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Classical Music in Depth Psychology: *Listening to the Unconscious in Active Imagination*

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This article aims to explore the role of classical music in depth psychology, with insight from the author's experience as a classical musician and psychotherapist. The author posits that classical music possesses deep archetypal wisdom that supports awareness for client individuation. Through personal reflection and case examples, the author examines archetypal potentials when classical music arises in active imagination. This writing aims to substantiate the importance of sound and music, as well as image, in the field of depth psychology.

KEYWORDS: Jung, depth psychology, classical music, psychotherapy, active imagination, archetype, myth

Disclaimer. This work is informed by the author's experience as a classical musician and licensed psychotherapist. A familiarity with classical music may be helpful, but not necessary, for the reading of the article. This research was inspired by several therapy clients who happened to be classical musicians, and the author found interesting commonalities between musical clients and their experiences in active imagination. All case examples have been obtained with client consent, and names and identifying information have been altered to protect confidentiality. This piece seeks to explore rather than answer the query surrounding the relationship between classical music and the depth psychology.

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“Music expresses, in some way, the movement of the feeling (or emotional values) that cling to the unconscious process... music represents the movement, development, and transformation of the motifs of the collective unconscious”

- Carl Jung, 1973 p. 542

Let us recall a time when we were deeply moved by a piece of music. A time when we felt music grip our hearts or propel us into a feeling. When a song or composition had a profoundly enlivening and moving effect on our soul. Music has the autonomous power to move us and show us what can occur when we make ourselves intimately receptive to an external force. When we engage in deep listening with music, we quiet the judgmental and controlling mind, or what Carl Jung called the Ego consciousness (1972).

The quiet mental state required when engaging in deep listening with music is similar, if not identical, to the mental state necessary during Jung's exercise of active imagination, a technique he resourced to bridge connection between conscious awareness and unconscious material (Chodorow, 1997). In active imagination, one softens into meditative conscious awareness, often silently with eyes closed. One waits, listens to what manifests, and lets the canvas of mental silence be painted upon in images and sounds. Active imagination involves the “amplification and personification of archetypal dream images and unconscious material while, in

a waking state, initiating a dialogue with one's inner characters" (Kroeker, 2014, p. 181). One listens deeply, looks intently, and waits for something to unfold.

Both deep listening of classical music and active imagination utilize radical nonjudgement, viewership, and sensory receptivity to connect with the collective and personal unconscious, as well as potential archetypal and mythic collective wisdom. Historically, Jungian active imagination has focused on images and movement, not sound. Despite the meaningful efforts of many music therapists and musical depth psychologists, a sizable gap in literature exists regarding music as a medium to dialogue with the unconscious. Additionally, classical music's capability to tell stories initiates the question to how symphony may be analogous to mythology. By examining previous literature on active imagination, as well as the intersection of music with archetype and myth, this analysis seeks to explore the deep potentials present when one invites classical music to the world of depth psychology.

Literature Review

To examine the potential relationship between classical music and active imagination, one must first consider the practice of active imagination itself, as well as the work to date incorporating classical music in depth psychotherapy. Active imagination has been practiced under many names throughout history. French scholar Antonie Faivre defined active imagination as an "organ of the soul, thanks to which humanity can establish a cognitive and visionary relationship with an intermediate world" (1994, p.12). Poet Samuel Coleridge differentiated between active imagination and fantasy, elevating active imagination as "the condition for conscious participation in a sacramental universe" (Gregory, 2003, p.59). Coleridge's nod to accessing the "sacramental" via active imagination supports Jung's expansion of this practice. In Jungian terms, active imagination is utilized to allow the Ego to witness the collective unconscious and notice archetypal themes that resonate within the individual.

Jung developed his technique of active imagination between 1913 and 1916 (Hoerni, Fischer, & Kaufmann, 2019). At one point, Jung called the exercise "the transcendent function" and at other times "the picture method" "active fantasy" or "visioning" (Depth Psychology Alliance, 2020). By any name, the purpose of Jung's method is to establish and maintain a dialogue with the unconscious in a meditative state, later analyze its messages in conscious awareness, then integrate this new awareness to move towards psychological wellness, wholeness and individuation (Jung, 1968).

