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Popolaresco, peasants and primitivism

THE FISSION BETWEEN POPULAR AND SERIOUS MUSIC has its roots in the ancient world, at precisely the point when Pythagoras established the mathematical ratios behind the Greek scales. But even as he set up his exact calibrations of the diapason, de pente and diatesseron, music continued to flourish in the hands of the untutored and uninitiated, in work songs hummed behind a spinning wheel or intoned behind a plough, and also in recreational singing and playing. It had another use as well – a quasi-psychological function derived from its dual identity as an art both intellectual and emotive. Western music has always on the one hand been structured by rules as precise and rational as mathematical theorems, and on the other operated as a medium of feeling, able to grasped (in essence at least) without the aid of theory. At the very time that Pythagoras claimed music as an extension of mathematics, the Corybantic priests were turning it into a very different enterprise, and treating ‘nervous and hysterical patients by wild pipe music, thus exciting them to the pitch of exhaustion, which was followed in turn by a healthy sleep from which the patient awoke cured’.¹ A philosopher displayed music in predictable aural ratios; ‘clerics’ aroused and quelled disorderly feelings through the catharsis it offered.

Given the fact that music invariably creates a degree of emotional excitement, Plato’s misgivings about the art come as no surprise; nor does his banishment of Corybantic pipes from his ideal *polis* (Socrates observes that ‘We aren’t really doing anything revolutionary, you know, my dear Glaucon, [...] in preferring Apollo and his instruments to Marsyas and his’²). Not only would wind instruments be proscribed in this utopia (though shepherds receive a patronising exemption from the ban), but so would most of the Greek modes. Since only the Doric and Phrygian conduce to the decorum of an ideal government, music is once again re-invented as something severe and high-flown and intellectual:

‘Tell me then – you are a musician – which are the modes suitable for dirges?’

‘The Mixed Lydian and the Extreme Lydian and similar modes.’

‘Then we can reject them,’ I said: ‘even women, if they are respectable, have no use for them, let alone men.’

‘Quite right.’

‘But drunkenness, softness or idleness are also qualities most unsuitable in a Guardian?’

‘Of course.’

‘What, then, are the relaxing modes and the ones we use for drinking songs?’

‘The Ionian and certain Lydian modes, commonly described as “languid”.’

‘Will they then,’ I asked, ‘be of any use in training soldiers?’

1. John Burnet: *Greek philosophy: Thales to Plato* (London, 1960), p.41.

2. Plato: *The republic*, trans. & intro. Desmond Lee (Harmondsworth, 1974), p.160.

'None at all,' he replied. 'You seem to be left with the Dorian and the Phrygian.'³

Thus does puritanical logic shrink both the immediacy and the expressive range of art, further rarefying its 'scientific' reconception by Pythagoras, and placing it at a remove from general human experience.

In the course of time, this elitism issued in that most potent Platonic-Pythagorean concoction, the 'Music of the Spheres', which Boethius characterised as *musica mundana* in contrast to the *musica humana* of everyday life:

For how can it happen that so swift a heavenly machine moves on a mute and silent course? Although that sound does not penetrate our ears – which necessarily happens for many reasons – it is nevertheless impossible that such extremely fast motion of such large bodies should produce absolutely no sound, especially since the courses of the stars are joined by such harmonious union that nothing so perfectly united, nothing so perfectly fitted together, can be realized.⁴

Here Boethius reduces 'scientific music' to an abstraction indistinguishable from silence itself – a notional music derived from untested premises of cosmic fitting and jointure, rather than, as we know it now to be, a bang deafeningly loud and chaotic. For centuries the dogma of *musica mundana* held sway as the rationale underpinning of the art itself, and also of poems in its honour, even though, all the while, peasants sang heartily and 'unscientifically' at their spinning wheels and ploughs, or, having moved into town to forge the beginnings of an urban proletariat, in taverns and stews. Indeed, we know that some medieval bishops, aware of the one-sided competition between 'sphery' church music and the memorable infectiousness of tavern songs, decided to deny the devil an exclusive use of good tunes, and contrafacted religious words to some of them.

Shakespeare gives us a glimpse of the rawly boisterous tavern song – the beginnings of 'popolaresco' or popular music – in *Twelfth night* 2.3.87–93. Here Malvolio, like Plato before him, reproaches the flesh for its delight in the modes of 'drunkenness, softness, or idleness', in the 'Corybantic' arousal of disorderly feelings:

My masters, are you mad? Or what are you. Have you no wit, manners, nor honesty, but to gabble like tinkers at this time of night? Do ye make an ale-house of my lady's house, that ye squeak out your cozier's catches without any mitigation or remorse of voice? Is there no respect of place, persons, nor time in you?

Not, of course, that Shakespeare didn't elsewhere embrace its Boethian antitype, a conception almost as austere as the Newtonian formulae that came in time to displace it:

There's not the smallest orb which thou beholds't
But in his motion like an angel sings,
Still quiring to the young-ey'd cherubins;

3. *ibid.*, pp.158–59.

4. Boethius: *Fundamentals of music*, trans. & intro. Calvin M. Bower, ed. Claude V. Palisca (New Haven, 1989), p.49.

Such harmony is in immortal souls,
 But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
 Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.

(*The Merchant of Venice* 5.1.60–65)

This advances music both as a cosmological agent and as a product, devised by a 'first mover' sufficiently abstract to satisfy Plato's demand that deity be both uniform and changeless:

'But god and the things of god are entirely perfect.'

'That is undeniable.'

'On this argument, then, god is not in the least likely to take on many forms.'

'Not in the least.'

