

A Year in Classical Music: 1837, vol. 6

In volume 5, we discussed the life and work of Hector Berlioz in 1837. Berlioz was a resident of Paris, the epicenter of the Liberal revolution and the transition of European culture to its post-Christian era. I devoted a blog post to this topic at AYICM.com. It was what Nietzsche would call “the death of God” towards the end of the 1800’s: the belief that the ascendancy of Liberal philosophy over Christian faith as the foundation of Western society had made belief in God impossible, and that as a result, society might collapse.

On the other side of this culture war we have Anton Bruckner, one of the great progressive composers of the 19th century, and a man of devout Catholic faith. Like Manuel de Falla in the next century, Bruckner was one of the most important musicians of his time, but was also a reverent Christian in a society increasingly indifferent or hostile to the faith. Bruckner would become the most important Romantic symphonist after Beethoven, but he was as out of place in the Viennese artistic circles of the late 1800’s as a Southern Baptist from Mississippi amongst progressive artists in New York today. In his private life Bruckner had nothing to do with the Liberal revolution, yet his musical hero was Richard Wagner, the great revolutionary composer of the Romantic age. To call Bruckner a paradoxical figure in our cultural history is an understatement to say the least.

Bruckner was 12 years old at the start of 1837. He had just begun to compose music, so this episode of *A Year in Classical Music* is a good place to discuss his childhood and the development of his character. Bruckner showed no signs of being the great artist he would become until he was in his 40’s, so we’ll better understand this most unlikely of innovative and influential composers through a look at his early years.

Bruckner was born in 1824 at Ansfelden, just south of Linz in northern Austria and about a hundred miles west of Vienna. He grew up in a society called the *Vormärz*. The *Vormärz* was the defiant, reactionary response of German speaking Catholic society to the Liberal revolution. Led by Prince Klemens von Metternich, the *Vormärz* was the last stand of the absolute German monarchy. They refused their citizens a constitution and representative government, upholding the feudalism and papal theocracy of Old Europe. The *Vormärz* endured in rural parts of Austria and Germany after the Congress of Vienna in 1815, until the great European revolutions of 1848. Bruckner’s personality was wholly formed in this conservative order. His letters, journals, and biographies reveal an attitude of extreme deference and abasement to people of higher social castes, and almost everyone in Austria belonged to a higher social caste than Bruckner did for most of his life. In Bruckner we find none of the individualistic autonomy that was typical of great Romantics like Berlioz. In his personality Bruckner had much more in common with people of J.S. Bach’s time, a century and a half before. It is a mistake, however, to dismiss Bruckner as a rube, or a redneck as we’d say in America. Many have made that mistake, because it’s difficult to reconcile what they consider a backwards, regressive worldview with the fact that Bruckner was

one of the 19th century's most visionary artists. His more perceptive biographers have demonstrated that he was anything but a simpleton. Derek Watson calls him "a mystic in an unmystical age," and most importantly he notes that had it not been for these inner conflicts and paradoxes in Bruckner, he might never have composed music.

Bruckner has always been known by his middle name, Anton, but his full name is Joseph Anton Bruckner. We know this because in 1885 an American swindler wrote to Bruckner, pretending to be part of the music faculty at the University of Cincinnati. He told Bruckner that if he'd mail him his birth certificate, along with a fee to process the paperwork, the University of Cincinnati would award him an honorary doctorate in music. Bruckner fell for it and mailed off his birth certificate and the money.

Like his father before him, Bruckner was a schoolteacher. Schoolteachers held very low social standing in Austria in the early 1800's, and in keeping with the extremely conservative culture, history and science were not part of their curriculum. However, Austrian schoolteachers of the day were required to be able to teach music to a considerably higher degree of skill than in German schools to the north. Bruckner's father was the organist at their parish at Ansfelden. His mother had a fine singing voice. Both of his parents were enthusiastic musicians, and they took him to High Mass each day. From the age of 4 Bruckner could play simple hymn melodies on the violin, and by the age of 10 he was able to assist his father with some of the organ playing at their services. At the Ansfelden parish Bruckner became familiar with Michael Haydn's liturgical music. Michael Haydn was the brother of the great classicist Joseph Haydn, and a colleague of the young Mozart while the two lived at Salzburg.

