



Eros Centre Music

'Eros Centre Music': the title kindles promising associations. It starts off with a bang - 'Eros', synonymous with sensual and passionate love. In the middle is the idea of a 'Centre', suggesting that sensual love is a hub, perhaps *the* hub, of creation. In Eros, to quote Schopenhauer, the ancient Greeks saw 'the primordial creative impulse from which all things proceeded' - a divine force that arose from the initial chaos at the dawn of time, earth and cosmos. Later they personified Eros as a lovely boy, later still as a rascally winged toddler with bow and arrow. We are familiar with Eros from painting and music for almost three millennia; he strikes and inflames our hearts and senses, robbing us of reason and understanding, undermining our free will. He is always underway somewhere between the celestial powers and our human hormones. In the twinkling of an eye he can turn the world upside down, as in the prologue to Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, where Amor outfoxes the goddess of fate - Fortuna - and the goddess of Virtue: 'I, a tiny child, vanquish age and time and every other deity [...], you should call me your ruler!' Which the opera promptly goes on to demonstrate.

And not just this opera: love stories and amorous couples have peopled the musical stage since its very inception. Even instrumental music and song cycles are unthinkable without erotic inspiration - all those 'Distant Beloveds', 'Maids of the Mill', '*Liebesträume*', '*Sirènes*', those dreaming fauns and heart-throbbing '*poèmes de la amour er de la mer*'.

'Eros Centre Music': the title also hints at our contemporary downgrading of the erotic, the image of those frigidly tiled rooms where the world's oldest profession has found a niche in our forbidding metropolises, where the main object is trade and merchandise, giving and taking, subjugation and the slaking of drives, love as a commodity as opposed to genuine love. Eros knows all about crude commercial exploitation, not to mention its darkest links with the death wish discovered by depth psychologists and anthropologists. It knows all about Georges Bataille's *Tears of Eros* and its ramifications in the many forms of polymorphous perversity. The pictures, writings, even the music speak of every facet of Eros, elevated or degraded, altruistic or commercialised, heavenly or cruel, personified in such figures as Alceste and Poppea, Genoveva and Lulu, Juliet and Phaedra, Leonore and Carmen and Salomé.

'Eros Centre Music': we maintain that music is the art that communicates the erotic in

unencrypted form. It is the only medium that presents, with stunning immediacy, the elemental force and creativity of Eros, its metamorphoses and ecstasies, its ruses and confusions. We maintain that Eros, when combined with music, is powerfully restored to the very location where it all began - in our nerve cells and bodily sensors.

But wait a minute. 'Eros Centre Music' is a metaphor invented for Lucerne, one of the most beautiful festivals in the world. But even the most beautiful festival in the world is also a business enterprise and will wax enthusiastic when it comes to trumpeting its annual theme, Eros, and preparing us for the rising temperatures to come. 'We devote ourselves to the great lovers of music history, to Tristan and Isolde, Romeo and Juliet, Pelléas and Mélisande. We tell stories of faithfulness and betrayal, of notorious heartbreakers and the eternally unrequited, of tempestuous conquests, persevering courtships and heartrending farewells. We yield to the sensuous magic of music.' Thus the advertising brochures.

Does this mean that 'art music' has an equally large arsenal of devices for titillating our physical and emotional sides as do the immensely more popular forms of musical expression brazenly aimed at sexploitation? That such devices are not unknown to 'classical music' and may even be its subliminal purpose and significance, embedded in highly dramatic plots and frame stories, hidden behind masks, roles and heavy costumes? What do they mean, all those amply familiar and ever-recurring male-female duets for tenor and soprano, all those luscious parallel thirds and sixths, those ethereal unisonos, those upsurges of soaring violins in Mahler's *Lied von der Erde* or the blood-pounding rhythms in such highly complex works of art as Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*?

For the moment, we willingly lend credence to the organisers' advertising copy and are prepared to pursue and explore it, asking whether music's appeal lies specifically in a set of biological drives, and which works place those drives sharpest relief.

Music - primarily popular music, from Tin Pan Alley to operetta, from rock and pop to the 'light classics' - is considered an artistic *Erotikon*, an aphrodisiac applied to our erotic sensibilities in order to put us in the right mood, to further our amorous advances or to accompany our copulations. It belongs to the legitimate forms of expression of the ever-hungry human soul and its craving for stimulation.

