

Rainer Maria Rilke: To Music:

Music: breathing of statues. Possibly:
stillness in pictures. Speech where speech
ends. Time upright and poised
upon the coastline of our passions.

Feelings for whom? You are the transformation
of all feeling into – what? . . . audible landscape.
You stranger: music. Heart's space
that's outgrown us. Innermost us
which it's scaled, surmounted, gone beyond
into holiest absence:
where what's within surrounds us
the way the most skillful horizon does,
or the other side of the air,
pure,
immense,
no longer lived in.

---- translated by William H. Gass

I listen to a lot of music. A lot. At times I wonder why music appeals to me so much, why I find myself deeply connected to it, why sometimes I am deeply moved by it.

Why? I have discovered many answers to my questions in a short poem by Rainer Maria Rilke.

There is so much about Rainer Maria Rilke for me to dislike. Sponger on women. Ultra-esthete. Self-centered. So Romantic that he was almost a caricature of himself. [I've written about Rilke before, about his magisterial "[Ninth Duino Elegy](#)."]]

Yet despite what I dislike about Rilke his poetry moves me deeply, speaks to me, asks me to reconsider myself and the world I live in. Let me begin writing on this poem about music by looking briefly at a poem that requires far more consideration than I am going to give it, a poem that I consider to be among the very greatest poems ever written. It is about a piece of sculpture – not even life

itself, not even art in its perfection since the sculpture is but a fragment of an ancient Greek piece, disfigured, defaced. But what a poem! A sonnet!

Archaic Torso of Apollo

(translated by Stephen Mitchell)

We cannot know his legendary head
with eyes like ripening fruit. And yet his torso
is still suffused with brilliance from inside,
like a lamp, in which his gaze, now turned to low,

gleams in all its power. Otherwise
the curved breast could not dazzle you so, nor could
a smile run through the placid hips and thighs
to that dark center where procreation flared.

Otherwise this stone would seem defaced
beneath the translucent cascade of the shoulders
and would not glisten like a wild beast's fur:

would not, from all the borders of itself,
burst like a star: for here there is no place
that does not see you. You must change your life.

I should go through the poem with you, it is so wonderful and rich. But I won't. I will merely point out that in the poem the poet looks at an old Greek sculpture and sees it looking at him, although through time the head has been lost, and the arms, and the legs. Only a torso. But its sexuality, its acute bodiliness – if I may coin a term – makes him feel deficient by comparison. It has no eyes, yet can see him; it has an animal magnetism: yes, a sexuality (“that dark center where procreation flared”) that makes him, the observer, realize he lacks the vibrancy and bodiliness and acute awareness of sensual excitement that lights up the stone sculpture before him. It is lit, as if from within. And yet it is a piece of rock.

Then the stunning final phrase: “You must change your life.” Wow.

Rilke is standing before a piece of ruined sculpture and feels inadequate by comparison to the piece of chiseled stone: it has more life, more sexuality, more light (rock!) than he does. Of course he must change his life.

Rilke was all of the things I have accused him of: sponger, narcissist, wearying esthete. But he is redeemed by two things. One, he could use words extraordinarily. In this sense, he was a poet almost beyond imagining. But he

brought to his poems something else: a consciousness so attuned to itself, and to the world his consciousness 'lived' in, that I always find myself learning. Not learning about Rilke, but about myself, about what it means that I am a human being endowed with perceptions and consciousness. I learn from almost every one of his poems.

Which brings us to this poem about music. As with all great poems, there are things which go beyond my understanding. But then, why would we re-read poems if we could get all that they contain on a first reading, or second, or third? Even in the simplest of great poems there is always more, always something that on a further reading can and will surprise us.

That's especially true of this poem. So for once I will skip things: to be specific, I will ignore its artistry. It is about music, and it tells us things about music, and about ourselves, that we do not know, or had forgotten, or that stand just beyond our realization.

Music: breathing of statues. Possibly:
stillness in pictures. Speech where speech
ends. Time upright and poised
upon the coastline of our passions.

That first phrase alerts us. How can statues, which are made of inanimate rock (as we saw from the poem I referred to earlier), how can statues breathe? Music is something that logic cannot comprehend. It 'lives' where we expect something that is not alive, since it is a series of sounds and is not an organism, and does not have a beating heart. It talks to us ("speech where speech ends") but not in words.

