

COMPOSERS AND MENTAL ILLNESS

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This article is designed to consider how mental illness may affect a composer's work, Does their life style affect their music?

I have taken as a starting point the composer Scriabin with particular reference to his controversial Piano Concerto.

This article, in itself will be considered controversial and deals with matters already expressed elsewhere, but introducing the subject of composers with mental illness.

This concerto is controversial in that it has provoked comments as diverse as any could be.

Here are some:

It is frank and has pure outbreaks of emotion

My favourite Scriabin

It makes me cry

It is a great piece; a lovely concerto

As good, if not better than Rachmaninov.

Scriabin is a god.

Sublime

Probably the worst Piano Concerto ever written

It is better without the awful piano part.

It fails because it imitates Chopin.

The theme and variations of the slow movement are truly beautiful

Drivel

Should have the Victor Borge treatment to improve it

Truly awful music but it relieves my constipation

Many of we concert pianists will not play it ' not because we cannot play it, but because it is such a poor piece.

Melodic nullity

The best bit is in the finale which we now know was written by and orchestrated by Rimsky.

It is a piece that makes many physically ill. To listen to it is torture like having your testicles or breasts electrocuted

The most boring composer... ever

Marvellous cure for insomnia.

I would rather shoot myself than hear this again!

It is just notes, just bloody notes!

Well, you make up your own mind. These are not my personal comments.

While not wishing to demote any pianist, the great named pianists who have recorded this work are comparatively few such as, for example, Solomon, Ashkenazy and Richter. Most of the other pianists are Russian and, as you may know, in Moscow there exists Scriabinmania.

Scriabin was weird.

Note the word weird pertains to both witchcraft and the occult and to those who believe in it and practice it. Check in your dictionary.

He was certainly into the occult and its sexual liberty. He was sexually active way before his teenage years and said that, at this time, he had ploughed many a new and unsullied furrow. Many little girls were sexually humiliated by him. Because he was short in stature, he had to be big in other ways and his greatest interest in life earned him the nickname of Pussy. He was a predator around girls and women all his life and from about the age of eight.

He became involved in the Theosophy movement and in one of its leaders, the notorious spiritualist Helen Blavatsky (1831 -1891) who was proved to be a fake and a charlatan. She was a devout Devil worshipper and an enemy of Christianity. She founded the Society in 1875. She was well into spiritualism and its money making potential, the occult and the paranormal. She was a psychic, a mystic and a pagan. She mocked Christ and had her own inner circle of twelve disciples.

One of Scriabin's interests in this movement was because it encouraged sexual liberty and, in its ranks, were many paedophiles, such as C W Leadbeater (1854-1934) (his name is spelt differently elsewhere). He wrote books on The Chakras, The Astral Plane, Thought-Forms and Children. The society's belief was that sex should have no boundaries or rules. Men were hunters and had the right to capture any prey that appealed to him sexually and to have his way with such women or even little girls. Of course, we should mention The Grand Tour where elite young men from Britain toured many parts of Europe for two to four years to study art, architecture, culture and to have sex with women and thus compare the women and sexual activities of many nationalities.

As an aside, and to reinforce this aspect of Theosophy that appealed to Scriabin, there have been many famous men who have been paedophiles... the composer Benjamin Britten is the most famous and, without doubt, he was the most loathsome man I have ever met. Many homosexual men are also said to be paedophiles, for example, J M Barrie of Peter Pan fame, Lord Montgomery, Baden Powell, Laurie Lee, Swinbourne, Lawrence of Arabia, L S Lowry, Wifred Owen, Lewis Carroll, Lord Gordon and John Ruskin are all said to have been child abusers.

Britten also said that bestiality was the next step up from homosexuality. He told Walton that if he had never bugged a boy he was missing out on one of life's greatest pleasures. But it must also be said that many homosexuals do not and would not practise bestiality. I have to repeat here that I do not hate homosexuals. In fact, I have friends who are like this. I am not homophobic because I do not have an intense fear or dislike of them.

The composer, Cyril Scott, was also influenced both by Blavatsky and her evil Theosophy movement.

He tried to get Edmund Rubbra to encompass this. When, in 1948, Rubbra became a Roman Catholic, Scott was furious and exceptionally rude to Rubbra. But that was his nature, as is the nature of many in the spiritualist movement and it is also and often the response of those in sympathy with these teachings. If you disagree or dare to disagree with psychic dogma, you are both ostracised, made to be an enemy and perhaps subject to the spiritualist's Explosive Anger Disorder (EAD) a serious mental disorder which may be coupled with BPD (Borderline Personality Disorder) another serious mental condition where the person believes that all errors or misfortunes in his life are always someone else's fault and never his own. The patient is never wrong.

Scriabin had these disorders. He was mentally ill.

