16 The kitten and the tiger: Tovey's Haydn

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One of the standard ways for a critic to set up an argument is to state that the popular image of an artist is misguided. The rhetorical manoeuvre cuts two ways, or would were it not so overused. It sets the critic up as a thoughtful expert and clears the ground for the construction of a contrary image that claims to be truer to life. What remains for both the straw man and the thoughtful expert is the necessity of the image, a narrative trope that tags the artist with certain identifying traits and provides a ready means of orientation for both apprehending the artist's work and communicating about it in social contexts. It would be easy to dismiss these images as packaging or window-dressing, both of which they are, but it would also be a mistake. The images are as unavoidable as they are useful, the basic coinage of the pragmatics of art. They are also symptomatic of the cultural trends that they serve or challenge. None of them should be believed, exactly, but all of them should be taken seriously.

This is perhaps especially true with respect to Haydn, whose fortunes, at least in the English-speaking world, have been tied exceptionally closely to a pair of images with remarkable staying power.

The first, still surprisingly alive, is the nineteenth-century image of the periwigged Papa Haydn, sturdy, cheerful, and unreflective, a higher-order artisan who ingeniously devised the Classical forms, especially the symphony – he is, of course, the "father" of the symphony – in which others would upstage him. The process starts with his most famous younger contemporary, the Icarus to Haydn's Daedalus. The artistic genius of Mozart regularly trumps the supreme skillfulness of Haydn. This image was influentially purveyed by both E. T. A. Hoffmann and Wagner, for whom Haydn conveys "the expression of a serene and childlike personality" (Hoffmann) or "serenity and placid, easy intimacy" (Wagner). It is Mozart, not Haydn, whose music "leads us to the heart of the spirit realm" (Hoffmann) and encompasses "the whole depth of the heart's infinite feeling" (Wagner).[1] The image of Haydn as a master artificer lacking in depth is very close to the common Romantic stereotype for the eighteenth century itself. It was consolidated with lasting authority by C. F. Pohl (also a German) in the first edition of *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians* in 1879. Among the traits Pohl singles out for admiration, perhaps the most telling are Haydn's "studied moderation" and "the childlike cheerfulness and drollery which

chase away trouble and care."[2] Pohl's entry remained unchanged until revised – but not seriously rethought – for the fifth edition of 1954. From there it is only a small step to Harold C. Schonberg's *The Lives of the Great Composers* of 1970, which celebrates Haydn for his "direct, clear, good-natured, unneurotic view toward life and art."[3]

The second image is what keeps the first alive by showing it up as misguided. This is the twentieth-century image of Haydn as the master as well as the innovator of the classical aesthetics of music, a figure of unrivaled originality and expressive range not to be upstaged by Mozart or anyone else, not even by Beethoven, the Leviathan himself. This is the Haydn who was the first to understand the very essence of modern musical logic, the Haydn who grasped the infinite possibilities of tonal, motivic, and contrapuntal development and found the techniques required to release them and bring them dramatically to life. To the educated ear, this Haydn can do anything and express anything. To call him emotionally limited is absurd. The work of such scholars as H. C. Robbins Landon, Charles Rosen, and James Webster has given this image considerable weight in the scholarly world, even though listeners – what's left of them – still seem inclined to give Haydn a back seat behind Mozart and Beethoven. Something about the first image, it seems, is not *that* misguided, never mind that the image itself is condescending and nowadays seems absurd.[4]

The second image was largely created by Donald Francis Tovey (1875–1940) in the program notes on the later symphonies collected in his *Essays in Musical Analysis* (1935–39; this influential compilation drew on the notes Tovey wrote for the Reid orchestra, which he founded in 1917 a few years after assuming the Reid Chair of Music at Edinburgh University). The twentieth-century Anglophone Haydn is essentially Tovey's Haydn. In what follows, I propose to explore in greater detail the image that Tovey created and to read it symptomatically as a means of coordinating musical aesthetics with social and cultural values.