Such 'deific' aspirations inform most poems about music before the invention of 'melophrases'⁶ – which is to say, verbal transcripts of actual compositions. To view the 'muddy vesture of decay' as an *impediment* to the perception of music is to stress its austere verticality as an avenue upward and outward from an imperfect world, an 'open sesame' to a system as god-centred, god-ordered and serenely detached as any Plato could have wished for. Which is not to say that Shakespeare didn't at the same time plot a *via media* between the extremity of coziest catches on the one hand, and the exalted inaudibility of *musica mundana* on the other. Desdemona narrates the story of a servant who found emotional catharsis in an old love song, thereby asserting music's function as a vector of powerful feeling:

My mother had a maid call'd Barbary,
 She was in love, and he she lov'd prov'd mad,
 And did forsake her; she had a song of "willow",
 An old thing 'twas, but it express'd her fortune,

(*Othello* 4.3.26–29)

The song 'expresses' in the sense of embodying as well as purging, and the phrasal recapitulations of its formal melody, so central to any idea of 'scientific music', double up as the blind, unfocused repetitions of grief: 'The fresh streams ran by her, and murmur'd her moans, / Sing willow, willow, willow' (4.3.44–45). *King Henry VIII* likewise furnishes a lyric definition of the art that, looking ahead to Schubert's *An die Musik*, encompasses both cosmic and personal ideas of order:

Every thing that heard him play,
 Even the billows of the sea,
 Hung their heads and then lay by:
 In sweet music is such art,
 Killing care and grief of heart
 Fall asleep, or hearing die.

(3.1.9–14)

5. Plato: *The republic*, p.36.

6. Rodney Stenning Edgecombe: 'Melophrasis: defining a distinctive genre in the literature/music dialogue', in *Mosaic* 26 (1993), pp.1–20.

Milton provided a similarly bivalent take on music. On one occasion he

exults in the 'soft *Lydian* airs' that 'lap' the subject 'with many a winding bout/Of linked sweetness long drawn out'⁷ (in a state, no doubt, of languid terrestrial recumbency), but his thoughts 'At a solemn music' also strain upward in that same erected, neo-Platonic posture struck, we have glimpsed, in *The merchant of Venice*:

And to our high-rai'd fantasy present
That undisturbed Song of pure concent,
Aye sung before the sapphire-color'd throne
To him that sits thereon,
With Saintly shout and solemn Jubilee.⁸

The poet's abstract, cosmological conception of the art declares itself in the pun on 'concent', which images musical concord on the one hand, and the concentric circles of the Ptolemaic system on the other. Like Plato, another puritan *avant la lettre*, Milton's sense of music here is severely vertical, a Jacob's ladder away from human emotion, the dross of a disordered life that would otherwise disturb its 'solemn Jubilee'.

But of course there was nothing exclusively puritanical, or indeed Puritanical, about these fantasies of a high-flown, 'improving', cosmological music. Look, for instance, at the way Robert Herrick, a poet cavalier and Cavalier:

Musick, thou *Queen of Heaven*, Care-charming-spel,
That strik'st stillnesse into hell:
Thou that tam'st *Tygers*, and fierce storms (that rise)
With thy soule-melting Lullabies:
Fall down, down, from those thy chiming spheres,
To charme our souls, as thou enchant'st our ears.⁹

While to Milton's Mariophobic ears, an art conceived as the 'Queen of Heaven' would have struck a decidedly 'heathen' chord, little otherwise distinguishes the musical outlooks of men located on opposing sides in politics. Both believe that music ennobles because it transcends. In Herrick's unorthodox sense of its range, it even brings relief to the noisiness of hell, a noisiness confirmed by the aural meaning that eventually attached itself to that dwelling of all demons (Pandemonium).

However, we also find that Herrick makes room for a view of music much closer to that of the Corybantic priests. 'To music' might seem to enjoy a point of contact with the preceding poem in its sense of music's charm (itself derived the Latin *carmen* = 'song'), but we soon realise that 'charm' in this context comes much closer to 'enchantment' (*carmen* can also mean 'spell'), for it can absterge misery and anger:

Begin to charme, as thou stroak'st mine ears
With thy enchantment, melt me into tears.
Then let thy active hand scud o'er thy Lyre:

7. John Milton: *Complete poems and major prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York, 1957), p.71.

8. *ibid.*, p.81.

9. Robert Herrick: *The poems of Robert Herrick*, ed. LC Martin (London, 1965), p.103.

And make my spirits frantic with thy fire.
That done, sink down into a silv'rie straine;
And make me smooth as Balme, and Oile again.¹⁰

Herrick has for the moment adopted a vision of music more lateral than vertical, concerned as it is with psychological purging and, by implication, with social adjustment. Even so, the apparatus of the poem remains relentlessly classical, and the hands scudding over the lyre are the plump hands of a Lely model posing as a muse. No provision here for 'the tongs and the bones' – that glimpse of demotic artisans' music provided by *A midsummer night's dream* 4.1.28–29 (though in a context of patronising irony).

For an altogether more serious take on music of and for the people, we have to wait for the 18th century. Here, for the first time, we sense that music is no longer the agent of 'heavenly harmony', a topos that had had its day, and for which Dryden provided a final consummation in the 'Song for S^t CECILIA's Day, 1687':

From Harmony, from heav'nly Harmony
This universal Frame began:
From Harmony to Harmony
Through all the compass of the Notes it ran,
The Diapason closing full in Man.¹¹

Goethe, by contrast, was much more concerned with *earthly* harmony (better known as 'communication') in this letter from Italy written in 1786:

For this evening I had made arrangements to hear the famous singing of the boatmen, who chant verses by Tasso and Ariosto to their own melodies. [...] The moon had risen when I took my seat in a gondola and the two singers, one in the prow, and the other in the stern, began chanting verse after verse in turns. The melody, which we know from Rousseau, is something between chorale and recitative. It always moves at the same tempo without any definite beat. The modulation is of the same character; the singers change pitch according to the content of the verse in a kind of declamation.

I shall not go into the question of how the melody evolved. It is enough to say that it is ideal for someone idly singing by himself and adapting the tune to poems he knows by heart.

[...]

For the first time I felt the full effect of this singing. The sound of their voices far away was extraordinary, a lament without sadness, and I was moved to tears. I put this down to my mood at the moment, but my old manservant said, '*é singolare, come quell canto intenerisce, e molto più, quando é più ben cantato.*' He wanted me to hear the women on the Lido, especially those from Malamocco and Pellestrina. They too, he told me, sing verses by Tasso to the same or similar melody, and added: 'It is their custom to sit on the seashore while their husbands are out sea-fishing, and sing these songs in penetrating tones until, from far out over the sea, their men reply, and in this way they converse with each other.' Is this not a beautiful custom? I dare say that, to someone standing close by, the sound of such voices, competing with the thunder of the waves, might not be very agreeable. But the motive behind such singing is so human and genuine that it makes the mere notes of

10. *ibid.*, p.67.

