LISTENING TO MUSIC
The best tranquilizer and antidepressant

By Doctor Leonidas Samouilidis

Scientific psychiatrists have managed throughout the years to convert the existential conditions called anxieties and depressions into medical illnesses. Research done over several years is pointing to the biochemical changes in the brain that are allegedly related to conditions of people diagnosed as suffering from anxiety, depression, etc.

Although it has been known for years that different feelings (e.g., anger, sadness, elation) are affecting the functioning of bodily organs and vice versa, it is not clearly understood how, and there is still no strong indication of a specificity of chemical imbalance and anxiety-depression, like the specificity of insulin insufficiency and diabetes. Beyond each "chemical imbalance" which is called depression or anxiety, we find that people who are "suffering" from them, have also a myriad of existential problems such as unsatisfactory marriages, an incurable disease, unfulfilling careers and jobs, children who went astray, financial insecurities, disturbed relationships and all kinds of unresolved human conflicts.

Psychological help can be available, to promote better awareness of themselves, tackle their dormant potentials, improve their world and help to resolve underlying conflicts. Ultimately the fact that throughout the centuries different disciplines like philosophies, religions, political systems, psychological theories, etc., failed to create a globally "better world" has allowed the emergence of existential hopelessness. That means that the world as a whole will continue to be beset by wars, conflicts, crimes, economic instabilities, etc., etc.

However, in my opinion, this is not as hopeless as it sounds. I firmly believe that, in spite of the apparent hopelessness of the world, individuals not only have the capacity but also the elementary duty to create a well-balanced and well-integrated environment. Of course, anxiety and depression, existential or otherwise, are serious obstacles to attain just that.

Scientific psychiatrists have resolved the issue by a very simplistic formula. Diagnosis — Depression or anxiety — Chemical imbalance — Treatment with chemicals (Drugs). Although this approach has lifted or calmed the spirits of numerous persons, who have depressions and/or anxieties, it has also created many iatrogenic drug addicts and pill pushers among the doctors. The hope is that one day the right pill will be discovered and that will be the cure all! Realistically this is not happening and probably will not happen in our lifetime or after. One wonders whether this is the right pathway to approach an existential problem. In spite of all this, drug treatment may be indicated on a temporary basis, under very close medical supervision and for a brief period in situations that the individual has lost control over his/her behavior or has been unable to properly function.

Drug treatment should always be accompanied by psychotherapeutic sessions. In my opinion, medicine in general, has relied too much on pharmacologic treatments ignoring or even undermining, other human means available for the same goal. I suppose the ancient Greek "Pan Metron Ariston" could have a good applicability in medicine. What are other human means and resources? I shall name a few, Satisfaction of one's basic needs (food, sleep, sex). Doing things in moderation. Nutrition. Exercise (Physical and mental). Human creations (Art).

In today's article, music, as a human creation is the center of my attention. Music is resourceful enough to lift one's spirits and calm one's tensions and stresses of everyday life, and does it in a superb way so it can be used effectively, as a "psychotropic agent". I shall proceed to describe what music does to me and how.

Music, with this effect, can be of any kind. Classical music is characterized to be immortal. Other music such as popular, folk, jazz, primitive, can be used for the same purposes. There may be not a clearcut distinction between these categories. This article deals with classical music which, in addition to being very pleasant to my ears, has also a therapeutic effect on my emotions, when they are troubled. Other types of music may just have a pleasant auditory effect.

I consider classical music to be, any music from the Gregorian Chant and Giovanni Pierluigi Da Palestrina, to the contemporaries such as Andrew Lloyd Weber and our own Greek composer, Mikis Theodorakis (3rd, 7th symphonies and Canto General). I distinguish four major categories of classical music. Chamber music, Ecclesiastical music, Opera and Symphonic music.

Chamber music being of small scale,
generally relates to feelings of serenity and calmness.

Ecclesiastical music connotes an expression of a sublime loving, or awe inspiring feeling, inside oneself, that is frequently externalized to a supreme being.

Opera is the most concrete expression and experience of a whole gamut of feelings, from love and adoration, to vengeance and hatred that are directed to, and derived from human actions, behaviors and attitudes. Human conflicts are expressed in a most dramatic fashion.

Symphonic music, finally, has that element of fullness and grandiosity, that fulfills the human need for strong self esteem, and accomplishments.

More specifically, now, I would like to focus on several musical pieces, that out of the immense musical repertory, have had a powerful impression on me.

Hector Berlioz's "Symphonie Fantastique" symbolizes his frustrated and finally fulfilled love. It is demonstrated in the struggle of the compulsively repetitive theme (idée fixe) in each of its five movements, that re-emerges each time with basic similarities but additional variations. The symphony was born out of Berlioz's passion for Henrietta Smithson, a Shakespearean actress, who eventually became his wife. Berlioz has composed many other orchestral pieces and operas. Worth mentioning in his "Symphonie funèbre et triomphale" for which he used enormous orchestral forces, giving a tremendous impact. The Requiem (Grande Messe des Morts) is extremely powerful, particularly with the intensifi-
cation with 16 more trumpets, at the "Tuba Mirum" that make the warning even more ominous. Berlioz is a true representative of the Romantic period and defied convention and tradition, by using unusual instruments.