The image has three leading aspects that can be taken up in turn, though each inevitably overlaps the others. In order of what I take to be increasing importance these are: (1) originality, understood in terms later made familiar by Harold Bloom as a capacity to be liberated rather than constrained by precedent, but – and this is the distinctive part – without the Bloomian elements of anxiety and struggle; (2) a creativity not bound by rules, understood as the manifestation of a wider and deeper freedom that is both artistic and social; and (3) the disposition of that freedom along a continuum of transformative play, of wit and critique, whimsy and pugnacity, summed up in the images – repeated in Tovey's writing on Haydn like a leitmotif – of the kitten and the tiger.

In all three aspects, Tovey's Haydn occupies a position that affords him the trappings of the Romantic outlaw without their transgressiveness; it is the position of a skeptical insider, capable of irritability and impatient of pretense, but rendered affirmative and creative by the vital energy of his own wit, in the large eighteenth-century sense of the term that embraces both intelligence and invention. Like many an eighteenth-century wit, this Haydn is a man with a mission. He is called on by his gifts to take up arms with good or high spirits against the forces of dullness, orthodoxy, and convention – forces that at their worst are genuinely stultifying and dark. This position is derived from certain strains in eighteenth-century British literary tradition, which is as much the context for the construction of Tovey's Haydn as is the history of music in German-speaking Europe. As Alexander Pope memorably defined it, "The life of a wit is a warfare on earth." If one is willing to stretch the chronology a little, Tovey's Haydn turns out to be a musical cross between Pope and William Blake.

And so, for that matter, does Tovey, whose mission it is to rescue Haydn from the pedantry that can see nothing but its own image and thus represents a mercurial genius as a periwigged pedant. Tovey's writing on Haydn is even more quirky, witty, and unpredictable than is normal for its author; it approximates the very traits that Tovey finds and admires in Haydn himself. The writing is also frequently satirical or sarcastic, at times to the point of disdain: "[The] differences [among the "London" Symphonies] grow upon us with their merits as we emancipate ourselves from the doctrine which regards them as pianoforte duets tempered by the inhibitions of two nice little school-girls with flaxen pigtails."[5] "The 'surprise' in this symphony [No. 94, nicknamed the "Surprise"] is the most unimportant feature in all Haydn's mature works."[6] "After all the a-priorities have been accepted as to powdered wigs and courtly formulas, will the a-priorists kindly predict what modulation Haydn is going to make at the end of the sixth measure of the following theme?"[7] Like Pope and Blake, Tovey at cultural war is inclined to show no mercy.

Tovey is hardly original himself in regarding Haydn as a great original, but the terms of his conception are pointedly unconventional. The originality of his Haydn is not to be measured by formal innovations in a progressive narrative of music history – the measure adopted by Pohl and his forbears. Tovey pooh-poohs the very idea of such a narrative, except in an epochal sense; for him, once music itself had reached a point of maturity, essentially with J. S. Bach, it could only change, not progress, at the highest level of accomplishment. From this standpoint, Pohl's summing up of Haydn's significance is vacuous, not to mention being uncomfortably close to damning with faint praise: "When we consider the poor condition in which he found

certain important departments of music . . . it is impossible to over-rate [Haydn's] creative powers."[8]

In 1880 (just a year after the first edition of *Grove*), in his famous essay "The Study of Poetry," Matthew Arnold had severely chastised this historicist attitude as inconsistent with the work of building a literary canon. A half-century later, Tovey took the same line with regard to music. His attitude is consistent with the one expounded in a more recent and equally famous literary essay, T. S. Eliot's "Tradition and the individual talent" (1917). Eliot celebrates a general artistic mentality, "the mind of Europe," that constantly undergoes "a development which abandons nothing enroute, which does not superannuate either Shakespeare, or Homer, or the rock drawing of the Magdalenian [Cro-Magnon] draftsmen." Change may bring "refinement, perhaps, complication certainly," but what it does not bring is improvement.[9] Great art exists in a simultaneous cultural order that continually reconstitutes itself as new entries are enshrined in it.

