

*Genius in the 18th Century: C. F. D. Schubart's
"Vom musikalischen Genie"*

Richard W. Harpster

In the mid-18th century there arose among diverse artists and philosophers a fascination with the notion of Genius. This enthusiasm (which had its roots in the *furores* of Plato) reached its peak in the so-called *Genieperiode*, or *Sturm und Drang* era, as a reaction against the view of Nature held by Johann Winckelmann and Abbé Batteux: that art is eclectic mimesis. Perhaps the greatest catalytic force in this reaction was Voltaire's *Nature, Dialogue entre le Philosophe et la Nature* (1771). If Nature is so worthy of imitation, he asked, how do we account for its caprices and waste; for example, how do we explain the countless acorns needed to produce just one oak tree?

Thus the evolution of the concept of Genius in the 18th century was to a large extent coexistent with the development of a view of Nature. As Rudolf Wittkower has pointed out in his enlightening essay "Imitation, Eclecticism, and Genius,"¹ there were four approaches to Nature in the 18th century:

- (1) The view that the closer a work of art is to Nature, the more perfect it is. Thus, Art may never surpass Nature.
- (2) The interpretation of Nature as imperfect. In this sense the artist should choose the most perfect parts from Nature and combine them in his work of art. Thus, Art surpasses Nature and results in what Batteux called *la belle Nature*.
- (3) Another interpretation of Nature as less than perfect. Here the artist uses the works of the ancients as models; combining the "virtue of his models," he then creates works of an even higher quality. The guiding ideal of this process is none other than Winckelmann's epithet "stille Grosse und edle Einfacht."
- (4) The notion that, in his imagination, an artist can render concepts formed by images from Nature that were stored in his mind.

The explanations in defense of Genius, like those of Nature, were multifarious. One was the eclectic Genius of Batteux:

First the genius, who is the father of the arts, should imitate Nature. Secondly, he should not imitate anything which is ordinary or commonplace. And thirdly, taste, for which the arts are made and which is their judge, should be satisfied when Nature is well chosen and well imitated by the arts. . . .²

And there was the reaction against this eclecticism, the "original genius":

Many a Genius, probably there has been,
which could neither write nor read.³

Human nature also entered into the development of the concept of Genius, in the guise of the twin ideas of *Sensibilité* and *Empfindsamkeit*. The painter

Jacques Louis David, for example, revealed his heritage of *Sensibilité* when he declared: "The artist must therefore have studied all the springs of the human heart. . . ."4 And Diderot coupled *Sensibilité* and the Sublime when he offered the following definition of Genius in the *Encyclopédie*:

To be of genius it [the work of art] must sometimes be careless and have an irregular, rugged, savage air. Sublimity and genius flash in Shakespeare like streaks of lightning in a long night. . . .5

In J. G. Sulzer's opinion *Empfindsamkeit* was the sole criterion for determining the presence of Genius:

[Geniuses are only those who] conceive and feel more sharply and have their ideas and feelings more in their authority than other men. . . .6

The last generation of 18th-century Geniuses—the progenitor of the 19th century's lonely Genius—was that of the *Sturm und Drang*. With this movement the aim of the Genius was shifted from mimesis to originality; the watchword changed from imitation to *Ursprünglichkeit*. And the judge of this Genius's art was the heart. Thus, Herder could declare that the sign of a Genius was a "natural or spontaneous god-like creativity and the facility to ascend to a great height while at the same time not dispensing with his originality."7 Schiller echoed these sentiments in his essay "The Pathetic," when he stated:

Poetry ought not to take its course through the frigid region of memory. . . . It ought to go straight to the heart, because it has come from the heart. . . .8

When C. F. D. Schubart's *Ideen zu einer Aesthetik der Tonkunst* appeared in 1806, it stood less as a document of original thought than as a synthesis of the myriad ideas of Schubart's artistic contemporaries. Hence, many of the notions of Genius and Nature discussed above appear in the chapter entitled "Vom musikalischen Genie." This portion of the book is a pasticcio whose sources range from the autodidactic Genius of Edward Young and the *Sensibilité* Genius of David to the *Herz-Genie* of Herder and Schiller. It was especially toward these *Sturm und Drang* figures that Schubart was inclined: witness the opening statement of the chapter. Here, then, is a translation of Schubart's ideas on Genius:9

