ROMAIN ROLLAND ET L’HÉROISME:
UNE PERSPECTIVE MUSICALE

ROMAIN ROLLAND AND HEROISM:
A MUSICAL PERSPECTIVE

BY

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Reproduction d’une photo de Romain Rolland dans
*L’idéalisme de Romain Rolland*

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Résumé

Romain Rolland et l’héroïsme: une perspective musicale

Le nom de Romain Rolland, écrivain, historien et musicologue français, est étroitement lié à l’héroïsme. Plusieurs auteurs ont déjà examiné l’importance de l’héroïsme dans la vie de l’écrivain. Son intérêt pour la musique a fait l’objet de nombreuses études. Le penchant de Rolland pour les compositeurs qu’il décrit héroïques tels que Beethoven et Händel nous a mené à postuler qu’il existe un lien entre la musique et la formulation rollandienne de l’héroïsme. Le but de cette thèse est de montrer que les influences musicales et la vie de certains compositeurs jouent un rôle central dans la conception du héros rollandien.

Dans le premier chapitre, La formation musicale de Rolland, nous nous concentrons sur la formation de Romain Rolland soulignant le développement de son goût pour la musique et pour l’héroïsme. Nous examinons, dans ces domaines, l’influence de son mentor Malwida von Meysenbug ainsi que sa quête pour un modèle héroïque à émuler.

Le deuxième chapitre traite l’influence de Beethoven dans la vie de Rolland. Nous étudions ses qualités héroïques qu’adapte l’écrivain pour la formulation de son héros. De plus, nous examinons la biographie intitulée Vie de Beethoven.

Dans le troisième chapitre, D’autres musiciens héroïques, nous étudions les ouvrages rollandiens de musicologie afin de dégager les qualités des autres musiciens qu’il admire.

Rolland crée son propre héros basé sur les caractéristiques héroïques qu’il a glanées de son étude des musiciens. Son roman Jean-Christophe est son ouvrage le plus célèbre et nous examinons en détail le caractère du protagoniste dans le quatrième chapitre Jean-Christophe.

Selon Rolland, un grand nombre de compositeurs ne sont pas héroïques. Afin de mettre en contraste les qualités héroïques du héros rollandien, nous étudions les traits de ces “non-héros” dans le cinquième chapitre La mauvaise foi chez les musiciens.

L’écrivain est tellement inspiré par Beethoven qu’il compose sa propre “symphonie héroïque” sous forme d’une symphonie littéraire. Le sixième chapitre, La symphonie héroïque de Rolland révèle comment Rolland construit son roman selon des lois musicales.

Après avoir étudié les qualités héroïques de certains musiciens, Rolland est empreint de ces traits. Dans le dernier chapitre, Romain Rolland, héros-prophète, nous montrons qu’il se donne pour mission d’une part, d’être lui-même un héros et d’autre part de créer une œuvre capable d’inspirer ses lecteurs.
Abstract

Romain Rolland and heroism: a musical perspective

The importance of heroism in the life of Romain Rolland, French author, historian and musicologist has previously been investigated as has been his love of music. The fact that Rolland preferred composers he considered heroic such as Beethoven and Handel led the author of this thesis to believe that there may be a link, as yet unexplored, between Rolland’s formulation of heroism and music. The aim of this thesis is to demonstrate that musical influences and the life of certain composers played a central role in the fashioning of Rolland’s concept of heroism.

The first chapter, Rolland’s musical formation covers the formative years of Rolland’s life, outlining the development of his musical taste and also his interest in heroism. The influence of his mentor, Malwida von Meysenbug is examined, as is his search for a role model heroic figure.

Beethoven, the second chapter, discusses the influence of this composer in Rolland’s life and enumerates the musician’s heroic qualities which Rolland adapts for the formulation of his own fictional hero. The biography The Life of Beethoven written by the author is also examined.

The third chapter, Other heroic musicians investigates Rolland’s musicological works in order to highlight heroic qualities found in other composers admired by Rolland.

