

# Boethius' Three Musicians

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IN his *De Institutione Musicae*, Boethius provides a definition of "what a musician is", to which subsequent musical history adds an interesting commentary. Boethius points out<sup>1</sup> that there are three types of people who concern themselves with music: theorists, composers, and performers. Of these, the performers are excluded from true musical understanding, since "all their efforts are devoted to the exhibition of their skills with instruments. They therefore act as slaves, without reasoning or thinking". The composers, or poets, "compose more with their natural instinct than through the exercise of thought or reason", but the theorist, on the other hand, "is entirely devoted to reason and thought", and "is able to judge modes, rhythms, the genera of songs and their mixtures... basing this judgment of a use of reason and thought especially suited to the musical art".<sup>2</sup>

Boethius draws the conclusion that the theorist is the highest of the three, alone worthy of the name "musician" since he depends not on mechanical skills, nor on instinctive or intuitive guidance, but on his powers of reason and judgment. This view was by no means Boethius' own: it has been observed by Guillaume de Van<sup>3</sup> that it was only in the Renaissance that the idea of the "musician" was transferred from the theorist to the composer: during the period from Pythagoras (ca. 550 B.C.) to Phillippe de Vitry (author of the *Ars Nova*, ca. 1320 A.D.), the art of music was personified by the figure of the theorist, at least in such literary records as have come down to us; but by the end of the fifteenth century, says de Van, the emphasis had shifted, and Dufay or Josquin des Pres was seen by contemporary writers as the personification, on the human level, of the art of music. De Van also remarks on the fact that some of the best musicians of the time were able to unite the dual roles of composer and theorist: indeed, that this was a golden age of sorts in which the composer was not merely an artisan "*qui réalisa dans le temps la doctrine absolue des théoreciens*", but that he incarnated "*la plénitude de la science musicale, grâce à cet équilibre instable, mais parfaitement harmonieux, du divin et de l'humain en lequel réside le secret du dynamisme et de la beauté de la Renaissance*".<sup>4</sup>

Returning to a more mundane level, it is quite obvious that over the succeeding centuries the composer gradually (though never entirely) lost ground to the performer. The latter type, formerly a faithful servant of the art, rose in conformity with two phenomena: the increasing ease of communications, and the spreading of the art across the social barriers that had formerly contained it. Each of these conditions produced a certain kind of executant: from the former came the international virtuoso, at first a composer in his own right, as for instance were Bull, Dowland, Froberger, and Corelli in the seventeenth century, and only later a mere "interpreter"; from the social leveling, and especially as a result of the institution and astonishing proliferation of public opera houses throughout Europe, came the more insular "star" typified by the castrato, and the

intrigues, rivalries, and cultivation of purely physical display that followed inevitably.

If one considers from this standpoint the musical scene of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, one sees performers leap like shooting stars before the public, which greets them with paroxysms of reverence, but forgets them even before they are burnt out; while composers are born, grow to maturity, and die, yet often warm other creative hands with their ashes. A kind of triangular equilibrium, with the public as the third party, was maintained. The eighteenth-century public still seems to have been interested, to some extent, in the music itself, as opposed to the performers thereof: witness the operatic quarrels that kept Paris amused while other, more sinister, quarrels were fermenting. But in the following century, from the point of view of the general public, the performer's work, and not the composer's, became the primary focus of attention; a composer had to make a certain name as a performer before recognition of his creative talents would be granted (always remembering exceptions such as Berlioz).

Proof of this debasement of the public's intellect can be seen in the mediocrity of most of the music which was executed, presumably by "popular demand", by the virtuosi of the time: indeed, it is interesting to note that the quality of popular music becomes progressively lower from the earliest days until our own.<sup>5</sup> But there existed, at the same time, a musical intelligentsia whose palate was more discriminating and whose taste and devotion is evidenced by the proliferation of musical journalism in the early 19th century and the wide dissemination of serious music through publishing which could not have taken place without their honest support and genuine interest.

The theorists, during this period, have virtually disappeared, giving way to commentators and lexicographers. In the treatises of Descartes and even of Rameau there is still some of the old rigor and delight in logical construction, but with the abandonment of a traditional philosophical framework their reasoning can only be speculative, and they depend largely on the data of the senses. During the nineteenth century the theorist was replaced by the modern musicologist, who is in most cases a mere scholarly drudge.

In the present century the "equilibre instabile" of composer, performer, and audience is upset, for the simple reason that few composers write music of any appeal either to the musical intelligentsia (who frequent concert halls, like museums, to enjoy the achievements of the past) or to the masses, who now have an art of their own that bears little relation to any serious music, past or present. To both of these groups, the performer has become of paramount importance: pianists, conductors, and pop singers are the "great musicians" of today. At the same time, a very small but powerful and vociferous minority cultivates the "new music", which evinces more lip-service than heartfelt devotion, and which in any case demands more skill of its executants than of its creators. Finally, a number of composers attempts bravely to express the nineteenth-century ideals of music in a modernized language, some of them succeeding to the extent of joining the aforementioned "museum", in which however there is little room for new acquisitions.

