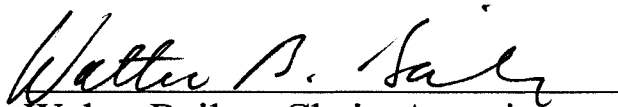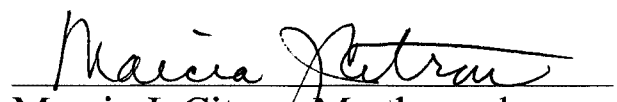RICE UNIVERSITY

The Aesthetic of Difficulty

by

Alexis L. Witt

A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

Master of Music

APPROVED, THESIS COMMITTEE:

Walter Bailey, Chair, Associate
Professor of Musicology

Marcia J. Citron, Martha and
Henry Malcolm Lovett
Distinguished Service Professor of
Musicology

David Ferris, Associate Professor
of Musicology

HOUSTON, TEXAS

MAY 2007

UMI Number: 1455298

INFORMATION TO USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleed-through, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

UMI®

UMI Microform 1455298
Copyright 2008 by ProQuest LLC.
All rights reserved. This microform edition is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.

ProQuest LLC
789 E. Eisenhower Parkway
PO Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346

ABSTRACT

The Aesthetic of Difficulty

by

Alexis L. Witt

The purpose of this project is to present and elaborate upon the relatively unexplored concept of an aesthetic of "difficulty". The aesthetic of difficulty begins as compositional intent, is expressed through the experience of the performer, and ultimately is perceived by the listener. Difficulty itself, not to be confused with virtuosity, refers to segments or pieces of music that are uncomfortably challenging for the sake of intentionally sounding "hard" or labored. For example, when a knowledgeable composer purposefully writes a part that is unidiomatic for a particular instrument, or makes use of fingerings or ranges that would have been problematic in order to achieve an effect. Furthermore, this aesthetic is lost to the modern music world primarily because of the influence of recording technology on the perception of performance, and developments in instrument construction and design.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to my advisor, Dr. Walter Bailey, for without his patience and his invaluable advice this project would have been insurmountable. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Marcia J. Citron and Dr. David Ferris, for their time and their input. Without Dr. Lawrence McDonald and his penchant for conversation the idea for this project might never have occurred to me, and without Dr. Richard Lavenda's input in the early stages of my research I would have floundered. Finally, my thanks go to my parents, for their continued support and guidance.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1

Introduction and Objectives

Despite the wealth of scholarship in the field of music and aesthetics there are still some aspects of music that remain unexplored or lack satisfactory explanations. One such element is the idea of difficulty. Technical difficulty and the physical mastery of one's instrument, voice, or compositional craft that is required in order to overcome such difficulty have been discussed at length throughout history.[1] Difficulty as a concept, therefore, is hardly a new entity; however, there are other aspects of difficulty that warrant deeper investigation, including the idea of an aesthetic of difficulty.

In order to reach an understanding of what difficulty is as an aesthetic, one must first examine one of the most contentious areas in scholarship pertaining to music, that of composer intent. Often, composers do not clearly articulate their

---

[1] A survey of the literature on technical difficulty would be tangential to this project, but the subject has been discussed in early instrument manuals from the eighteenth century such as C. P. E. Bach's *Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen*, Leopold Mozart's *Versuch einer gründlichen Violinschule*, and Jean-Louis Duport's *Essai sur le doigté du violoncello et sur la conduite de l'archet*. Each of these works presents the performer with methods of overcoming various kinds of technical difficulties he or she might encounter when playing the keyboard, violin, or cello. Theorists and aestheticians have also discussed technical difficulty. Theodor Adorno, for example, has written an essay entitled "Difficulties," published in *Essays on Music*, with introduction, commentary, and notes by Richard Leppert, trans. Susan H. Gillespie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

intent, leaving the conductors and performers responsible for interpreting their works to intuit their desires, although there is a difference between a composer who intends a passage to be difficult and one who writes something technically difficult out of inexperience or ignorance. An issue such as the intent of a composer regarding difficulty, which I will discuss further in Chapter 2, calls up the layers of difficulty surrounding the notion of an aesthetic of difficulty. While technical difficulty is easy to identify when it is encountered, an aesthetic quality of difficulty is less obvious and is often mistaken for other musical elements. The frequent misidentification of aesthetic difficulty as other similar musical entities, such as virtuosity for example, is the main reason for its lack of attention and recognition over the years, an oversight I am seeking to correct.

The primary objective of this paper is to examine a hitherto under-appreciated and almost un-discussed aspect of music, one that can greatly affect the way in which pieces are analyzed, understood, and possibly performed. Granted, the aesthetic quality of difficulty has been discussed to some extent in the field of literature by scholars such as George Steiner and Alan Purves;[2] however, the discussion of difficulty in a literary sense concerns the ability of the reader to understand the written words, but not necessarily an intention on the part of the author to make those words difficult to understand, which makes it somewhat different from the musical aesthetic of difficulty, which I argue stems more from intention than reception. Difficulty as a musical aesthetic has only

---

[2] George Steiner, "On Difficulty," in *On Difficulty and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). Alan C. Purves, *The Idea of Difficulty in Literature* (Albany: University of New York Press, 1991).

been discussed in few sources to date. James L. Martin has written an article entitled "Beethoven and the Purpose of Difficulty,"[3] in which a possible aesthetic concept of difficulty is used to explain elements in Beethoven's music; however, other similar discussions are rare and scholars have yet to truly engage this particular subject. Such an oversight should be corrected, and since I believe there is evidence to support the existence of an aesthetic of difficulty, I argue for its inclusion in scholarly discourse and will introduce this aesthetic and discuss its qualities and the circumstances of its existence in the course of this project.

Once the concept of difficulty as an aesthetic has been introduced and explained, I will offer musical examples from the Classical, Romantic, and Modern eras, in which this kind of difficulty may be observed. Following the discussion of examples, I will explain the current state of an aesthetic of difficulty in the present age of music making, presenting the idea that despite its applications and importance it has become almost completely lost in modern performance practice. Lastly, I will present some of the many further questions that arise whenever one undertakes a project pertaining to aesthetics, offering directions for potential research endeavors in the future.

---

[3] James L. Martin, "Beethoven and the Purpose of Difficulty," Piano Quarterly 39, no. 154 (Summer, 1991): 37-42.

Chapter 2

Identifying Difficulty

What is Difficulty?

When considering the concept of difficulty, one can reach a definition fairly easily. Without hesitation one might respond that difficulty in music pertains to passages that are technically challenging in some way, be it through physical awkwardness, unusual phrasings, complex rhythms, or any of the many quandaries a musician faces on a day-to-day basis. Difficulty is inherent in music; it is what motivates performers to improve their technical facilities, it challenges the reasoning capacities of theorists, it pushes conductors to achieve more elaborate acrobatic gestures on the podium, and it can lead listeners to expand their appreciation for a work. But when does difficulty cease being merely a characteristic of music and become the purpose of music? Is it possible to have difficulty for difficulty's sake? Would a composer ever purposefully intend for a piece to not only be difficult, but actually *sound* difficult as well? These are the questions that this thesis will attempt to address.

The distinction between common difficulty and *difficulty*[1] as an aesthetic is a subtle one and is based largely in the sometimes unfathomable realm of composer intent, for although music is understood only through performance, a performer is necessarily limited by the perceived will of the composer, or at the very least constrained by what the composer has written on the page.[2] As with most issues pertaining to aesthetics, the issue of composer intent, and whether or not specific meaning can be expressed through the will of the composer, is surrounded by controversy and differing opinions. Music is undeniably an expressive form of art, but whether or not music is capable of expressing specific meanings has been at the heart of many of these debates.[3] On one side of the spectrum, scholars such as Eduard Hanslick purport that human feelings cannot be the content of music and that such associations are purely in the hearts and minds of the listener as they perceive such feelings based on their own experiences, not because of any compositional intent.[4] According to Hanslick, composers do not have a specific content in mind when they compose and they do not seek to portray a specific feeling.[5] Listeners who perceive an emotional content or feelings have made a subjective connection which is not part of the musical

---

[1] Difficulty as an aesthetic concept will henceforth be denoted through the use of italics to distinguish it from difficulty as a technical element.

[2] Stan Godlovitch, *Musical Performance: A Philosophical Study* (London: Routledge, 1998), 32.

