

PILVAX

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Béla Hamvas was born in Prešov (Eperjes) in modern-day Slovakia in 1897 and soon moved with his family to Pressburg (Bratislava/Pozsony) and later to Budapest when his father refused to take an oath of allegiance to Czechoslovakia in 1919. Between the wars he wrote for *Budapest Hírlap* and *Szózat*, but was barred from publishing in 1948 by the communist regime. He then he worked as a land laborer in Szentendre and an unskilled worker in a power plant. He continued to write his philosophical essays until his death by brain hemorrhage in 1968.

The Seventh Symphony and the Metaphysics of Music

by Béla Hamvas

(translated from Hungarian by Dániel Antall & Sam Poole)

1.

To say the music of Beethoven is titanic is cliché. But it's true. Not because of its transcendent greatness, but because he robbed the universe. He lured sounds from beneath their cover, tore them from their hiding places, violently yanked them up from where they grew, relentlessly bled them, and raised them from the depths in which they'd sank. From the rocks and the seas and the earth, from souls, the stars and the underworld, he passionately, wildly, furiously, forcefully rendered them, entranced them, drew them out and dragged them forth. What remained afterwards hardly matters. It is certain his music is titanic, as it is certain that destiny is too. For what he did, only a titan could have done, what he suffered, only a titan could have suffered. He suffered alone, his jaw clenched; this wild-headed, ill-mannered beast suffered for stealing every sound in the world. Only the Greeks could have understood what happened as he became deaf, as this humiliated, surly, half-mad man could no longer hear what he had plundered. And thus, like all titans, Beethoven too fell victim to his own greatness – he who, even in his religious music, honored his gods by tearing them apart, inciting whole worlds of sound against them, heaping the entire elemental demony of sound upon them, though they had no choice but to submit to him – if they wanted to hear music worthy of them, they had to listen to Beethoven. There may be a place for debate in poetry: Homer or Shakespeare, the *Mahabharata* or something else; similarly in the arts of painting and sculpture. But in

music there is no such debate. Beethoven stands alone. And in all of existence there was one wretch who heard none of this music: Beethoven himself.

2.

The titan is a creature whose power is divine, but WHOSE sense of morality is not. As such he knows no moderation, and for this he will clash with the Great Order, and he must fall. His power is in vain if he does not contain it. It is boundless and inexhaustible and can bear no one as its equal or superior. The titan's flaw is his arrogance. He believes that existence is subject to power – power, knowledge, talent, persistence, and will. To him the world is his prey and he must conquer it by force.

In time this becomes his weakness. There exists that which he does not know, and against which he hasn't enough strength: humility. All who develop transcendent powers play with the danger of becoming a titan, of losing restraint, of placing oneself above all, and thus they commit the sin of arrogance. There exists that which the titan does not know, is incapable of, and for which he lacks strength. The transcendent becomes demonic and without constraint, turning against the one in whom it resides. It is this power that takes revenge on the person who thought it would lead him to success. He fails because of this power. He keeps winning and winning and winning, mere victory and triumph. Meanwhile, he doesn't realize that part of him is empty, exposed, weak, fragile and incomplete. He lacks the power to stand up and then drop to his knees. He lacks restraint, morality, religion, weakness; he lacks the strength to be weak, and the capacity for gratitude. Thus in this emptiness he must vanish, and from this inadequacy become nothing.

3.

The titan is recognizable by his arrogance, and by the siren at his side. The siren is the feminine, inner side of the titan, just as the titan is the masculine, inner side of the siren. The power of the titan is the enchantment of the siren. These two are but one.

Enchantment and allurement are the ways woman loses her restraint and her obedience, raising herself above the feminine to catch and dominate her prey. Force is the way man loses his restraint and obedience, raising himself above humanity to catch and dominate his prey. As enchantment is the force of woman, force is the enchantment of man.

4.

To define the existence of the titan and siren isn't difficult. It is the sorcery of the *I*; that is, it wants to make this *I*, this form, this being as it is, transcendent, to cast it into the

eternal: the magic of enchantment and force, for eternity with this face, this hair, this voice, this head, with these hands, this skin, and these eyes, with these thoughts, images, wishes, instincts. As it lives now, it wants to remain forever, unchanged across infinite spans of time. It is unaware of anything better, anything more for itself, because it is arrogant, this *I*, as it is, and is worthy to remain so forever, wanting to maintain happiness and to enter a place where no tears can reach. It demands happiness – pure, calm, deep, fluid, and sparkling being, devoid of excitation, ascendant over the uncertainty from which rapture has vanished.

We don't know which came first. But it is certain that when the titan was born and began to pillage the world, the gods banished the siren. When the titan beheld the charming creature, he shouted, "here she is, it is she!" And when the siren began to charm the world with her allure, the gods banished the titan. When the siren beheld the mighty creature, she shouted, "here he is, it is he!" This is the moment when they both slipped. The titan believed happiness to be within the siren, and the siren believed it to be within the titan. Since then they have believed, as every titan and siren believes to this day, that happiness is within the other. They have forgotten what they wanted, forgotten divine immortality. They turned their magic against each other, each making a conquest of the other, charming one another as they have done ever since and still do today. The gods are smiling because they are still biting, tormenting, conquering, charming, and tearing at each other; they have forgotten about the rest.

