

After Silence, That Which Comes Nearest

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The association of music and the musical experience with the Ineffable is an old one, as may be learned from any anthology of quotations: “Where words leave off, music begins,” wrote the nineteenth-century German poet Heinrich Heine.¹ The novelist Victor Hugo: “Music expresses that which cannot be put into words and that which cannot remain silent.”² And the Aldous Huxley observation that gives me my title: “After silence, that which comes nearest to expressing the inexpressible is music.”³

Such thoughts are evocative yet vague, and confer a kind of free pass to those profoundly affected by music but untrained in it, and thus unable to discuss it in technical terms: such enthusiasts can claim whatever they want and we nod in empathy. Many of those who *have* received musical training still cling to the mystical aspects and prefer to talk as if music as played and sounded belongs in some magical, undefinable realm. In my view, a great deal about musical expression can be explained and demonstrated, and to do so in no way diminishes its power and effect.

A famous cautionary explanation by the composer Felix Mendelssohn can help here, though it’s a bit long. Someone had just written him about the possible meanings of some of the op. 19 *Songs Without Words*, suggesting that one was a “*par force* hunt,” another “praise of the goodness of God,” and so on. Somewhat wearily, Mendelssohn responded:

There is so much spoken about music, and yet so little is said. I believe that words are entirely insufficient for that, and if I should find that they were sufficient then I would write no more music. People usually complain

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that music is so ambiguous; that what they should think of when they hear it is so unclear, whereas everyone understands words. But for me it is just the opposite, and not just with the entire discourses, but also with individual words—these, too, seem to me so ambiguous, so unclear, so misleading in comparison to good music, which fills one’s soul with a thousand things better than words.—What the music I love expresses to me is thoughts not too *unclear* for words, but rather too *clear*. I therefore find in all attempts to put these thoughts into words something correct, but also always something insufficient [and] not universal. [...This] is the fault of the words, which simply cannot do any better. If you ask me what I was thinking of in [the Songs Without Words], then I will say: just the song as it stands there. And if I had even one certain word or certain words in mind for one or another of these songs, I could not divulge them to anyone, because the same word never means the same thing to different people, for only *the song* can mean the same thing, say the same thing, arouse the same feelings in one person as in another—a feeling which is not, however, expressed by the same words.—Resignation, melancholy, praise of God, a *par force* hunt: one person does not think of these in the same way as someone else. Resignation is for one person what melancholy is for another; a third person can’t get a clear sense of either. Indeed, if one were by nature an enthusiastic hunter, for him the *par force* hunt and praise of God would be pretty much the same thing, and for him the sound of horns would truly be the proper way to praise God. *We* [on the other hand] would hear nothing but the *par force* hunt, and however much we debate with him about it we would get absolutely nowhere. The words remain ambiguous, but we all understand the music.”⁴

One salient aspect of Mendelssohn’s explanation is not how far from words these pieces end up being, but rather how close. For him, it is not that musical expression eludes verbal description because it sings of the Infinite, but rather that because you and I could not possibly agree on the quite-possibly-everyday characteristics of the Infinite, there’s no point in trying to nail it down to the point of clear description. That is a very different proposition. So whether the idea of heaven is a hunt, or angels fluttering around with harps, or (to choose an entirely abstract example) an endless used book store with plentiful coffee, it is the hearer who synthesizes it all, rather than there being an inherent power in the music, or a definitive immensity of what is expressed.

