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Trends in Chamber Music Composed by European Composers Who Became Deaf in the Romantic Era

By: Vinh Dao

Introduction

In music composition, deaf composers revolutionized the manner in which music was crafted. Beethoven ushered in the shift between the Classical and Romantic Era while Smetana established the national sound for Czech music after the Austro-Hungarian Empire granted Bohemia its independence during the Romantic Era. However, the music that was associated with these momentous events was composed during these composers' deaf periods. This study attempts to discover if there are trends among the composition style of composers from the Romantic Era who went deaf. To ascertain the true nature of deaf composition, 10 scores were analyzed – 5 scores from composers who were hearing or were not deaf yet and 5 scores from composers who were completely deaf. The scores were examined rather than recordings of these pieces as modern string quartets, piano trios, violin and piano duet players would not be able to replicate the sound and style of music from the Romantic Era.



Figure 1. Smetana's String Quartet No. 1, Movement 1, Measures 33-36

Methods

- 10 scores from the Romantic Era were analyzed
- The total number of measures were counted
- The number of beats were calculated by having a quarter note=1
- The frequency and length of any note equal to or above a G6 was recorded
- Every dynamic marking was notated and was divided into either loud dynamics (*mf*, *f*, *ff*, *fff*, *sf*, and *sff*) and soft dynamics (*mp*, *p*, *pp*, and *ppp*)
- The total number of crescendos and decrescendos were counted, as well as the crescendos and decrescendos that were elongated
- The number of repetitive phrases that resulted from doubling, tripling, or quadrupling were chronicled

Table 1. Frequency of High Notes in Chamber Music Composed by Hearing Composers

Piece	Bartok String Quartet No. 1	Elgar String Quartet in E Minor	Beethoven String Quartet No. 4	Fauré Violin Sonata	Smetana Piano Trio
Beats with Notes ≥ G6	115.333	90.917	59	143.417	121.9583333
Number of Beats	3109	3356	795	3835	2749
Percentage of High Notes	3.710	2.709	2.635	3.740	4.436
Average Percentage of Hearing Composers	3.209				

Table 2. Frequency of High Notes in Chamber Music Composed by Deaf Composers

Piece	Beethoven String Quartet No. 10	Beethoven String Quartet No. 14	Smetana String Quartet No. 1	Smetana String Quartet No. 2	Faure String Quartet No. 1
Beats with Notes ≥ G6	18.333	129.729	57.125	39.333	3.5
Number of Beats	2915	5498	2979	1475	2640
Percentage of High Notes	0.629	2.360	1.498*	2.667	0.133
Average Percentage for Deaf Composers	1.457				

Discussion

This study found that deaf composers featured an increased number of dynamics on the louder spectrum (fortes, fortissimos, sforzandos, and subito fortissimos), a higher number of crescendos and decrescendos, a smaller percentage of notes that had a frequency equal to or above G6, and a large number of repetitive passages that are doubled and/or tripled, which results in an unbalanced sound between the melody and the accompaniment. As these trends were observed within all of the deaf composers in the Romantic Era being studied, this study contends that these trends could be ubiquitous among deaf composers. In the future, an additional study should be conducted among different musical eras to conclude the nature of deaf composition.

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Figure 2. Beethoven's String Quartet No. 14, Movement 7, Measures 339-344



Figure 3. Fauré's String Quartet No. 1, Movement 1, Measures 6-10



Figure 4. Bartok's String Quartet No. 1, Movement 1, Measures 21-23

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