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ON THE DIVIDE: A CLASSICIST/MUSICIAN WHO REFUSED TO GROW UP

ABSTRACT: *This paper had its origins at the 2010 Classical Association of the Atlantic States meetings in Newark. For a panel on music and the classics I was slated to offer “The Well-Tempered Clavier: Play, Musical and Otherwise,” a lecture-recital that features music by Ives, Cowell, Cage, and Satie but that is really about the centrality of play and playfulness in creative endeavor of any sort. When it proved impossible to find the two pianos required for this performance the organizer, Judith Hallett, agreed that an alternative might be for me to speak about the interplay between music and classics in my own career. The following paper, a playful backward glance that might perhaps be called “A Well-Tempered Classicist,” is the result.**

I. On Divides—And Not Growing Up

In my 2008 book *On the Divide* I explored Willa Cather’s lifelong schism between ascetic quest for the “Kingdom of Art” and worldly pursuit of recognition, success, and higher royalty checks.¹ My own divide came to the fore in 1953, when I realized that I wanted both to pursue classics at Swarthmore College and to continue serious piano study. Swarthmore initially resisted the idea—one professor (not in classics) dubbed piano-playing banausic (my first contact with that demeaning word), and our family doctor told me to concentrate on my B.A. and, when I felt the need, to “go emote on the piano” (a suggestion that sounded vaguely indecent). Eventually Swarthmore agreed that I might extend my college years from four to five, thus providing time for piano study with Edward Steuermann in Philadelphia, and when I moved to Princeton in 1958 it was with similar intentions—to take four years instead of three for the Ph.D. in classics so as to continue my studies with Steuermann. The Princeton classics department winked at the piano part of this plan so long as they didn’t see it, but after my third year, the head of the foundation that was generously funding my graduate study summoned me to his office. “David,” he said, “it’s time you grew up.” I suggested that I was already doing so—married, with a son, and dissertation plans in place at Princeton. His response: “Mature people make decisions.” “Ah,” I said, “it’s the music, isn’t it?” “Yes,” he responded, and told me to get the dissertation done—one more year was all the funding I’d get, given the time I’d already squandered. A year later I wrote him that I’d finished the degree but cheekily added that I hadn’t yet grown up: Carleton College had given me a job teaching half-time each in classics and music, a boon that would shape my teaching, writing, performing, and living—and spawn whatever growing up I’d manage to do.

* My warm thanks to *CW* for publishing a piece that is both more personal and less scholarly than one expects to find in this journal.

¹ *On the Divide: The Many Lives of Willa Cather* (Lincoln, Neb., 2008).

II. Conversations across the Divide

During my Princeton years ring composition was much in the air. Cedric Whitman had just published his *Homer and the Heroic Tradition*, in which ring composition looms large in relationships he found throughout the *Iliad*—books 1 and 24, 2 and 23, 3 and 22, 9 and 16, etc., with the turning point coming in the central books. In his Princeton seminars George Duckworth frequently discussed similar structures in Vergil and Horace, in the latter especially with *Odes* 1–3, where he stressed the balance between the outside poems of the collection: 1.1 and 3.30, both about Horace’s poetic ambitions, both—and they alone—in the First Asclepiadean; 1.2 and 3.29, both large and programmatic, both featuring flooding rivers and sea; the dangers of Vergil’s sea voyage in 1.3 picked up in Europa’s bullish ride across the waves in 3.27 and Horace’s imagined sea jaunt at the end of 3.29. And in 1957 Walter Ludwig had shown that the tight-knit group 2.1–12 lies at the precise center of *Odes* 1–3 and that its ringed poems frame the closely related central poems, 2.6–7, which serve as fulcrum for the whole collection.²

During these same years I was learning and starting to perform Beethoven’s longest piano piece, *33 Variations on a Waltz by Diabelli*, where I soon noted features that recalled what we had been studying in Homer and Horace: links between its outside units, with Diabelli’s opening waltz balanced by the ethereal minuet with which Beethoven ends, the march that is the first variation by the double fugue that is in the penultimate position, the close-knit variations 2–4 by the similarly related 29–31; and emphasizing the overall concentricity, two variations at the exact center, 16–17, so closely linked that they are played without break—the one time this happens in the piece, and a striking counterpart to Horace’s 2.6–7, also at the precise center of *Odes* 1–3.³

This analysis was new to Steuermann, who had played the *Diabelli* for decades, and it not only informed my thinking about the piece but also suggested new ideas about Homer and Horace, as well as more general insights as to how structures of this sort lend unity and cohesion to large works that consist of potentially centrifugal materials.