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There are at least a couple more points in Mendelssohn’s explanation that bear closer scrutiny. The first is the statement “If you ask me what I was thinking of in [these pieces], then I will say: just the song as it stands there.” This is a bit of a problem, because Mendelssohn’s concern about the fluid meanings of words must logically apply to notes, too: there is no reason on earth why the “meaning” of a minor chord or ascending melodic figure or chorale texture would somehow be more consistent, from listener to listener, than words are. So his statement that “only the song can mean the same thing, say the same thing, arouse the same feelings in one person as in another” simply cannot stand up, especially if we think of people from other cultures (which Mendelssohn most assuredly was *not* doing). What is more, the entire idea of “just the song as it stands there” collapses with the comment that for a hunter, “the *par force* hunt and praise of God would be pretty much the same thing, and for him the sound of horns would truly be the proper way to praise God.” The giveaway here, which is easy to miss, is that the moment Mendelssohn refers to “the sound of horns” in connection with hunting, two points become inarguable: 1) the sound of horns is unquestionably associated with the idea of hunting, and 2) that it is quite possible to write music that imitates horn-calls, and thus evoke (or “express,” or “talk about”) the hunt. These points may seem obvious, or even trivial, but their implications are crucial. Never mind disagreements about the nature of *heaven*; Mendelssohn, here, offhandedly admits that music *can* be expressive of hunting via imitation of the instrument associated with it. To illustrate, **Example 1** gives the opening section of the piece in question, the “Song Without Words” Op. 19, No. 3—it’s usually called “Hunting Song,” although that title did not originate with Mendelssohn. And from the very first appearance of “the sound of

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hunting horns” (mm. 1–2 and throughout, in various forms), one is no longer in the realm of “just the song as it stands there,” because it is irrefutably *about* the Hunt, via the clear imitation of the instrument associated first and foremost with hunting.

Molto Allegro e vivace.

Nº 3.

f

sempre f

p

f

p

vive.

Ex. 1. Felix Mendelssohn, *Song Without Words*, Op. 19b/3 (“Hunting Song”), opening.

It is here that Mendelssohn, renowned composer and pianist, parts company (perhaps unconsciously) with a large percentage of the philosophers who have written about music. Arthur Schopenhauer, for example, wrote that “It is music’s exclusive universality, together with its extreme precision, that gives it the status of a panacea for all our suffering. If therefore music allies itself too closely with words and seeks to portray events, it becomes engaged in a language that is not its own.”⁵ Schopenhauer is speaking in particular against music’s role in accompanying song and opera, but with his

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phrase “seeks to portray events” he betrays a certain anxiety about music that behaves like a language and imagines itself able to be understood literally. Now, it is important to be aware that this condescension to vocal music is directly opposed to the prevailing view of the previous century, which privileged vocal music and looked upon instrumental music as something not far from meaningless chattering, *certainly* unable to express profound moods and emotions. “Purely harmonic music is short on substance,” wrote Jean-Jacques Rousseau in 1768—he was talking about music without any text, and the sonata specifically:

...in order to be continually pleasing and avoid boredom, music must raise itself to the level of the imitative arts; but its imitation is not always immediate like that of poetry or painting; the word is the means through which music most frequently determines the object whose image it offers us, and it is by means of sounds in conjunction with the human voice that this image awakens at the bottom of our hearts the sentiment it is its purpose to produce. Who does not sense how far pure *Symphon[y]*, in which nothing is sought but instrumental brilliance, is from such an effect? Can all the violinistic fireworks of M. Mondonville [the foremost French violinist of the time] evoke in me the tenderness the voice of a great singer produces in two notes? *Symphon[y]* can enliven song and add to its expressiveness, but it cannot supplant it. In order to know what all these heaps of sonatas mean, one would have to follow the example of the inept painter who must label his figures: *this is a tree, this is a man, this is a horse*. I shall never forget the sally of the celebrated [French academician] Fontenelle, who, finding himself over-burdened with these interminable *Symphonies*, cried out in a fit of impatience, “*Sonate, que me veux-tu?*” “*Sonata, what do you want of me?*”⁶

Rousseau—encyclopedist, freethinker, and author of *The Social Contract*, scion of an operatic age and himself the composer of the pastoral opera *Le Devin du Village* among other texted musical works—here brushes aside the pretensions of instrumental music to *express* anything without the help a explanatory caption. He was not the first writer to voice such skepticism about music’s depictive and specifically expressive

