



# THE HUMAN CONDITION THROUGH CLASSICAL MASTERPIECES

*A course in classical music appreciation*

**Lectures by Jonathan FIELDS, musician and composer**

**Tuesday, June 15, 2010: Mozart and Beethoven: absolute music**

Em Lee Concert Hall, Turtle Bay Music School  
244 East 52nd Street, New York

**Crossroads:** Welcome on behalf of Crossroads New York Cultural Center. I am pleased to introduce the second in a series of four talks by Mr. Jonathan Fields on the human condition through classical masterpieces. Tonight's talk is entitled *Mozart and Beethoven: absolute music*.

The focus of this series of talks is not just musicology or musical history in a strict technical sense. Rather, the emphasis is on discovering the very foundation of music, viewed as the most sincere and moving expression of human experience, of the universal human desire and expectation for beauty, for happiness, for a mysterious Other who will fulfill the promises of the heart. In this sense, the work of the great composers represents a prophecy of the ultimate meaning of human existence and history. The late Msgr. Luigi Giussani, speaking about the role that music played in his life and in his pedagogical method, once said, "In music, in nature's landscape, in a nocturnal dream, ...what man pays homage to is something else, something he is waiting for: he is waiting for it. His enthusiasm is for something that music, or whatever is beautiful in the world, has awakened inside him. When man 'fore-sees' this, he immediately bends his soul to wait for the *other* thing: even in front of what he can grasp, he awaits something else: he grasps what he can grasp, but he waits for another thing."

Mr. Jonathan Fields is a composer, music teacher and lecturer who in his career has explored many regions of the musical world. After graduating first in his class from Mannes College of Music in 1981, he joined David Horowitz Music Associates, one of the leading commercial music production companies in the world, and has been an award-winning composer of over a thousand television and radio spots. At the same time he has composed a variety of musical works spanning multiple genres, including film scores, soundtracks for TV, a mass, hymns and many others. An accomplished guitarist, he has toured the world playing with jazz, rock, folk and pop bands playing with first-rank musicians from the New York studio recording world. He has also worked with New York downtown experimentalists and minimalists such as Phillip Glass and Glen Branca. In recent years he has been a frequent lecturer and musical educator, and the author of several publications aimed at introducing new audiences to the treasures of European and American classic and traditional music. Currently, Mr. Fields is composing music for television and film through his company L-SID Productions. His recent clients include GE and Samsung. He also works as organist and music director for Holy Rosary Church in Staten Island, and teaches private lessons for guitar, composition and studio music. Mr. Fields resides in Brooklyn with his wife and three children.

**Fields:** Last week we spoke about Bach and the well-tempered system, and now we're going to move ahead to the next really focused period, which is the classical period. There is a transition. Bach's children are two of the famous composers who helped this transition. Bach died in 1750, and the first composer that we really call the first classical master is Franz Joseph Haydn. Haydn is 1732-1809, and he is the person who begins to perfect this new system, the classical system.

What is the classical system? I'm really only going to talk about one thing and that's the sonata-allegro form. We're going to understand that this form of music, I think, is as important to Western culture, the culture of all of history, as any great invention by any great thinker, even at the level of Thomas Aquinas. This form of music began to bear fruit of emotional depth and the human condition, the human journey of such proportion that these masters are really friends of ours; they are my friends and I really want to share that. Hopefully you'll learn to love them as I love them. We're talking about the two real masters of the classical period, the absolute great composers—Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Ludwig van Beethoven. That's all we're going to cover tonight.

If you see, it's a sonata-allegro form, and obviously it grew out of Italy, and you have had pretty much up to the Baroque period mostly vocal music; that was the music that dominated the musical landscape. But as European society was growing and becoming more mature in certain ways, they were developing very good instruments and so you began to have much more highly proficient musicians and musical compositions. *Cantata* meant "to sing," and *sonata* meant "to play."

