

## THE GENIUS COMPOSER

‘What is genius?’ a friendly voice asks me over the telephone. It’s like Time according to St. Augustine. When no-one asks me, I know the answer. When I want to explain it to someone who asks me, I do not know.

But genius is even more difficult, because genius, it is said, is timeless.

Thankfully I was given three months to think about it. Genius. Of course I wanted to have an opinion and say something about it. I am surrounded by geniuses every day, enjoy their company, squabble with them, and try to learn from them.

Here they are.

To the left of my desk, at eye level, in the centre bookcase; Stravinsky, that is to say, almost two metres of books on the composer. To the right behind me another metre of his music and some titbits. Also to the left, but a little bit more to the front and higher up, Bach and Beethoven. Directly to the left at elbow height; all the Mahler symphonies. I hardly ever look at them any more, but still. Plenty of geniuses.

The question ‘What is a genius?’ turned into ‘Who is a genius?’ Just as St. Augustine was quite capable of giving examples of time without being able to answer the question about the essence of time, I had no trouble naming a number of undisputed genius composers.

Bach? Yes, yes, yes.

Beethoven? Yes, yes.

Bartok? Yes.

Brahms?

I had resolved to be strict and fair and to be very sparing with the inflationary term genius.

Brahms? Hmm, yes-ish.

Bruckner? Great, very great composer.

Boulez? Towering admiration, sky-high respect, as well as floor-to-ceiling love.

Berio? Sky-high admiration, floor-to-ceiling respect, towering love.

At this point, I began to feel a little uncomfortable.

Once it began to dawn on me what the cause for this discomfort was (for how can you compare Beethoven’s versatility with Bruckner’s one-sidedness?), and once it began to dawn on me what the cause of the discomfort was that subsequently arose out of this discomfort (why should you have to compare one person’s versatility with someone else’s one-

sidedness?), I began to devote myself to another letter in the alphabet. Obviously I should never have started with B. B has geniuses by the dozen. If you want to become, beget or bear a genius composer, you should change your name. A name starting with S will also get you quite far in music.

From B to A, then.

I did not pick up a book with an index, but decided to write down what came to me spontaneously.

Abbado? No, unless it's Abbado's Beethoven that is being played in two hundred years' time instead of Beethoven's Beethoven. Only those who think up something new are allowed to take part. Performing musicians do not do this, unless indirectly.

Abel? Abel who?

Adam? *Giselle*?

Adams? No, what a shame.

Addinsell? Even though Reinbert de Leeuw has, in all earnestness, played his *Warsaw Concerto*.

Alkan? No, not exactly.

Alfvén? I think only Maarten 't Hart<sup>1</sup> knows how to pronounce his name.

Antheil? Genius is not the right word.

Arensky? No, no.

Aschenbach? See Mahler.

Those whose names start with A and are not called Andriessen might as well forget it.

How about C.

Carter? Not really.

Chausson? If only.

Chopin? I should say, See Bruckner, but I think that's too feeble. A genius, therefore.

Copland? Might have been if Stravinsky had not beaten him to it. But therefore could *not* have been, because otherwise someone else would have beaten him, Copland, to it.

Couperin? When I only knew one piece by him, yes. That is 'le Grand', François Couperin le Grand.

C comprises one genius and many composers to have a soft spot for. But as everyone knows, you cannot have a soft spot for a genius. Having a soft spot for Bach is as absurd as having a soft spot for Shakespeare or Vermeer.

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<sup>1</sup> Dutch novelist and music lover.

Soft spot, yes or no: the litmus test for genius.

There was one composer I deliberately forgot in the C-list: John Cage. It was only when I wrote down the name John Cage that the full extent of the genius problem hit me. What was it that Cage had said about himself, and Schönberg about Cage and Leonard Bernstein about Schoenberg?

One question leads to another.

For example:

Does a genius always produce the work of a genius?

When does a genius stop being a genius?

Is Mozart, as Professor Reeser<sup>2</sup> told his first year students in 1968, an even greater genius than Bach because, unlike Bach, he also wrote operas?

So is the versatile genius greater than the one-sided genius?

