

1 | Inspiration

HOWARD SKEMPTON

*Clear melodic fragments
Form as if from nowhere;
Each a cause of wonder,
Serving now as tinder;
Offering a bounty:
Flames of lyric beauty.
Melody awaits us,
If we dare to go there.¹*

It should be easy. The least elusive meaning of ‘inspiration’ is ‘inhalation’, so inspiration should be as straightforward as breathing; or, precisely, as easy as breathing in. Voice teacher Michael McCallion advises that ‘the hard work in breathing, surprisingly, is not breathing in but breathing out. We have a basic predisposition to breathe in which makes that part of the breathing cycle relatively easy for us.’² Jonathan Harvey, in his book, *Music and Inspiration*, points eloquently to this primary meaning of inspiration:

Firstly, and most literally, inspiration is an intake of breath: the necessary prelude to expiration, an essential part of the process that keeps human beings alive. Music, as well as life, relies on inspiration in this most basic sense. No musical utterance can be imagined without such ‘inspiration’ as its pre-condition: whether literal, as in the singer’s or wind player’s intake of breath, or metaphorical, as in the string player’s preparation of the bow or the conductor’s up-beat.³

This is not to suggest that inspiration is there for the taking. Though arguably essential, it seems to lie beyond our grasp. How can we pin down a concept as elusive as inspiration? Perhaps it is a sort of ‘dark matter’, recognisable as a force but impossible to observe directly? Perhaps it is not to be ‘grasped’ at all, but simply touched, like William Blake’s Joy, in ‘Eternity’:

He who binds⁴ to himself a Joy
Doth the winged life destroy;
But he who kisses the Joy as it flies
Lives in Eternity’s sunrise.⁵

Jonathan Harvey's book (re-drafted and updated by Michael Downes) was based on his doctoral thesis. When he first expressed a wish to explore the subject of music and inspiration, his university, Cambridge, disapproved and he headed to Glasgow where he was welcomed 'with open arms'. The book is packed with quotations. It is a mixture of gentle probing and wise reflection. He begins at the beginning, finding three definitions of inspiration in the Concise Oxford Dictionary (7th edition). The first is the literal 'drawing in of breath' described earlier. The second refers to divine influence; and the third describes it as a 'thought etc. that is inspired, prompting; a sudden brilliant or timely idea'. 'Timely' suggests immediacy: a flash or spark of illumination; a 'lightbulb moment'. Dieter Schnebel, writing about Stockhausen in the fourth issue of the journal *die Reihe*, describes the process of creation of Stockhausen's music as 'like lightning – illumination and endless work at the same time'.⁶

Jonathan Harvey makes a number of references to Stockhausen in *Music and Inspiration*, but also draws heavily on writers from other disciplines. One of these is the psychiatrist Anthony Storr, who casts light on the role of inspiration in both science and the arts.⁷ He recognises its magical nature in noting that 'creative people habitually describe their dependence for inspiration upon sources outside their conscious volition'.⁸ This quotation is taken from a chapter entitled 'Symbols of Integration'. It begins, irresistibly: 'Jung, like Freud, and like many another creative person, fell in love with his own ideas to the extent that he was apt to overgeneralize them.'⁹ Storr goes on to discuss Jung's observations on the appearance of so-called mandalas in the drawings and paintings of his patients, and suggests that in describing his patients' quest for integration, Jung was also describing the creative process. He explains:

For the artist, the work of art serves the same purpose; that is, the union of opposites within himself, and the consequent integration of his own personality. Jung and his followers tend to describe the individuation process in terms of a once-for-all achievement, like maturity, or self-realization, or self-actualization, or genitality for that matter. But every experienced psychotherapist knows that personality development is a process which is never complete; and no sooner is a new integration achieved, a new mandala painted, than it is seen as inadequate. Another must follow which will include some other omitted element, or be a more perfect expression of the new insight.¹⁰

Most composers would recognise this process; not just from work to work, but from day to day. Invention or formulation prompts self-criticism, provoking further invention or formulation, and consequent self-criticism, and so on. We could view this alternation, this back-and-forth, as integration and interrogation; with integration somehow linked to, if not identified with, inspiration: an integrating breath in, and an interrogating breath out.