11. John Dryden: *The poems and fables of John Dryden*, ed. James Kinsley (London, 1970), p.422.

the melody, over which scholars have racked their brains in vain, come to life. It is the cry of some lonely human being sent out into the wide world till it reaches the ears of another lonely human being who is moved to answer it.¹²

This must surely be a watershed moment in the *Empfangsgeschichte* of popular music, and we can thank Rousseau for Goethe's adjusted perspective, so different from the grandiose cosmography that had breathed a last majestic gasp in Dryden's ode. By descrying 'living music' in humanity and genuineness rather than in scholarship or art (conceived as *techne*), Goethe recapitulates the music lesson in *Émile*, which, notwithstanding the author's considerable success as a 'scientific' musician, centres on a 'simple, tuneful air, always based on the common chords of the key'.¹³ Indeed, in his earlier *Lettre sur la musique française*, Rousseau had argued that melody is heightened speech, which phatic, human, communicative conception of music leaves *musica mundana* far behind. He begins *Émile* by stating that 'God makes all things good; man meddles with them and they become evil',¹⁴ a tenet of pre-Romantic primitivism that reworks the earlier myth of musical decadence set out in Boethius's *De institutione musicae*:

Music was indeed chaste and modest when it was performed on simpler instruments. But since it has been squandered in various promiscuous ways, it has lost its measure of dignity and virtue; and, having almost fallen into a state of disgrace, it preserves nothing of that ancient splendour. Hence Plato prescribes that children not be trained in all modes, but only in those which are vigorous and simple.¹⁵

Goethe's Venetian letter skirts musicology as so much pedantry ('I shall not go into the question of how the melody evolved') and projects music as something spontaneous ('it is ideal for someone singing idly to himself') and emotive ('I was moved to tears'). This is not the first record of the way that folk art, by its very simplicity and even its occasional clumsiness, can penetrate to the *lacrimae rerum*. In Gray's 'Elegy', the graves 'With uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture decked'¹⁶ move the speaker more deeply than the frigid polish of 'storied urn or animated bust', and the emotional charge of an a capella song in Wordsworth's 'Solitary reaper' is a function of a simplicity aligned with birdsong rather than 'scientific music' ('No Nightingale did ever chaunt/More welcome notes'; 'A voice so thrilling ne'er was heard/In spring-time from the Cuckoo-bird'¹⁷). Even though the semantic content of her music is indecipherable, it communicates without words:

Will no one tell me what she sings? –
Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow
For old, unhappy, far-off things,
And battles long ago:
Or is it some more humble lay,
Familiar matter of to-day?

12. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: *Letters from Italy*, trans. WH Auden & Elizabeth Meyer (Harmondsworth, 1995), pp.43–45.

13. Jean Jacques Rousseau: *Émile or education*, trans. Barbara Foxley (London, 1911), p.114.

14. *ibid.*, p.5.

15. Boethius: *Fundamentals*, pp.3–4.

16. Thomas Gray, in *The poems of Gray, Collins and Goldsmith*, ed. Roger Lonsdale (London, 1969), p.132.

17. William Wordsworth: *Poetical works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson. rev. Ernest de Selincourt (Oxford, 1969), p.230.

Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain,
That has been, and may be again?

The roots for this shift in emphasis from a high-flown *musica mundana* to an accessible *musica humana* can be traced to the eclipse of Ptolemaic thought by the rise of empirical science in the 17th century, but it's also bound up with the proto-primitivism of such authors as Carey and Philips. Even though they wrote at the high noon of Augustanism, they anticipated Wordsworth in their appetite for a music closer to the template of birdsong. Carey embraced the native ballad opera in preference to its 'scientific' Italian analogue with a reckless taunt –

There's Madam *Faustina*, Catso!
And eke Madame *Catsoni*;
Likewise *Signior Senesino*,
Are *tutti Abbandonni*;
Ha, ha, ha, ha; *Do, re, mi, fa*,
Are now but Farce and Folly,
We're ravish'd all, with Toll, loll, loll,
And pretty! Pretty POLLY.¹⁸

– and Philips self-righteously banished the imported Italian soprano as an inhibitor of England's musical freedom:

Hence, to southern climes again;
Tuneful mischief, vocal spell,
To this island bid farewell;
Leave us as we ought to be,
Leave the *Britons* rough and free.¹⁹

Thus, in the very heart of the Augustan age – one of the most artificial in the history of English poetry – do we find manifestos in favour of immediacy rather than calculated effect. Consider, in this regard, an early poem by William Collins:

When Phoebe formed a wanton smile,
My soul, it reached not here!
Strange that thy peace, thou trembler, flies
Before a rising tear!²⁰

18. Henry Carey: *Poems on Several Occasions, the third edition, much enlarged* (London, 1729), pp. 151–52.

19. Ambrose Philips: *The poems of Ambrose Philips*, ed. MG Segar (Oxford, 1937), p. 107.

20. William Collins, in *The poems of Gray, Collins and Goldsmith*, ed. Roger Lonsdale (London, 1969), p. 365.

This indirect plea for an art based on directness rather than calculated effect looks ahead to Rousseau, and comes to subtend most Romantic takes on music. The ascendancy of an idiom 'rough and free' in the Philips manner rather than polished and contoured by Italian vocalism is present not only in 'The solitary reaper', but also in this admission by the era's leading novelist:

It is only by long practice that I have acquired the power of selecting or distinguishing melodies; and although now few things delight or affect me more than a simple tune sung

with feeling, yet I am sensible that even this pitch of musical taste has only been gained by attention and habit, and, as it were, by my feeling of the words being associated with the tune.²¹

