



# H

But he was serious about finding an “image”, and here we encounter a peculiarity about artistic ideas of making. For although music is sonic and unfolds in time, both Mozart and Beethoven (and Schoenberg, who started out as a painter) spoke of apprehending work visually, in the first instance, and with remarkable completeness, before they’d written a note. Arguably - as Tippett goes on to suggest - they were conceiving and planning rather than seeing. We use phrases like “artistic vision” in the knowledge that we are employing an analogy or metaphor to describe both the sudden nature of inspiration and the searching quality of hard work, and yet the metaphor is so common as to make me wonder if it is a metaphor at all.

If we think of artistic envisioning as a kind of *navigation* through complex territory, then the metaphor acquires creaturely precision, with a few surprises along the way. What follows is a little eccentric, and probably personal to me, but it is based on the simple idea that physical “seeing” is already a varied mode of apprehension.

How, in everyday life, do we know where we are? The answer is that our view of a landscape makes use of remembered abstract information - an internalised template or map of space - to tell us where objects are likely to be. Objects and landmarks matter, too, but the spatial map is important because it works in concert with active looking (the depth perception acquired by binocular vision, for instance) to reveal distance and help us orientate ourselves. This idea can be extended to other mammals, as an exercise in comparative psychology and with allowances for their variety of optical mechanisms. For a long time, too, it was thought that birds did something similar, matching object cues to spatial memory. But recent research (“Taking an Insect-inspired Approach to Bird Navigation”, *Learning & Behaviour*, 2018, by David J. Pritchard and Susan D. Healy) suggests that the avian world, or at least some of it, is closer to that of

*insects*, where a map or remembered view is less important than what the animal sees when it's moving.

For example, when a bee flies sideways or in an arc around a flower, it is generating motion parallax - a depth-perception cue in which nearby objects move faster than objects further away - to identify its food source. Mapping still goes on, but at a dynamic level: location is revealed as much by motion round an object as by the object itself. Hummingbirds approaching a feeder have been seen to behave similarly.

The intriguing question is: do we? According to a famous account, from 1822, by the Darmstadt violinist Louis Schläsler, Beethoven described his process of planning a new piece in the following terms: "I begin to elaborate the work in its breadth, its narrowness, its height and its depth . . . It rises, it grows up, I hear and see the image in front of me from every angle, as if it had been cast . . . [and] very often I work at several things at the same time." In other words, it is the composer's mobile consideration of the "work" - seeing it move, moving around it himself "from every angle", like a bee or a hummingbird - that reveals its nature, not any kind of given appearance.

If the animal comparison seems extravagant, then it is worth remembering that humans use motion parallax, too; we just don't notice that we're using it. Cycle along the road, look to one side, and you'll see the pavement moving by in a blur, with the houses set back from the road passing more intelligibly. Such experience of relative motion in a turbulent world helps clarify depth, the three-dimensionality of the visual field and your sense of where you are in it. Perhaps "artistic vision" works this way, too. Perhaps it *is* a part of physical seeing, in which the details of the work are not as important as the work's rising shape; where ancillary visual processes (parallax, peripheral awareness, looking away or looking sideways) matter more than locked-on focus, and

where (maybe most important) an always-changing spatial cognition helps us to trust in the existence of the thing we haven't yet fixed on paper or in sound. A sense of the music or the story being out there, in the mix, as life rushes by, underpins our search for it.

I am not suggesting Beethoven was an insect. Nor am I trying to mechanise the mystery of how art comes to be. If anything, I wish to make it stranger, and truer, by the process of counter-intuition described earlier. We are not insects or birds, but we are animals, and all animals have their own way of transforming sense data into experience - what it is "like" to be hungry, to feel pain, to hear sound or be (*pace* Thomas Nagel) a bat.

What I am suggesting is that artistic vision, far from being an inaccessible cultural refinement, is a part of our animal response to the world, which comes soon after the encounter with stimuli, and gives those stimuli meaning. Painters know this. From Cézanne onwards, the geometric re-sorting of fully apprehended objects like tables and plates into lines and discs has been a way of reminding us of what it is the eye actually sees before the mind gets to work on the sense data and turns them into items of furniture. The artist's need to discover the special aesthetic properties of an image, or a sound, is an extension of the mind's more fundamental need to discover form - to stabilise a relation between new stimuli and known objects. In that moment between exposure (to light, sound, pressure) and recognition, we are all animals - and artists.