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capabilities; Richard Taruskin and Piero Weiss, in their widely used collection *Music in the Western World: A History in Documents*, assemble a parade of such Enlightenment-era writers, from the English organist and composer Charles Avison in 1752 through the philosopher Immanuel Kant in 1790. This strain of thought continued in the nineteenth century, and has come down to us in the two centuries that followed as what is loosely called *Absolute Music*, music that is essentially only about itself and does not seek after crude depictions or narratives in the fashion of late-Renaissance madrigals, with their teardrops, descents from mountains, and so on. Indeed, the twentieth-century philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch, who wrote an entire book titled *Music and the Ineffable*,⁷ sourly observed of literalist interpretations that “In the hermeneutics of music, everything is possible, the most fabulous ideologies and unfathomable imputed meanings.” He continued:

It is critical to point out, however, that all such *metamusic*, music thus romanticized, is at once arbitrary and metaphorical. It is arbitrary because one cannot see exactly what justifies taking the acoustic universe and privileging and promoting it to this degree above all others. Why should hearing, alone among all the senses, have the privilege of accessing the ‘thing in itself’ for us, and thus destroy the limits of our finitude?⁸

One might observe that language, which one also in fact apperceives by hearing (that is, when it is not perceived visually, as with sign languages), has precisely this privilege of standing for the “thing in itself”—the word *hand* does indeed stand for the hand itself—so music might be another place to look for this capability.

On the other hand [Jankélévitch continues], the metaphysics of music is not constructed without recourse to many analogies and metaphorical transpositions: the correspondences between musical discourse and our subjective lives, between the assumed structures of Being and musical

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discourse, and between the structures of Being and our subjective lives as mediated by musical discourse. A first example of such analogies: the polarity of major and minor corresponds to that of the two great ‘ethoi’ of subjective mood, serenity and depression. Dissonance tends toward consonance through cadences and appoggiaturas, and consonance troubled anew by dissonance allegorizes human disquiet and a human desire that oscillates ceaselessly between wish and surfeit.⁹

Now, the bone being thrown to idea of expression here—that of analogy, with the all-too-common example of major/happy and minor/sad, is highly problematic and even shallow for a thinker of Jankélévitch’s stature. One might make the observe that Yiddish music, for example, Yiddish music, can be riotously happy and exultant in minor mode (this is familiar in Hungarian-Gypsy music too), and utterly heartbreaking oin major. Jankélévitch, however, refers to only a particular pattern in much of the music with which *he himself* is familiar, or wants to discuss—a very limited repertory—and elevates that pattern to a philosophical universal. Music scholars see a lot of this: a major figure in another scholarly discipline, perhaps even a trained musician him- or herself, delivering opinions on music that are quite two-dimensional, thus demonstrating that a mind that is subtle and penetrating in one area is still susceptible to naïve and credulous positions in another, with elevated philosophical or academic discourse obscuring that fact. (Jankélévitch’s next example is “the superimposition of singing above bass sonorities, of melody and harmony, corresponds to the cosmological gamut of beings, with consciousness at the peak and inorganic material at the base.” For that, we will hold off until later, because the musical realization of that very analogy rather subverts his argument about the vagueness of metamusical explanations.)

Jankélévitch’s view is a deeply personal and mystical one that accords music, as did his ancient forebears, a far greater power than that of mere spoken language. “Solon

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the lawmaker is a sage, but Orpheus the enchanter is a magician,” he wrote. “Music, like movement or duration, is a continuous miracle that with every step accomplishes the impossible.”¹⁰ He is clear that music is non-rhetorical, except by weak analogy: “Is a symphony a form of discourse?” he demands. “Is a sonata comparable to a closing argument? Fugue a dissertation, oratorio a sermon? Do the themes in a symphony play the role as the ‘ideas’ in an academic’s lecture?... Where a spatializing and associative intelligence, skimming over this unfolding, distinguishes several sections framed by an exordium and a peroration, the ear [his ear? “one”’s ear?]-caught in the immediacy and innocence of succession as experienced live—does not perceive such things at all.”¹¹ Sometimes he lets the aphorism stand for explanation: “The musical universe, not signifying any particular meaning, is first of all the antipode to any coherent system.”¹² And finally: “Allocution—the communication of meaning and the transmission of intentions—is out of a job where music is concerned.”¹³