That Walter Scott's became the dominant view is attested by its lingering even into the 20th century, as in this poem by DH Lawrence:

Now it is vain for the singer to burst into clamour
With the great black piano appassionato. The glamour
Of childish days is upon me, my manhood is cast
Down the flood of remembrance, I weep like a child for the past.²²

This rejects art music in terms similar to those with which Collins rejected Phoebe's artfully manipulated smile, and Keats any verse with 'a palpable design upon us'.²³ Lawrence yearns for the domesticity of parlour songs, songs that, touching the *lacrimae rerum*, recall the end of Wordsworth's 'Ode on the intimation of immortality', with its reference to 'Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears'.²⁴ Patrick White, too, writing half a century after Lawrence, connects the populist simplicity of 'pretty music' (in this instance, Victorian quadrilles) with the pathos of transient happiness: 'To move along the sunny avenues of rather pretty music, produced in the young woman such a sense of innocent happiness she did for a moment feel the pricking of tears'.²⁵ For all these and many other proclamations favouring a music of simple immediacy, Goethe's experience in Venice is, whether consciously or not, the *fons et origo*. Before him poets had strained their ears for the inaudible symphony of planets and stars, but there, on the shores of the Lido, a lateral axis of reference displaced the severe verticalities of Pythagoras, Plato and Boethius: 'But the motive behind such singing is so human and genuine that it makes the mere notes of the melody, over which scholars have racked their brains in vain, come to life.' And so begins a universal Romantic quest for the values entailed in primitivism. That improvisation is one way of guaranteeing artlessness can be deduced from Leigh Hunt's aetiology of the fandango:

Is it a commonplace to say that the *castanets* used in dancing, evidently originated in the nuts of this tree, *castagnette*? They are made in general, I believe, of cockle-shells, or an imitation of them; but the name renders their vegetable descent unequivocal. It is pleasant to observe the simple origin of pleasant things. Some loving peasants, time immemorial, fell dancing under the trees: they pick up the nuts, rattle them in their hands; and behold (as the Frenchman says) the birth of the accompaniment of the fandango.²⁶

Here we hear an echo of Boethius – the chastity and modesty of his primeval music, but without the prudish overtones. Hunt has reconceived the chaste and the modest as purely aesthetic terms, terms that issue in an art as unelaborated as it is sincere, and indeed sincere *because* it is unelaborated. For his part, he deplored Rossini's decorative encrustation of limpid melody:

21. Quoted in JG Lockhart: *The life of Sir Walter Scott Bart*, 2 vols (London, no date), vol.1, p.34.

22. DH Lawrence: *Selected poems*, ed. Keith Sagar (Harmondsworth, 1972), p.21.

23. John Keats: *The letters of John Keats*, ed. Robert Gittings (London, 1970), p.61.

24. Wordsworth: *Poetical works*, p.462.

25. Patrick White: *Voss* (London, 1980), p.343.

26. Leigh Hunt: *Autobiography* (London, 1867), p.349.

the absurdity of this extravagance, which, carried to such a pitch, is really nothing better than so much stammering to music: La-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-an – gui-i-i-i-i-ir – per u-u-u-u-u-u-u-una be-e-e-e-e-e-e-ella. It is as ridiculous as if a Gentleman, asking a Lady how she did, were to say *How* – and then take a scamper round the pavement – *do*, and then another scamper – *you* (scamper again) and so on, to the astonishment of the gathering spectators.²⁷

Horried though he might have been to be told it, Walter Scott, on the opposite side of the political spectrum from Hunt, joined hands with him in embracing a simple music endowed with moving words, and both were, in effect, repeating the desideratum of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*:

'Give us something that shall entertain the spirit and the heart as well as the senses,' said Wilhelm. 'The instrument should but accompany the voice; for tunes and melodies without words and meaning seem to me like butterflies or finely-variegated birds, which hover round in the air, which we like to catch and make our own; whereas song is like a blessed genius that exalts us toward heaven, and allures the better self in us to attend to him.'²⁸

Thus do the cosmic aspirations of Boethius and Plato – exaltations 'toward heaven' – find themselves paraphrased and reconstituted through the values of musical primitivism.

By the time we reach the late 18th century, when that primitivism has reached full flower, we can observe a threefold division in music: (a) the 'scientific' (which would become the 'serious music' of the 20th century); (b) simple or demotic music in a rural context (which would become 20th-century 'folk'); and (c) simple or demotic music in an urban setting, which would ultimately become 'popular', and, having shed a few syllables, 'pop'. National differences and preoccupations have begun to supervene on the essentially international style of the baroque, and the Germans had, by the end of the century, developed a reputation as musical 'scientists', the Italians as melodists and the French as something in between. When Spohr visited Paris in 1820, he noted that French audiences favoured melodic charm as much as, or more than, harmony and counterpoint:

Is it a subject for praise or blame, that the French, notwithstanding the many excellent things with which their operatic repertoire has been enriched during the last twenty years, still give the oldest things of all? And is it indeed a proof of the advanced cultivated taste for art, when one seems them give as enthusiastic a reception (if not more so) to the oldest operas of Grétry, with their poverty of harmony and incorrectness, as to the masterpieces of Cherubini and Méhul?²⁹

He goes on to observe:

The masses, the leaders of fashion here, positively know not how to distinguish the worst from the best; they hear *Le Jugement de Midas* [Grétry] with the same rapture that they listen to *Les Deux Journées* [Cherubini] or *Joseph* [Méhul]. It requires no long residence here, to adopt the frequently expressed opinion, that the French are not a musical nation.³⁰

27. Lawrence Huston Houtchens & Carolyn Washburn Houtchens, edd.: *Leigh Hunt's dramatic criticism* (New York, 1977), p.211.

28. Johann Wolfgang Goethe: *Wilhelm Meister's apprenticeship and travels*, trans. Thomas Carlyle, 3 vols (London, 1891), vol.1, p.109–10.

29. Quoted in Edward Bellasis: *Cherubini: memorials illustrative of his life* (London, 1874), pp.241–42.

30. *ibid.*, p.242.

