

RANTS

Joseph **Haydn** (1732-1809) on **Musical Rules**: (quoted in a biography by Willi Reich)

“Art is free, and must not be confined by technical fetters. The ear – naturally, the cultured ear – must be the judge, and I feel myself as authorized as anyone else to make up rules. Such artificialities have no value; I should rather someone try to write a truly new minuet.”

Ludwig van **Beethoven** (1770-1827) on **Tempo Markings** (traditionally just one or two words), in a letter to Ignaz von Mosel, Vienna, 1817:

“I am delighted to know that you share my opinion of those headings, inherited from times of musical barbarism, by which we describe the tempo of a movement. What, for example, can be more absurd than ‘allegro’ which, once and for all, means ‘cheerful’? How far removed we often are from this meaning! How often a piece of music expresses the very opposite of its heading! ... We would do well to dispense with headings. The words which describe the character of the piece are a very different matter. These we could not give up; whereas the tempo is really no more than the body, these refer rather to the spirit of the piece.”

Beethoven had already started micro-managing interpretation in his scores. In his (written in 1800) string quartet, Op.18, #6, he added two unusual things: He titled the 4th movement “La Malinconia” (Melancholy). Under the title he wrote “Questo pezzo si deve trattare colla più gran delicatezza” (This piece must be treated with the greatest delicacy.) And under that instruction he gave the tempo marking “Adagio” (technically means “At ease”)

Claude **Debussy** (1862-1918), and Camille **Saint-Saëns** (1835-1921): **Slug-Fest.**

Debussy opined in articles published between 1901 and 1905, through an alter-ego: “Monsieur Croche, Antidilettante”

He and Saint-Saëns loathed each other, and M. Croche said this:

“I am sorry to see how difficult it is to keep one’s respect for an artist who was once filled with enthusiasm and a thirst for pure glory. I hate sentimentality! But I wish I could forget that his name is Camille Saint-Saëns! How is it possible to go so completely wrong?”

Ten years later Saint-Saëns wrote, in a letter to Fauré:

“I advise you to look at the pieces for two pianos, *Noir et blanc* [actually *En blanc et noir*] which M. Debussy has just published. It’s incredible and the door if the Institut must at all costs be barred against a man capable of such atrocities.”

Benedetto **Marcello** (1686 –1739), cellist, composer, and writer or the **Satire II teatro alla moda** (1720) : The Theater A La Mode OR Safe and easy METHOD of

properly composing and producing Italian OPERAS according to modern practice.

“He (the composer) will take care, never to read the entire opera, to avoid getting confused, but will set it line by line ... and if the ... words to the said arias fail to fit the notes felicitously, he will again pester the poet until he is wholly satisfied with them.”

“If the impresario should later complain about the music, the composer will protest that he is unjust in so doing, as the opera contains a third more than the usual number of notes and took almost fifty hours to compose.”

“The composer will arrange that the best arias fall to the prima donna, and if the opera needs cutting, he will not permit the removal of arias or ritornelli, but rather (removal) of entire scenes of recitative, of the bear, of earthquakes, etc.”

“If the second lady should complain that she has fewer notes in her part than the prima donna, he will manage to console her by making the number equal with the aid of passages in the arias, appoggiaturas, graces in good taste, etc., etc., etc.”

Robert **Schumann** (1810-1856): In defense of **Harmony**

Schumann wrote a great deal of music criticism as editor of *the Zeitschrift für Musik*, (Music Magazine) using three pseudonyms: Florestan, Eusebius, and Master Raro.

This is from a letter to Felix Mendelssohn, October, 1845

“What, indeed, does the world in general (many so-called musicians included) understand of pure harmony? There is Wagner, who has just finished another opera. [Tannhäuser] He is certainly a clever fellow, full of crazy ideas and audacious to a degree. Society still raves over *Rienzi*. Yet he cannot write or think out four consecutive bars of beautiful, hardly of good music.”

Charles **Ives** (1874-1954): on **Hypocrisy**

Ives was full of contempt for, and full of rants against those who didn't “get” his music, including his professor at Yale, Horatio Parker. He nicknamed Parker “Rollo” and accused him of writing “nice” “easy chair” music.

“Beauty in music is too often confused with something that lets the ears lie back in an easy chair.”

