

At first glance, the title of this study may appear puzzling, for Charles Bukowski was not a musician and his writing is far from musical. His prose is terse and his poetry is in free verse; his harsh style mirrors the tough, working-class life that he led. But there exists within Bukowski's opus an undeniable musicality: it resides in the approximately 500 references to the works of more than 60 classical composers. It is this vast musical intertext that forms what I call the musicality of Charles Bukowski.

"I am a classical music freak," Bukowski proudly proclaims in "how to get rid of the purists. (Bone Palace Ballet, p.195) And for over five decades he assiduously listened to classical music three to four hours a night, principally on the radio. Over the years, his radio took a lot of punishment: while in drunken rages he threw it out the window more than once, but it always kept working.. The music it played was more than just pleasant background sound. In a journal entry dated September, 1991, Bukowski states that classical music is "my drug, it washes the crap of the day right out of me. The classical composers can do this for me. The poets, the novelists, the short story writers can't." (The Captain Is Out to Lunch and the Sailors Have Taken Over the Ship, p.16)

Serious music also inspired Bukowski's art. "I never write anything without the radio on to classical music, it has always been a part of my work, to hear the music as I write." (Captain, p.113) And finally, classical music lifted Bukowski's spirits during difficult times. In one letter, he states that "classical music and booze -- taken together -- have carried me through many a night." (Living on Luck, p. 205) In the poem "classical music and me" (The Last Night of the Earth Poems, p.374), Bukowski's major single statement on music, he declares that serious music

“gave heart to my/life, helped me get/to/here.”

Bukowski admits “I am totally astonished by the mass of great music, centuries and centuries of it.” (Captain, p.113) He enjoyed music of all periods -- the Baroque, the Classical, the Romantic and the Modern --although he shunned the 20th century avant garde. He preferred 19th and 20th century symphonies, especially those by Beethoven, Brahms, Bruckner, Mahler and Shostakovich. Bukowski’s preference for symphonic music is understandable. He was never a musical snob, never one of those “stiff, phoney crows” he refers to in a letter of 1967 (Living, p.27) As an American of lower middle-class origins, he was naturally attracted to the most democratic form of serious music, the symphony, which is performed in large concert halls before mass audiences. For Bukowski, the symphony is the people’s music, and he feels that it should be available to all the people everywhere, even “in the jukeboxes of beerhalls and bars.” (Living, p.27)

Bukowski had a good ear and discerning taste in music and as he listened to his radio and wrote, he commented on the works that he heard. His prose and poetry are filled with both references and opinions. Bukowski admits that he was always more interested in the sound of the music and the lives of the composers than in the technical aspects of composition, but he is nevertheless a knowledgeable amateur critic of music. In fact, he wrote half-jokingly in a letter of 1967: “I think I could be a music critic for the New York Times if they’d let me.” (Screams From the Balcony, p.291) In all seriousness, Bukowski’s readers could probably profit from listening to his musical recommendations.

Music is as important as Bukowski’s other major themes -- work, alcohol or women. Interestingly, a significant portion of the novel Women brings together music and women with

surprising results. At one point in this work, the protagonist Henry Chinaski encounters a beauty named Cecelia. With her strong thighs, big ass, red lips and beautiful eyes, she represents the archetypal desireable woman. But Cecelia loves flowers, does not eat red meat and will not make love to Chinaski. In one scene, while loud music plays in the background, he strokes her knee, but she pushes his hand away. This woman is saintly; in fact, I feel that she symbolizes a saint -- Saint Cecilia, a 3rd century Roman martyr who, from the 16th century on, has been the patron saint of music and musicians. I contend that the spirit of Saint Cecilia pervades all of Bukowski's music-filled works just as surely as the presence of his more mundane women.

Let us now continue our study of Bukowski and classical music chronologically.

THE BAROQUE ERA

Among Baroque composers, Bukowski refers once to Domenico Scarlatti, who composed more than 600 sonatas and other pieces for the harpsichord. In the novel Pulp (p.119) the central character Nicky Belane (a parody of the hard-boiled American detective writer Mickey Spillane) says that he would rather hear a Scarlatti sonata than talk business. Like Bukowski himself, Belane is a tough guy with a fondness for good music.

Bukowski reveres George Frideric Handel (whom he mentions 4 times) and Johann Sebastian Bach (20 references). Handel's *Concerti Grossi in A Major* are on the soundtrack of the movie Barfly, which chronicles Bukowski's young manhood. And in "classical music and me" Bukowski declares that Handel "created things that/took your head and lifted it to the ceiling."