He was also weird. He believed that the world could and would only be saved through art. He suffered from hallucinations that is to say seeing things that were not there. There are also voice hallucinations usually associated with schizophrenia, mania or other mental illnesses. He said that the world would end with everybody involved in a sexual orgy. Men would be shagging men as well as women and little girls and everyone would be happily involved in gang bangs. He said that all his music contains eroticism although he called it ecstasy. He was narcissistic. Narcissism is another serious personality disorder of being excessively preoccupied with self and self interest. He was a megalomaniac. Megalomania is a very serious psychopathological disorder characterised by personal power and self-importance. Not only was he into spiritualism but other dangerous cults and promoted them. He was effeminate, a real pansy. Effeminacy refers to a trait or traits in men which are historically and traditionally feminine. He was a notorious drunk and much of his music was written under the influence of alcohol which resulted in poor quality and incoherence in his music. Like Nietzsche, he campaigned against morality so he could force sex on any girl or woman. He resigned from the Conservatory over yet another sex scandal. Not only was he a paedophile, he was a rapist.

As to eroticism in his music, someone asked, "Where does the copulation occur in the Poem Of Ecstasy?"

Someone replied, "Which copulation?"

His hatred of Christ was shown when he said that he was greater than Christ and said he could walk on the waters of Lake Geneva and prove this. His attempt resulted in having to be rescued from drowning. This is another example of his madness.

Even as a child, he was deemed to be mentally ill and all his life he was. Does his mental illness and instability show in his work such as the Piano Concerto?

Glazunov, Rimsky and Rachmaninov were discussing the Piano Concerto and they were all in agreement that it was a terrible and dreadful work. One said, "Scriabin has lost his mind!" Another replied, "He never had a mind to lose!"

Are comments like this relevant and go any way to prove the poorness of this Concerto?

You may rightly answer that Rachmaninov played some Scriabin which indicated that he liked his music.

That is a false premise. Musicians play works they do not like because they are paid to play junk music as well as good music.

I remember a famous British pianist being asked why he played the Frank Bridge Sonata.

"Because I was commissioned to do so and paid very well!" was his reply.

“But did you like the piece?”

“Certainly not,” the world famous pianist replied, “It is a dreadful work and, like many others, I hate it!”

It is true to say that some composers have written fine works when mentally ill, and often the illness is depression. The Finnish composer, Jonas Kokkonen wrote four fine symphonies, probably the finest Cello Concerto of the 20th century and, in fact, all the works I know of his are excellent and yet he suffered from depression and, often, alcohol played a part in his life.

Alcohol is a depressive and can annul a composer's ludicity when composing.

But it is true that some composers when mentally ill have written some sub standard music such as Chopin and Schumann. Schubert, Smetana and Hugo Wolf suffered from both depression and syphilis which rots the brain and, consequently, they wrote poor works. However, Smetana and Wolf wrote some excellent pieces as well. Chopin not only suffered from many mental disorders including being a manic depressive, he was probably an epileptic. He had syphilis which rots the brain which explains why works like his Opus 61 are incoherent and very poor. Even Chopin hated it saying it was an awful work!

The British composer, Lennox Berkeley, eventually suffered from Alzheimer's and the works he wrote when this disease was coming and while it was with him are very poor. Illness and the effect on his brain resulted in poor compositions. However, it must be said that there are those who do not regard Alzheimer's as a mental disorder. But, in happier times, Berkeley wrote some delightful scores.

Frustration is not a mental illness but I wish to quote two of the many examples when composers have had problems resulting in temporary depression.

Sir John Barbirolli was not a good conductor and an unpleasant man. He premiered the First Symphony of a British composer and he 'messed it up' because he did not understand it and could not conduct its complex rhythms. That composer's career was ruined as a result. Barbirolli undertook a performance of Richard Arnell's Third Symphony which lasts a hour but he cut out 15 minutes of the work because he could not conduct its difficult pages. The composer suffered as a result and the work was ignored until Norman Del Mar took it up and played the work complete.

Ivor Gurney had several mental disorders even in his childhood. He had paranoid schizophrenia and prolonged bouts of depression. He was a manic depressive with his unpredictable mood swings. He was psychotic and had delusion disorders. And all of this existed before he was gassed in World War 1. Does this mental malaise show in his music and render it to be of poor quality? Yes, in some of his music but then there are splendid pieces such as the gorgeous song I will go with my father a-ploughing.

Hans Rott was an Austrian composer whose short life spanned 1858- 1884. His mind snapped in October 1880 on a train journey where he pulled out a revolver on a fellow passenger. He was confined to a mental hospital suffering from severe depression. He was admired by both Bruckner and Mahler. In fact Mahler's Symphony no 1 written five years after Rott's Symphony steals ideas from Rott. This young composer was devastated by Brahms rejection of his symphony which is a very fine work. Rott died of TB.