No proverb is so true and appropriate to the nature of things as this venerable one: *Poets and musicians are born*. As certain as it is that each man brings along into the world a musical germ, it is just as certain that this musical germ involves the tools of the ear and throat, and even the detrimental structure of the hands; sometimes even education may hinder the development of this musical germ. The musical genius has the *heart* as its foundation, and it receives its impressions through the ear. "He has no ear, no hearing" in musical terms means that "he has no musical mind." Experience teaches that men are born without a feeling for rhythm and that they are deaf and unreceptive to the beauty of music. On the other hand, artistic virtuosity announces itself

already in the youth. This youth's heart is his principal chord, with strings stretched end to end, each string so fine that they all blend at every harmonic agitation. All great musical geniuses, therefore, are autodidactics; for the fire that inspires them compels them to seek, undetained, their own individual line of flight. The *Bachs*, a *Galuppi*, *Jommelli*, *Gluck*, and *Mozart* excelled already in their childhood with the splendid productions of their spirits. Musical euphony dwelled in their souls, and soon they threw away the crutch of art. The characteristics of a musical genius are thus indisputably as follows:

1. *Zeal*, or enthusiastic feeling for musical beauty and greatness.
2. An especially delicate *feeling of the heart*, which sympathizes with all the Noble and Beautiful that music evokes. The heart is like a sounding board of the great musicians: without it there is nothing; without it the artist can never create something great.
3. A most highly refined *ear*, which drinks in each consonance and listens reluctantly to each disturbing sound. When a child without any instruction produces a chord on the piano; when a maiden or lad can improvise a second part to a folksong; when the brows of young listeners wrinkle on hearing dissonance and relax on hearing consonance; when the young throat trills a melody at a very early age—then musical genius is present.
4. A natural feeling for *rhythm and meter*. Let one give a child of six or seven years a key and then sing or play a piece: if the child taps the meter by himself, even when I mix even and uneven meters back and forth—then there certainly is a musical head before us.
5. Irresistible *love and preference for music*, which sweeps us up so supremely that we prefer music to all other joys of life—this is a very strong criterion for the presence of a musical spirit. Nevertheless this characteristic is at times misleading, for there are people who fiddle all day, who strum and play the lyre, and who themselves hardly rise above the mediocre.

In a word, the heavenly *flash of genius* is of so splendid a nature that it cannot be concealed. This heavenly flash presses, propels, pushes, and burns until it erupts in flames and, in its olympic magnificence, transfigures itself. The mechanical musician puts one to sleep; but the musical genius excites and lifts himself up to heaven. Yet he has room enough on his cherub wings to carry the listener up as well. However, the musical genius without culture and practice will always remain quite imperfect. Art must complete what Nature presents raw. If in any of the arts there were men who were born perfected, industry and fatigue would easily become extinct in the world.

The history of great artists gives evidence of how much sweat trickled off their brows as a result of practice; how much oil their nightly lamps consumed; how many imperfect attempts they let evaporate up the chimney; how, deeply hidden in solitude, they trained fingers, ears, and heart until they eventually stepped into the limelight and then, by their masterpieces, elicited from the world a jubilant Bravo.

The greatest strength of the musical genius manifests itself in composing and in wisely directing great orchestras. A true *Capellmeister*

and music director must know all the musical styles and, at all events, prove himself as master in at least one of them. He must have studied counterpoint from the strictest approach; he must be rich in the greatest and most interesting technique of melodic motion; he must have studied deeply the hearts of men, in order to be able to play on the heartstrings [*Cordialnerven*] as surely as on his own favorite instrument. Finally, he must be an acoustician and also know how to direct, with whisper and stroke, a hundred heads as if they were one, so that by this means a great all-working whole is formed. Even if one studied the perfected *Capellmeister* only from a *Mattheson* or a *Junker*, he would be amazed at the wide circumference of the theoretical and practical requisites.

