

John Louis Miller
email: j5miller@charter.net
Copyright 2001 John Louis Miller

THE MUSIC HATER¹

E.T.A. Hoffmann

trans. John Louis Miller

It must be wonderful to be so thoroughly musical--so endowed with those special powers that one can understand and appreciate the greatest works of music ever created! The countless notes and tones, the diverse instruments the masters have put together in those grand musical structures--to experience all of it blithely and nonchalantly, without any particular emotional involvement, without the painful jabs of passionate delight, without that heart-rending melancholy . . .

What pleasure one might then derive from the virtuosos' performances! One might even try to express those feelings in words--express them without fear of ridicule. Remembering the ineptitude I've displayed from childhood on, I wouldn't even think of performing myself. The anguish I now feel in the presence of this wonderful art probably comes from those childhood feelings of inadequacy.

My father was certainly a respectable musician. He used to play with great enthusiasm on a big grand piano, often until late at night. Whenever there was a concert at our house he played very long pieces, with others helping out as best they could on violins, basses, sometimes even flutes and French horns. When one of these long pieces finally came to an end they would cry out to each other: "Bravo, bravo! What a beautiful concerto! How skillfully, how masterfully performed!" and the name Philipp

¹*Der Musikfeind*

Emanuel Bach was reverently invoked.

But father had pounded and stormed at such length that it always seemed to me it was hardly music--which to me meant melodies that go directly to the heart. It seemed only a game to him and the others seemed to feel the same way about it.

At such occasions I was always buttoned into my Sunday suit and had to sit on a tall chair next to my mother, listening with as little squirming as I could manage. The time grew unbearably long for me, and I probably couldn't have stood it at all if I hadn't taken such delight in the grimaces and contortions of the various players. I remember with particular vividness an old lawyer who always sat close to my father, playing the violin. Everyone said he was a music lover past all bounds of reason--that the music made him half crazy, so that in the delirium to which Emanuel Bach's or Wolf's or Benda's genius drove him he could neither play in tune nor keep the beat.

To this day I can see the man perfectly. He wore a plum-colored coat with spun gold buttons, a little silver dagger and a reddish, carelessly powdered wig with a small, round bun in the back. There was an indescribably comical earnestness about everything he did. "*Ad opus!*" he would shout when my father set out the parts on the music stands. With his right hand he seized his violin and with his left hand his wig, which he took off and hung on a nail. Then he set to work, bending closer and closer to the page so that his red eyes bugged out, gleaming, and beads of perspiration clung to his forehead. Sometimes he succeeded in getting through a piece ahead of everyone else, which surprised him no end, and then he would glare at the others, furious. Often it seemed to me that he produced tones resembling those our neighbor Peter coaxed from our Tom through calculated pinching of his tail--for which father always beat him (beat Peter, that is). Peter had a bent for natural science and was

researching latent musical talent in cats.

In short, the plum-colored lawyer--his name was Musewius--completely countered my discomfort at having to sit still, for his grimaces, his comical excursions and even his scraping on the violin delighted me totally. Once he completely disrupted the music, causing father to spring up from the piano and, together with the others, rush over to Musewius, all of them afraid that some terrible misfortune had befallen the man. He had begun with a very slight shaking of his head, then with a rising *crescendo* threw his head back and forth more and more violently, drawing the bow viciously across the strings, clucking with his tongue and stamping his foot. What had driven him to such desperation was nothing more than a mischievous little fly, who, with stubborn single-mindedness, hovered near his nose, buzzing in a circle. Though chased away a thousand times, he landed on the fiddler's nose again and again.

Sometimes my mother's sister would sing an aria. How I looked forward to that! I loved her very much. She devoted a great deal of time to me and would often sing for me, her beautiful voice so penetrating my soul that to this day I carry many of those wonderful songs inside me and still can sing them softly to myself.

There was always a certain formality when my aunt brought out the music for an aria by Hasse or Tr etta or some other master: the lawyer wasn't allowed to participate. Even while they were playing the introduction and my aunt hadn't yet begun to sing my heart would start pounding with such a strange, wonderful feeling of joy and melancholy that I could scarcely control myself. Hardly had she sung a phrase when I would begin to weep so bitterly that my father would scold me and send me from the room. My father often disagreed with my aunt, for she thought my behavior in no way indicated

that music affected me badly, but was rather a sign of unusual sensitivity. Father retorted that I was a stupid boy who got a perverse pleasure out of howling like a music-spoiling dog.

