"Melomachia": Melodic Challenge and Displacement in Some Nineteenth-Century Music
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In François Philidor's *Ernelinde* (the three-act version of which premiered at the Opéra in 1767, and the five-act redaction in 1777), a battle is waged "dans les coulisses" between the soldiers of Ricimer and those of Rodoald. Although the musical interest of this scene is negligible (*gruppetti* at the nodes of the D major triad against static tonic/dominant harmony), it does represent something of a *coup de theâtre*. I don't know enough about eighteenth-century opera to be able to cite any precedents, but I would imagine that, if they exist at all, they are few and far between. After all, most librettists of the Baroque and the Galante were wedded to a paint-by-numbers Aristotelianism, and would have thought twice about disrupting the unities. The neoclassical recipe specified that battles and their outcomes be relayed by a *nuntius*. There is, of course, no shortage of soldier choruses in pre-Romantic opera, but these tend to be anticipatory ("Già la tromba, la chiamo" in Handel's *Serse*--1738) or *ex post facto* (the "Entrée des combattants" in Lully's *Thesée*--1675 and the exchange between "soldats croisés" and "soldats sarrasins" in Act III of Sacchini's *Renaud*--1783). Nor does sinfonia to Act III of *Giulio Cesare* (1724) fit the bill, for, despite its sub-title ("Battle Music"), it turns out to be a Handelian presto with comparatively few military inflections. In all of these, actual combat is conspicuous by its absence, and when it *does* figure on the stage (as in the *Giulio Cesare* ballet) its oppositional tension is stylized out of existence. The stage directions speak significantly of "A *mock*-battle between Egyptian and Roman youths" (131--italics mine), while the andante pace and the portly gravitas of the antiphons give a masque-like composure to the proceedings.

Having thus brought his armies to the very fringes of the stage, Philidor was on new ground, even he did not actually break it. He was also, in part, prefiguring an (in)famous institution of the primo ottocento, the banda that Rossini set marching on its brash forward path in *Ricciardo e Zoraide* (1818). For in *Ernelinde* an oppositional dynamic also seems to obtain between the official pit orchestra and military players "dans les coulisses." César Franck, who made a piano reduction of the opera for the *Chefs-d'oeuvre classiques de l'opera francais*, apparently sensed the importance of the battle scene when he tabulated its orchestral forces (something he did nowhere else in the score): "*N.B.* Dans l'orchestration du morceau suivant sont employés (dans l'ordre de la partition, de haut en bas): *Petites Flûtes*, Trompettes, *Clarinettes*, Hautbois, Violons, Cors en *Ré, Tambour à la Panurge,* Bassons, Basses, Timbales en *Ré*" (258).

Are those italics random, or are they separative? Does it mean that fifes and clarinets were marked out as an agonistic body in relation to the larger orchestra, and placed, for this scene at least, "dans les coulisses"? If so, this would be one of the earliest instances of an instrumental texture attenuated to suggest distance and therefore separation. As early as 1819, Spontini had used woodwinds to cap the fanfares of the *Olympie* overture, and so, following his example, had Meyerbeer in the Introduction to *Robert le Diable* (1831), and Bellini in the Overture to *Norma* (1831). To twentieth-century ears these scaled-down

antiphons have an undignified perkiness, as though they were backchatting the brass gestures they complete. But clearly their composers had a different effect in mind, one (I would guess) of simulating the "sublime" acoustic of a mountain landscape or resonant building. And if indeed Philidor used piccolos and clarinets as a "distance" timbre opposed to the "nearer" horns and trumpets then he (and not Spontini) established precedent for this favoured nineteenth-century mannerism. Such claims must remain speculative, however, until a full score is published, or the opera is recorded.