Woe unto thee, Pupil of Music, if you deceive yourself into thinking that you are already among the *Capellmeister* before you have the qualities of a good ripienist. Or, as Handel cared to state it: it is like wanting to be an admiral without having even the training of a sailor. The half-developed musicians, these traveling he-men, who from dawn to dusk blacken the musical world like a swarm of locusts, may threaten you so that you will wear yourself out in your chamber; for you must discipline yourself in melody, modulation, and harmony—and only then can you step forth among your contemporaries in the glory of a cultivated genius.

We have seen the wave of the 18th-century Genius swell from the depths of the eclectic-mimetic Genius to the crest of the *Sturm und Drang* original Genius. There was, nevertheless, one other ripple provoked by the 18th-century Genius. This was the notion of the Genius in Kant's sense, as one who "invents the rules which others follow."¹⁰ This sense of Genius also appears in Schubart's text, in the chapter entitled "Von der Applicatur," according to which fingering cannot be fixed exactly since the Genius, who can invent new compositions, will also invent his own fingering.¹¹

This second sense of the term is a significant testimony to a sociomusicological phenomenon of the late 18th century. For with the rise of the middle class and the concomitant return of the amateur, when almost anyone could try his hand at *Musizieren*, it became necessary to distinguish between the professional and the amateur, between the *Genie* and the *Liebhaber*, a problem not unfamiliar to our own epoch.

In summary, two themes can be found under the surface of Schubart's "Vom musikalischen Genie": his notion that "Art must complete what Nature presents raw" and his definition of Genius as a delicate feeling of the heart which sympathizes with the Noble and the Beautiful. Both motives have their origins in the writings of Winckelmann and Batteux; both reveal Schubart's dependence on the concept of Nature for his definition of Genius.

Itself eclectic, the chapter translated above and, in fact, the entire *Ideen* represent a synoptic record of the evolution of the idea of Genius in the 18th century. In his frequent use of terms like *Herz*, *Empfindung*, *Ausdruck*, etc., Schubart stands in the very center of the *empfindsamer Stil*. With its concept of

Genius, his book is representative of a line of thought which is tangent to two epochs. For, with the heart as judge, Schubart's Genius stands in the midst of the *Sturm und Drang* philosophy, still within the chambers of the 18th century and yet at the very threshold of the *Donnersturm* of Romanticism.

NOTES

¹ In Earl R. Wasserman, *Aspects of the 18th Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1965), pp. 143–63.

² Mssr. l'Abbé Batteux, *Principe de la littérature*, "Premier traité" (Paris: Durand, 1774), p. 30. Translation by the author.

³ Taken from Edward Young's *Conjectures on Original Composition*, 1759, cited in Logan Pearsall Smith, "Four Words: Romantic, Originality, Creative, Genius," *Society for Pure English*, Tract 17 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), p. 27. This "natural genius," incidentally, was denounced by Dr. Johnson as "the mental disease of the present generation" (*ibid.*, p. 25).

⁴ Hugh Honour, *Neoclassicism* (Baltimore: Penguin Books Ltd., 1968), p. 145.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Allgemeine Theorie der schönen Kunst*, vol. 2 (Leipzig: M. G. Weidemann, 1792), p. 364. Translation by the author.

⁷ Hugo Goldschmidt, *Die Musikaesthetik des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Zurich: Rascher & Company, 1965), p. 172. Translation by the author.

⁸ Nathan Haskell Dole, ed., *Aesthetical and Philosophical Essays*, vol. 1 (Boston: Francis Niccolls & Co., 1903), p. 165.

⁹ *Ideen zu einer Aesthetik der Tonkunst* (Vienna: J. V. Degen, 1806; reprint Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1969), pp. 368–71. Passages translated by author and Dr. Pierre Tagmann.

¹⁰ See Kant's *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (Berlin: Lindemann & Lüdecke, 1799; reprint Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1954), p. 160, paragraph 46.

¹¹ Schubart, *Ideen*, p. 292.