Music and Dreams – A Fantasy
- Matthias Roth about the CD-Album 'Lichtungen'

Listening to Schumann's "Reverie" from the "Scenes of Childhood" (1838), I have always asked myself: Who is dreaming here? Is it the pianist, the composer, the listener? And is he dreaming on his own or in communion with the audience? And what kind of musical dreams are these, obeying as they do the requirements of musical form and systems of tonality, melodic and rhythmic structures, possibly even the strict rules of counterpoint?

Hardly anything could be more personal. In sleep and in daydreams, the dreamer frequently learns things about himself that he will perhaps prefer not to talk about. But art is an exercise in communication, it requires an audience, the listener, the beholder, the reader.

Occasionally a musician may appear to be all alone with his dreams. But it is surely more usual for it to be the listener who drifts off into his own world, while the musician counts bars, juxtaposes rhythms, and seeks to produce sounds that are as beautiful (or ugly) as the music requires. In performance, he will attempt to convey the composer's dream to the listener by evoking that same vision in the listener's consciousness. Even in the case of improvisation, the music itself is never a dream, it is at the most "dreamlike," a source of pleasure conveyed by the ethereal nature of musical imagination.

Dreams have a logic all their own. That is what makes them special. Rhythm, speed, timing or the conditions and restrictions imposed by an instrument are all categories that genuine dreams can upend at will. Nor will they ever conform to the strictures of good taste or stylistic convention.

The dreams of music itself are dreams devoid of risk, even when they attempt to overcome the limitations imposed by nature - for example, when a pianist tries his best to make his instrument sound like a violin or the human voice. But composers and musicians are more than just professional dreamers. Are not some of the more bizarre effects we encounter in Haydn's symphonies a way of stopping us from dreaming? No, they are designed to prevent us from falling asleep. For genuine dreaming, the vigilance of our consciousness is indispensable!

At the hands of Sigmund Freud, dreamers lost their innocence once and for all. Unwittingly, they found themselves progressing into "expanses the like of which no human eye had seen before," and those expanses were the bottomless depths of their own selves. Small wonder, then, that modern art should set out to do precisely the same thing. Sleep as the vibrant source of inspiration received new impulses from psychological research unraveling the mysteries of dreams and interpreting them as a map of the unconscious. Today we tend to speak more often of the "extension of consciousness." Artists turned away from the realism of the late 19th century and began to think in abstract, atonal terms. Just like sounds, formal structures began to levitate in space (Kandinsky is a case in point), while the sounds themselves, liberated of major and minor modes and other harmonic systems, were transformed into dreamlike sequences whose unpredictability made it impossible to guess where they would be going next (Schönberg and the New Viennese School). Perhaps it was here that music got closest to the dream state: no one could say where the next stage would lead. Dissonance lost its capacity to shock, similar in this to nightmares, now accorded positive features as a way of coming to terms with psychological problems.

The German author Jean Paul insisted that we should distinguish carefully between the "notional images" and the "emotional images" vouchsafed by dreams. Idealized wish-dreams have little in common with the somnambular reality of the nocturnal visitations we more properly call "dreams." But they also play a major part in the occasionally sentimental ideas of what we unthinkingly call "dreamlike." Astute publishers appreciate the potential behind this inclination and tag onto a simply

crafted piece, brilliantly suggestive in its own right, the disastrous nickname “Moonshine Sonata,” thus pandering to clichés that can be expected to boost sales by means of the skillful evocation of pleasant associations. (This absurd title was invented by a contemporary critic in search of suggestive imagery to describe his own impressions. Beethoven himself found it execrable.) As soon as a musician sits down to “dream” with or at his instrument, he usually avails himself of such convenient resources. And for this purpose, the “Moonshine” sonata looks to be a much better bet than, say, the artistically crafted sound chimeras of Anton Webern, although his mini-nightmares have at least as much to do with the world of sonic reverie as Beethoven’s hardy perennial.

After a few measures, the experienced listener will normally know what tradition an improvising artist is drawing upon, whether he is “dreaming” of Bach, Scriabin, Stockhausen, Steve Reich or Keith Jarrett, or perhaps even devising a spectacular postmodern medley out of all of them. But when Arvo Pärt invents – not to say blueprints – music that in its economy and its tendency toward harmonic, structural, and sonic standstill almost coerces the listener into filling it out with “dreams” of his own, then we will perhaps come to the conclusion that, though this music does not expressly aspire to a dream status, it may require the listener’s willingness and ability to dream if the sounds he hears are to be perceived as music in the first place. We are reminded of the legendary (probably in the true sense of the word) response of one conductor when leafing through one of Pärt’s scores for the first time. Where, he asked, was the music behind those few notes scattered across the page? Without a capacity for dreaming there can be no meaningful answer.

“Unfortunately,” Jean Paul muses, “the whole dream world is built into a twilight which the eye, blinded by the light of day, cannot pierce.” “It is strange enough,” he continued, “that, like the other side of the moon, half of our life accompanies us averted and concealed.” With psychedelic substances and sophisticated artistic designs the British rock group Pink Floyd attempted to explore this “Dark Side of the Moon” (1973). Others have also drawn sustenance from the encounter with dream worlds. The Australian aborigines, for example, whose way of “being-in-the-world” is a source of fascination for an increasing number of people from other cultures, see dreams as vessels of their own history and as such directly bound up with song. They sing the “dreams” of their ancestors, follow their “songlines,” and thus join up past and present. “It’s fine to collect things,” says Bruce Chatwin, whose Songlines is perhaps the most eloquent book on the connection between dream and the mythic world of Australia, “but it is better to go walking.” This nomadic wisdom can be applied without reserve to music.

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