Debussy followed by Wagner, Schumann followed by Chopin, and, talking of opera, Dvorák followed by Brahms? Did I really say that: Dvorák followed by Brahms?

Are there gradations of genius, and if so, what is the lowest grade of genius?

Is the creator of a bar of genius, a genius for the duration of one bar?

And is the creator of a work of genius, a genius for the duration of one whole work?

Is there really all that much of a link between a composition of genius and an oeuvre of genius?

What are we to think of a note or harmony of genius in a non-genius context?

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<sup>2</sup> Eduard Reeser (1908-2002), Dutch musicologist.

ca. 14'

piccolo, klarinet, basklarinet,  
viol, altviol, cello

Piccolo, clarinet, bass clarinet  
violin, viola, cello

Or by another composer:

klavecimbel

harpsichord

Or are this octave and this triad not of genius, but the notes preceding and following them, because they enable the octave and the triad to behave, if not in way suggesting of genius, at least in a masterly fashion? In other words, is an interval or chord like this simply a sound which capitalises on the genius of the notes above and below?

Venus

my love, ah, ah, ah, A - do ..... nis

continuo

The image shows a musical score for a vocal part and a continuo part. The vocal part is labeled 'Venus' and has the lyrics 'my love, ah, ah, ah, A - do ..... nis'. The continuo part is labeled 'continuo' and consists of two staves (treble and bass clef). Below this is a grand staff with three staves (treble, middle, and bass clef).

Are there any silent notes of genius?

The image shows a musical score with two staves (treble and bass clef). The key signature is one flat (B-flat) and the time signature is 2/4. Both staves contain a whole rest, indicating a silent note.

And what to make of a passage of genius in a non-genius composition? Or a movement of genius in a non-genius composition? How big does this movement have to be in order for a non-genius composition to become a composition of genius?

[Adagio]  
*mp*

tenor

Il gît et ses os de - vien - nent en - rail au bai - ser des

orkest

*mp*

A: strijkers + harp

on - des. Ce sont deux per - les que ses yeux:—

B: houtblazers + celesta (8=)

A: strijkers + harp

B

[Adagio]  
*mp*

tenor

Il gît et ses os de - vien - nent en - rail au bai - ser des

orkest

*mp*

A: strijkers + harp

on - des. Ce sont deux per - les que ses yeux:—

B: houtblazers + celesta (8=)

A: strijkers + harp

B

And how big should the genius part of an oeuvre be in order for the creator of this oeuvre to be counted as a genius? And for that matter, how big should this oeuvre be in its entirety?

Is a potential genius a genius?

Does music history acknowledge geniuses without an oeuvre?

Is a child prodigy a genius? And why not?

Is genius in fact a question of the right amount of talent?

Is it possible for the genius to have less talent than the non-genius?

According to Goethe the two qualities that ultimately define a genius are naiveté and irony. This can be read in *Kunst und Altertum*, and the remark refers to the composer Josef Haydn. Goethe ascribed temperament, sensitivity, wit, humour, spontaneity, gentleness and strength to Haydn. What more do you want? When Louis Andriessen and I wrote a book about Stravinsky in 1982<sup>3</sup>, we could not think of a more appropriate motto than Goethe's beautiful words about Haydn. So: not superior skill, not supreme technique, not universal human values, but something as unprofound as naiveté and irony. But we were in good company. We obviously realised that Goethe's criteria were more programmatic than scientific, but this had the advantage that they covered a reasonably clear-cut group of composers, writers, poets and artists ranging from Haydn to Stravinsky, but also included Balanchine, Hockney, Klee, Pessoa, Pushkin, Ravel, Stendhal, Chekhov - just to mention the first ten names that come into my head as I write this.

And Bach, the genius of geniuses, both in and beyond music? The third rate religious poetry he set to music week after week for the happy congregation that was his, is this naiveté? Or should Goethe's desired naiveté be found more in the general sense, in the *Solo Deo Gloria*, the *Jesu Juva* with which the orthodox Lutheran Bach humbly signed his scores?

But irony?

However useful Goethe's definition may be in practice, it does not hold water. The universal genius - if I may be so bold as to use this romantic notion - is the absurd exception to this equally absurd rule. Stravinsky quotes Pushkin somewhere, who is alleged to have said that all good poetry should be a bit stupid. Genius likewise: Mozart, Beethoven, Bach - we should be thankful we did not have to deal with them on a daily basis.