5.

One's first impression, upon listening to Beethoven, is that this man did not write with pleasure. When one sees, hears, or reads a great work, the impression is always that the artist did not take pleasure in its creation. Here we recognize the difference between the novice and the master. The novice paints, writes, or sings for his own enjoyment, and this enjoyment in painting or writing or singing is important to him. He becomes his own audience, is both the composer and listener in one, at once within the work and observing from the outside. The resulting mess is characterless dilettante art, like autoeroticism, giving joy to none but its creator.

We shouldn't write a single note or word for our own delight. Why? It's a secret. And it's forbidden. The master knows instinctively that he must vaccinate himself against feeling pleasure from his own work. As long as he feels delight, he's a novice. Only when it begins to hurt, to be a burden, to constrain – only then does he begin to be a master. The poet must give up his joy in words; the musician must break the habit of finding passion in music. All great works are the result of asceticism and can only be great by sacrificing joy. The novice does not know this. He becomes intoxicated and begins to enjoy the sound of his own voice, but at that moment it is no longer sound, only

emptiness. The master is an ascetic; while the whole world may be rejoicing, he remains sober. He has to know the antidote to use against the enjoyment of art. His vow is more austere than that of any religious order: what you create, you cannot enjoy, and only you cannot enjoy it.

6.

Beethoven faced a much greater problem than taking delight in the beauty of the notes he composed: he had to avoid the increasing weight of his duty. To remove himself from under the crack of the whip that drove him towards a less and less bearable endeavor. What he didn't want troubled him far more than what he did want. Were his creations beautiful? Were they great? When he realized that they were, he found terror rather than pleasure, fear rather than delight. After all, the only one who is truly, existentially interested in a work is its creator. It is he alone who knows not only that the work is beautiful, but also what it cost. Rather than accept triumph, he conceals himself, offering excuses, reluctance, delay. This is why the inferiority of the amateur work resides in what it declares, whereas the greatness of the masterpiece lies in what it leaves unstated. Rather than haughtily beat his own chest, he would toss the work out. Balzac said that creation always begins with a wry face and progresses through struggle; eventually it entrances, and when finished, we long for it once again. One only reluctantly gets involved with such intensity of being, and once begun, is unable to remove oneself, suffers immensely, and in the end is at home nowhere but here.

7.

According to the phrasing of modern psychology, yoga raises the contents of the subconscious towards the threshold of consciousness through continuous exertion. What it hopes to achieve by this is, for the time being, unimportant. Undoubtedly, such a method for raising and examining the dark, sunken parts of life exists. Perhaps at one time the wholly deep, shadowy, Poseidonic being lived in illumination. It is also likely that what now lurks in the subconscious, at one time inhabited the realm of sunlight, and sank because of some cosmic catastrophe such as Atlantis. If this weren't so, we couldn't raise subconscious reality to the surface. For if its place were there, grown of the shadows, it wouldn't be possible to bring it forth. The subconscious was conscious once, when humans lived in the light, when the greater part of the conscious hadn't yet sunk. For this reason and this reason only, those things which are below can be brought up; raising the sunken from the depths is triumph and greatness; what falls back brings danger and alarm; and if one himself dips below the conscious, catastrophe. Yoga is that

procedure which illuminates one's deepest darkness and which brings forth what has sunken there.

8.

It is unquestionable that Beethoven's compositions are sound yoga. This is why his works never give the impression that he took delight in their creation. The ascetic or the yogi never admires his own work, and thus cannot enjoy it. He knows what he achieves, what it cost him, what awaits, and what he will have to pay. For him music is the conscious and disciplined method by which he raises the sunken, and the dimension of sound is the dimension where he practices this yoga.

Asceticism, and as such, yoga, turns the light towards the world of shadows, consciously ushers in illumination, draws out from the darkness those forms that psychology calls "archetypes." The archetype is a form independent of humans, an ancient form, a primitive being, a primordial manifestation, essential. All of the creatures in mythology are such ancient figures of existence: the dragon, Pegasus, the bringer of light, the angel, the devil, Satan, the protector, the progenitor. The titan and the siren are also such manifestations. Asceticism, and as such, yoga, is a magical procedure that is, as every form of sorcery, extremely dangerous. Why? Because as the conjurer brings these ancient manifestations to the surface, so must he recognize and name these primordial figures. Whether a person, star, plant, animal, newborn, or something newly discovered rises from the unknown to the surface, the very first and most important thing is to recognize and name it. This name now ties it to the light and prevents it from sinking backwards. If one doesn't recognize this primordial manifestation and cannot name it, this ancient figure will once again sink. What then follows is unspeakably horrible. The ascetic begins to identify himself with the ancient form. It is in this moment that, as is familiar in mythology, a person becomes a dragon, a beast, or a demon because he believes he is that ancient being. And so Beethoven became a titan, because he believed he was a titan. One identifies himself as the ancient manifestation and thus its fate becomes his fate. Beethoven had the powers of the titan, the charm and arrogance of the siren, and thus their fate became his: retribution and fall.

The rest of Béla Hamvas's essay can be found in the WINTER 2007 issue of PILVAX. Locally available in Budapest.