Like Eliot, Tovey regards that order as both immanent and palpable in genuinely original works. He typically claims as much by reversals of chronology, coupled with a claim that Haydn is upstaging a nominally latter-day colleague. The second subject in the finale of the Symphony no. 104, we're told, contains "an impudent prophetic plagiarism of Brahms's cadence-theme" (in the finale of the latter's Symphony no. 2) that is also "an ingenious transformation, not to be outdone by Wagner or Liszt, of the features of the main theme."[10] And the slow movement of the Symphony no. 88 ends with "a coda in which Brahms's ninth symphony retires into a heaven where Brahms, accompanied by his faithful red hedgehog [*Der Rote Igel*, Brahms's favorite restaurant], can discuss it with Haydn, Beethoven, and Schubert over a dinner cooked by Maitre du Clavecin Couperin and washed down by the best Bach."[11] This dinner-party fantasy is admittedly troubling from a latter-day perspective; it's too smug, too clubby – no women or other lesser mortals admitted. But its emphasis, and no doubt its intention, is elsewhere. Its image of genius as conviviality is both a witty way to affirm the non-progressive character of artistic accomplishment and to debunk the convention of dealing with great artists in tones of wide-eyed piety. The ultimate point of reference is a much earlier compound of whimsy, conviviality, and wisdom: Plato's *Symposium*.

In one key respect, however, Tovey differs from Eliot. Where Eliot posits a thorough historical awareness as the precondition of original creation, Tovey traces originality to a sturdy independence of mind that allows the artist to free himself from history and concentrate on the demands of the artistic material. "The truth is," he says (and means it!), "that great artists always . . . invent everything, and that it does not in the least matter which of them invented anything first."[12] Thus he can say with a straight face,

and so often that it turns from a leitmotif to a mannerism, that this or that recapitulation in the first movement of a Haydn symphony is one of Beethoven's best codas.

Perhaps Tovey overuses this trope because it encapsulates his understanding of Haydn's originality so well. There is a story behind it, one that can be gleaned by piecing together remarks scattered across essays on several of the symphonies.

The story begins with Johann Christian and Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach. Tovey regards them as the masters of Haydn's early style, much to its detriment. This style, he says, is "his most nearly regular," and "of a roughness that removes every vestige of interest from questions of detail."[13] Though inclined to remain cryptic on this point, as if not wanting to malign his hero, Tovey implies that the regularity and the roughness fed on each other; where music is regular, wit has little need to trouble itself. Between Haydn's "earliest" and his "mature" styles lies a "vast gap," which the "middle style" after 1771 diminished but could not bridge. Instead, Haydn abruptly jumped the gap as a result of his encounter with Mozart, the effect of which was "to set him free, so that his large movements became as capricious in their extended course of events as his minuets had always been in the cast of their phrases."[14] Mozart thus awakened the originality only latent in those quirky minuets. True originality does not belong to Tovey's Haydn in general, but only to the "mature" Haydn who sprang forth fully formed from the meeting of creative spirits – "one of the best-known wonders of musical history" – in the 1780s.

This Haydn inherits the identification of freedom with caprice that defines his sense of form, not from past precedent, but from the possibility of an unprecedented future. When Tovey says that Haydn writes Beethoven's codas, more is involved than an impish rhetoric that siphons Beethoven's large reservoir of prestige in Haydn's direction, and far more than the underlying technical claim that Haydn's so-called recapitulations, unlike Mozart's and Beethoven's, are typically irregular in the manner made familiar by Beethoven's codas. The trope locates the mature Haydn in a nonlinear mode of creative time that is always one step ahead of itself and two steps ahead of the listener: "Haydn is well aware of all [available] possibilities; and he always uses the one you did not expect."[15] He does so, moreover, with an effect that is as much ethical as it is aesthetic: "the life his themes live is one that has no room for meanness or triviality. This is great music; and nothing other than great music, whether tragic, majestic, or comic, can stand beside it."[16]

The progressive historical scheme of Pohl and others seems very remote from this account, but it has not quite vanished. Tovey has relocated it within the independent course of Haydn's career, which takes the shape

of a sudden emergence from the cocoon of a younger, more conventional self. This emergence does far more than license Haydn's unconventional side; it makes him the very embodiment of constructive unconventionality. Haydn's genius seizes on a historical accident – the phenomenon of Mozart – to free itself from history. In that freedom lies his originality, and vice versa.

