soon again renew that song,
And keep in tune with heav'n, till God ere long
To his celestial consort us unite,
To live with him, and sing in endless morn of light.

[Milton, *At a Solemn Music.*]

The association of consonance with good and dissonance with evil can be seen in the adoption of the Pythagorean scale of perfect intervals as the basis of Gregorian chant. The rejection of dissonance from the Gregorian system may be seen as a cleansing or purification of the music. This quality is still recognized today in that people comment upon the soothing, peaceful, reconciling qualities experienced in listening to the chant. This is even more true of those who perform such music.

In the medieval period, one of the aesthetic objects of sacred music was the exclusion of dissonance, in particular the tritone. Thus we have the creation of a special theoretical construct—the hexachord—by Guido d’Arezzo around 1000 a.d., which was used first in teaching Gregorian chant, and later in the composition and singing of polyphony. The hexachord is the largest diatonic collection that does not include the tritone as a member. It is one note short of the Pythagorean scale.

[sing and play an example]

Hexachordal theory pervaded western music throughout the medieval and Renaissance periods, and remained part of music theory as late as the eighteenth century. The following chant is based on the hexachord.

Sing “Salve Regina” (*LU 276*).

In the tenth century, when polyphonic music began to be composed and sung, the tritone [*tritonus*] was identified as an unstable element, for example in *Musica enchiriadis* (ca. 900) . In the 13th century it was known as *discordantia perfecta*—perfect dissonance. (NEW Grove Tritone vol 25: Drabkin) It came to be known as *diabolus in musica*—the devil in music, and was, at least theoretically, avoided where

possible. For example, in the medieval cadence, the sharpening of leading tones in the two upper voices produces a special, harmonically purified, but to our ears less harmonious, ending; this is known as the double-raised leading tone cadence.

[play various cadences]

[The equation of good with concord and evil with discord runs through many quotations of the period:]

The man that hath no music in himself,
Nor is not mov'd with concord of sweet sounds,
Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils;
The motions of his spirit are dull as night,
And his affections dark as Erebus:
Let no such man be trusted.

Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*.

The tritone, too, retained its status as evil through the eighteenth century, both in secular and sacred music. We hear Bach, for example, taking advantage of the jarring effect of the melodic tritone in the St. Matthew Passion—just to take one example—at the point where Jesus declares that Judas will betray him.

[sing p. 43]

Again, a pronounced tritone is the centrepiece of the anguished theme of the crucify section.

[sing p. 198]

For harmonic music, the evil or chaotic aspect of the tritone has been adopted most typically into the diminished seventh chord, a chord

composed of two intertwined tritones equidistant from each other.

[play example]

This notion of equidistance is important, because musical structure is predicated upon a hierarchy of tones, the tonic being the most important, the dominant following after, and so on, in fact following the cycle of perfect fifths of the Pythagorean system. Now a chord like the diminished seventh, in its very symmetry proclaims against hierarchy—any one of its notes is as important as any other. This is a chaos that is potential in democracy and actual in anarchy. The diminished seventh is the chord you hear while the villain is tying the damsel to the rails in front of an oncoming locomotive.

[play tremolo diminished seventh.]

As William Drabkin notes, “In 19th c. Romantic opera, the tritone regularly portrays that which is ominous or evil; [In the] dungeon scene in Act 2 of *Fidelio*—the tympani are tuned A-E-flat—a mistuning of the regular perfect fifth that tympani habitually use.”

[NEW Grove Tritone vol 25: William Drabkin]

At the same time, diminished seventh chords in the orchestra set an ominous mood.

[play p. 141, noting diminished seventh chords and tritone in tympani]

One of the most dramatic examples of the diminished seventh is to be found in Schubert’s famous lied, *Erlkönig* (text by Goethe). A child and father ride through the night; the child is terrified of the Erlking who threatens to take him from this life. The father is powerless to flee or to protect the boy who dies in his arms. At the words

Siehst, Vater, du den Erlkönig nicht?

Den Erlkönig mit Kron’ und Schwief?

Schubert introduces the diminished seventh to the already overheated

drumming of the piano texture.