In his most famous work Jean-Christophe, Rolland creates his own heroic figure based on characteristics gleaned from his study of musicians. The character of his protagonist is examined in detail in the fourth chapter, Jean-Christophe.

Many composers are criticised by the author for lacking an heroic nature. In order to develop fully the concept of Rolland’s hero, a close examination of these “non-heroic” composers is made in the fifth chapter, The insincerity of musicians.

So inspired was Rolland by Beethoven that in writing Jean-Christophe, the author endeavoured to write his own literary “Heroic Symphony”. The sixth chapter, Rolland’s heroic symphony investigates how the author “musically” structured his novel.

The final chapter, Romain Rolland, the hero-prophet discusses how Rolland absorbed many of the heroic qualities that he read about, believing that it was his mission to lead an heroic life and to write inspirational works for his readers.
Synopsis

Romain Rolland and heroism: a musical perspective.

This thesis contains an introduction, seven chapters, conclusion and bibliography. The chapter titles are Rolland’s musical formation, Beethoven, Other musical heroes, Jean-Christophe, The insincerity of musicians, Rolland’s Heroic Symphony, and Romain Rolland, the hero-prophet?

The first chapter investigates the development of Rolland’s musical taste during his younger years. This approach has been chosen because the heroes admired by Rolland and those he creates himself have an intrinsic link to music.

A solitary child, born in the French province of Nièvre, Rolland spent much of his childhood, cloistered in his grandfather’s library familiarising himself with the heroes of Shakespeare. From the age of five, he learnt the piano, his mother being his first teacher. Works of Mozart, Weber, Haydn and Beethoven filled his repertoire.

His adolescence was spent in Paris where he prepared for entry into the Ecole Normale in 1886. He did not adapt easily to Parisian life as he was horrified by the shallowness and artificiality of his peers. Seeking refuge in music, he became a regular concertgoer. The music of Wagner and Berlioz were a source of inspiration to him at this stage. Having rejected formal religion, he saw music as his “real religious cult”.

Always searching to make contact with heroic figures, Rolland corresponded with Léon Tolstoï, amongst others. He adopted the Russian author’s belief that art must not be solely an amusement for the elite; art must serve the people. At this stage of his life, Rolland also developed a Credo quia verum in an attempt to explain man’s role in the universe. In this, he compared life to a musical work or “universal symphony”.

After completion of his Agrégation d’histoire, Rolland gained a scholarship to study in Rome where he met an elderly German aristocrat, Malwida von Meysenburg, who had been the friend of such celebrities as Nietzsche, Ibsen, Liszt and Wagner. Because of their common love of music, a deep friendship arose between
Malwida and the young Frenchman. Acting as his mentor, Malwida helped him understand more clearly the germanic soul of Beethoven, and broadened his concept of heroism by describing the lives of those she had known, the “Great Vanquished”. She also encouraged the development of his “European spirit”, and urged him to become a writer some years later.

On returning to Paris from Rome, Rolland began to study Beethoven’s life in greater depth. The character of the composer impressed him foremost, and he admired Beethoven’s qualities such as his kindness, his love of his fellow man, his courage, his strength of will, his independence and his vitality. He was particularly inspired by Beethoven’s ability to overcome personal suffering to create great music, a process which the composer himself had termed “joy through suffering”.

Believing that others could also draw comfort from his hero, Beethoven, Rolland decided to write a biography which would inspire his readers. He intended to demonstrate that heroism was not just an attribute of supermen, but that ordinary people, armed with faith in life and the future, could also overcome seemingly unsurmountable difficulties.

In the small biography, *The Life of Beethoven*, Rolland concentrated on certain details of Beethoven’s life such as his unhappy childhood, his encroaching deafness and its devastating effect on his piano playing, on his ability to conduct his symphonic works, and also on his relationships. Rolland emphasises the composer’s reaction to his deafness, stressing his ability to overcome his suffering and create a music which still brings joy to its listeners.

When the Beethoven biography was published in 1903, it was an outstanding success, helping to bring about an “heroic cult” in France.