I do not know if there is a generally accepted, scientific definition of 'genius'. The Ninth Edition of the Van Dale Dictionary<sup>4</sup>, the Dutch equivalent of the Oxford Dictionary, gives the following definition: 'the innate gift of great minds which enables them to create exceptional things', and: 'exceptional aptitude and originality of mind.' This is not quite the same. The first definition is somewhat tautological (can a small mind create something exceptional?), and leaves its options open with the quality 'exceptional'.

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<sup>3</sup> *The Apollonian Clockwork. On Stravinsky* (1982; English translation: Oxford University Press 1989; Amsterdam University Press 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Dutch equivalent of the Oxford Dictionary.

The second definition is reminiscent of a remark made by Leonard Bernstein about Arnold Schoenberg. According to Bernstein, Schoenberg was endowed more with genius than talent. Which is reminiscent of something Schoenberg said about Cage, whom Schoenberg thought was more of an inventor than a composer. Cage himself made no secret of the fact - he can be heard saying so in the documentary *From Zero* by Frank Scheffer - that he had no sense of harmony. But surely no-one would maintain that Bernstein was the greatest composer of the three.

Something is going wrong here. A composer is someone with an measurable aptitude for composing music, and an inventor is someone who searches for something which has as yet not existed. An inventor is aiming for something. He is inclined towards subjective originality. He may be trying to invent something with all his might, but he will only succeed if he is not only the inventor but also the discoverer and if he has the gift of serendipity. And if he is such a person, then, like Roentgen of the X-rays, he will turn out to have discovered something completely different from what he was looking for. 20th Century music is swarming with inventors, but there are few discoverers. It seems to me that discovering is more to closely connected with genius than talent.

Vincent d'Indy (1851-1931), count, composer of forgotten operas and symphonies, founder of the Paris Schola Cantorum and in his latter days the conscience of the more conservative part of the musical nation, in 1898 devoted a chapter to the 'constitutional qualities of the artist' in the first part of his four-part *Cours de composition musicale*. Apart from thinking that the artist should believe in God, he considered himself able to distinguish two artist types. He said: 'The artist may be a genius or a talent.' (Incidentally, according to d'Indy the artist should have, apart from talent and if possible genius, an additional faculty, namely *goût* or taste. This phrase has sadly become obsolete and in modern art is even the subject of grave suspicion).

D'Indy says the following about genius and talent: '*Genius* is the sum of mental faculties in their highest state of operation.'

And: '*Talent* is the sum of mental faculties which is sufficient for absorbing works of genius, but not powerful enough to create truly original works.'

In the original French it all sounds a lot more splendid and vague. But wait for it: 'There have been, there are and there will be, latent geniuses, who, lacking the necessary talent to express themselves, have not left or will not leave behind a trace or a single work of lasting beauty.'



A genius who does not leave a mark, let alone a work of lasting beauty; this latent genius fires the imagination. All those genius symphonies that have only been in the mind, those non-written *Sacres* and *Symphonies Fantastiques* floating through space like a choir of unborn children and together make up an un-written, parallel music history - sometimes you dream about them, and this kind of dream leaves every actual sound reality far behind. Sometimes you read about them, as in *Doctor Faustus* by Thomas Mann. Mann's attempt to describe unheard masterpieces has in itself a Faustian quality.

### Talent and Genius

When we combine Vincent d'Indy with the Van Dale Dictionary we get aptitude on the one hand and aptitude in the highest state of operation on the other.

Bernstein now. The question is not whether he was right, but what he meant. I think Bernstein meant: Schoenberg had very original ideas (genius!), but he did not manage (talent!) to transmit these convincingly.

When we distinguish talent and genius thus, we may have two extremes: talent without a glimmer of genius on the one hand, and genius without the slightest bit of talent on the other.

The first type is not a problem. The world is swarming with them. Out of the hundred scores which are completed all round the world each day, about eighty are of this kind. Out of the remaining twenty, nineteen point ninety-nine are devoid of any talent.

