

## SPORT AND MUSIC: AN UNCOMMON PARTNERSHIP

Only out of an intimate union of seriousness and playfulness can true art arise." (Goethe)

From earliest times, sport and music, two highly individual and autonomous partners, have formed a fragile and at times intense sporadic union. Pierre de Coubertin, an enthusiastic amateur of music and admirer of Wagner, dreamed in vain of having a great master compose a grand symphony on sport. His hope that the music section of the Olympic art competitions would produce something other than ephemeral circumstantial pieces with sporty sounding titles also remained unfulfilled.

Nevertheless, the ties between the two fields are close, and far transcend the realm of modern sports events which use a musical accompaniment. They are based on many common characteristics, although these often diverge at different levels.

Sport and music coincide discernibly or audibly in four aspects:

- in play and movement, which follow set rules but can be varied almost inexhaustibly in constantly new and surprising ways;
- in continuous mental and physical training for discipline and excellence that forge the way toward achieving a virtuoso performance. This standard can only be maintained through a constant testing of skills against those of the competitors;
- in the performance pyramid, where millions of amateurs form the base while the elite virtuosos make up the "international league";
- and in the virtually universal language which these two cultural spheres constitute as forms of expression.

by Hans-Dieter Krebs'



Movement is the common denominator between forms of expression in sport and music, as clearly reflected in the English and French use of the word (*mouvement* in French) to designate sections of musical works such as symphonies or sonatas. It is revealing that Isaac Stern uses sports metaphors to describe the challenges of performance: "Every single performance absolutely has to have something spontaneous about it. The



Richard Strauss.

essence of making music is constant rediscovery. It is as if your head was filled only with music, with musical ideas and a physical sense of the start and the finish, of what you are about to begin and for which you have to prepare, like an athlete preparing to make a jump or a throw, or whatever. Before anything actually happens, for a fraction of a second you concentrate on achieving exactly what you have prepared for; your thoughts merge together and you can see, feel and hear how they will come out - and, hopefully, the audience will enjoy it."

In addition to these parallels, in which mental effort and physical execution are said to act in unison, there are differences, divergences and dividing factors. These complex factors are clearly illustrated by the relationship between music and sport which one sees in choreographed movements that are accompanied and stimulated by music. In figure skating, this unison has been elevated in French with a lofty reference to "art" (*patinage artistique*). Rhythmic gymnastics, synchronized swimming and dressage are performed "on the waves of music", which may be composed for the occasion or borrowed from the works of great composers or from popular music. It is in dressage that we find the first specifically sports-related compositions: the *Balletto cavallo* by the Vienna court composer Johann Heinrich Schmelzer von Ehrenruef, which was revived and put to practical use by Gabriella Grillo, Olympic dressage champion with the German team in 1976, was written in 1667.

Until such time as scholars discover an earlier work, this composer comes



*Maurice Ravel.*

first in the chronology of sports-related compositions. In addition to his equestrian ballet, *Die musikalische Fechtschule* (“the musical fencing school”) was also penned by Schmeltz. This exquisite miniature captures in musical notes a fencing bout and the pained cry of the struck opponent. The art of fencing has not only been masterfully practised by composers such as the Italian Umberto Giordano, but has also been used by them to create dramatic effects: for example in Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* or in musical versions of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* by Berlioz and Prokofieff. In his suite *Der Bürger als Edelmann* (“Le Bourgeois gentilhomme”), which Richard Strauss composed in 1920, inspired by Lully, the movement entitled “The Fencing Master” describes in musical language a mock fencing match between master and pupil. Richard Strauss’s name is also attached to an Olympic work commissioned for the Games of the XI Olympiad in 1936. Although he was initially unenthusiastic about the idea

of sport, the famous composer - who lived in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, site of the IV Olympic Winter Games in 1936 - created an Olympic anthem. Musicologist Albrecht Dümling writes that, full of “artistic pride”, Strauss presented the anthem to the commissioning officials in Berlin in 1936 with tenor Julius Patzak. But Strauss’s hope of having his work recognized as the official Olympic anthem was never fulfilled.