This situation, which may well be described as chaotic, is not really ruled by any of our three musicians, for rule would imply at least a certain order; it is, rather, the result of chronic uncertainty on all sides: the composer striving above all to be "original", the performer and the intelligent public trying to recreate the values of a bygone age, and the theorist abdicated in favor of the music critic and the musicologist.

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Is there any way in which Boethius' theorist and his values can be paralleled today? To answer this, we must first explain what those values were, and why Boethius (and his philosophical brethren of all ages) established the priorities that they did. Boethius' treatise was designed as a didactic work dealing with one part of the Quadrivium, the fourfold path "by which one should come to those places where the more excellent mind, having been delivered from our senses, is led to the certainty of intelligence".<sup>6</sup> His work, moreover, begins by describing the three species of music—*Musica Mundana*, *Musica Humana*, and *Musica Instrumentalis*—yet deals only with the last of these, never fulfilling the promise to treat of the others in more detail. It is clear, then, that the theory expounded in *De Institutione Musicae* is but a beginning: the logical and rational training that must precede further studies in the harmonies of the person and of the universe. Boethius' theorist, far from being a mere music student, is rather someone who is preparing to tread a spiritual path, and who is acquiring as preliminaries the knowledge of logic, of psychology and physiology, and of cosmology leading to metaphysics.

Various developments that have taken place in the human being since the Middle Ages cast a somewhat different complexion on this matter. If the mediaeval student had first to cultivate his rational mind, the modern one may, on the contrary, have to begin by overcoming the prejudices and the modes of thought that may have been instilled by a humanistic, positivistic, and "rationalist" education: the latter, as Guénon says,<sup>7</sup> "implying the denial of everything that is of a supra-individual order". He is no longer in need of a training of the sort which the Quadrivium provided, for the basis on which he begins, and the circumstances in which he continues, are quite different from those of his mediaeval counterpart. He needs, perhaps, to become less, rather than more rational. We might say, too, that the purpose of music—if it has one beyond that of entertainment which is all that it is generally granted today—has changed in conformity with these developments. Boethius, like his Greek predecessors, writes of the amazing effects, both physical and mental, wrought by the art; these being taken for granted, he seeks to find a rational basis for seemingly irrational phenomena. We, who know all about the physical basis of music and the theoretical basis of composition, suffer effects of a far reduced intensity; perhaps it is better for us to approach from the other direction, seeking to obtain from music the effects which are generally dulled by our obsession with the mechanics of performance or of composition, or simply by our inability to listen properly.

If, as traditional thinkers invariably maintain, the purpose of art is a contemplative one: if works of art, existing in time or in space, should arrest our attention, induce forgetfulness of our transient egos, and fix our minds—indeed our whole being—in a state of contemplation—then every piece of music is potentially a *mantram*, every painting a *mandala*, so long as it is free from unsuitable elements. This is no place to examine the spiritual validity of various kinds of music, but it should be mentioned in passing that to contemplate representations of nonsense and chaos, violence or hatred, except in special cases which in no way concern us here, can do no good, but rather the opposite. The modern "theorist", then, who uses music as a spiritual means, is not so much the student of its rational basis as the contemplative listener, who after proper discrimination loses himself in his chosen object. The kind of listening referred to here

can seldom be achieved spontaneously; it can, however, grow if the listener will gain a familiarity with a piece of music that overcomes all "interest", surprise, and other interfering reactions: a degree of familiarity which few, in an age which demands novelty, are willing to attain. But in this respect we find assistance from an altogether unlikely direction: the mechanical reproduction of music has now opened up to people of all conditions, so long as they have "ears to hear", the possibility of establishing an acquaintance with a musical work which in former times was open only to a performer, or, in the case of orchestral music, to virtually no-one. The solitary and repeated communion with music, unencumbered alike by the performer's physical, the composer's creative, and the "normal" listener's analytical or phantasmic activity, can become a means leading to intuitions of a higher order which was precisely the object, if not the method, of Boethius' theorizing.

(Original editorial inclusions that followed the essay:)

*This is the last and sternest contest set before the Soul, this the sum of all her labors, to win through to the Beatific Vision. Blessed is he who beholds that blessed sight, and he who fails in that fails in all.*

Plotinus, *Ennead i, 6, 7.*

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<sup>1</sup> Book I, Chapter 34.

<sup>2</sup> If these definitions seem to us a little sweeping, let us remember that Boethius meant, in this summary of the situation, to be concise. He was no doubt as well aware as we of the exceptions, the borderline cases, which contentious minds will always cite: he speaks here not of these, but of the types of the three musicians in their most general and ideal form. If it occurs to us, incidentally, that today the composer tends to use "thought and reason" far more than a "natural instinct", let us ask whether, in that case, he really qualifies as a composer, in the Boethian (and traditional) sense.

<sup>3</sup> "La Pédagogie musicale à la fin du moyen âge", in *Musica Disciplina* II (1948), pages 75-97.

<sup>4</sup> The writer refers, presumably, to the Renaissance in music, and not in the other arts, whose equilibrium was heavily weighted on the human side.

<sup>5</sup> This may be due as much to the spread of music through the strata of society as to the debasement of taste within single classes.

<sup>6</sup> Boethius: *De Institutione Arithmetica*, Bk. I, Ch. 1.

<sup>7</sup> *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*, trans. Lord Northbourne; London (Luzac), 1953; Ch. XIII.