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THREE BARS BY WITTGENSTEIN

Ludwig Wittgenstein, one of the greatest philosophers of the 20th century, in his diary (April 28, 1930): “I often think: the highest thing I’d wish to achieve is composing a melody. Or I’m amazed that when wishing to do so, a melody has never actually occurred to me. But then I have to say to myself that it is probably impossible that I will ever compose a melody, as I lack some or perhaps all of what it takes to do so. It floats before me as a lofty ideal as I would then be able to more or less sum up my life; and present it, as it were, crystallized out. It would perhaps be only a small, poor crystal, but still a crystal.”

In November 2003, a few bars of music composed by Ludwig Wittgenstein had their world premiere in Emmanuel College, Cambridge. The fragment was discovered by Dr Michael Nedo, director of the Wittgenstein Institute at Cambridge, in a Wittgenstein notebook of 1931. – These bars, then, were written about a year after the diary note quoted above.

Might this be Wittgenstein’s crystal? – What could that mean, a crystal that sums up your life? Can one sum up one’s life in a melody? How do we use language then? What sort of image is this?

Wittgenstein’s note, below the fragment: “That must be the end of a theme which I do not know. It occurred to me today as I was thinking about my work in philosophy & said to myself: ‘I destroy, I destroy, I destroy—’.”

Curious coincidence: Nietzsche, too, wrote the end of a musical piece, a piano piece called *Schluss eines Klavierstücks*. – “Is there some sort of connection between philosophers and the endings of musical compositions?”

Why should we make a fuss about three bars of music by Wittgenstein? – You could say: “Wittgenstein is an idol”. The philosopher as an idol – isn’t there something odd about that? Can people no longer think for themselves? Or don’t they want to? Isn’t studying all notes, letters, drawings, musical fragments, etc., that we can lay our hands on, a superfluous cult? What motives are hidden behind our curiosity? – One is inclined to think: “this is voyeurism”.

When I look into myself I have to confess that I, too, experience a certain fascination. Wittgenstein’s fragment is a curious case. “Schau!”, said Wittgenstein, *look and see* how the language is used. How does he use musical notes? – And does Wittgenstein’s accompanying comment add anything?

Four bars, the commentators say, but I see only three. They correspond to the three separate segments of the fragment. This shouldn’t surprise us, as musical themes are often like that. – Think of the beginning of Mozart’s 40th symphony or the opening bars of the Kyrie from Bach’s B Minor Mass.

Musical themes often start with an idea, a motif, which is then more or less repeated, perhaps at a different pitch. – Then, the composer repeats the motif again, this time altering its shape, so that the music gets a chance to develop. He may for instance change the melody, but retain the rhythmical structure. We might call this rhythm imitation, analogous to sound imitation in poetry. – Consider this technique as part of the grammar of music.

Wittgenstein's opening motif is likewise repeated, but the second time it is resolved differently. This sounds like an answer to the opening motif. – “But why do we experience this as an answer?” Well, something comes to rest.

The third segment, however, *doesn't* show a relationship with the opening motif, neither melodically nor rhythmically. There is no “family resemblance” here. Wittgenstein transgresses the musical grammar. – It consists of a new musical idea which has to be repeated four times. Wittgenstein seems to be the composer with the hammer here. – Why do the words “I destroy, I destroy, I destroy?” now come to mind?

“Ende eines Themas, das ich nicht weiss.” But I hear *the beginning* of a theme! “Why doesn't it sound like an ending to me?” – Maybe it's this: the dotted half note at the start of the first motif raises some sort of musical expectation, and is followed by a rising motif that ends in the dominant of the key of A minor. This in turn raises another expectation. The closing notes are even harmonically supported. – Have I now said something about the essence of an opening theme? What went on in my mind as I did so?

The composer Anthony Powers – who has set fragments of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* to music – says that the fragment appears to be the continuation of an incomplete sentence. As if Wittgenstein had set out to express something and, failing to find the appropriate words, turned to music. – Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must write a melody. Can music be a substitute for language? Well, didn't I say just now: “the repetition of the final idea brings to mind the words ‘I destroy, I destroy, I destroy’”? Or do we only have an instance of a rhythmical family resemblance here? – Yet I hear no *continuation* in the fragment.

This repeated motif sounds like a rhythm which has to be hammered home. Rather like children do when they memorize words. – “Is that what the end of a theme sounds like?” And why shouldn't it?

Another riddle: the time. The last bar seems to suggest four-four time. But what about the first two bars? If I count correctly, they are in ten-four time, a time signature which is never really used. Like a sentence which is perfectly correct, yet does not fit into the language. – Is this another breach of the musical grammar? Or didn't Wittgenstein know how to score time and rhythm? – I *know* that scoring rhythm and time is a distinct task requiring specific knowledge and skills.

A final notational puzzle: the triplet signs. The figure three over a group of three notes indicates that they are to be performed in the time of, for instance, two or four notes. But what could the figure three under a dotted half note or a

rest mean? I don't see any options here. What rule does Wittgenstein follow here? – You could say: “he doesn't follow any rule”.

To sum up one's life crystallized out in a melody. – It reminds one of inscriptions on tombstones like: “Her life was caring”. – Wittgenstein's melody starts yearning, as a passionate *sigh*. As an indication of the piece's character, Wittgenstein has written *leidenschaftlich* above the score. But in the final section all passion seems to be forcefully suppressed. – So might Wittgenstein in this fragment have presented his life “crystallized out” after all?

Translation: Hans Peterse

Lebensgefühl

leidenschaftlich

Das war das Ende des Themas, das ich nicht mehr. Es fiel mir heute ein als ich über meine Arbeit in der Philosophie nachdachte & mich vorsopte: "destroy, destroy, destroy"