What we do know for sure is that Philidor created an oppositional texture by *dynamic* if not by instrumental means. Since brass will outplay woodwind, it can claim a bullying precedence over its "rival," even though some composers have inverted this scheme of things. Take Naina's motif in *Ruslan and Lyudmila* (1842), for example. Like all sorceresses worth their salt, she devotes herself to disempowering the active male, an ambition that Glinka registers by giving a hunting call to oboes and bassoon. The woodwind texture subtracts (and, given the bassoon, even mocks) its masculine triumphalism, turning it into the dainty husk of itself. Equally brilliant (and doubtless Glinka-inspired) is Tchaikovsky's oboe miniaturization of the trumpet at the start of the *Nutcracker* battle, its ineffectual bleat the index of an ineffectual army. Small wonder the Mouse-king should need to be despatched with a wallop from Clara's slipper!

In a sheer contest of decibles, then, an oboe must yield to a trumpet and a clarinet to a horn. But what if the composer skewed the outcome with dynamic specifications *against the grain*? Look at this note from Philidor himself in the vocal score of *Ernelinde*: "Note de l'auteur accompagnant l'entrée de cet Allegro: *Les Trompettes forte* et tout *l'Orquestre piano*" (260). Even if there were no separation of musicians between the stage and pit, there would still have been an ethos of combat within the orchestra, the ensemble submitting to persistent clamour of the trumpets. Clearly the one represents the triumphant army of Swedes, the other the vanquished soldiers of Norway. But, even so, a musical agon needs more than a dynamic seesaw to give it definition. The absence of trenchant outlines is worsened by the fact that the armies (Swedish tenors and Norwegian basses) trade identical melodic phrases between the staves. Divisions that should be defined and angular are thus blurred by repeated choral crossings.

Meyerbeer's battle scene in *Il crociato in Egitto* (1824), while it goes one better than *Ernelinde* in bringing the armies into view, shows little musical advance on 1777. Once again, the writing is banal--a blatant military figure capped from different directions by cadential gruppetti--and, since the composer adds *two* bands to the orchestra, twice as noisy. No doubt here about the division and marshalling of instrumental forces, for Meyerbeer has given brass to the Crusaders and woodwind to the Muslims. But where one might have expected this textural divide to issue in a corresponding separation of melodies, we find Meyerbeer miscalculating as Philidor had miscalculated before him. The Crusaders repeatedly bounce their brassy notes down the F major triad and the Muslims repeatedly answer with their woodwind gruppetti--all *within* the paragraphs of melody. Thus while the audience sees an oppositional mustering of forces, it hears an essentially integrated sound. And although in the first version of *Macbeth* Verdi made the same dramaturgical mistake in *his* battle

scene (a function, perhaps, of his having no established Macbeth and Macduff *Motive* to forge into an agon), his 1865 revisions came up with a striking alternative to this monothematic formula.

At first glance the choice of counterpoint might seem perverse, for counterpoint, its countersubjects notwithstanding, is nothing if not monothematic. However, that subject is always on the move--is always being seen from different angles of pitch and key--so while Philidor's and Meyerbeer's soldiers never *get* anywhere, Verdi's seem to be all over the place. In the context of the opera, the contrapuntal subject represents the nisus, the effort of battle, passing from point to point within the conflict. That is why Julian Budden's judgement seems so harsh, cavilling as it does at the very grounds of Verdi's success: "Despite a brilliant opening for trumpet and trombone it is rather ineptly scored, the orchestral weight being often wrongly distributed for this kind of writing" (1:310). But, by Budden's own admission, this is "'theatrical' counterpoint," and those inequalities and imbalances of texture should be read as an expressive resource. In their purest form, fugues require an *instrumental* performance to focus the mind on pattern and sequence rather than texture. Indeed the unsatisfactoriness, say, of Stokowski's Bach transcriptions bears witness to our sense of that, here at least, colour can obscure a design instead of enhancing it. But by having the trumpet-call subject begin on home ground, then find itself articulated by lower strings in unison and eventually by that (emasculating!) oboe, Verdi suggests that in battles, as never in fugues, the transfer of energy is random and unpredictable, and that instead of rule-driven pattern we have the contingent dynamics, reversals, peculiar circumstances. As it takes up and casts off different orchestral clothes, the subject changes in character; its abstract ordonnance turns to ordnance. Even so, there can be no sense of opposition and eventual conquest in such a design, because the fugal subject, always chasing itself, is *self*-displacing.

