

Orpheus in the Insect World

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A middle-class parlor in Central Europe at the turn of the twentieth century: fallen on hard times, the family has had to take in boarders to make ends meet. One evening after dinner, the daughter of the family, who once entertained dreams of studying music professionally, takes out her violin and begins to play. Her parents and the boarders gather to listen.

What could be more conventional than this scene? In the era before recording technology, household music-making was the norm in middle-class European families in the evening. Daughters often learned to play the violin, the harp, the flute, or, pre-eminently, the piano, both so that they could entertain the family and also as an “accomplishment” that would help them attract a husband.

Our text, however, is anything but conventional. Along with the young woman’s parents and the boarders, someone else is listening: her brother, who just happens to have turned into an enormous bug. And the text draws our attention preeminently to *his* reaction to the music.

Franz Kafka’s placement of this musical experience at the turning point of his story *The Metamorphosis*—examine the cover art on the Penguin Classics edition!—engages questions about the status of music, its meaning, and, most importantly, its power to stir the emotions. Such questions had preoccupied European Romantic culture in the nineteenth century, particularly in German-speaking countries—the very culture out of which Kafka grew as a writer. The introduction of Grete’s violin sets up and then overturns the narrative expectations of a reader schooled in these debates. This essay will examine some of these ideas, bringing in two influential texts about music’s power that lie “in the background” of Kafka’s story. These discussions and texts in turn reflect light back on *The Metamorphosis*. As we will see, the ambiguous effects of Grete’s performance exemplify Kafka’s broader narrative strategy of deliberately leaving the story’s pressing ethical questions unanswered.

Romantic European culture celebrated music’s transformative powers. Far more than a source of mere entertainment, to philosophers and literary writers of this period, music was an almost divine force capable of overpowering the rational mind with emotion and changing our

behavior (a belief rooted in Plato's philosophy). Thus, Kafka's introduction of Grete's music in *The Metamorphosis* is not an ornamental plot detail, but a tantalizing offer—quickly withdrawn—of the possibility of *transfiguration*. Since music wields such moral power, cannot the dulcet tones of Grete's violin transform the shabby flat into an abode of harmony? Will the music ennoble her parents and the boarders, even for a moment, softening their hearts and relieving their anger and hostility towards one another and Gregor? Will it transform Gregor himself, already strikingly transformed?

An educated reader of Kafka's tale in 1915 would have recognized its title—*Die Verwandlung* in German—as an echo of *Verwandlungen*, the German title of *The Metamorphoses* (8 AD) by the Roman poet Ovid (43 BC-18 AD). This lengthy recounting of the creation of the world and the early doings of the gods, goddesses, and heroes is one of the most popular works of Western mythology. It takes its title from the many magical transformations found in these myths: Narcissus who became a flower, Actaeon who became a stag. Kafka's tale of a traveling-salesman-turned-insect is at least in part a parody of and commentary on Ovid's book.

Within its complex web of stories imbedded within stories, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* contains the classic account of the life of the Greek singer and demigod Orpheus, the greatest musician of all time. The essence of the myth of Orpheus is a series of demonstrations of the power of his music—and, by extension, of music in general—to sway the emotions. Orpheus exceeds all other musicians in literature in that his music has the power to move not only humans, but gods, animals, plants, and even inanimate objects. Early in the myth, Orpheus achieves the impossible: he persuades Hades and Persephone, the King and Queen of the Underworld, to release his beloved Eurydice from death. He does this through his music, which literally brings the Underworld to a standstill, and inspires pity in the pitiless:

Through the weightless throng, and the ghosts that had received proper burial, he came to Persephone, and the Lord of the Shadows, he who rules the joyless kingdom. Then striking the lyre-strings to accompany his words, he sang. . . . The bloodless spirits wept as he spoke, accompanying his words with the music. Tantalus did not reach for the ever-retreating water: Ixion's wheel was stilled: the vultures did not pluck at Tityus's liver: the Belides, the daughters of Danaüs, left their water jars: and you, Sisyphus, perched there, on your rock. Then they say, for the first time, the faces of the Furies were wet with tears, won over by his song: the king of the deep, and his royal bride, could not bear to refuse his prayer, and called for Eurydice.¹

¹ All quotations are from Books X and XI, trans. Tony Kline, www.tonykline.co.uk.

Even more strikingly, Ovid describes how, after Eurydice dies a second time, the trees, animals, and even *stones* gather around Orpheus to hear his laments. Such is the lasting effect of these songs that later, the same trees, beasts, and stones weep in turn at Orpheus's own death:

The birds, lamenting, cried for you, Orpheus; the crowd of wild creatures; the hard flints; the trees that often gathered to your song, shedding their leaves, mourned you with bared crowns.