In a letter dated 1969, Bukowski is overjoyed to hear a work by Bach on the radio: "now Bach. thank Christ." (Screams, p.347) In "classical music and me" Bukowski states that if you listen to Bach long enough, you will not want to listen to any other composer. Popular music

may have a good beat, admits Bukowski in the short story "Remember Pearl Harbor?" (South of No North, p.86) but Bach's music has soul. In the poem "ANTS CRAWL MY DRUNKEN ARMS" (The Days Run Away Like Wild Horses Over the Hills, p.37) Bukowski laments the fact that American schoolboys admire the baseball player Willie Mays more than they do Bach.

But Bach has other, weirder connotations for Bukowski. He writes in a letter dated 1969 about a troubled time when he lived behind closed curtains, ate green potatoes and listened to the works of Bach and to the footsteps of his landlady. (Living, p.87) In another letter, written when he was listening to "a little dark Bach organ music," Bukowski states: "Bach was supposed to be a man of God but I always get the idea when listening to his organ works that the devil is talking to me...." (Screams, p.169) In "the eagle of the heart--" (Last, p.59) Bukowski listens to Bach while drinking cabernet sauvignon and thinks that such music "waits/in the/shadows of/hell." In this same macabre vein, Bukowski associates Bach with the hydrogen bomb in the poem "communion." (Love Is a Dog From Hell, p.67)

Bukowski once wrote a poem entitled "sitting around and listening to Bach" but refused to let it be published because it was a vindictive work, written at a time of bitterness when Buk had broken up with a woman. (Living, p.186) But near the end of his life, Bukowski returned to the music of Bach. In the poem "Bach" (Bone, p.357) Bukowski states that this composer's music "lifts me beyond / pain / and my / pathetic / self- / interest." In "Bach, come back," (Bone, p.331) Bukowski poignantly asks, "Bach, couldn't you have been my father?" then admits that the compositions of this master "make my hell bearable."

Bukowski's opinion of Antonio Vivaldi (7 references) is extremely negative. In the poem "Spain Sits Like a Hidden Flower in My Coffeepot" (The Roominghouse Madrigals, p.249) Buk listens to "the bones of Vivaldi." In "poem for the future" (Poems Written Before Jumping Out of an 8 Story Window, p.14) an unpleasant woman with a "wax heart" gushes: "I just love Vivaldi." In the poem "Tour" from Bukowski's recorded reading Hostage a snob with a British accent, green sunglasses, a yellow sports car and "no dirt under his fingernails" listens to Vivaldi on the radio. And in the poem "Lord Byron" (Bone, p.113) an overly-sensitive "writer" who has never published anything is mocked as a lover of Vivaldi's music. For Bukowski, Vivaldi clearly represents the worst pretentiousness and sterility.

THE CLASSICAL ERA

From the elegant classical period, Bukowski prefers Joseph Haydn (8 references) and Mozart (35). Haydn is generally associated with comfort. In the poem "very" (Roominghouse, p.112) as a nervous Bukowski prepares to give a poetry reading -- a task that he despised -- he hopes for good luck by thinking of the "successful papa Haydn." In the story "Nut Ward Just East of Hollywood" (Erections, Ejaculations, Exhibitions and General Tales of Ordinary Madness, p. 267) Bukowski is listening to Haydn's *Symphony No. 102* when he happily realizes that he has enough beer to last the night. In the poem "postcard" (Septuagenarian Stew, p.201) Buk contentedly drinks Beaujolais and smokes a cigar while enjoying a Haydn concerto on the radio.

In a letter written in 1964 while listening to Haydn's *Symphony No. 99*, Bukowski calls the composer a good "workman" but admits that he has not heard all of Haydn's symphonies, adding: "I guess few men have." (Screams, p.105) Bukowski is probably correct, since Haydn wrote no less than 108 symphonies over a 36-year period! In a letter written three weeks later,

Bukowski once again regrets not knowing more of Haydn: "there is much of him that I haven't heard -- the masses, *Mass in Time of War*, so forth." (Screams, p.295)

It is entirely appropriate that Bukowski admired Haydn, for Buk loved the symphony and Haydn has been called the Father of the Symphony. His 108 symphonies transformed an initially insignificant genre (derived from the overture to Italian opera) into one of the most important forms of musical expression. The symphonies of Mozart and of the 19th and 20th centuries could hardly have been written without Haydn's pioneering work.

For Bukowski, a Mozart symphony ranks among the "decent things" in life, like "the sky/the circus/legs of ladies getting out of cars." ("lack of almost everything," Crucifix in a Deathhand, p.55) In the poem "sweet music" (Love, p.23) the radio plays Mozart as a woman prepares Bukowski's breakfast and they discuss seeing each other again. In Women (p.193) Bukowski enjoys an idyllic dinner: "Liza sat me down and poured me a chilled wine." Wolfgang Amadeus is an even better accompaniment to the action that occurs in the poem "The place didn't look bad" (Love, p.259):

she had huge thighs
and a very good laugh...
she bent over
and I saw all that behind
as she put Mozart
on.

