

Kabbalah and Musical Composition in the Western World

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To understand the process of composition it would be useful to look first at the nature of music and consider how it functions as a kind of language. Following that, we may see how music developed in the western world. This will give us a background with which to examine the creation of a piece of music. In kabbalistic terms the idea of music is the Beriatric element. The forms through which that idea has evolved are Yeziratic and an actual example of bringing music into the physical level of reality belongs to the world of Assiyah.

So what is music? As all art forms its function is to communicate knowledge of the Universe. Music is a good analogue for the creative world of Beriah for a very simple reason. It is the first world of separation here time and space begins. Music is unable to exist without movement through time, one note has to follow another along the line of time for them to be heard. This is beautifully portrayed in the first verse of Saint John's Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word"

At this point the reader can imagine the very first sound. The voice of the Holy One calling forth the beginning of creation. That one fundamental tone heralding all that is contained within it.

How does the language of music work? Rather like speech there are certain conventions in music that help us understand its message. The three basic components of melody, harmony and rhythm are used to convey the intention of the composer. For instance, music portraying a calm lake would have a long flowing melody, without any leaps in it; slow moving, fairly consonant harmony and a gentle, static rhythm. In this way the music has communicated the Yeziratic state of the lake, its present state of serenity. This is what music does best, it evokes an emotional response in the listener without applying it to too definite an object. The task of expressing specific ideas and describing specific objects is left to the spoken word. One could put music on the expressive right pillar and speech on the rational left pillar of the Tree.

This gives us an insight into the possible development of music in history. If we consider the way a mother and baby communicates before a child develops speech, we hear them making various sounds. These sounds will express many different emotions like pleasure, fun, encouragement, distress and warning. It is likely that early Man felt the need to communicate in the same way, there is a very basic emotional need in all of us to communicate, even if it is just to recognise each other's existence. There seems to be only a short step from making single, expressive sounds to stringing them together into a kind of song.

There are records of music used in the temples of Mesopotamia (now Iraq) around 4000 BC. The Priest King Gudea is said to have called for music: "To fill the Temple Court with joy. To chase the city's gloom away". So it would be fair to assume that music fulfilled much the same function then as it does today.

Our first real knowledge of how music sounded is probably plainsong that originated in the early Christian era and was standardised by Pope Gregory in the seventh century. If you listen to music of the Middle Ages you will recognise that it is based very much on melody without harmonic or chordal structure. It has a seamless quality, lacking the musical equivalent of commas and full stops that the harmony of a later period supplied. To a large extent the music depended on words for its structure.

This whole period from the earliest days of plainsong to the renaissance of the 15th and 16th century seems to have been a celebration of melody in music. From the beginnings of monophonic singing (a whole melody) as heard in plainsong to the polyphony (many voices) of someone like Thomas Tallis in the fifteen hundreds.

To assist the ever increasing complexity of polyphonic music, notation was developed. It seems to have originated as an aid

to memory by merely indicating the general direction of pitch of the words to be sung. In the 10th century the idea of drawing a line and placing marks either side of it appeared and it was not long before this developed into the stave as we know it. By the early 14th century the system was sufficiently refined to indicate the time values of the notes as well.

The next period in musical history is the Baroque that dates from approximately 1650 to 1750. Monteverdi and Bach are familiar composers of this time. In some respects it appears to be a transitional period. The flowering of polyphony in the previous century brought with it a consideration of how all these many voice parts should be grouped together. Which is to say harmony was born. Each melodic line had to follow certain conventions about how it fitted with the lines above or below it.

Baroque music extended these ideas of harmony. The major and minor scales that we recognise today completely replaced the old modal scales. The familiar pattern of tones and semitones gave the ability to emphasise tension and release that is the hallmark of music conceived harmonically. So melody and harmony became linked and music had its own form. Words were no longer necessary to shape the contours of a piece of music. Consequently, this was also the time when instrumental music flourished. As regards notation; changes occurred in writing time values of notes that makes baroque music perfectly intelligible today.

