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Ernst Müller

THE CONCEPT OF ›CLASSIC‹ AS AN INTERNATIONAL MARKER OF EUROPEAN ART MUSIC BETWEEN THE 18TH AND THE 19TH CENTURY

Luca Aversano

This paper deals with the terms ›classic‹ and ›classical‹ in European art music. It assumes an historical-lexical perspective and refers to German, Italian, English and French literary sources in the music field.

Before the last third of the 18th century only a few testimonies of the word ›classical‹ are known in musical writings.¹ The lexical instances have always been detected in contexts referring to rules, canons or patterns for the correct learning of musical composition. For example, in 1648 Heinrich Schütz writes in the preface to his *Geistliche Chormusic*:

»besondern will ich vielmehr alle und jede / an die von allen vornehmsten Componisten gleichsam Canonisirte Italienische und andere / Alte und Newe Classicos Autores hiermit gewiesen haben/als deren fürtreffliche und unvergleichliche Opera zu denenjenigen / die solche absetzen und mit Fleiß sich darinnen umsehen werden; in einem und dem anderen Stylo als ein helles Licht fürleuchten/und auff den rechten Weg zu dem Studio Contrapuncti anführen können.«²

Even from the linguistic-morphological point of view, the connection to the latin-humanistic semantics of the concept is evident. The etymology of the terms ›classic‹/›classical‹ traces back to the substantive *classis*, any one of the five divisions into which Servus Tullius divided the Roman citizenry. In pedagogical parlance the adjective ›classical‹ later assumed the meaning of ›what is taught in school classes‹:

»Lt. *Classis*, ursprünglich ›aufgebot in militärischem sinn‹ erhält durch die von Servius Tullius getroffene einteilung der bürger in sechs gruppen die bed. ›volkklasse‹, sodann ›landheer‹ und ›flotte‹, endlich zu Augustus zeit, auch ›gruppe von knaben, die gemeinsam unterrichtet werden‹. In verschiedenen dieser bed. ist es vom fr. entlehnt worden: 1 aus der bed ›flotte‹ (wohl nur mit bezug auf das Altertum); 2 a aus der bed. ›volksklasse‹, zuerst auch mit bezug auf das alte Rom, dann aber auf moderne verhältnisse übertragen; dabei ist b eine sekundäre verwendung dieser bed. in der naturwissenschaftlichen terminologie. 3 a aus der bed. ›schulklasse‹; b ist daraus übertragen, weil auch die jahresklasse der soldaten aus gleichaltrigen besteht.«³

In the Latin tradition the epithet was therefore associated with authors who, regardless of when they lived, thanks to the excellence of their works had to be studied in school, remaining actual and becoming exemplary. So, at the beginning of the 18th century, classicality in music can be defined as a metahistori-

1 Regarding the history of the terms ›classic‹ and ›classical‹ in Western literatures see René Wellek: »Das Wort und der Begriff «Klassizismus» in der Literaturgeschichte«, in: *Schweizerische Monatshefte* 45 (1965–66), pp. 154–173. On the concept of ›classic‹ according to a different perspective, in relation to other literary, aesthetic and philosophical sources, see Wilhelm Voßkamp: »Klassisch/Klassik/Klassizismus«, in: Karlheinz Barck/Martin Fontius/Dieter Schlenstedt/Burkhard Steinwachs, Friedrich Wolfzettel (ed. by), *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe*, Stuttgart 2010, vol. 3, pp. 289–305.

2 Heinrich Schütz: »Gesammelte Briefe u. Schriften«, ed. by

Erich Hermann Müller von Asow, Regensburg 1931, p. 195.

3 Jacques Derrida: »Glas«, Paris 1974, p. 102 (see also pp. 100–101).

cal concept with a strong pedagogical imprint: in their validity over time, which is independent of any composition-style trends, classical authors are those who assure the perpetuation of a correct grammar of counterpoint (understood here as the technique of putting together voices rather than as a style preference) and offer apprentice composers the best schooling in music composition. Later testimonies, around the middle of the 18th century, confirm the metahistorical character of the attribute and the link to the humanistic tradition: without making any distinctions of style or epoch, classical authors can be Graun, Telemann, C.P.E. Bach, Nichelmann and Händel, diverse composers whose commonality must be found in the excellence of their works.