For me, Jankélévitch’s meditation on Music and the Ineffable is wanting. The subjective nature of his reasoning is exacerbated by his near-rejection of the entire Austro-German musical tradition, which he does not discuss but the absence of which is, so to speak, the elephant in the room. He had compelling personal reasons for this rejection, but it still makes little sense to dismiss entirely music’s capability to function as a language while conveniently refusing to engage the music of the Viennese Classical period, which often functioned very much like a language. In doing so, it used not only precisely those rhetorical procedures that Jankélévitch preferred to dismiss, but also with obviously symbolic gestures that can be seen to correspond to the way verbal languages use words and phrases. I already identified one clear example: a hunting-horn figure

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signifying a hunt. Even while denying music’s “communication of meaning,” though, Jankélévitch still observed that “one way for human beings not to tell stories about themselves is to talk to us about ‘Collines d’Anacapri’ or the wind on the plains or bells heard through leaves.”¹⁴ The three Debussy pieces to which he explicitly refers (nos. 5 and 3 from the first book of Preludes, and the first of his second book of *Images*) are full of suggestive musical gestures, and I can conceive no essential difference between the communication of meaning that he has explicitly denied and his straight-faced acknowledgment of “talking about” things. We had just been told, ten pages previous, that music was out of a job as far as expressing meaning was concerned; but because there is no way to “talk about” things without having the expressive means to do so, he seems to have given his own game away entirely.

In any case, rather than spending more time disputing Jankélévitch specifically or The Literature generally on this issue, I’ll return to my demonstration of music functioning as language, though at this point it is a language largely forgotten. From there, it can be shown how music that was widely considered to express the ineffable could be fashioned from the most basic and commonplace musical materials.

The hunting-horn imitation was familiar enough that it was a straightforward matter to argue for a relatively explicit musical expression based upon it. What about when the idiom lies a bit further from contemporary awareness? **Example 2** gives the opening of Mendelssohn’s famous “Venetian Boat Song,” another of the *Songs Without Words*. Appropriate descriptors might include “gently rocking,” or “sweet,” or “melancholy,” but what we miss is the significance of Mendelssohn’s chosen title. The Barcarolle, or Gondolier’s Song, was a well-known nineteenth-century genre that set a

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melody, ardent or melancholy, over a $\frac{6}{8}$ or $\frac{12}{8}$ accompaniment. But because it was sung by a boatman—the third wheel, as it were, to what was presumed to be the romantic couple snuggling in the gondola—it had a strong serenade component; it never ventured to the extremes of passion, and it always relied on the gentle rhythms of the boatman’s oars dipping in the canals. Mendelssohn’s designation of “Venetian Boat Song” thus set explicit expectations for his listeners, who understood the essential conceit: “as if sung by a gondolier.” Nearly two hundred years later, this more distant image is something we might easily overlook.

The image shows the opening of Mendelssohn's "Venetian Boat Song" (Op. 19b/6). The score is in G major and 6/8 time, marked "Andante sostenuto." It consists of four systems of music. The first system shows the vocal line (treble clef) and the piano accompaniment (bass clef). The vocal line begins with a half note G4, followed by quarter notes A4, B4, and C5. The piano accompaniment features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The second system continues the vocal line with a half note D5, followed by quarter notes E5, F5, and G5. The piano accompaniment continues with a similar rhythmic pattern. The third system shows the vocal line with a half note G5, followed by quarter notes F5, E5, and D5. The piano accompaniment continues with a similar rhythmic pattern. The fourth system shows the vocal line with a half note C5, followed by quarter notes B4, A4, and G4. The piano accompaniment continues with a similar rhythmic pattern. The score includes various dynamic markings such as *p*, *sf*, *dim.*, and *pp*, and articulation marks like accents and slurs.

Ex. 2. Mendelssohn, *Song Without Words*, Op. 19b/6, “Venetian Boat Song,” opening.