In the spring of 1835 Bruckner's parent sent him to live with his godfather Johann Baptist Weiss at St. Florian, the next town to the east of Ansfelden and the site of a Catholic monastery with a beautiful Baroque cathedral. Weiss was an accomplished composer. He guided Bruckner through his first intensive musical studies during the young musician's stay there, and introduced him to Mozart's masses and Joseph Haydn's late oratorios.

By 1837 the young Bruckner had written a collection hymn preludes for the organ, his first compositions for the instrument he would eventually master. These organ preludes are not masterfully written, however. They lack harmonic cadences, for example, demonstrating that Bruckner's knowledge of music at the age of 12 was still incomplete. Even so, the magnificent opening chords in one of these preludes give us an early example of Bruckner's fascination with harmony. In his maturity Bruckner would become one of the great masters of advanced, post-Romantic harmony, and those organ preludes from his childhood shows him already searching for harmonically distinctive sounds. I found a recording that offers three of Bruckner's early organ preludes, on an album by Alexei Parshin that also contains organ pieces by Liszt and Brahms. Look for a link to that album on the page for this podcast at AYICM.com.

Before its Renaissance and the beginnings of its rise as a world power, Europe suffered more than a millennium of continual invasions. The first came in the 4th century, before there was such a thing as Europe, culturally speaking, when the Huns invaded out of central Asia and displaced many of the Germanic tribes to the north of the Roman, Mediterranean world. Then came the Avars, the Slavs, the Umayyad invasions of Spain and France, and the Vikings, to name just a few of the great conquests of Europe in the first millennium AD. Two of the last great conquering armies came again from the East, with the Mongols in the 13th century and the Ottoman invasions from the Balkans, which began in the 15th century and continued through the 17th. The last serious threat from the Ottomans came with their siege of Vienna in 1683.

These invasions each left their mark on European culture, one way or another. The Turkish style in classical music originated with the Ottoman military bands that played outside the walls of Vienna during the siege of 1683. They played an exotic, Middle Eastern style of music that was not remembered with any real accuracy by Viennese musicians, but it inspired the Turkish style in classical music, which was popular from the time of Gluck through the time of Beethoven, or from the 1730's until the 1820's. The Turkish style was more the product of the Western imagination than it was a serious attempt to mimic Ottoman music, but it colored some of the best-loved works of classical music including Mozart's opera *The Abduction from the Seraglio* and Beethoven's 9th Symphony.

Another musical style that influenced classical music as a result of that millennium of invasion came from Hungary. The Magyar people came over the Carpathian Mountains from the east and settled in the Carpathian basin in Eastern Europe in the late 9th century. From that time through the 1600's, they played a distinctive style of folk music drawn from that Magyar heritage in Hungary. The Habsburg monarchy held political power in Hungary and in lands to the west from the 1500's, drawing the country into the realm of Western European politics and culture. Starting in the 1700's, wealthier, educated Hungarians began to regard German music, with its bass lines, counterpoint, and elaborate harmony, as more sophisticated and cultured. Upper-class Hungarians imported German music, leaving the Hungarian folk style to the Gypsy underclass. The Gypsies then took their music west as migrant workers, and that's the origin of the Hungarian style, or *style hongrois*, in classical music. The Hungarian style influenced classical composers in the 1700's and 1800's in much the same way that jazz would influence them in the early 1900's. I read Jonathan Bellman's book *The Style Hongrois in the Music of Western Europe* as part of my research for this podcast. He writes, "The *style hongrois* represents the first conscious and wholesale embrace of a popular music associated with a lower societal caste by the composers and listeners of more formal, schooled music."

