



## *Defending our Music*

*Music is the harmonious Voice of Creation, an Echo of the invisible World.*

*Giuseppe Mazzini*

*Rap is Crap*

*Urban Dictionary*

There are moments in life when Death crosses our path and takes a cool look at us. Depending on how close the encounter will be, our heart misses a beat or leaves us slightly more rattled.

As happened to me some years ago in Italy when they rolled my frayed torso into an operating theatre. While watching the many white-clad professionals preparing their gleaming instruments, I passed through an instant of silent rumination. Time in such moments is irrelevant, and it might have been just a few seconds or an endless minute.

Already slightly doped, was my mind hazy and buoyant, and I wondered without particular emphasis if this could be the final and rather brief chapter of my life.

While pondering the notion, I heard music from somewhere far away.

I could not make out any particular tune, and certainly not a distinctive instrument. But it reminded me of one of my favourites, the Andante of Mozart's *21th Piano Concerto*, though only in a very general way. Meaning that what I heard seemed just beautiful. And I thought how nice it was, and that someone in the administration had had a really good idea, because what better way to lessen the anxiety of those waiting to be cut up but a lovely and calming piece of music playing somewhere in the background?

Then the anaesthetist came, gave me a cool look as well, lowered the mask over my face and dropped me into a deep black hole.

A month later, after a reasonably fast recovery, I thought it a good idea to express my gratitude to those fine professionals who had saved my life. And since the State of Italy had largely paid for their endeavours, I decided to be particularly forthcoming and drove to one of the *Valpolicella's* finer wine growers, him actually a direct descendant of the incomparable *Dante Aligheri*. Where I bought a few crates of the best *superiore* on hand. The gesture was well received, and as I sat for a moment with the chief surgeon, I mentioned in passing how much I liked the idea about the beautiful music in the operating theatre.

Whereupon he gave me a strange look, smiled and said that they never played any music at all, since that might interfere with their powers of concentration.

Thus thinking it over on my way back home, and looking at it from all possible angles, I came to the conclusion that what I had heard in the operating theatre must have been in some way related to *Guiseppe Mazzini's* observation at the top of this piece.

Now these are insights you usually keep to yourself, for the simple reason that they don't make sense to anybody who never had had the experience. And thus may think you way over the top, and pity you for it.

Or worse...

As a counterpoint to the above, or better its diametrically opposed extreme, let me recount an episode that happened while I lived in Amsterdam during the glorious Seventies. These were the flower-power times, and with regard to music, pop and rock stood paramount on the agenda. But since thanks to my mother I grew up with the great classics, there were occasionally moments when I needed a respite from acoustic behemoths like *Credence Clearwater*, *Family* or *Ten Years after*.

Thus when I saw one day an advertising for a chamber music concerto, I decided on an impulse to attend. As to the program, I had given it only a cursory glance. Among the composers were *Vivaldi* and *Schubert*, two of my favourites, which settled the matter. The event, privately organized, was to take place in one of those magnificent patrician mansions huddled along Amsterdam's main canal.

So it came to pass that on a fine summer Sunday morning my gal and I rolled uncommonly early out of bed and stepped into our best garb. Me donning light-green velvet trousers and a finely woven *djellaba* that sat well with my fuzzy mane and the dark-red boots from fake crocodile leather, she a long flowing something of near gossamer fabric. To sensually enhance the occasion, we allowed for a joint laced with exquisite Red Lebanon that had just hit the market. After floating in excellent spirits towards the place, we were met by an elderly lady with unsteady black eyes and a sallow complexion who gave us a contemptuous leer and accepted my contribution only reluctantly. But this was Amsterdam, and freaks and hippies belonged to the city panorama like Dutch cheese on a soft sandwich.

All went well during the first half of the performance, ending with Schubert's *Ave Maria*. Which, as usual, required all my willpower to suppress an aberrant tear. During the interval we had two large glasses of cold fizz each, which left us fairly befuddled and even more starry-eyed. We sat down again, full of happy expectation, while the sextet, mostly flutes and violins and Japanese, fiddled with the chores. They sat in a half-circle around a low dais onto which, after some minutes, climbed a mountainous lady with narrow-set eyes and an impressive double chin who wore a frazzled green-and-brown something that looked like a piece of military camouflage.