Another *Song Without Words*, one without a subtitle, demonstrates how a vocabulary of musical formulas that once were familiar, and which would have made

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sense to informed contemporaries, are all but forgotten today and thus easily misunderstood. (See **Example 3**, which gives the entire piece.) If we were to take Mendelssohn at his exasperated word, then his answer to “What was *that* about?” would be “just the song as it stands there.” It is not that simple, though; despite his desire not to be pinned down, this piece is of a very specific type, as numerous gestures throughout demonstrate. Consider: the arpeggios and punctuating cadence that open the piece are repeated note for note at the end, so it’s less an introduction than a device that frames or bookends the main part of the piece—and they’re pedaled, so whatever instrument is “really” playing them has no dampers. The main melody that follows is simple in construction, almost exclusively in four-bar phrases, and several gestures point to a certain Germanic archaism, as if a fairy tale: the careful speech-like portato articulations (as if one is recounting a story rather than singing a lament or love song), the close-harmony choral texture throughout, the hint of grandiose royal procession or presentation set over the descending octave scale, and the minor triad on the fifth scale degree that is heard several times. Particularly this last seems unremarkable today, but at that time the lowered third of a dominant triad was a special effect, a distant evocation of the mixolydian mode with its lowered seventh. During the early 1830s, when this piece was written, epic poetry and the misty poetic visions of the largely fictitious ancient Scottish poet Ossian were all the rage—indeed, the last European epic poem, Adam Mickiewicz’s *Pan Tadeusz*, was just then being written in Poland—so a little piece with harp-like punctuation before and after, a kind of *parlando* or “spoken” articulation, and archaic harmonies and textures would have expressed something very clear to the contemporary ear: a bardic retelling of a heroic ballad of days of yore. Frédéric Chopin’s first Ballade,

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which had its own framing sections and a much more involved narrative strategy, was sketched out at the same time,¹⁵ so the idea was familiar, very much in the air.

Adagio non troppo.

Nº 3.

p

mf

f

cresc.

p

f

p

f

p tranquillo

M. H. 76.

Ex. 3. Mendelssohn, *Song Without Words* in E Major, Op. 30/3.

It is clear, now, that the musical language of the western common practice could, and did, express specific ideas, whether or not later writers and thinkers understood the point.

Musical expression of specifics, though, is different from singing of the ineffable. For

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that, I will need to introduce a genre little remembered today but very helpful for our purposes.

From the end of the eighteenth century through the beginning of the twentieth, amateur pianists had an insatiable appetite for descriptive fantasias, pieces that recounted a specific narrative—a battle (like Beethoven’s *Wellington’s Victory*, which was widely disseminated in its piano version), a funeral or memorial, a storm, natural disaster, or any of a variety of other possibilities. Such pieces might be a series of self-contained vignettes, or the episodes might be elided, but the essential characteristic of the genre was the way the episodes were captioned in the score with little phrases like “word of command,” “the heat of the action,” or “cries of the wounded.” (We remember, here, Rousseau’s remark about instrumental music being like the work of an incompetent painter captioning his paintings “this is a horse,” etc.; we also remember Schopenhauer’s frowning disapproval of “music that seeks to portray events”—their anxieties probably had much more specific targets than we realize.) Such pieces thus provide a kind of Rosetta Stone to the contemporary musical vocabulary: providing musical figures with their verbal translations, they explain to later generations what the musical gestures were meant to depict. The importance of knowing the way such musical gestures were heard and understood is huge, because they also appear without explanatory captions in symphonies, sonatas, Ballades, tone poems, and so on. Again, when we don’t know the musical language, it is too easy for us to think about musical expression in bland and abstract terms when it can be demonstrated that the associations were more specific.

