Image: Firebird, from Wikipedia

David Farrah
Attunedness

Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall. . . .

—Virginia Woolf[1]

The position of the artist is humble. He is essentially a channel.

—Piet Mondrian[2]

One of the most striking phenomena of Balinese gamelan music is the way in which it travels and colors and hangs in the air, thereby creating a shimmering effect that can only be described as magical.

And circling around the source of that magic—along with other formulative powers of expression—is the science of harmonics. In his book titled *Balinese Music*, Michael Tenzer explains:

> In Western music, when pairs of like instruments . . . play a melody together on the same notes, we say that they are in unison. This means that they are producing sound waves of exactly the same

> dimensions, making for the simplest and purest concordance of sounds. . . . In Balinese music such tones would be considered wan and lifeless. Instead, pairs of instruments are intentionally tuned just slightly apart from one another so that when the same tone is struck on the two instruments simultaneously, the sound waves that emerge are of slightly different speeds. This causes an acoustical phenomenon called beating, which makes the tones seem agitated and charged with pulsations. . . .
>
> Furthermore, in order to keep the rate of beating constant throughout the gamelan, octaves and other intervals within the scale must sometimes be compromised. But the result is fantastic—a glorious bouquet of tones each with its own character and relation to the whole. And when the full gamelan strikes up and a glistening cascade of sound rushes forth, the complexities of the tuning add a great deal to the intense visceral effect of the music. (32-33)

The complexities of tuning to which Tenzer refers are notable, indeed, not only for their associated visceral effects, but also for the way in which they underscore the fundamental and sustaining function of frequency in an equation that implicitly links the musical to the spiritual to the earthly to the ethereal. In addition to these richly intermodulating realms, there are other realms into which we can reach for factors of resonance that can be included in the equation, namely, the atomic and subatomic. At these levels, we approach as near as we might to a structural understanding of the material source of the magic that sparks the shimmer of artistic expressiveness. Specifically, building blocks of elementary particles with mass, frequency, and charge (electrons, for example) interact with other subatomic particles to collectively begin playing their deeply imbedded parts. From within the molecules of the substances they configure, their formational qualities of being reverberate through the rendering of not only the medium with which the artist can potentially engage, but also the frequencies by which he can synergistically proceed. Furthermore, if string theorists are to be believed, "absolutely everything in the universe—all of the particles that make up matter and forces—is comprised of tiny vibrating fundamental strings. Moreover, every one of these strings is identical. The only difference between one string and another . . . is its resonant pattern, or how it vibrates" ("The Elegant Universe"). In any case, given the deep, structural and compositional resonances that occur along the lines of

creation and its quiddities, perhaps it can be suggested that the evolutions of music and life are essentially one and the same, comprising a shared, symbiotic process of incremental, evolutionary entanglement. In other words, life is musical to—and at—its core.

In the case of Balinese gamelan and its predominantly percussive instrumentation, the core is composed of "a bronze consisting of three parts copper to ten parts tin" (Tenzer 29). This alloy, having been poured, pounded, and shaped by human hands, is thereby in elemental terms a forging of frequencies that produces the first creative link in a musical chain of being extending in turns into the equally exuberant hands of the musicians themselves. These musicians, in concert with the accompanying dancers, then aspire through their performances to complete the chain by forging their own intimately entangled relationships with the divine.

Occasionally, the artist's urge to synchronize "the human // with the divine" (Farrah *Landscapes* 24) is so precisely and powerfully expressed that it not only shimmers, but it dazzles:

"The Firebird"[4]

From within

the piano
passionately

two birds
two red birds

fly out and as

their color
deepens

surpassing
the highest C

(Farrah, *Ronso* 37)

Like the Balinese who so willingly and passionately align themselves with and through their music, so too does the pianist in this poem attune himself with and through the transfiguring frequencies of ascendence. Two birds take flight as they take on color, "surpassing / the highest C", reverberating upward through both the aural and visual spectrums as a result of the trance-like intensity of the artist. Without

this fine-tuned intensity of technique and spirit, the synesthesia of forms could not have been achieved.

The achievement of having brought these birds to life and having coaxed them to simultaneously "fly out and as" (as both being and metaphor), highlights the transformative function of the artist, as well as the organic nature of art itself. In her 1968 essay titled "Origins of a Poem," Denise Levertov writes: "The substance, the means, of an art, is an incarnation—not reference but phenomenon. A poem is an indivisibility of 'spirit and matter' much more absolute than what most people seem to understand by 'synthesis of form and content" (260). In the case of "The Firebird," the incarnation of "spirit and matter" begins within the piano itself. From there, the concatenation between material and means that spans the creative process originates, and the artist himself is left to forge the indivisibility of the achievement. As a result, those two red birds—those phenomena, those incarnations—become the kinetic, performative embodiments of human imagination as they "fly out" and extend themselves from one realm into the next.

Through this transfiguration of forms, the artist also demonstrates a desire and willingness to transfigure himself. In fact, the biology of the creative act demands it. As Stravinsky points out: "All creation presupposes at its origin a sort of appetite that is brought on by the foretaste of discovery. This foretaste of the creative act accompanies the intuitive grasp of an unknown entity already possessed but not yet intelligible" (51). To make that entity intelligible, to bring those red birds to life, the artist must align himself with his appetite. He must be hungry and daring enough to embrace and apply the technical rigors of his medium, while at the same time humble enough to seemingly paradoxically submit to a comprehensive realignment of the self. In a word, he must become the "channel" to which Mondrian refers, albeit one which actively courts and accommodates the forces of his creative energies.