[3] Ruth Katz and Ruth HaCohen, *Tuning the Mind: Connecting Aesthetics to Cognitive Science* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2003), 103.

[4] Hanslick, Eduard. *On the Musically Beautiful: A Contribution Towards the Revision of the Aesthetics of Music*, ed. and trans. Geoffrey Payzant (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1986), 8-9.

[5] Ibid., 32, 35.

composition. On the other side of the spectrum are scholars such as Theodor

Adorno, who discusses the conflict between compositional subject and

compositional objectivity in his writings.[6] Adorno argues that the objectivism

promoted by writers such as Hanslick is an "illusory façade of power and

security" which lacks substance and concentrates only on function to the

exclusion of artistic expression.[7] Since compositional intent, or the intended

meaning the composer wished to express, is admittedly difficult to discern, many

scholars believe that such intent is not an observable part of music; however, it

remains impossible to prove whether or not the observation and recognition of

intent is necessary for, or even a component part of, listener comprehension.

Whether or not one believes that the intention of the composer can be

expressed or is necessary for understanding, a discussion of difficulty as an

aesthetic is in part contingent upon the assumption that music can express

something, either through compositional intention or subjective association on the

part of the listener. Even if one believes as Hanslick does that a composer does

not have an emotional intent, or one believes that even if the composer does have

an emotion or a specific event in mind while composing it is merely an

organizational device,[8] one can still accept that composers seek to accomplish

certain goals when they compose a new piece of music. Such goals are part of the

---

[6] Theodor W. Adorno, "Difficulties," in *Essays on Music*, with introduction, commentary, and notes by Richard Leppert, trans. Susan H. Gillespie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 644-675.

[7] Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, trans. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), 202.

[8] Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful*, 37.

compositional process, and as such they potentially can be observed, if only as a means of organization. For those who believe as Adorno does, the inclusion of such intentions as integral parts of a composition is more easily accepted. Since *difficulty* as an aesthetic is ultimately an elevation of technical difficulty into an emotional state or affect, then it can be perceived as an expressive component in a composition.

The interpretation of musical meaning is entirely subjective, and yet even untrained listeners can distinguish between music that portrays happiness and music expressing sadness even when they cannot identify or verbalize the reasons for their choices. According to studies done by Patrik N. Juslin, a given piece might sound happy because it is in the major mode, has a lively tempo and simple harmonies that both remain consistent, a volume level that is neither too soft nor too loud, and clean articulation within smooth, steady rhythms. Likewise, sadness is generally expressed through the minor mode, a slow tempo, increased dissonance, *rubato*, less distinct articulation and descending melodic lines.[9] Since basic emotions can be translated into specific musical terms, one might logically assume that more complex emotions would have similar musical manifestations. In addition to happiness and sadness, Juslin goes further to give detailed technical descriptions of pieces identified as expressing anger, fear and tenderness.[10] Despite the specific level of detail Juslin offers, emotions themselves only supply

---

[9] Patrik N. Juslin, "From Mimesis to Catharsis: Expression, Perception, and Induction of Emotion in Music," in *Musical Communication*, eds. Dorothy Miell, Raymond MacDonald, and David J. Hargreaves (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 96.

[10] Ibid.

a superficial level of expression, and even the more complex emotions do not make up the entirety of musical meaning.

In order for there to be meaning, there must first be a message, and that message must be communicated in a recognizable fashion. Once a chain of communication is established from the composer to the listener via the performer, the message can be determined.[11] Like that of "difficulty," the concept of a "message" is a deceptively simple one; however, when taken in a musical context the idea of a message can become quite complex. Since aestheticians are generally more concerned with the transmission and meaning of the message, a clear definition of what a message actually is must be obtained from a scholar in the field of music psychology. Carl E. Seashore states:

> The musical message is that esthetic experience – be it feeling, ideation, impulse, craving, wish, or inspiration – which the composer in the first instance and the interpreter at the next level desire to convey to the audience through the form given by the musical medium.[12]

And so, by accepting elements such as feelings, wishes, and inspirations as musical messages, all of which are even more abstract than mere emotions, the possibility of discussing hitherto unrecognized aesthetics arises. *Difficulty* has not been recognized as an aesthetic for a number of reasons, the first and certainly not the least of which being the inherently subjective nature of the materials involved. But perhaps the biggest obstacle has been the frequent mistaken identity it suffers due to the close similarity it shares with the far more noticeable musical quality of virtuosity.

---

[11] Ibid., 87.

[12] Carl E. Seashore, *Psychology of Music* (New York: Dover Publications, 1967), 379.

Difficulty and Virtuosity: Two Sides of the Same Musical Coin

As with the relationship between technical difficulty and the idea of *difficulty* as an expression or aesthetic, the distinction between *difficulty* and virtuosity is hard to discern. Both originate with the composer in the form of intent, both must be accurately executed by the performer, and both must be correctly understood by the listener in order to exist as the composer intended them to. More specifically, both rely almost entirely on technical complexities. If a composer writes a piece that is technically challenging out of ignorance, then the piece is considered difficult; however, since difficulty was not the intention, it becomes a mere byproduct of the compositional process, not a recognizable aesthetic. Similarly, if technical skill is incidentally required to perform a piece rather than being the intended purpose of the performance, then the piece is not truly virtuosic.[13] The primary cause of confusion stems from a commonly mistaken assumption: virtuosic pieces are technically difficult; therefore pieces displaying technical difficulty must also be virtuosic. While it is true that virtuosic music is difficult to play, not all difficult pieces are necessarily "works of virtuosity."[14] In summary, virtuosity is most often expressed through performance as a way for a performer to demonstrate a high level of technical and

---

[13] Thomas Carson Mark, "On Works of Virtuosity," *The Journal of Philosophy* 77, no. 1 (Jan., 1980): 29.

[14] Ibid., 41.

interpretive skill which makes him or her sound as though they can play an obviously challenging work with ease.

This modern conception of virtuosity arose out of a nineteenth century practice, although virtuosos existed before then. Late in the eighteenth and early in the nineteenth century any performer who was capable of playing technically challenging music with "apparent ease and rapidity" was considered to be a virtuoso; however, Niccolò Paganini was the first performer known for combining technical brilliance with interpretive originality, both of which captured and engaged audiences.[15] What Paganini did on the violin, Franz Liszt introduced and expanded on the piano.[16] The musical endeavors of performers like Paganini and Liszt, combined with their often flamboyant and intriguing lifestyles, eventually led to the modern conception of a virtuoso as the epitome of showmanship and exhibitionism, performers known for their technical mastery, ability to play in extreme tempos, and unrivaled agility.[17] Virtuosity itself is a concept associated with challenging audience expectations and pushing the boundaries of technical abilities.[18]

The differences between the two terms occur at each stage in the presentation of a work. First, the composer must intend for a piece, or a section

---

[15] Jane O'Dea, *Virtue or Virtuosity? Explorations in the Ethics of Musical Performance*, Combinations to the Study of Music and Dance, no. 58 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000), 41.

[16] Ibid., 42.

[17] Ibid., 40.

[18] Dana Gooley, *The Virtuoso Liszt*, New Perspectives in Music History and Criticism, eds. Jeffrey Kallberg, Anthony Newcomb and Ruth Solie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1.

of a piece, to be virtuosic or difficult, and while the difference of intent between

virtuosity and *difficulty* seems obvious conceptually, the appearance of each on a

page is similar. The difference becomes more apparent in the performance itself.

The performer must interpret the piece and correctly present it as being either

difficult or virtuosic, and the aural result is the most striking difference between

the two. In a "work of virtuosity," the piece is not intended to sound easy or

effortless, rather the performer is meant to sound as though he or she had no

trouble playing an obviously challenging work. Virtuosity is entirely about the

demonstration of skill, primarily on the part of the performer.[19] According to

Jane O'Dea:

What casts a piece as a work of virtuosity, in other words, is not so much
the intrinsic difficulties it presents to performers, but rather whether or not
these difficulties are intended to be displayed... Technical skills are
incidental in works like these... Making these skills visible... radically
changes its import and character. It suggests to listeners that virtuoso
display figures prominently among its central qualities and focuses their
attention onto the technical skills of the instrumentalist. In doing so, it
makes noticeable not so much the products of skillfulness, but rather the
act of skillfulness itself. In effect, it puts center stage that which was
meant to be invisible.[20]

A piece that is aesthetically difficult, on the other hand, is meant not only

to be recognized as being technically difficult, it is also meant to sound labored or

unwieldy in some way. The performer is not meant to dazzle or impress. Often, a

lesser performer attempting a virtuosic work will achieve a labored rendition of

the piece, but lacking the compositional intent of *difficulty*, such a performance

cannot transform virtuosity to *difficulty*. Once the piece leaves the composer's

---

[19] Mark, "On Works of Virtuosity," 32.