From Berlioz and his dramatic music I come now to his antithesis, Gioacchino Rossini. Berlioz hated Rossini and his sparkling, gay and frivolous music. He used to call him derogatorily "Le gros homme gai". Rossini's music, particularly as it is reflected in the overtures of his numerous operas, creates feelings of joy, elation, aliveness, exhilaration. Most of his themes are tragicomic. It is difficult for me to choose one overture that I like more, than others. Therefore I shall treat Rossini collectively. A typical characteristic of his, is the slowly mounting intensity of the music, which invariably leads into an orchestral crescendo, for which the composer was nicknamed "Il signor Crescendo". Creation of confusion and delight out of it, is another characteristic. Typical of this confusion is also the fact, that overtures of his operas do not belong originally to the opera that they are connected with, now, but to another. For example the famous overture to "Il Barbiere di Siviglia" (Barber of Seville) belonged originally to another opera, called "Elisabetta Regina d'Inghilterra".

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, when it comes to opera, could be characterized as the German Rossini, as with few exceptions, the style of his operatic overtures is more or less the same with Rossini, and creates the same set of feelings. In Mozart, however, I can see more refinement of human feelings, a childish softness and goodness, an eternal reminiscence of youth. From all of Mozart's operas, the one that impressed me, as a creation of a child prodigy, and genius, is the less known "Mitridate Re di Ponto". The story concerns the expansion and defeat of King Mithridates of Pontus and the conflicts, that arose out of his defeat, in his family. Mitridate was composed when Mozart was 14 years old and I find it outstandingly amazing, how a child of that age, could translate into music all the powerful feelings, the characters in the opera convey toward each other.

If one follows the opera, from beginning to end, he becomes acquainted with feelings, conveyed through music, or brotherly jealousy and rivalry between Sifare and Farnace, Mitridates' two sons. The king was thought dead and thus the issue of succession to the throne was emerging.

Mozart, in his 35 years of life has produced an enormous amount of musical pieces, from opera and ecclesiastical music, to symphonic and chamber music. The culmination of his colossal work, was his Requiem. It is questionable whether he finished it himself. But Beethoven said, that if Mozart was not the one who completed the Requiem, then the person who did must have been a Mozart.

Moving upwards the chronological ladder of opera, it is worth mentioning the impressively tragic quality of most of the known operas of Christoph Willibald von Gluck. It is epitomized by the opera "Iphigenie en Aulide" whose overture has been a popular concert piece. It starts with a lamentous brief introduction and soon enough goes into a dance like somber and emphatic crescendo. It feels like a premonition to what is to follow in the whole opera. The imminent tragic fate of Iphigenia and Artemis' kind appeasement in a musical relief.

The prologue of Arrigo Boito's opera "Mefistofele" begins with a series of splendid and impressive fanfares followed by the heavenly chorus "Ave Signor degli angeli...". Mefistofele appears as a discordant figure, among the angels. One feels the conflict between these two opposite extremes. Who is going to win Faust? The suspense and tension mounts throughout the prologue and ends up in a climax. One cannot help but feel Mefistofele's hopeless situation, in spite of his winning sarcasm. The answer to the conflict is given at the end of the opera, in the epilogue where Mefistofele, defeated, sinks into the earth amid the celestial choir.

Now I come to the three great Bs. Bach, Brahms, Beethoven. Out of the tremendous volume of Johan Sebastian Bach's works, I want to single out his Mass in b, a work of tremendous depth of feelings and significant length. I can get absorbed in the music in a serene fashion, relaxing all the tensions and disappointments and arrive into a state of utter ecstasy, till the emergence of the "Sanctus" which, according to some musicologists, should stand alone, isolated by its own tremendous grandeur. It is interesting that Bach, instead of using the traditional "Pleni sunt coeli et terra, gloria tue (thy glory)" he uses the word, "Gloria ejus (his glory)" as if he is talking to God indirectly, or even doubting a bit his existence, according to musicologists. This can also be explained by the fact, that, although Bach had an enormous repertory of religious music, most: of it was commissioned under some form of a contract or other. Bach was, above all, a good businessman.

Johannes Brahms, the nordic German composer is actually the bridge between classicism and romanticism. There is no conflict between the two, but a high order of integration. The end result is the creation of a feeling of stability and confidence. I am thinking of Brahms' first symphony, which is a work of great maturity, although it is a first. The famous conductor Hans von Bulow called this symphony "Beethoven's Tenth." So much admiration had Brahms for Beethoven, that he followed his path. However he remained quite an individualist. The first symphony opens with a note of sublimity. Violins against throbbing background of tympani. The second movement is very lyric in nature and creates feelings of love and introspection, carried over by an emotional delirium and subsides into serenity and calmness. The third movement, although brief enough, is full of wisdom and understated power. It leads to the gigantic expanse of the finale, with all its grandiosity. Brahms' first, has many similarities as far as the inception and format with Beethoven's ninth, which is the next musical piece, that I am going to comment on.

My personal statement has been that, after I listen to the "Ode to joy (An die Freude)" I do not want to hear anything else for a while. It takes some time for its effect to wear off. Ludwig van Beethoven's ninth symphony follows the traditional four movements, with the novelty of introducing solo voices and chorus in the last movement.

The first movement inspires awe and mystery and gives a premonition of what is to come at the finale. It is very anticipatory in nature.

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