Martin Lawes – Oil Paintings

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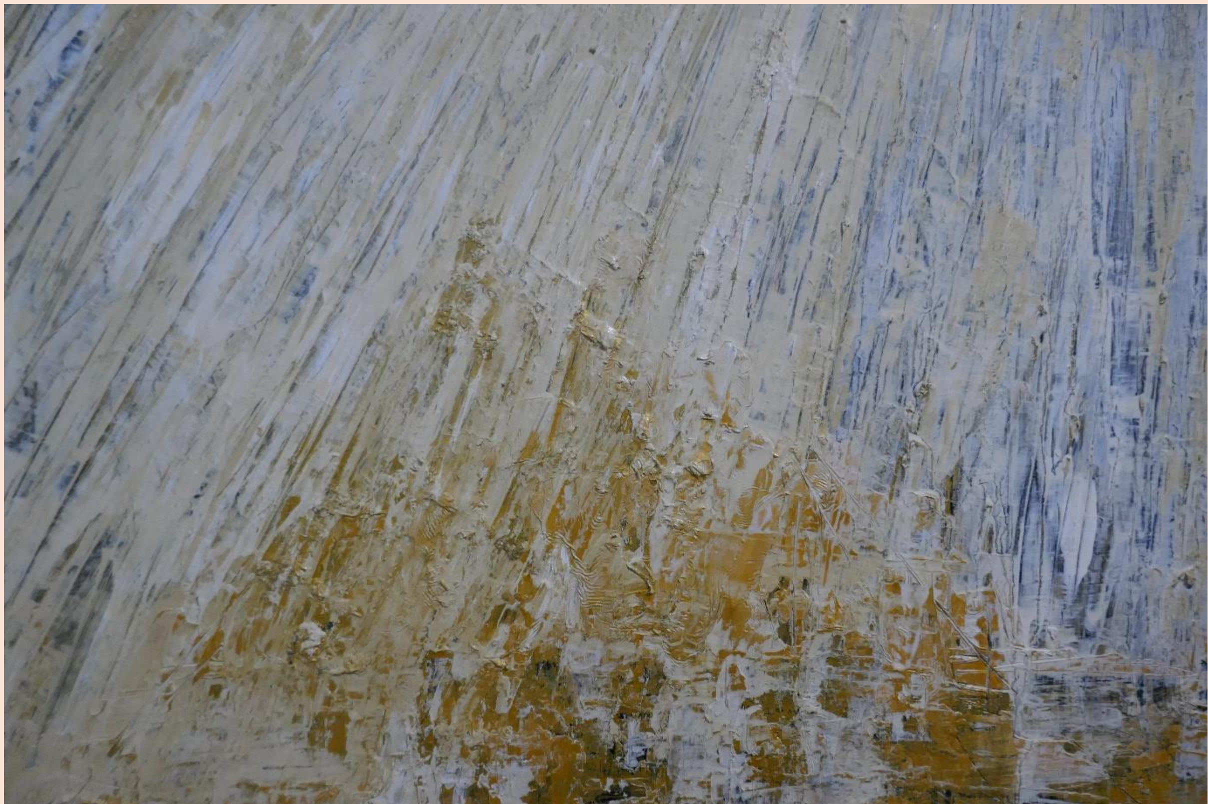
Creating art through 'becoming music'

Painting title: Themon

Music used: Bruckner - Symphony No 9 (1st movement, ending)

https://drive.google.com/file/d/132xGPkt22oY_c93cXZGpkrTI7GVKyZkd/view?usp=drive_link



This was painted listening repeatedly to the end of the first movement from Bruckner's *Ninth Symphony,* in a remarkable and intense wartime recording by the Berliner Philharmoniker conducted by Wilhelm Furtwängler in 1944 in Berlin.

This historical performance is very poorly recorded by modern standards, the musicians not as accomplished technically as their current day counterparts. Nevertheless, the performance is very compelling, reflective of the historical context, where amid the horrors of war comes what might be identified as an expression of existential trauma that is at once personal and collective, this performed by German musicians towards the end of the war in their decimated capital city. With a striking synchronicity, on the exact same day the recording was made, October 7, 1944, Jewish prisoners at Auschwitz staged a major revolt, as apparently had never happened before and would never again, killing SS guards, damaging the gas chambers, but ultimately losing hundreds of lives in a failed escape attempt.