According to prominent Jungian analyst, Anthony Stevens, Jung maintained that the key to active imagination was to restrain from conscious influence or filling in the blanks (1994). It is a practice of engaged witnessing and visualization until it, an object, moves of its own accord. Jungian analyst and co-host of the podcast *This Jungian Life*, Deborah Stewart, defines active imagination as, "A conscious intention to engage the unconscious in waking life by focusing on something then letting that something have a life of its own" (Stewart et al., 2018). She continues, "so you're calling up the autonomous capability of the unconscious, which the Ego can then observe".

Regarding the relationship between classical music and active imagination, Jung placed primary focus on image recollection during this exercise, and little emphasis on music or sound. Though music was not his preferred medium of dialogue with the unconscious, Jung did have a transformative meeting with renowned music therapist, Margaret Tilly. After their meeting, Jung recalled the following:

This opens up whole new avenues of research I'd never even dreamed of. Because of what you've shown me this afternoon – not just what you've said, but what I have actually felt and experienced – I feel that from now on music should be an essential part of every analysis. This reaches the deep archetypal material that we can only sometimes reach in our analytical work with patients. This is most remarkable.” (Tilly, 1947, p. 480)

There appears to be an untapped wealth of information regarding music and the collective unconscious in the field of depth psychology. Musician and Jungian analyst Patricia Skar emphasized the “unconscious archetypal possibilities inherent in music” (2002, p.630) and emerging therapies such as AMP (Archetypal Music Psychology) (Kroeker, 2014), GIM (Guided Imagery and Music) (Bonny, 1995) and AMT (Analytic Music Therapy) (Priestley, 1994) substantiate the importance of music in depth psychology and art therapies.

As we venture into exploration of the relationship between classical music and depth psychology, let us recall the first-mentioned experience of being moved by music. One acknowledges the autonomous powers inherent in music, like that of the unconscious, which the Ego can then observe. Both listening to music and witnessing the unconscious in active imagination have curious similarities. So, one wonders, what is the role of listening, music and sound within the practice of active imagination?

Sound travels faster than light

As a classical musician, I heard unconscious motifs before I saw them. Before I was trained in any formal practice of meditation or active imagination, I would hear melodies from symphonic works, musical lines I had never heard before, sonorous tones and cacophonous clatter. As someone who is more auditorily inclined than visually, the sounds would arrive first in the silence of meditation, then images and feelings would follow. I knew I was relating to something larger than myself. It was my vocational transition from classical music performance to depth psychology that elevated this soulful silence from the space of artistic inspiration to the terrain for the collective unconscious and sacred guides.

I recall one particularly stirring experience with classical music in active imagination. I was sitting in silent waiting, meditating and quieting my mind to begin deeply listening to my soul. I stayed in this silent, empty mental state for several minutes. Then, I began to hear the violin solo from Sibelius's *Violin Concerto in D minor*, as if the music were being played behind my right ear. I kept my eyes closed and listened. Then, on my left, I saw the amorphous outline of woman singing “*The Flower Duet*” from Léo Delibes' opera, *Lakmé*. A few moments later, to my right, I began to hear an oboe and flute carrying the melodic theme of Stravinsky's *Firebird Suite*. As I listened, I began to see six women coming together in a ring, each singing or playing their favorite music. As their images became clearer, it was revealed that they were the six cardinal Greek goddesses, Hera, Athena, Aphrodite, Persephone, Artemis, and Demeter. I listened for a few moments more, until they all stopped playing. Then I realized, this was the sacred feminine asking to be attended to. These women were coming into my world, calling me to action, to learn more about them and let them serve as spiritual guides in my life.

After this powerful experience in active imagination, I did my best to recall the music each goddess was playing. I realized that each choice of composition was intimately connected to the virtues and qualities pertaining to that goddess. For example, upon further research of Sibelius's

Violin Concerto, I read that the solo was a sort of homage to his “ghostly self” (Steinberg, 2017). When Sibelius realized that his fervent ambition for becoming a violin virtuoso would inevitably kill him, he gave up playing, but wrote this piece to honor the death of and love for his violin playing. This was the piece Persephone chose. Each goddess selected music that reflected her realm. Be it Persephone’s underworld, Artemis’s hunting, Demeter’s mourning, Hera’s rule, Athena’s war, or Aphrodite’s love. I was in awe. It was from this experience in active imagination that inspired me to continue study of the goddess archetype in doctoral scholarship.