Thus, from the 16th until the middle of the 18th century, the history of the term ›classical‹ in music seems to register no change. Its employment occurs always in adjectival form and is crystallized in different adaptations of the syntagma *classicus Autor*, e.g. *classici Symphonetae*, *classische Musiker*, *classici scriptores*, etc. This syntagma was, in fact, the only one officially sanctioned. For example, the 1753 entry in Diderot and D'Alambert's *Encyclopédie* reads: »Classique, adj. gramm. Ce mot ne se dit que des auteurs que l'on explique dans les collèges«. ⁴

From the last third of the 18th century onwards, the diffusion of the word ›classical‹ increases, especially in German areas, where the development of neo-humanism promulgates the spread of the word in the literature, and consequently in musical writings. ⁵ At the same time the adjective frees itself from the only substantive-type with which it has, till now, been regularly combined (author, musician, composer, etc.). Some examples: 1779 Forkel names Kirnberger's *Kunst des reinen Satzes* a »gründliches und classisches Werk«; 1784 Hertel writes that Kraus' *Musikalische Poesie* is a »fürtreffliches classisches Werk«; in Gerbers *Lexicon* (1790) Heinichen's *Generalbaßschule* is considered a »klassisches Werk«. ⁶ The sign

of classicality, before only reserved for the creators, is now employed also for the creations. From the formal point of view this is an important novelty: the entry of the expression ›classical work‹ into the literature on music. On the other hand, concerning the semantics, one cannot point out any development in the actual musical use of the word ›classical‹. In the late 18th century, the meanings of excellence, of pedagogical exemplarity and of meta-historical stylistic neutrality still correspond completely to the humanistic tradition. The classical creations mentioned are indeed manual-like works: not musical compositions, but musical treatises and essays with educational aims.

The first evidences of a use of the word referring to musical compositions appears only at the beginning of the 19th century. The reason is probably that in this period the full affirmation of a canonized repertoire in the musical world (ie the idea that one could continue to listen to a piece of music even after its first performance) can secure the musical work a fundamental element of classicality: durability over the time. It is likely that the attribute ›classical‹ was previously reserved for theoretical works for the simple reason that, composed of written words, they could stay alive in the reader's memory much better than musical pieces.

The first example for the expression ›classical music‹ comes from two Italian musicians and publishers, Cianchettini and Sperati, who in 1805 opened in London a firm with the name »Classical Music-Warehouse«. In 1807, courting the amateur market like all music publishers of the time, Cianchettini and Sperati decided to publish Haydn, Mozart and the first three Beethoven's symphonies. They launched a subscription with the following text:

»Cianchettini and Sperati, Publishers and Importers of classical Music, have the honour to acquaint the Nobility, Gentry, and Amateurs of Music, that they have undertaken to publish in Score all the universally admired Symphonies of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. The Names of those celebrated Composers they conceive is more than sufficient to give credit to this invaluable undertaking. [...] The respect that every Amateur of Classical Music must entertain for the Symphonies of these wonderful Masters, persuades the Publishers, that a general anxiety

4 »Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers...«, III, Paris 1753. This *Encyclopédie* entry certainly favored the spread of the syntagma for the whole of Europe (see Paolo Trovato: »Per la storia di «classico»«, in: Patrizia Castelli (Hg.): *L'ideale classico a Ferrara e in Italia nel Rinascimento*, Firenze 1998, p. 125–161: 131).

5 On the concept of Neo-humanism see Herwig Blankerts/Kjeld Matthiessen: »Neuhumanismus«, in: Dieter Lenzen (Ed.), *Pädagogische Grundbegriffe*, Reinbek 2001 (Sixth Edition), vol. 2, pp. 1092–1103.

6 See respectively Johann Nikolaus Forkel: »Musikalisch-kritische Bibliothek«, III, Gotha 1779, p. 193; Johann Wilhelm Hertel: »Selbstbiographie«, Köln 1784, p. 34; Ernst Ludwig

Gerber: »Historisch-biographisches Lexicon der Tonkünstler« (2 volumes), Leipzig 1790, 1792, s. v. *Heinichen*.

to possess a Collection so precious to the Musical World, will afford ample encouragement to a Publication honoured with the immediate Patronage of His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, who has most graciously condescended to sanction it, by accepting the Dedication«. ⁷

Here, for the first time, Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven's symphonies are provided with the epithet ›classical‹, about thirty years earlier than the ›classic triad‹ formula created by Amadeus Wendt⁸ (but without any aesthetic-historical awareness or intention).