The *Iliad* and *Odes* 1–3 are clearly of this ilk; so are the *Diabelli Variations*. In many such sets, including Beethoven’s own, most variations relate seamlessly to each other and to the theme, but in the *Diabelli*, most are discrete and independent, their disparities highlighted by jarring juxtapositions (probably Beethoven’s ironic response to Diabelli’s waltz, which he dubbed a *schüsterfleck*, a cobbler’s patchwork of ill-related musical ideas). The miracle is that Beethoven’s own seeming patchwork exudes so powerful an aura

² W. Ludwig, “Zu Horaz, C. 2, 1–12,” *Hermes* 85 (1957) 336–45.

³ See “The Structure of Beethoven’s *Diabelli Variations*, op. 120,” *Music Review* 21 (1970) 295–301; “The Structure of Beethoven’s *Diabelli Variations*, op. 120—Again,” *Music Review* 52 (1991) 294–98.

of cohesion. Its larger symmetrical organization is one source of this unity, but equally important is the way Beethoven weaves the diverse musical ideas of Diabelli's waltz into his variations, building this variation around one motif, that around another, in some variations superimposing Diabelli's motifs upon each other, in still others rewriting Diabelli's disjointed materials so as to wrest unity out of disparity. We scarcely notice these motific manipulations as we listen to the piece, but they create a pervasive, inwoven cohesion that is the more effective for working on us subconsciously.

Just as the ring composition I'd encountered in classics had, at the macrocosmic level, catalyzed a new analysis of the *Diabelli Variations*, so Beethoven's handling of Diabelli's musical motifs now pointed the way at the microcosmic level as, under the foundation's shotgun, I began a dissertation on Horace *Odes* 4. Here was a collection long castigated as a *schüsterfleck* cobbled together from large national odes written in the teens at Augustus' behest and small earlier poems that Horace had set aside.⁴ I soon realized that a series of recurrent motifs—rivers, birds and bees, gifts and commerce, fire, trees, etc.—appear in poem after poem, varied and layered in ways strikingly similar to Beethoven's in the *Diabelli*. Moreover, just as Beethoven, always the reviser, tightened his web of motifs over the several years he worked on the *Diabelli*, so Horace, as he wrote and rewrote the fifteen poems of book 4 during the years after the *Carmen Saeculare*, must also have reworked his motific threads into an ever more cohesive tapestry.⁵

The *Diabelli Variations* also enriched my work in classics in another and more important way. For despite its motific continuities and symmetrical structure, the work comes across in performance as a vast and even terrifying journey, one that leaves listeners feeling they have crossed over to a new place, that the world will never be the same again. Both hearing and playing it brought home the necessity of seeing it and other such works as performances that unfold over time, as adventures, as ongoing narratives. This experience permanently changed my approach to both the *Iliad* and Horace's *Odes*, works that, like the *Diabelli*, are to be performed, to take listeners on aural journeys across time. I still encouraged students to study the *Iliad's* structural balances, but my emphasis moved toward how this structure undergirds the poem's vast and scarring crossing. And three post-*Diabelli* titles suggest my similar change of focus with Horace: "From Separation to Song: Horace *Odes* IV," "The Downward Momentum of Horace's *Epodes*," and *Horace's Poetic Journey*.⁶

⁴ See, e.g., C. M. Bowra, "Horace, *Odes* IV.12," *CR* 42 (1928) 167: "But when he had to gather his materials at the imperial command for a fourth book, Horace unlocked his drawers and produced his more trivial and temporary compositions. . . ."

⁵ See D. Porter, "The Recurrent Motifs of Horace, *Carmina* IV," *HSCP* 79 (1975) 189–228. On the evolution of the *Diabelli Variations* over their several years of composition, see esp. W. Kinderman, *Beethoven's Diabelli Variations* (Oxford 1987).

⁶ *ICS* 12 (1987) 97–119 and 20 (1995) 107–30; *Horace's Poetic Journey* (Princeton 1987).

III. On Not Getting It Right

The interplay I describe extended well beyond Homer, Horace, and the *Diabelli Variations*: to ring composition in John Cage's lengthy *Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano*, with—again!—two linked interludes at dead center of the twenty-piece set;⁷ to motific variation and recurrence linking the twenty-one miniatures of Erik Satie's *Sports et Divertissements*;⁸ and to thinking about Greek drama in entirely new ways thanks to what the *Diabelli* had taught me about the gulf between analysis and performance. And then there was that conversation between myth and Charles Ives.