I shared this experience, of hearing the unconscious world before seeing it, with a mentor. He responded, “well sound travels faster than light and image, why should messages from the unconscious be any different?” Emboldened by his cheeky response, I became curious if the unconscious was calling to others via music in depth psychotherapy, particularly in active imagination. In other words, was the world of classical music being *employed* by the collective unconscious, to offer more than artistic inspiration, but personal guidance to individuals in their therapeutic work? It appeared so.

Case Example: “A”

Let us first consider the case of “A”. “A” was a professional trumpet player and taught lessons virtually between symphony jobs. “A” sought psychotherapy with me to work on creative motivation, indecision, and his goal to be more assertive in his life. In the eighth session of his therapy, he was expressing frustration regarding an inability to decide how to perform a particular trumpet excerpt for a symphony audition. Following this session, “A” reported this “waking dream” he experienced:

I was awake, sort of half-awake, half-asleep. Then I had this waking dream, where I was asleep in bed and someone was breaking into my apartment. It was dark. I recall trying to reach for a weapon. Then I could sense that someone was crawling through my window and airhorns started going off. I still could not see anything, it was horrifying. The sound around me was louder than a fire alarm and brought on visceral panic and fear. Then the alarm morphed into the trumpet solo from Strauss’s *Ein Heldenleben*. It was sort of combined with the sound of the alarm. I just remember being terrified, then I opened my eyes.

As “A” and I explored his experience, I inquired, “What does that trumpet solo mean to you?” “A” shared that he never got to perform it during his time in a symphony orchestra. He was alternate first chair for the performance of Strauss’s *Ein Heldenleben*. When the principal trumpet became ill the night of the concert, he was to sit in for the principal and perform the solo. However, the second chair trumpet player convinced “A” to let *him* play the solo instead of “A”. At this moment of the retelling, “A” became noticeably upset and exclaimed, “Why did I let him just take it from me? I just gave it up!” I had never seen this upset in “A” before and encouraged him to stay with this feeling. At the end of the session, he realized that his belief system and approach to life were supporting excessive passivity, and that he needed to be more assertive. I assessed that “A” wished to be more in touch with the animus of his soul and briefly shared that the trumpet lines within *Ein Heldenleben*, or “A hero’s life”, frequently carry the heroic main theme of this piece. I asked if “A” sensed that the hero archetype, or a strong assertive part of him, was trying to get his attention? “A” smiled, “I think so.”

Reflection of “A”: Instrument as Archetype, Symphony as Myth

Upon reflection of this case, it is of note that “A” does not fit the typical personality of a trumpet player. Most trumpet players are men, confident (occasionally to the point of arrogance) and sure-footed. The trumpeter, as well as the trumpet’s character in a symphonic story, is often an animus-driven man, the protagonist, the hero. “A’s” generally passive and non-confrontational personality made me curious about the trumpet’s archetypal role in his life, as well as the meaning of solo that showed up in his waking dream. There appeared to be a complimentary effect when in healthy relationship to his trumpet playing. With the trumpet, “A” found confidence, empowerment and courage that was not as accessible to him in his life outside of the symphony hall. This compensatory effect of playing an animus instrument offered “A” a sense of wholeness when integrated with his general anima nature.

To assess this material from an alternative, somatic angle, I later asked “A” about the breath and lungs role in this client’s experience, as the trumpet is a wind instrument. Perhaps there is a chakra or space in the body that the unconscious is trying to somatically guide him towards. What might the client believe about the role of breath, support, or the element of air in the context of his issues? Additionally, to investigate any relational, social information underneath the music I will often inquire: Is the musical line a solo or perhaps a duet? For what purpose would the unconscious select a solo, duet, quartet, or full orchestra? At this juncture, I listen to the individual, relationship, family, and systemic underpinnings of the client’s material. These are but a few avenues to explore when a client hears classical music in active imagination, every analysis and interpretation is intimately subjective to the client’s experience and their psychotherapeutic work.

Like working with myths and story in depth psychotherapy, a familiarity with the terrain of symphonic works may be helpful to deepen analysis. “A’s” hearing of the opening trumpet solo, rather than a subsequent solo line later in Strauss’s *Ein Heldenleben* (A Hero’s Journey) is particularly noteworthy. A different sensation may arise for the client if the hero charging out to battle versus returning home, alone or with comrades, etc. As we continued to work with the themes that arose from his experience during active imagination, I introduced “A” to Joseph Campbell’s work, referencing the steps of *The Hero’s Journey* (1990). “A” felt particularly moved by the “Call to Adventure” or the beginning of his own hero’s journey. “A” shared that he was being called to live with more confidence and courage, virtues that every hero must exercise along their journey. Classical music epics move like epic myths and can be explored with similar tools. Symphonic works illustrate collective stories for the auditory soul, and can be utilized to support, validate, and guide individuals on their own journey.