[play p. 2]

The piece musically becomes a tremendous conflict between dissonance and consonance, reflecting the struggle between the goodness of the protecting father and the evil of the deceiving Erlking. Interestingly, the Erlking portrays himself as the seducing serpent, promising undreamed pleasures and singing in a warm, well-tuned diatony with delicate ornaments.

[play p. 3]

The resolution comes in dramatic, *recitativo* fashion. As the child dies in the arms of the father and the struggle ends, the diminished seventh in the accompaniment, and the tritone in the voice resolve, into a traditional cadence.

(Norton Scores II)

[play p. 6] [9]

“Interestingly, the tritone is also at the basis of the “Tristan chord”, which is associated with seduction.” [NEW Grove Tritone vol 25: Drabkin]

[play Tristan opening]

Moving into the twentieth century, I turn to the music of Peter Warlock. In the Christmas song, *The First Mercy*, (1928), Warlock uses a combination of flats and sharps to create a jarring harshness that can literally send shivers up the spine if it is well performed. Technically, Warlock is combining the bright sounds of the dominant harmony with the dark sounds of the Neapolitan sixth. They are both traditional musical elements. What is special is that they are used simultaneously

rather than sequentially. The two harmonies themselves, a tritone apart from each other, portray the fear of the text:

Men who guarded where He lay
Moved to frighten us away. (Text by Bruce Blunt)

[play page 5]

The “proof” of the interpretation is the comparison to the concluding verse:

With so sweet a gesture He
Called us to His company.

Which reverts to a diatonic character, but enhanced by converting the tonic harmony from minor to major—a symbolic resolution of evil into good if you will. [10]

Carol Dawn’s 1984 music for Thomas Troeger’s exorcist text, “Silence, Frenzied, Unclean Spirit” is a modern-day attempt at painting evil in terms of dissonance: within the context of hymnody, this is a daring piece. I am not sure whether it is ultimately successful as an artistic work, but it certainly maintains the age-old association of dissonance with evil; consonance with good.

At the demonic opening words “Silence, frenzied, unclean spirit!” the music fills with dissonance; at the words “God’s healing, holy one”, the music smooths out into consonance; at “ranting, Flesh can’t bear it”, the dissonance returns, to disappear again at the words “flee as night before the sun.”

(Play Voices United 620)

I will touch on rock music with a brief example provided by my colleague, Ken McLeod: It is the opening of the song “Black Sabbath”.

The style is that of traditional melodrama, but I include it to point out the use of the tritone in popular culture. The guitar theme that is repeated over and over and then fades is simply the octave divided at the tritone rather than the fifth.

[Play example, track 1]

But this music also serves to highlight another trope of evil in music: The distortion of tone in the instruments and voice; this is a hallmark of hard rock. One might even view the vocal line as a seductive trope—as siren from hell.

Many people are critical of music like this and see it as a form of perversion: “The new barbarianism (of unorganized music), with its pre-musical worship of noise, glissando, and indistinct pitches, offers no vision and denies natural and artistic norms. It is like screaming during a catastrophe—an occupation that is neither musical nor artful.” [Levy and Levarie, 75.]

But, perhaps in a postmodern setting we can view things from another perspective, as George Bernard Shaw so often does:

“Hell is full of musical amateurs:
music is the brandy of the damned.”

G. B. Shaw, *Man and Superman* (1903)

One must of course turn this inside out to get the full meaning: “Heaven is full of music;
brandy is the music of the damned.”

Shaw continues:

“Is the devil to have all the passions as well as all the good tunes?”

We follow the words of Milton's Satan: "Evil be thou my Good."
[–Milton, *Paradise Lost*, iv-108]

Music such as this has been accused of contributing to evil in society. There seems no conclusive evidence of this point, and it might be more tactful to see the music as a reflection of issues in society rather than as an instigator of societal behaviour.

Having shared some preliminary observations regarding the portrayal of evil in music, I will conclude with a final, provocative yet well balanced perspective from a person who himself had little use for music:

"Of music, Dr. Johnson used to say that it was the only sensual pleasure without vice." (Anecdotes by William Seward)

Finis