[20] O'Dea, *Virtue or Virtuosity?*, 49.

music being played. A work of virtuosity requires that the listener be knowledgeable enough to recognize the challenging nature of the music and the subsequent skill of the performer,[21] for an unknowledgeable listener will not be aware that he or she is hearing a work of virtuosity played by an adept virtuoso, because only the apparent ease with which the performer is playing will be recognized. A work of *difficulty* requires no previous knowledge on the part of the listener, only that the listener feels and recognizes the effort of the performer. The place virtuosity holds in the musical realm is recognizable due in no small part to the sheer number of virtuoso concertos and the famous virtuosos of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who composed and played them. An obvious position for the aesthetic of *difficulty* in the musical realm does not make itself as readily apparent; however, a place for it does exist, as does a need to distinguish *difficulty* from virtuosity.

The Value of Differentiation

A piece that is meant to sound *difficult* may seem like a wasted effort since most people have no desire to hear music that sounds under-rehearsed or poorly written; however, the musical realm is not populated solely with beautiful sounds. Music, as the aforementioned psychologist already demonstrated, can present elements from the full range of the human experience. All aspects of life are expressed in music, even the troubled and ungainly ones which cannot be fully

---

[21] Mark, "On Works of Virtuosity," 42.

realized in styles that are refined or obviously perfectly executed. Those who make music, whether they are performers or composers, "bring into existence a set of relationships that model the relationships of our world," the end result being that they must inadvertently express the less-than-perfect along with the ideal.[22]

Unlike the comparatively straightforward emotions that Juslin presented, the emotional qualities associated with *difficulty*, such as uneasiness, awkwardness, and discomfort, are not as easy to describe in practical musical terms. Although the result remains the same, that is, the difficult-sounding quality of the piece, the methods of obtaining *difficulty* are varied and depend on the composer or the piece in question. No one condition found in music can dictate whether the piece is meant to be difficult; however, one can examine a survey of observable elements, such as strange or unexpected key relationships, and extremes in tempo or range. Rapid or unexpected shifts between keys, tempos, and ranges would not only potentially be difficult for a performer to execute, but they might also be unsettling and awkward for a listener to experience. Similarly, a composer well-versed in the art of orchestration may purposefully ask for an instrument to play outside its normal range, or in a manner unusual for that instrument. In some cases the effect would not only be a new color, but a new emotion as well. The novelty of such an effect would only last so long as the technique remained difficult, or in other words, until performers overcame the challenge and passed on their new-found technique to subsequent generations, but for a time the aural result would be one of strain or awkwardness.

---

[22] Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening*, Music/Culture, eds. George Lipsitz, Susan McClary, and Robert Walser (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 50.

piece containing unidiomatic passages for the instrument the composer plays, or an instrument with which the composer has a significant familiarity. Unidiomatic writing would be jarring for a performer and likewise it might be disconcerting for the listener to experience. All such effects are examples of *difficulty* as the primary purpose in a piece, and while this list is hardly exhaustive, it serves as a starting point for the following discussion of specific examples found in Mozart's Clarinet Concerto, K. 622, Beethoven's *Hammerklavier* Sonata, op. 106, and Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*.

Chapter 3

From Mozart to Stravinsky: Examples of Difficulty

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart – Concerto for Clarinet and Orchestra in A Major, K. 622

When Mozart wrote his Concerto for Clarinet in 1791, the clarinet was still a relatively new and developing instrument. The clarinet's predecessor, the chalumeau, first appeared in the early part of the eighteenth century and quickly fell into disuse by the middle of the century after the clarinet had become established. More flexible and with a higher range than the chalumeau, the clarinet grew in popularity starting in the 1730's, and became a regular fixture in the orchestra by the 1770's.[1] Originally, the clarinet was merely a novelty instrument, played by other woodwind players in the orchestra in the rare instances when it was called for, but as more music was written for it, clarinet specialists and virtuosos began to appear in the second half of the century.[2] Two such specialists were Anton and Johann Stadler. These brothers were active in Vienna from the 1770's until around 1800, and they were usually hired as a pair

---

[1] John Spitzer and Neal Zaslaw, *The Birth of the Orchestra: History of an Institution, 1650-1815* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004; Oxford University Press, 2005), 25.

[2] Ibid., 311.

to fill the two clarinet positions in an orchestra.[3] Anton Stadler, elder of the brothers, was acquainted with Mozart, and it was primarily through that acquaintance that Mozart developed a taste for the newest member of the woodwind family. Stadler and Mozart traveled together to Prague in 1791, and Mozart even lent Stadler money on occasion, so it can be assumed that they had a fairly close working relationship and through Stadler, Mozart would have had a good knowledge of the clarinet's capabilities.[4]

Among the first to write solo works for the clarinet, and writing specifically for Stadler, Mozart composed the Clarinet Quintet, K. 581 in 1789 and the Clarinet Concerto two years later. Stadler was a virtuoso performer, but he was also interested in instrument design. A lesser-known member of the clarinet family, the basset horn, had been invented in 1770, thereby offering clarinetists new possibilities in the lower register of the instrument.[5] As a virtuoso on both the clarinet and the basset horn, Stadler wanted an instrument that had a low register similar to that of a basset horn, but without its small, doubled-up bore and acoustically misplaced finger holes so that it looked and played more like a regular clarinet.[6] In collaboration with the Royal Instrument Maker in Vienna, Theodor Lotz, Stadler helped to design what was then referred to as a "*bass-*

---

[3] Ibid., 425.

[4] Ibid., 427.

[5] Alan Hacker, "Mozart and the Basset Clarinet," *The Musical Times* 110, no. 1514 (Apr., 1969): 359.

[6] Nicholas Shackleton, "The Development of the Clarinet," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Clarinet*, ed. Colin Lawson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 31; and Colin Lawson, "Playing Historical Clarinets," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Clarinet*, ed. Colin Lawson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 147.

klarinett" in 1788.[7] This instrument was essentially a clarinet with an extended low range of a third, but since 1796 it has been commonly referred to as a basset clarinet,[8] a term coined by Jiří Kratochvíl to distinguish the instrument from the modern bass clarinet while still showing its kinship to the basset horn.[9]

Clarinets at the time had limited key mechanisms, usually ranging from three to five keys depending on the manufacturer or the geographic region. Instrument encyclopedias from the second half of the century such as the *Diderot and d'Alembert Encyclopédie* (1751-1772; extended and supplemented 1776-1777) the clarinet article written by F. D. Castillon, *Den første Prøve for Begyndere udi Instrumental-Kunsten* (1782), *Musicalisches Handwörtenbuch* (1786) by J. G. L. von Wilke, and *Historisch-biographisches Lexicon der Tonkünsteler* (1790-1792) by E. L. Gerber, each contained detailed articles about the instrument, explaining technical aspects and offering advice for amateurs attempting to learn how to play it. Unlike the other woodwind instruments, the clarinet overblows at the twelfth rather than at the octave, creating a gap between registers of a fifth.[10] Keys were eventually added to bridge that gap, but since the tradition of cross-fingering on other woodwinds had been so ingrained, and apparently so successful, the clarinet adopted it as well for most chromatic pitches, and players resisted the addition of more keys beyond the initial five until

---

[7] Pamela L. Poulin, "Anton Stadler's Basset Clarinet: Recent Discoveries in Riga." *Journal of the American Musical Instrument Society* 22 (1996): 111.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Colin Lawson, *Mozart: Clarinet Concerto*, Cambridge Music Handbooks, ed. Julian Rushton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 25.