Case Example: “B”

Let us now examine the case of “B”. “B” was a baroque classical musician, an oboe player who reached out to me for psychotherapy services to work on self-esteem, challenging negative self-talk, and coping with a strained relationship with parents. After incorporating guided meditation and active imagination in sessions for roughly 6 months, “B” had a particularly moving experience one session. She recalled the following active imagination:

I was walking through a meadow, I seemed to be wandering a bit. It was peaceful and quiet. I looked up and saw a tree, I stopped walking and focused on this tree. I saw the wind

moving its branches. As I looked, I began to hear the oboe solo from my eighth-grade recital, I just listened. Then I felt flushed, nervous, and worried. The solo grew louder. I looked at this tree and it was angry, I became afraid. I saw myself playing at my recital, but I was still looking at this tree. It started to swing its branches at me, but it couldn't quite reach me. I knew I had to keep playing and finish this solo, then it stopped.

As we explored this experience together, "B" noted that her parents were disappointed with her choice of solo, as well as her performance. However, *she* was pleased with herself. She did her best and actually enjoyed the piece. She recalled the intensity of her parent's criticism during this period in her life, imaged by the fear-inducing "swings" of the tree. "B" realized her introjection of her parent's criticism and verbalized a personal conviction to stay true to her playing, her choices, and her voice. She recalled this experience, the solo in particular, in subsequent sessions. "B" maintains that the solo was "trying to remind her" to have strength in her own convictions.

In the personal and clinical reflections in this section, classical music was employed by the collective unconscious to reveal something to the individual. This occurred primarily in a state of dream-like active imagination or silent meditation. Classical musicians, in particular, were having a deeply archetypal and auditory experience in their psychotherapeutic work that merits inquiry. Musicians, and all creative personality types, have practiced engagement in the art of being a vessel for something larger than ourselves. There is an embodied quality about the practice of active imagination that is simultaneously personal yet radically impersonal. It is in this state of consciousness that we become receptive to music and messages from the unconscious. We trust that this space has something wise and meaningful to reveal.

Witnessing

Many of the musicians I have supported in my clinical therapeutic work have relative ease moving into the exercise of active imagination. In my personal active imagination practice, I noted that it felt like slipping into deep listening. Like falling in love, one simply falls, rides the wave, and trusts that *it* has something to show you. Musicians can move into the precise state of creative witnessing that is conducive to active imagination. I found this intriguing, as this exercise can be challenging for some. Musical clients remained focused, curious, and in dialogue with the manifestations that arose. This is a state of relaxation and engagement, not so relaxed as one is tempted into sleep, not so engaged that one's Ego attempts to control or shape the experience.

It is as though our conscious, relaxed gaze serves as a bridge, looking across at what the unconscious is presenting. We are seated in the audience, waiting for the symphony to begin. As we gaze, we create as well. Our witnessing eyes and listening ears serve as the necessary medium with which the unconscious needs to be made known, so it may *create itself*, so it may manifest. In this state of witnessing, we provide the canvas and paint necessary to allow the unconscious to create a work of art. In active imagination, we provide the silence necessary before a symphony, as if we are handing the conductor's baton over to the unconscious, and saying, "*Now, you go. I'll listen.*"

Detours

Artists and appreciators of music have practiced attunement to this level of engaged witnessing. In symphonies that take roughly one hour to unfold, there are passages and movements

that deter from the path at hand. We must exercise patience and faith, even when the journey detours or the branches begin to swing, we must remain in dialogue and trust that all will come together at the end.

In listening to a symphony, it is common for the music to briefly sojourn in an unexpected direction. If the Ego is over-present in listening, the Ego winces: “*This is not what I thought was going to happen...this is not supposed to happen.*” Cadenzas in classical music are an example of this type of detour. Cadenzas are brief passages in symphonic works that offer an unaccompanied solo moment for a performer, often prior to the climax or finale of a piece. Cadenzas require the performer to play with their own musical interpretation of the passage, with personal emotion and expression, their own stretching and compressing of time, separate from that of the full orchestra. It can be a bit abrupt and disconcerting for the listener, a shift from the previous full orchestra experience. We do not know what to expect, we do not know what the soloist will do.