But even art music, composed with an ear for higher verities and intellectual rigour, triggers our erotic fantasies and emotions. Not necessarily the complex fugal constructs of a Johann Sebastian Bach or the cerebral exercises of the Serialists. But Monteverdi, Handel, Gluck, Mozart, Schubert, Liszt, Wagner, Verdi, Puccini, Strauss, Henze and Wolfgang Rihm form a genealogical line in which we would be ill-advised to deny the emission of erotic impulses, whether the yearning major-minor shifts in Schubert, the intoxicating chromaticism of Gesualdo and Wagner, the exhilarating interplay of glorious voices in Verdi, the glittering, seductive orchestral colours from Berlioz and Debussy to Henze, the ecstatic, gut-wrenching eruptions of Alexander Scriabin and Wolfgang Rihm, tearing us into the heights and casting us down into the depths.

Unlike the visual arts, where our sense impressions arrive via our optical and perhaps tactile faculties, things are more complicated in music, with its higher degree of abstraction.

Experimental psychologists, anthropologists, neuroscientists, empirical scientists and all manner of new 'physical philosophies', up to and including gender studies, have been at pains to unveil and disclose the erotic element and impact of music. Let us take a closer look at their studies for a moment, abandoning the high ground of music's aesthetic, ethical or transcendently religious *raison d'être* and viewing it as what Michaela Graf has termed a 'parafunction of arousal'. 'Arousal' implies a heightened emotionality, and heightened emotionality borders on the erotic and sexual. But what we have in mind is an arousal of the psyche, an arousal conditioned by music and channelled, guided and activated by sounds.

Since practically every form of voyeuristic arousal in music can be *prima facie* disqualified, the exact sciences began by examining the other organs in which an exposure to music intensifies the sensibilities or unleashes expressive behaviour related to eroticism or sexuality. Here we can read of rising skin temperatures and enhanced electric resistance in the skin, of chills, *frissons*, goose-flesh. Of increased rapidity of respiration or pulse, of expanding arteries and skeletal muscles, of a heightened release of hormones and, finally, an increased circulation to the intestinal musculature. The relevant literature abounds in curves, figures and measurements. Emotional intensity curves are measured, degrees of affect traced, feelings of lust captured at their climaxes and at their downturn to the opposite: aversion. The vehicle of eroticism in music,

it was concluded, resides primarily the human voice, or what might be called the body's own material, not too high in the case of women's voices, and rather husky in the case of men's. The list goes on: moderate tempo, medium volume, subdued timbre

It doesn't sound all that exiting and inevitably reminds us of cocktail music, though it certainly applies to the many forms of 'Musak'. But the 'higher' art of musical arousal attempts something more. For example, it can engage our erotic sensibilities extremely effectively by proceeding along the simple pattern of tension and release. To the Austrian music theorist Heinrich Schenker, who concocted his theories from the same intellectual surroundings as Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis, the essence and the meaning of music reside precisely in the energising principle of tension and release. Musical form, Schenker maintained, can build up, sustain and then release tension in such a way that it resemble human forms of sexual arousal. Tones are like creatures equipped with biological drives; the world of nature and the world of sound have the same basic *modus operandi*. We must, Schenker continued, accustom ourselves to hearing sounds as creatures that look at us, turn upon us and then turn away. Though Schenker remained an unyielding champion of tonality, his statements seem strangely apposite in view of what the arch-expressionist Arnold Schoenberg wrote about his melodrama *Pierre Lunaire*: 'The sounds become an immediate expression of sensual and mental perceptions, almost as in animals.'

But it was Richard Wagner who toyed splendidly with a quasi-biological world of sounds. In *Tristan*, as we all know, an ascending chromatic line generates tension and is delayed to the brink of the unbearable in the 'Tristan chord', a restless chord or, as Schoenberg put it, a 'wandering chord' that 'meanders homelessly between tonal areas. Chords like this are renegades for whom the abandonment of their own personality is an end in itself.' Isolde's final *Liebestod*, which practically defies description except in organological terms (it is first heard in the second-act love scene!), is dominated by undulating motions, by fluctuation and culmination, by dynamic upsurges with ever-new climaxes, generating new tensions from tension itself, and finally the last unresolved harmony. This is how its radiant message was understood. To read the writings on Wagner, especially the literary effusions from the late 19th century to the Great War, *Tristan and Isolde*, which was completed here in Lucerne, has been considered a sexual stimulant ever since its première, either in a compensatory sense as a musical surrogate for the real thing, or as an aid to disinhibition following a visit to the opera house. Thomas Mann would

understand completely.