The Hungarian style in classical music first shows up in Haydn's music. There's a good album by my favorite period instrument violinist, Monica Huggett, called *Haydn and The Gypsies*. It places movements of Haydn's chamber music influenced by the style alongside performances of authentic

Gypsy music. Eszterháza, the royal palace where Haydn worked for most of his life, is in modern-day Hungary, and Vienna itself is only about 75 miles from the Hungarian border, so Viennese music was the first venue for the Hungarian style. It was popular in the music of Haydn and Schubert in the Classical era and with Liszt and Brahms in the Romantic era, when nationalism was such an important cultural force coloring Germanic music. Then, in the 20th century and with the development of Modernist musical styles and techniques, composers outside Germany were able to develop expressions of their national styles that did not depend on the sound of German Romanticism. As French composers were fond of putting it, they were able to get the sauerkraut out of their music. Bartók and Kodály led the way in establishing an authentic Hungarian musical style based on 20th century Modernist compositional techniques. I discussed this in the *A Year in Classical Music* podcasts on the year 1926.

Our 1837 composer associated with the Hungarian style is Ferenc Erkel. Where Franz Liszt, the foremost Hungarian musician of the day, was living in Switzerland and working primarily in French musical circles, Erkel remained in Hungary for the whole of his career. He was born at Pozsony in 1810; the city is called Bratislava today. Pozsony was one of the few cities in Hungary other than Pest that upheld a high standard of formal, schooled music. It was close to Germany and heavily influenced by German music, but Erkel was actively involved with Hungarian national music, as well. At around 1828 he had moved to Kolozsvár, the cradle of Hungarian national theater and opera. He was an excellent pianist and by the end of 1834 he'd begun his career as an opera conductor. In 1835 his opera company moved to Buda, the capital, and by 1838 Ferenc Erkel was one of the leading figures in Hungarian national opera. In 1861 he would compose *Bánk Bán*, the great Hungarian national opera of the 19th century. If you'd like to hear it, see the post about *Bánk Bán* at AYICM.com.

In 1837, Erkel composed a piece in the Hungarian style for violin and piano, called *Duo Brillant en Forme de Fantaisie sur des Airs Hongrois Concertante*. That means something like "Concert Duet in the Brilliant Style in the Form of a Fantasy on Hungarian Melodies." It's a dazzling treatment of Hungarian melodies and Gypsy fiddling, a little over 15 minutes in length. There's a good performance on the Naxos label by violinist Ferenc Szecsódi and pianist István Kassai.

The half-century from 1820 to 1870 was the golden age of the Opéra-Comique at Paris. Before 1820, Italian opera had carried the day, with many of the Italian *bel canto* opera composers moving there to have their work produced at the Paris Opéra. In the early 1700's, French comic opera was a more lowbrow form of entertainment, associated with farce, satire, and vaudeville. In 1752 Rousseau had attempted to establish a more respectable model for French comic opera with *Le Devin du village*, or *The Village Soothsayer*. The piece pleased both French audiences and Italian opera connoisseurs, but it didn't immediately succeed in establishing the new genre Rousseau had in mind. In

1755, though, Italian opera composer Egidio Duni moved to Paris and began composing French comic operas in the style Rousseau had provided. Duni's operas were so similar in style to the productions of the Comédie-Italienne that in 1762 it merged with Duni's company. That merger finally established French comic opera as an important Parisian artistic institution. In 1783 a new theater was built for the company, the same building it occupies today. For their first ten years there, the company was still called the Comédie-Italienne. It was closed for a time in the early 1790's, in the midst of the violent chaos of the French Revolution. In 1793 it was reopened as the Opéra-Comique. From 1793 composers writing for the Opéra-Comique offered more progressive music, and addressed more serious topics in the plots of their operas. Much of the repertoire at the Opéra-Comique was serious drama, not comedy, as the company reached its maturity. In these cases the difference between a French comic opera and a grand opera was only that the comic operas were productions of a smaller scale, and that comic opera used spoken dialogue between the musical numbers, where grand opera used recitative.

The end of the great age of the Opéra-Comique after 1870 came for two major reasons. France was defeated in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870 to 1871. The defeat came as a blow to French culture. It led French composers and other artists away from the early Romantic ethos, towards more abstract, intellectually serious kinds of expression. This helped foster the second trend that brought the Opéra-Comique tradition to its end: the influence of Wagner. Wagner fully revolutionized and even reinvented opera with his music dramas. The music produced at the Opéra-Comique after 1870 was largely concerned with imitating his style.

