

Henry Thoreau: "True Musician and Harmonist"

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Concert artist Sigurd Rasher once said: "There are no melodies in nature..."¹ Such a statement results from the theoretical orientation fundamental to a classical musician's formal training. Technically, music is a system of human construction derived from the study of music theory and acoustics. Pitches are classified into modes and keys, rhythms into meters, sounds into timbers, and themes into forms until an abstract theoretical structure has been built which serves to house musical aesthetic associations. The system can be viewed as analogous to the bureaucratic organizations in society that, as humanly conceived social structures, tend to distract us from the order indigenous to the natural world. From this perspective, nature has no melody because its array of sounds seems all too random when compared to the formally structured designs of European art music.

To Henry Thoreau, however, music was not a system of modes, harmonic sonorities or structured forms. It was the very essence of sound. Music of human construction was a mere representation of a greater harmony open to the perceptive ear. The chorus he so often wrote about was made up, not of men and women, but of owls and bullfrogs, the latter of which he credited with creating the "snoring music" of nature at night." (Journal, June 20, 1852.)

This article is a study of Thoreau's non-systematized and somewhat mystical view of music. The following topics are considered;

1. Music and natural sound
2. Harmony and the human character
3. Music, poetry and the senses
4. Music as a metaphysical reality

Music and Natural Sound

It is not known exactly how much knowledge of the western musical system Thoreau possessed. We can be reasonably certain, however, that Thoreau could read music to some extent. As noted by Edward Wagenknecht, Thoreau sang as well as he played the flute and his sisters were provided a piano by the family.² In this environment, he in all likelihood acquired some knowledge of scales and musical notation. But Thoreau had a predilection for rejecting, or at least looking beyond human-derived systems, whether they be systems of religion, government, or artistic expression. For him, music existed in sound rather than in composed or pre-conceived melody. In his journal entry of June 25, 1852, Thoreau describes hearing a laborer playing the flute at the end of the day. "He plays some well-known march. But the music is not in the tune; it is in the sound. It does not proceed from the trading nor political world."

This tendency to see beyond artificial systems seems rooted in a deep desire to appreciate sensory experience in a genuinely fresh and innocent way, uncluttered by the analytical intellect. In his first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, Thoreau describes hearing the beating of the drum from afar to which he and his brother "listened with such an unprejudiced sense as if for the first time we hear at all."³ Also, in a journal entry dated June 9th, 1852, he relates his experience of sounds to the unprejudiced ears of a child.

A child loves to strike on a tin pan or other ringing vessel with a stick, because, its ears being fresh, sound, attentive, and percipient, it detects the finest music in the sound, at which all nature assists. Is not the very cope of the heavens the sounding board of the infant drummer? So clear and unprejudiced ears hear the sweetest and most soul-stirring melody in tinkling cowbells and the like (dogs baying the moon), not to be referred to association, but intrinsic to the sound itself...Ah, that I were so much a child that I could unfailingly draw music from a quart pot! Its little ears tingle with the melody. To it there is music in sound alone.

The child has no contrived musical system to shape (or perhaps corrupt) its aesthetic experience of sound. Its intellect is not yet fully engaged. Each experience is potentially filled with wonder. This child-like perception is at the basis of Thoreau's simple but profound view of music.

Harmony and Human Character

Since the time of the ancient Greeks, harmony in music has been viewed by many authors as analogous to Man's relationship to himself and the universe. Thoreau takes no exception to this view, but expresses it in a way that uniquely preserves his individuality as a writer. In the following journal excerpt dated September 12, 1853, he applies this analogous relationship to the realm of human sensitivity.

...man has been treated as a musical instrument, and if any viol was to be made of the sound timber and kept well tuned always, it was he, so that when the bow of events is drawn across him he may vibrate and resound in perfect harmony. A sensitive soul will be continually trying its strings to see if it is in tune.

Thoreau's most direct and extended passage on the subject of music appears in chapter four (entitled Monday) of *A Week*. Here is made an important association between music and human character.