The musical contributions to the Olympic art competitions have fallen into near oblivion today. Only a few composers of any note took up the challenge: among the laureates, the Czech Josef Suk (silver 1932), the Canadian Jean (Jacob) Weinzweig (silver 1948) and the Germans Werner Egk (gold 1936) and Harald Genzmer (bronze 1936) are still remembered today. The major musical lexicons make no mention of the Olympic prizes. For the Games of the VIII Olympiad in Paris in 1924, the most significant composers of the time were nevertheless invited to serve on the

jury: Nadia Boulanger, Béla Bartók, Manuel de Falla, George Enescu, Gabriel Fauré, Arthur Honegger, Maurice Ravel and Igor Stravinsky. From the organizers’ point of view, this was a great mistake, as this distinguished body found none of the entries worthy of a medal!

Pierre de Coubertin imagined modern versions of the ancient victory songs - the *Epinikes*, Pindar’s *Odes*. This hope was never answered, nor was his desire for a new version of the *gymnopoedia* played in the *palaestras* and *gymnasia* of ancient Greece. Nevertheless, Coubertin’s contemporary, Eric Satie, an eccentric innovator who still, regrettably, is often overlooked, composed three piano pieces of great and penetrating power entitled *Gymnopédies*. The first and third of these were given an orchestration by Claude Debussy. Satie also gave the young sports movement two further compositions in the year 1914: the *Fantaisie musculaire* and the delightful ‘*Sports et divertissements*’, a collection of piano sketches. Igor Stravinsky had been invited to create these musical interpretations of drawings by Charles Martin, but he required a higher fee than was offered; hence, Satie immediately volunteered and created these musical gems.

Shortly before the outbreak of the World War I, Claude Debussy was inspired by a figure in the sport world for his ballet *Jeux*: this triangular story takes place on a tennis court. Ballet offers the closest relationship between sport and music, for its very essence is movement, role-playing, and symbolic contests between two or more dancers in harmony with the music. Ballet critic Jochen Schmidt described the boxing match of 1996 by “virtuosos” Henry Maske and Duran Williams as a “pas-de-deux to the power of two” on account of the

dancer-like technique, observing that its choreography was “a model of modern life”.

An image of contemporary life from the early days of the mass sport movement in the ‘twenties is to be found in *Skating Rink*, a ballet by Arthur Honegger which features a swimmer, a runner and a football fan. Fernand Léger designed a perfectly matching cubist stage set for this ballet, which was created to great popular acclaim in 1922 for the Ballets Suédois and has become a “modern classic”. The significance of the work was apparent in its extremely successful revival by the Zürcher Ballet in 1996. Honegger’s interest in sport is reflected especially in the famous “*Mouvement symphonique II*” for which the programmatic title “*Rugby*” is used. According to composer Rolf Urs Ringer, its approachable music triggers “visual associations”. Honegger also composed music for sport-related films.

The father of American music, an insurance manager named Charles Ives, created a detailed two-minute piece of programme music full of depth and irony in *The Yale-Princeton Football Game*. It ends (without any reference to the Olympic Games) with a “Greek hurra”. He also paid tribute to the second American national sport with a sketch entitled “*Baseball-Take-Off*”.

American composer William Schuman dedicated two works to American baseball star Casey Stingle: the opera *The Mighty Casey* (1953) and the cantata *Casey at the Bat* (1976).

Operas set in a background of sport are very rare. Ernst Krenek’s boxing opera *Schwergewicht oder die Ehre der Nation* (“Heavyweight or, the honour of the nation”, 1928) has been forgotten. The most recent work to emerge from the football milieu is



Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart



Ludwig van Beethoven.

‘*Playing away*’ by the British composer Benedict Mason (1993). Football as an international attraction with its tremendous and electrifying range of drama, which ranges from joy to despondency and encompasses

determination, duelling, wiliness and wisdom, has hardly been a source of fascination for composers. One exception is the 1930s ballet ‘*The Golden Age*’ by Dmitri Shostakovich. The work is a propaganda story about a Soviet football team that triumphantly withstands all temptations - and sporting challenges - in the capitalist world. A suite of the same name, whose unusual instrumentation including saxophone, xylophone, accordion and banjo sets it apart, is still included in the concert repertoire.