The fact that I could delight myself by the hour searching out and playing all sorts of pleasant-sounding chords--when by chance my father hadn't locked the piano--was cited by my aunt not only as grounds for my defense, but as a sign of a deep-seated musical sensitivity. When, with both hands, I had found three, four, maybe even six keys which, depressed together, produced a lovely, magical consonance, I never tired of playing them and letting them slowly die away. I would lay my head on the lid of the instrument, close my eyes, and I would be in another world. It always ended in bitter tears, though, and I never knew whether from sadness or from joy. My aunt often listened to me, taking great pleasure in what my father called tomfoolery. You might say they had totally opposite points of view about me, just as they disagreed on other matters, and particularly on music. My aunt loved quite simple, unassuming pieces, particularly those composed by Italian masters. My father, however, was a Man of Action. He called such music "dilly-dallying" and said no one with any sense would bother with such stuff. My father's watchword was common sense, while my aunt always spoke of feeling.

But she finally persuaded my father to let me take piano lessons from an old cantor who played the violin at the family concerts. Wouldn't you know it, it soon became apparent that my aunt had given me too much credit and that father was right after all. The cantor maintained I was in no way lacking in feeling for rhythm or in comprehension of melody, but that my abysmal clumsiness spoiled everything. When I was supposed to practice an *étude* I would sit down with all good intentions to work at it, but would soon slip into that chord-searching game and wouldn't get much further.

With great, with *enormous* effort I finally worked my way through several keys to that infernal

one with four sharps which, as I now know only too well, is called *E-Major*. At the top of the piece in great letters stood: *Scherzando Presto*, and as the cantor played it for me there was something bouncy and springy about it that I didn't like in the least. Oh, the encouraging whacks that unsaintly cantor gave me, the tears that accursed *Presto* cost me!

Finally the dreaded day arrived, when the skills I had sweated out were to be paraded before father and his musical friends: I was to show off what I had learned. I could manage it very well up to that terrible *E-Major Presto*. The evening before That Day I was sitting at the piano in a kind of desperation, determined to learn to play the piece without mistakes no matter what. I don't know myself how I happened to play it on the keys right next to the correct ones. The whole piece became easier and I didn't miss a note, the only thing being that I played it on those other keys. It even seemed to me the piece sounded better that way than when the cantor played it. I was delighted and enormously relieved. The next day, full of confidence, I sat down at the piano and thumped gaily through my little piece. Over and over my father gasped: "I wouldn't have believed it!"

When the *Scherzo* was over, the cantor said quite amiably: "That was the difficult key of *E-Major!*" and my father turned to his friends, saying: "See how the boy has mastered the difficult key of *E-Major*." "Excuse me, old friend," replied the one addressed, "but that was *F-Major*." "Nonsense, nonsense," said father. "But yes," insisted the friend, "Let's just take a look." They both came to the piano. "See!" cried my father triumphantly, pointing to the four sharps. "But yet the boy played *F-Major*," said the friend.

I had to repeat the piece. I did it with perfect aplomb because I had no idea what they were discussing so earnestly. My father kept his eyes on the keyboard and I hadn't played more than a few

notes when his hand whistled through the air and landed on my ear. “Obstinate, stupid boy!” he screamed in a rage. Weeping and howling I ran from the room, and that was the end of my musical instruction forever. My aunt maintained that my playing the whole piece correctly in a different key showed real musical talent, but I think now that father was right to give up on me. My stiff, clumsy fingers would have frustrated all efforts.

This ineptitude in the performance of music seems to affect to my understanding of it as well. Only too often during the performance of an acclaimed virtuoso--when everyone else was bursting with admiration--I have felt only boredom, disgust and tedium. Because I’m not clever at concealing my opinion, or worse yet because I express my feelings honestly, I have become the butt of jokes for those endowed with musical taste. There was an incident just a short time ago, when a famous pianist was traveling through the city and consented to play in the home of one of my friends.

“Today, old chum,” said my friend, “we’re going to cure your indifference to music. “You’re going to be overwhelmed, *thrilled* by the magnificent Y___.” They made me get right next to the piano and the virtuoso began. He rolled the tones up and down and raised a powerful roar, and the longer it lasted the more dizzy and ill at ease I became. But suddenly something attracted my attention and I must have gazed quite fixedly into the piano, no longer hearing the performer at all. When he finally stopped thundering and raging my friend took me by the arm and cried, “See, you really *are* caught up in it! Did you finally feel the profound, *captivating* effect of this divine music?” Then I confessed honestly that I had scarcely heard the player but had thoroughly enjoyed watching the wildfire interaction of hammers and strings. At this they all broke out in peals of laughter.

How often am I unsympathetically, even cruelly reprimanded for making an exit when I see the

piano being opened or when this or that lady takes guitar in hand and clears her throat to sing. I know before it begins that the music usually heard in such situations makes me physically ill--actually upsets my stomach.

This is a real problem for me, inviting the contempt of refined people. I know well that such a voice, such singing as my aunt's finds its way into my soul and arouses feelings for which I have no words. It seems to me that these feelings are a kind of heaven, somewhere beyond all that is earthly, something for which there is no terrestrial expression. That's why when I hear such a singer I can't break out in applause as the others do. I keep still and look into myself, for inside me all the tones which have faded in the outer world still echo in a living stream. Because I have no words for my feelings I'm called cold, devoid of feeling, a music-hater.