As polishing expresses the vein in marble and grain in wood, so music brings out what of heroic lurks anywhere. The hero is the sole patron of music. The harmony which exists naturally between the hero's mood and the universe the soldier would fain imitate with drum and trumpet...Marching is when the pulse of the hero beats in unison with the pulse of Nature, and he steps to the measure of the universe; then there is true courage and invincible strength.⁴

In this passage, the poetic reference to marching "in unison with the pulse of Nature" is essentially the concept of universal harmony expressed in rhythmic or metric terms. With regards to Nature and human character, Thoreau in effect is unifying rhythm and harmony in this universal sense. This poses no problem for Thoreau; he is not bound to the western theoretical system which, for the most part treats rhythm and harmony as distinct musical elements unassociated with natural order.

There can be little doubt that Thoreau's view of music was influenced by Pythagorean and Platonic ideas. Thoreau was well schooled in classical literature, and the ancient poetic idea of the "Music of the Spheres" as expressed in Greek philosophy is referenced several times in his journal, including this masterful poetic line from his entry dated August 10th, 1838:

The human soul is a silent harp in God's quire, whose strings need only to be swept by the divine breath to chime in with the harmonies of creation.

In Book III of "The Republic," Plato concerns himself with music and its ability to affect human character in both positive and negative ways. In what is often referred to as "Doctrine of Ethos," Plato remarks that, "He who mingles music with gymnastics in the fairest proportions, and best tempers them to the soul, may be rightly called the true musician and harmonist."⁵ Thoreau does not leave his brief discussion of music in *A Week* without quoting the Greek biographer, Plutarch, in affirmation of Plato's view.

Plato thinks the gods never gave men music, the science of melody and harmony, for mere delectation or to tickle the ear; but that the discordant parts of the circulations and beautiful fabric of the soul...might be sweetly recalled and artfully would up to their former consent and agreement.⁶

For Pythagoras, music was a microcosm of the universe, and orderly system governed by the same mathematical laws operating in the visible and invisible creation.⁷ Thoreau appears to embrace this idea when he links music to the order in the natural world. He does so, however, in a way that transcends the system of western music in keeping with his theme of the musical essence of sound. To conclude his discussion of music in *A Week*, Thoreau includes this quote from the Neoplatonist, Iamblichus, on Pythagoras.

...he extended his ears and fixed his intellect in the sublime symphonies of the world, he alone hearing and understanding, as it appears, the universal harmony and consonance of the spheres, and the stars that are moved through them, and which produce a fuller and more intense melody than anything effected by mortal sounds.⁸

Perhaps this perceptual experience is what Thoreau was trying to capture poetically when he wrote:

I hear beyond the range of sound,
I see beyond the verge of sight, -⁹

Music, Poetry and the Senses

The ancient Greeks also regarded music and poetry as virtually synonymous concepts. The Greek words “ode” and “hymn,” for example, which were used in antiquity to designate certain kinds of poetry, were actually musical terms.¹⁰ Furthermore, melody, rhythm, and language were designated by Aristotle as the three elements of poetry.¹¹ In *A Week*, Thoreau writes,

What are ears? What is Time? that this particular series of sounds called a strain of music,...can be wafted down through the centuries from Homer to me, and he have been conversant with that same aerial and mysterious charm which now so tingles my ears? What a fine communication from age to age, of the fairest and noblest of thoughts, the aspirations of ancient men, even such as were never communicated by speech!¹²

It is significant that the poet Homer is mentioned in the context of this musical experience. The “same aerial and mysterious charm” at the center of this passage is not bound separately by the speech of the poet or the melody of the composer. Both poetry and music, when they succeed in capturing the inexpressible, transcend their individual media to achieve a common and unified aesthetic end.

Thoreau goes on to define music as the “...flower of language, thought colored and curved, its crystal fountain tingled with the sun’s rays, and its purling ripples reflecting the grass and the clouds.”¹³ This passage is of special interest because Thoreau is describing music synesthetically in terms of sight and touch rather than of hearing. There apparently has occurred in his subjective experience a perceptual merging of the senses, where terms appropriate to one sensory channel of experience are needed to describe the depth of experience taken in through another. Thoreau then recapitulates the theme of antiquity in his discussion of music, disassociating the music he hears from temporal reality.