Not so the final act in *Les Huguenots*, however, where Meyerbeer, the immaturities of *Il crociato* behind him, has reached the flower of his considerable talent, and, in obedience to Gertrude's aphorism, achieved more matter, less art. Here the opera's conflict reaches its climax in the conduct of two antagonistic melodies. One of them (Luther's "Ein' feste Burg") has been established as the motif of the Protestant minority, but where in Act I it was cast in C, conventionally harmonized, and vigorously declaimed by the bass, it is now shaded into G flat and given to a female chorus *divise*, the voices of which wonder over the unfamiliar terrain of vi. The melody associated with Catholic persecution is equally arresting. As a tune it is all but shapeless, its phrases gusting up and down without direction, and deriving whatever momentum they have from the juggernaut throb of the bass. In my experience, it invariably sounds a mess, and I suspect that, like the tenor's quick march in the Beethoven 9th, and like certain choral moments in the *Missa Solemnis*, it is ultimately unperformable.

But whereas in Beethoven the "unperformable" passages offer moving testimony to the Platonism of his music ("Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter"), the "messiness" of the Catholic thugs--like the "messiness" of the *Macbeth* battle fugue--is a calculated dramatic effect. I will concede Meyerbeer's failure when it comes to the construction of self-sufficient, rounded melody, but

look at his success in devising *mélodies caractérisques*, tunes that don't speak for themselves, but for the situations they serve. How better to suggest the inchoate, undirected nature of mob feeling, and at the same time the relentlessness with which it prosecutes its purpose. (A version of this intentionally "shapeless" choral writing can also be found in the last act of *La traviata*, where it indexes the unruliness of Mardi gras festivities. The Meyerbeerian thumbprint is unmistakable.) Because the Catholic chorus recurs throughout the last act of *Les Huguenots*, it half-establishes a rondo Gestalt, equating cyclic return with the inexorable cycle of violence. So pervasive does it become that, at the end, it carries all before it, and even the dumbshow receives no additional pointing-- Marguerite tries to stop the bloodshed, fails and gives up in disgust. The very fact that the relentless chug of the bass and gusty phrases *can't* be arrested proves that a killing machine has been set in motion: the "silence" of the intervention is a measure of its impotence. But that is nothing to its cruel act of engulfment earlier on, where Meyerbeer throws it against "Ein' feste Burg," the chorale losing force as death claims the singers group by group. Surely Poulenc and Bernanos had this moment in mind when they had a growing silence displace the canticle at the end of *Les dialogues de Carmélites* (1957), though both these instances could be traced back to an altogether happier precedent--the silence that creeps through the finale of Haydn's "Farewell" Symphony and finally ingests it.

And surely Tchaikovsky also remembered the melomachia of *Les Huguenots* when he came to write the *1812 Overture*. Here, as in Meyerbeer, the oppositional forces are motivally tagged, and the design ensures the triumphal obliteration of one by the other. David Brown, endorsing many other dismissive judgements on work, has belittled its inventiveness: "It was an equally obvious decision that [Tchaikovsky] should take the national hymns of the warring powers as musical symbols, allowing the Marseillaise to range freely but fragmentarily in the early portions of the work before retreating in the face of the Russian cannon which allies its explosions to the already full battery of percussion in the coda" (3:119). But one of the fascinations of Tchaikovsky's symphonic writing, here and elswhere, is the way it superimposes a dramatic scheme upon the purely formal transactions of sonata design. It would have been an "obvious" decision to construct a melomachia from Russian and French melodies if these had been aligned with first and second subjects of the overture--but they aren't.