As I stared at her, vaguely thinking that she might be an excellent soprano on account of being so portly, all hell broke loose. The sextet began to shriek and to screech and to howl like an overheated piece of industrial machinery, and the fat woman rapped full blast in an unidentifiable language at the audience while wagging her backside as if someone was serving her a bugger too large to handle. The whole pandemonium lasted about five minutes, and when it ended, I just sat there open-mouthed and couldn't believe my ears. It seems the rest of the audience was equally dumbfounded, because when my girlfriend spoke up rather unexpectedly, it sounded as clear as glass in the shocked silence.

“So what's this opus called then? *Symphony for a Harbour Trollop while five tomcats having their balls singed*? And what on earth *is* the fat runt rapping and ranting about?”

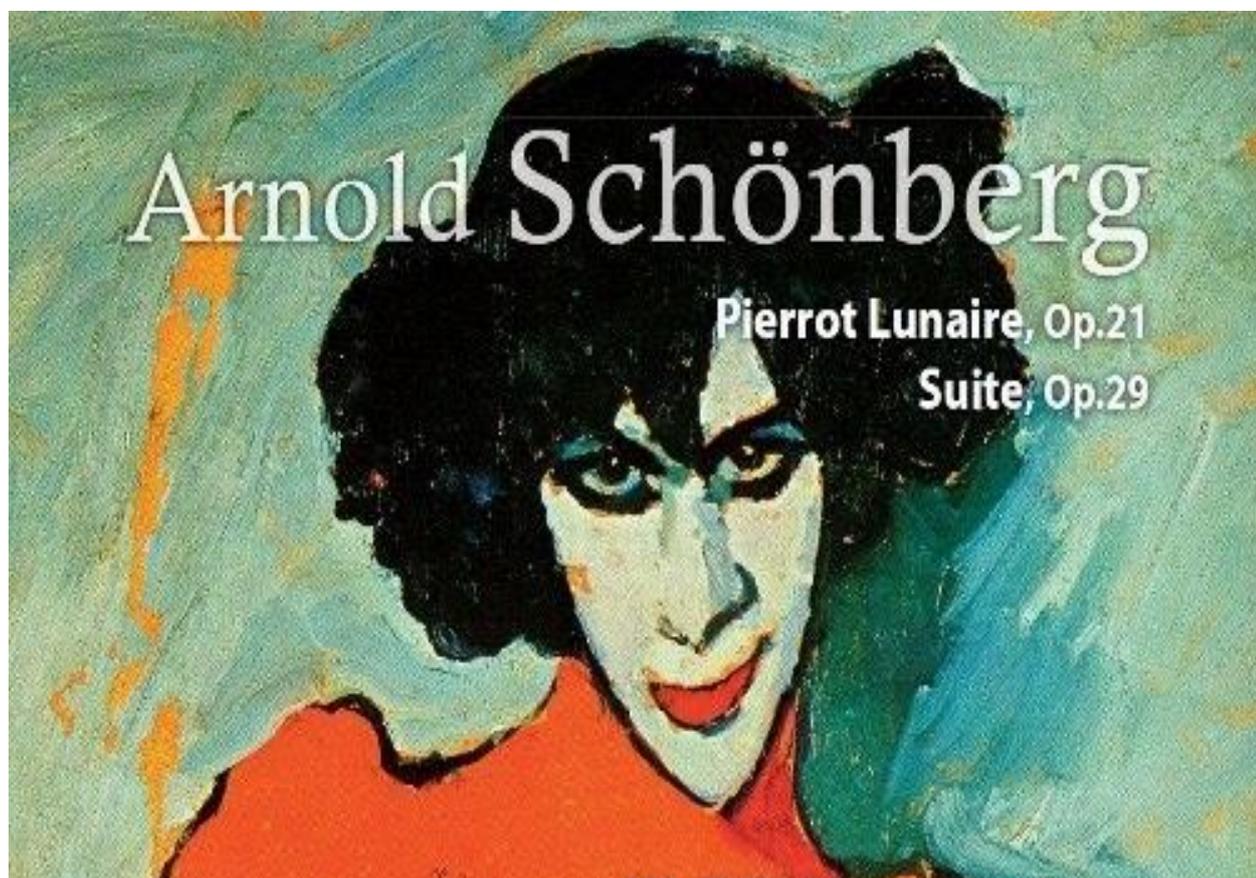
Or something along these lines. Now she, a magnificent corker but not too generously buttered on the cultured side, had never any qualms to make herself understood. To underline her point, she broke into a giggle that caused some hilarious sniggering among the audience, which in turn had the aforementioned lady rushing at us with visible signs of agitation. Hissing and spitting like one more angry cat, she called my girl a dirty name and ordered us to leave. Once the insult had sunk in, I reared myself up with some difficulties, told her I'd wring her dirty old neck if she didn't piss off on the double, and for good measure gave my elegant Rococo chair a kick that dislodged one of its legs. Which made her recoil and retreat and yell at us from a safe distance.