...A strain of music reminds me of a passage of the Vedas, and I associate with it the idea of infinite remoteness, as well as beauty and serenity, for to the senses that is furthest from us which addresses the greatest depth within us. It teaches us again and again to trust the

remotest and finest as the divinest instinct, and makes a dream our only real experience.¹⁴

The Vedas are an Indian scripture recognized by literary historians to be among the oldest poetic writings. To the Hindu, however, they are more than ancient scripture, they are “nothing less than the inexpressible truth of which all scriptures are of necessity a pale reflection.”¹⁵ By invoking the Vedas, Thoreau returns us to the “Beginning” of things, to what the transcendentalist might call the unblemished source of Truth within us, to listening “as if for the first time we heard at all.” He goes on to unify infinite remoteness, “that which is furthest from us,” with what may be considered the most intimate part of one’s subjectivity, “the greatest depth within us.” By equating these intellectually opposing concepts, Thoreau succeeds in linking the outer sensory world of waking consciousness with the subjective realm of myth and dream, and it is clear from the words “our only real experience” that he considers the latter reality more real than the former.

Music as Metaphysical Reality

The Transcendentalist writers of New England fostered the belief of the “over-soul,” a reality linking all life in ultimate oneness. According to Emerson, Thoreau’s mentor in his youth, the over-soul is “indefinable and unmeasurable,”¹⁶ yet intimately a part of us as it is “...that Unity...within which every Man’s particular being is contained and made one with all other...”¹⁷ This concept is virtually identical to the Hindu “Brahman,” which is often referred to in the Upanishads as the “Self,” the transcendent Ultimate Reality to be realized by the earnest seeker of Truth.

For Thoreau, music appears to mirror its transcendent reality both by its intangible form and intrinsic charm. Moreover, the question of what music is, is viewed akin to the question of self-knowledge.

There are few things so evanescent and intangible as music; it is like light and heat in physics – still mooted themes. In aesthetics music occupies the same mysterious place as light and electricity in physics. It seems vain to ask ourselves what music is. If we ponder the question, it is soon changed to, What are we? It is everything but itself. It adorns all things and remains hidden itself. It is unexpectedly the light which

colors all the landscape. It is, as it were, the most subtle ether, the most volatile gas. It is a sovereign electuary which enables us to see all things.¹⁸

What did Thoreau “hear” when he imbibed in the seemingly random sounds of the natural world? It undoubtedly was more than the typical admirer of nature hears. We can hardly expect to find it adequately described with words, but the following quote used to preface his discussion on music in *A Week* provides us with a possible answer.

I see, smell, taste, hear, feel, that everlasting Something to which we are all allied, at once our maker, our abode, our destiny, our very Selves; the one historic truth, the most remarkable fact which can become the distinct and uninvited subject of our thought, the actual glory of the universe; the only fact which a human being cannot avoid recognizing, or in some way forget or dispense with.¹⁹

As a favorite melody may linger with us, capturing our streams of thought by its charm, so may the transcendent, “that everlasting Something to which we are all allied,” await us at the depths of life’s most meaningful experiences, to be unmistakably recognized through personal reflection. It is that part of every profound experience that cannot be dispensed with, a glimpse, or rather, motif, peripherally removed from direct sight or hearing, as a faint star is better seen when we glance to its side. It may be that only in such a glimpse can one come to know and genuinely appreciate the sublime meaning of Thoreau’s aesthetic experience.

Conclusion

Thoreau’s view of music was highly individualistic and remarkably perceptive. As a musical layperson, he could recognize the subtle qualities inherent to the experience of sound which the trained musical artist, whose thought is bound by a structured system, often overlooks. Moreover, Thoreau appreciated and shed new light on ancient views of music and poetry. His writings merge sensory experience in an aesthetic oneness that reflects the ideals of transcendentalism. Henry Thoreau certainly would not have fulfilled a concert artist’s definition of a musician; he came closer perhaps to satisfying Plato’s criteria for the “true musician and harmonist.”

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