The sonata is a very simple idea. Here's the beginning of musical stories. Exposition is the first part of the sonata. And the sonata can be a symphonic form, a piano sonata, a string quartet, and usually it's the first movement of any of these pieces during the classical period, but other movements can also use this form. The exposition is where you hear the themes, the characters, the people who are going to be in relationship and generate a drama. So you have a first theme, and second theme. The first theme is in the key of the piece, like we said, one harmonic area. And the second theme is going to go to a new theme, a new harmonic area, so it really sets itself off as a new person. And you begin the search. Pop songs mostly stay in the same key, and it's one theme. But here you have the idea, it's not a song anymore; it's two themes that are working together to generate creativity for the composer.

After you have the exposition, you have the development section. And that's where the beginning of the great composers starts. You develop this story. What does this theme suggest? Remember we talked about what we learned from Palestrina, from the early Church musicians? What we learned from Bach? Techniques that go deep inside of themes that unlock their secrets, and to see what type of stories are hidden within them. In the development section you can hear these themes in very low keys, very low instruments, high instruments. (By the way, we're just doing symphonies today. Symphonies are considered the highest form of the entire musicians' catalogue. To compose a symphony is the top of the top of the top for Western composers. Since we're talking about the two top composers, I decided just to do symphonies.) You can also have the second theme come in. It's up to the composer, depending on what type of story he wants to tell.

Then, at the end of the development, you have the recapitulation which means you re-state the theme, and a good composer, after this development, when you hear the theme again, it's like, aha! The theme has revealed something of itself as it has journeyed through life, as it's gone through different experiences. But the theme comes out to us and reveals something about us too. I think that's how you have to listen. If you're not listening and not following it, it's just going to go right over your head and you're not going to be changed in the way the composer was thinking and feeling as he was developing this story. When the second theme comes back, it's not in a different theme. Now we're headed towards unity so the two themes are now in the same key, and then it closes. That is the standard sonata form.

I'm just going to play the first movement of Mozart's G Minor Symphony. I talked about it last week as the symphony that made me understand how beautiful classical music was. It's very easy to see how Mozart is writing something beautiful and something coherent and together and moving all the parts. You know the theme [sings theme] and that little *dee-dah-dah*, that's called an interval, a musical interval, and that's the smallest interval there is. It's called a half step. And you're going to hear how he keys in on this sort of unstable interval, how he builds. So let's just listen to this. It's about eight minutes. This is *Symphony No. 40*

*in G Minor* by Mozart.

[plays music] This is the first theme...second theme in major, contrasting...more settled...the first theme...hear that interval?...this is the closing theme, the closing exposition...beautiful unsettling minor theme...this is at the end of Mozart's life; he was about 34 years old...now he's moving away; there's a progression...now he's moving towards the second theme. Second theme much more peaceful, with a sigh...those are the woodwinds on tops...the strings...he reiterates the first theme...low...high...low...he's very proletarian...very little material...the closing...the violin...he changed...new key is a completely new emotional area...there's the theme...and he's still moving...now the sequence...low...high...low again...he's very influenced by Bach...we feel very far away from where we're going...see the contrast...so many changes...and back...the recapitulation...towards the second theme...a little bit more dramatic...there's a much bigger melody in the exposition...second theme in the same key...more drama...the closing...

Okay, could you follow that? That is a very clear example of sonata-allegro form. I was talking about use of material. He's using a very tiny bit of material to express lots of things. I want to show you on the piano what I mean. He's able to use that small interval [plays interval on piano] but he's also using that interval more sorrowfully. He can do it fast which gives it a more anxious feeling. By using the same interval he's making a sigh. And when you're composing, most composers when they're starting out write 20,000 ideas. They don't realize that with a tiny bit of material you can express a lot. So that's why we're all taught to study him because if you listen to this over and over again you realize he's building something with nothing.