Helsinki’s Olympic stadium may have witnessed the birth of the great sporting opera in August 2000, with Tuomas Kantelinen’s work *Paavo Nurmi Suuri* (Paavo Nurmi the Great). The action-packed drama by Nurmi, nine-times Olympic champion and national idol, takes place against a backdrop of Nurmi’s solitary race against the clock, the long jump, a tank and a helicopter, war scenes filmed during the winter of 1940, and an impressive contingent of walk-ons, singers and musicians spread throughout the arena, all interspersed with appearances by the former athlete and the future Finnish President Urho Kekkonen.

The relationship between sport and music has a number of oddities. Perhaps the most original configuration - called *Match for three players* - was created by Mauricio Kagel after a dream. This composition, which Kagel even produced himself for television, constitutes a tonal duel between two cellos with the percussion playing the role of referee. This “instrumental theatre”, with its predetermined gestures and patterns, is inspired by something that modern sport often lacks, namely a sense of irony.

Any list of the great composers who have produced minor but high-calibre sports-inspired works would not be

complete without Leonard Bernstein (Olympic festive music for the Olympic Congress in Baden-Baden in 1981), Benjamin Britten (Alpine suite), Leos Janacek (music for club swinging and the gymnastics festival fanfare in the Sinfonietta), Bohuslav Martinu (Half-Time, Rondo for orchestra, and overture and march for gymnastics exercises), and Alexandre Tcherepnin (sports sonatina, ballet "training" and "for boxing practice" for chamber orchestra).

Although the Olympic Games have not been influenced by the "dogma of Wagnerian aesthetics", it was Coubertin's idea that they should always be closely associated with music and sometimes even venture courageously beyond the ordinary, for example by using electronic sounds in the opening of the X Olympic Winter Games in Grenoble in 1968. The ballet-like union of dance movement and music characterizes the performances at Opening Ceremonies, which are a form of cultural self-representation.

After his *Olympisches Reigen* (Olympic Roundel) of 1936, Carl Orff wrote a more intimate type of music on the theme of a medieval song for the Games in 1972. In Munich, the traditional pathos of the march music for the participants' opening parade gave way to the sounds of a more folkloric type of music, alluding to the guest countries and played by a big band. In 1936, incidentally, one of Coubertin's dearest wishes was fulfilled: in Berlin, Beethoven's Ninth Symphony was played, with Schiller's Ode to Joy, which is now the European anthem. The question of the musical logo, i.e. the melody which is identified with the Olympic Games or other championships, is particularly vexatious. The

prerequisites for these signature tunes - a striking form of expression, brevity and "catchiness" - force composers to resort to stereotypes with ringing trumpets and heavy drums. This circumstantial music only rarely outlives the occasion in question. It was an inspired idea for UEFA to go back to a reliable source like Handel (whose Halleluia chorus rang out in at the Games of the XIV Olympiad in London in 1948 as the finale of the Opening Ceremony) to find the signature tune for television broadcasts of its champions' league.



*Georg Friedrich Händel.*

Thanks to television as a universal media presence, musical hits play a quasi-missionary role at international events. Not a single symphony orchestra in the world could have guaranteed Ravel's Bolero the popularity it acquired through the skating performance of ice-dancers Torvill and Dean. And the musical event that marked the 1990 football world championships, a concert given in the Caracalla baths in Rome by the tenor

"dream team" Carreras, Domingo and Pavarotti, gave millions access to world-class belcanto and led to repeat performances by the trio, who, like pop groups, perform in huge stadia to enthusiastic audiences. Purists may turn up their noses at this aspect of the relationship between sport and music. However, the communicative synergy attained by these two partners remains unchallenged, and it draws music beyond the narrow confines of the elite and the connoisseurs. The title "Olympia" or "Olympiad"

occurs surprisingly often in lists of musical works. However, they are mostly operas of the Italian or French baroque period. The librettos, by authors such as Voltaire or Metastasio, present various scenes from Greek mythology. Unfortunately, the modern Olympic world has so far failed to find an adequate musical representation. One can only speculate as to why this should be.

With the exception of the accompanying cultural programme, music understandably plays a supporting role at the Olympic Games. This observation is not intended to detract in any way from the efforts to give this international event an appropriate tonal framework, for here too, the highest quality is called for. The

Olympic Games set composers this challenge again and again. Will they ever find the perfect work? Such an idealistic hope seems unrealistic. And yet Goethe's words about true art, which can arise only out of an intimate union of seriousness and playfulness, could become a refrain for the next Olympic century.

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