As we move into the classical period (1750 - 1820 approximately) structure dominates in music. Listen to a piece of Mozart and you will hear clear beginnings and endings to every section. Melodic phrases are shorter and almost architecturally balanced. Everything is clear and precise. There are strict rules regarding dissonance in harmony.

The following hundred years is called the Romantic period. During this time music became a method of expressing the inner emotional world of the individual. As a consequence, the language of music expanded. Dissonance was used to convey special effects and arouse emotions in the listener. All the rules of harmony were explored, bent and broken in the quest to paint musical pictures and convey important ideas. Everything grew to enormous proportions, including orchestras.

This century again finds music at a point of transition. The system of key signatures and tonal harmony was thoroughly explored in the 19th century and has reached its limits. Now music has become atonal, with each of the twelve semitones in an octave being of equal value. It has gone even further, because we now hear tones which come between the semitones. These are called quartertones or microtones. This is a natural progression from the music of the Romantic period. Just as tonal music of the Baroque period developed from polyphony.

Something that has hardly been mentioned so far is rhythm. We have looked at melody and we have looked at harmony both of which employ rhythm as they unfold, but another aspect of 20th century music is the complexity of its rhythms. The changes in beat are often so frequent that any continuity is lost. What might appear to be chaos is in fact meticulously controlled down to the last demisemiquaver.

Perhaps this is the next field of exploration for the history of music as it evolves over the centuries. If you consider all that we have discussed as being the developing form of the archetypal "Idea of Music" that exists in the world of Beriah. Then it is possible to view each period as a kind of incarnation or stage of development in the lower worlds. First came the growth and understanding of melody. Later harmony was incorporated into the being of music, ushering in the tonal period. Could it be that the present time is devoted to an exploration of rhythm?

It is certainly true to say that music's history has followed a basic law of Kabbalah that is the oscillation from pillar to pillar on the Tree. We have the growth of polyphony until it reaches its peak on the right hand pillar and then a return across the centre during the Baroque period. The Classical period is one of structure and formality, which does not preclude creativity but just shapes it. Music of this era can be related to the left hand pillar. Romantic music represents another swing across the centre to the expansive side of the Tree. Perhaps we are now in the process of returning to a more ordered approach to music as we return across the central column. Only time will tell. One thing is for sure, music will continue to evolve.

Now let us consider the process of composition on the Kabbalistic Tree. The four levels are present in the diagram and start

with the topmost triad made up of the sefirot entitled Creativity, Creative Impulse and Structure. This is where all creativity arises. Below that, is the world of abstract ideas: incorporating the triads of Inspiration, Insight and Form. This is not specific to music but outlines the concept which in this particular case will take the form of music. The next four triads of Choice, Musical Expression, Musical Forms and Overview make up the next level that is called internal music and can be understood to represent the organisation of sounds in the composer's head. If you wish to experience the meaning of this, hum a tune in your head or imagine the sound of a brass band playing a familiar tune. This is internal music. The final three triads are connected to the actual physical sound of the work, called external music. The circles in the diagram demonstrate a certain degree of overlap of these worlds. This is correct and shows how they influence one another but it should be remembered that each world is unique in character.

After the Divine triad that is the background to the whole process of composition, the first stage of development happens in the central triad of Inspiration. This is the seed of the composition and may appear in a number of ways. It may be a memorable dream or an interesting experience. The subject of a poem might provide inspiration. Love can be a recurring theme that spans a number of works as in the case of Robert Schumann and his love for Clara Wieck, his wife to be.

Whatever has been brought into consciousness in the triad of Inspiration takes on a significance in the expansive triad of Insight. Ideas develop around the experience as it grows into something important and very real to the composer. It takes on a life of its own as it becomes apparent to the composer that the reason for the experience was inspiration for a piece of music.

