

PATRICK SIMPSON
#9 SCRIPT

TO START, I WANT YOU TO NAME AS MANY COMPOSERS AS YOU CAN.

[BACH - INVENTION NO. 1]

COMPOSER IN THE CLASSICAL MUSIC SENSE, LIKE BEETHOVEN. FOR THE SAKE OF OTHERS, JUST DO IT IN YOUR HEAD. AND YOU CAN'T USE BEETHOVEN. SORRY. I'LL GIVE YOU TEN SECONDS. GO.

[OLD JEOPARDY THINK MUSIC]

AND STOP, AND YES THAT WAS A LITTLE OVER TEN SECONDS, BUT SHOULD YOU REALLY BE COMPLAINING?

SO YOU PROBABLY THOUGHT OF MOZART, OR BACH, WHO'S PLAYING RIGHT NOW IN FACT, OR MAYBE EVEN CHOPIN OR TCHAIKOVSKY. AND IF YOU KNOW MORE THAN YOUR AVERAGE GUY, THERE'S BRAHMS, HAYDN, HANDEL, SCHUMANN, SCHUBERT, VIVALDI, WAGNER, LISZT... YOU COULD KEEP GOING FOR A LONG TIME, BUT I'LL SPARE YOU THE PLEASURE. BUT NOW I WANT YOU TO DO SOMETHING A LITTLE DIFFERENT. NOW JUST THINK OF AS MANY COMPOSERS AS YOU CAN FROM THE LAST HUNDRED YEARS—LET'S SAY SINCE THE END OF WORLD WAR I. ANY COMPOSER WHO WROTE ANYTHING AFTER THAT COUNTS. I'LL GIVE YOU ANOTHER TEN SECONDS. GO.

[MODERN JEOPARDY THINK MUSIC]

STOP, AND IF YOU'RE WONDERING WHY I SWITCHED WHICH JEOPARDY MUSIC I WAS USING, I SWITCHED IT TO THE MORE MODERN ONE BECAUSE WE'RE TALKING ABOUT MODERN MUSIC NOW—YOU SEE, IT ALL MAKES SENSE.

SO ANYWAY, IT'S A BIT MORE DIFFICULT, ISN'T IT? THERE'S JOHN WILLIAMS...

[JOHN WILLIAMS - "IMPERIAL ATTACK" FROM THE STAR WARS SOUNDTRACK]

... WHO I THINK DEFINITELY COUNTS, BUT DON'T YOU THINK HE'S KIND OF AN OUTLIER? MAYBE YOU THOUGHT OF DEBUSSY...

[DEBUSSY - ARABESQUE NO. 1]

... WHICH IS GREAT, BUT UNFORTUNATELY, DEBUSSY DIED IN 1918, SO HE JUST MISSES THE CUT. SO, WHO ELSE IS THERE?

WELL, YOU'VE GOT RAVEL...

[RAVEL - GASPARD DE LA NUIT]

... IF YOU'RE GONNA STICK WITH THE IMPRESSIONISTS, LEONARD BERNSTEIN...

[LEONARD BERNSTEIN - "MARIA" FROM WEST SIDE STORY]

... OR THERE'S GEORGE GERSHWIN...

[GEORGE GERSHWIN - RHAPSODY IN BLUE]

... OR EVEN DUKE ELLINGTON...

[DUKE ELLINGTON - TAKE THE A TRAIN]

... IF YOU'RE OKAY WITH A LITTLE JAZZ. BUT OTHER THAN THOSE FEW, AND NOT EVEN A LOT OF PEOPLE KNOW THEM, THERE'S NOTHING. NADA.

ZIPPO.

BUT IT'S NOT LIKE CLASSICAL MUSIC JUST *STOPPED*. IN FACT, IT'S STILL GOING TODAY. BUT MOST ARE JUST KNOWN FOR FILM SCORES RATHER THAN THE MUSIC ITSELF.

[DISPARITION - TOLOSA]

SO, TO KICK OFF THE NEW SEASON OF MELOMANIA, I'LL BE ATTEMPTING TO REMEDY THAT SITUATION. I'LL BE COVERING A FEW LESSER-KNOWN, BUT STILL INCREDIBLY IMPORTANT IDEAS IN MUSIC FROM THE 20TH CENTURY, STARTING WITH THIS CONCEPT OF "SERIALISM," NOT LIKE BREAKFAST CEREAL—LIKE SERIAL KILLERS, BUT NOT REALLY. TRUST ME.