Now that's Mozart. This is at the end of Mozart's life. His most beautiful symphonies are *Symphony No. 35-41*, and this is at the end of his life. He's converting from this nice court musician that everybody liked. He's writing his best operas, his deepest piano concertos and the *Requiem*. He's going to leave room for this next man to come along, Beethoven. He's beginning to say, you can tell about your personal drama with this music. We're going to come back to Mozart, but now we're going to skip ahead a little bit.

I'm going to go to Ludwig van Beethoven. He's born in 1770 and at 28 years old he finds out he's going deaf and it devastates him. First of all, anybody who knows about Beethoven, he was a horrible man. He ate and got food all over the place, he would go to restaurants and scribble music and not pay for the food and walk out. I think he moved over 800 times because nobody could handle having him in their house. He had very dear friends who understood that this man had something so beautiful inside him. He lived in Vienna where they loved him; he was a hero; it's just that nobody wanted to eat with him. However this man was like a child; he had a child's heart. Around this period of time he had written his first two symphonies and Napoleon Bonaparte had just become what he thought was going to be the liberator. There was a lot of idealism in that period. We're moving away from the kind of clear, Catholic culture that had dominated Italy, and you have new ideas of freedom—political freedom was starting to be a possibility. And Beethoven believed deeply in this, so Bonaparte is his man, and originally he writes his *Symphony No. 3* for him, the *Eroica*—the Heroic Symphony. At the same time, a year before, when he found out he was going deaf, he wrote a letter called the *Heiligenstadt Testament* where he basically says, I'm in despair over what's happening to me and I really have contemplated suicide, but I know God gave me a gift and this gift is what I'm going to bet on. And in that moment the drama of his life becomes the gift that he gave the world and it begins with this symphony. This symphony takes where Mozart is here [gestures] and brings it to a level of exploration, of life that had not been known. And this is the piece that changes everything—*Symphony No. 3*. After *Symphony No. 3*—*Symphony 5*, *Symphony 7*, *Symphony 9*—there's a working out...he really confronts life's deep questions in front of his hearing going away, and in front of the fact that Bonaparte declares himself emperor. Beethoven apparently took the page, tore it in half, spit on it, threw it out and said, "He's just another bastard like the rest of them and he's just going to use us all." Beethoven recognized that what Bonaparte professed was a complete lie. So his idea of political freedom has been demolished, he can't hear,

no woman's going to love him, so where does he look for fulfillment? Where does this man look? He has a deep relationship with God; I don't know that much about it. But he looks for it in his art.

So *Symphony No. 3*—I'm going to play the first and second movements. It's long. I'll play half of the second movement. In the first movement we're going to try to hear the sonata form, but he starts changing it; he really starts changing it. He can't help but just go deeper, more ideas. Instead of two themes, the second theme is so weak he decides to put a third theme at a certain point. The development is so shockingly dramatic. What he wrote in *Heiligenstadt Testament* comes out in this piece. You're going to hear piercing cries of trumpets and brass that pierce the heavens. So dramatic does this piece become, it's almost as if you're breathless by the end of it. This piece of course is the one that is played in times of deep tragedy. The second movement is the famous funeral march. I think this is the moment where music changes because eight minutes into the piece, he is describing death. Beethoven is not afraid of any part of his experience. Nothing. The good, the bad, everything—he wants to face it. And in facing it something changes for him every time. But he gets to a certain point, eight minutes in...remember we talked about the fugue last week? Beethoven decides to use the fugue...it's almost as if you're watching a movie and see all these people dead in a field, but as soon as it gets to this fugue you realize that it's his personal terror of death, his personal terror, not describing a scene. He is revealing completely the depth of his human experience and it's a chilling, chilling, unbelievable moment of power and expressivity. So let's sit back. Let's listen to the first two movements of the *Eroica*.