The picture is complicated, for while Méhul and Cherubini were revolutionary composers in the sense that their music found favour during the French Revolution and its aftermath, it cannot in any sense be called populist. Popular appetite demanded an accessible tunefulness that Cherubini lacked, but which Grétry could effortlessly command, an ironic situation if one recalls that, apart from such forcedly expedient works as *Denys le tyran*, Grétry had been a composer for the ancient régime. The following account of Cherubini's idiom shows how rebarbative many of his contemporaries found him:

since it is easier to produce harmonies and noise, effects of purely theoretical calculation, than to create song, M. Cherubini, renouncing the Italian method, which requires imagination and fecundity, allies himself to the German manner in substituting for an expressive melody the noisy and often unnatural effects of instrumental profusion.³¹

Many felt this way long after 1792, and Frederick Crowest observes that while 'musicians of every type take off their hats to [Cherubini's] name, his music has never been popular with the masses, who at all times and in every land, prefer to be entertained rather than elevated'.³² Indeed, the 'Italian method' paradoxically found lacking in this Italian master, was one of the chief avenues by which the populist idiom entered the world of 'serious' music, for we ought not to forget that Rousseau had aligned himself with the Italians in the *guerre des bouffons* that raged between the national schools in the 1750s.

While the Italians undoubtedly led the way in infusing street music into the idiom of the lyric stage, I dissent from the view that Rossini was its pioneer. Crowest claims that Cherubini's *Lodoïska* 'appeared to negative the approaching flood of melodic exuberance which was soon to distinguish the Rossinian period in Italian opera',³³ and, writing of Donizetti's *Zoraida di Granata*, Jeremy Commons notes that there is 'nowhere a trace of the banalities which, once he began to follow more closely in the steps of Rossini and use a more 'popolaresco', catchy, obvious type of melody, can sometimes disfigure his scores'.³⁴ Donizetti did indeed follow the master closely in the galley years before *Anna Bolena* (and even after it), but the influence issued chiefly in the use of the declamatory aria that Rossini had made his own, and which often seems to trench on recitative. This is anything but popular in nature, and has more in common with Lully than the cafés of Naples. In fact, Rossini can only be said to have become mischievously banal in at the time of his *Péchés de vieillesse*. These postdate *Guillaume Tell*, an opera thoroughly dignified in its melodic invention. Even though Rossini exerted a huge influence on his successors, it was they, the *rossiniani*, who pioneered the *popolaresco*, though a standard canard lumps them together as vectors of the trivial. WH Auden, for example, was brought up to believe that 'Rossini, Bellini and Donizetti were simply beyond the pale',³⁵ even though

31. Quoted in Frederick J. Crowest: *Maria Luigi Carlo Zenobi Salvatore Cherubini 1760–1824* (London, no date), p.11.

32. *ibid.*, unnumbered page carrying the preface.

33. *ibid.*, p.10.

34. Jeremy Commons: 'Zoraida di Granata', in libretto booklet for the Opera Rara recording (ORC17), p.52.

he came to honour and love the latter two composers in later life.

It's certainly true that in his Italian operas, Rossini will often prove jaunty to the point of irreverence (and even in his late period, he inserts a perky march into the *Stabat Mater*), but not in ways that suggests the boulevard. This jauntiness has roots in the more decorous kind of popolaresco pioneered by Haydn, and better called *Volkstümlichkeit* in a German context. The connection is best illustrated by the similarity between the Ploughman's song in *Die Jahreszeiten* ('Schon eilet froh') and an aria in *Il barbiere di Siviglia* – 'Zitti, zitti, piano, piano' – an instance of that half-conscious mode of plagiarism known as *Modeltechnik*. But if Rossini half-approximated the jauntiness of popular music, he took care to clothe its naked vigour in sequined gowns. His strings of showy *floriture* bear little relation to primitivism properly conceived: remember in this regard Leigh Hunt's abhorrence of the meaningless melismata in *L'italiana in Algeri*, and remember also Rousseau's belief in melody as heightened speech. If the popolaresco is 'vulgar', its vulgarity is of the streets; Rossini, however, is vulgar in the manner of a nouveau riche, ostentatiously scattering his roudades in a gesture of conspicuous consumption.

In my opinion, credit for pioneering the populist element in Italian opera must be assigned to the *rossiniani*. If the defining qualities are the simplicity and accessibility of folk idiom, along with a superadded jauntiness, then 'Si, fino all'ore estreme' in *Norma* must represent one of the first irruptions of the *urban* popolaresco on to the lyric stage in Italy – the real idiom of the Neapolitan street song and not its 'bedazzled' and bedizened Rossini simulacrum. Donizetti was quick to follow his rival, and *both* composers improved their master's legacy in the process. There is far more humanity in a simple cavatina from *L'elisir d'amore* or *La sonnambula* than in all the frigid decorativeness of *Semiramide*. Having found access via these works, the popolaresco worked itself into the very tissue of Italian opera, and asserts its presence right up to Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana* and beyond. Even Tchaikovsky was occasionally tempted to the write Slavonic paraphrases and approximations, as in the waltz from the Fifth Symphony. But it is ultimately Verdi who became the past master of the idiom, shrewdly aware of its latent energy and its political ramifications. For the duration of his first period, and for most of his second, he produced music of irresistible vigour – the vigour of the streets, of the barracks and (compounding those venues), of the barricade. This pulsing élan must be blamed for his eclipse – in Western Europe, at least, and for much of the 20th century – as a composer of high seriousness, exactly reversing the way that Cherubini's musical 'science' had alienated him from the Parisian masses. Verdi's heirship to the Neapolitan experiments of Bellini and Donizetti crystallises above all in the confident strut of 'La donn' é mobile', which millions of people who

