

1. Aesthetic Essay: Unfinished Business:

An investigation into the ethics of finishing unfinished works.

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Throughout history, there have always been unfinished works of art – works left incomplete by their creators due to illness, loss of interest, writer’s block, death, or works that have never been found in their entirety, works partly destroyed, partly found, lost works or just sketches of them. Many attempts have been done to complete these works and expose them to the public as they would be, had they been found complete by their creator.

Looking at unfinished works in arts other than music, one can find various interesting cases or approaches to finishing unfinished works. In literature, for example, a very famous case is that of writer Franz Kafka. When Kafka died, in his will he stated that he wants all of his works to be incinerated and not published. However, his close friend Max Brod refrained from following Kafka’s last wish and, after fleeing Prague in 1939, he edited some of Kafka's writings and later published them. Since then, Kafka has been acclaimed as one of the major 20th century fiction writers but Max Brod’s actions raise issues of ethics, in terms of whether he chose to “do the right thing”. It can be said that since Kafka had willed all his works to be destroyed upon his death, and since he is the only true owner of his writings (regardless of copyright issues or literary executors), the works should have been destroyed. But had the works of Kafka been destroyed without being published, it would have been a terrible loss in the body of literature of the 20th century. So the question is whether Brod's decision to not burn Kafka's works and publish them against his will is more morally justified due to the impact and international acclaim of Kafka's works.¹

¹ Bronner, Ethan. “Under ‘Kafkaesque’ Pressure, Heir to Kafka Papers May Yield Them”. The New York Times. August 17, 2008 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/18/world/18kafka.html?scp=6&sq=kafka&st=cse>>

In the history of painting, there have been a lot of sketches which were never realised into a painting². Slowly they have started gaining artistic value in themselves, to the extent where sketches or even paintings which were started but never finished are found in the walls of famous museums and galleries, such as the Uffizi gallery and the Louvre. A famous example is Leonardo Da Vinci's *Adoration of the Magi* which was left unfinished when Da Vinci left Florence and went to Milan. The work was never finished, but instead the church that ordered Da Vinci's painting ordered a similar painting from Filippino Lippi, but Da Vinci's incomplete painting remains in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence since 1670³.

The approach to finishing a painting or sculpture, however, is a lot different to finishing a musical piece or a literary work. The reason for that is because in the case of paintings and sculptures the “artistic value” of the piece of Art is found in the creation itself – the painting or sculpture itself is the piece of Art. On the other hand, it is not the manuscripts of Kafka's works or Schubert's 10th symphony that are considered Art, but rather what these manuscripts mean.⁴

Another reason the approach to finishing a piece of music is different to finishing a piece of another art is because in most other arts, the works can be experienced by the wider public in their unfinished forms without the need to be complete. On the other hand, in music this is impossible as the music is the performance of the score and not the score itself, given also that the majority of people are incapable of interpreting (western) musical notation in their heads

² Note: *Da Vinci and Michelangelo, for example, are famous for leaving their works unfinished.*

³ Da Vinci, Leonardo. “Adoration of the Magi”. Uffizi Official Website entry. Retrieved 19th of April, 2009. <<http://www.virtualuffizi.com/uffizi1/cercals1.asp?Contatore=124>>

⁴ Of course, there are exceptions where the score is considered a piece of art in itself (such as with scores of George Crumb, John Cage, Earle Brown etc) and they have also been shown in exhibitions alongside actual paintings, but these are not in the scope of this essay so they shall not be dealt with here.

Focusing on music, a lot of unfinished compositions have been finished by other composers. Famous examples include Mozart's Requiem (completed by his student Süssmayr), Mahler's 10th Symphony (completed by Deryck Cooke), Beethoven's 10th Symphony (reconstructed from the sketches and finished by Brian Newbould), Puccini's opera *Turandot* (finished by Franco Alfano, and also Berio wrote an ending for the piece later), and Berg's opera *Lulu* (last movement was written by Friedrich Cerha).