The second type is more problematic. Genius without talent? Are these the critics who always know how it should have been done? Or are they the fictional composers such as Adrian Leverkühn? Or is this the composing equivalent of the blind photographer?

'Talent without genius comes to little. Genius without talent is nothing,' Valéry said, but I do not know if it is this simple.

During d'Indy's time, when it was just about possible (and of course just about no longer possible) to write a generally applicable 'Cours de composition musicale', musical creative talent was rather precisely defined. Talent was the ability to do what others had done before you. Talent was the ability to make a musical statement in the style and idiom of your teacher. You listened carefully to Mozart and wrote your first symphony. Only if you were Beethoven would you leave your model behind you. One composer may have been better - more gifted at least - at instrumentation than harmony (Berlioz), better at harmony than melody (Beethoven), better at melody than counterpoint (Schubert), or simply better at everything (Bach), but they were all well-steeped in the secrets of the tonic, dominant and subdominant, which during the 18th and 19th century fulfilled the same role in music as the grammatical sentence in everyday speech. The ban on the so-called parallel octave in functional-tonal music is not the result of

some sinister plot by music theory against music practice, but a convention of the same magnitude as the one that makes the phrase ‘Bach an infallible’ come across as ungrammatical. Bach is not infallible anyway, I realise each time I pass the ugly, so-called covert parallel octave in bars 62-63 of the Toccata BWV 913 - something which only reinforces the awareness of his genius, because geniuses merely make mistakes to give us duffers a momentary feeling of parity, to then put us firmly in our place with notes of genius.

Functional-tonal music required great precision. Its implicit rules turned out to be infinitely, almost infinitely pliable, but those who began to tap at the rafters of the musical construction had to listen out carefully for the effect this would have on the foundations. The link between the rules had to be respected under all circumstances. Those who casually sawed off a section of a leg in the music, would immediately end up at the wrong angle. In such a musical culture, talent can be measured reasonably objectively.<sup>5</sup>

During the 20th century a definite stop was put not to tonality, but to functional tonality, the realm of the dominant and tonic. In its non-tonality, post-tonal twentieth century music resembles pre-tonal music from the middle ages and the renaissance, and to some extent, all non-western music. Non-tonal music also has its rules (including one about the relationship between consonance and dissonance), depending on time, place and genre, but these rules have never engendered a similar illusion of naturalness. A motet by Josquin sounds more ‘artful’ than an *Albumblatt* by Schumann, as does a *Dérive* by Boulez. But there is one big difference between then, pre-tonality, and now, post-tonality; the speculative quality of music since Schoenberg is without precedent. The fact that this is the case has, oddly enough, everything to do with the preceding tonal period.

It is the illusion of naturalness, of grammaticality, of organic coherence - of that which, when we hear a few bars of Mozart, enables us to imagine within certain margins what the following bars will sound like, and especially what the following bars will not sound like - it is this illusion which has led the music in question to have been analysed and interpreted as having these qualities. Since the invention of *Ursatz* and *Urlinie* by the influential music theorist Heinrich Schenker (1868 - 1935), 20th century musical thinking has fallen under the spell of scientific models. The image of the musical universe mirrored itself in that of the physical universe and the musical artform was seen as a functional and rational system with a deep structure and a surface structure which are as two sides of the same coin. Schenker and his disciples inferred musical deep structures from musical surface structures. Schoenberg,

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<sup>5</sup> It remains to be seen not only whether the sheer talent to create the breathtaking harmonic and contrapuntal complications of scores such as *Elektra* or *Gurrelieder* still exists, but also whether it can still exist, now that its soil bed has dried out as a result of the collapse of functional tonality in classical music. According to composer Alexander Goehr the decline of this type of talent can already be found in the *Gurrelieder*.

Webern and all of those who followed them in their speculative footsteps then did the reverse: they designed deep structures in order to arrive at coherent surface structures. This is the thin ice of much 20th century music written in the speculative and anti-empirical tradition of the Second Viennese School, and in its continuation, the tradition of serialism. The molecular structure of my word processor and its shape are, simplistically speaking, as much two sides of the same coin as Stockhausen's *Formel* and its corresponding compositions.<sup>6</sup>

What has all this to do with talent and genius?