Across the way from me lives a concertmaster who has friends in to play quartets every Thursday. In the summertime after the streets are quiet I can hear the softest tones of their playing--through the open windows. I sit on the sofa, listening with closed eyes, filled with bliss. But only through the first quartet. By the second the tones are becoming muddled, for it seems they must compete with the melodies of the first, which are still alive inside me. By the third quartet I can no longer endure it and have to leave. The concertmaster has often laughed at me because I'm driven to flight by the music. They probably play six or eight quartets at a sitting, and I truly admire the mental strength, the extraordinary spiritual tenacity that goes with appreciating so much music in succession, bringing to life what they have conceived and felt in their innermost selves.

It's just the same at concerts. Often the first symphony arouses such a tumult in me that I am deaf to everything else. To be truthful, just the first movement sometimes shakes me so powerfully

that I long to be outside in order to reflect more closely on the strange impressions that take hold of me, to weave myself into that marvelous dance so that I, among those wonderful apparitions, come to resemble them. It seems that I *become* the music that I've heard. That's why I never ask who the composer was; it doesn't matter to me. For me, in that state, there is only the movement of an amorphous psychic substance, and in that sense I feel almost as if I myself have created something wonderful.

Just writing this down makes me anxious--though writing only for myself--afraid I might one day let these ideas slip out. How they would laugh! Many of those true music lovers would think I had lost my mind!

Every time I bolt from the concert hall at the end of the first symphony they call after me: "There he goes, the music hater!" and they pity me, for every educated person now expects, and rightly so, that one knows how to bow when being introduced, that one can talk about what one doesn't understand, and that one appreciates and takes part in music. I'm sorry to say it's just these goings-on that make me seek solitude. When I'm alone some omnipotent power awakens wondrous tones in the rustling of oak leaves and in the splashing of a brook. These intermingle in some mysterious way with the sounds inside me and stream forth in majestic music. There! I've laid out my whole problem!

This wretched, embarrassing failure in the comprehension of music is also a problem for me at the opera. To be sure, it sometimes seems that a proper musical sound is made, one that drives away boredom or the more serious cares one might have, just as wild animals are kept away from a caravan by the frenzied clamor of cymbals and drums. The characters on stage seem caught up in the mighty course of the music. Quick as a flaming star wondrous realms open up for me, and it's all I can do to

hold on in the tempest that threatens to overwhelm me and plunge me into a realm beyond time and space.

I go to such an opera over and over, and it glows ever more brightly inside me. All the figures step out of a hazy mist and come toward me; I get to know them. Soon they are like friends and they carry me along with them, wonderfully alive. I'm sure I've heard Gluck's *Iphigenie* fifty times. Real musicians laugh at that and say: "We heard everything it had to offer the first time, and by the third we were tired of it." I'm sure they must be right.

I am hounded by an evil demon who forces me to be comical without intending to be, makes me the butt of more and more jokes about my enmity to music. For example, I was recently in a theater, where I had gone because I didn't want to disappoint an acquaintance of mine, and was completely lost in thought. An opera was being performed, and the musicians were just then making a big noise that said nothing to me. My neighbor nudged me, saying, "This is a really wonderful spot!" At that moment it didn't occur to me that he was speaking of anything other than our seats in the loge, and I answered quite honestly, "Yes, a good spot, but a little drafty." He got a good laugh out of it and a new anecdote about the music hater was spread all over town. Now everywhere I go I'm teased about my draft in the opera, though what I said was perfectly sincere.

Could you believe that in spite of all this there is a real, a true musician who shares the opinion of my aunt about my musical perception? To be sure, no one will give it much credit when I admit that it's none other than Kapellmeister Johannes Kreisler, who is quite notorious for his fanciful notions. But it's important to me that he doesn't think himself too grand to play and sing for me, in perfect tune with my innermost feelings, in a way that lifts my spirit and gives me joy.

Recently he said to me, as I lamented my musical maladroitness, that I could be compared to the apprentice in the Temple of Sais, who seemed awkward in comparison to the other novices, but who nevertheless found the Stone of Wisdom for which the others had searched in vain. I didn't understand what he meant because I hadn't read the Novalis work to which he referred. I requested the book at the library today, but probably won't be able to get it because it's supposed to be quite wonderful, and so will certainly be very much in demand.

But no, I just now received Novalis's works, two slender volumes. The librarian said I could get such stuff as that any time because it never went out of the library. He hadn't been able find it at first simply because no one ever asked for and it had been stuck back out of the way. Now I want to see what my kinship to this Apprentice at Sais might be.