We might respond to Rilke by saying that sometimes there are words that join together with music as in songs and arias. But even in those instances the music goes beyond the words. In instrumental music we have sounds without words. Such music is in fact where speech has ended and yet expression continues.

Music, this expression which speaks to us yet is not living, is outside of the realm of organisms. It partakes of a special 'being,' as with the "stillness of pictures," which we recognize also speak to us but from a static place where no sounds occur. Think, here, for the poem is compressed, of standing before a great painting by, say Rembrandt or Matisse, and feeling moved in our own personal time by this unwavering, unchanging patch of paint upon canvas. Yes, this is "speech where speech ends." The painting is not 'in time' for it is static, always there and always the same, and yet it speaks to us as we live in our own individual time.

This special speech exists in time, but in a special kind of time. When the music is happening, other time seems elsewhere; there is only the ‘uprightness’ of musical time. (Maybe I have got this wrong?) Music makes its own time (measures, tempo) which our own lives accord with, but which is not the same as the time we live with.

I have been on a long trip through a history of Western classical music. Its author, Richard Taruskin, whose work I have referred to previously writes of the librettist for opera Metastasio, that he is the origin of the distinction between *recitative* and *aria*. In opera, *recitative*, which is sung to minimal musical accompaniment, is what moves the plot and its characters forward. It exists in the time we recognize, moving from past through the present into the future. *Aria* expresses the inner life of the character. It exists in inner time, which has no clocks, no movement. It presents us with emotion, which is somehow not temporal, though it does have beginnings and endings. Still, emotion is marked not by duration but by intensity. It exists in what we might call ‘lyric time.’

Music, Rilke claims, lives on the edges of our passions. We feel our way into music, because music – a series of ordered sounds – has to do with how we feel. It is on the “coastline of our passions” not because it is without adequate passion, but because it is the boundary we cross as we move into the continent that is our inner self, that world of feelings we live and breathe in.

Then Rilke asks, remarkably,

Feelings for whom? You are the transformation
of all feeling into – what? . . . audible landscape.

We all know that music is about, or stimulates, feelings. But, asks Rilke, for whom? And he does not answer, but gives us a formulation that is so right, so apt, so penetrating, that each time I encounter the line I am in awe. Music transforms feelings into landscape, landscape we do not see but hear, landscape we can live in and with, but which is entirely aural. (Modern parlance speaks, not unrightly, of ‘soundscapes.’)

Rilke is right, remarkably so. When we listen to music, we hear our feelings transformed into something that we encounter, something made audible. The internal becomes the external. Feeling is transformed into sound, so that it has substance – sound waves – and not just . . . well, whatever we sense within us.

Yet lest we leap too quickly into understanding, Rilke reminds us that music is always a stranger. In the German, the ‘you’ of this phrase is ‘*du*,’ the familiar form of you, used for family and lovers. We are deeply connected to music, yet since it is outside us and apart from us it is always strange, and a stranger.

You stranger: music. Heart’s space

that's outgrown us. Innermost us
which it's scaled, surmounted, gone beyond
into holiest absence:

Our emotions, our feelings, are transformed into something different and *outside*. What is innermost in us – no one but Rilke can write about something as sentimental as “heart’s space” and yet not fall into sentimentality – is outside us, larger than we are. It has “outgrown” the self which feels, it is ‘out there,’ and yet it is still ours in that it emanates from us and speaks to us. (Remember that just a few short lines before, he wrote of “speech where speech ends”?)

Our innermost feelings, our “heart’s space” is made external in music. The tones and rhythms and melodies of music climb the heights within us (“scaled¹”) and go beyond them (“surmounted”) and in going outside us, into music and not remaining in the inner life, our feelings enter into “holiest absence.” Music comes from us, from the deepest part of our being, and yet is external, in a place that is both holy and also absent. It is no longer within us. Whew. This is complicated stuff, and yet I think Rilke is right. Music comes from within us but what is within us is made external, and so we are no longer in it.

We are back to audible landscape. What was and is within us is outside us, and we can hear it, it surrounds us. Yet it is on the outside.

where what's within surrounds us
the way the most skillful horizon does,

I know this sounds esthetic, perhaps labored, mystical even, maybe the way we imagine stoned hippies talk. But it is the marvel of Rilke that he pulls this off. We all know that our deepest needs and longings are expressed in music; we all know we respond to music not only because it contains what is within us, but because it goes beyond ourselves. And sometimes, maybe sometimes, we know that since music is external to us and surrounds us it is, well, *strange*. “You stranger: music.”