The type of hero represented by Beethoven, i.e. one who demonstrated kindness, strength of will, sincerity, independance, courage, suffering, sacrifice, etc., had gradually been forming into the “Rollandian hero” in Rolland’s mind. The heroes of his early plays had lacked a benevolent nature, being more reminescent of traditional heroes. Did this new evolved hero bear any relationship to other hero types?

The Rollandian hero did not much resemble the romantic hero prevalent in nineteenth century literature who tended to be introspective and melancholic. He did
however share the independent and rebellious nature of the latter but his love for humanity inspired others rather than causing their distrust.

Rolland had intended to produce a series of “Lives of illustrious men” to provide a continuing source of heroic inspiration for his readers but he soon realised very few people existed who could match up to his “heroic” criteria. He therefore set about gathering ideas for his own fictional hero.

During his teaching years, Rolland also studied the lives of other composers in depth. Lecture material and journal articles on these musicians were later gathered together in his Musicians of today, Musicians of yesterday, Handel, and Musical voyage into the past. The composers featured here were those who also possessed heroic traits. After Beethoven, Handel was the musician most admired by Rolland. Handel’s most outstanding trait was his “universal spirit” as he wrote a music which reached out to everyone regardless of social class.

Rolland also admired the fact that Handel continually had to rework his manuscripts to achieve a satisfactory result. This revealed perseverance and strength of will on the part of Handel. Like Beethoven, Handel had his share of suffering, battling health problems and eventually blindness. His motto “whatever is -is good” was also used by Rolland in his writings.

Composers who showed an independance of spirit were preferred by Rolland. Among these were Telemann for whom Rolland revived an interest among music lovers. Gluck was another whose simple and sincere music “represented the free spirit of the eighteenth century”. As far as Mozart was concerned, although he showed independence of thought, Rolland considered that the composer’s extraordinary genius placed him in an altogether separate class from other musicians.

Other “free spirits” were the composers Hugo Wolf, Berlioz and Saint-Saëns. According to Rolland, Berlioz had rediscovered the “French musical thought” established in the seventeenth century and subsequently lost.

Although, Rolland often spoke of the desirability of universal music, he also wished to see a revival of French music, per se, believing that Italian and German music were in decline. He argued that Wagner and Richard Strauss were responsible for the changing style of German music. An admirer of Wagner in his youth, Rolland saw his later music as both pessimistic and decadent. Richard Strauss, although independant and strong in spirit, was creating a contemptuous and proud music that
did not invoke feelings of benevolence nor love of humanity in its audience. Strauss’ musical hero was the “conquering hero” who showed no kindness. This hero’s life was an empty one and he would only know failure in the long run. Rolland believed that the “vanquished hero” portrayed by Beethoven, a benevolent hero exhibiting faith and courage, would eventually triumph despite being physically vanquished.

Kindness was not a quality displayed by many of the composers examined by Rolland. He mentions only Gluck, Telemann and Mozart in this respect. Another quality, strength of will, present in both Wagner’s and Strauss’ character was sadly lacking in Berlioz who was “never able to dominate his life or his work”.

Looking at composers who had known great suffering, Rolland was particularly moved by the life of Hugo Wolf, who, despite his spasmodic bouts of genius succumbed to madness. Rolland also dwelt on difficult periods in Wagner’s life where he had undergone suffering.

An admirer of revolutionary souls, Rolland cites only Wagner and Gluck (with Beethoven) in this category.

After his study of these composers, Rolland had to concede that although they all possessed some of the heroic qualities that he admired, none possessed all of them together.

Since the time spent in Rome with Malwida von Meysenburg, Rolland had been formulating the concept of his own hero who was to be “a Beethoven” in the contemporary world. Jean-Christophe would be a German composer like Beethoven but possessing, in addition, traits from other composers such as Händel, Gluck, Wagner and Hugo Wolf. His life story was to be a Bildungsroman or perhaps more aptly a “roman de socialisation”. A work of such large dimensions enabled Rolland to develop in depth many psychological aspects of his protagonist. Several incidents in the book were drawn from the lives of composers such as Mozart, Beethoven, Wagner and Hugo Wolf.