In Symbolism, as in Debussy's *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*, the mythological beast's lust for nymphs gives rise to a shimmering, southerly atmosphere of dream fulfilment. A different example - Ravel's *Bolero* - thrives entirely on the principle of ever-increasing erotic tension. Instead of heating up the emotions and chromaticism, as in Wagner, Ravel works with the incessant repetition of a soft, rhythmic dance tune of ritualistic import, generating a trance-like state and escalation both in volume and in density of orchestration. Here music, rather than being a 'parafunction' of arousal, is arousal per se, as if from a distant world or primitive culture. The driving force of this music, reduced to musical and rhythmic essentials, admits of no 'redemptive' release but only a single gigantic crescendo that ultimately explodes in a savage dénouement. We feel all our rational assurances collapse, whether we recognise in this music the true character of sexuality (which would surely fit the Dionysian nature of Eros), or whether we view it historically as the collapse of Europe's rationalism as it plunged headlong into the mass carnage of the world wars, as if freed from all cultural restraints.

Most of all, it has been the fathers of the church, the founders of religions and the dictators of this world who have always been aware of music's power to circumvent the control mechanisms of society. Even as early as the third century BCE the church father Origin gave an theological twist to that obviously erotic love song from the Bible, the Song of Solomon ('the curves of your thighs are like the work of a skilled craftsman ... your navel a rounded goblet ... your belly a heap of wheat ... your two breasts like two fawns, a pair of gazelles'), claiming that it represented the bond between the bridegroom, God, and his bride, the chosen people. If words seemed disreputable in this case, the fears of the moral arbiters of the Reformation - Zwingli and Calvin - were directed toward music and its sensual impact. Organs were banned from churches. We know all-too well how suspiciously the dictators of the 20th century viewed the ability of music to overcome boundaries. *Tristan*, being unsuitable as music for the masses, was blacklisted in the former state of East Germany. Today we are shocked by the prohibitions on secular music promulgated by the Taliban regime, who want music to be limited to the recitation of verses from the Koran. Time and again the liberating erotic effect of music has been yoked together with the longing for political freedom - and rightly so. A longing for liberty can escalate into exaltations that in no way differ from erotic rapture. When Florestan, in the solitude of his dungeon, yearns for liberty, his thirst merges with his longing for Leonore, his angel, his wife - and a melody from

the solo oboe.

Yet the dictators and moral arbiters of every age had basically nothing to fear from the eroticism unleashed by music. Eroticism is already the result of a cultivation of sexuality - of suppression and sublimation. It is a permanent fixture of our Western civilisation, a cultural transformation of our animal nature. The appearance of shame in the Judaeo-Christian creation myth gave rise to the taboos, prohibitions and restrictions that have marked our civilisation for centuries and divided it into pure and impure realms, with spirit and soul on the one side and the shamelessness of the naked body on the other.

But sexuality, having been made an object of shame in Christendom, also marks the beginning of an eroticism capable of producing the subtlest of social forms and arts. Ever since medieval music turned the renunciation of love's fulfilment into its fundamental ethos and handed it down to us in the exquisitely beautiful songs of the troubadours, trouvères and minnesingers, we have been aware of the merging of the erotic experience - or what Georges Bataille calls an 'inner experience' - with the mystical. Indeed, it is audible in many emotionally charged Passion settings and church compositions. Human love can be recast into love of God, as the fate of the Song of Solomon already demonstrated.

Nonetheless, Eros basically had to go into hiding in Christendom. It was not until the Age of Enlightenment that it re-emerged, publicly visible in the Rococo, whose literature is full of erotic allusions and whose paintings border on the risqué. The image of the divided world - of pure, elevated, genuine love vs. sensual lust - gave way to a philosophy of all-encompassing sensualism that spread across England and Germany from the French-speaking countries. Eros had wings again, and all the variants and ambivalences of love were permitted, as witness the enchanting 'bifeminine' love scenes for two sopranos acted out in Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*, with Cherubino played off against the Countess. Here eroticism is a silvery union in the duplication of timbres, swaying musically in the same direction. The sharp, conflict-ridden polarity of the sexes in the 19th century, leading ineluctably to the 'battle of the sexes', had not yet arisen, not even in music. Trouser roles and castrati are at once symbols and stage manifestations of liberated Eros, which was now able to take any form it wanted, and which relished playful disguises and erotic ambiguity between the sexes. Partner swapping was no problem for the Rococo: we need only think of *Così fan tutte*

Once courtly culture had come to an end, the educated and propertied classes erected their taboos. The patriarchal structures became more repressive, and the world was organised in accordance with new privileges and rules of dominance, as the 'lords of creation' adopted a double morality in sexual matters while femininity was stigmatised as sexual and morally reprehensible. A trousers role transcending the two sexes was unthinkable. Eros became hysterical, and Sigmund Freud knocked at the door. The prime example of this is Kundry, the sex slave of the magician Klingsor in Wagner's *Parsifal* and the first personification of the hysterical Eros in the world of opera, torn between a desire for purity and unbridled sensuality. This is no longer 'eroticism', but a collision of sexual desires - which, however, being prohibited, seek flight in every imaginable form of sin, dread or longing for death.