Music exists outside us. It resounds in the air, and yet it comes, despite its origin within our inmost selves, from ‘outside.’ [Wallace Stevens, considering a new day dawning, with both the sun rising above the horizon and the birds singing as day emerges, says in one of his finest poems, “Not Ideas About the Thing but

¹ Fine work by the translator here. Gass puns on ‘scaled,’ relating the climbing to heights to the practice of composing music within a scale, an organized series of notes. He is picking up on something that has to do with the text as a whole, not with the specific word – ‘surmounted’ – that Rilke uses.

the Thing Itself,” that the sun and the birds “would have been outside.” This poem will be the subject of my next mailing.] There is something beyond ourselves, beyond our subjectivity. Music transforms the subjective into, well, the objective world. Our feelings are transformed into measured pitches and ordered sounds.
Outside.

or the other side of the air,
pure,
immense,
no longer lived in.

It is an external, audible landscape, but it is also – to steal a phrase from the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas – otherwise than being. It is quite possibly ‘the other side of the air.’ Stranger to us, music is both “immense” and something that, being outside us, exists apart, “no longer lived in.”

When we listen to music, it is pure, and we feel pure. It is immense and we feel like we have been taken outside of our meager selves and been enlarged. And being external, being outside us even as it “surrounds us,” we cannot live in it. We think we can, but we do not consider it with as focused a gaze as Rilke. Music is, if we are fully honest, not our home.

What a surprise! Music is not comfortable, not our habitable world. It is an esthetic object, beautiful, made of sounds, connected to us perhaps but not really ours.

Audible landscape, always strange, the speech of our hearts made external, pure – and not ours any longer now that it is in the realm of beautiful objects.
Music.

I listened today, on the radio, to one of Beethoven’s late string quartets. Stick with me: I know if I heard that phrase at one point in my life, I would say, ‘Omygod, an intellectual snob is coming up on me: late Beethoven indeed.’ Well, late Beethoven is peerless, even if when younger I was resistant to this point of view. Yes, he is talked about by musical snobs. But he is also, in his own fashion, the height of what human beings can be and he made the very best that human beings can make.

So why am I going on about Beethoven? Because the late quartet seemed to me an instance of what Rilke wrote about. And then I went on to listen to my current favorite music, the string quartets of Dmitri Shostakovich. (Don’t get me started. Snob territory once again, though Shostakovich is beyond fabulous.)

To answer my question: why bring up Beethoven? Because I think when I sat in a chair and listened to this quartet I recognized that Rilke is writing about the very best of music. For me it is classical music; for those of you who are reading this, it may be jazz or rock or rap. But the point is, not all music emanates from our heart's space, and not all music surrounds us and goes beyond us and is then out there, from a human source but not somewhere we can live in. Only the best music. That, that, is what Rilke is writing about.

I didn't realize it until I heard Beethoven's quartet. It came from the deepest of inner spaces, and yet was finally outside, strange, "no longer lived in." That there can be such places, such audible landscapes, and that we have the opportunity and capacity to encounter them, is a miracle of human existence.

Here's the poem as Rilke wrote it, in German, and another translation into English:

Rilke: An Die Musik

Musik: Atem der Statuen. Vielleicht:
Stille der Bilder. Du Sprache wo Sprachen
enden. Du Zeit
die senkrecht steht auf der Richtung
vergehender Herzen.

Gefühle zu wem? O du der Gefühle
Wandlung in was?— in hörbare Landschaft.
Du Fremde: Musik. Du uns entwachsener
Herzraum. Innigstes unser,
das, uns übersteigend, hinausdrängt,—
heiliger Abschied:
da uns das Innre umsteht
als geübteste Ferne, als andre
Seite der Luft:
rein,
riesig
nicht mehr bewohnbar.

To Music (Translated by Stephen Mitchell)

Music: breathing of statues. Perhaps:
silence of paintings. You language where all language
ends. You time
standing vertically on the motion of mortal hearts.

Feelings for whom? O you the transformation
of feelings into what?--: into audible landscape.
You stranger: music. You heart-space
grown out of us. The deepest space in us,
which, rising above us, forces its way out,--
holy departure:
when the innermost point in us stands
outside, as the most practiced distance, as the other
side of the air:
pure,
boundless,
no longer habitable.