It is no fortuity that this important testimony is contained in a publishers' announcement. In the early 19th century most instances of the word ›classical‹ are to be found in press advertisements and catalogues edited by publishing houses or in titles of printed music anthologies. If one considers the brevity of such texts, this is still more surprising. For example, in 1801 Breitkopf & Härtel announced in the *Vossische Zeitung* a print edition of Haydn's *Sieben letzten Worte des Erlösers am Kreuze* in the following way: »Bekanntlich war dieses klassische, längst von jedem Kenner geschätzte Werk, ursprünglich bloß ein großes Instrumentalstück; erst späterhin gab ihm der Verfasser, durch die gänzliche Umarbeitung desselben zugleich für Gesang, die Vollendung, in der es hier zum erstenmal im Druck erscheint«. ⁹

In 1806 Leduc published a *Collection générale des oeuvres classiques* in Paris containing sacred works from composers of different eras, such as Leo (1694–1744), Desprez (1450 ca.–1521), Jommelli (1714–1774), Palestrina (1525 ca.–1594) and Pergolesi (1710–1736). The publication can be seen in the context of an extraordinary development of the music trade in Europe towards the end of the 18th century. In this period, the English, French and German-Austrian publishing houses systematically followed policies of expansion in national and foreign markets. In order to realise their commercial aims they made use of modern promotional techniques to arouse a desire to purchase within their customers. Thus, in the hands of the publishers, classicality became a promotional label. The title of an anthology published in 1762, *Tonstücke für das Klavier, vom Herrn C. P. E. Bach,*

und einigen anderen classischen Musikern, can be considered a precursor element of this development.

Receivers of the advertising language used by publishers were mostly amateurs who bought music editions not in order to learn the correct composition rules, but to play or collect music. In this context, the meaning of pedagogical exemplarity loses importance and eventually atrophies, so that even if Haydn and Mozart could still be proposed as patterns to be imitated, we cannot imagine Cianchettini and Sperati's 1807 usage of ›classical‹ in relation to Beethoven's *Eroica* as intended to designate the work a model of symphonic composition. In fact Beethoven's second symphony was already considered an eccentric work by his contemporaries — a very original and strange composition, which could hardly be understood as the kind of structure to be taught at school:

»Die neueste Sinfonie von Beethoven [die zweite] wurde, ohngeachtet ihrer grossen Schwierigkeiten, zweymal so gegeben, dass man sie ganz nie geniessen konnte. Auch wir finden, wie man von Wien und Berlin bemerkt hat, das Ganze zu lang und Einiges überkünstlich [...] und das Finale halten wir, auch jetzt, nach genauer Bekanntschaft, für allzu bizarr, wild und grell: aber alles das wird durch den gewaltigen Feuergeist, der in diesem kolossalem Produkt wehet, durch den Reichthum an neuen Ideen und die fast durchaus originelle Behandlung derselben, sowie auch durch die Tiefe der Kunstgelehrsamkeit, so weit überwogen, dass man dem Werke das Horoskop stellen kann, es werde bleiben und mit immer neuem Vergnügen gehört werden, wenn tausend eben jetzt gefeyerte Modesachen längst zu Grabe getragen sind«. ¹⁰

The sense of classicality in the early 19th century is no longer the exemplarity of the composition, but its high quality. Even if founded on an original style, this quality gives to the music a durability over time, beyond all variable fashions. In other words, classicality has moved from the ambit of composition to that of performance and reception, changing from a pattern of artistic production to a measure of aesthetic evaluation. The shift is strongly influenced by the entrance of the adjective ›classical‹ into the jargon of publishers' advertising. According to this terminology, the music for sale splits into ›novelties‹ and ›classical works‹. An opposition develops between classical music, with its enduring success on the market, and music of rapid

7 Cit. in Georg Kinsky: »Eine frühe Partitur-Ausgabe von Symphonien Haydns, Mozarts und Beethovens«, in: *Acta Musicologica* 13 (1941), p. 78–84: 80.

8 See note 9.

9 *Vossische Zeitung*, 10.10.1801.