A medium sized scandal thus, and when we were finally outside, I still didn't understand the situation. But another glance at the program solved the riddle. We had been treated to *Pierrot Lunaire*, an oeuvre by the atonal avant-garde composer *Arnold Schoenberg*.

On our way home my girlfriend asked what I knew of the man. Very little, I said, remembering only that he had fabricated some utter baloney called *twelve-tone music*, that the liberal left adored him as a kind of musical *enfant terrible*, and that he had dropped dead some time ago. No great loss, she said, and hoped him to inhabit a specific dungeon in Hell where he was treated continuously to *Pierrot Lunaire*, on the loo, during breakfast and in all Eternity. Being generally of a humanitarian inclination, I proposed to leave the loo out. The next day we looked him up in the *Britannica* and discovered to our surprise that the venerable encyclopaedia's laudation of the atonal sod was almost as long as that of the great and wonderful *Schubert* a few pages further on. Which put me off to such a degree that I didn't even try to catch a glimpse of the method behind the madness.

In those days of innocence and ignorance I did not know of course who owned the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and how much its contents had been sanitized to promote a version of Modern History that was in many important areas as far removed from reality as diluted hogwash from sparkling champagne.

If attempting to squeeze the two episodes into a larger context, it could be said that the paradisiacal orientation on one hand and its infernal antipode on the other mark the outmost boundaries of human aural perception. In other words, the Gates of Paradise open a fraction once our soul takes wing while listening to a beautiful piece of music, no matter if it is a Mozart symphony, a Verdi aria, a hymn sung by the Sunday-morning-mass congregation, or just a heart-warming folksong. Whereas the dreadful din produced by abominable cranks like Schoenberg and his kind can't be anything but a nerve-jangling premonition of Hell's general uproar that is wafting across its sulphurous threshold.



*Pierrot Lunaire*'s assault on the aesthetically unswerving minds of those days didn't have the intended effect. No matter how grandly eulogized by the resident feuilleton pimps and pansies, including those who scribbled the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* nonsense, he only managed to sizzle and fizzle sporadically at cultural routs of the lunatic liberal fringe, but for the rest couldn't raise so much as an eyebrow. Bach and Mozart were simply too persuasive! Thus those bent on devastating our musical legacy needed to come up with a different approach.

*Gershwin*, again with much help from the media, made an impact, but for want of intuitive depth lost most of his glitter. *Modern Jazz* was touted for a while as the non-plus-ultra in advanced composition, yet somehow failed to produce the desired impact, particularly among the youth. It took a few decades, but then an opportunity presented itself.

In a generally accelerating society that declared time to be money and wrought leisure into consumerism, popular music suffered a profound change as well. Whereas our parents and grandparents remembered mellow evenings under huge lime-trees while singing lovely old folksongs with neighbours and friends, the new generation succumbed to an exiting invention called *Rock 'n Roll*. It began innocently enough, with musical prodigies like *John Lennon* or *Keith Richards* commanding the scene, but soon took a turn for the worse. Truly beautiful gigs like *Norwegian Wood*, *Nights in White Satin* or *Moonlight Mile* faded into the past, while Lennon, perhaps the 20<sup>th</sup> century's finest composer whose *Imagine* had captured millions of hearts, was conveniently taken out of circulation. Perverted mugs like *Johnny Rotten*, *Marilyn Manson* or that blasphemous trollop *Madonna* began to conquer the charts, all nicely stage-managed by the muzak-moguls from their *Big Bagel* strongholds. Thus Rock became *Punk*, *Metal* and whatnot, and to effectively round off this descent into Hell's lesser forecourts, *Arnold Schoenberg*'s magnum opus was lifted from the dustbin and restructured into *Gangsta Rap*.

