

Spark #1.12 - Polyhymnia v. Euterpe

- Henry Warwick

- 10/23/2000

In keeping with the mythological theme from last week, I'd like to develop it a bit this week.

The ancient Greeks had their Muses (which is cool - it's where we derive the word *MUSIC*) and some of them were paired up- Thalia and Melpomene as Comedy and Tragedy in the performing arts, and in music- Polyhymnia and Euterpe- for Sacred Poetry (which was sung) and Profane or Lyric Poetry (also sung). There was an earlier Greek muse- Aoede- the music of songs, but her position was eroded and basically taken over by Euterpe on one side and her higher notions co-opted by Polyhymnia on the other. Now, in this understanding, Euterpe as the Muse of Profane Music isn't necessarily profane meaning "bad". That kind of judgment is more a product of our puritanical and anti-pagan religious history of the past 1600 years. Her music is that of lyrical melody, and her instruments were the drum and (especially) the flute. Euterpe could have sacred overtones, but in general, her work was considered common and certainly less sacred than Polyhymnia's music of chanted voices and harp. Euterpe's music was one of joy and celebration; Polyhymnia's music was of profundity and mystical wonder. It is the balance of the influence of these two Muses in a culture that has traditionally made for a healthy musical environment. Electronic Music changes things a bit, but I will get to that in a while.

This archetype of Polyhymnia survives in our own culture, where the cliché of music in Heaven consists of saints singing praise to God and angels playing harps. The demonisation of Euterpe's music has continued throughout the recent centuries. In medieval times, the only "acceptable" music was church music. Polyhymnia's rule was strict and intense. The influence of non-Christian cultures (acquired in the invasion of Palestine known as the Crusades and inflicted at point of sword by the Mongols) brought other types of music into the Western Tradition and set out the framework for increased polyphony and the development of chromatic expansion, and so through the Renaissance the development of "popular music" became Euterpe's method of survival, and is her primary source of strength to this day. As religion and politics conflated to a toxic mix in the medieval period, Polyhymnia's survival lay in the music of authority- both religious

and secular, and we are still dealing with much of this unfortunate consolidation, with the distinctions between "Serious" and "Popular" music being yet another example of the Muses' battles.

With the advent of the industrial age, we acquired a few new archetypes. Most of them are not very nice, and the ones that are most relevant to my discussion are the ones most nascent and vaguely defined. None of them have really helped much in the battle of the Muses.

One of the new archetypes is the Frankenstein Monster. It permeates modern culture, and is the (greenish) face of our modern world's terror and Promethean promise of the technology we have made. The promise lives in our present mythologies of Star Trek's "Data" and Star Wars' "C3PO" and "R2D2" robots. The terror lives in the Matrix and The Borg. This new archetype is an extremely ambivalent one. It lives in our music in the form of automation and recorded music.

It's important to remember that prior to just several decades ago, the only way people in any culture ever heard music was in performance. Record players up to the 1950s were weak and uncommon, and people didn't collect recordings like they do today. And the sound quality was mediocre until technology in the 1970s made high fidelity stereo playback a commonplace and affordable prospect. Now we live in a world of simulated events, where the complexity of such an event can preclude any possible performance. In such a scenario, the very playing of a recording constitutes a performance.

This was struck home in 1968 by John Cage and Lejaren Hiller who made a piece of computer music called HPSCHD, which came with instructions on how one was to "perform" the stereo pre-amplifier as the record played. Turn the balance to the left for so many seconds, turn the treble down for so many seconds, etc. In this way, the distinction between audience and performer is blurred, and the difference between static objective recording and performance is eradicated.

The maddening battleground between Polyhymnia and Euterpe has narrowed. Their acolytes still do battle, but over the past few decades, through the auspices of post-modern aesthetics, there are some signs that a truce may FINALLY be in order, even though they both have hardcore constituencies that require appeasement and continuous reassurance. For Polyhymnia, she has her unyielding acolytes in academic music (the unlistenable crap generated in universities), the necrophilic classical music industry, and

"Serious" music (music that can be formally identical to some variants of popular music, but features flashy academic credentials and/or fans that are especially well heeled). Polyhymnia will also take support from Opera Fans, avant-garde jazz aficionados, and anyone else who believes in music for its own sake as a "higher" notion of human activity.