Mental illness must be a major obstacle in composing music since this calls for clear thought to enable music to be coherent, well written and to be technically sound.

Schubert is an interesting case. I am not saying that, as a young teenager, he had any mental disorders but he was lazy and wrote things in a hurry in order to visit the local brothels and spend what little money he had on the services or prostitutes. This led to his having syphilis and the resultant brain damage that was clearly an hindrance to his work, some of which is very poor. All his stage and theatre works were flops!

But, even before them, he would set out a work of a few bars, then a long gap, another few bars, another a long gap etc. as you can see from his manuscripts in Vienna. The long gaps were filled in by scales, broken chords and note-padding. As one composer has said his works were akin to painting by numbers!

His syphilis altered his brain and, today, X-rays show the damage to the brain caused by this venereal disease and, therefore, it produces, a mental illness. This is medically confirmed.

For a few moments I want to extend the scope of this article.

If mental illness causes people to be irrational and also clouds their judgment and intellectual powers, take the case of Charles Darwin and his theory of evolution,. Since he was 16, in 1825, he was mentally ill often spending months at a time in bed. He was a hypochondriac, had delusional disorders, paranoid schizophrenia, many phobias and treated his wife and grown up children like children. He also had regular stomach cramps, anxiety, tremors and vomiting. He was often confused and admitted that his condition was caused by his lifelong desire to debunk the God of the Bible by any means.

Darwin was mentally ill. Does this therefore challenge the veracity of his theory of evolution and the irrational notion that only the fittest should survive? Is this not the irrational belief of an irrational and mentally unwell man?

But to return to Scriabin and his Piano Concerto which is in three movements.

1. Allegro. This opens with a feeble effeminate piece of writing which meanders, wandering around with no definite aim or direction. It has a high string melody of sorts but it gets nowhere. There is a powerful outburst at 1.20 with crashing chords from the piano which is at odds with the orchestra. We enter the labyrinth again going round in endless circles and becoming frustrated. It is all aimless. There are fragments of melody and irrelevant arpeggios in the predictable piano part. The music stops and starts. It has no coherence.
2. Andante. This is a theme and variations movement in which the opening is effective to some extent but it tends to wallow and indulge itself and it meanders. The clarinets and the piano enter. The piano part is at odds with the orchestra and takes away from any beauty in the orchestral theme. The piano part consists of more boring arpeggios and tinkling. If the piano part were silent this piece could be effective. Then we have crashing piano turbulence ruining the character of the theme. We travel to the depths of the piano which, again, is out of character with the theme. The piano part and the orchestral part are like two completely different works. They do not gel. The accents are in the wrong places. Sometimes the piano part is irrationally bombastic! There is more tinkly Chopinesque music like an out of tune music box and even the theme has become banal. The piano part is too fancy for the simple and direct theme. The music has become increasingly tedious.
3. Allegro Moderato. This has another Chopinesque opening with tedious arpeggios and the music is repetitious,. There is an expectancy but no baby! At 1.36 there is an attempt at a theme but it has no shape or coherence. The music is pointless with arpeggios, cascades and unnecessary piano gymnastics. Often the music sounds like piano exercises or that damaged music box. There is no form just episodic ramblings. At 4.40 there is a bold variant of the theme with crashing piano chords in the section written by Rimsky concluding at 5.20ff with the trombone writing. We have more laboured piano cascades but the music is getting nowhere. At 7.03 there are scalic chords akin to Rachmaninov but, of course, he came later. The end of the work is welcome.

Is it an awful work? You may protest and say it is a matter of opinion and not a fact. Opinion is a belief not founded on certainty or proof. A fact is not an opinion but something that can be proved.

Let us take Chopin. In one of his piano works in D flat he has an extended passage chock- a -block

with accidentals and sharps which is difficult to read and a hindrance to the pianist. All he had to do was to change the key signature to E major to avoid all the accidentals. In his Scherzo no 2 in B flat minor, he marks the piece Presto but the middle section does not lend itself to that speed and pianists rightly pay it slower... but Chopin has not changed the tempo. As with Scriabin, many of his works have no form or coherence whereas, for example, Haydn, Beethoven, Mozart, Mendelssohn and Brahms have. Take as another example, Szymanowski's Piano Sonata no 2. In a quick bar of 4/4, the dynamics range from pppp to ffff without a pause and within that one bar and in two seconds. In both Chopin and Scriabin, they do not understand the difference between B double flat and A natural or F double sharp and G natural. These are but a few examples.

Scriabin relies on formulae and repetition, as did Schubert, and the usual high jinks on the piano which has no thematic link to the music since they are only scales and arpeggios and, while many of us may be guilty of writing like this, Scriabin's over-usage serves no purpose but is merely decorative like eye shadow and lipstick. His 24 Preludes, Op 11, are, in the main, slight and purposeless pieces, although a couple of them have some little merit. A Scriabin prelude lasting 40 seconds which has nothing to say is hardly good music and certainly not great music. And yet there are people who complain that modern music has no tunes. Neither has much Scriabin!