[plays music] This is the first theme...he's moving towards the second theme...that's the second theme...descant...and that's it...back to the first theme...Beethoven also explores rhythm; his rhythms are very exciting...remember that theme, it's going to come back...the closing material...this is the development; he doesn't repeat...there's the theme...it's in minor, more tension...the bass...it just keeps transitioning...the connecting material...wonder...here comes the strings...you see he's developing much more than Mozart did...he's really gone somewhere...here it comes...there's the new theme...during the development he introduces a theme; it's the first time it's ever happened in music...melancholy theme...there's the first theme, the hero theme comes back...new key...there's the third theme...it's a beautiful, tender, bittersweet theme inside of all this heroic and struggle and battle...the first comes back again...he's taken us a lot of places...the oboe on the top, sad oboe...he's bringing us back to the recapitulation...he was 28 years old by the way...the French horns...he's moving all over the place; he can't stop...brass...heroic...the light connecting material...it's a motif, not really a melody...he's riding the rhythm...he's not going to stop...second theme...moving again...here's the theme...now, shift...one more time...now...how did he think of that?...that oboe really plays a lot in this piece, very quiet...he loves it so much he has to bring it back, the recapitulation...beautiful theme...the heroic theme and this cry, this more humble, human cry...the fast strings on the top, the other strings just playing the melody...and the lower strings...there it is...he wrote the whole piece for that intensity...

Okay, the *Funeral March* [plays music]...that's the oboe...what's beautiful about this, Beethoven, if he were alive today would've been medicated so much he wouldn't have written a damn note of music. Because he wasn't medicated, he could express the really hard parts of life which we're not allowed to do today which is why we have to be medicated. If you'd just listen to Beethoven, you wouldn't need the medication...listen to this...let it carry your heart...he was going deaf; he was just hearing it in his head...now it's kind of a noble theme, a second theme...*Symphony No. 5* was being born here...this undercurrent of tension, faith...face life!...face it!...he's made a choice to really face things and not kill himself which he told us he was considering...the oboe again...loud and soft, not just loud...follow that...because usually it's just loud, loud, loud...this is loud and soft; follow that...he's exploring a theme now...now it's getting to the major...like a soldier remembering home, how good life is...feel how transparent Beethoven is...the hero returns...there's drama and release, drama and release for Beethoven...he's not comfortable with just going along...that's not life; life is challenging...there's the drama; face it...he doesn't like music that's just pretty and we can just

listen to; you can go on his journey with him and face life because something more beautiful is born of that, a way of seeing and feeling...our heart is big, but we diminish it all the time...he's going to introduce a fugue which is going to bring the most intense expression of what he's trying to say...do you see after all he does and where he takes us, when the theme comes back...pop music doesn't do that; it doesn't take us on a journey...pop music is good, but it doesn't excavate our heart...there it is...first...second...third...the cellos...the basses...the hero...one of the most thrilling moments of music...back to the first movement...

I can't play the whole thing. Anyway, do you see what Beethoven was able to dig out and share with us in expressing the *Funeral Dirge*, what it means, what he observed and what he felt personally. It brought us into with the French horns, a personal cry, a cry for help. "Show me that life has meaning!" It's not for nothing he does this. It's not so we say, "Oh, what a genius he is." Beethoven is not writing because he wants to be a genius. He's writing for his life; he makes music so he can live, and that's what Beethoven means to me. This is really the beginning of the whole next 200 years of music, and he works out the show-me-the-meaning...show me that there's a joy that graces everything, all these ups and downs of my life, and he reaches his climax in the *Ode to Joy*, his 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony. But he writes a tremendous amount of music in the meantime, but we don't have enough time for that. I just wanted to show you what I think is the turning point for him and for the expressivity that classic music is able to create.