My first assignment when I arrived at Carleton in 1962 was to create a new course on classical mythology. There was no prior syllabus to draw on; I'd last studied myth in the fifth grade; my only prior teaching had been giving private piano lessons—and here I was lecturing to seventy-two students. No wonder my focus that year was on “getting it right”: I packed lectures with names and genealogies, larded exams with objective questions, and probably suggested to students that the road to mythological paradise led through H. J. Rose's *Handbook of Greek Mythology*.

We may have gotten the myths right, but I certainly got the course wrong. Twelve students wisely escaped during the drop-add period; sixty slogged on but took revenge by warning their friends off the course. Enrollment plummeted from seventy-two in 1962 to twenty-four in 1963, some of whom told me they were there only because mine was the one class still open. In hopes of livening things up, I added some contemporary authors who had reworked Greek myth, and one day after a class on Sartre's *Flies* I mentioned in passing that if any students were interested in crafting their own contemporary versions of myth, I'd be happy to look them over. To my surprise, twelve students—half the class—took me up on the offer, even though it carried no credit. What immediately caught my attention as the results trickled in was that though these original mythological pieces ranged from awkward to brilliant, every one tapped into myth in ways that went far beyond H. J. Rose: instead of getting the myths “right,” students had, at the risk of getting them “wrong,” made them their own.⁹

My musical activities were undergoing a similar change. Edward Steuermann, pioneering associate of Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern, always emphasized that music in performance must be fresh, evolving, individual, with the unchanging score the catalyst for ever-new interpretations: “Is not music,” he once wrote, “the great music, so much alive *because* it was enclosed in cold signs on paper, to be

⁷ See D. Porter, “Reflective Symmetry in Literature and Music,” *Perspectives of New Music* 8 (1970) 118.

⁸ See D. Porter, “Recurrent Motifs in Erik Satie's *Sports et Divertissements*,” *Music Review* 39 (1978) 227–30.

⁹ The approach has yielded some remarkable results over the years. For three recent examples, see D. Porter, “Troubling the Familiar into New Life: Some Thoughts on Teaching Mythology,” *CW* 99 (2006) 436–38.

brought back to life again and again like the grain in the earth?"¹⁰ That was not, however, how things felt in his studio. I would play, and suddenly—often before I'd finished—he'd have leapt from his chair and run to the other piano: "No, no," he'd say, "this is how it must go"; or, worse, "this is how I play it." His way always sounded better than mine and was often revelatory both pianistically and interpretively, so I easily fell into the habit of trying "to get it right" for the next lesson. The unintended consequence was to reinforce my first teacher's mantra: "You must be able to play it perfectly even if the chandelier falls down."

The antidote to this constraining and anxious-making mindset came in 1965, when I began learning Charles Ives' monumental second piano sonata, subtitled "Concord, Mass., 1840–1860." Here was a piece where at one point Ives suggests that a certain passage may sound better played with the fists than with the fingers, in another that the tempo should be "as the weather vane on the old red barn may direct"; where the final movement, "Thoreau," ends with a flute solo—if a flutist happens to be available; and where the first movement, "Emerson," exists in multiple versions because Ives felt that to choose any one final version would trammel a spirit that by its very nature must remain always free to evolve and change. As I began performing the *Concord Sonata*, I realized that the one way *not* to play it was to try to "get it right" (even were that possible). Far more important than getting all the notes every performance was conveying that spirit of adventure, of boundless possibility, of spiritual exploration that was at its heart.¹¹

I could not miss the complementarity of what was happening at the piano and in the myth class—indeed, a passage about myth from Pavese's *Dialogues with Leucó* captured perfectly the freshness that Ives sought for each performance of his music:

What is more acutely disturbing than to see familiar stories troubled into new life? . . . The surest, and the quickest, way for us to arouse the sense of wonder is to stare, unafraid, at a single object. Suddenly—miraculously—it will look like something we have never seen before.¹²

This spirit soon began to inform how I taught myth, how I played the piano—and a great deal more. In myth, the "original piece" now became a regular assignment, as did each student's evolving definition/description of myth itself. In class I now aimed to present alternatives, raise questions, oblige students to find their own way, efforts reinforced by open-ended exams that sought not right answers but

¹⁰ C. Steuermann, D. Porter, and G. Schuller, eds., *The Not Quite Innocent Bystander. Writings of Edward Steuermann* (Lincoln, Neb., 1989) 102.

¹¹ I tried to suggest the transformative nature of my initial encounter with Ives and the *Concord Sonata* in "I Struck the Board and Play'd," *Carleton Miscellany* 8.2 (1967) 80–95.

¹² Foreword to his *Dialogues with Leucó* (Ann Arbor 1965).

students' discovery and articulation of their own answers; in place of one lecture each week was an afternoon of discussion sections, each on a different topic—myth in the contemporary theater and/or novel; myth in art; myth in opera; “a modicum of Greek” (a crash-course that gave students by the end of the term some feel for the poetry of the *Odyssey*). In practice, those long Wednesday afternoons felt a bit like confronting the Hydra, but both the format and its results underscored myth's infinite capacity for variation and regeneration.