35. Humphrey Carpenter:
W. H. Auden: a biography
(London, 1983), p.261.

have never entered an opera house now contrafact as 'Tarara boom diday'. As he matured he learned to use the *popolaresco* more discriminately, and one should always recall that the artful vulgarity of 'La donn' é mobile', indubitably catchy in its own right, also characterises a *soi-disant* nobleman as a cad. In such early operas as *Giovanna d'Arco*, however, the control is less assured, as witness the unfortunate confusion of the demotic and the demonic in its devils' chorus, which

sent Muzio into ecstasies: '... a pretty waltz, full of seductive themes; you can sing it straight away after two hearings ... original, popular, purely Italian.' That of course is its fault. It has an innocent vulgarity which reeks of a Neapolitan café. However, if it does not precisely illustrate the proverb that the Devil has all the best tunes it is more memorable than that of the Angel host which follows without a break in the same key.³⁶

Budden here gives us a good idea of *how* the *popolaresco* came into being, having been borrowed from the Neapolitan cafés that had for their part urbanised the folk music of the region. A similar adaptation occurred in Devienne's anti-clerical *Les Visitandines*, the second version of which contained a *chanson gasconne* so popular that it survived the score's immolation in a theatre fire. In this we witness the very birth of *popolaresco* out of folk music, the urban appropriation of regional songs that at the same time honoured their communal character. Devienne's revised version of *Les Visitandines* ended with a vaudeville – a character-by-character moralising song – set to a well-known melody or 'timbre', which the audience would recognise and hum as verse after verse was sung from the stage. In the process, folk idiom had its catchiness enhanced, not least when its harmonies were regularised. The barcarole that Paulli incorporated into the score of *Napoli* in 1842 is another case in point. Not trusting himself (as a Dane) to catch the exact accent of the *popolaresco* – innocent and knowing at the same time – he borrowed a Neapolitan arietta by G. Torrente, 'Te voglio bene assaje' (1840 – but one can't help noting the distance between this pretty ditty and the haunting, hoarse, barcaroles that Goethe had heard on the lagoons of Venice). Within a couple of decades, the dogged intransigence of folk music had been tamed and to some extent trivialised.

Goethe had demurred about the roughness of the Venetian barcaroles ('I dare say that, to someone standing close by, the sound of such voices, competing with the thunder of the waves, might not be very agreeable'), but such roughness didn't survive translation to city cafés and cabarets, where the tenets of 'scientific' music had a measure of hegemony, polishing away melodic gaucheries or modal oddities as so many vestiges of bumpkin dialect. Sometimes, indeed, the city went as far as offering dystopic parodies of folk music, as when John Davidson travestied the 'Merry Englandism' of such songs as Purcell's 'Nymphs and shepherds' in the bleak urban landscape projected in 'Piper, Play':

36. Julian Budden: *The operas of Verdi*, 3 vols. (London, 1973–81), vol. 1, p. 212.

Now the furnaces are out,
 And the aching anvils sleep;
 Down the road a grimy rout
 Tramples homeward twenty deep.
 Piper, play! Piper, play!
 Though we be o'erlaboured men,
 Ripe for rest, pipe your best!
 Let us foot it once again.³⁷

Merry England, as the poems of George Crabbe show, was always a myth, but a myth more tenable in a green world than in a grimy one, in a prelapsarian context more than in a knowing. Davidson and his musical equivalents contrafacted an urban reality upon the music of pastoral myth, just as medieval bishops had contrafacted their mythic music in turn upon the urban reality of the tavern song. Analogues for this subversive anti-pastoralism can be found in Shostakovich's *Limpid brook* and Poulenc's *Les biches*, both of which reveal undertow of brittle sophistication beneath a faux blatant populism. Poulenc's *Les codardes* likewise make a conscious project of subjecting the chanson populaire to the mordancy of Cocteau's vision.

However, the city didn't necessarily traduce the innocence of folk music, but rather softened and refined it with the 'science' to which it had been opposed. Tchaikovsky had tactfully to tell Tolstoy that once Russian folksongs have been transcribed in D major, they *lose* their modal innocence, and fall from the rural grace they are meant to exemplify. By the same token, while it tries to retain simplicity of folk idiom, poplaresco invariably adds a polish designed to prettify (one thinks of Muzio's delight in the demons of *Giovanna d'Arco*), and in this its very ethos is defined. More than any other great composer, Tchaikovsky understood its charm, and, calling it *le joli*, he often proved its effortless purveyor (having, after all, found more musical delight in Delibes' *Sylvia* than in the whole of *The ring*). How strange, therefore, that he should have arraigned Arensky for the 'prettiness' of his Marguerite Gautier tone poem:

If we set aside the thought that by *orgy* there is understood a drinking party and ball at *some* [slut's] at which there is a *very large number of people*, that at this orgy they're drinking *champagne*, eating truffles with mayonnaise, and then dancing *the cancan* – then the music which depicts the orgy is not lacking in liveliness, fire, movement, sparkle. But it's steeped, as is the whole fantasia, in Liszt, and when it is examined closely, its beauty is *external, conventional*, and contains nothing within it to carry you away. Such beauty is not *absolute beauty*, but mere *prettiness* (conventional beauty) – and *continual prettiness* is a defect rather than a quality. *Rossini, Donizetti, Bellini, Mendelssohn, Massenet, Liszt*, and so on – their names are legion – are always pretty. Of course they are masters of their kind. But *their* predominant trait is not an ideal towards which we must strive, for neither Beethoven nor Bach (who is boring, but a genius all the same), nor *Glinka*, nor *Mozart* pursued conventional prettiness but an ideal beauty which not infrequently manifests itself in a form which, at a first superficial glance, is not beautiful.³⁸

37. Derek Stanford, ed.:
Three poets of the Rhymers'
Club: Ernest Dowson, Lionel
Johnson, John Davidson
 (Manchester, 1974),
 pp. 157–58.