In a letter dated 1967 (Screams, p.307) thoughts of Mozart's death make Bukowski's own demise easier for him to visualize, parody and accept. "Well, Mozart had a pauper's grave

but he had some strange and glowing creatures at the handles. Well, that's what counts: give me 4 good strong pall bearers carrying a cheesebox and let the president of U.S. Steel block traffic."

Nevertheless, Mozart is not a totally positive force. For Bukowski, even Mozart has his limits. Bukowski cries out in the poem "quiet clean girls in gingham dresses" (Love, p.74):

"I need a good woman ... more than I need Mozart." And as Bukowski admits in "classical music and me": "Mozart was only good/when I was feeling/good and I seldom/felt that/way."

^{Elsewhere}
~~Elsewhere~~, Bukowski implies that the music of Mozart can have a negative effect by making the listener too soft. He writes in a letter of 1963 (Screams, p.89) that there are "things that kill: like penthouse blondes and collections of Mozart." Perhaps Bukowski saw a certain brittle weakness in Mozart's highly intellectual music, which was written for cultured audiences. For Bukowski, refinement and safety may be more deadly than freedom and danger.

Beethoven, that monumental bridge linking the Classical and Romantic eras, receives more references than any other composer (53) and Bukowski cites Beethoven's *First, Third, Fifth, Ninth and Tenth Symphonies*. Beethoven's *Tenth Symphony*? Is this a mistake? Before passing judgment, let us focus more closely on the question of Beethoven's *Tenth*.

In the poem "Bee's 5th", published in 1977 in Love Is a Dog From Hell (p.55) a whore in Caliente, Mexico talks about Beethoven's *Tenth Symphony*. And she is not wrong. On the contrary, she is strangely prophetic, for a few years later an English musicologist reconstructed the first movement of this symphony from Beethoven's fragmentary sketches. In 1988 this work was recorded and made available to the public.

Since Beethoven is the giant of the Western musical canon, it is natural that his works surrounded Bukowski during much of his life. Thus, Bukowski associates Beethoven with a

variety of everyday memories, such as those of innocent young women, heavy rains, and bums asking for a dollar. (“sardines in striped dresses, War All the Time, p.154) Bukowski listened to Beethoven while writing to his mother and while hand printing short stories when he was too poor to buy a typewriter. While living in a San Francisco roominghouse, he played Beethoven’s *Fifth* so loud on his victrola that the other tenants pounded angrily on the walls of his room. (“we, the artists,” Burning in Water Drowning in Flame, p.208) And Bukowski pounded back!

For Bukowski, Beethoven represents creative energy, unflagging courage and formal beauty. In the poem “L. Beethoven, Half-Back” (Days, p.103) the composer becomes a star performer on an American football team. In the poem “brave bull” (Roominghouse, p.19) the fallen animal is “as good as Beethoven” In the poem “mother and son” (Crucifix, p.27) a young woman’s “pink tight magic butt” blazes in Bukowski’s eyes and mind “like a Beethoven symphony.” One can become addicted to Beethoven like one can become addicted to betting on the horses or smoking marijuana. And if Beethoven were alive today, writes Bukowski in the poem “note upon the love letters of Beethoven” (War, p.198) he would be :

tooling along in his red sports

car

roof down

he’d pick up all those mad

hard cases on the boulevards

we’d get music like we

never heard before....

In the very serious poem “what they want” (Love, p.82) Bukowski depicts Beethoven as

an artist betrayed by his public. The public does not want art, Bukowski bitterly asserts, it wants “a goddamn show.” And only fools could fail to appreciate Beethoven says Bukowski in the poem “making it.” (Mockingbird Wish Me Luck, p.29) These hedonistic idiots ignore “all possible concepts and possibilities ...ignore Beethoven ... and just make it, make it.”

Not only does Beethoven receive by far the largest number of references, but sections of his *Archduke Trio* and *Fourth Piano Concerto* are heard in Barfly. Nonetheless, Bukowski occasionally makes disparaging comments concerning Beethoven. In a letter from 1966 (Screams, p.280) Bukowski complains: “I don’t trust Beethoven. He catches the ear with surface crash I keep feeling like he’s skimming on a giant mirror.” At the end of the previously-cited poem “Bee’s 5th” Bukowski admits that he is tired of hearing this mighty symphony. And in “classical music and me” he admits that as a young man he preferred Tchaikovsky and Brahms. Bukowski may adore Beethoven, but he does not fear criticising this great German composer (or any other composer, for that matter).