With freedom we come to the second leading trait of Tovey's Haydn, and also to a leading theme in the work of his most influential contemporary. Tovey never mentions Immanuel Kant in relation to Haydn (whom he likes to brush clean of dusty book-learning), but his representation of Haydn as a free imaginative agent is thoroughly Kantian. Both the terms that constitute Haydn's aesthetic freedom and the exemplary relation between that freedom and human freedom generally regarded could have come straight from the pages of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790).

Briefly and (of course) inadequately: Kant regards art as the product of genius, which he understands as the faculty of combining imagination and understanding while leaving the imagination free. By finding the means to communicate the effects of this combination, the artist as genius also frees the imagination of others. Indeed, a communication between one freedom and another is the basis of art in general: the artist replicates the productive power of nature without being fettered by nature, and one artist finds in the example of another – as in the mutual influence of Mozart and Haydn – the substance of his own originality.

For Kant, as for many eighteenth-century writers, this circulatory system of freedoms expressed itself as an independence from rules:

> the product of a genius . . . is an example that is meant not to be imitated, but to be followed by another genius. (For in mere imitation the element of genius in the work – what constitutes its spirit – would be lost.) The other genius, who follows the example, is aroused by it to a feeling of his own originality, which allows him to exercise in art his freedom from the constraint of rules, and to do so in such a way that art itself acquires a new rule by this . . . [and] gives rise to a school for other good minds.[17]

This is not to say that rules are simply repudiated on behalf of a creative furor; the rules are played with, played on, skirted, outfoxed, anything but fetishized. By fostering an intelligent liberation from rules (which is close, for Kant, to saying: by fostering Enlightenment), art becomes the school of spirit.

Tovey's Haydn is proof of Kant's point: he is the very embodiment of art's liberating mentorship. His music is exemplary in its defiance of the symmetry and regularity so often ascribed to it; each of his mature works "has a form of its own which constantly upsets the orthodoxies of text-books."[18] This freedom of form "makes it necessary for us to

anathematize our text-book knowledge before we can listen to Haydn with ears naively attuned to his note."[19] For Tovey to say so, of course, was itself not entirely unorthodox. Pohl, for one, had said so, remarking that Haydn "was no pedant with regard to rules, and would acknowledge no restrictions on genius" – the genius in question being, as usual, Mozart's.[20] Haydn himself had said so, in a statement quoted by Pohl: "Art is free, and should not be fettered by . . . mechanical restrictions. The educated ear is the sole authority on all these questions, and I think I have as much right to lay down the law as anyone."[21] But Tovey's Haydn does not lay down the law; he flaunts it. And he flaunts it so skillfully that the law (being, proverbially, an ass) does not even realize that it's been flaunted. This Haydn, retrospective construction though he may be, is the prototypical Kantian artist for whom not rules, but the manner in which genius plays with and against them, is the cardinal point: one freedom imitating another.[22]

For Tovey, the measure of this freedom is sonata form, which he never tires of telling us is fundamentally inapplicable to Haydn's music. At most it is present ironically or in ruins. "The orthodox theory of sonata form," he says, applies "fairly well" to Mozart and Beethoven, though only with some elaborate qualifications, but "for most of the mature works of Haydn this account simply will not do."[23] "Haydn's freedom and unconventionality will complicate the analysis of any of his mature works."[24] "This Symphony [no. 99] conforms just closely enough to the orthodox scheme of sonata form to make that scheme a guide that can only divert our attention from its most important points."[25] "When you come to look at it, you find not only that all the rules of form as observed by both Mozart and Beethoven are frequently violated by Haydn, but that they are so seldom observed that it would be quite impossible to infer them from his mature practice at all."[26] Poor Mozart and Beethoven at times come out sounding like hacks.