Here is a musical example that is widely considered to brush the face of the Inexpressible, and it provides an apt illustration. We are all, whether we know it or not,

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are familiar with the third movement of Chopin’s B-Flat Minor piano sonata, which is probably the most familiar funeral march in the repertoire (though it was not so designated by Chopin). The movement is in a simple three-part form, with the grim outer sections framing the one of the gentlest songs of consolation ever written. And although any given piece or excerpt heard as ineffable by one person might be heard as leaden or treacly by another, such responses are at the center of our problem: one person’s Ineffability is another’s nothing-of-the-kind. However, the D-Flat Trio, the middle section of Chopin’s Funeral March, is as good an example as any: it was the soft center of a work that transformed the entire funeral march genre,¹⁶ and as such was lauded in the most exalted terms. Chopin’s biographer Frederick Niecks called the Trio “a rapturous gaze into the beatific regions of a beyond,” while Wilhelm von Lenz, Chopin’s sometime student, heard Chopin himself play it and recalled: “What Chopin made [of this Trio] is indescribable. Only Rubini sang like that, and even then only exceptionally. [...] This is where you learn whether the pianist performing is also a poet or merely a pianist; whether he can tell a story [*fabulieren*] or merely play the piano.”¹⁷ Franz Liszt, peerless virtuoso and erstwhile belle-lettrist both, rhapsodized at length about the march, and the following excerpt seems to refer to the trio especially:

All of most pure, most holy, of most believing, of most hopeful in the hearts of children, women, and priests, resounds, quivers and trembles there with irresistible vibrations. [...] Yet this *Mélopée* so funereal so full of desolating woe, is of such penetrating sweetness, that we can scarcely deem it of this earth. These sounds, in which the wild passion of human anguish seems chilled by awe and softened by distance, impose a profound meditation, as if, chanted by angels, they floated already in the heavens: the cry of a nation’s anguish mounting to the very throne of God! The appeal of human grief from the lyre of seraphs!¹⁸

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As exemplar of ineffability in music, then, this passage, with its silken accompaniment and *vox angeli* sopranissimo melody, seems to have reached its mark. (See **Example 4.**)

The image displays a musical score for the Trio section of Frédéric Chopin's Sonata No. 2 in B-flat Minor, Op. 35, III ("Funeral March"). The score is presented in five systems, each consisting of a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The key signature is B-flat major (two flats), and the time signature is 3/4. The piece begins with a piano (*pp*) dynamic. The right hand features a melodic line with a soprano-like quality, often marked with a *tr* (trill) and a *cresc.* (crescendo) marking. The left hand provides a silken accompaniment of eighth notes. The score includes various performance markings such as *pp*, *tr*, *cresc.*, and *rit.* (ritardando). The piece concludes with a first ending (1.) and a second ending (2.).

Ex. 4. Frédéric Chopin, Sonata No. 2 in B-Flat Minor, Op. 35, III (“Funeral March”), Trio.

It may be surprising to learn that this sublime Trio had earlier antecedents of very common stock—from the descriptive piano fantasies, in fact. The following excerpt is from Jan Ladislav Dussek’s 1793 work *The Sufferings of the Queen of France*, a musical narrative depicting the imprisonment and execution of the Queen Marie Antoinette, who

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had actually been a friend of the composer. This passage is found in the closing section, “Apotheosis,” which follows the guillotine’s fatal stroke. In **Example 5**, the passage in question, the horn-fifth motive—identical to that used by Beethoven as motto for his Op. 81a “Lebewohl” sonata sixteen years later—is answered by an upward-reaching figure, clearly suggestive of a soul freed from earthly bonds.

The image shows a musical score for two systems. The first system consists of a piano part (left) and a violin part (right). The piano part begins with a 'p' dynamic and a 'dolce' marking. The violin part begins with a 'p' dynamic. The second system continues the piano part with a 'ff' dynamic and the violin part. The score is in a key with one flat and a 3/4 time signature. The piano part features a prominent upward-reaching figure in the right hand, while the violin part has a more melodic line.

Ex. 5. Jan Ladislav Dussek, *The Sufferings of the Queen of France*, from the “Apotheosis” section.