This moment is a source of wonder. It is mercurial, always reproducing itself as the eye moves in saccades across the room - resolving one image and then the next - or as we find ourselves ambushed by the sheer attack of a songbird's melody, not yet having spotted the blackbird, or thrush, or robin pouring it into the air. And it is especially a musical encounter, I think, because it is an

experience before it has a name or describes anything. This immediacy has much in common with the experience of childhood synaesthesia, where words and things and sounds (and self) are bound together. In *Flickerbook* (2006), her sensual memoir of early life in the Manchester of the 1920s and 30s, Leila Berg reinhabits the memory of pushing her way through autumn leaves: “Crunching, whispering, scuttling leaves! Is it the leaves I am hearing or the words? Where have they come from, these words?”

So much of writing is the attempt to undo the separation of word and world so that we can “see” the latter as we once knew it to be - and of course it cannot be done, even if you believe, as the Romantics did, that words are things. The poignancy of Berg’s summoning lies in its refusal of the truth that the gap between experience and the moment of retrieval - of writing about it - widens as you get older, although really the gap is always there, because words refer beyond themselves as musical notes do not. If you write a piece of music inspired by your childhood, the notes say nothing about your age now or then. The paradox of music, even old music, is that it is a temporal art with no views on history. It insists only on being, which is why people like it at funerals.

**D**uring the recent Covid lockdowns, the importance of these “musical” encounters was borne in on me by the two woodpigeons who arrived unexpectedly in my yard and their tough-nut cousins in the park. Finding myself bereft of normal objectives and destinations - going to work, going to see people - I paid attention to these common birds for what felt like the first time; looked, listened, experienced their oddity and familiarity; saw how the people coming to feed them - approaching singly, speculatively, seeking contact - made their own scattered flock. Like us, pigeons forage individually but imitate each other within a group, taking advantage of the same convenient food source and competing for it. One afternoon I saw a flock descend. Their fast, zig-zagging tussles over a

few crumbs had a dramatic outcome: there was a fight (or what I call a fight: perhaps it was something less/more for the pigeons) and the loser flew off, retreated into one of the Lombardy poplars overlooking the upper pond.

I felt I was among the birds, and defined in relation to them, to their motion. I felt this as a musical property, something rhythmical. The vocal commotion, the head-bobbing, the stamping and fluffing and their rapid cessation seemed to stretch out one moment and disappear into the next with the changing light. Back home, the woodpigeons weighed heavily on the branches of my elder bush while looking away in different directions. They were at once intimately observable, and very hard to describe.

As I came to write “Pigeon”, a musical image on the scale of the pieces from Olivier Messiaen’s *Petites esquisses d’oiseaux* (1985) - his last work for the piano and one of his most beautiful for that instrument - I had (unlike Messiaen) no initial sense that I would be writing “about” birds. But I did see, without yet hearing, two and then three lines in simple time jerkily mimicking each other, moving in intervals, dovetailing, pulling apart, pausing now and again, before rushing forward, sometimes stumbling. Once I had that idea, the notes suggested themselves. I wrote them down and their clustering turned into a canon. (A canon is a form of counterpoint in which note-for-note repetitions of a melody overlap each other at various intervals and rhythmic distances; a round, for example, is a kind of canon.) At about that stage, I knew the motion was that of pigeons, scrapping and breaking off, and a kind of story fashioned itself from the notes’ wordless conversation - that of a solitary bird being ousted or returning to its mate.

A reasonable objection to this account is that I am trying to have it both ways! First, I’ve said the shaping of the piece is intrinsically animal, then - halfway through writing it - the notes get identified with that-over-there and the music

is suddenly “about” or “like” a pigeon coming adrift. In other words, a description. Well, which is it?

Leonard Bernstein (and he is not alone) raises a forceful objection to the idea that music refers to *any* externals in his NBC show for children, *What Does Music Mean?*, from 1958: “Music just is. Music is notes, beautiful notes and sounds put together in such a way that we get pleasure out of listening to them, and that’s all there is to it.” One of his examples is Modest Mussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition*. Stories and paintings and birds are associated with the music only “because the composer SAYS so”; you could have other stories or objects replacing the “Great Gate of Kiev” (Bernstein nominates the Mississippi river) and the music would be just as passionate, chordal, great.