French opera composer Daniel-François Auber lived almost the whole of his long life at Paris. He was a Parisian through and through, a cultured man of discriminating taste. Celebrity social circles and a fine wine, gourmet lifestyle, Auber was every bit the character you'd expect of a prominent artist in the Paris of the early Romantic era, when Paris was the cultural capital of Europe. Auber studied with the meticulous composer Cherubini in the early years of the 19th century, acquiring the same high standard of craftsmanship his teacher possessed. Auber wrote both grand opera and comic opera, but comic opera was his specialty. His start as a professional composer wasn't especially promising, but Auber was a tireless worker who slept very little. A critic remembered him, writing, "Auber was always composing. You met him sauntering down the boulevards: he was working. At the theater you had a stall next to his, in which he was working. You passed along the Rue St. Georges after midnight. The street looked black on all sides except for a window through which the light of a modest lamp percolated: he was working. You knocked on his door at 6 AM. The valet showed you to an hospitable drawing room where the sounds of the piano already reached you: he was working."

By the early 1820's, when Auber was in his late 40's, he'd begun to earn the respect of Paris critics and audiences, and it was at around this time that he started working with Eugène Scribe, the librettist with whom he'd

collaborate for the rest of his career. Scribe was the most important French playwright of the early Romantic age, and the great literary figure of the Opéra-Comique. He was incredibly prolific: he wrote hundreds of plays and opera libretti. The complete edition of his work fills 76 books. Scribe wasn't interested in stories drawn from Greek mythology and other classical subjects, or in characters who "shit marble," as the Mozart character in Miloš Forman's movie put it. Scribe wrote historical dramas and stories about the contemporary bourgeoisie. His plots were original and well suited to the tastes of the new French Romantic culture. He wrote libretti for the grand operas at the Paris Opéra and the lighter fare at the Opéra-Comique. It was Scribe who wrote the first draft of the libretto for Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots*, though Meyerbeer asked Émile Deschamps to revise it, so as to give the characters more psychological depth. Auber and Scribe collaborated on 38 operas from 1828 to 1864. Their operas were amongst the few that could compete with Meyerbeer's enormous popularity in the mid-1800's.

Rossini described Auber's work as "little music, written by a great musician." Auber wasn't interested in the overly dramatic, emotionally exhausting style of someone like Berlioz. He wrote operas that, even if aesthetically superficial, were always pleasing to the ear, humorous, graceful and witty, perfectly balanced, and that made the most of the subtleties of the French language. A critic wrote that for Auber, "Science was the means, not the end. Far from flaunting it with the complaisance of the upstart who wishes to show off his wealth, Auber draws on it with discretion and almost conceals it."

In 1837 Auber composed *Le Domino Noir*, one of the two operas for which he is remembered today. (The other was *Fra Diavolo*, composed in 1830.) *Le Domino Noir* means "The Black Mask." The story is about two novice nuns who attend masquerade balls, where everyone wears masks, to enjoy the world a little before they fully commit to their convents. The usual opera hijinks ensue, and the nuns end up being told by the queen to marry instead of staying at the convent, much to the delight of the two men who fell in love with them at the ball. It's a ridiculous plot, of course, but as Scribe himself said, "If a comic opera contained common sense, it would not be a comic opera."

Hector Berlioz reviewed the first performance of *Le Domino Noir*, in December of 1837. Of one of the lead soprano's arias he wrote, "It is impossible to put more grace, elegance, finesse, and purity into the execution of a vocal piece which is already graceful and elegant in itself." Berlioz found another aria to be "too close to vaudeville." This might be a criticism of the Opéra-Comique genre itself as much as it's a criticism of *Le Domino Noir*; as we've seen, the Opéra-Comique had its roots in vaudeville and satire.

The recording to hear of *Le Domino Noir* stars the Korean coloratura soprano Sumi Jo, with the English Chamber Orchestra directed by Richard Bonyngé. The album is Jo's great performance on record. Her singing lights up Auber's difficult lead role. As an interesting bit of trivia about the album, two of the recitatives used are by Tchaikovsky, written to suit an Italian prima

donna who performed *Le Domino Noir* at Moscow in 1869. My favorite numbers from the opera are the trios and quartets that have the male and female leads interacting. Auber's writing is graceful and charming throughout.

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