Euterpe's lot is much more tragic- from jazz to rock to disco to hip hop to pop to house and techno and whatever flavour of the month is down at the record shop to make you bop 'til you drop- she's had a bad go of it. Being a more inclusive Muse, she doesn't really care what goes on, as long as people are moving and their senses are filled and ecstatic. Unfortunately, her invitation to the somatic is not well received in our puritanical culture, and the new archetypes of technology have only served to cloud matters.

The acolytes of Polyhymnia have treated her oddly- from the arcane and astringent ballet to laughable attempts at co-option (from the Boston Pops playing Simon and Garfunkel to Philip Glass doing "covers" of music by David Bowie and Brian Eno) the results have always been disquieting. For instance, those following another Muse- Terspsichore- have had an especially bad time with Polyhymnians. Ballet is beautiful- there is no doubt about this- but the cost to the health of the performers is tremendous. It's as if Polyhymnia's saying "OK- music may help celebrate the body- but I will BREAK THE BODY in the end! I demand perfection!" Every Swan Lake is a torturous act of love and misery, joy and self-destruction. And on the other end- Euterpe's open to Terpsichorean influence, but it comes out as "dance music"- disco, house, electronica, etc. So Terpsichore comes off the weaker Muse in that deal.

And when Euterpe's higher notions are brought into play, the results are hotly contested and the arguments sharpen. The fate of Progressive Rock is an instructive and classic example- condemned by the Polyhymnians as being inferior half-baked nonsense by insensitive unschooled upstarts, and equally despised by the hardcore unenlightened Euterpeans as pretentious twaddle, and completely ignored by Terpsichore's gang because you can't dance to it - Progressive Rock as a way of making music never got its proper due.

But Euterpe doesn't give up- she doesn't surrender. She moves and works every opportunity- she is expansive. This often leaves her thinly spread and vulnerable.

Polyhymnia sits on her glass throne- she knows her alliance with institutional power gives her a great deal of socio-political gravitas. At the same time, her throne is brittle, and is a damn cold place to park her butt. She seeks new sounds and new sensations, but is not one to take them wholesale or at face value, something she often finds detestable in Euterpe. Euterpe eats wildly – nowadays she spins discs of music to make new music, she doesn't care where the food comes from- she's too busy moving to care and needs the energy to keep that moving going. Polyhymnia sits and sips her cup of distilled ambrosia and considers its flavour. Less active than her sister, Polyhymnia's province is power. Euterpe guzzles a beer and goes forward with the show. Her power base is the insatiable human need for entertainment.

Polyhymnia's acolytes get grants from the state, or jobs in academia. Many others work day jobs and play concerts that no one attends, much less appreciates. Euterpe's province is energy, and her acolytes have to hustle for a living or work day jobs to play concerts in clubs where scores of people pay them no attention much less actively listen to their efforts, as they are too often reduced to simply providing the soundtrack to a mating ritual.

And the new machine archetypes? Polyhymnia uses them to make ever more varied textures- new voices for her tired angels. Euterpe uses them for a multitude of purposes, the most common being the maintenance of the hegemony of common time. Neither of them quite yet understand the power of the tools Frankenstein has provided. The tools, at best, are only several decades old, and the archetypes aren't well developed- they're fuzzy and indistinct- history hasn't worked up a proper portrait yet. The parentage of Frankenstein's Monster was easy to trace - there were similar archetypes before- the Golem, Prometheus. However, Frankenstein's Monster is a new archetype, as he is a product of human endeavour, not an immortal God or Nature. The results of the rise of the Frankenstein Monster's archetype are also dramatically different as they are revolutionary. The buzzy synths and samplers of our age - the instruments of Frankensteinian Archetypal inspiration - are still looking for a Muse to guide them. She is needed- the human psyche doesn't function well in a archetype-free vacuum.

But man- when she finally does arrive - it might not be a pretty scene, but it could be a beautiful thing.

Like a 19th century chemist, we might name her before we find her. Like the discovery of an element, we might find out where she lives, know her weight, size, and half life.

We just can't find her because we don't know what she looks like.

Maria?