That’s true, but one can get too dogmatic about this kind of thing. *West Side Story*, even without the book and lyrics, has a more than arbitrary relation to its first treatment by William Shakespeare, and “associated” isn’t a dirty word. Things and ideas pair up - the goldfinch outside, right now, sounds like a nearly defunct doorbell - and Aristotle thought that association either by experience or recall underpinned the ability to learn. Bernstein indulges in it himself: on the one hand, musical meaning is (he says) “just” the “movement . . . from one note to another”; on the other hand, music “*names feelings* [my italics] only in notes instead of in words”. So it *does* describe (that is, it describes feelings). Can’t both positions be true? A movement of notes takes us from abstraction to emotion. To hear just the bugler’s first two notes in the Last Post is to have an experience, and experiences involve emotional associations. That’s how we make sense of them.

The mystery of music isn’t solved by putting it on some Platonic top shelf. It may not point to specific externals, but that is not to say it doesn’t depend formatively on the world of other things, in a way most composers - including

Tippett, Mozart, Schoenberg and Messiaen - acknowledge. A comparison with mathematics is instructive. Would we have formed the concept of number without objects, like sheep, that needed to be counted? And would rhythm and melody have developed without our ancestors' awareness of the drumming of hooves, or the dawn chorus in the forest canopy?

Associations matter. Without them, where are we? Without them, where is the artistic possibility of imitation? Without them, Messiaen cannot claim of his vast, intricate piano cycle *Catalogue d'oiseaux* (1956-8) that "All here is truth, even the countryside with its accompanying sights, sounds, smells and thermal currents." Without them, Kate Bush's swooping melodic lines do not follow the motion of a kite (in "Kite"). Without them, lyrics are arbitrary; we don't need Noël Coward's words, and Prince's erotic "Tamborine" isn't a funny, sexy, teasing evocation. Without them, John Cage's "4'33'" is an absence, not a teeming presence. Without them, one note cannot suggest the next and there is no change, no "questioning" (so: no Beethoven), no wondering "what-now?" as you look at your hands in contrary motion on the keyboard and think of two spiders, a mirror, parting.

The truth is a kind of dissonance. Music isn't about anything, but it carries meaning: and, for some reason, this dissonance matters to me.

To answer the question at the head of this chapter, I work in a welter of associations, confronted by moving images and blurred auditory signals filling the landscape in front of me, and my job is to decide which ones count. I can't adequately convey what this is like in the moment of writing (either words or music); I can't tell you what I am about to do; I can't refer to the unconscious directly. But the sense of an objective (the house standing back from the road) becoming more stable, even as the foreground roils with near panic, is at the heart of it; I can only, like a sandpiper searching for the right tiny mollusc

among so many inert shells, react consecutively to the lure of each note, each verbal relation. This way or that? Over here? Over there?

Did the idea of another bird lead to “Sandpiper”? After “Two Ornaments”, an earlier composition, I may have considered the possibility of pairing pieces like the panels of a diptych, but I suspect the mazy action of the second piece had multiple origins. It took a while to hatch as a bird.

Hitting the keyboard with both hands together and then alternating hands, as fast as you can go, is a staple of childhood play, which - to my ears - survives into both the finale of Mozart’s Piano Sonata No. 8 in A Minor, K310, where the left hand hops about after the right, and the pulsating fifth dance in Bulgarian rhythm from the last book in Bartók’s astonishing piano tutor, *Mikrokosmos*. But these were not conscious influences, and I am not sure who or what the finished piece resembles, musically. Andrzej Panufnik? Lene Lovich? All I know is that it led me to its own nature. There was a moment when it became a sandpiper, when the up-and-down “teetering” turned into a gliding quest across the octaves, dipping into tonality - F sharp minor followed by a swerve into D minor in bars eighteen to twenty-one - before flying off again: and I knew what I had seen.

*Will Eaves is a novelist and poet. Invasion of the Polyhedrons, a collection of poems, will be published in October.*