AND TO BE CLEAR, I'M NOT SAYING THAT THIS MUSIC IS QUOTE-UNQUOTE *BETTER* THAN POPULAR MUSIC. JUST THAT IT'S DIFFERENT, AND WORTH GIVING A SHOT. ALMOST EVERYONE KNOWS MODERN ARTISTS, LIKE PABLO PICASSO, OR JACKSON POLLOCK, OR EVEN ANDY WARHOL—BUT IT SHOULD BE THE SAME FOR MUSIC.

I'M PATRICK SIMPSON, AND THIS IS MELOMANIA.

[TOLOSA]

SO, BEFORE WE GET INTO THE MEAT OF SERIALISM, WE NEED... LET'S SAY, A LITTLE APPETIZER, IF WE'RE GONNA STICK WITH THIS FOOD METAPHOR.

SO YOU MAY REMEMBER FROM THE LAST SEASON OF MELOMANIA THAT MUSIC FOLLOWS CERTAIN RULES, RULES THAT WERE FIRST LAID OUT BY BACH IN THE 17TH CENTURY.

[BACH - PRELUDE IN C MAJOR]

MUSIC FROM THIS TIME ONWARD, CALLED THE COMMON PRACTICE PERIOD IN SCHOLARLY CIRCLES, IS BUILT AROUND WHAT'S CALLED A TONAL CENTER. THIS IS WHY ALMOST EVERY PIECE OF CLASSICAL MUSIC YOU HEAR IS IN THE "KEY" OF SOMETHING, LIKE G MAJOR, C SHARP MINOR, WHATEVER. ACTUALLY, I BET MOST OF THE MUSIC YOU HEAR, WHETHER ITS CLASSICAL OR NOT, IS IN A KEY. TONALITY REMAINS THE DOMINANT FORM OF MUSIC COMPOSITION.

BUT ALMOST AS SOON AS THIS PRACTICE WAS FULLY ADOPTED, COMPOSERS WERE ALREADY BREAKING THE RULES. THEY ARE ARTISTS, AFTER ALL.

[DR. ANDREW FARINA: "There are these individuals who then basically kind of take the idea of 'okay so we have these chords...'"]

THIS IS DOCTOR ANDREW FARINA.

["... they're supposed to operate a certain way..."]

HE'S A MUSIC PROFESSOR AT BUTLER UNIVERSITY.

["But now, we can broaden our horizons a little bit. So things start to essentially break away from tonality, really even as early as, well, in some cases, Haydn."]

[HAYDN - "THE REPRESENTATION OF CHAOS" FROM CREATION]

THIS IS HAYDN'S CREATION, A HUGE ORCHESTRAL PIECE MEANT TO DEPICT THE BOOK OF GENESIS FROM THE BIBLE, AND SEEN BY MANY AS HIS GREATEST WORK.

["In the introduction to it, the first section is called 'The Representation of Chaos,' and it is, in many ways, almost atonal."]

IT REPRESENTS THE CHAOS BEFORE GENESIS, SO THE CHORDS NEVER RESOLVE. AND FOR THE NEXT CENTURY, COMPOSERS WOULD ONLY FURTHER DISMANTLE TONALITY, UNTIL YOU GET TO SOMETHING LIKE STRAVINSKY'S RITE OF SPRING IN 1913.

[STRAVINSKY - THE RITE OF SPRING]

THIS IS WHERE OUR PROTAGONIST, AUSTRIAN COMPOSER ARNOLD SCHOENBERG COMES IN.

[SCHOENBERG - VERKLARTE NACHT]

BY THE 1920S, HE HAD ALREADY BUILT A REPUTATION AS ONE OF THE BEST COMPOSERS OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY. BUT HE WASN'T SATISFIED. HE SAW THE DIRECTION MUSIC WAS GOING—FURTHER AND FURTHER AWAY FROM TONALITY, UNTIL EVENTUALLY THERE WOULD BE NO RULES, OR EVEN GUIDELINES—AND HE DIDN'T LIKE IT. IT WOULD ALL JUST BE UNSTRUCTURED, INCOMPREHENSIBLE NOISE WITHOUT SOME KIND OF GOVERNING PRINCIPLE. BUT WITHOUT TONALITY, WHAT WOULD THAT PRINCIPLE BE? ENTER SERIALISM.