The most famous English expression of Orphic power was penned by the English poet William Congreve (1670-1729), who wrote in *The Mourning Bride* (1697), "Music hath charms to soothe a savage breast, to soften rocks, or bend a knotted oak." Kafka refers directly to this power in *The Metamorphosis* when he asks of Gregor, "Could he be an animal, to be so moved by music?" (136).

Kafka knew that his readers were mostly Romantics at heart, as we still tend to be today. We want to celebrate the power of music to move and change us, hence the glimmering of hope that arises in this new *Metamorphosis* when Grete takes up her violin. Perhaps it will echo Orpheus's lyre, melt cold hearts, and animate the inanimate (or rehumanize the dehumanized). The story, however, rapidly dashes our hopes that music can ameliorate the situation in the Samsa household. Far from being transfigured by Grete's playing, the boarders are—the pun doesn't work in German—just bored. They are unRomantic souls (we already know this), well defended against the violin's presumed Orphic power.

[T]he tenants, on the other hand, hands in pockets, had initially taken up position far too close behind the music stand, so that they all could see the music, which must be annoying to his sister, but before long, heads lowered in half-loud conversation, they retreated to the window, where they remained, nervously observed by the father. It really did look all too evident that they were disappointed in their expectation of hearing some fine or entertaining playing, were fed up with the whole performance, and only suffered themselves to be disturbed out of politeness. The way they all blew their cigar smoke upwards from their noses and mouths indicated in particular a great nervousness on their part. And yet his sister was playing so beautifully (135-136).

Indeed, despite the Romantics' idealized notion of music, they knew well that some people are deaf to its voice, or prefer the simple entertainment of dance tunes and sentimental songs to the ennobling grandeur of Great Art. The term for such people was "Philistines," a reference

to the “godless” people perpetually at war with the Israelites in the Hebrew Bible. Since, the metaphor held, artistic truth was like divine truth, those sensitive to art were like the Chosen People, while those insensitive to it were the Enemy. Kafka’s description of the boarders’ non-plussed reaction to the music makes us feel superior as readers: they are unquestionably Philistines, not to hear how Grete “was playing so beautifully.”

Like most aspects of *The Metamorphosis*, however, the situation at this moment is not quite as straightforward as it seems. We have only Gregor’s internal monologue as evidence that Grete plays “beautifully.” The text gives no hint of what music Grete plays, whether it is difficult or easy, or how it really sounds. Perhaps the idea that Grete would enter the Conservatory was just Gregor’s fantasy all along, and the boarders are not such insensitive clods. They crowd around the music stand at first, so they can read music; when they retire to the window to talk, perhaps they find the performance genuinely disappointing.

As readers, we don’t want to believe that Grete plays badly. We want to believe that she is an undiscovered virtuoso, so that we can pity her degradation at being forced to take a menial job and play only for uncomprehending louts. But the scene actually makes more sense if Grete isn’t very good; after all, by the time of her performance, she hasn’t touched her instrument for months, and she stopped taking lessons well before that. That her skill should magically transcend these cold facts seems out of place with the gritty reality depicted in of the rest of the story, the reality against which Gregor’s transformation is so striking. Furthermore, after this scene, the violin completely leaves the story. The tale ends by emphasizing Grete’s readiness for marriage, *not* her matriculation at the Conservatory.

Only on Gregor himself does Grete’s music apparently have its full Orphic effect, hence the text’s (or Gregor’s own) rhetorical question, “Could he be an animal, to be so moved by music?” But note that this snide question has a disturbing implication: that *only* beasts are moved by music. Humans, it implies, can and should be able to defend themselves against music’s power. Taking this position, an alternative to the Romantic faith in music’s Orphic power held that this power was properly *limited* to beasts (and trees and rocks). When humans succumbed to music’s siren call, they were losing the very self-awareness and self-control that made them human. Any force that compelled us against our will was *dangerous* and *immoral* and demanded resistance. Consider: impressionable young people cultivated intimate musical genres in draw-

ing rooms; when the music's demands conflicted with the conventional standards of behavior demanded by bourgeois life, there was bound to be trouble.