Tchaikovsky's systematic infection of the word 'pretty' resembles Marc Antony's pollution of 'honourable' in his funeral speech for Caesar. At every turn one senses as excess of the protestation for which Gertrude censures the player queen in *Hamlet*. That old triumvirate of the 'trivial' – Rossini, Donizetti and Bellini – the same triumvirate that the young Auden had been taught to place 'beyond the pale' – were in fact composers that afforded him delight. Here again one senses a fission between musical science (Tchaikovsky at least has the candour to admit that Bach bores him) and unstrenuous pleasure, between high-minded musical Platonism and earth-hugging musical realism. Fortunately for us, Tchaikovsky didn't always practise what he preached, having received a somewhat similar rebuke from Taneyev about the Fourth Symphony: 'One of this symphony's failing with which I shall never be able to reconcile myself is that in each movement there is something that recalls ballet music'.³⁹ Russian (and not only Russian) ballet music had, at the time of the Fourth Symphony, become a major preserve of the *popolaresco*, its *pas de deux* simulacra of Donizetti and Bellini cavatinas, and its variations boulevard tunes and beer garden idylls – so much so that, in the scores of the time, 'scientific' music invariably figures as an emblem of pedantry or antiquation. Roger Fiske, for example, points out how a 'stiff, dry music' characterises Dr Coppélius in Delibes's ballet, and how 'his pedagogy [is] suggested by canonic device'⁴⁰ while Minkus's *Don Quixote* has, as its eponymic motif, an edgy, tense gavotte that might originate in Spohr's Piano Quintet in C Minor op. 52, though the latter's toes would no doubt have curled at the suggestion. Nineteenth-century ballet music, all cheerful, open homophony, will also use the 'scientific' to register the 'other', Schneitzhöffner having appropriated a Bach fugue for the witches in *La Sylphide*, and Adam also having rendered the vampiric project of the wilis in fugal terms. In the light of this prejudice, Tchaikovsky's rejoinder to Taneyev seems a little slippery, modulating as it does from 'ballet music' to 'dance tunes', an entity altogether less blameless in this regard: 'I simply do not understand how in the term ballet music there can be anything censorious [...] I do not comprehend why a dance tune may not appear occasionally in a symphony, even if only when it has a deliberate shade of vulgar coarse humour. Again, I'll cite Beethoven, who resorted to this effect more than once.'⁴¹

'Vulgar coarse humour' is bound to have an invigorating effect on the music it aerates, and most Romantics, whether literary or musical, favoured folk music for its primitive immediacy – its immediacy and also its intimacy, since it cut directly to the heart. Wordsworth, listening to his solitary reaper, felt that he had eavesdropped on a private confession at the furthest possible remove from Rossini's limelit prime donne. He honours her with the same

38. David Brown: *Tchaikovsky: a biographical and critical study*, 4 vols (London, 1978–91), vol. 4, p. 106.

39. Brown: *Tchaikovsky*, vol. 2, p. 162.

40. Roger Fiske: *Ballet music* (London, 1958), p. 26.

41. Brown: *Tchaikovsky*, vol. 2, p. 162.

attentiveness and respect that Goethe had shown to the Venetian fishermen and their wives, and like the latter, she touches the *lacrimae rerum* through the mysterious austerity of her song. But even while Wordsworth entertained the Romantic impulse to glamorise and – at the risk of tautology – to Romanticise her melody with Scott-like memorials of the past, he showed an equally strong sense of its regionalist *raciné* colour, its involvement with the here and now ('Or is it some more humble lay,/Familiar matter of today?'⁴²). No *musica mundana* for him, but rather mundane music. And indeed familiarity does play a key role in the functioning of the popolaresco. The march from Wagner's *Lohengrin*, certainly not conceived in the idiom of the Neapolitan café, has, even so, by sounding in countless suburban churches, joined the repertoire of such predicable, ready-for-contrafaction melodies as 'Happy birthday to you' and 'For he's a jolly good fellow'. (I recall chanting an irreverent version as a child: 'Here comes the bride,/All dressed in white;/She slipped on a banana peel/And went for a ride'.) Thus can *any* 'solemn music', absorbed into a satiric urban context, trigger associations very different from those set out in Milton's poem.

We have seen that the popolaresco is essentially communal, unlike the singing of the solitary reaper on the one hand, and unlike the exclusive difficulty of musical 'science' on the other. Catchy tunes tend to unite, as witness the effect of the Carmagnole and Marsellaise on the course of the French Revolution, and Verdi's Risorgimento choruses on the unification of Italy. We ought therefore not to forget that military music also played its part in forging the populist idiom. Before he abandoned periodic melody for the rarefactions of quasi-recitative, Wagner himself had condescended to such productions as the *Rienzi* march, barely distinguishable from its equivalent in *La Muette de Portici*. The latter proved so revolutionary (in the political rather than the musical sense) that it provided a wedge to split off Holland from Belgium in 1830. And Beethoven himself didn't flinch from including a demotic march in the finale to the Ninth Symphony, outraging the censorious Spohr and others with like aspirations to 'refinement'. The locus classicus for sneers of this kind can be found in *Daniel Deronda*, in which a Wagnerite trounces the popolaresco of Bellini:

Still, you are not without gifts. You sing in tune, and you have a pretty fair organ. But you produce your notes badly; and that music which you sing is beneath you. It is a form of melody which expresses a puerile state of culture – a dangling, canting, see-saw kind of stuff – the passion and thought of people without any breadth of horizon. There is a sort of self-satisfied folly about every phrase of such melody; no cries of deep, mysterious passion – no conflict – no sense of the universal. It makes men small as they listen to it.⁴³

That Eliot clearly smiles the pomposity of this denunciation, and the musical attenuation to which it can lead, is evident from her account of Klesmer's own compositional technique: 'an extensive commentary on some melodic

42. Wordsworth: *Poetical works*, p.230.

43. George Eliot: *Daniel Deronda*, ed. Barbara Hardy (Harmondsworth, 1967), p.79.

ideas not too grossly evident'.⁴⁴ Klesmer's censoriousness resembles Tchaikovsky's toward Arensky and Taneyev's toward Tchaikovsky in turn. The passage might even have lodged in the latter's mind when he came to arraign his pupil, for we know that he read George Eliot with avidity.