This: that the above development has complicated the relationship between the two. That it remains to be seen whether, as d'Indy and Valéry remarked, genius without talent is nothing. Or at any rate, that the relationship between the two phenomena is not nearly as sharply defined as it once was.

There are clearly times and genres (the 19th century, jazz) in which sheer talent gets you further than it would in other times and genres. But when talent is given priority, geniuslessness strikes. Listen to the romantic rubbish - I mean rubbish from Romanticism - which floods the ether.

There are clearly also times and genres (the 20th century, electronic music) in which sheer genius gets you further than it would in other times and genres. But where genius, at any rate in the definition 'originality of mind', is given priority, talentlessness strikes. The romantic rubbish of our grandparents and great grandparents has been replaced by pretentious rubbish.

What to do when, in art - considering we would like art to add something to our minds and souls - we are faced with the choice between talent and genius?

A bit more genius and a bit less talent rather than the other way round, after all? But the difference between the two should not become too great either. When the creativity quotient CQ is equal to  $G(\text{enius})/T(\text{alent})$ , in which the values of this quotient vary between the absurd extremes of infinitely small (infinitely little genius in combination with infinitely large talent) and infinitely large (infinitely large genius and infinitely small talent), my preference swings between 1 and 2, whereby G and T must exceed in an absolute sense a certain threshold value.

Bach's genius, incidentally, is  $\infty/\infty$ , in a mathematical sense undefined.

Satie was undoubtedly a limited talent, but *Socrate* changed music a little.

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<sup>6</sup>CF Peter Kivy, *Philosophical Reflections on the Purely Musical Experiences* (Ithaca and London 1990), p. 124f.

Thelonius Monk created piano pieces lasting five minutes, but we have not finished listening to them or talking about them.

The story goes that Scelsi was unable to write out his own scores, but, whoever held the hand of the composer of *Anahit*, his music has, albeit in only a few pieces, revealed something in music that had not been there in that literally monotonous form before.

Feldman had an ‘extremely amateurish vocabulary’ according to Boulez, but the square inch he exploited was his and he made the most of it.

And finally Cage. More a way of life and thinking than of creating. From the moment he left sounds for what they were and tried to switch off his taste, ideas and personality using chance manipulation, he became in some sense a composer without an oeuvre.

I sometimes wonder who the John Cage of the 19th century was, and what he did for a living.

And also who from the 17th century became John Cage in the 20th century. Perhaps Athanasius Kircher.

And who are the Ustvolkskayas, Scelsis and Feldmans of the 18th century?

None of them undisputed geniuses, these composers, and there is not much to be said about their objective talent. They are instigators, highest authorities and sole subjects of a highly personal one-man or woman state, a little bit like the Scarlattis, the Chopins, the Bruckners and to a certain extent the Wagners were in earlier times. But contrary to their historical counterparts, their one-person realms do not belong to a United Europe of Tonality. They are literally all on their own. This does not always make them particularly attractive to the piano or violin playing music-lover. It is even debatable whether they will outlive their time. But listening to Classic FM it is clear survival is no watertight criterion either.

On the other hand, genius or not, it is these composers who, in the shadow of Boulez, Berio, Ligeti and Stockhausen, have given the second half of the 20th century more of an identity than all the you-name-them together.

To conclude:

I took the genius octave in example 1 from the first movement of the *Kammerkonzert* by Ligeti. There is not one single octave in the minutes that precede this octave, not even an interval which could be recognised as an interval.

The triad from examples 2 and 3 comes after Adonis has died in Venus’s arms. The announcement of his death makes the music drop down an entire tone out of sadness and after

that it merely stumbles. The composer of *Venus and Adonis* is John Blow, a slightly older but less genius contemporary of Purcell. (The example is a schematic rendition from the 1994 recording by the New London Consort conducted by Philip Pickett on L'Oiseau-Lyre 440 220-2).

The silent notes of example 4 appear - or rather do not appear - in the first movement of Ravel's violin sonata.

Example 5 is an excerpt from the genius setting of 'Full Fathom Five' (in French) from Chausson's non-genius music for the *Tempest*.

translation: Suzanne Jansen

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