I want to go back to Mozart. A lot of what I'm talking about comes from a series of CDs that were used by Fr. Luigi Giussani, the founder of Communion and Liberation, to teach young students about the human condition. There's a real question there. When somebody wants to search for God, it's not pious; it's a real conversation, a real going into, an experience, a human experience with the Infinite. He wrote a big series of talks with some students. He got his passion for music from his dad who obviously loved music and used to deny them food and hire string quartets instead. Anyway, I just want to read something that an Italian musician said about Mozart, and then I'm going to play you a few pieces of the *Requiem* because this is really at the level of Beethoven. Beethoven is coming after the *Requiem*, but I wanted to play Mozart first. Remember I said Western music was always sacred and secular, even the Gregorian Chant is secular because Christian music as well as Jewish music describe events. It's not spiritual. They're talking about Moses going across a river with rocks and the sky is this color and the knife they used to kill that guy was like this, and it takes place in different parts of the year. Judeo-Christian music has always been secular and sacred whether you're talking about sacred secular music or secular music. It's very hard to know the difference between the two. That's what allows for such drama in both the secular instrumental music and the sacred music—using the same materials. So I want to read what this Italian musician says:

Yes, we understand life through Mozart. There is a wonderful title by the great critic Harold Bloom on Shakespeare. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. Shakespeare invented the human. The same can be said of Mozart. These two are real. Perhaps the only two who could look each other in the eye; they are the only ones who have really understood life. Yes, we find life in them. [We're going back to what we were discussing earlier.] Mozart understands everything; he describes everything. Mozart was a great sinner, but also understood the greatness of God. He describes the borderline between what we are and what we will be, what we want to be. But Mozart gives us a glimmer; he helps us revere. These things are beyond us; they are on the other side; they are stolen from almighty God; they are prayers. Sacredness is very human, the sacredness of a sinner who has recognized his sin. Bach is more Protestant where Mozart is Catholic. In the first case you are born, predestined, and chosen by God. Things have already been decided. While in the second case, there is all the drama of our everyday choices.

From Mozart's *Requiem* I'm just going to play the *Dies Irae* (Day of Wrath) where Mozart really makes us feel the terror of what nonexistence, of complete annihilation could be. And he wants to feel that and make

us feel that. And then he goes to *Rex tremendae* where he talks about God in his majesty. What he does then, what he dramatizes after all that fear...the choir comes down to a quiet little, "Save me," in its weakest, weakest voice. It's beautiful how he juxtaposed the grandeur of God and our plea in front of that. It's just so beautiful because he says, "Fount of pity, befriend us!" This type of understanding of what the human drama is is not just what I ate yesterday or what my feelings are; that's part of it, but there's a real drama, this drama to understand what the meaning of everything is in relationship to big things, not small little things that we seem to get caught up in. And these big things are why this music is so great, because it allows us to experience the big things of our life, the big questions of our life. So let's just quickly play this.

[plays music and reads lyrics from *Dies Irae*]

*Oh, what fear man's bosom rendeth,  
When from heaven the Judge descendeth,  
On whose sentence all dependeth!*

...See where Beethoven's coming from?...There's intensity...

Okay, that's *Dies Irae*. Next is *Rex tremendae*:

*King of majesty tremendous,  
Who dost free salvation send us,  
Fount of pity, then befriend us.*

[plays music]...The response in front of God is so human...remember the movie when they're singing, "Salva me, salva me,"?... "Confutatis"... "Doomed to flames"...the strings are burning flames..."Spare me, oh, God," ...same thing, drama and then, "spare me."..."See, like ashes, my contrition;"...I just love that he dramatizes it so deeply with the strength of God and this pleading of our hearts. It's just beautiful having thought or conceived it. You feel like he's your friend now. Mozart is probably a better friend than most of our friends are. He tells us what our hearts need. We just don't listen. He's tremendous. And this is a period of time where you were really a hired guy as a musician, and to really begin to break out and start expressing the human drama—this is the beginning of real poetry in our culture. If you listen to his early work, you hear him just trying to get paid like I'm doing, except he does it a lot better than I do.

Okay, that's it for the classical masters. There's so little time. Each of these artists produced so much work. I used to think that art was all about being concerned about the poetry, and my friend told me, "No, these men were not concerned with the poetry; they were concerned with output." Instead of waiting for perfection they were concerned with just getting it out; output was their primary concern, not poetry, art, feelings. They were concerned with output.

Thank you. Next week is the Romantics.