[10] Eric Halfpenny, "Castillon on the Clarinet," *Music and Letters* 35 (1954): 333.

the early nineteenth century.[11] Although these cross-fingerings were employed when chromatic notes were needed, the authors of the encyclopedia articles cautioned against using the pitches, stating that the clarinet should only be played in its written keys of C and F major because other keys would be "uncomfortable."[12]

Since this particular concerto was intended to be a showpiece for Stadler, one can assume that the clarinetist would have informed Mozart if he had written unsuitable material out of sheer ignorance.[13] Similarly, Mozart would have written all material in the final version of the Concerto with the basset clarinet in mind, and any unusual sections must have been intentional. One such passage that is decidedly unusual is the second theme of the first movement (Example 1).

The piece is written in A major for a solo instrument also pitched in A, and yet this theme features prominent and prolonged written A-flats (concert pitch F natural). The music of Mozart's final years was marked by his use of "expressive, even painful chromaticism" that permeated works such as his Piano

---

[11] Ibid.

[12] Albert R. Rice, "The Clarinet as Described by Lorents Nicolai Berg (1782)." *Journal of the American Musical Instrument Society* 5-6 (1979-80): 49-50.

[13] One such conversation supposedly took place in which Stadler, referring to a now unknown passage in the concerto, complained of the difficulty. Mozart responded by saying that if the notes exist on the instrument in any capacity, then it is Stadler's task to produce them. Pamela Weston, *Clarinet Virtuosi of the Past* (London: Novello & Co., 1971; reprint, 1976), 51.

Concerto in B-flat, K. 595, written just six months before the equally chromatic

Clarinet Concerto.[14]

Example 1. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Concerto for Clarinet and Orchestra in
A Major, K. 622, mm. 78-87.[15]

As was already mentioned, chromatic notes tended to be problematic for

clarinets of that time, even specially designed ones such as Stadler's basset

clarinet. The written A-flat from the second theme was a pitch for which there

was no added key on Stadler's instrument,[16] necessitating an awkward cross-

fingering and resulting in a distinctively different sound in comparison to the rest

of the instrument. Relatively recent reconstructions of basset clarinets offer an

---

[14] Charles Rosen, *The Classical Style: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven*, Expanded Edition
(New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 260.

[15] Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Concerto for Clarinet and Orchestra in A Major, K. 622,
edition by Henri Kling, eds. Sabine Meyer, Wolfgang Meyer, and Reiner Wehle (Wiesbaden:
Breitkopf & Härtel, 1987), 10.

[16] Poulin, "Anton Stadler's Basset Clarinet," 117.

idea of what the original concerto would have sounded like. The design of the basset clarinet was not standardized in the eighteenth century, and Stadler's own instruments have been lost; however, reconstructions have been based on other instruments from the time, or other instruments made by Theodor Lotz.[17] As one can hear in the recording made by Anthony Pay on a historically reconstructed basset clarinet,[18] the upper register has a bright sound quality, whereas the written A-flat has a dull, nasal and forced sound.[19] In this case, Mozart's intentions are clear. In order to contrast with the beautiful, lyrical opening theme, more than a simple change of mode was needed. Mozart, therefore, employed a very unexpected and chromatic pitch, accented it through elongation and by making it the highest point for most of the melody. He then allowed the distinctly awkward and labored sound that even a virtuoso like Stadler would have produced make the desired level of contrast. The inherent difficulty Stadler would have faced when playing that particular note determined the musical character of the entire theme, thereby turning difficulty into an intrinsic part the passage.

In addition to the chromaticism of the work, the length was also a factor in its *difficulty*. The first movement is equal in length to many of Mozart's great piano concertos, and it is the longest of all his wind concertos.[20] Therefore, the

---

[17] Lawson, *Mozart: Clarinet Concerto*, 51.

[18] Anthony Pay's instrument was built in 1984 by Edward Planas and Daniel Bangham, and is based on the Tauber A clarinet in the Shackleton collection. Ibid.

[19] Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Clarinet Concerto in A Major, K. 622, Anthony Pay, basset clarinet; The Academy of Ancient Music, cond. Christopher Hogwood; compact digital disc (Decca Record Company, 414 339-2, 1986).

[20] Leonard G. Ratner, *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1980), 290.

challenge Stadler faced when first performing this work went beyond the mastery

of his new instrument and the awkwardness of cross-fingerings and chromaticism;

he also had to develop a new level of endurance just to play the piece in its

entirety.

Ludwig van Beethoven – Hammerklavier Sonata, op. 106

As a child, Theodor Adorno's first impression of Beethoven's op. 106 was

a mistaken one. He said:

I thought the 'Hammerklavier' Sonata must be an especially *easy* piece,
associating it with toy pianos with little hammers. I imagined it had been
written for one of those. My disappointment when I could not play it
[sic].[21]

Many subsequent performers have likewise been disappointed when they

approached the *Hammerklavier* due to the extreme challenges it presents to the

pianists who attempt it. In the few years prior to its composition, Beethoven had

been experiencing a troublesome period in his life. He had many personal issues

to contend with, not the least of which was the legal battle over his nephew's

custody, and his compositional output subsequently suffered. In the face of these

compositional difficulties, he claimed that he was "constricted by the limitations

---

[21] Theodor W. Adorno, *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 4.

of the piano," and he therefore tested the limits of the instrument in search of new

ideas and techniques.[22] According to Charles Rosen:

The *Hammerklavier* is not typical of Beethoven, and does not sound it; it
is not even typical of his last period. It is an extreme point in his style. He
never again wrote so obsessively concentrated a work. In part, it must
have been an attempt to break out of the impasse in which he found
himself... It was an attempt to produce a new and original work of
uncompromising greatness...[23]

The result of his two-fold attempt was one of his most notorious piano works.

Completed in 1818, this sonata is also one of Beethoven's most technically

challenging pieces and the most striking example of how he uses *difficulty* as an

aesthetic. Although it was completed nearly 200 years ago, Robert Taub claims

that the work "still makes pianists quake in their boots" because of how

challenging it is.[24] Beethoven may have begun a trend toward this aesthetic in as

early as 1804 or 1805 with his *Waldstein* and

Appassionata Sonatas, opp. 53 and 57,[25] and he was certainly aware of what he

was doing. In a letter to Tobias Haslinger in 1816, Beethoven refers to his Sonata

in A, op. 101, the first of the two sonatas which included *hammerklavier* in the

title, by admitting that not only is it difficult, but it "will startle folk, and make

them reflect that the term 'difficult' is a relative one... for what is difficult, is also

---

[22] Rosen, *The Classical Style*, 404.

[23] Ibid., 434.

[24] Robert Taub, *Playing the Beethoven Piano Sonatas* (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 2002), 198.

[25] Maynard Solomon, *Beethoven* (New York: Schirmer Books), 197.

beautiful, good, great, etc."[26] Although his piano sonatas featured an increasing

level of difficulty up until this point, the shift away from works that dedicated

amateurs could play culminates with the *Hammerklavier*, op. 106.[27] The best

example of how Beethoven achieves *difficulty* occurs in the opening bars of the

work (Example 2), and although it is a brief excerpt and by no means the most

difficult section of the entire piece, it is "undeniably treacherous" due to the chord

placements, and it establishes the challenging aspect of the work from the very

beginning.[28]

Example 2. Ludwig van Beethoven, *Hammerklavier Sonata*, op. 106, mm. 1-4.[29]

After considering the technical challenge behind the physical leaps a

performer must execute in playing these opening chords, one must then observe

---

[26] A. Eaglefield-Hull, ed., *Beethoven's Letters*, Dent's International Library of Books on Music, trans. J. S. Shedlock (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1909; reprint, London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1926), 209-210 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

[27] Charles Rosen, *Beethoven's Piano Sonatas: A Short Companion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).

[28] Taub, *Playing the Beethoven Piano Sonatas*, 200.