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The Romantics elicited varying responses from Bukowski. In Screams (p. 347) he listens to some *lieder* by Franz Schubert on the radio. In regard to Robert Schumann (3 references) Bukowski is of two minds. In a letter from 1966 (Screams, p. 280) he writes: “Schumann’s good, too, you oughta listen to Schumann just once. once. trust me. you’ll know.” But in the poem “TO HELL WITH ROBERT SCHUMANN” (Days, p. 122) Bukowski cannot bear to hear yet another piano concerto, so he turns off the Schumann on the radio and goes out to the boxing matches.

“Chopin was only good at moments,” writes Bukowski in “classical music and me.”

Nevertheless, he makes 11 references to this Polish-French composer and pianist. In the poem "Chopin Bukowski" (Love, p. 101-102) the composer's piano is equated with the poet's typewriter; but in the story "Head Job" (Hot Water Music, pp. 113-119) Bukowski ridicules the melancholy sweetness of Chopin's nocturnes as an example of effete over-refinement.

Bukowski makes 4 references to Hector Berlioz and in the poem "Soirée" (Roominghouse, p. 134) he mentions the *Symphonie Fantastique*. In the poem "rain" (Mockingbird, p. 29) Bukowski refers to the *Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2* of Franz Liszt.

Moving beyond the Romantic era, we see that Bukowski admired the Franco-Belgian composer César Franck. In a letter from 1962 (Living, p. 26) Bukowski states that Franck's *Symphony in D Minor* is one of his favorites. The title of the poem "John Dillinger and *le chasseur maudit*" (Burning, p. 132) surrealistically juxtaposes the name of one of America's most notorious criminals and one of Franck's later masterpieces. Bukowski is probably saying here that both outlaws and creative artists may be desperate men relegated to the margins of society.

Bukowski refers to Anton Bruckner, that stalwart son of the Romantic era who wrote 9 monumental symphonies, no less than 13 times. In the poem "defeat" (Love, p. 108) he finds Bruckner's music "peaceful"; in a letter from 1966 (Screams, p. 281) Bukowski praises Bruckner as "quite graciously good." In a letter written 11 years later (Living, p. 204) Bukowski states that Bruckner's reputation is "terribly underestimated."

Bukowski makes a passing reference to the Waltz King, Johann Strauss, Jr. And in "classical music and me" he calls the Austrian composer Karl Goldmark (famous during his lifetime for operas, but remembered nowadays for his instrumental works) "very underrated."

Johannes Brahms receives 30 references, with Bukowski mentioning the *First*, *Second* and *Third* of Brahms's four symphonies. In his poem "a place in Philly" (Bone, p.53) Bukowski writes

there's nothing like being young

and starving,

living in a roominghouse and

pretending to be a writer . . .

Listening to Brahms

your belly sucked in

nary an ounce of

fat

stretched out on the bed

in the dark . . .

Brahms is the only

friend you have,

the only friend you

want,

him and the wine

bottle . . .

The wine and

Brahms mix well

In the short story "Doing Time With Public Enemy No. 1" (Erections, p. 248) Bukowski enigmatically writes about listening to "Brahms' "second movement" when he was arrested by FBI agents in Philadelphia during the 1940s. The second movement of which work? This question is resolved in the poem "ww 2" (Mockingbird, p. 93) where Bukowski writes: "I am listening to the 2nd movement of brahms' 2nd symphony when there is a knock on the door." However, in a letter dated 1966 (Screams, p. 248) Buk states that he was listening to Brahms' *First Symphony* when the federal agents arrested him. Perhaps the passing of time has blurred his memory. And what caused Bukowski's arrest? His uncle was a counterfeiter and Bukowski was accused of avoiding military conscription.

It is evident that the music of Brahms has a powerful emotional effect on Bukowski. In one instance, a Brahms symphony on the radio leads Bukowski to consider his own death. (Screams, p. 240) But over the years, Bukowski has heard a lot of Brahms -- too much, perhaps - and he writes in the poem "I was born to hustle roses down the avenues of the dead" (Roominghouse, p. 227) that "Brahms can get/to be a bore and even insufferable...."

For Bukowski, the great Russian composer Tchaikovsky (12) often represents freedom. On a glorious, lazy morning Buk listens to Peter Ilich's *Violin Concerto in D* ("the life of the king," NOLA Reading); in the short story "Flower Horse" (Erections, p. 466) Bukowski wins big at the racetrack, then sings the melody from this concerto, adding his own lyrics : "Once more, we will be free again, oh once more, we will be free again...."

