

New article on abuse and classical music by Damian Thompson in the Spectator, and some wider reflections on classical music and abuse

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A new article went online yesterday on abuse in the classical music world – **Damian Thompson, ‘Classical music’s dirty little secret’, *The Spectator*, December 6th, 2014.** It contrasts in particular the revelations about alleged abuse within the El Sistema organisation through the **work of Geoff Baker**, and those about abuse at Chetham’s School of Music and elsewhere, featuring an interview with me on this and related subjects. The article goes deeper than most have done previously, and I would urge all to read it.

I have been reflecting more widely on the relationship between the callous exertion of power in music and also aestheticised outlooks, and the abuse of both children and adults, and wanted to share a few thoughts growing out of what I said for the *Spectator* interview. I have published previously on this in the *Times Educational Supplement* **here** and **here**, and will write at more length on these issues at a future date. At the heart of this lie the issues of the exploitation of power beneath an artistic veneer, and the relegating of human interests secondary to other aesthetic or more abstract concerns, an subject which has exercised me for a great many years. Here are my thoughts for now.

There are multiple ways in which sexual abuse occurs in musical education in the UK (see my earlier posts **here** and **here** for documentation of various cases since 1990). One involves abuse of pre-pubescent boys in choirs, and has been found time and time again in many leading private schools; another involves adolescents, primarily but not exclusively girls, who are sexually exploited by instrumental teachers, especially in specialist music schools and at summer music courses and the like. There is also of course much evidence of abuse of both sexes by private music teachers, who are often not subject to the same checks as those working in some institutions. The process of sexual exploitation of adolescents also continues with young adults in conservatoires, in a similar fashion. Instrumental teachers have great power and prestige which can easily be exploited when they have access to vulnerable, sometimes star-struck, girls and young women. The many stories I have heard are utterly hideous and depressing. Teachers regularly reduce their students to

tears so they can then comfort and sexually touch them, or ask the students to perform sexual acts as a sign of how much they ‘trust’ them. Some are told they can only do justice to certain types of music when they have become a ‘whole woman’, as a prelude to sex. Other teachers simply attempt to force themselves on students in lessons in ways which can be terrifying and amount to attempted rape. Some have been told by directors of institutions that if they dare to go to the police, then they can give up any hope they might have had of a musical career; those with powerful connections are indeed often in a position to do this.

But there are certainly non-sexual forms of abuse which have gone on at all the music schools as well, which can be just as damaging. The issues of abuse in the classical musical world are not in my opinion simply about some people in power being sexually attracted to some musicians – I don’t think that is something surprising, unnatural or wrong, even if they act on those desires, when the musicians are above the age of consent and of course consenting. But I believe these link to a deeper culture of power and its wilful exertion, a vocabulary and mentality of sexual predation as a strategy to demean, dominate, humiliate for reasons that are far from merely sexual. In this field, in my experience, there is no reason to believe that female teachers are any less likely to be culpable than male ones (and in the case of actual sexual abuse the gender divide is not necessarily so simple; even where not actual perpetrators, some female teachers and others have been amongst the most staunch defenders of abusers, and acted in hateful and vicious ways towards those they have exploited).

In such a context sexual abuse can often be an extension of other forms of emotional and physical abuse, in order to enforce a relationship of domination and dehumanisation mystified by the aura surrounding ‘artistic’ personalities and their relationships to others. An artistic aura and its associated temperament can often mask simple cases of fragile egos and other insecurities, which can be bolstered by dominating others. Such domination works best with a willing or at least helpless victim in the form of a child, or one who acts and appears like one.

At the same time, I think we need to look hard at the way audiences and others ‘consume’ and psychologically dominate musicians, especially young ones. Is the young performer presented in a rarefied fashion for an audience’s delectation so different from a glamour model, or even one in a window in a red light district? Are they meant to have a will of their own, or merely to please others?

The world view of the nineteenth-century aesthete still has a profound impact upon classical music culture, certainly in the UK, US, France and some other places. I have spent quite some time studying this in various contexts (not least the ways in which this outlook can be linked to fascism, as diagnosed in different ways by Walter Benjamin, Roger Shattuck and Frederic Spotts). The aesthetic movement was a type

of quasi-aristocratic rearguard group of aesthetes reacting against the growth of bourgeois society and mass culture. They believed moral questions and human interests to be of little importance relative to their own notions of beauty. This beauty was of course something only a small number were in a position to appreciate, an aesthetic aristocracy if you like, and they often viewed other human beings in purely aesthetic terms. I believe this is profoundly dehumanising. There is also a considerable overlap between early aesthetes, including Pater, Wilde, Huysmans, Crowley and others, and the movement of 'Uranian' poets and some artists, **a group of pederasts who were described in the volume *Betrayal of Youth* as like a nineteenth-century version of the Paedophile Information Exchange.**

To the aesthete, a young boy not yet faced by the doubts, moral choices and responsibility of an adult, is unthreatening and more ripe to be adored and salivated over. If you look at pederastic photographs of naked young boys in classical poses by **Wilhelm von Gloeden**, who was associated with the Uranians (and whose work I have earlier written about in terms of its influence upon some music of Michael Finnissy), you will see a similar thing. Certain qualities are favoured – looks suggesting arrogance but submission, petulance and self-centeredness, and sometimes exaggerated hyper-masculinity, absolutely nothing which would suggest an emerging mind or any trappings of an intellectual-to-be.