The equation of high range with heaven, exaltation and so on—and please remember Jankélévitch’s reference to the high-low, heaven-earth parallel as just an “analogy”—became ever more firmly established. **Example 6** gives a passage from Fernando Sor’s 1826 *Funeral March on the Death of Tsar Alexander*, published in Paris, which bears the captions, “His pure soul flies off on its celestial sojourn,” “The religious duties he fulfilled with dignity,” and “His placement among the angels.” The ascending figure (“flying off”) in the sixth bar of this Sor excerpt seems to echo, texturally and affectively, the seventh bar of the earlier Dussek, and the little chorale that follows resonates with later chorales in Chopin’s music—but from that last sweet melody in the high register, obviously, it is no distance at all to the Trio of the Funeral March.

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Handwritten musical score for piano, featuring three systems of music. The first system includes the lyrics "Son âme pure s'est envolée vers le séjour céleste" and the marking "Dolcissimo". The second system includes the lyrics "Les devoirs religieux qu'il a dignement remplis" and "Le placent parmi". The third system includes the lyrics "Les anges" and "fin".

Ex. 6. Jan Ladislav Dussek, *The Sufferings of the Queen of France*, from the “Apotheosis” section.

Even the tune itself, in far less satisfying form, existed already; in 1816 Carl Maria von Weber published his Op. 34 Clarinet Quintet, and some three minutes into the second movement we find the passage given in **Example 7**:

Printed musical score for Clarinet Quintet, Op. 34, II, mm. 41–46. The score shows five staves (Clarinet, Bassoon, Violin I, Violin II, and Cello/Double Bass). The first staff is marked "a tempo" and "pp", with "sempre pp" and "cresc." markings. The other staves also have "cresc." markings. The score is marked with a first ending bracket and a star symbol.

Ex. 7. Carl Maria von Weber, Clarinet Quintet Op. 34, II, mm. 41–46.

It is possible that Chopin knew Weber’s piece when he was composing the Funeral March in the late 1830s, but just as likely not. It is hard to deny, though, that the

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melodic germs of the type Chopin used in his Trio were already out in the air, so to speak. Had Chopin known the Weber, it took only slight adjustments to make it transcendental: starting on the third of the chord rather than the fifth, so that the opening two notes ascend, and making it a question-answer phrase rather than a wain sequence. Whether or not the idea was ultimately Weber’s, the general upward-reaching melodic shape and characteristic texture were already both familiar enough to have “heavenly” ideas associated with them in the far more literal piano fantasies of Dussek and Sor, just sampled. Chopin in turn managed his rapturous-gaze-into-the-beatific-beyond piece by redeploying and improving upon preexistent ideas—indeed, musical commonplaces. In other words, setting a yearning, heaven-seeking melodic shape in the register of the angels is a composer’s clear deployment of the effable, so to speak, to achieve what many listeners apparently heard as *ineffable*. This is an artistic *coup*, yes, but it is not divine or mystical. Chopin thought as a musician thinks, and therefore had a profound understanding of how music worked on its listeners. What he wrote, then, was the middle section of a death-piece where the combination of gestures that suggested heaven and angels and comfort could ignite the “Ineffability Cortex,” as it were, for many listeners.

I will close with an flash of self-awareness from John Ruskin, prominent Victorian art critic and essayist—a subtle and perceptive thinker, and one of the most celebrated aesthetes of his time. The pianist and conductor Charles Hallé recounted a visit with Ruskin, during which the critic was most struck—to Hallé’s surprise and disappointment—by Sigismond Thalberg’s variations on “Home! Sweet Home!” Ruskin told Hallé the he didn’t “care about the art of it...but I did care about having a million

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low notes in perfect cadence and succession of sweetness. I never recognized before so many notes in a given brevity of moment...I have often heard glorious and inventive and noble successions of harmonies, but I never in my life heard variations like that. Also, I had not before been close enough to see your hands...” (Example 8 gives the beginning of the finale, in which Henry Bishop’s sugary little melody appears in chords, in the tenor register, while arpeggio figures from deep bass to highest soprano registers festoon and embroider around it.)