Music's destructive moral potential is one of the themes of another tale which Kafka knew well. In *The Kreutzer Sonata* (1889), by the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910), the intrusion of music into the parlor leads to disaster. The story tells how a Russian gentleman, Pozdnyshev, becomes mad with jealousy upon hearing his wife, a pianist, playing music with a handsome violinist at a party, and eventually murders her. The central scene of Tolstoy's story and its title—referring to the Beethoven sonata for violin and piano that the wife and her apparent lover perform—connect with our theme. The musical performance not only releases or reveals the passion that the wife and the violinist feel for each other, but also and more importantly it seizes control of all the guests who listen. In Pozdnyshev's overwrought voice, Tolstoy lays out music's terrible menace:

A terrible thing is that sonata, especially the presto! And a terrible thing is music in general. What is it? Why does it do what it does? They say that music stirs the soul. Stupidity! A lie! It acts, it acts frightfully (I speak for myself), but not in an ennobling way. It acts neither in an ennobling nor a debasing way, but in an irritating way. How shall I say it? Music makes me forget my real situation. It transports me into a state which is not my own. Under the influence of music I really seem to feel what I do not feel, to understand what I do not understand, to have powers which I cannot have....

In China music is under the control of the State, and that is the way it ought to be. Is it admissible that the first comer should hypnotize one or more persons, and then do with them as he likes? And especially that the hypnotizer should be the first immoral individual who happens to come along? It is a frightful power in the hands of any one, no matter whom. For instance, should they be allowed to play this 'Kreutzer Sonata,' the first presto—and there are many like it—in parlors, among ladies wearing low necked dresses, or in concerts, then finish the piece, receive the applause, and then begin another piece? These things should be played under certain circumstances, only in cases where it is necessary to incite certain actions corresponding to the music. But to incite an energy of feeling which corresponds to neither the time nor the place, and is expended in nothing, cannot fail to act dangerously.²

Pozdnyshev's fury against music stems precisely from his inability to protect himself against it, as a human being should. To paraphrase Kafka, could Pozdnyshev—who, after all, is a murderer—be a beast, to be so moved by music?

With respect to Gregor, the violin scene in *The Metamorphosis* seems closer to *The Kreutzer Sonata* than to the Romantic ideal of art as an ennobling force. The vague ecstasy that

² Trans. Benjamin Tucker, www.gutenberg.org/files/689/689.txt.

the music inspires in Gregor sounds like a parody of Romantic musical mysticism—“It was as though he sensed a way to the unknown sustenance he longed for” (136)—and the music draws him, not to higher truth, but rather into incoherent and unrealizable fantasies that lead eventually to his death: “He would not let her out of his room, at least not as long as he lived ... but his sister wasn’t to be forced, she was to remain with him of her own free will; she was to sit by his side on the sofa, and he would tell her he was resolved to send her to the conservatory.” Already weakened by injury and malnutrition, Gregor loses all touch with reality when the music starts.

Then, in a deliberate evocation of the gathering of inanimate trees and stones around Orpheus, the music’s false promise draws Gregor with irresistible force and *without his conscious knowledge* into the parlor. His physical intrusion spurs Grete, who until this point has been at least marginally supportive of his continued presence in the flat, to her final break with him. Ironically, in this roundabout way, the music *does* lead to a crucial and necessary transformation, just not the one we expected when it began.

So where then does Kafka’s narrative—for we should distinguish between the author and his creation—actually stand on the significance and power of music? One reading would claim that by virtue of their deafness, the story’s so-called “humans” are moral voids, while Gregor, by becoming *physically* a bug and escaping his routine, becomes more fully human and thus more receptive to music’s mystical force. Another reading could see music as a fancy irrelevancy to the humans, with no bearing on their world of grim flats and thankless jobs, while to the bestialized Gregor, living in filth and intellectually reduced to insect-like neural responses, it acts as nothing more than an automatic and irresistible stimulus.

Obviously, both of these interpretations are overblown; we don’t want to settle completely for either one. Rather, the text remains profoundly ambiguous about music’s effect, raising expectations and associations, but silent about its meaning. The more we consider *The Metamorphosis*, the more we find similar questions left jarringly open. Pre-eminently, we must decide—and keep readjusting our decisions—with whom we want to sympathize, and to what extent. At first, we identify with Gregor in his predicament and resent his parents; we have access to his interior monologue, after all, where he is (intermittently and decreasingly) still Gregor. But soon the doubts start. Is his family so wrong to turn against this horrible vermin? Perhaps Gregor was in a sense a vermin all along, holding his family captive through his groveling beetle-like industriousness. (Is the beetle a symbol of filthy sloth or of unrewarding industry?) How

do we understand the tale's extraordinary sun-drenched final pages, where the family is liberated and transformed (*verwandelt*) by his removal?

Kafka's *Metamorphosis* repeatedly induces us to make assumptions about characters and situations, only to trip us up on those facile judgments—not by inverting them, but by problematizing them and withholding its own. One of the delights of reading the story is precisely our inescapable confrontation with such ambiguities, carefully crafted as they are in prose that is otherwise astonishingly lucid. A nagging sense that there is more to discover, the desire to revisit the questions and test our judgment anew, draws us back to the text again and again.