

The Efficient Causation of Artistic Inspiration with Regards to Music

Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story...
Homer, first line of the *Odyssey*

What is the efficient causation of artistic inspiration? This question is rarely posed in musicological and philosophical circles. Even for scholars interested in aesthetics and the philosophy of music, the *cause* of creative activity is generally viewed as a less preferable topic for investigation than its *effect* (the musical composition itself, or the quality of “genius” as displayed by the composer). Various reasons for such a penchant within scholarship can be readily proposed: Defining the efficient causation for artistic inspiration is a futile pursuit, for there is no universal formula, no ideal model for artistic inspiration upon which a theory can be built; inspiration is a spiritual and/or sensory experience, unique to each composer and consequently indefinable as a philosophical construct. Or, as the philosopher of music Peter Kivy has explained: “Such a theory is impossible. It is a way of suggesting that there is *no* explanation for how someone ‘gets a bright idea.’”¹

In this essay, I hope to show that even though scholars have avoided the topic of efficient causation of artistic inspiration with regards to music, the “idea” of artistic inspiration, as it is displayed here in visual representations of three historically prominent composers, has been pondered by musicians and their audiences for centuries. Indeed, even Homer, the foundational poet/musician of Western culture, began his *Iliad* and *Odyssey* with musical visions of artistic inspiration:

¹ Peter Kivy, *The Possessor and the Possessed: Handel, Mozart, Beethoven, and the Idea of Musical Genius* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 1.

“Sing, goddess, the anger of Achilles son of Peleus ...”² (*Illiad*)

“Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story...”³ (*Odyssey*)

Homer sought assistance from the gods, and until the early modern period, divine intervention was generally accepted as the efficient causation of artistic inspiration in the realm of music.

Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) the Benedictine abbess, visionary, writer and composer who produced, among other works, an impressive array of liturgical songs and a morality play with music, included a portrait of herself under the influence of divine intervention (figure 1) in the preface to her *Scivias* (1151), an account of her mystic visions, which contains 14 lyric texts designed to be set to music. Hildegard claimed that from the age of five, she experienced visions, which served as the source of her writings, illustrations and music.⁴ In Hildegard’s portrait, flames of divine inspiration engulf her head as she sits alone in her room, eyes raised toward heaven, notating her visions on a wax tablet. Her assistant, Volmar, stands outside and, looking through a window, witnesses the effect (Hildegard’s artistic output) of the divine intervention that has seized her. She is not an active agent in the production of her works. Rather, she is presented as a passive receptor, a conduit for the voice of God.

Divine intervention remained the central explanation for artistic inspiration prior to the eighteenth century. But with the dawn of the Enlightenment came new explanations for efficient causation. Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750), though a devout Lutheran and a prolific

² Homer, *The Iliad*, translated by Samuel Butler (1898, Reprint edition, St. Petersburg, FL: Red and Black Publishers, 2008), 7.

³ Homer, *The Odyssey*, translated by Robert Fitzgerald (1961, Reprint edition, New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 1.

⁴ As Hildegard explained in the beginning of her autobiography (*Vita* II, 22) the works that flowed from her were the product of a mystical, divine intervention: “Wisdom teaches in the light of love and bids me tell how I was initiated into this vision. And I do not say these words of myself, but the true Wisdom says them of me and speaks thus to me: “Hear these words, O human, and tell them not your way but my way, and taught by me, speak this way of yourself.” Cf. Barbara Newman, “Three-Part Invention: *The Vita S. Hildegardis* and Mystical Hagiography,” in *Hildegard of Bingen: The Context of Her Thought and Art*, edited by Charles Burnett and Peter Dronke (London, UK: The Warburg Institute, 1998), 193.

composer of sacred music, did not claim divine inspiration as the source of his musical ideas. Instead, he borrowed a term from contemporary rhetoric: “invention,” which referred to the selection of topics to be treated, or arguments to be used during the process of creation. In Bach’s day, “invention” denoted not only the subject matter of a composition, but also the mechanism, the process used for discovering artistic ideas.⁵