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Berlin. October 7, 1944. A typical day toward the end of the Third Reich. Soldiers die. Civilians suffer. Jews are murdered. Nothing special.

In the Beethovensaal a concert is about to begin, Wilhelm Furtwängler conducting but the theatre is empty, relieved of its usual audience studded with Nazi elite seeking a brief cultured respite from the stresses of war. The Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra is on stage, awaiting its cue. Conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler stands awkwardly on the podium. The vague meandering of his baton summons the first shadowy note of Bruckner's Ninth Symphony. A Radio Berlin engineer starts his Magnetophon. The most extraordinary orchestral recording of the century has just begun.

Genuinely transcendent musical events are rare. Their advent is hard to foresee. They often arise in improbable places and at chance times. And so it was on a grim fall afternoon in wartime Berlin that a lone Nazi technician bore witness to one of the most impassioned performances ever put on record.

Like all truly great artistic achievements, the intensity and conviction of Furtwängler's wartime work was distilled from hard-earned experience. In our era of pampered socialite classical superstars, it seems hard to conceive of a famous conductor genuinely torn by anguish. And yet, Furtwängler endured such extreme torment and pain that he was able to fully identify with the profound suffering from which the greatest composers wrested their most heartfelt and enduring masterpieces. Under pressure designed to crush any sensitive artist, he transmuted his distress into a vision of unprecedented insight and power.

The saga of how Furtwängler's incomparable artistry arose within the appalling abyss of Nazi Germany forces us to confront the terrible collision of art, society and morality ...

The composition of the Symphony # 9 consumed the last agonized decade of Bruckner's life. He was a peasant who craved acceptance but was crushed by the snubs of society and the critical establishment. His music was strikingly original, but the cultural gatekeepers of the time insisted on editing and reorchestrating it to conform to their own artistic norms. He was obsessed with morbidity, and was increasingly terrified by his own imminent end. He was deeply religious and dedicated his final work to God, but could not comprehend how God could refuse him the strength and inspiration to finish it.

The symphony is incomplete in far more than the immediate sense of lacking a final movement; Bruckner clearly struggled for something new and far-reaching but ultimately died unable to realize it. The first movement, in particular, seems fragmentary and rough. Every other conductor tries to smooth the score into a cohesive whole. Furtwängler's approach, though, is far, far different.

Furtwängler once said that "an interpreter can render only what he has first lived through." Of all the conductors who have grappled with the complex challenges of the Bruckner Ninth, Furtwängler was best positioned to understand what Bruckner had achieved. Bruno Walter had hinted at this when he observed that he never understood Bruckner until he became mortally ill. The Ninth is not a failed attempt at a cohesive artistic statement. Rather, it is a complete and perfect musical depiction of a tortured mind: a desperate snatch at a vision that grew ever more elusive, a vain quest for understanding and fulfillment in a world that would not provide it, a fevered groping for fragments of life in the lengthening shadow of death. As he wrestled with his Ninth Symphony, Bruckner stood at the very edge of that abyss. By late 1944, Furtwängler stood there too.

The first climax of the first movement heralds his emotion. The Berlin Philharmonic is fully controlled and its ensemble perfectly together, and yet the tempo is so unstable and dynamically alive that no note falls quite where its predecessors would suggest, as if to reflect the entire orchestra's heaving, nervous desperation.

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Furtwängler often spent entire rehearsals polishing crucial transitions, but not here; he chops the first movement into dozens of inconclusive fragments, deliberately wrenching the mood from lilting lyricism to raw savagery, the tempos from standstill to runaway, and dynamics from inaudible to heavily overloaded. The movement ends in screaming trumpets, a primordial burst of sheer abject terror as both Bruckner and Furtwängler confronted the most horrifying fear of all: that at the very end of their struggles there would be only a void.

Although nothing could eclipse the unparalleled power of the opening, the wonders of this radical reworking of the Bruckner Ninth do not end with the shattering climax of the first movement. Furtwängler whips the scherzo and trio from a slightly menacing waltz and bucolic pastorale into a furiously driven, vertiginous ride to damnation. He then gradually builds the unintended adagio finale to a terrifying dissonance, after which the exhausted fragments wither into eternal silence.