Tchaikovsky was the first composer to whom Bukowski alluded in print. Bukowski's

very first publication, "Aftermath of a Lengthy Rejection Slip," which appeared in Story magazine in 1944, contains a reference to Tchaikovsky's *Sixth Symphony*. But Bukowski did not fear criticising Tchaikovsky. In "Notes of a Potential Suicide" (Erections, p. 248) Bukowski scorns the sugary, simplistic *Nutcracker Suite*. And in Notes of a Dirty Old Man (p. 92) Buk attacks Tchaikovsky for sacrificing his own freedom by marrying "a nutty soprano with wrinkles under her eyes, and a lesbian, when you were not even a man...."

The preceding passage illustrates Bukowski's familiarity with the details of the composers' biographies. In the novel Post Office (~~1944~~, p. 75) he mentions owning a two-volume Lives of the Classical and Modern Composers. He goes on to explain: "Most of these men's lives were so tortured that I enjoyed reading about them, thinking, well, I am in hell too and I can't even write music." In the poem "fragile" (Roominghouse, p. 233) Bukowski cannot sleep and continues his musicological education by reading about Frederick Delius and Igor Stravinsky at 5:30 a.m.

Bukowski was well-acquainted with the 19th century nationalist composers. He mentions the Norwegian, Edvard Grieg, and the Russians, Mussourgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov and Borodin. In Notes of a Dirty Old Man (p. 216) Buk cites Rimsky's *Sheherazade*. And although Bukowski writes in "classical music and me" that Borodin "didn't work" for him, he nevertheless alludes to three pieces by this Russian -- *Symphony No. 2*, *Prince Igor* and *On the Steppes of Central Asia*. Bukowski also wrote a poem entitled "the life of Borodin" (Burning, p. 19) which sketches this chemist-composer's tragic existence. Evidently, the music of Borodin "worked" for Bukowski at one time.

Bukowski also refers to the Czechs, Bedrich Smetana and Antonin Dvorák. In the previously-mentioned poem "john dillinger and *le chasseur maudit*" Bukowski cites Dvorák's

tone poem, *The Midday Witch*. However, in “classical music and me” he dismisses Smetana as “obvious.”

The Finn, Jean Sibelius (8 references) stands above the other nationalists. For Bukowski, he is “awesome.” (“classical music and me”) In a letter dated 1962, Bukowski writes of “listening to a little Sibelius before going to work.” (Screams, p. 33) In the poem “suckerfish” (Dangling in the Tournefortia, p.191) Buk listens to an unnamed work by Sibelius, then feels good for the first time in hours. In the poem “Sibelius and etc.” (Dangling, p. 203) Buk relates a major event in the poet’s life: “When Sibelius reached 40 he shaved/all the hair on his head, walked/into his house and never/came out again until they/came for him.”

This colorful legend, which Bukowski mentions twice, actually gives a slightly distorted picture of Sibelius. In truth, although he became reclusive, Sibelius never sought total isolation. At the age of 40 he left Helsinki for the nearby village of Järvenpää, but he continued to frequent Helsinki restaurants and traveled to Germany, France and Italy whenever he could afford to.

Bukowski enjoyed the music of Sibelius from the early 1960s, when the composer became popular in America, through the 1990s. In the posthumously-published poem “lousy mail” (Betting on the Muse, p. 294) we witness a timeless scene -- Bukowski listening to the music of the great Finn during the early hours of the morning:

Sibelius working on the radio

there is a small refrigerator in the room

I get up now, reach in there, crack a

beer as

Sibelius continues to work.

Bukowski makes 32 allusions to Gustav Mahler, who combined late 19th century Romanticism with 20th century modernism. Buk mentions Mahler's *Fifth* and *Tenth Symphonies*, while Barfly includes music from Mahler's *Sixth Symphony*. In the autobiographical short story **CONFESSIONS OF A COWARD** (Betting, p. 59) the poor, miserable and sick central character want to join the Mahler Society.

Mahler's music is a search for the meaning of life, and on the first page of Notes of a Dirty Old Man we see Bukowski listening to Mahler in a darkened room and contemplating his own tortured existence. In the poem "PEACE" (Days, p. 30) Bukowski admonishes hunters to put down their guns and listen to something spiritual like a Mahler symphony. In "classical music and me" Bukowski declares that:

Mahler was always one
of my favorites
it's possible to listen to
his works again and
again and
again without
tiring of them.