[29] Ludwig van Beethoven, *Grosse Sonate für das Hammer-Klavier*, op. 106, Band 2 of *Beethoven Klaviersonaten*, ed. B. A. Wallner (München: G. Henle, 1995), 227.

the tempo indication. Some of Beethoven's metronome markings, particularly those in works written after he had already gone deaf, are notoriously fast and are usually viewed with some amount of skepticism; however, his tempo indications are another matter. In a study of metronomes from Beethoven's time, Peter Standlen discovered that the metronomes were generally accurate and those that were not actually tended to be a bit fast, resulting in metronome markings that are too slow today.[30] Regardless, metronome indications are only part of what determines the tempo for Beethoven. The movement is marked *Allegro*, which for Beethoven is more an indication of character than of speed, although speed does play a part. He would not have written "*Allegro*" if he had meant "*Allegro maestoso*" or "*Allegro non troppo*."[31] Beethoven had originally indicated the tempo as *Allegro assai*, but in a letter dated April 16, 1819 he wrote to Ferdinand Ries "*Allegro* only, the *assai* must be taken away" and indicated that the tempo should be half note equals 138.[32] When played on Beethoven's piano, a Broadwood, the first movement would have had a lighter character, and most of it would be manageable at the fast tempo.[33] Beethoven's friend and pupil Carl Czerny studied the piece under Beethoven's tutelage and played the work for him, although by that point the composer would have been completely deaf. Despite

---

[30] Taub, *Playing the Beethoven Piano Sonatas*, 211.

[31] Rosen, *The Classical Style*, 421.

[32] A. Eaglefield-Hull, ed., *Beethoven's Letters*, 267.

[33] Rosen, *Beethoven's Piano Style*, 219.

the fact that Czerny could play the piece at the written tempo,[34] he still considered it to be "unusually quick and impetuous," even on the instrument it was intended for.[35] The thick chords of the opening bars are not meant to sound majestic or be perfectly placed, as many performers choose to play them, while simultaneously they are not particularly easy chords to execute, especially when played quickly. By playing them with an *Allegro* sound and at a faster tempo the performer creates an intentionally harsh effect, and "this harshness is clearly essential" to the character of the movement.[36]

The rest of the work, although long by sonata standards and technically difficult throughout, is in a fairly conventional four movement form. The least conventional element, and consequently most difficult, of the work is the fugue finale for which Beethoven referred to the works of Bach as a model.[37] The fugue section is the culmination of the *difficulty* in the work, and according to Martin Cooper the character of the fugue is not only defined by technical difficulty, but the technical challenge represents "the experience of a single man confronting and overcoming what appear overwhelming obstacles."[38] Once technical difficulty transitions from being a superficial element to becoming an emotional aspect it becomes *difficulty*. One of the only scholars to address the subject of *difficulty* is

---

[34] Martin Cooper, *Beethoven: The Last Decade 1817-1827* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 159.

[35] Carl Czerny, *On the Proper Performance of All Beethoven's Works for the Piano*, ed. Paul Badura-Skoda (Wein: Universal Edition, 1970), 53.

[36] Rosen, *The Classical Style*, 421.

[37] Ibid., 404.

[38] Cooper, *Beethoven: The Last Decade*, 172.

James L. Martin and he does so in the context of Beethoven's piano sonatas. He argues that the difficulty is an inherent and necessary aspect of a work such as op. 106, for it "provides a very special experiential knowledge" of Beethoven's music, allowing the performer to experience not only the music itself, but the physical and emotional struggles of the composer as well.[39] In Beethoven's case, the *difficulty* may be the direct expression of the problems he suffered in his life, and by experiencing the *difficulty* and maintaining it in works such as the *Hammerklavier*, one can experience "the most essential ingredient of what it is to be human."[40]

Despite the novelty of the fugue, the preservation of the classical four movement form indicates that unlike many of the Romantic composers that came after him, he did not need to re-invent form or structure in order to be original. Beethoven made his statement in this work through *difficulty* alone, supposedly telling the publisher, Artaria, that this work would continue to challenge pianists fifty years after its composition.[41] This particular piece is remarkable in that it is not merely technically difficult; its interpretation depends upon facing and expressing the technical challenges Beethoven has written.[42]

---

[39] James L. Martin, "Beethoven and the Purpose of Difficulty," *Piano Quarterly* 39, no. 154 (Summer, 1991): 38.

[40] Ibid., 42.

[41] Solomon, *Beethoven*, 300.

[42] Kenneth Drake, *The Beethoven Sonatas and the Creative Experience* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 271.

Igor Stravinsky – The Rite of Spring

For Stravinsky, *difficulty* was just one of the many ways in which he was innovative at times during his compositional career. Theodor Adorno described Stravinsky as a man who carried on an "aesthetic flirtation with barbarism" and one who was "drawn to the place where music, lagging behind the developed bourgeois subject, functions intentionlessly and excites corporeal movements."[43] "Intentionless" music is music that appears to exist simply for its own sake, lacking pretense and set aside from social conventions. In order to create music that was both barbaric and seemingly without intention, Stravinsky sought a way to aurally create a world that lacked civilization and refinement. Pushing the boundaries of rhythm, meter, range, and tempo, Stravinsky used *difficulty* to achieve his aims.

Stravinsky was aware that he was creating a new kind of musical language with works such as *The Rite of Spring*. In his autobiography he laments that critics and audience members blame the composer for their own lack of comprehension or understanding of new music.[44] The first, and most striking, way in which Stravinsky challenges the audience and the performers alike opens the work (Example 3).

---

[43] Theodor W Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 108.

[44] Igor Stravinsky, *An Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1936. Reprint, New York: M. & J. Steuer, 1958), 176.

Example 3. Igor Stravinsky, *The Rite of Spring*, mm. 1-9.[45]

The famous bassoon solo that begins the work has become a standard

piece of audition material, an excerpt that all student bassoon players labor over at

some point in their education; however, at the time it was written, this solo pushed

the boundaries not only of what the performer was capable of, but also what the

listener was accustomed to hearing. The bassoon player is called upon to play in

the uppermost reaches of the instrument's range, pitches bassoon players

---

[45] Igor Stravinsky, *The Rite of Spring* (Moscow: State Music Publishing House, 1965; reprint, New York: Dover Publications, 1989): 1.

normally do not encounter due to the overlap with the range of the English horn.

Even for an adept performer, this passage is "riskily fragile."[46] For the premiere

in 1913, not only did the principal bassoon player, Abdon Laus, have to find

fingerings for such high notes, but audience members were noted to have asked

each other if the strange sound coming out of the pit was some kind of

saxophone.[47] In this instance, Stravinsky used the strained, thin sound quality

produced in that register to create the effect of something otherworldly or

primordial. In order to achieve this effect and set the mood for what is to take

place in the rest of the work, the music could not sound refined or easy, it needed

to sound labored and inhuman. Stravinsky confessed that he borrowed the tune

itself from an anthology of Lithuanian folk melodies compiled by a Polish priest

named Anton Juszkiewicz,[48] but the choice of instrumentation and its subsequent

scoring more than the actual melody create the striking effect.

Stravinsky himself comes very near to discussing *difficulty* as an aesthetic

in his writings about music. He divides music into two states, and then

distinguishes between the two. The first kind, what Stravinsky calls "potential

music," is the music that exists unheard on the page or in the memory before it is

performed. In contrast, "actual music" is that which occurs in a performance, or

---

[46] Peter Hill, *Stravinsky: The Rite of Spring*, Cambridge Music Handbooks, ed. Julian Rushton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 60.

[47] Thomas Forrest Kelly, "Igor Stravinsky, *Le sacre du printemps*: Thursday, May 29, 1913, 8:45 P.M.," in *First Nights: Five Musical Premieres* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 289.

[48] Richard Taruskin, "Russian Folk Melodies in *The Rite of Spring*," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 33, no. 3 (Autumn, 1980): 502.

that which the audience perceives.[49] According to Stravinsky, this division in

music thereby creates two kinds of musicians which he calls creators and

performers.[50] By making this distinction, he implies that each kind of musician

with his or her respective kind of music performs separate and distinct tasks. The

creator brings into existence the music which the performer makes audible. He

has also written about compositional intent and the will of the composer:

> It is taken for granted that I place before the performer written music
> wherein the composer's will is explicit and easily discernible from a
> correctly established text. But no matter how scrupulously a piece of
> music may be notated, no matter how carefully it may be insured against
> every possible ambiguity through the indications of tempo, shading,
> phrasing, accentuation, and so on, it always contains hidden elements that
> defy definition, because verbal dialectic is powerless to define musical
> dialectic in its totality. The realization of these elements is thus a matter
> of experience and intuition, in a word, of the talent of the person who is
> called upon to present the music.[51]

One of these "hidden elements" that must be realized and presented by a

talented performer is *difficulty*. Stravinsky obviously felt strongly about his own

intentions, so much so that he became angered when one of his collaborators on

the work attempted to undermine them. He had an ongoing struggle with

Nijinsky because, according to Stravinsky, the choreography was too complex for

the music, sometimes creating problems for the dancers that were "impossible to

overcome."[52] Stravinsky wanted the dance to be simple and seem unlabored in

---

[49] Igor Stravinsky, *Poetics of Music in the Form of Six Lessons*, trans. Arthur Knodel and Ingolf Dahl, with a preface by George Seferis (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 161.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Ibid., 163.