Although many people would claim the state of music today would be unimaginable without some of the works mentioned above, two of the most interesting approaches to finishing unfinished compositions are Berio's *Rendering* of Schubert's 10th Symphony, and Anthony Payne's reconstruction and finishing of Elgar's 3rd Symphony. The reason why these two completions are very interesting is because they were both written by composers of the second half of the 20th century but the works completed are different in style and era and the approaches of the composers to this task are diametrically different.

Payne's completion of Elgar's symphony is an attempt in finishing the symphony in Elgar's style, using the sketches as starting points for the orchestration, structure and development of the piece while filling in the gaps with his own material in the style of Elgar, sometimes borrowing material from previous of Elgar's pieces just as Elgar used to do⁵. When Payne was commissioned by the BBC to finish Elgar's 3rd Symphony, he was given access by the Elgar family to all

⁵ "Elgar: His Music". *A Musical Tour of the Symphony*. Retrieved on 19th of April, 2009. <<http://www.elgar.org/3symph3m.htm>>

of Elgar's sketches. Payne himself had started work in the completion of the symphony prior to the commission to his personal satisfaction.⁶

Berio's approach, on the other hand, is very different to Payne's. Berio used the orchestration Schubert used for his "Unfinished Symphony" (No.8), and orchestrated Schubert's piano parts in the way Schubert indicated (wherever possible), and in the gaps between the sketches he has filled in his own music, borrowing material from the sketches and other of Schubert's works Schubert was writing at the same time as the last Symphony. Berio writes this very still, immobile music which is very distinctly Berio (although with some of Schubert's elements), until the next sketch is encountered, where the music goes back to Schubertean music. Berio believed that it was impossible to become Schubert, especially in his latest years when he was constantly trying to do new things. For that reason, he found it impossible to finish the Symphony in the style of Schubert⁷ (as opposed to Payne, who states that he felt like Elgar when finishing his symphony⁸).

So the question remains, which one of the two is a more ethical approach to finishing an unfinished work? And is it ethical to finish unfinished works in the first place? On that matter, Adorno

inclines to the view that precisely someone who senses the extraordinary scope of the conception of the Tenth [Symphony of Mahler] ought to do without adaptations and performances. The case is similar with sketches of unfinished pictures by masters: anyone who understands them and can visualize how they might have been completed would prefer to file them away and contemplate them privately, rather than hang them on the wall.⁹

⁶ Payne, Anthony (composer). *Short interview by the author, via e-mail*. 14th of April, 2009 (Appendix 1)

⁷ "Schubert-Berio: Rendering, for orchestra" All Music Guide (<<http://www.allmusic.com>>)
<<http://www.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&sql=42:233040~T1>>

⁸ Payne, Anthony. *Ibid.*

⁹ Adorno, Theodor W. (tr. Edmund Jephcott) "Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy" (October 1963). Published by University of Chicago Press, 1996, p. x (from the preface)

Although Adorno's attitude to music has long been known to be very absolute (and to various degrees arrogant), this attitude towards completing unfinished works is quite striking. He implies that finishing works is in a way dangerous and misleading, and the audience should in fact be expected to experience and understand these works without a completion or a performance. But talking about ethics, the ethics of finishing an unfinished work of music can be compared to the ethics of finishing a literary work, such as the case of Kafka. For example, if Berg's opera *Lulu* hadn't been completed by Cerha (and assuming it hadn't been completed by anyone else) the score would probably have not attained the status it has today. What's more, *Lulu* has become one of the most important pieces of the first half of the 20th century, arguably Berg's masterpiece (albeit unfinished). The loss of such a work in the course of the development of music throughout the rest of the 20th century would be unimaginable to those who have studied avant-garde music and the development of music after the Second World War¹⁰. The same can be said for Kafka's writings, which proved to achieve iconic status in the history of 20th century fiction writing, and many writers could never imagine a world without his writings.