Christophé was to be a very human figure whose kindness and strength of character would inspire readers. From the very start of Jean-Christophe it is established that the protagonist’s life is a difficult one, his childhood being reminiscent of that of Beethoven’s.

There are other heroic characters in the novel, all with positive roles to play. Among them is Christophé’s uncle Gottfried, a humble pedlar, who teaches him that
music must always be sincere, not filled with false sentiments. Gottfried also explains that a real hero is one who “does what he can” in life.

Honing his skills as a composer, Christophe becomes aware of the falseness, “le mensonge allemand”, in most German music. Believing he must speak the truth, he openly criticises such music and creates many enemies in the German musical world.

Later in France, the protagonist examines Parisian society and music with the critical eye of a stranger, like the Voltairian “Huron”. So doing, he becomes a vehicle for the author to express critical comment on his fellow citizens.

Life in Paris is difficult for Christophe as he struggles against poverty and health problems to get his music known and appreciated. He becomes aware of the kindness of people from poorer backgrounds and endeavours to become much kinder and more understanding, himself. Eventually his very presence starts to radiate out an aura of goodness and spirituality.

However the author ensures that other aspects of his protagonist’s character also affect his life. Following an incident during a demonstration where Christophe kills a policeman seemingly in self-defence, he exiles himself in Switzerland. There, he succumbs to a passionate affair with a married woman. Escaping from this situation, he withdraws to the wilderness of the Swiss Jura where he eventually experiences the presence of God who reminds him that one must never give up the fight, even when vanquished.

Christophe then enters a serene period of his life where his musical creation reaches a new stage of maturity. The novel concludes with Christophe’s death in a scene using the symbolism of Saint Christopher and which is also evocative of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The protagonist has left the realms of ordinary men to join the ranks of the saints and supermen. His glorification makes him a special type of hero far removed from the “everyday” hero type.

The novel, Jean-Christophe was also used as by Rolland as a means to criticise composers whose characters he considered weak and non-heroic. Because it was a work of fiction, his novel gave him much more freedom to express what he really felt through the guise of Christophe.

The author establishes that both Christophe and his friend Olivier in their respective German and French childhoods were exposed to the great music of the
older German masters, Beethoven, Mozart, Gluck and Handel. Theirs was an heroic
music which expressed “sincerity, good faith, true idealism and an openness of spirit
which appealed to all peoples”.

As Christophe begins to write his own music, he discovers that the music of
many German composers expresses false sentiment. It is either a “deluge of insipid
tenderness, emotion, melancholy and poetry” or it is filled with pompous patriotism.
For example, the music of Schumann is too “feminine” whereas Wagner’s is full of
false idealism.

It is the “insincere” music of Richard Strauss which the protagonist criticises
for inciting the new frenetic patriotism on the rise in Germany. Although the narrator
admires the heroic streak in Strauss, he feels that he could put it to better use, to
inspire his audience with a more universally orientated music.

Turning to France and French musicians, the narrator observes that
contemporary French musicians have lost their direction or “internal compass”, after
the impact of the French Revolution and various political upheavals. Many of the
popular French composers are also guilty of “insincerity” in their music, “le
mensonge français”. Gounod, Massenet, Charpentier, Thomé and Bruneau are
targetted for writing “insipid, frivolous” music.

The only composer seen capable of “resuscitating” French music is Cézar
Franck who composes a “pure, well-constructed” music without “ornament”. However, as Franck was Belgian, he was not really in a position to launch a true
French musical school of thought.

Musicians from any country other than France, Gemany and Italy are also
neglected.

Overall, according to Rolland, music produced by contemporary musicians
reflected their insincerity and lacked the heroic elements of the music of the great
masters, Beethoven, Handel or Gluck.

At heart a musician himself, Rolland apparently conceived all his creative
ideas first as a “nebulous musical impression”. He chose to construct Jean-
Christophe like a musical symphony, based on a central theme, the life of Jean-
Christophe, which would develop fully throughout the novel with secondary themes
being announced and elaborated successively in the manner of musical counterpoint.
Thus the structure of the novel is divided, like a symphony, into four movements, each with its own “atmosphere” and “tonal” qualities.

