A Function of Time

In this essay, I want to discuss the relationship between life and art in general, between familiarity with an art and perception of this art in particular. I see a virtuous cycle in this life–art relationship: art helps us in understanding and enriching our life, which helps us in understanding and enriching art, which helps us more in understanding and enriching our life, which? With this in mind, I will talk about my experience with the music of Rachmaninoff and the literature of Proust.

My interest for Rachmaninoff's Piano Concertos emerged, despite an initial rejection. I believe it illustrates well how much familiarity with an artwork influence the way we experience it.

The first time I listened to Rachmaninoff's work about four years ago, I didn't enjoy it. The patterns, by which I mean any recognizable entity of the piece, be it rhythmic, melodic, structural, etc., were so new and convoluted to me that I could hear the noise, but not the music. I left it aside for a few months; after all, one rarely seeks to relive a bad experience.

Later – and my vagueness only reflects the quality of my remembrance – I happened to listen to the first movement, Allegro ma non tanto, of Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto N°3 in D minor, again and again. Each listening shed light on some previously unsuspected facet of the music. The power of anticipation, of knowing what will come, a pleasure in itself, didn't diminish the joy of musical discoveries, but, on the contrary, caused other surprises, by building the confidence for a subtler listening.

This familiarity with one movement provided me with a foundation with which I could tackle more of Rachmaninoff's world. Provoked by contrasts, reassured by similarities, I was like a child, whose intuition is forged by experiencing the world around him.

I realize it remains a challenge for me today to express the intuition I have gained of Rachmaninoff's world. It's not the same to have an intuition of a world and to be capable of describing its laws. One more particular reason might be that the movements are so long and so rich throughout, that I am not sure where to start and what to say or omit. I decide to limit myself in my discussion to the opening of the particular movement that initially titillated my interest: the first movement, Allegro ma non tanto, of Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto N°3.

After a short introduction by the orchestra, whose function is to set the meter, the piano reveals the first theme of the movement. Its core motive is a tuneful melody, even though it is contained around the tonic key. This motive appears so clearly, that I now wonder why it took me some listening to recognize and remember it. Perhaps, the variations and fragmentations that appear later in the piece confuses the initial clarity of the theme. Indeed, the orchestra, moving to the foreground, immediately echoes the main motive just introduced by the piano, which now agitates itself in counterpoint.

Losing patience with the orchestra, the piano seems to want to rise to the foreground again. The textural style shifts to dialogues between the orchestra and the piano. And it all stops. The orchestra, lead by the horns, timidly replays, with a feeling of incertitude as to the direction of the piece. As soon as all the orchestra is recomposed, a unity is attained, which is maintained even with the reentry of the piano. After a dialogue with the orchestra, the latter plays a tuneful melody, the second theme, the sublime outcome of these wanderings.

Every movement represents such a unity in itself that their juxtaposition in a Concerto may sometimes seem as a mere artifice. Yet, I believe that, beyond the obvious gain in familiarity with a composer's world, there can be benefits in this ensemble structure. For example, the second movement of the concerto discussed above, in spite of a new main theme, is insidiously invaded by variations and suggestions of the main theme of the first movement, like a narrator, who after introducing himself and his feelings in a first section, focuses on another character in a second. This is exactly what happens in Proust's 'A la recherche du temps perdu' ('In Search of Lost Time'). In the section "Un Amour de Swann" ("Swann in Love"), the main character of Proust's masterpiece shifts from the narrator to Swann, even though the point of view stays that of the initial narrator. Thus, the first section constantly resurfaces in the second, an inherent effect of the structure, as we recall the narrator's story – and what it implies about him – to interpret the new situation.

I started reading Proust's "A la recherche du temps perdu" this summer. However, my first encounter with the text dates back to a few years ago in a literature class, where we analyzed the excerpt about Proust's madeleine. I remember being interested, but not particularly delighted. One aspect of Proust's genius, which a short excerpt can't convey, is the flow of ideas, the right juxtaposition of all elements. For this reason, I feel he's an author hard to cite without loss, the same way a musical phrase played out of the context of its piece appears so impoverished.

So far, I’ve shown how familiarity with an artistic world influences our experience of an art. With references to my reading of Proust, I now want to go one step further by discussing the role of our life experience in our understanding of an art.

In the first section "Combray", the narrator describes the gentle emotion of receiving his mother’s goodnight kiss as a child and the feverish effect of its refusal or even simply of the anticipation of its refusal. Even though I haven’t experienced the extreme of the narrator’s feeling, I can sympathize, and even identify, with him through his analogies, with love in particular. As he is about to get caught by his father, waiting for his mother to kiss him goodnight while he should be asleep, the rhythm of the sentences, paralleling the dramatic tension, increases.

As a contrasting example, when the narrator describes his love for Gilberte in "A l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs", I can relate to him directly. This time, the comparisons, metaphors and nuances allow me to analyze my own past experience in finer details and at a deeper level. I won’t even attempt to paraphrase Proust, but his mentions include the cycle of increasing desires, the over–interpretation of the loved one’s gestures, the doubts, the jealousy, the unconscious ambition of proving one’s ability to live without the loved one, etc. To me, the most interesting aspect is the development into which all these feelings fit repeatedly in parallels and oppositions.

The first example shows that life can help us understand art, and the second, that art can help us understand life. If we look at it another way, art deepens, when familiar, or broadens, when unfamiliar, our experience of the world around us.

Familiarity with an art, both through artistic and life experiences, is the first step to appreciating it. In this context, revolutionary artistic ideas seem even more admirable, as the artist has to go through an inner development to tame a wild idea on his own. Considering the collective parallel of this individual need to digest an idea, to make it one's own, before acknowledging it, could explain why the time of creation and recognition of extraordinary masterpieces rarely coincide.