But there is a danger: in Bukowski's writings, Mahler's introspective and anguished tones may be associated with the demented as well as with the noble. In "Nut Ward Just East of Hollywood, (Erections, p.268) one character is "fucked-up on ... a minor admixture of [American novelist Norman] Mailer and Mahler." A rapist in the short story "The Fiend" (Erections, p. 207)

listens to symphonic music -- preferably Mahler-- on his radio. This composer represents his last link to reality.

In the novel Factotum (pp. 36-37) Bukowski's alter ego Henry Chinaski is savaged by an obese whore to the sounds of Mahler. This hilarious passage merits both quotation and close examination:

My penis rose; she groaned, bit me. I screamed, grabbed her by the hair, pulled her off. I stood in the center of the room wounded and terrified. They were playing a Mahler symphony on the radio. Before I could move she was down on her knees and on me again. She gripped my balls mercilessly with both of her hands. Her mouth opened, she had me; her head bobbed, sucked, jerked. Giving my balls a tremendous yank while almost biting my pecker in half she forced me to the floor. Sucking sounds filled the room as my radio played Mahler. I felt as if I were being eaten by a pitiless animal.

We have here an example of grotesque juxtaposition, where the sublime (in this case Mahler) is placed in direct proximity to the repulsive. Bukowski frequently uses this technique in regard to classical music. For example, there is his disrespectful reference to Beethoven's best-known symphony in the previously-cited "Bee's 5th." Bukowski writes: "I heard it first while screwing a blonde/who had the biggest box in Scranton," a tough coal-mining town in Pennsylvania. In this instance, it is not only the act of screwing with Beethoven in the background but one particularly lurid detail -- the size of the woman's vagina -- that makes the grotesque juxtaposition all the more powerful.

Elsewhere in Factotum we witness a similar scene. Chinaski has contracted crab lice and has applied a strong ointment to kill them. The ointment burns terribly, and he rolls around in his bed in great pain. As this agony goes on, Beethoven and Brahms play on the radio.

If we ask why Bukowski employs grotesque juxtaposition, we see three possible answers. First, perhaps the scene actually happened that way in real life and he is simply recording reality. On the other hand, Bukowski may consciously create this technique for shock value: the background of high culture in the form of symphonic music highlights the unsavory activities occurring in the foreground, making them stand out even more clearly. Finally, Bukowski may employ grotesque juxtaposition in order to debase the great composers. By degrading them somewhat, the rebellious Bukowski asserts his own independence and power.

I think that this is exactly what happens in the following episode. In the poem “society should realize . . .” (Bone, p.67) Bukowski recounts an adventure in a Mexican whorehouse:

this gal . . .

And I got it on and we worked easily, no effort, no

tension, and some guy beat on the door and

yelled,

‘Hey! What the hell’s going on in there?

Hurry it up!

But it was like a Mahler symphony -- you just don’t

rush

it.

Once again, we have the music of Gustav Mahler together with a scabrous sex act. The important word here is *like* . . . “like a Mahler symphony.” This is metaphor, deliberately chosen by Bukowski; this is not realism. The composers may be geniuses, but in Charles Bukowski’s works Charles Bukowski will reign supreme!

Moving from the 19th into the 20th century, Bukowski makes a passing reference to the impressionistic Frenchman, Claude Debussy, and refers twice to the Austrian, Hugo Wolf. In the poem “WHEN HUGO WOLF WENT MAD-- (Days, p. 41) Bukowski sketches the mental collapse of this syphilitic songwriter. Buk also makes a brief reference to the eccentric Russian, Alexander Scriabin, whose swirling *Poem of Ecstasy*, based on his strange philosophical beliefs, is on the Barfly soundtrack.

THE OPERA

At this point it might be appropriate to examine Bukowski’s opinion about the opera of the 19th and 20th centuries. In so doing, we see that he had very mixed feelings. He makes neutral comments on Beethoven’s *Fidelio*, Offenbach’s operetta *La Vie Parisienne* and Smetana’s *The Bartered Bride*. Bukowski mentions the Italian-American opera composer Gian Carlo Menotti and in a letter of 1963 (Screams, p. 57) states his liking for Gluck, Massenet and Gounod. In the poem “now” (War, p. 248) Buk refers to Stravinsky’s *The Rakes’s Progress* (with libretto by W.H. Auden) and calls Stravinsky “the best.”

But in a letter from 1965 (Screams, p. 124) Bukowski makes a sarcastic reference to Giacomo Meyerbeer, best known for *Les Huguenots*. And although the detective Nicky Belane hums “his favorite bit from Carmen” (Pulp, p. 118) after intimidating an impudent bartender, Bukowski calls Bizet’s *Carmen* “very corny” -- especially when sung in English.

(“Flower Horse,” Erections, p. 464)

But Bukowski reserves his greatest scorn for three masters of Italian opera.