While sonata form has sometimes been related to Hegelian dialectic, difficulties arise when we try to establish an equivalent for the synthesis. In Hegel's paradigm, this crucial stage involves recision, ennoblement and preservation (*aufheben* contains all three)--but the sonata offers nothing comparable, unless it be the essentially unstable and transient negotiations of the development. In the recapitulation, which at first blush seems to represent a synthesis, the first subject yields nothing of itself, and the second, its contours unaltered, is merely brought into the tonic orbit. Small triumph that, like the elephant swallowed by the snake in Saint-Exupéry's *Petit Prince*. As if sensing this essentially Pyrrhic victory, Tchaikovsky often places sonata form behind a scrim of dramatic values. These then glimmer through the formal transactions like a *pentimento*, complicating and enriching the task in hand. Far from compromising his achievement as a

symphonist, I believe it enhances it still further. Let us return, for example, to the "obvious" *1812*. Here the melomachia subsists largely in the introduction and the coda (the Russian Orthodox chant and imperial anthem), while the components of the sonata design (the plunging first subject in E flat minor and the second, a self-rotating melody in C flat, notated as B) oppose each other in a drama *contained by* the arch of nationalist assertions. We could attach vague meanings to the two subjects (Russian despair, Russian hope), but that vagueness simply serves to make their formality more apparent. But when Tchaikovsky threads the Marsellaise into the exposition and development, its unequivocal identity slots it into the scheme of challenge and displacement that overarches, and intersects with, the subsidiary sonata pattern. (And why, by the way, have I never encountered a compliment on the semi-quaver torpedo the composer attached to Rouget de Lisle's anacrusis, turning its innocent skip to menace?) Given the double scheme of the Overture, Tchaikovsky abridges the development (a curtal development, not an "inadequate" one, as Brown alleges) to make space for a coda in which the Marseillaise is quenched in a carillon that itself inexorably converts into the imperial anthem. Festivity and triumph thus run seamlessly into each other. If, like Brown, you dismiss this brilliant *coup de theâtre* as "heavy-handed," you would have, for consistency's sake, to feel equal scorn for the string passage in the *Leonore No 3* that inspired it. Setting the Overture against Liszt's *Hunnenschlacht*, where the transitions from battle music to chorale are comparatively flat and unresistant, we can better appreciate the ways in which Tchaikovsky has articulated and sustained its tensions. Even so, its fine craft notwithstanding, the *1812 Overture* did not rank among his favourite children, and one is tempted to read the battle scene in *The Nutcracker* as its wry antimasque. The puny woodwinds do service for the trumpeted Marseillaise; the a-rhythmic drum rolls (like those of an unmusical child on a new toy) parallel the noisy finale, and the scurrying zigzags of the mice recall the passing-note *martellato* of the first subject. And the whole takes us back to Meyerbeer once again, for its formless momentum it is not unlike that of the persecution chorus in *Les Huguenots*.

Here we begin to trench on the comic potential of the melomachia. But before we turn in that direction, we need to consider some other ways in which the idea of melodic arraignment affected Tchaikovsky's symphonic thought, issuing in a compound of formal and dramatic values. In his splendid analysis of the Fourth Symphony, Brown has pointed out that, while the *Romeo and Juliet* Fantasy-Overture also presented the dramatic infiltration of sonata design, "none of the friar's thematic interventions had possessed anything like the violence with which the introductory theme of the Fourth Symphony . . . intrudes into later events, whether it is savagely hammering at the first movement's main material, as in the climax of the development, or intruding peremptorily to sweep aside other ideas, as it does before both the development and the coda of this same movement or when it suddenly resurges towards the end of the finale" (2:167). The keyword here is "intrusion," of a formal space invaded and displaced and reconstituted--so much so that the listener often has a bifocal sense of the symphonic proceedings, one formal, one dramatic. Take the development, for example, which Brown describes as having "three distinct stages." The first is a development in the traditional sense, but the second (the section marked "O" in the Hawkes Miniature Score--43 ff.), while it has been "bred" from

the semitonal bridge of crotchet and quaver in the first subject, registers as something experientially separate, an effort to escape the confines of the symphony. Tchaikovsky then blocks the rising and yearning of its *Liebestod* with the "Fate" motif. A dramatic conception of music has supervened upon a formal one without wholly banishing it, since the structural nexus is there for the finding. Similarly the coda to the same movement, far from leading us away from the conflicts that have gone before--codas, as their etymon suggests, are ordinarily tailpieces--re-introduces the fanfare, and an agonistic drama breaks in on what would ordinarily be a moment of abstract balance and resolution.