Artists of the early modern period responded to culture's demand for the suppression of Eros in a different way, experiencing it not as a torment but as a source of inspiration. 'It is not the beloved who is distant, but the distant that is beloved', quipped Karl Kraus, summing up the situation in a nutshell. Unlike the 'sexual gaping' of the bourgeois world order, Kraus opined, artists are fundamentally erotic beings: they strive for detachment from the object of their desire as an obstacle on which their imagination catches fire. This may always have been the case. The same artistic mindset allowed Beethoven to cherish his 'immortal beloved' and Wagner to revere Mathilde Wesendonck, the unattainable wife of a Zurich entrepreneur. What was new about the *fin de siècle* was that art, for the first time, was recognised and referred to as the sphere of sublimation from sexuality. Alban Berg, in *Lulu*, turned the figure of Alwa, an ordinary possessive lover in Wedekind's play, into a self-portrait: a man caught up in rapturous and selfless love, a *homo eroticus* who consumes Lulu's body primarily in song - and in composition.

But to return to the empirical sciences and their link between music's erotic nature and biology: if philosophers descried in Christian prudery the obstruction that led to our own highly cultivated 'disembodied' eroticism, the same conclusion was reached by cultural anthropologists. They speak of music's lost 'physicality' and lament the misguided division of music into what Rudolf zur Lippe called 'disembodied high culture' and 'inferior bodily folk art'.

In a search for the lost origins of music, researchers delved back even further into evolutionary history. Before the emergence of language and music - the 'cool' cognitive system of verbal

communication and the 'hot' emotional system of music - human beings uttered sounds directly generated by the body - heartbeats, respiration, gasps - in conjunction with ordinary human activities. Any change in their emotional state automatically altered their utterances, thereby informing their fellow-beings of this change. 'Transcoding processes' is the term given by scientists to this form of communication. Now, the excitations and relaxations attributed to human biology apply not only to the earliest emotional utterances, but were retained in musical expression (Georg Knepler). That is why music is especially well-appointed to depict the emotions. Music may work on an abstract level, but its origins lie deep in our biological makeup. Without *bios* there would be no *eros*.

Today physicality dominates the musical scene, massively so in pop and rock music. Even 'highbrow culture' is finding its way back to the physical level, namely, via experiments in sound-art and its cult of perception through body and skin rather than ears and brain. But wasn't this already accomplished long ago by the 'sexual revolutionaries' in highbrow music, beginning with Franz Liszt and Niccolò Paganini, who are said to have transformed every concert hall into a house of ill repute?

Virtuosos of the calibre of Liszt and Paganini, whose erotic magnetism became legendary, bring us back once again to the Age of Romanticism, the principal era of erotic emancipation. But didn't the Romantic Age also have a bit of common sense, or rather civilised solutions to the notoriously motoric problem of Eros, which mainly leaps up when the two sexes fail to come together?

If Wagner could claim of *Tristan* that good performances will drive people to madness, he softened his tone in his next work, the bourgeois *Meistersingers of Nuremberg*. Here he recalled the deadly consequences of unbridled passion with a self-quotation from *Tristan*, but he avoided the catastrophe - the 'Liebestod', the living internment, the decapitation. Conflicts become soluble; a happy marriage awaits the lovers. More than half a century earlier, Beethoven's *Fidelio* also had a happy ending. Those who win each other are united in marriage. Music's strategies of arousal serve the needs of civil society; marriage - the quintessence of morality, the domestication of human drives, the victory over chaos - is celebrated. Conjugal love blends into a pathos for humanity - another 'Song of Songs'. But perhaps it is only a dream, honoured listener: today's divorce rate is high.

You may submit to this dream of unbridled Eros if you wish, but the winged being will always manage to find you, time and time gain - at the very least in the many other pieces of music you can hear at this year's Lucerne Festival.