The Klesmerian quest for a 'universal' idiom was all very well, but it more often than not alienated and de-universalised by excluding many legitimate forms of musical expression. If dance music can enter symphonies only as 'vulgar coarse humour', they will be the poorer for their hermetic Platonic exclusivity. At least EM Forster was ready to concede the universalism of a good tune, and Patrick White (in other respects an intolerant snob) to admit that 'pretty music' can produce a 'pricking of tears'. Indeed, by reversing the separation of the serious and popular that Pythagoras initiated by establishing the aural ratios of a scale, *popolaresco* becomes the very image of human connectedness. 'Only connect' is the epigraph of *Howard's End*, a novel also famous for a scene set at a symphony concert:

Here Beethoven started decorating his tune, so she heard him through once more, and then smiled at her cousin Frieda. But Frieda, listening to Classical Music, could not respond. Herr Liesecke, too, looked as if wild horses could not make him inattentive; there were lines across his forehead, his lips were parted, his pince-nez at right angles to his nose, and he had laid a thick, white hand on either knee. And next to her was Aunt Juley, so British, and wanting to tap.⁴⁵

In the context of self-important capitals ('Classical Music' evokes the spectre of a Platonic archetype), and a joyless, braced position that scowls its attentiveness to the world, Forster comes close to celebrating Aunt Juley's naïve kinetic responsiveness even as he deprecates it.

Where angels fear to tread transposes this over-insistent Good Taste into an Italian opera house where, confronting the tuneful masterpiece of a great musical populist, it finds itself at a loss for words. Philip baits his sister (in almost all the meanings of that verb) into attending a performance of *Lucia di Lammermoor*:

His sister shook her head. 'Mother wouldn't like it. It would be most unsuitable – almost irreverent. Besides all that, foreign theatres are notorious. Don't you remember those letters in the *Church Family Newspaper*?'

'But this is an opera – *Lucia di Lammermoor* – Sir Walter Scott – classical, you know.'⁴⁶

But for those who reject the *popolaresco*, the 'classical' turns out to be suburban stuffiness by another name (we can be sure that the *Church Family Newspaper* espoused the causes of Stainer and Stanford):

Harriet, meanwhile, had been coughing ominously at the drop-scene, which presently rose on the grounds of Ravenswood, and the chorus of Scotch retainers burst into cry. The audience accompanied with tappings and drumming, swaying in the melody like corn in the wind. Harriet, though she did not care for music, knew how to listen to it. She uttered an acid 'Shish!'

[...]

44. *ibid.*, pp.79–80.

45. EM Forster: *Howard's End* (Harmondsworth, 1941), p.101.

46. EM Forster: *Where angels fear to tread* (Harmondsworth, 1959), p.101.

Lucia began to sing, and there was a moment's silence. She was stout and ugly; but her voice was still beautiful, and as she sang the theatre murmured like a hive of happy bees. All through the coloratura she was accompanied by sighs, and its top note was drowned in a shout of universal joy.

So the opera proceeded. The singers drew inspiration from the audience, and the two great sextettes were rendered not unworthily. Miss Abbott fell into the spirit of the thing. She, too, chatted and laughed and applauded and encored, and rejoiced in the existence of beauty. As for Philip, he forgot himself as well as his mission. He was not even an enthusiastic visitor. For he had been in this place always. It was home.

Harriet, like M. Bovary on a more famous occasion, was trying to follow the plot. Occasionally she nudged her companions, and asked them what had become of Sir Walter Scott. She looked round grimly. The audience sounded drunk, and even Caroline, who never took a drop, was swaying oddly. Violent waves of excitement, all arising from very little, went sweeping round the theatre.

[...]

'Call this classical?' she cried, rising from her seat. 'It's not even respectable! Philip! Take me out at once.'⁴⁷

This passage draws together many of the threads that have been running through this essay. Forster grants us a sense of music as the Platonic gateway to sublime beauty, but allows that access is offered as much by Beethoven's Fifth Symphony as by a tuneful opera of the primo ottocento. The sublime and popular both have a power of linkage, binding their audiences into a great sheaf of humanity. Notwithstanding its capacity for transcendence, Forster shows that music establishes itself in the communal here-and-now, cleansing the audience of social discord in much the same way that the Corybantic priests, by similar means, had purged the feelings of their followers.

Even though Modernism, in both its musical and literary manifestations, embraced difficulty, and to that extent might be said to have blocked off access to the popolaresco, it also embraced the juxtapositional method of collage, and it was via the calculated shock of such idiomatic 'mismatches' that the populism entered into the high art of the 20th century. We find TS Eliot quoting *Tristan und Isolde* in 'The waste land' on the one hand, and picking up the hiccuppy rhythms of ragtime on the other in the same way that Stravinsky's *Petrushka* makes sardonic space for Lanner, a Viennese petit maître. In time, the convergence of high and low issued in a homogeneous compound, the unstrained inclusiveness of post-modern literature paralleling the receptivity that its art music showed to jazz. In Edwin Morgan's 'Oban Girl', an unforced, inconsequential anadiplosis knits up the Beatles with the other *données* of everyday life – melons, painting and marriage:

A girl in a window eating a melon
eating a melon and painting a picture

47. *ibid.*, p.105.

painting a picture and humming Hey Jude
humming Hey Jude as the light was fading

In the autumn she'll be married.⁴⁸

How different the conceit-laden formality in Marvell's glimpse of another singer altogether:

I could have fled from One but singly fair:
My dis-intangled Soul itself might save,
Breaking the curled trammels of her hair.
But how should I avoid to be her Slave,
Whose subtile Art invisibly can wreath
The fetters of the very Air I breathe?⁴⁹

48. Edwin Morgan: *Collected poems* (Manchester, 1990), p.237.

49. Andrew Marvell: *The Poems and letters of Andrew Marvell*, ed. HM Margoliouth, rev. Pierre Legouis and EE Duncan Jones, 2 vols (Oxford, 1971), vol.1, p.33.

Matching the dissimilarity of comportment between these two poems is the dissimilar music that each describes, the Oban girl's as loose and intimate and informal as the poem that is her vehicle, and the Caroline vocalist's as elaborately decked out with shakes and roulades as the verse with its own tropes and figures. The regional *popolaresco* of the north has become a universal language in a way that Marvell, MP for Hull though he was, could never have conceived. His Pythagorean and Platonic baggage about the *musica mundana*, that cosmic twining of planets and stars and love, would surely have got in the way.

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