Donizetti's *The Elixir of Love* fails to lift the protagonist from a depression in “Nut Ward Just East of Hollywood. (Erections, p. 264) In the short story “Notes of a Potential Suicide” (Erections, p. 430) Bukowski calls Rossini's opera *La Gazza Ladra* an example of the “grammar school of music.” In a letter dated 1965 Bukowski writes: “listening to a Rossini opera. I can see why they failed. all his operas sound like his overtures, and the overture and the meat of an opera are two different things.” (Screams, p. 230) In the short story “All the Great Writers” (Erections, p. 150) the protagonist praises Rossini because he *stopped* writing operas! Once again we see Bukowski's familiarity with the lives of the artists: while still in his middle 30s the burned-out Rossini, loved by some and hated by others, ceased composing operas.

Although in a letter of 1963 (Screams, p. 57) Bukowski says that he likes Verdi, in the short story “Too Sensitive” (Erections, p. 343) he mocks a phoney avant-garde writer whose pseudo-sophisticated characters possess such things as complete collections of Verdi. This reminds us of Bukowski's scorn for Vivaldi. And in the short story “Beer and Poets and Talk” (Erections, p. 383) Bukowski sarcastically remarks: “There's nothing as good as ...a Verdi opera...to hold back progress.”

Why this dislike of opera? The answer is that Bukowski does not particularly appreciate the sound of the human voice. As early as 1963 he wrote in Screams (p. 65):

I just don't like the human voice. I think it's fake. Almost anything that comes out in voice is fake Here you have some bitch singing ultra-soprano who beats her kids and squats over a bowl

and drops turds like the rest of us, and she is through the Art-form
trying to become purified and trying to purify the rest of us. I just
don't like the human voice: it drags down, it wears, it simply will
not let things alone.

Bukowski continues in this manner in the poem "how to get rid of the purists." (Bone,
p.195) Here he states that he hates the human voice -- especially the soprano voice:

the human voice besides being basically
ugly also reminds me of the human
race
and one of the last things I want to
think of and one of the first things I
want to get away from when I listen to
classical music is
the human
race.

But Richard Wagner, whom Bukowski calls "my German buddy" (Last, p. 22) is
a notable exception to Buk's aversion toward opera. In one of his 24 references to Wagner,
Bukowski writes: "The Ring on now. Wagner goes good with me." (Screams, p. 218)
Bukowski was greatly moved by this composer, whom he considered emotional but solid.
In a letter from 1965 he describes Wagner as "a man who never wrote a bad note. what
I mean is, it all came from the GUT." (Screams, p. 231) Elsewhere, Bukowski writes: "Wagner
had MUSCLE/ENERGY/HEART." (Screams, p. 186) For Bukowski, Wagner is a "roaring

miracle of dark energy.” (“Classical music and me”) who creates an “astonishing FORCE of sound.” (“1813-1883,” You Get So Alone at Times That It Just Makes Sense, p. 13) The title of this last poem gives the dates of Wagner’s life.

Bukowski often associates Wagner with violent storms, which are naturally Wagnerian settings. In the poem “rain” (Mockingbird, p. 25) thunder halts an outdoor performance of Wagner’s music; in “1813-1883” Bukowski listens to Wagner “as outside in the dark the wind blows a cold rain the/trees wave and shake....” The entire house trembles as the music and tempest combine. And in the poem “climax” (Mockingbird, p. 37) the storm gets worse: Bukowski imagines a nuclear götterdämmerung erupting during a performance of Siegfried: “there was flame / world ending / bodies hurled through the air....”

But Bukowski could also see a less serious side to Wagner. In the poem “WHEN HUGO WOLF WENT MAD--” the worms surrealistically hum melodies from *Tannheuser*. In another instance, Bukowski tells a screechy German heckler that he should have been a Wagnerian soprano. (“there are hecklers in Germany too,” (Dangling, p. 198)

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

For Bukowski, the 20th century was considerably less rich than the 19th. He briefly mentions Sergei Rachmaninoff; the German Neoclassicist Paul Hindemith; the Russian composer of Belgian descent, Reinhold Gliere; the Australian-American pianist and composer, Percy Grainger; and the innovative American, Charles Ives. Bukowski also makes a passing reference to Richard Strauss’ tone poem *Death and Transfiguration*. (Women, p. 145)

Regarding 20th century composers, Bukowski could be extremely critical. In

“Notes of a Potential Suicide” (Erections, pp. 430-431) he dismisses Ravel’s *Bolero*, Manuel de Falla’s *The Three-Cornered Hat*, Edward Elgar’s *Pomp and Circumstance*, George Gerhwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue* and Aaron Copland’s *El Salon Mexico* as works for beginners. In a letter of 1965 (Screams, p. 185) he calls Gustav Holst’s *The Planets* “bad music.” Darius Milhaud and Ralph Vaughan Williams fare little better: in Notes of a Dirty Old Man (p. 220) a character named Stirkoff masturbates to the accompaniment of their music.

