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

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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 by 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.

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 noted 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Piece</th>
<th>Bartók String Quartet No. 1</th>
<th>Elgar String Quartet in E Minor</th>
<th>Beethoven String Quartet No. 14</th>
<th>Faure Violin Sonata</th>
<th>Smetana Piano Trio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beats with Notes &gt; G6</td>
<td>115.333</td>
<td>90.917</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>143.417</td>
<td>121.958333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Beats</td>
<td>3109</td>
<td>3356</td>
<td>795</td>
<td>3835</td>
<td>2749</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of High Notes</td>
<td>3.710</td>
<td>2.709</td>
<td>2.635</td>
<td>3.740</td>
<td>4.436</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Percentage for Hearing Composers</td>
<td>209</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Piece</th>
<th>Beethoven String Quartet No. 10</th>
<th>Beethoven String Quartet No. 14</th>
<th>Smetana String Quartet No. 1</th>
<th>Smetana String Quartet No. 2</th>
<th>Faure String Quartet No. 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beats with Notes &gt; G6</td>
<td>18.333</td>
<td>120.729</td>
<td>57.125</td>
<td>39.333</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Beats</td>
<td>2915</td>
<td>5498</td>
<td>2979</td>
<td>1475</td>
<td>2640</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of High Notes</td>
<td>0.629</td>
<td>2.360</td>
<td>1.498*</td>
<td>2.667</td>
<td>0.133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Percentage for Deaf Composers</td>
<td>1.457</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.

Acknowledgements

Mentor: Professor Mary Boyes
The Teaching Assistants in HONR 200

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

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

Works Cited


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

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

Figure 3. Faúre’s String Quartet No. 1, Movement 1, Measures 6-10

Figure 4. Bartók’s String Quartet No. 1, Movement 1, Measures 21-23

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