10 *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* 7 (1804), p. 215.

consumption, destined to be easily forgotten. ›Classical‹ are those works which, due to their internationally recognised value, stay alive in the memory of the public and always deserve to be purchased: not as examples for a few composers to learn from, but as pieces which can be played or listened to repeatedly by a large number of music amateurs. Niemetschek, for example, writes in his 1798 Mozart biography that the beauty of Mozart's works isn't exhausted even after frequent performance. According to him, »dieses ist der wahre Probestein des klassischen Werthes«.¹¹

For this reasons, classical works constituted the forté of a publishing house. The origins of the modern semantics of the expression ›classical music‹ can be found in the contrast between classical works and novelties, which today generally means distinguishing classical-music from so-called popular music. In an article by Antonio Ghislanzoni in the *Gazzetta Musicale di Milano* (1867), titled *Musica classica e musica popolare*, the phenomena is particularly evident:

»If classical music is not popular in Italy, it happens for the quite obvious reason that the people, who are not obliged to be deeply versed in literature or in music, live from hand to mouth and ask of books, such as works of music, that they reflect the spirit and the progressive form of their age. [...] To deliver ancient scores from oblivion, to have them performed in the conservatory and also in concerts which the most cultivated class attend is a very laudable thing – but to hope that such musical works can be today so popular as in other ages is an illusion which I cannot share with anybody«.¹²

Without any interruption in its semantic line, the expression ›classical music‹ is used today as it was in the daily language of 19th century, independent of any trait of style or epoch, and with a supernational character. In fact, if we compare authors and compositions

marked with the epithet ›classical‹ in different European countries like Italy, France, England and Germany, we can see that around the middle of the 19th century the repertoire was common to all these countries. A hypothetical council of musical classicism embracing German composers of instrumental music between the XVIII and XIX century (particularly Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven), vocal polyphonists from Palestrina's period, sacred pieces by Stradella, Pergolesi, Händel, operatic music by Gluck, Rossini and others, would have certainly been accepted throughout Europe, at least at that time (the repertoire canon is constantly updated). Each genre had its classical pieces and composers, irrespective of their nationality. That means, in the consciousness of the 19th century, the phenomenon of musical classicism was not limited to the Austro-German area – neither in a linguistic sense nor concerning the music selected. This is a consequence of the fact that the evaluation process which sanctioned the classicality of a work and its entrance into the musical canon was in substance international, as an effect of the internationalization of the music market and the consequent globalization of musical taste in early nineteenth century Europe.¹³ Other meanings attested in musicography – like the identification of a ›classical period‹ with the triad Haydn-Mozart-Beethoven (Wendt, 1836)¹⁴ – enjoyed very limited diffusion, which didn't influence the current semantics of the concept.

Summarizing, from the beginning of the XIX century classicality loses the traditional and generic function of referring to authorized models and achieves a specific musical meaning, though without yet being imprinted with a historic-stylistic mark. This process of linguistic and conceptual specification is strongly supported by the affirmation of an international musical canon and an international musical market, which are both cause and effect of an internationalization of musical taste. Therefore, for some aspects, when we speak about a classical-romantic era of European music, we are talking about a paradox: the cohabitation of two opposite tendencies, the romantic search for national roots in the context of stylistic-compositional research and the international imprint of so-called classical music on public perception, influencing both the markets and public taste.

11 Franz Xaver Niemetschek: »Leben des k.k. Kapellmeisters Wolfgang Gottlieb Mozart«, Prag 1798, pp. 46–47.

12 »Se la musica classica non è popolare in Italia ciò avviene per la ragione abbastanza ovvia che il popolo, il quale non ha nessun obbligo di essere profondamente versato nella letteratura e nella musica, vive alla giornata, e domanda naturalmente e necessariamente ai libri come alle opere musicali lo spirito e la forma progressiva del suo tempo. [...] Rivendicare i vecchi spartiti dall'oblio, farli eseguire nel conservatorio ed anche nei concerti a cui intervenga la classe più colta, è opera lodevolissima – ma sperare che a tali musiche debba arridere oggi giorno la popolarità di altre epoche, è una illusione che non posso dividere con alcuno« *Gazzetta musicale di Milano*, 22 (1867) 26, p. 201–203: 202–203.

13 See Luca Aversano: »Editoria musicale e globalizzazione del gusto all'inizio del XIX secolo«, in: Roberto Illiano, Luca Sala (Hgg.), *Instrumental Music and the Industrial Revolution*, Bologna 2010, pp. 321–328.

14 Johann Amadeus Wendt: »Über den gegenwärtigen Zustand der Musik, besonders in Deutschland, und wie er geworden«, Göttingen 1836, p. 3.