[52] Stravinsky, *Autobiography*, 41.

order to sharply contrast with the music, and as a matter of practicality, he wanted the dance steps to be simple because the music could not be slowed down to accommodate them if they were too involved.[53]

The tempo of various sections in the work has been a frequent point of contention. Early conductors of *The Rite*, such as Pierre Monteux, who was the conductor of the premiere in 1913, often romanticized the tempo by drastically slowing down many sections and adding frequent *rubato*.[54] According to piano rolls made by Stravinsky in 1921, he did not intend the dramatic shifts in tempo and the exaggeratedly slow sections that other conductors were using.[55] In sections such as the "Ritual of Abduction" in the first part, Stravinsky took the already fast tempo (dotted quarter note equals 132) even faster in the first recordings he made of the work in order to achieve a more exciting effect, even though the performance was sloppy and the rhythms were indistinct.[56] Stravinsky's first orchestral recording, in which he conducted the Parisian *Orchestre de Straram*,[57] appeared in 1929, after the advent of the microphone made the task of recording an orchestra far easier, with the "Ritual of Abduction" section taken at 138 to the dotted quarter note.[58] Stravinsky and Monteux argued

---

[53]Ibid., 48.

[54] Robert Fink. "*Rigoroso (J=126)*': *The Rite of Spring* and the Forging of a Modernist Performing Style." *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 52, no. 2 (1999): 304.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Robert Philip, *Performing Music in the Age of Recording* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 150.

[57] The *Orchestre de Straram* is listed as the *Orchestre Symphonique* on the recording.

[58] Hill, *Stravinsky: The Rite of Spring*, 124.

over which of them should produce the first recorded rendering, and Monteux

also has a recording from that year, although he takes the section at 120.[59]   Other

conductors began recording the work shortly thereafter. Interestingly, Stravinsky

must have changed his mind about how far he wanted to carry the feeling of

difficulty, because in the recordings that he conducted in 1940 and 1960 he took a

more reasonable tempo, possibly in order to achieve a greater degree of technical

mastery on the part of the performers.[60] The "Ritual of Abduction" section is

taken at the written tempo of 132 in both subsequent recordings.[61]

Although they are far from being the only composers to use difficulty to

achieve an effect, these three each did so in important ways. A few examples of

other composers who have raised technical difficulty to the level of an expression

or an affect are J. S. Bach with his late keyboard works, Johannes Brahms with

piano pieces such as his Piano Sonata in C Major, op. 1 and his Handel

Variations, op. 24, and Gustav Mahler with some of the orchestrations in his

symphonies; however, Mozart, Beethoven, and Stravinsky each used *difficulty* to

a greater degree. All three men pushed the limits of what certain instruments

could comfortably do purely based on the technical and mechanical capacities of

each. Similarly, both Stravinsky and Beethoven used the difficulty inherent in

playing at a fast tempo. To some extent, Mozart even used harmonic difficulty, or

chromaticism, to achieve his desired effect. Unfortunately, despite these efforts

---

[59] Ibid., 118 and 124.

[60] Philip, *Performing Music in the Age of Recording*, 150.

[61] Hill, *Stravinsky: The Rite of Spring*, 124.

on the part of composers, the aesthetic is rarely heard in modern performance practice. Of the three aforementioned works, the *Hammerklavier* Sonata comes closest to retaining the feeling of *difficulty* that was intended, although only the most adept of pianists attempt it. The *difficulty* of Mozart's Clarinet Concerto is being regained to an extent due to the Early Music movement and the revival of the basset clarinet. Despite these vestiges, the aesthetic has become almost completely lost in modern performance practice due to developments in instrument design and the advent, proliferation, and effects of recording technology.

Chapter 4

A Lost Aesthetic

Much like compositional styles and audience preferences, not all aesthetics are necessarily enduring. The aesthetic of difficulty is one such element that has become almost completely lost in a modern world of music, its few remaining vestiges misunderstood or misinterpreted by those who perceive them today. Despite composers' intentions to write music for the purpose of being difficult, the ever-changing field of music itself thwarts their plans by producing better musicians and higher standards of performance. If one views the intention of the composer as the supreme aspect in music, this development is decidedly negative; however, one who prefers a clean, clear and technically perfect performance would find the trend to be beneficial and desirable. The decision as to whether or not an element of value has been lost lies in the opinion of each individual who experiences the music. Aside from the musicians themselves, who are constantly pushed to improve their abilities and strive for perfection, no other factors have been as influential in subverting the aesthetic of difficulty as the continual advances made in the area of instrument design and the more recent introduction and improvement of recording technology. These two

forces, while decidedly different, have both impinged upon *difficulty* from different angles, but nevertheless have similarly diminished the expression of *difficulty* in modern performance practice.

Developments in Instrument Design

Technical difficulty and instrument design have often developed side-by-side. Composers frequently push the limits of their performers and once they are given enough challenges, the design of an instrument may change to meet the growing need for greater flexibility and improved tone quality.[1] Despite the obvious benefits of improved instruments capable of playing increasingly difficult music, composers who wish their pieces to sound purposefully difficult can only expect them to do so while the instruments remain in the state they existed in at the time of composition. Once an instrument's technical capacities improve beyond the intended *difficulty* of a work, the aesthetic effect becomes lost.

The study of the development of musical instruments, or organology as it is now called, began late in the nineteenth century in Europe when the social preoccupation with Darwin and his theory of evolution spilled over into the musical world.[2] People of this period, the Victorians in particular, believed that

---

[1] Marc Pincherle, "Virtuosity," trans. Willis Wager, *The Musical Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (Apr., 1949): 240.

[2] Laurence Libin, "Progress, Adaptation, and the Evolution of Musical Instruments." *Journal of the American Musical Instrument Society* 26 (2000): 187.

not only did instruments evolve over time to match technical demands in

compositions, but they also slowly evolved towards a state of perfection.[3]

Although they were correct in their assumption that instruments are often

improved upon as greater and more challenging demands are made of them,

change can occasionally indicate mere differences rather than implying

improvement, and just because an instrument falls out of popularity in a given

society its obsolescence may not correlate with an inferior design.[4] Undoubtedly

instruments do evolve in a sense, and although the nineteenth-century Victorian

view of instrument development was relatively narrow and biased since it implied

that perfection could only exist during that particular technological age, it

provided the groundwork for later scholars who sought to understand the history

of particular instruments.

Unlike the antiquarians and museum curators of the nineteenth century,

organologists of the twentieth century have a broader understanding of how

instrument designs develop. The "Early Music" movement provided a renewed

interest in older models of instruments, and better replicas were subsequently

constructed not only to challenge the view that newer is necessarily better, but

also to allow a greater understanding of what pieces of music were meant to

sound like at the time of their composition.[5] Twentieth century organology also

provides a seemingly less-biased view of instrument development before the

---

[3] Ibid., 190-191.

[4] Ibid., 194-195.

[5] Ibid., 195.

Victorian era, one that does not hold its own time period as the pinnacle of cultural development.

Modern organologists can objectively examine the history of instrument design that occurred prior to the nineteenth century. The eighteenth century in particular was a time of great development for instrument designers and builders, especially those who worked with woodwind and brass instruments. String instrument makers were members of luthier guilds, entities that provided quality standards and uniform designs; however, there were no guilds for makers of winds and an industry for these instruments did not emerge until after the breakdown of the guild system in the late eighteenth century.[6] Once an industry was established, developments in design flourished as instrument builders experimented with existing designs and sought ways to "improve intonation, even out timbre, eliminate awkward stretches, and make instruments fully chromatic."[7] Thus, once instrument designers could experiment and saw the need for instruments with better technical capabilities, they were able to constantly redefine the idea of difficulty, pushing composers to write even more difficult music if they wished to use it as an aesthetic. The example of Mozart's Clarinet Concerto no longer poses the challenge it once did, for unlike the five-key instrument it was written for, modern clarinets have been improved to the point where they have seventeen keys or more. Although this cycle of composers and instrument builders alternately challenging each other has done much to

---

[6] John Spitzer and Neal Zaslaw, *The Birth of the Orchestra: History of an Institution, 1650-1815* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004; Oxford University Press, 2005), 173.