Unlike Kant's, Tovey's attitude toward rules is openly hostile; he writes not with the detachment of the philosopher but with the bite of the satirist. Yet as with satire at its most serious, the critical energy that he celebrates and imitates is only the inverse of an affirmative ideal. And as in Kant, this ideal is a concept of human freedom embodied by art but never confined by it. Tovey, accordingly, will sometimes abruptly doff his antic disposition and write with grave eloquence, nowhere more revealingly than in a comment on the slow movement of the Symphony no. 99: "this adagio is typical of that greatness in Haydn which moved Cherubini to tears, and of that freedom which taught Beethoven's inmost soul more than he, the uncouth pupil, could learn from Haydn the tired teacher."[27] No pedagogy, except a transcendental pedagogy; no social mannerism at all: just one freedom imitating another, in the communicative intimacy that is one of Kant's definitions of spirit.

This turn from the critical to the affirmative can serve to introduce the last leading trait of Tovey's Haydn. Since the key element in this trait is a higher-order, transformative playfulness, the turn might also be said to embrace a movement from Kant to Schiller, with the latter's concept of a "play drive" as the basis of aesthetic education and its social benefits.[28] But Tovey's concept is more neoclassical than that, linked more to the eighteenth-century contexts of Kantian aesthetics than to their nineteenth-century offshoots. The playfulness of Tovey's Haydn is the work of wit in the large eighteenth-century sense. It absorbs the elements of freedom and originality and gives them their ultimate rationale both aesthetic and cultural.

Play is the category through which the construction of Tovey's Haydn most often becomes musically explicit in an analytical sense. Although his usage is quite variable, Tovey's comments on the higher-order play in Haydn's symphonies tend to focus on the finales, which he seems generally to regard as transformative where the first movements are quirky or whimsical. The first movements tend to embody the critical energy of a heterodox, independent, anti-conventional spirit; the finales more often represent that spirit in purely affirmative, animating, pleasure-giving mode.

Tovey's favorite way of highlighting the transformative character of Haydn's playfulness is to invoke a little fable involving the two animals named in my title. The amiable, gamboling, seemingly innocent and harmless melodies with which many of the finales begin constitute Haydn's kittens. Similar feline creatures are also said to inhabit the slow introductions of Symphonies nos. 92 and 100, where they give unwary listeners the impression that nothing much is about to happen. Tovey values his kittens as little nubs of unsocialized energy that the convention-bound listener thinks of as charming because – being weak as kittens – they pose no obvious threat. But these themes only play at being weak; Haydn's kittens tend to scratch and pounce:

> The introduction [to Symphony no. 92] was undoubtedly in some former incarnation a saintly tabby cat whom Thoth or Ra (or whatever deity is in charge of cats) has elevated to the heavens of Haydn's imagination. My first [musical example] gives its transition from the fireside to the outside world. The allegro spiritoso, having thus begun as if butter would not melt in its mouth, promptly goes off with a bang, and works up the two principal figures (a) and (b) of its theme into a movement so spacious and full of surprises that it might well seem to be among the longest Haydn ever wrote. In fact it is among his shortest.[29]

As usual, Tovey's archness contains a serious implication. The historically accurate invocation of the sacralization of cats in ancient Egypt, together with the suggestion of an esoteric wisdom not available to the uninitiated (but perhaps available to Rosicrucians or Masons or members of other

secret societies popular during the Enlightenment), alerts the reader to the principled deception that for Tovey forms the root of Haydn's art. Absolutely nothing is what it seems to be at first. The truth resides in the deception, from which truth eventually appears in the form of a surprise. And the same principle applies to Tovey's critical prose, which once again emulates Haydn's technique of clothing insight in motley.