[SCHOENBERG - SUITE FOR PIANO, OP. 25]

SO, THE ULTIMATE GOAL OF SERIALISM IS TO MAKE IT IMPOSSIBLE FOR ANY ONE NOTE TO GAIN IMPORTANCE OVER ANOTHER. YOU SEE, TONALITY IS REALLY JUST A WAY OF PUTTING NOTES INTO A HIERARCHY. SO, FOR EXAMPLE IN THE KEY OF C, YOU HAVE C, WHICH IS THE MOST IMPORTANT NOTE, AND THEN THERE'S G, THE FIFTH OF C, WHICH IS THE SECOND MOST

IMPORTANT NOTE, AND SO ON. BUT SERIALISM ELIMINATES THAT HIERARCHY.
ALL NOTES ARE EQUAL.

[SUITE FOR PIANO]

IT'S BASICALLY TONAL COMMUNISM.

[SUITE FOR PIANO]

SO, HERE'S HOW IT WORKS. YOU TAKE ALL TWELVE NOTES IN WESTERN
MUSIC...

[CHROMATIC SCALE FROM A TO G]

RANGING FROM A TO G, WITH ALL THE SHARPS AND FLATS BETWEEN,
AND ORDER THEM IN A ROW. SIMPLY ENOUGH, THIS IS CALLED A TONE ROW.
FOR EXAMPLE, THE TONE ROW FOR THE PIECE WE HEARD EARLIER, ONE OF
SCHOENBERG'S EARLIEST SERIALIST WORKS, IS E-F-G-D^b -G^b -E^b -A^b -D-B-
C-A-B^b .

[TONE ROW]

THAT'S ALL TWELVE NOTES. SO YOU TAKE THAT ROW, AND BUILD YOUR
PIECE OFF OF THAT. AND YOU CAN ONLY PLAY THE NOTES IN THE PIECE IN
THAT ORDER. ONCE YOU PLAY A NOTE IN THE ROW, YOU CAN'T GO BACK TO
IT UNTIL YOU GO THROUGH THE ENTIRE ROW AGAIN. ALL OF THIS IS TO
ENSURE THAT THE "GHOSTS OF TONALITY," AS SCHOENBERG ONCE CALLED
IT, WON'T CREEP INTO THE PIECE.

SO NOW YOU'RE PROBABLY WONDERING... "OKAY, BUT WHY WOULD
ANYONE WANT TO LISTEN TO THIS IN THE FIRST PLACE?"

[SUITE FOR PIANO]

“IT’S DISSONANT AND REALLY JUST UGLY. IT SOUNDS LIKE RANDOM BANGING ON A PIANO. I COULD DO THIS. A FIVE-YEAR OLD COULD DO THIS.”

AND YES, I HAVE TO ADMIT, IT’S DIFFICULT EVEN FOR ME TO LISTEN TO THIS FOR TOO LONG. BUT I KNOW ONE THING FOR SURE—IT’S NOT RANDOM. RANDOM SOUNDS LIKE THIS:

[GRANT TIMMERMAN - RANDOM]

THIS IS COMPUTER-GENERATED RANDOMNESS, SO IT’S THE REAL DEAL. NOW COMPARE THAT TO SCHOENBERG’S PIANO CONCERTO, ONE OF HIS LATER SERIALIST WORKS.

[SCHOENBERG - PIANO CONCERTO, OP. 42]

FORGET ABOUT THE DISSONANCE. INSTEAD, NOTICE HOW NOTES ARE ARTICULATED. LISTEN FOR THE MELODY—AND YES, THERE IS A MELODY. PAY ATTENTION TO THE RHYTHM, THE DYNAMICS, EVERYTHING. IT WAS ALL COMPOSED AND PERFORMED WITH AN INCREDIBLE ATTENTION TO DETAIL. IT’S JUST AS STRUCTURALLY PERFECT AS BACH—WELL, NOT REALLY, BECAUSE NO ONE IS AS PERFECT AS BACH—BUT ALMOST. IT’S JUST A DIFFERENT FORM OF EXPRESSION.