“Some nice people, whenever they hear the words “Gospel Hymns” or “Stephen Foster”, say “Mercy Me!” and a little high-brow smile creeps over their brow – “Can't you get something better than that in a symphony?” The same nice people, when they go to a properly dressed symphony concert under proper auspices, led by a name with foreign hair, and hear Dvorak's New World Symphony, in which they are told this famous passage was from a negro spiritual, then think that it must be quite proper, even artistic, and say, “How delightful!” But when someone proves to them that the Gospel Hymns are fundamentally responsible for

the negro spirituals, they say, "Ain't it awful!" – "You don't really mean that!" – "Why, only to think!" – "Do tell!" – "I tell you, you don't ever hear Gospel Hymns even mentioned up there to the New England Conservatory."

Igor **Stravinsky** (1882-1971): wrote this **in defense of** Arnold Schoenberg, who created **Serialism** (also known as 12-tone music)

Our vanguard elite, sworn perpetually to outdo itself, expects and requires that music should satisfy the taste for absurd cacophony. ... My position in this regard is exactly the same as it was at the time when I composed the Rite, and when people saw fit to call me a revolutionary. Today, just as in the past, I am on my guard against counterfeit money and take care not to accept it for the true coin of the realm. Cacophony means bad sound, counterfeit merchandise, uncoordinated music that will not stand up under serious criticism. Whatever opinion one may hold about the music of Arnold Schoenberg (to take as example a composer evolving along lines essentially different from mine, both aesthetically and technically), whose works have frequently given rise to violent reactions or ironic smiles – it is impossible for a self-respecting mind equipped with genuine musical culture not to feel that the composer of *Pierrot Lunaire* is fully aware of what he is doing and that he is not trying to deceive anyone. He adopted the musical system that suited his needs and, within this system, he is perfectly consistent with himself, perfectly coherent. One cannot dismiss music that one dislikes by labeling it cacophony."

Gioachino **Rossini** (1792-1868)

Here is an excerpt from one of **Rossini's** letters: (taken from Composers on Music by Sam Morgenstern, pp. 105-6)

The Best Time to Compose an Overture

Wait until the evening before opening night. Nothing primes inspiration more than necessity, whether it be the presence of a copyist waiting for your work or the prodding of an impresario tearing his hair. In my time, all the impresarios in Italy were bald at thirty.

I composed the overture to *Otello* in a little room in the Barbaja palace wherein the baldest and fiercest of directors had forcibly locked me with a lone plate of spaghetti and the threat that I would not be allowed to leave the room alive until I had written the last note.

I wrote the overture to *La Gazza Ladra* the day of its opening in the theater itself, where I was imprisoned by the director and under the surveillance of four stagehands who were instructed to throw my original text through the window, page by page, to the copyists waiting below to transcribe it. In default of pages, they were ordered to throw me out the window bodily.

[I imagine it might actually have taken four stagehands to throw him out a window. He was surely used to eating more than just ONE plate of spaghetti!]

I did better with *The Barber*. I did not compose an overture, but selected for it one which was meant for a semi-serious opera called *Elisabetta*. The public was completely satisfied.

I composed the overture to *Conte Ory* while fishing, with my feet in the water, and in company of Signor Agnado who talked of Spanish finance. The overture for *William Tell* was composed under more or less similar circumstances. And as for *Mosè*, I did not write one.

Haydn: Composers On Music p.69, Ed by Sam Morgenstern, Pantheon Books, 1956 – original: Willi Reich, Joseph Haydn: Leben, Briefe, Schaffen, (Life, Letters, Works) Lucerne, Syovkrt, 1946

Beethoven: Composers On Music p. 91, Ed by Sam Morgenstern, Pantheon Books, 1956 – original: Michael Hamburger, ed. Beethoven: Letters, Journals and Conversations, Pantheon books, NY 1952

Beethoven: String Quartet, Op.18, #6, Ernst Herttrich ed G.Henle Urtext Edition, Munich, 1996

Debussy: Three Classics in the Aesthetic of Music, pp.12-13, Dover publications, 1962 – the original of Monsieur Croche pub by Noel Douglas 1927, translation by B. N. Langdon Davies, Viking Press 1928

1928 Saint-Saëns quote: from the article on Debussy by Roger Nichols in The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, Vol 5, p. 309, section 8: Debussy and the Musical World: MacMillan, 1980,

Marcello: Source Readings in Music History pp. 518-531, compiled by Oliver Strunk, Norton, New York, 1950

Schumann: Letters of Composers, Ed by Gertrude Norman and Miriam Lubell Shrifte, p. 161, Knopf 1927 and after, and Pantheon Books, 1945
The letter to Mendelssohn is also quoted in Composers on Music and the text is different. (but the sentiment is the same!)

Ives: Charles E. Ives Memos, Edited by John Kirkpatrick, Norton, NY, 1972, p. 52

Stravinsky: Composers on Music, p. 450