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*Listening to breathing:  
Subtle oscillation  
Heard against the silence;  
Delicate the balance;  
Tenderly it holds us,  
Whispering consensus.  
Waves of love subsiding,  
Deeper than the ocean.<sup>11</sup>*

Connections of one sort or another are the key to inspiration. For the composer, a connection must be made between pattern and sound; and between ideas and circumstances. Benjamin Britten understood this clearly, and it is good to be reminded of relevant extracts from his speech, 'On Receiving the First Aspen Award'. Britten is 'amazed not only by the extraordinary mastery of [Schubert's *Winterreise*] . . . but by the renewal of the magic: each time, the mystery remains'.<sup>12</sup> He continues, 'This magic comes only with the sounding of the music, with the turning of the written note into sound – and it only comes (or comes most intensely) when the listener is one with the composer, either as a performer himself, or as a listener in active sympathy'.<sup>13</sup>

Britten is forthright in promoting practicality. 'During the act of composition one is continually referring back to the conditions of performance . . . the acoustics and the forces available, the techniques of the instruments and the voices – such questions occupy one's attention continuously, and certainly affect the stuff of the music, and in my experience are not only a restriction, but a challenge, an inspiration'.<sup>14</sup> Inspiration often springs from reality; from lived circumstances. However ineffable it is, it is probably meaningless unless it connects with reality. Anthony Storr highlights the example of Albert Einstein: 'Einstein's laws proved to be an advance on previous scientific thought because the

effects predicted by them turned out to be better in accord with observation. In other words, where his theories touched the external world they worked'.<sup>15</sup> The interaction of reverie and ratiocination with the 'external world' or 'conditions of performance' may result in new connections being made, and what one might call a 'eureka' moment.<sup>16</sup>

What is happening here? An understanding of the physiology of the brain may offer clues. Some five decades ago, the mathematician Christopher Zeeman decided that the time had come 'to provide some sort of mathematical theory connecting the activity of nerve cells and electro-chemical activity in the brain together with the global structure about memory and thinking'.<sup>17</sup> Zeeman, who founded the Mathematics Department at the University of Warwick was a specialist in topology. He offers an account of how his mathematical (topological) model of the brain could explain the mechanism underlying creativity. His explanation is challenging for the layman, requiring a grasp of concepts such as dynamical system, multidimensional space and attractors. Within the multidimensional space of the brain – with as many dimensions as neurons – there is a stable flow towards attractors, each of which is itself multidimensional. We are to understand that 'an attractor represents a body or context of ideas'; also, that the mind 'will seldom stay still and will tend to jump from idea to idea, but ... remain within the same context of ideas'.<sup>18</sup> It is then assumed that two states can be superposed.

Zeeman explains, 'the superposition of states means that two attractors can be multiplied together, corresponding to the mind thinking of two thoughts at once and creating an associative memory (putting two and two together). However, in the dynamical system the product of two attractors is unstable, and "any arbitrary slight perturbation" [highlighted, in italics] will cause the product to break up into new stable attractors (of lower dimension than the product)'.<sup>19</sup> This 'phenomenon of the break-up of the product into new stable attractors', he continues, 'is the essence of creativity. ... [There are] a finite number of contexts [of ideas], but these are drawn unpredictably from an infinite bank of possibilities'.<sup>20</sup> If this forming of new attractors is associated with a flash of insight, there is another creativity associated with the growing conviction or mature reflection. It follows, that 'if a mind dwells upon a large body of ideas and experiences, the dynamical system of the brain will build

huge attractors, which in time will break up into fewer smaller very stable attractors.<sup>21</sup>

The unpredictability of this process accords with Stravinsky's view of creating a 'faculty [that is] never given to us all by itself. It always goes hand in hand with the gift of observation. And the true creator may be recognized by his ability always to find about him, in the commonest and humblest thing, items worthy of note.'<sup>22</sup> It is here – and only here – that Stravinsky acknowledges inspiration: 'One does not contrive an accident: one observes it to draw inspiration therefrom. An accident is perhaps the only thing that really inspires us.'<sup>23</sup>