At the start and end of Jean-Christophe, Rolland creates a prelude and postlude with the use of leitmotifs that are also auditive symbols, i.e. the pealing bells and the murmuring river which signal birth and death. These leitmotifs are also used elsewhere in the book. There are likewise included interludes in the text such as The dialogue of the author with his shadow complete with musical quotation indicating hope. A coda is added at the end of the novel where Rolland launches an appeal to others to follow in his protagonist’s heroic footsteps.

In order to give his novel a feeling of musicality, Rolland makes use of other literary techniques. For example, he frequently uses images to compare music to nature or vice versa, an example being: “a rain of arpeggios like the drops shaken from damp branches by a gentle breeze”. Many of the passages in the novel are written in free verse and Rolland makes liberal use of consonants, assonants, anaphora, alliteration, onomatopoeia, euphony, rhythm and rhyme to render his phrases more musical. One particular joyful pastoral scene is reminiscent of a symphonic poem. The author uses short words to establish a lively, happy style and uses a succession of the consonant “s” to suggest the whisper of a gentle breeze.

Also included in the text are several musical quotations complete with written out music. These correspond to different moods prevailing in the “movement” in which they appear. For example, La bel’aronde (The beautiful swallow) set in a major key reflects Christophe’s belief in the future whereas Bleib bei uns (Stay with us), cantata number 6 of Bach highlights the sombre atmosphere preceding Christophe’s imminent death.

Through his protagonist, Rolland was able to “create” the music which he could not produce in real life. The description of Christophe’s process of musical creation echoes Rolland’s own creative process. One of the protagonist’s works based on a biblical scene is described with infinite detail. It is the type of stirring, edifying work Rolland would like to have seen created by a real-life composer. The vivid description evokes images of a haunting flute solo contrasted against tumultuous orchestral colour. However Christophe’s style of musical composition must remain hypothetical. Had his music absorbed considerable French influences after his stay in Paris? All that the reader can really understand is that over the course
of his life, Christophe’s music had matured to become universal in quality, reaching out to all peoples.

***

As an author, Rolland produced an extensive output of work including musicological texts, biographies, political writings, plays and novels, all of which were didactic in nature. His study of composers such as Beethoven and Handel consolidated his belief that he had a mission in life as a hero-prophet to create works which were both enlightening and inspiring for his readers.

The author was not physically robust and, although often subjected to health problems, he pushed himself to physical and mental extremes in his work. This demonstrated a strength of will equal to that of any of his heroes.

Rolland believed that his writing must be sincere at all costs, “to see life as it is and to tell it as it is”. Following in the footsteps of such independant souls as Beethoven, Telemann, Gluck or Berlioz, he refused to let any falseness enter his life, and wrote only what he believed was the truth.

His obsession for work was not motivated by monetary desire as was evidenced by the donation of his 1915 Nobel Prize for Literature to various charities. Neither did he seek fame or fortune: “Success, renown, even art itself is not important, only one thing counts - to be oneself”.

The examples given by the great masters, Beethoven and Handel confirmed for Rolland that “greatness and suffering were linked together”. He, at times, sacrificed friendship and love in the pursuit of his literary mission. He was particularly ostracised by his fellow countrymen during the first world war when he chose to live in Switzerland promulgating peace. The lives of Beethoven, Gluck or Handel had taught him the necessity to continue to strive against all odds.

Although Rolland often lived a solitary life, he never ceased to take an interest in contemporary society and its problems. Cultivating kindness and benevolence, qualities he had admired in Beethoven, he showed a deep love for the human race. He was a “citizen of the world” possessing a “universal spirit” akin to that of Handel’s.

Unable to transmit this spirit through music, Rolland wrote his novel Jean-Christophe with the following aim: “We must try to ensure that racial differences
disappear in art so that it becomes more and more a language common to all people where opposing thoughts can exist together".
Avant-Propos

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