With cadenzas, the conductor and symphony abruptly halt, rest their baton and their instruments. They look at the soloist, sit back, and enjoy. *This* is precisely the level of attunement and receptivity we must have when witnessing the unconscious. *This* is the attitude we must have when cadenzas occur, when the unconscious shifts to an unexpected passage, when sound or images morph and change during active imagination. For “B” when she noticed the tree begin to move and swing of its own accord, she maintained engagement in the dialogue. We must notice this shift and continue attending to the object at hand. Joan Chodorow, a Jungian analyst and dance/movement therapist noted the unpredictable quality of dialoguing with the unconscious, calling it an “uncertain path” (1997, p.3). We do not know what we will find here. In active imagination, as a story is unfolding, we must sustain radical nonjudgement for the movement of the unconscious from beginning to middle to end. *Expecting* cadenzas, detours and side-trips, *expecting* the unexpected. The virtue of patience is vital in active imagination and listening to symphonies, one must let go of time, as the unconscious moves at a tempo that is not up to us.

Tempo

While performing in classical symphonies, I recall the experience of letting an “other” hold time. As we must let go of “Ego time” in active imagination and accept the tempo of the unconscious, we too let go of “Ego time” when playing in a symphony. In classical music, the responsibility of managing tempo is the conductor’s sacred task. Musicians even call this duty “keeping time”. I remember playing Arturo Márquez’s *Danzón No.2* during my days in youth orchestra, a short symphonic piece with Latin color and ever-changing tempo. The fluctuating tempo is the crux and challenge of this piece, with accelerandos and ritardandos at every turn, one can never ground in a steady tempo. It is precisely this fluid and evolving quality of time that makes the piece so beautiful and unruly, erratic and formidable.

In early rehearsals of *Danzon*, the violins were anxiously ahead of tempo, what musicians call “rushing”, and the brass were behind the beat, or “dragging”. Each section battled for control of the tempo. Our conductor pleaded with us to relax and trust him. He implored us to let go and follow his lead in unity. As we were young musicians learning a new piece, letting go was challenging. However, by opening night of the performance, we knew how to relinquish control and trust the conductor to hold the duty of time. We knew how to relax yet remain focused. Engaged with the task at hand of playing our instruments and reading the music, but it felt as though something larger were sweeping through all of us. We were merely vessels. We knew how

to let an “other”, the conductor, hold and illustrate the tempo, so that the music was truly allowed to manifest and flow through us all.

I think about this experience fondly and notice how similar it is to the experience of active imagination. Analogously, the music was the unconscious material, the conductor was gatekeeper to the unconscious world. We had to let go of our Ego’s desire for control and perfection, so that the conductor may bring the music out of us and let the piece come to life. Musicians know how to be both a vessel *and* the creative medium for larger forces. This is creativity. Active imagination is an act of creativity for the unconscious.

Conclusion

Jungian active imagination is a powerful exercise to bridge conscious awareness with unconscious material. For those who *hear* the unconscious in active imagination before they see it, further research and qualitative inquiry must be encouraged to supplement this body of work. Classical music, in particular, has deep, archetypal wells of wisdom awaiting further study, and Jungian active imagination appears to be a well-trodden path for musicians to access this wisdom. Classical and lyric-less music can circumvent the Ego and speak directly to the soul. We become receptive to the spirit of music, and by extension, the archetypal and collective wells of inspiration that musical creators draw from. The collective, archetypal well that inspired composers hundreds of years ago during the golden age of classical music is the same well that we enter when being moved by classical music today. Like myth, classical music is timeless. In the same way that present day Western culture has moved away from storytelling and oral tradition to make sense of the world, we have also moved away from classical music. However, both are hallmark modalities of timeless storytelling and personal guidance. Classical music provides nuance, narrative arc, feeling, images, archetypal characters and story that support our understanding of the psyche, personal and collective unconscious. One must learn, as musicians do, how to be a creative vessel for the forces that moves us. By honoring and welcoming *all* sensory modalities that serve as correspondence between conscious awareness and unconscious material, we may continue to deepen our collective awareness of the sensational, soulful capacities within the human experience.

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