The good news is that we do not have to wait for accidents to happen, but rather technique is all-important. By technique, I mean how we go about doing what we do; how we set things up; how we 'prime the canvas'. Accidents do not happen by accident. Preparation might be so careful as to become almost a ritual. In Stravinsky's case, one imagines pencils lined up and ready for action. He would have had intimate knowledge of his habits, and limits, as a pianist, and would have been able to trust his fingers to slip with sufficient frequency. His technique allowed him to enable inspiration (as described above) by playing to his strengths as a musician: by exercising his musical memory, by using his taste and reason to select from what he found, and to shape it and commit to paper what needed to be saved for further consideration. We cannot copy Stravinsky – technique is idiosyncratic – so the accidents we have will be of our own making, and the ways of dealing with them, of our own choosing. Inspiration will be there, looking over our shoulder (as long as we allow it to do so).

There is another view of inspiration, of course; the popular view that a work can be conceived in a moment. Dieter Schnebel's remark about Stockhausen's music – quoted above – suggests as much. One can understand why those of a Romantic disposition would prefer to hold out for the explosive revelation, in the manner of Mahler's account of being 'at the mercy of spontaneity'.<sup>24</sup> Having committed himself to finishing his Seventh Symphony, both slow movements having been completed, he became convinced, after weeks of waiting, that 'not a note would come'. Returning home, he recounts in a letter to his wife, 'I got into the boat (at Knumpendorf) to be rowed across. At the first stroke of the oars the theme (or rather the rhythm and character) of the introduction to the first movement came into my head – and in four weeks the first, third and

fifth movements were done.<sup>25</sup> His reference to ‘the rhythm and character’ of the work qualify – but do not replace – theme. Here at last, in something like idyllic circumstances, the composer ‘unlocks’ the piece. This theme may not (yet) take the form of a melody, but it still inspires in its completeness and openness. As for divine influence, who can say? It is enough to wake up to love: that is inspiration enough.

## Notes

1. Howard Skempton, *What to Make of Music?* (Unpublished, 2021), ll. 25–32.
2. Michael McCallion, *The Voice Book* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1998), 48.
3. Jonathan Harvey, *Music and Inspiration* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1999), xiii.
4. ‘He who binds’ is sometimes printed as ‘He who bends’. ‘Binds’ or ‘Bends?’ ‘Bends’ differs from ‘kisses’ in a more subtle way than ‘binds’.
5. William Blake, *Eternity* (1757), [www.poets.org/poem/eternity](http://www.poets.org/poem/eternity) (accessed 12 March 2022).
6. Dieter Schnebel, ‘Karlheinz Stockhausen’, *die Reihe* (1960), 131.
7. Anthony Storr, *The Dynamics of Creation* (London: Pelican Books, 1976).
8. Storr, *Dynamics of Creation*, 287.
9. Storr, *Dynamics of Creation*, 282.
10. Storr, *Dynamics of Creation*, 289.
11. Skempton, ‘What to Make of Music?’, ll. 33–40.
12. Benjamin Britten, ‘On Receiving the First Aspen Award’ (31 July 1964), [www.aspenmusicfestival.com/benjamin-britten](http://www.aspenmusicfestival.com/benjamin-britten) (accessed 12 March 2022).
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*
15. Storr, *Dynamics of Creation*, 88.
16. ‘Eureka’ is an exclamation of joy and satisfaction which comes from the Greek word *heúrēka* [εὕρηκα] meaning ‘I have found it’; reputedly uttered by Archimedes when discovering a method to determine the purity of gold.
17. Quoted in David Paterson and Steven Rose, *The Brain* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1969), 35.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Paterson and Rose, *The Brain*, 76.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Paterson and Rose, *The Brain*, 77.

22. Igor Stravinsky, 'Poetics of Music' (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970 [1942]), 54.
23. Stravinsky, 'Poetics of Music', 55.
24. Quoted in Harvey, *Music and Inspiration*, 28.
25. Donald Mitchell and Knud Martner (eds.), *Gustav Mahler: Memories and Letters* (London: Cardinal, 1990), 328.