Similarly in *Poetics of Music*, Stravinsky also takes up this "great principle of submission" (127). In particular, in his third lecture "Composition of Music," he reminds us that "step by step, link by link, it will be granted [the creator]"—and I would argue the pianist and poet, too, by virtue of evolutionary entanglement—"to discover the work" (50). Once again, we are referred back to the incremental nature of the process that creatively links our lives to art. And in referencing that process yet again, we might also wish to more specifically consider what it is that ignites, feeds, and sustains a work of art. In the case of "The Firebird", it is passion that fuels the flight. Both the pianist and the firebirds depend on it, as they merge their energies into a singular, activating, adverbial line. From then on, there is a surge in the molecular excitability of the poem, as the firebirds move from one level of flight to

the next, one frequency to the next, taking on the substantiality of color as they pass through a transformative process that leads to a final, unifying moment of perceptive expression in the sound of "the highest C."

Attuning oneself toward that moment of divine communion is no mean feat, particularly "in a field where everything is balance and calculation through which the breath of the speculative spirit blows" (Stravinsky 50). However, passion as catalyst is risky business, as it can so easily upset that formulative balance by bringing with it the capricious, interfering amplitudes of extreme emotion. As a result, it has been well warned against throughout literary history. In *The Sonnets to Orpheus,* Rilke advises that it's best "to forget that passionate music" (231). And in *An Essay on Man*, Pope cautions against the "Chaos of Thought and Passion, all confus'd" (55). However, he also acknowledges that "On life's vast ocean diversely we sail, / Reason the card, but Passion is the gale" (67-68). But how to quell the gale while at the same time test the limits of flight? How to steady and sustain the procreative spark while also harnessing what Lucretius called the vagarious "swerve" (66) of atoms?

To be clear then, we are not speaking of the artist as a flailing conjurer in a storm of emotion, but rather as a uniquely focused, inspirationally balanced, and highly disciplined energizing source of laser-like conductivity who depends upon and is thereby assisted by the underlying organizational properties of life itself. Pertinent to such a view is a January 2014 *Quanta Magazine* article titled "A New Physics Theory of Life" in which Natalie Wolchover discusses the recent work of MIT physicist Jeremy England whose groundbreaking formula "indicates that when a group of atoms is driven by an external source of energy . . . and surrounded by a heat bath . . . it will often gradually restructure itself in order to dissipate increasingly more energy." In other words, "Particles tend to dissipate more energy [thereby organizing and evolving] when they resonate with a driving force, or move in the direction it is pushing them." While England's theory is meant to address the "underlying physical principle driving the origin and evolution of life", might not a similar—or even the same—organic, evolutionary system also apply to the origins of a work of art? Could it not be said that the artist is the "the driving force"—albeit one with a self-effacing trajectory—that resonates with Lucretius' swerving atoms and pushes them through the formulative processes of nature and art into precisely aligned organic patterns of expressiveness?

In training and refining himself to become that highly attuned driving force, the artist will also find that his endeavor is as expressively delicate as it is biologically robust:

"Rini's Song"

Above the hibiscus, a hovering of vowels
that somehow mouths the flowering

of shape and color, long red notes
at the back of the throat turned out

into lips through which each petal
sounds.

(Farrah, *Stevens Journal*)

The above poem begins in a moment of artistic potentiality, as all poems—all works of art—must. While the delicate blossom of the hibiscus has already realized its biologically expressive form, Rini's song has not. Instead, it is just beginning its evolutionary process. The vowels hover in mid air, mouthing the "flowering" of the hibiscus' organic template "of shape and color", their frequencies aligning, their atoms and molecules incrementally assembling into patterns of being as they are imbued with Rini's driving force. Indeed, it is the songstress herself who catalyzes and channels the potential into the kinetic. As a result, flower, song and songstress all begin to synchronize and assume the same physiological form: "long red notes / at the back of the throat turned out / into lips". And through these lips, a culminating, unifying resonance is thereby facilitated and subsequently forged into the final, singular syllabic link of "sounds" in the poem's last line. The creative chain of artistic expression is now complete.

During the 1930's, the island of Bali was visited by a myriad of artists and academicians, among them British cultural anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer and American musicologist Colin McPhee. In his book *Bali and Angkor: A 1930's Pleasure Trip Looking at Life and Death*, Gorer writes:

> I wish to suggest, as a hypothesis, that man is a machine with two functions. The best analogy which presents itself to me is that of a radio-gramophone . . . [which] can either make music with things (wax discs) or pick music out of the air. . . . It is very hard to describe concisely what I mean by "being a radio," for it is an unscientific and irrational conception; to put it as simply as I can I consider that the human mind is always potentially a source of energy, and that by special training this energy can be enormously

> increased in power. I propose calling this energy M.E., to stand for Mental, or Mystical or Magical Energy, as you will. To the extent that it can be observed and measured this energy does not obey any of the laws of physics that we know . . . (87-88).

With a nod to Jeremy England, now we know. And for his part, in his book titled *A House in Bali*, McPhee writes:

> Late into the night they [the gamelan players] played. From the house I could hear them going over phrase after phrase, correcting, improving, until the music began to flow of its own accord. I fell asleep with the sounds ringing in my ears, and as I slept I still heard them, saw them rather, for now they seemed transformed into a shining rain of silver. (26)

Whatever the equivalency, attunedness is the openness and willingness and ableness of the artist to align and link himself with the constitutive elements of a potential work of art as they might be formulated into life. It is a process that activates and colors the mind. It is a high-frequency, highly sympathetic state of being that facilitates the transformation of sound into light into red birds and silver rain.

Notes

1. Qtd. in Woolf 150.
2. Qtd. in Cameron xv.
3. Stravinsky's "L'oiseau de feu" as performed by Kotaro Fukuma, Matsukata Hall, Kobe, 6 Oct. 2013.

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