None of this is explicit in the score. It took Furtwängler to recognize and recreate an absolutely perfect depiction of a single mind and, by extension, an entire world on the brink of collapse. (Gutmann, 1996/9).

General background information about my approach to painting

As a creative arts psychotherapist and practitioner of Music and Imagery (MI), a psychotherapeutic approach which involves supporting clients to create art-work whilst listening to music to explore their inner experience, I have developed my own practice as an oil painter using a similar technique which integrates art-making with music listening.

My paintings involve my being intuitively drawn to music which I then listen to repeatedly whilst I paint. For this I use short extracts of music that is especially meaningful to me, each extract lasting around a minute and a half. I typically repeat such an extract for several hours at a time as I work on a painting, the process often repeated on many different occasions over a period of weeks and sometimes months until the painting is finished. Repeating the music never feels like repeating the same experience. Rather it is a way of ever deepening into the present moment experience of the music until I feel that I have 'become the music' in a way that transforms my state of consciousness. It is only out of this that the painting emerges authentically in the way I work. 'Becoming the music' involves feeling immersed in it as though I am living within the music, continually aware of its transformative presence.

Titles and meanings

The titles of my paintings are intended to be both evocative and ambiguous, so as not to convey a precise meaning but be open to many possibilities of interpretation. I don't consider the paintings to represent the music but to arise from my having 'become it' in a way that is personal to me as I explore universal human themes. There is often a connection with the music's meaning for the composer, or a connection with the text set, though this may not be immediately obvious. It is in any case for the viewer to create their own possibly very different meaning.

I will end with a favourite quotation about meaning in art which gets to what is most essential I believe. This comes from Ken Wilber's 2001 publication *The Eye of Spirit: An Integral Vision for a World Gone Slightly Mad*:

Let me return to what art is finally all about. When I directly view, say, a great Van Gogh, I am reminded of what all superior art has in common: the capacity to simply take your breath away . . . you are changed somehow, maybe just a little, maybe a lot; but you are changed. No wonder that for the East and West alike, until recent times, art was often associated with profound spiritual transformation.

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. . . When we look at any beautiful object (natural or artistic), we suspend all other activity, and we are simply aware, we only want to contemplate the object. . . In that contemplative awareness, our egoic grasping in time comes momentarily to rest. We relax into our basic awareness. We rest with the world as it is, not as we wish it to be. We are face to face with the calm, the eye in the centre of the storm. We are not agitating to change things; we contemplate the object as it is. Great art has this power to grab your attention and suspend it: we stare, sometimes awestruck, sometimes silent, but we cease the restless movement that otherwise characterises our every waking moment.

It doesn't matter what the actual content of the art is; not for this. Great art grabs you, against your will, and then suspends your will. You are ushered into a quiet clearing, free of desire, free of grasping, free of ego, free of self-contradiction. And through that opening or clearing in your own awareness may come flashing higher truths, subtler revelations, profound connections. For a moment you might even touch eternity; who can say otherwise, when time itself is suspended in the clearing that great art creates in your awareness?

. . . Great art suspends the reverted eye, the lamented past, the anticipated future: we enter with it into the timeless present; we are with God today, perfect in our manner and mode, open to the riches and the glories of a realm that time forgot, but that great art reminds us of: not by its content, but by what it does in us: suspends the desire to be elsewhere. And thus it undoes the agitated grasping in the heart of the suffering self, and releases us - maybe for a second, maybe for a minute, maybe for all eternity - releases us from the coil of ourselves.

That is exactly the state that great art pulls us into, no matter what the actual content of the art itself - bugs or Buddhas, landscapes or abstractions, it doesn't matter in the least. In this particular regard - from this particular context, great art is judged by its capacity to take your breath away, take your self away, take time away, all at once.

And whatever we mean by the word "spirit" - let us just say . . . that for each of us it involves our ultimate concern - it is in that simple awestruck moment, when great art enters you and changes you, that spirit shines in this world just a little more brightly than it did the moment before. (Wilber 2001: 122-124)

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