I am sure the Russian pianist who said that Scriabin's music was 'just notes, just bloody notes' is right.

Scriabin was effeminate and that is a worrying mental condition. Effeminacy is in this piece. He said that the piece was erotic and full of sex. Do we have to examine it to find the sexy bits? If we do, will that help us to understand or like the piece?

Why is it that many famous concert pianists agree that it is a dreadful piece and will not play it. Some pianists have told me that they will not play it not only because it is a badly written piece but because they do not want to be associated in any way with a composer who are immoral, decadent and a disgrace to humanity who stole the virginity of little girls by acts of sadistic rape and who, sometimes paid the families to keep quiet.

I asked twelve professional cellists to write an honest report about a famous Cello Concerto. They all said that they had played it but it was a poor work since the composer did not understand the cello. The fast music does not suit the cello at all and most of the music was slow and a ghastly wallow in the mud of the composer's incompetence. Their agreement that the composer did not understand the cello is perfectly right and yet people call this work flawless, and, wait for it, some call it a masterpiece!

In another article, The Man is his Music, I prove that composers do reveal themselves in some of their music. Britten's lifestyle of homosexuality and pederasty is in many of his works, Berg's natural love for women is in many of his works, Haydn's diplomacy and wit appears in much of his music and so on.

Scriabin's music is opaque and unintelligible and symptomatic of his life style, the weird things that occupied his mind and his sexual deviancy. There is no clear form, exposition or normal development in his work such as the Piano Concerto. Richter said that it was haphazard. Scriabin said that his music was ecstasy when he meant erotic which word means concerning or arousing sexual desire or giving sexual pleasure. It obviously was only erotic in Scriabin's mind. I know of no one who has been sexually aroused by his Piano Concerto or anything else he wrote.

However, a couple of my female students have told me that they sense eroticism in music because they are women. The slow movement of Beethoven's Emperor Concerto conjures up for one lady sexual fantasies. I did not ask for an explanation.

This student who, like me, believes that Beethoven is the greatest composer of them all, has said that Beethoven's morals were questionable and he was probably mentally ill.

But to Scriabin and his Piano Concerto, shallow people will say, " I don't care if the Concerto is badly written or that Scriabin was a sex maniac. I don't care that he does not know the difference between F double sharp and G natural. It means nothing to me that he was a rapist, a drunk and had severe mental problems. I like his work and that is all that matter so shut up!"

People that say things like this about music are indeed shallow; they have no depth of feeling; they do not give serious thought to such matters.

Lest I be considered a snob, I admit that I like some music which is awful and badly written but I do not contend with those who criticise or condemn it. They are right.

If the majority of concert pianists and professional musicians deplore this Concerto, does not their expertise count for something?

I have often been belittled for dwelling too much on the private lives of composers and their morality. I am told that I am severe on them. I have been told that I dislike them and their music because of their dissolute lives. No so. I hated Elgar before I knew about his questionable life style and obsession with navy blue knickers. But, as I have proved, the composer is often in his music and the life he lives in living sometimes in his music. What people forget is that I praise composers for their work and their invaluable service to society. There is more positivity in my writing that negativity.

Scriabin a god? His music is sublime? He is as good if not better than Rachmaninov? A marvellous work and a lovely concerto? The world can only be saved by art? When the world ends it will be in a universal sexual orgy with even little girls wanting to be sexually active with any man or woman? A glorious orgy when everyone will pass from one to another without discernment and have an endless one night stand?

And still people say that I should not major on his private life but only on his music. What right have I to condemn him? Am I a saint? No, a thousand times, no.

But what a man is, is in his music. His music contains his fingerprints, his DNA. Bruckner was a spiritual man, in the correct sense of the word, and his Symphony no. 8 and Te Deum are examples of that. Britten's sexual abuse of boys is shown in many of his works such as Death in Venice, Martinu's repulsion at war is shown in his Memorial to Lidice, Mahler's angst is shown in his work such as Kindertotenlieder and Scriabin's mental health is shown in the ramshackle of his Piano Concerto. The composer is in his music. His attitudes, beliefs and life style is also there to various extents.

The Russian pianist was right about Scriabin's music. "It is just notes, just bloody notes!"

But you should consider all these things and make up your own mind. Articles like this do have the effect of people reacting and coming to the defence of the person concerned and so the article itself should not be dismissed or pilloried since Scriabin is likely to get the sympathy vote!

Mental illness does affect the quality of the composer's music but that does not mean that all bad music is because the composer is mentally unwell!

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NOTES I have quoted from the letters of Rimsky, Rachmaninov and Gretchmaninov