[7] Ibid., 337.

simultaneously create and destroy the aesthetic of difficulty, the impact of recording technology has been far greater and took place much more quickly.

Recording Technology

The effects of recording technology on classical music have been far-reaching and dramatic; however, not all of these effects have been beneficial. Ironically, the same recording technology that is responsible for preserving musical traditions, disseminating authoritative renditions of masterworks, and making classical music available in convenient and affordable ways, is also responsible for the eradication of certain musical elements, such as the aesthetic of difficulty.

Not only do recordings offer listeners their own private concerts, held in the comfort of their own homes, and with personal control over the duration and program selection, they also inadvertently create a different type of listener. People who listen to a recording of a particular work and then attend a live concert of that same work are often shocked at the disparity between the two sounds. Recordings are not mere auditory documentations of live performances; they are in themselves a performance medium with their own unique sounds and styles. Often, the sound of a recording is artificially and brilliantly saturated,

causing some people to prefer that sound to that of live performances.[8] Similarly, a note that is out of tune can be electronically corrected in a recording, or instruments that are normally hard to discern in a thick texture can be enhanced through appropriate microphone placement. To some, recordings seem sterile, lacking the life and energy provided by witnessing live performers, but to others, live performances become disappointing in comparison to the often artificially perfect recordings.

The accidental result of all this technological wizardry is not only the ability to change perceived flaws, but the lack of compunction about doing so. Pieces written for the purpose of being difficult are electronically doctored, and any live performances that maintain the feeling of *difficulty* seem second-rate in comparison. Not only can music be electronically altered in a recording, but the recording itself is a compilation of different versions of a piece, sections that are selected and then pieced together to include the best elements of the many renditions involved.[9] Due to the sound experienced in these artificially perfect recordings, people lose their desire to hear the seemingly less perfect live performances since the *difficulty* they hear in the latter is understood as error or insufficient preparation.

The new type of listener that has been fashioned through his or her experience with recordings in turn fuels a growing cycle. Recording technology

---

[8] Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening*, Music/Culture, eds. George Lipsitz, Susan McClary, and Robert Walser (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 76.

[9] Evan Eisenberg, *The Recording Angel: Music Records and Culture from Aristotle to Zappa*, 2d ed (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 20.

itself is merely a segment of the commercial machine that is the recording industry. Capitalism has turned music of all kinds into a commodity, a pre-packaged unit for human consumption.[10] Music is now an object, and the listeners are now consumers in ways that audience members never were in the past, for they can choose to buy only what they want to hear.[11] The listener's will, therefore, takes precedence over the composer's intention since even the most accurately portrayed rendition of how the composer intended the piece to sound will not sell if the listener does not wish to hear it. Once again, the value judgment of such a development lies in the opinion of the individual experiencing the music. The consumer who wishes to hear only what he or she prefers will gratefully allow renditions of a work which are personally less desirable go out of print, even if those renditions are closer to the intentions of the composer. Conversely, a listener in search of recordings that represent the imagined will of the composer will be disappointed if such recordings are less popular and subsequently more difficult to obtain.

Recording technology also affects the way musicians learn and develop their skills. In times past, performers had to rely on their own perception of what their playing sounded like while they were actively engaged in performing. With the advent and easy access of personal recording devices, students can record their time spent in the practice room, replaying their efforts once the sound

---

[10] Ibid., 89.

[11] Ibid., 24.

production has ceased, and evaluating their technique in an entirely new way.[12] Professionals can replay concerts or recitals of themselves decades later and contemplate their changing musical views. But most importantly, mistakes that had gone unnoticed during the act of performing or practicing become glaringly obvious when played back on a tape, thereby allowing musicians the chance to understand their faults and improve them, in essence giving them insight unavailable to musicians of the past.[13] Not only can mistakes be corrected, but sections that *sound* like mistakes can be adjusted. If a composer intends a section of music to be aesthetically difficult in an attempt to express suffering, emotional hardship, awkwardness, or any other such feeling that is part of the human condition, and a modern-day performer perceives that *difficulty* as a personal error that must be diligently practiced and corrected, the composer's intent has been defeated and the aesthetic effect has been subverted.

In an age where there is a growing interest in recreating the original intentions of the great composers of the past, at least some of those intentions are being lost daily. Performers strive for technical perfection that listeners have come to expect, even to the point of expecting perfection that is only achievable through artificial or technological means. Composers such as Mozart, or even Stravinsky, had no way of knowing that music would one day be the way it is now, and conversely, most people today have little understanding of what those composers meant their music to sound like.

---

[12] Don Lebler, "Learning and Assessment Through Recording," in *Aesthetics and Experience in Music*, eds. Elizabeth Mackinlay, Denis Collins, and Samantha Owens (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2005), 322.

[13] Ibid.

Chapter 5

Conclusion and Further Questions

As with any question regarding an aspect of aesthetics, a definitive conclusion is difficult to obtain. For each answer one achieves, more questions undoubtedly arise. For example, is difficulty simply a historical aesthetic that no longer applies to our performance practice, or are contemporary composers still applying it to their music in ways that are relevant to modern standards of difficulty? Even if difficulty is clearly proven to be an aesthetic, should performers strive to express it today? What, if anything, is added to the musical experience if one is aware of the purpose of difficulty in a given piece? In a musical culture where we highly value the intent of the composer, how far should our respect extend in terms of expression and aesthetics? With each question answered, more questions will be raised. Questions such as these are the next step in exploring the full extent to which *difficulty* exists as an aesthetic.

Such a next step, in my opinion, might lead to different interpretations of pieces, or at least a different understanding of certain works. For example, performers might reevaluate other pieces by Beethoven and change their method of performing once they are aware of how Beethoven regarded *difficulty* in at least

some of his works. Listeners may be able to emotionally connect to works in new ways if performers express the *difficulty* found in the pieces. Conversely, listeners might reject the interpretations that express *difficulty*, preferring not to connect with that aspect of the human experience. Only further examination and possibly experimentation in which performers play in a way that expresses *difficulty* where it is warranted and listeners experience that aesthetic will tell if *difficulty* should be embraced in order to achieve a new mode of expression, or if it is unnecessary, unwanted, or should be allowed to disappear.

  Admittedly, at least a portion of any project such as this study of the aesthetic of difficulty is purely conjecture, for unless hitherto undiscovered letters written by these composers are unearthed in which they clearly state their desire to write music that is difficult for difficulty's sake, compositional intent or the emotional or expressive connections made by listeners will always remain to some degree a matter of educated guesswork when one seeks to discuss complex musical issues of that nature.   Clearly, however, there are possibly elements in music that have not been explained sufficiently, or even explored in the slightest, and *difficulty* is merely the first of such elements to be addressed in this manner. Even if there is no room for an aesthetic such as difficulty in our modern musical practices, understanding can still be acquired through an awareness of it. Music is supposed to express the full range of human emotions and every element of the human condition, whether through the intent of the composer, or through the subjective and personal associations made by the listener. The aesthetic of difficulty helps to fill out that spectrum of expression by providing a way through which composers can

portray, or listeners can understand, the emotions that correlate to strained situations, uneasy conditions, frustration, and awkwardness. Since all people have experienced the feelings this aesthetic embodies, or been in situations to which it pertains, its presence in music is merely a representation of an expressive entity to which everyone can relate.

Even if a performer does not perform a piece in such a way as to make it purposefully sound difficult, he or she can still benefit from the knowledge of what the composer intended. A better understanding of the conditions behind a work can lead to a more engaging, informed performance, for even if the audience does not share in the performer's or composer's specific understanding of the meaning or intention of the piece, the feeling behind the performance can still touch the listener in some way and further their musical experience of that work. Understanding an aesthetic such as this can allow scholars or theorists to better evaluate seemingly inexplicable pieces of music or passages of music that contain elements that are unusual or unexpected, but the purpose of which has not been identified. By analyzing what was difficult in the past we can better understand how music has developed thus far, and by appreciating the elements in music that are purposefully flawed we can better enjoy those which are perfect.