Now, consideration of shape and size of the work begins to take place. Something as intimate as an expression of love is likely to take a smaller form than the portrayal of universal principles of life and death. In musical terms we are talking about the difference between, say, a duet and a large scale orchestral piece. Regarding the shape of the music to come, the skeleton is established at this stage. Usually the inspirational experience will suggest some kind of pattern that can be divided into sections. For example, the life cycle of a flower begins with a seed growing to perfection, flowering then dying, suggesting three sections.

A change of levels occurs now in the process of creation. The work takes on a particular form. In this case it is music and as already noted above, the four triads of Internal music are involved in producing the appropriate musical language to suit the idea.

At this point the composer has to sit down and consider the musical material. It is possible that a fragment of melody might be the starting point or a chord progression. Whatever it is that sets this musical process going it is common for the principle of Vitality to sustain it for quite a period of time, so that ideas about the music pop up at all sorts of times and places. The important thing at this stage is to let the ideas flow, unrestricted by too much detail.

The job of the left hand triad at this level is to implement in musical terms the pattern laid out by the triad of Form above it. In simple terms this will involve trimming superfluous material and organising it in a satisfactory order. The Sefirah of Response gathers much information about things like instrumentation and harmonic procedure. It will supply this material on demand to assist in the trimming and organizational process. In this way the piece begins to take shape.

A good analogy for these two triads is the difference between a wilderness where everything grows in profusion and a cultivated garden where selection is imposed to ensure good results. A musical example would be a great deal of jazz music where the left hand triad provides a set of chords or a framework for the right side to improvise on. Each triad is of equal importance and in many ways inseparable.

The triad of Choice monitors this process. Its central position on the Tree gives it a unique opportunity to make objective decisions regarding the musical language to be used. It represents the composer's individual style of musical expression that will span a large part of his or her output, particularly the more mature works.

The final triad at this level is that of the Overview. It carries a memory of all the thought processes that go on while the

work is in progress. It is rather like a set of snapshots taken at crucial moments of decision, so that one may look back over the sketches and remember, instantly why certain harmonies were formed, or a particular melodic line was taken up. Interestingly, this tends to fade once the work is complete.

The level of External music is centred on the Sefirah of the Score. This does not have to be a huge orchestral score. It can just be some type of physically communicated instructions to enable the performance to take place.

The triad of Sketches contains all the sketches. From when the general shape of the work was being considered, through the period when various musical fragments were being considered and fitted into suitable sections. Ending with the final stage of orchestration when the actual sounds of the instruments are fully taken into account.

The information needed to write down the musical notes and symbols is acquired in the triad of Notation. As with the score, varying levels of skill are required according to the type of music but at its most involved level, the art of music copying can be a lifetime's work.

Similarly, playing music demands equal dedication. In the triad of Performers, on the right hand side of the Tree can be found the musicians and all their experience. The composer will probably occupy this triad too when he or she tries out various bits of the work.

Eventually we come to the actual performance. There are various degrees of performance; starting as already mentioned with the composer's trials, progressing to rehearsals and culminating hopefully in a polished performance. All these stages belong to the last sefirah because the music is finally being heard. It is manifesting in physicality

It can be seen that while each of the four levels described above is self contained and unique in character, they work very much in conjunction with each other. Sometimes overlapping in terms of time. An obvious example is the composer trying out melodic or harmonic fragments to see if they will represent the original inspiration in a suitable way. For a moment the work touches the final stage of Performance to aid the processes of Internal Music. Similarly, the triad of Sketches is used as a physical storehouse for all sorts of musical and conceptual ideas.

If the work of each of these levels has been performed successfully then it is possible that a listener will be transported back to the source of the composition. The form of the music should resonate in the listener and awaken in him a similar emotional response to that of the composer. The music should speak of the composer's original intention. In this way one can hear sad music but be uplifted by it. The listener is being made conscious of the transpersonal, archetypal level of sadness. This is why music is such a good tool for bringing down knowledge of the higher worlds.

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