Fortunately, Bukowski found some brighter lights on the 20th century musical horizon. In a letter of 1963 he expresses admiration for the Hungarians Zoltán Kodály and Ernst von Dohnányi. (Screams, p. 57) In another letter from the same period Buk praises the Soviet composer Dmitri Kabalevsky. (Screams, p. 64)

Bukowski was a fervent admirer of the Russian-born Igor Stravinsky, whom he refers to 13 times. Buk favorably compares Stravinsky to the great American poet Ezra Pound and to John Fante, one of his favorite American novelists. (Screams, p. 187) Moreover, I believe that the title of Bukowski’s poetry collection, Play the Piano Drunk Like a Percussion Instrument Until the Fingers Begin to Bleed a Bit comes from Stravinsky’s characterization of “the piano as percussion instrument.”

But Bukowski’s greatest praise (and 19 references) was reserved for the Soviet composer laureate Dmitri Shostakovich, who penned 15 symphonies. In the poem “take it” (War, p. 142) Bukowski hears this composer’s *First Symphony*, then sleeps like a baby. Years earlier, he had expressed admiration for Shostakovich’s *Fifth*. (Living, p. 26) However, in the poem “culture” (Dangling, p. 131) Buk admits that he

prefers Shostakovich's Fourth Symphony. This work has an intriguing history.

Written in 1936, it was withdrawn during rehearsals because the composer had fallen into political disfavor: in an article in Pravda, Stalin had criticized Shostakovich's opera, *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, as a pornographic insult to Russian womanhood.

Although Shostakovich quickly recovered his political standing by confessing his errors and composing the magnificent *Fifth Symphony*, the *Fourth* did not premiere until 1961, when it was performed by the Moscow Philharmonic Orchestra.

In his poem "within the dense overcast" (Last, p. 361) Bukowski gives a brief history of Shostakovich's *Seventh* or *Leningrad Symphony*, which was written in that city in 1941 at the beginning of the 17-month siege: "600,000 people died in the/siege of Leningrad/and we got Shostakovich's/Seventh."

CODA

In analyzing Bukowski's long love affair with the miracle of classical music, we see that his taste is decidedly mainstream and did not change much over the years. He needed music to counteract life's disharmonies and avoided avant-garde atonality. Stravinsky is about as radical as Bukowski could take. He never mentions Béla Bartók, Alban Berg, Anton Webern or Iannis Xenakis, and he makes a sarcastic comment about the American experimentalist John Cage. (Women, p.170) Bukowski mentions Arnold Schönberg's revolutionary twelve-tone scale only once. (Captain, p.82)

But rather surprisingly in "the voice of Chinaski" (Bone, p.226) Bukowski expresses interest in the fact that

modern composers are writing pieces using

the voice of the whale

working it in to

music-

This is surely a reference to *And God Created Great Whales* by the prolific but little-known American composer Alan Hovhaness.

In the final analysis, Bukowski's preferred genre is the symphony, and his favorite composers (listed alphabetically) are Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Handel, Mahler, Shostakovich, Sibelius, Stravinsky, Tchaikovsky and Wagner. The European musical influence on Bukowski, the American realist, is tremendous, and it is evident that the German and Russian symphonists predominate.

However, since Bukowski heard most of his music on the radio, he was not entirely free in his choice of composers and works: he was subject to the programming tastes of classical radio stations, and most of these stations stay within a restricted format of the classical favorites. As Bukowski writes in Women (p. 10): "The radio played mostly Mozart and Brahms and the Bee." At one point, Bukowski rebelled against this Western musical canon: in the poem "jam" (Last, p. 15) he attacks the "stale repetition of standard and/tiresome works."

To conclude, serious music was immensely important to Bukowski. In "classical music and me" he calls such music "a part of the world/like no other part of the world." And in one letter (All's Normal Here, pp. 109-110) he admits: "I've had my crutches ... Mozart, Mahler, Bach, Wagner."

The poem "storm" (Betting, p. 331) depicts a poignant moment. It is 1:42 a.m. and it is

raining. Bukowski is drinking and listening to the radio. He is sleepy and ill; in truth, he is waiting to die. But he is listening to Bach and he is content.

Charles Bukowski was a man of letters, but he esteemed composers above writers and was formed by the classical music he listened to as he wrote. For this reason, Charles Bukowski was also a man of music.

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