To sum up, the act of finishing an unfinished composition is serious business. It has tremendous musical, artistic and ethical considerations and is a very personal task to anyone who attempts it. People who have attempted to finish unfinished compositions had either a fascination with the composer and/or composition (e.g. Payne) or a fascination with music history (e.g. Berio). The

¹⁰ Note: *Payne, on that matter, says: " I composed [the third symphony] for myself, and also as a duty I felt I should undertake on behalf of future generations"* (Payne, Anthony. *Ibid.*)

impact the completion or the absence of the unfinished work in the artistic world and how this affects one's approach to finishing an unfinished work is not an easy topic to think about. And as Payne says, there is neither a right nor wrong way to do things¹¹. Regardless, there have been occasions where works of art were left unfinished on purpose, such as Donatello's "*non finito*" technique (creating sculptures which were partly sculpted so that the figure would emerge out of the material). But more related to the topic, postmodernist composers such as Boudewijn Buckinx have tackled the task, who in 1992 completed 9 "unfinished symphonies".¹²

Bibliography:

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¹¹ Payne, Anthony. *Ibid.*

¹² Buckinx, Boudewijn. Official Website. <<http://www.telefonica.net/web2/boudewijnbuckinx/wrk-list.htm#unfini>>

Payne, Anthony (composer). *Short interview by the author, via e-mail*. 14th of April, 2009 (Appendix 1)

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1.1 Appendix 1: *Short interview with Anthony Payne – via e-mail (by the author)*

Laonikos Psimikakis-Chalkokondylis: *What ethical considerations occurred to you when you first started writing your own notes on along with Elgar's sketches? Was it difficult for you to start writing the music, and did you ever consider you were doing something which is unethical (that is, trying to "become" a composer in order to finish their work - how feasible is it? How ethical is it?)*

Anthony Payne: There are no ethics involved to start with, as, for many years, I was composing in the privacy of my room, for my own personal satisfaction (as if it was a private hobby) and with no thought of there ever being a performance. Later, after it had been commissioned, with a recording and performances in view, I had 2 thoughts: 1) Elgar himself, having originally said on his death-bed : "don't *let anyone tinker with the sketches*," had, a day or so later, said “*Some day someone will finish it*". 2) There is also the idea that great artists belong to the world, and their work should be made available .

L.P.C.: *How would you feel if someone else took some sketches of a piece of yours (finished or not) and they finished it? Would you feel this piece is more yours or more theirs (if they approached composing that piece in the same way you approached finishing Elgar's symphony)? Do you feel different looking at your finishing of Elgar's symphony?*

A.P.: I would be astonished and rather proud if I thought that anybody had been interested enough in my music to complete an unfinished work after my death. I wouldn't be so pleased if they tinkered with anything I had completed to my satisfaction. I would say that it was a fifty/fifty situation, as I do with Elgar 3. (I composed about half of it using his themes, and orchestrated nearly all of it). There was little indication of the structures in the sketches.

L.P.C.: *What are your feelings towards Luciano Berio's "Rendering" of Schubert's 10th Symphony? Do you think one or the other (your finishing of Elgar's symphony or Berio's "Rendering") is more "right" or "wrong"? Why did you choose your approach to finishing Elgar's symphony? Was it more personal interest than it was communal? (i.e. did you feel it was more important for you as Anthony Payne to finish the symphony, or than it was an important task that had to be done to expose Elgar's 3rd symphony to the public, and you were the one who had undertaken it?)*

A.P.: I composed it for myself, and also as a duty I felt I should undertake on behalf of future generations. I am not familiar with the Berio completions but I understand that , with the Brahms Clarinet Sonata he orchestrated, that he framed the work with music in his own style (a post-modernist approach!). Neither this approach to past music, nor my attempt to make it sound just like Elgar is either right or wrong - they are simply 2 different approaches. As for the Schubert, I have to say , perhaps rather immodestly, that I found I could get inside Elgar's head, and I did feel that I was 'him' composing in his own language - like an actor playing a part.

L.P.C.: *The last question is: how is it to have returned back to composing your own music after finishing Elgar's symphony? Has it affected the way you interact with other musics and the way they interact with your compositions? Do you feel sometimes that you have to "become" Payne in order to finish a work, if you are stuck or have trouble finishing it? When you're dealing with your own music, has this experience made you feel more Payne or less Payne?*

A.P.: All these ideas occurred to me at the time that I started my next piece of original music (Piano Trio), but there was no difficulty and now, on reflection, I've not changed my views on any of the topics you raised. I am still me, and I still feel the same about all other music.

Tuesday 14th of April, 2009

----END OF INTERVIEW----