I have seen exactly the same attitudes at play regularly amongst those with power in the classical music world. Young men and women favoured to the extent they exhibit (deliberately or unwittingly) certain of these attributes. Some men because they look like a slightly thuggish rent boy, some women because they can give the right type of Shirley Temple-like sickly-sweet smile. Fundamentally, they become objects, and often the critics, administrators, radio producers and so on who favour them will abandon them as they get older, so they can move onto their next bright young things. This is all part of the same processes of domination of which sexual abuse of children is the most extreme form.

There's a very obvious continuum, to me, between von Gloeden's arrogant yet submissive naked boys and the picture of Gustavo Dudamel with a smug and self-satisfied expression, showing how his willingness to conform to the needs of others is rewarded with a Rolex watch. Similarly between **Lewis Carroll's pederastic pictures of young girls** and some of the images routinely encountered of young female violinists. The same is true of the publicity materials and discursive constructions around numerous *Wunderkind* young composers and performers. The arbiters of classical music enmesh musicians into their own web in ways which bear an uncanny resemblance to the grooming strategies of paedophiles. I have even come to consider more sinister interpretations of the apparent innocence, suffused with unspoken desire, which I hear in works such as Erik Satie's *Gymnopédies*, possibly representing

dances of naked boys (in part) at an ancient Spartan festival, at a time when the concept of 'Greek love' (love between men and boys) was very much in vogue in British and French artistic circles.

There were tyrannical teachers and educational practices which grew in the nineteenth century. It was seen as perfectly acceptable to beat students; teachers put them through gruelling (and generally useless) regimes of exercises so that the few who had not had a nervous breakdown or suffered irreparable muscular damage could feel themselves blessed and 'toughened up' for a musical career, in which they could inflict the same on their own students. Learning, practising, and music-making were made mind-numbing and conducted in an atmosphere of intense fear. In the educational culture bequeathed above all by the early Paris Conservatoire, the emphasis was no longer upon producing a rounded musician and individual, as in earlier times, but more simply a streamlined playing machine. But in many places these methods were found to be unsatisfactory in many respects and more mature and humane approaches began to take their place, which also often produced much finer musicians.

But then with the Cold War and the Soviet need above all to produce competition winners rather than rounded musicians, there was something of a backlash. Dictatorial approaches to teaching, with no concern for the wider consequences, came back into fashion. Some were aped in the West, crowding out some alternative approaches. Several of the specialist music schools in the UK – all of which were founded between 1962 and 1972 – were explicitly modelled on Russian institutions and styles of teaching, at a time when considerations of the welfare of children and the dangers of such hothouse environments hardly registered.

I have heard major allegations of abuse at all five institutions. The schools have certainly all produced some successful musicians, but if they are happy to take credit for these, they must also take responsibility for the ruined lives, sometimes racked by depression, self-harm, suicide attempts and more, which are equally their legacy. The effect of a school upon all who attended it, not just a small successful minority, matters.

Bullying and malicious exploitation of power in musical education are also rampant. Insecure teachers do this plenty. One of my own former students underwent some serious bullying at the hands of another teacher on a course, who tried everything he could to undermine this pianist by repeatedly spreading malicious talk about him to others, doing all he could to humiliate him in front of others (and before he was about to perform) and so on, because he saw him as a threat. Various people complained about the behaviour of this teacher, but of course nothing was done. This individual once proudly pronounced 'I get students who think they are good – my job is to make

them realise they suck'. This attitude is all-revealing – it is not about helping the student, but playing power games to bolster the teacher's own self-esteem.

Other types of behaviour I have often encountered have deeply shocked me – just the callousness of it all. One privileged young composer thought nothing of fabricating false rumours about a rival, claiming he was being beaten up by his father, so as to portray this rival as unstable and thus unlikely to be up to being a composer. What has shocked me even more is how many people know this and other similar things about this person, but are completely unbothered by it – certainly it did not impede his own progression in academia. I know one instrumentalist who feigns friendship in order to gain other musicians' confidence, so that they might reveal such things as spells of depression, which he then uses as malicious gossip to undermine them; another did the same when he found that one woman was going through a legal process in which she alleged her father had abused her. A prominent musician, upon being appointed to a prominent position, bragged to others that now he had the chance to get revenge on all those who had previously stood in his way.

Classical music and its associated culture is still shot through by some fundamentally hierarchical nineteenth-century values which are little in vogue any longer in other cultural fields. I am not saying we should throw out the baby with the bathwater, but do believe much rethinking is necessary. Sexual abuse in classical music is maybe the most extreme symptom of a wider corruption. When you have a culture which idolises a small few 'great men/women', sees narcissism, bullying and despicable treatment of others not simply as unavoidable evils but actually as signs of artistry, and encourages an attitude of awe and submission, rather than concrete and critical engagement, then the dangers of abuse are acute.

Whilst figures such as Beethoven or Wagner or Furtwängler or Britten continue to be idolised not just for the work they produced but for the personalities they were, then the role models for younger musicians are fatally flawed. We should reject entirely the idea that musicians are a breed apart, and discourage such thinking.