On two occasions, moreover, we discover that the principle applies yet again to Haydn's kittens, which do not grow up to become housecats: "The finale [of Symphony no. 100] begins with one of those themes which we are apt to take for a kitten until Haydn shows that it is a promising young tiger";[30] "The finale [of Symphony no. 102] begins with one of Haydn's best themes of the kittenish type. Young tigers are also very charming as kittens, and this finale has powerful muscles with which to make its spring."[31] Both of these statements introduce longish analytical descriptions giving the effects of breadth, high energy, and mercurial change, the very stuff of self-delighting self-transformation, their formal underpinnings.

What shall we say of this tiger, who lurks behind Tovey's descriptions of Haydn's kittens even when it does not spring by name? The image suggests danger and adventure, of course, and perhaps empire (it's surely a Bengal); Haydn's tiger lives in the forest or jungle, not the zoo. And the image projects a fusion of grace and power that, like Haydn's originality, is unique to the creature and, like Haydn's freedom, roams unafraid and at will across uncharted spaces. Most significantly, perhaps, the tiger suggests a spirit indifferent to the presumed niceties of civilization, a spirit both untamed and untameable that will only glare inexplicably at you if it is caged. Tovey believed that the pedantic wardens of musical scholarship – he called them "noodles" (squishy when wet, brittle when dry) – had caged Haydn all too effectively. His subversive mission was to engineer a jailbreak.

Tovey's tiger is closely akin to the Tyger of Haydn's contemporary William Blake, at least on one reading of that notoriously ambiguous cat:

> Tyger, Tyger, burning bright
> In the forests of the night;
> What immortal hand or eye,
> Could frame thy fearful symmetry?
>
> In what distant deeps or skies
> Burnt the fire of thine eyes!
> On what wings dare he aspire?
> What the hand, dare seize the fire?[32]
>
> (1–8)

Like the Tyger, the tiger into which Haydn's kitten grows up is an emblem rooted in two great British literary traditions, traditions that eighteenth-century figures such as Pope and Jonathan Swift had brought together when

one was old and the other still new. The old one was a genre, satire; the new one was a quality, the sublime.

On one hand, Tovey's Haydn has the moral and social force claimed for their own by the great British satirists from John Dryden to Samuel Johnson. The forests of the night in which he roams are dark with ignorance, repressiveness, officiousness, and sheer stupidity; he lights up these dark tracts by burning bright with wit, invention, and a reasoned irreverence that intimates the fundamental irreverence of reason itself. On the other hand, Tovey's Haydn has the spiritual and visionary force claimed for their own by poets of the sublime such as Blake and William Wordsworth. The forests of the night that he inhabits are those of cosmic space and time, mystery and majesty, and he lights the way through them by burning bright with the exemplary freedom of the Kantian genius.

Of course these categories overlap; that is part of the point. Like Pope, Tovey's Haydn can raise wit to the level of the sublime:

> Dulness oe'r all possess'd her ancient right,
> Daughter of Chaos and eternal Night . . .
> Laborious, heavy, busy, bold, and blind,
> She rul'd, in native Anarchy, the mind.[33]

Like Wordsworth, he can distill the mind-bending force of the sublime into the form of wit: if the poet traces what is keen, not dull, in him to the "obstinate questionings / Of sense and outward things, / Fallings from us, vanishings" of early childhood, then "The child is father of the man."[34] The tyranny of standard boundaries means nothing to Tovey's Haydn; he skips across or slides beneath them all the time.

Not bound by rule, Tovey's Haydn is no mere rulebreaker; no maker of law, he is no mere outlaw. He is, rather, what the majority of artist-heroes since the eighteenth century were deemed unable to be, some by themselves, some by others. This Haydn is a figure not bound by social constraint yet neither outside the social fabric nor hostile to it. He challenges the pieties of order without fomenting disorder. The kitten is father of the Tyger. Tovey's Haydn is the creative genius as model citizen.