In turn, trying to play Ives with the freedom he demanded inevitably changed one's approach to other composers. Would the Mozart so famed as an improviser always have played his pieces—or wanted them played—the same way? Would the Beethoven who had so exploited the sharp contrarities of Diabelli's waltz have limited the performance of his *Appassionata* to one “right way”? Wasn't the model rather what people said of Liszt, that hearing him play Beethoven was like hearing the sonatas created anew each time? This last touches on a concern that what I've been describing can undermine discipline and research, can open the door to neglect of hard facts—or of the composer's score. But the reason Liszt could play Beethoven with such freedom was that his mastery of both the score and the piano was so complete. Similarly, the student who can effectively make a myth her or his own is the one who has really sought out and explored its soul, and the great teachers and scholars are those who know their material so well that they can “trouble the familiar into new life.”¹³

IV. Play—And Second Childhood

Ives, whose *Concord Sonata* at one point requires the pianist to use a two-by-four 14¾ inches long, led to Henry Cowell, who requires arms as well as fingers on the keyboard; to John Cage, who in *Sonatas and Interludes* turns the piano into a gamelan by the insertion of some eighty objects between its strings; and to George Crumb, who has the pianist constantly playing directly on the piano's strings and frame. Living with these at times zany experiments, and with the puck-like humor of John Cage and Erik Satie, neither of whom ever quite grew up, can't help sharpen one's response to the ubiquitous playfulness of Horace—think of the surprise ending of *Epode* 2, of his sardonic portrait of Pyrrha in *Odes* 1.5, or of that rapsallion *puer* with whom he identifies both his book and himself in the final poem of *Epistles* 1. And much the same is true for Homer—think of the satirical cuts of the gods in both poems (e.g., Hera's seduction of Zeus in *Iliad* 14, the Ares/Aphrodite/Hephaestus boudoir scene in *Odyssey* 8), or of the layers of fictional multiplicity into which Odysseus—and his playful creator—lure us in the *Odyssey*.

¹³ See D. Porter, “*Metamorphoses* and Metamorphosis: a Brief Response,” *AJP* 124 (2003) 473–76.

Of my thirteen years as a college president I will say only that a spirit of play and the willingness to take chances—and to get it wrong—were essential. For Skidmore College to offer, and me to accept, a job for which I was about as prepared as I'd been for that myth class were acts as chancy as John Cage's music. (When at my departure I reminded the board of the risk they'd taken, the chair said, "Yes, David, it's turned out better than we thought it might.") That both Skidmore and I survived owes much to our recognizing that this institution had originated in an act of heady daring, that this same spirit of Ivesian adventure had shaped its history, and that our best hopes for its future lay in building upon that youthful and slightly quirky heritage. As for play, most students and alums know one thing about my Skidmore tenure: "Oh, you're the president who was always making those dreadful puns."

That job was fascinating and fun, but it cost me thirteen years of teaching which, in my second childhood, I am now trying to recover—2010–11 is the twelfth. The same blithe derring-do that lured me to give administration a whirl has led in recent years to teaching and writing about Virginia Woolf and Willa Cather, both of whom inhabited their own divides.¹⁴ In doing so I've been again reminded that living on the divide comes at a cost. As both classicist and musician I have indeed never fully "grown up," never mastered the repertoire of materials and skills in either field as completely as I might have done had I stuck to just one. And as for Woolf and Cather, I remain but a neophyte.

That said, conversations generated by multiplicity have enriched my work and life in ways I could never have imagined. And those conversations continue: Cather's divide between pure art and self-promotion has made me see Horace in new ways; the *Concord Sonata's* progression from dark and daunting complexity at the start toward transparency and peace at the end suggests insights into the similar trajectory of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*; my current work on Cather involves exploring the place of music in her life and her fiction. Etc., etc., etc.: too many ideas, too little time. But there are worse things in life, as a passage from Henry Cowell reminds us: "Of course no one life will ever be long enough for all that there is to be done. I like to think that Charles Ives was right when he declared: 'There is always something more to be said.' For myself, I have more ideas for music than I can ever use. This is a happy state, and I wish the same to all of you."

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¹⁴ On Cather, see above, n.1. In *Virginia Woolf and the Hogarth Press* (C. Woolf, Bloomsbury Heritage Series [London 2004]) I examine the interplay (and tensions) between Virginia Woolf's writing and her long involvement with the Hogarth Press.