Whereby the whole sordid tumble is unthinkable without an important accessory, namely drugs.

In the Amsterdam of the Seventies *Joints*, *Chillums* or *Sticks* were common fare like Macrobiotic Food or Indian Gurus. But already then the scene saw an ugly twist. Hashish and Marihuana were suddenly laced with strange ingredients that slugged you squarely over the head, and destructive chemicals like *Crack* made a first appearance in hubbubs like the *Milky Way*. Heroin was quite openly pushed by black lads in red Ford Mustangs, and their customers soon formed part of the general backdrop, either as miserable human wrecks or annoying petty thieves.

As to *Crack*, it is the stuff whose stimulus on your kinetic reflexes works so powerful that it makes you jiggle the hips to *any* rhythm, no matter if it's the monotonous racket of an oil-well pump or the bestial blubber of a *Gangsta Rapper*. Needless to say, it is also deadly.

Which brings me to the conclusion of my piece:

Among the most controversial "**gangsta rap**" labels was **Death Row Records** (including **Tupac Shakur**, **Dr. Dre**, and **Snoopy Doggy Dog**). **Death Row** products were distributed by the **Time-Warner** company until "pressure from stockholders after an outcry over the flagrantly violent and misogynist lyrics" of its stars.

**Time-Warner** dropped the label, but eighteen months later it was picked up for \$200 million by the **Universal Music Group**, a subsidiary of the New York **Bronfman** family's **Seagram** company. **Universal** too eventually abandoned the controversial label, only after "pressure from stockholders and regulators."



*Tupac Shakur*

But don't fret, sweet *Death Row* most likely raised its nasty head somewhere else under a different name. Because *Gangsta Rap* is, together with the entire "popular" music industry, firmly in a few hands. Names like *Joseph Heller, Steve Rifkind, Rick Rubin, Edgar Bronfman, Michael Koch* or *Lyor Cohen*, to name but a few, run the show exclusively. Whereby Cohen, according to *Rolling Stone*, has broadened his musical base and "oversees an empire that includes hundreds of artists performing in dozens of genres, a roster that features *PJ Harvey, American Hi-Fi, Shelby Lynne, Lionel Richie, Bon Jovi, Melissa Etheridge, Saliva, Ludacris, Kelly Price and Sisquo*." *Cohen's nickname is "Little Lansky" (after the famed mobster Meyer Lansky).*

Thus whichever pub, coffee shop or disco in the world you may haunt these days, you'll hear guitars, drums, electric organs, saxophones or similar instruments producing an utterly unmelodious clamour that has nothing to do with popular music as we know it. And if that don't satisfy you, you're treated to some big bad *Gangsta* rapping in English, French, Italian, German, Russian or what not, usually accompanied by the squeaks of some dumb blonde who can't wait to get laid.

All delivered with a giant propaganda machine like that of *Time-Warner* for the benefit of the world's kids who think it's totally cool and you're an old-fashioned sod if you don't dig it. Just as we thought when our parents or grandparents shook their heads in consternation when asked to get us the *Stones'* latest single as a birthday present.

With the small difference that we didn't need *Crack* to dig it.

The whole hideous scheme is so deeply entrenched that it can boast a lobby with a staff of seventy two operatives. Calling itself the *Recording Industry of America*, is it run by a powerful woman in an industry dominated by men (Washington Post) called *Hillary Rosen*. Jewish too, of course, and in case you wondered. This is what C.

Dolores Tucker, the founder of the *National Political Congress of Black Women*, has to say about her: "In terms of children, the RIA is the most destructive lobbying force in America. It is incomprehensible that anyone with an ounce of concern for children would be demanding the promotion, distribution, and sale of *Gangsta-porno rap* to children."

But it seems quite understandable to us, since we have long since recognized the power and method behind the incomprehensible.

On the other hand, not everything is lost yet!

I write these lines during the pre-Christmas period, and the medieval town where my little family and I found refuge after our precipitous flight from the Ukraine prepares for the biggest festival of the year. All kinds of concerts are performed, also one next Sunday in the beautiful old church. Five children's choirs from the city and its immediate surroundings will sing, and that is very pleasing for a very special reason.

Because in the last year there were only ... three!