[PIANO CONCERTO, OP. 42]

THINK ABOUT IT LIKE LEARNING A NEW LANGUAGE. IN FACT, I’D LIKEN LISTENING TO THIS CONCERTO TO THOSE VIDEOS ON YOUTUBE WITH TITLES LIKE “HOW ENGLISH SOUNDS TO NON-ENGLISH SPEAKERS,” WHERE THE ACTORS JUST SAY GIBBERISH BUT YOU FEEL LIKE YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO UNDERSTAND IT.

[GARY COUTURIE - WHAT ENGLISH SOUNDS LIKE TO NON-ENGLISH SPEAKERS]

YOU'RE CONSTANTLY ON THE VERGE OF KNOWING WHAT THEY'RE TRYING TO SAY, BUT YOU REALIZE IT'S JUST NONSENSE. IT'S THE SAME WITH SERIALIST PIECES, WHERE AT CERTAIN POINTS YOU THINK YOU HEAR A CHORD OR SOMETHING ELSE YOU RECOGNIZE, BUT THEN IT FLIPS ON YOU AND YOU'RE LEFT WITH NOTHING TO HOLD ONTO.

[PIANO CONCERTO, OP. 42]

OR REALLY, A BETTER COMPARISON WOULD BE LIKE LISTENING TO MUSIC FROM A CULTURE TOTALLY DISTINCT FROM OURS. TRY LISTENING TO THIS AZERBAIJAN FOLK SONG, FOR INSTANCE.

[AZERBAIJAN FOLK SONG]

TO OUR EARS, IT JUST SOUNDS VAGUELY EXOTIC AND MYSTERIOUS, BUT NOT REALLY MUCH ELSE. WE DON'T KNOW WHAT TO LISTEN FOR. WE DON'T EVEN KNOW WHAT INSTRUMENT IS PLAYING, OR EVEN, ADMITTEDLY, WHERE AZERBAIJAN EVEN IS! (BY THE WAY, THE INSTRUMENT IS AN ANCIENT KIND OF WOODWIND CALLED A BALABAN, AND AZERBAIJAN IS NEXT TO THE CASPIAN SEA, BETWEEN TURKEY AND IRAN IN THE MIDDLE EAST). NOW COMPARE THAT TO SOMETHING LIKE LISZT'S LIEBESTRAUM NO. 3.

[LISZT - LIEBESTRAUM NO. 3]

WE DON'T NEED TO UNDERSTAND ANYTHING ABOUT MUSIC THEORY TO KNOW WHAT HE'S SAYING HERE EMOTIONALLY. SURE, WE ALL HAVE VARYING INTERPRETATIONS, BUT WE GET THE IDEA.

BUT WHEN WE LISTEN TO A SERIALIST PIECE, WE'RE SUBJECTING OURSELVES TO A MUSICAL LANGUAGE THAT IS FUNDAMENTALLY IN OPPOSITION TO WHAT WE'RE USED TO. WE'RE FORCED TO FIND NEW WAYS TO LISTEN.

[PIANO CONCERTO, OP. 42]

BECAUSE TONALITY IS ALL THAT WE'VE GROWN UP WITH, ALL THAT WE EVER HEAR IN OUR DAILY LIVES. WE'RE ESSENTIALLY MUSICALLY MONOLINGUAL. BUT TONALITY ISN'T THE ONLY WAY TO DO "MUSIC." IN FACT, IT'S NOT EVEN THE ONLY WAY THE WESTERN WORLD HAS DONE IT. AS I SAID BEFORE, IT REALLY ONLY STARTED IN THE 1600S WITH BACH, AND BEFORE THAT THERE WAS ALL THIS OTHER WEIRD STUFF, LIKE GREGORIAN CHANTS...

[GREGORIAN CHANT]

... OR EVEN BEFORE THAT, THE GREEK MODES.

[ANCIENT GREEK MUSIC]

IT TAKES WORK TO LEARN TO LISTEN TO MUSIC LIKE THIS. UNDERSTANDING DOESN'T COME NATURALLY. BUT IT'S WORTH IT. IT'S WORTH IT, TO QUOTE FROM A SCHOENBERG STRING QUARTET, TO "FEEL AIR FROM ANOTHER PLANET." AND NOW, HERE'S LEONARD BERNSTEIN ON THE PIECE TO PLAY US OUT.

[LEONARD BERNSTEIN ON SCHOENBERG]

[SCHOENBERG - STRING QUARTET NO. 2]

MELOMANIA IS WRITTEN AND PRODUCED BY ME, PATRICK SIMPSON.
THANKS FOR LISTENING.