The image displays four systems of musical notation for a piano piece. Each system consists of a grand staff with a treble clef on the upper staff and a bass clef on the lower staff. The music is written in a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The first system begins with a dynamic marking of *ppp* and includes the instruction *leggierissimo*. The notation features intricate arpeggiated patterns in the bass and chords in the tenor register. Performance markings such as *Ped.* (pedal) and *m.f.* (mezzo-forte) are interspersed throughout the score. The piece concludes with a final chord in the bass register.

Ex. 8. Sigismond Thalberg, *Home! Sweet Home!*, Op. 72, finale.

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If anything is apparent from from Thalberg’s manneristically note-laden treatment of this little tune, it is that neither ineffability nor any other idea—including whatever pure pleasure Ruskin experienced—resides exclusively in the notes. As it is within the heart of the individual listener that the existential thirst for the ineffable is found, the nectar that slakes that thirst is, *pace* Mendelssohn, as unique as each individual, not the same for all. It follows that even the most philosophically based or even grandiose claims about the power of music to sing of the inexpressible are entirely contingent on each individual listener, at any given moment. Expression of the Ineffable—or of anything else—results from the alchemical combination of music and listener, and it is no disrespect to the composer, to the notes, or for that matter to the Muses themselves to say so. Without the fertile ground of the listener’s yearning, music is powerless: random vibrations in the ether.

¹ The wisdom of the internet agrees that this is Heinrich Heine, but I have thus far been unsuccessful in locating the original source.

² “*Ce qu’on ne peut dire et ce qu’on ne peut taire, la musique exprime.*” Victor Hugo, *William Shakespeare* (Paris: Librairie International, 1864), 120.

³ Aldous Huxley, “The Rest is Silence,” essay in *Music at Night* (1931).

⁴ Letter from Mendelssohn (Berlin) to Mar-André Souchay (Hamburg), 15 November 1842. Quoted in John Michael Cooper, “Red Roofs and Hunting Horns: Mendelssohn’s Song Aesthetic, With an Unpublished Cycle (1830) (*The Journal of Musicological Research* 21 (2002), 291.

⁵ Arthur Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, in *Arthur Schopenhauers sämtliche Werke*, ed. Otto Weiß (Leipzig: Hesse & Becker, 1919), 355. Trans. John Michael Cooper; quoted in Cooper, “Red Roofs,” 295.

⁶ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, quoted in *Music in the Western World: A History in Documents*, selected and annotated by Piero Weiss and Richard Taruskin, 2nd ed. (Belmont, CA: Thomson/Schirmer, 2008), 243–44. Trans. Richard Taruskin. The passage is taken from the end of the entry s.v. “Sonate” in his *Dictionnaire de Musique* (1768).

⁷ Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Music and the Ineffable* [1961], trans. Carolyn Abbate (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

⁸ Jankélévitch, *Music*, 12.

⁹ Jankélévitch, *Music*, 13.

¹⁰ Jankélévitch, *Music*, 2, 18–19.

¹¹ Jankélévitch, *Music*, 17.

¹² Jankélévitch, *Music*, 18.

¹³ Jankélévitch, *Music*, 20.

¹⁴ Jankélévitch, *Music*, 30.

¹⁵ Chopin’s Ballade No. 1, Op. 23, was sketched out from 1831–1833, but not published until 1836.

¹⁶ Recent research, notably that of Jeffrey Kallberg, suggests that this Trio may have originally been intended for another kind of work, and only later did the composer decide to use it here. If true, this would only offer further support for the idea that innumerable contextual and situational variables affect a particular piece of music’s “ineffability” far more than anything inherent.

¹⁷ Lenz, quoted in Lawrence Kramer, “Chopin at the Funeral: Episodes in the History of Modern Death,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 54/1 (Spring 2001), 105.

¹⁸ Niecks (quoted Huneker [Dover], p. 168 [orig. p. 298?]): “a rapturous gaze into the beatific regions of a beyond.” Liszt, *Frédéric Chopin* (1863 Boston edition), 25–26.