Even in works where the interpenetration of symphonic and dramatic values is less palpable, Tchaikovsky sometimes thinks in terms of challenge and displacement. Take, for example, the highly orthodox Second Piano Concerto, the second subject of which (in E flat) enters on a cloud of tremolo as though it were some interventive force for good, a *dea ex machina* in a ballet or a play. And in the *Pathétique*, after the first subject expires, all passion spent, and a fermata marks the momentary suspension of hostilities, the second subject enters expressly as a benediction. It is hard not to think of the Lilac Fairy at this point, and the way in which her theme places the curse of Carabosse in abeyance. Such instances could be multiplied, and reduplicated yet again.

It goes without saying that, in works untramelled by traditional form, patterns of melodic displacement are more easily accommodated than they are in the symphonic writing of Tchaikovsky. The later operas of Wagner, where form is conditioned chiefly by the events of the drama, represent the *ne plus ultra* of melomachia. *Motive*, each containing an extra-musical charge of meaning, proclaim their centrality whenever the text requires them to, and yield when the topic changes. Here form has become a catena rather than an interlocked structure, paratactic sequence instead of hypotactic design. Wagner sensed the dramatic value of this proceeding even his early work. In *Der Fliegende Holländer* mortal sailors try to out-sing their ghostly counterparts, and in *Tannhäuser* the erotic music of Venus summarily intrudes on the singing contest.

Nor is the systematic displacement of motif by motif the province of Wagnerian opera alone. Any work that has, in however "primitive" a way, aligned a melody with a concept or a character, can avail itself of these banishments and disruptions. Take Adam's *Giselle* (1841), for example. Giselle likes dancing, she tells Bathilde as much to a quotation of the D major waltz, and Berthe's bustling theme, now turned agitated cobbler's patch, rushes in to block it. There, without much need of additional mime from the dancers, a maternal ban has been placed on dancing. Although the preamble to the awakening scene in *The Sleeping Beauty* is a much more complex fantasia, it too involves a combative interchange of the Lilac Fairy and Carabosse motifs as the former tries to lead, and the latter to foil, the prince in his quest.

Both these instances represent a late survival of a medieval form, the *contentio inter philomelam et bubonem* (contest between the nightingale and the owl). The outcome of such contests was of course fore-ordained, and the nightingale always won. But that very predictability had comic potential, for the more entrenched a convention becomes the more it cries out for subversion. Bizet used to entertain his friends with an improvisation in which displacement and

conquest were effected not by merit but by persistence, and undignified Boulevard music won the day:

The second part was called '*Apothéose*.' Clapisson's soul, clad in the full-dress attire of the Académie, sword at its side, finding itself alone, flies from the cemetery up to heaven. God, surrounded by the most celebrated composers, receives him with honor among the immortals (here the ceremony of admission to the Académie was parodied. Beethoven . . . greets him with the opening bars of his Fifth Symphony, which Clapisson interrupts with a theme from *La Fanchonette*. Beethoven, only momentarily disconcerted, resumes his Symphony (left hand), but Clapisson is not to be outdone and pours forth a stream of his choicest melody (right hand). So for some time the contrapuntal battle continues, till Beethoven, as the wiser of the two gives in and *La Fanchonette* is carried to a swelling apotheosis. (Curtiss 67)

The real Beethoven was much less pusillanimous, of course, especially in the Ninth Symphony, a *locus classicus* for melodic challenge and displacement. In the last movement, the composer's spokesperson banishes discord to proclaim the harmony of *Bruderschaft*: "O Freunde, nicht diese Töne! sondern lasst uns angenehmere anstimmen, und freudenvollere." Here the substitution doesn't centre on the contest of power we find in military melomachias. Rather, we are invited to slough an imperfect world-view and embrace a better one, as the comparative adjectives and corresponding move from dissonance to diatonic harmony make clear. Such "ethical" displacements, often put in reverse, also find their way on to the operatic stage. In Bizet's mock-melomachia, Clapisson displaced Beethoven through a blind faith in his own ability, a pattern reduplicated in *Ivan le terrible* (1864), where, after the young Bulgarian sings an

amorous serenade, Ivan steps in to cry:

Eh! C'est un chant de femmes,
Un chant pour énerver les âmes,
Voici le seul refrain
Qui soit d'accord avec nos coeurs d'airain:Hurrah! hurrah!
Vive la guerre. (95)

This exactly parallels Serov's *Judith*, written one year before, for there Holofernes banishes the Hindu song of love and valorizes instead the *chanson de guerre*: "These songs about women are suitable for the harems of Babylon. But let me rather hear some battle songs like the ones we used to sing. We march forward on the torrid plain" (57). However, what pretends to be a transition between the effete and the martial turns out on

inspection to be have a hidden musical impulse--the age-old quest for variety that, in the "classical" suite, made the courante a statutory follow-up for the allemande, and twinned the sarabande with the gigue. Beethoven also seems to have played with this quest in the scherzo of the Seventh Symphony. Reminding us of the trio's function as a point of repose (because it displaces the high spirits of the form), he threatens to turn that repose into tedium. But just as the trio returns a *third* time he effects a brisk, mocking closure.

Rather more interesting than these frontal banishments and proclamations-in-their-place is the psychological development of the melomachia. In opera it can articulate two independent lines of thought--an "official" utterance like a worksong, and the internal reverie of the person who is singing it. In Gounod's *Faust*, for example, Marguerite sings her pastiche ballad about the King of Thule and then every so often drifts off into thoughts about Faust, thoughts signalled by the *parlante* line and the dissolution of the staid, even values of the melody. In *La traviata*, too, Violetta is arraigned by the offstage reprise of the love duet even while her cabaletta is proclaiming a life of feverish pleasure. And that displacement is displaced in turn when, dismissing that alternative voice, she affirms her old view of things. Donizetti's *Fille du régiment* (1840) converts these interventive moments into comedy, for there Marie learns an *aria antica* (hideously bedizened with grace notes) with the Eliza Dolittlish hope of talking "more genteel." Very soon, though, Donizetti lets the "Rataplan" chorus steal through the stuffiness, taking us forward into the demotic present and Marie's real self. Delibes also gives a comic twist to the tactic in *Le Roi l'a dit* (1873), where, during a music lesson, the pupils sing a Lully-esque address to the Furies. For a while this is intermitted with love music similar to the interlusive passages in the King of Thule ballad, but they resume it as a "cover" when their mother returns and tries in vain to stop their yellings: "Taissez-vous!" But perhaps the most interesting and thematically arresting of "psychological" melomachias is that moment in *Carmen* when, trying to persuade José to abandon the army and elope with her, the gipsy turns the barracks trumpet call into a dance. Here the confrontation is softened by a sort of anadiplosis (as in the carillon-into-imperial-anthem of the *1812*), and two discrete musical identities displace each other through gradations of change. But Bizet was quite as ready to avail himself of the other "apparitional" kind, the "Fate" motif entering the introduction with a "demon-king" suddenness, and breasting the same portentous tremolo that accompanies the second subject in Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No 2.

These, then, are some of the avatars of melomachia, the rhetoric of displacement. For the greater part of its history, Western music has been concerned with regularization, with the exorcism first of the *diabolus in musica*, and its proscribed successors, consecutive fifths and other "roughnesses" that, like the demons in the parable, rushed in to fill the void. But even as pedantry entrenched itself, composers systematically broke with its prescriptions. Moscheles, among the first to acknowledge genius of Beethoven, none the less found Chopin unplayable because his modulations and harmonies were too "harsh." And later in the century Tchaikovsky made a counter-finding on Mendelssohn, Moscheles' other god: "the exquisite roundness of his form and the fluidity of his harmonic progressions have been brought to such an ideal

purity . . . that, strange to say, they have led to sickly sweetness and to slickness, if one may so call it" (qtd in Brown 1:279-80). The chief value of melomachia accordingly lay in the option it offered of cutting into "roundness" at a stark right angle, and of snagging "fluidity" to generate some interesting counter-currents.

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