Bach described himself as a self-taught composer who spent countless hours diligently studying and copying out the learned counterpoint compositions of his predecessors. During his formative years, the writing of canons and fugues, with their elaborate codes and principles, was perceived as a carefully guarded knowledge akin to alchemy. A popular anecdote about Bach’s youth describes how, as a ten-year-old, he surreptitiously took his older brother’s collection of Pachelbel canons from a locked cabinet each night and copied it out by moonlight.⁶ At the end of six months, he had mastered the secret art of counterpoint. I share this anecdote because it reflects, I think, what Bach and many of his contemporaries considered the efficient causation of artistic inspiration: invention via the process of study and experimentation. Bach’s creativity was not the effect of passive divine intervention, but rather the result of his active acquisition of knowledge. Looking at the only surviving portrait of Bach painted during his lifetime, we see this concept of efficient causation confirmed (figure 2). With his right hand, Bach shows the viewer a sheet inscribed with three musical motives and the inscription “Canon triplex à 6” [triple canon for six voices], an encoded message, the musical contents of which would challenge

⁵ A thorough study of Bach’s reliance on the concept of invention is presented by Laurence Dreyfuss, *Bach and the Patterns of Invention* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996). For a study of the historical links between the arts of learned counterpoint and alchemy see: David Yearsley, “Alchemy and Counterpoint in an Age of Reason.” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 51 (July 1998): 201-243.

⁶ James R. Gaines, *Evening in the Palace of Reason: Bach Meets Frederick the Great in the Age of Enlightenment* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2006), 45.

even the most highly trained musicians.⁷ The presence of this canonical code is an emblem of Bach's creative method. Like the flames of divine inspiration that appear in the portrait of Hildegard, the "invention" included in the Bach portrait symbolizes the efficient causation of his artistic inspiration.

By the end of the eighteenth century, critical theory abandoned rhetoric in favor of philosophy (aesthetics) as a model for describing the artistic process, and the perfectible art of "invention" associated with Bach was replaced with the concept of transcendent creativity as an attribute of the sublime. Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) became the poster child for this point of view. Beethoven lost his hearing at a relatively early age, and the absence of this sense, considered by many to be indispensable for a composer, fuelled countless discussions about the source of Beethoven's miraculous ability. Space does not allow for an overview of Beethoven iconography,⁸ so I will limit my comments to a single illustration: Aimé de Lemud's "Beethoven" (figure 3), an engraving awarded a medal at the Paris Salon of 1863. In this image, the efficient causation of the composer's artistic inspiration is both active (like Bach's acquisition of knowledge) and passive (like Hildegard's reception of divine intervention). The instruments and manuscript paper scattered across the floor in the bottom half of the image serve as proof of Beethoven's active engagement as a composer, his human suffering and struggle against fate. Contrary to this, the ethereal images in the upper half of the engraving attest to Beethoven's superhuman ability to absorb passively, via a subconscious state, the essence of a metaphysical realm closed to the rest of humanity. The efficient causation of Beethoven's

⁷ Christoph Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach, The Learned Musician* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2000), 391-2.

⁸ For an exhaustive survey of Beethoven imagery in the 19th and 20th centuries see: Alessandra Comini, *The Changing Image of Beethoven: a Study in Mythmaking* (New York, NY: Rizzoli, 1987).

artistic inspiration, as displayed in the engraving, involves both his conscious activity within the physical world and his subconscious interaction with an idealized, metaphysical domain.

CAPTIONS for FIGURES:



Figure 1: Hildegard of Bingen, Portrait in *Scivias* (1151)
Formerly at the Hessische Landesbibliothek, Wiesbaden



Figure 2: Elias Gottlob Haussman, Portrait of Johann Sebastian Bach (1746)
Altes Rathaus, Leipzig



Figure 3: Aimé de Lemud, Beethoven (1863)
Library of Congress, Washington, DC