Bibliography

Adorno, Theodor W. *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music.* Edited by Rolf
    Tiedemann. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Cambridge: Polity Press,
    1998.

_____. *Essays on Music.* With introduction, commentary, and notes by
    Richard Leppert. Translated by Susan H. Gillespie. Berkeley: University
    of California Press, 2002.

_____. *Philosophy of Modern Music.* Translated by Anne G. Mitchell and
    Wesley V. Blomster. New York: Seabury Press, 1973.

_____. *Philosophy of New Music.* Translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor.
    Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

Beethoven, Ludwig van. *Grosse Sonate für das Hammer-Klavier,* op. 106. Band
    2 of *Beethoven Klaviersonaten,* ed. B. A. Wallner. München: G. Henle,
    1995.

Cook, Nicholas. *Music, Imagination and Culture.* Oxford: Clarendon Press,
    1990.

_____. "Playing God: Creativity, Analysis, and Aesthetic Inclusion." In
    Musical Creativity: Multidisciplinary Research in Theory and Practice,
    eds. Irène Deliège and Geraint A. Wiggins, 9-24. New York: Psychology
    Press, 2006.

Cooper, Martin. *Beethoven: The Last Decade 1817-1827.* Oxford: Oxford
    University Press, 1985.

Czerny, Carl. *On the Proper Performance of All Beethoven's Works for the
    Piano.* Edited and Commentary by Paul Badura-Skoda. Wein: Universal
    Edition, 1970.

Drake, Kenneth. *The Beethoven Piano Sonatas and the Creative Experience.*
    Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994.

Eaglefield-Hull, A., ed. *Beethoven's Letters.* Dent's International Library of
    Books on Music. Translated by J. S. Shedlock. London: J. M. Dent &
    Sons, 1909. Reprint, London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1926.

Eisenberg, Evan. *The Recording Angel: Music Records and Culture from Aristotle to Zappa*, 2d ed. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005.

Fink, Robert. "'*Rigoroso* (♪=126)': *The Rite of Spring* and the Forging of a Modernist Performing Style." *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 52, no. 2 (1999): 299-362.

Godlovitch, Stan. *Musical Performance: A Philosophical Study*. London: Routledge, 1998.

Gooley, Dana. *The Virtuoso Liszt*. New Perspectives in Music History and Criticism, eds. Jeffrey Kallberg, Anthony Newcomb, and Ruth Solie. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Hacker, Alan. "Mozart and the Basset Clarinet." *The Musical Times* 110, no. 1514 (Apr., 1969): 359-362.

Halfpenny, Eric. "Castillon on the Clarinet." *Music and Letters* 35 (1954): 332-338.

Hanslick, Eduard. *On the Musically Beautiful: A Contribution Towards the Revision of the Aesthetics of Music*. Translated and edited by Geoffrey Payzant. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1986.

Hill, Peter. *Stravinsky: The Rite of Spring*. Cambridge Music Handbooks, ed. Julian Rushton. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Juslin, Patrik N. "From Mimesis to Catharsis: Expression, Perception, and Induction of Emotion in Music." In *Musical Communication*, eds. Dorothy Miell, Raymond MacDonald, and David J. Hargreaves, 85-116. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Katz, Ruth, and Ruth HaCohen. *Tuning the Mind: Connecting Aesthetics to Cognitive Science*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2003.

Kelly, Thomas Forrest. "Igor Stravinsky, *Le sacre du printemps*: Thursday, May 29, 1913, 8:45 P.M." *In First Nights: Five Musical Premieres*, 258-299. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000.

Lawson, Colin. "The Authentic Clarinet: Tone and Tonality." *The Musical Times* 124, no. 1684 (Jun., 1983): 357-358.

_____. *The Early Clarinet: A Practical Guide*. Cambridge Handbooks to the Historical Performance of Music, eds. Colin Lawson and Robin Stowell. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

_____. *Mozart: Clarinet Concerto*. Cambridge Music Handbooks, ed. Julian Rushton. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

_____. "Playing Historical Clarinets." In *The Cambridge Companion to the Clarinet*, ed. Colin Lawson, 134-149. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Lebler, Don. "Learning and Assessment Through Recording." In *Aesthetics and Experience in Music*, eds. Elizabeth Mackinlay, Denis Collins, and Samantha Owens, 319-328. Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2005.

Libin, Laurence. "Progress, Adaptation, and the Evolution of Musical Instruments." *Journal of the American Musical Instrument Society* 26 (2000): 187-213.

Mark, Thomas Carson. "On Works of Virtuosity." *The Journal of Philosophy* 77, no. 1 (Jan., 1980): 28-45.

Martin, James L. "Beethoven and the Purpose of Difficulty." *Piano Quarterly* 39, no. 154 (Summer, 1991): 37-42.

Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus. Concerto for Clarinet and Orchestra in A Major, K. 622. Edition by Henri Kling, eds. Sabine Meyer, Wolfgang Meyer, and Reiner Wehle. Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1987.

_____. Clarinet Concerto in A Major, K. 622. Anthony Pay, basset clarinet; The Academy of Ancient Music, cond. Christopher Hogwood. Compact digital disc. Decca Record Company, 414 339-2, 1986.

O'Dea, Jane. *Virtue or Virtuosity? Explorations in the Ethics of Musical Performance*. Contributions to the Study of Music and Dance, no. 58. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000.

Philip, Robert. *Performing Music in the Age of Recording*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004.

Pincherle, Marc. "Virtuosity." Translated by Willis Wager. *The Musical Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (Apr., 1949): 226-243.

Poulin, Pamela L. "Anton Stadler's Basset Clarinet: Recent Discoveries in Riga." *Journal of the American Musical Instrument Society* 22 (1996): 110-127.

Ratner, Leonard G. *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style*. New York: Schirmer Books, 1980.

Rice, Albert R. "The Clarinet as Described by Lorents Nicolai Berg (1782)."
  Journal of the American Musical Instrument Society 5-6 (1979-80): 42-53.

Rosen, Charles. *Beethoven's Piano Sonatas: A Short Companion.* New Haven,
  CT: Yale University Press, 2002.

_____. *The Classical Style: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven,* Expanded Edition.
  New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997.

Shackleton, Nicholas. "The Development of the Clarinet." In *The Cambridge
  Companion to the Clarinet,* ed. Colin Lawson, 16-32. Cambridge:
  Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Seashore, Carl E. *Psychology of Music.* New York: Dover Publications, 1967.

Small, Christopher. *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening.*
  Music/Culture, eds. George Lipsitz, Susan McClary, and Robert Walser.
  Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998.

Solomon, Maynard. *Beethoven.* New York: Schirmer Books, 1977.

Spitzer, John, and Neal Zaslaw. *The Birth of the Orchestra: History of an
  Institution, 1650-1815.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004; Oxford
  University Press, 2005.

Stravinsky, Igor. *An Autobiography.* New York: Simon and Schuster, 1936.
  Reprint, New York: M. & J. Steuer, 1958.

_____. *Poetics of Music in the Form of Six Lessons.* Translated by Arthur
  Knodel and Ingolf Dahl. With a preface by George Seferis. Cambridge,
  MA: Harvard University Press, 1970.

_____. *The Rite of Spring.* Moscow: State Music Publishing House, 1965.
  Reprint, New York: Dover Publications, 1989.

Taruskin, Richard. "Russian Folk Melodies in *The Rite of Spring.*" *Journal of
  the American Musicological Society* 33, no. 3 (Autumn, 1980): 501-543.

_____. *Text and Act: Essays on Music and Performance.* Oxford: Oxford
  University Press, 1995.

Taub, Robert. *Playing the Beethoven Piano Sonatas.* Portland, OR: Amadeus
  Press, 2002.

Umemoto, Takao. "The Psychological Structure of Music." *Music Perception* 8, no. 2 (Winter, 1990): 115-128.

Walsh, Stephen. *The Music of Stravinsky*. Companions to the Great Composers, ed. Paul Griffiths. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993.

Weston, Pamela. *Clarinet Virtuosi of the Past*. London: Novello & Co., 1971. Reprint, 1976.

Winter, Robert. "Performing Nineteenth-Century Music on Nineteenth-Century Instruments." *19th Century Music* 1, no. 2 (Nov., 1977): 163-175.