

# *“The Crisis:” A Practical Realization of Kierkegaard’s Aesthetic Philosophy*

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**ABSTRACT:** This analysis of Kierkegaard's article “The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress” (1848/1967) reveals his prodigious ability to deal synchronically with aesthetic philosophy of existence at both metaphysical and pragmatic levels. It also reveals his ability to view women as individuals in the realm of art. Here he is able to make the exception and grant women full equality in both the categories of eternity and temporality.

**KEYWORDS:** shallowness, public, critic’s ability, youth cult, talent, luck, soulfulness, right rapport, tension, indefinable possession.

In a related paper “Kierkegaard, Musical Performance, and the Relation and Differentiation of the Sexes” in *Interchange*, 26, #2, I wrote that I hoped to give Kierkegaard a chance to exonerate himself somewhat by revealing his ability to view women as individuals in the realm of art. In this supplement it may be possible to see a valid appreciation of a woman and a very sophisticated analysis of what it is that a female actor as a representative of all artists – regardless of gender – can accomplish.

We are extremely fortunate that in the four-part newspaper article entitled “The Crisis and A Crisis in the Life of an Actress” (Kierkegaard, 1848/1967) we have a concrete or practical realization of important aspects of Kierkegaard’s aesthetic philosophy. The actress, the wife of J.L. Heiberg, for whom this article was written, was amazed at Kierkegaard’s critical ability and “paid high tribute to Soren Kierkegaard’s comprehension, as contrasted with the shallowness of ordinary theatre critics. More specifically, she expressed astonishment that this ‘inspired theorist’ could sense and express things which artists feel strongly but cannot articulate” (Arbaugh & Arbaugh, 1968, p. 284). Although the article deals directly with an actress, “the Crisis

extends itself beyond the consideration of the given actress, and even beyond dramatic art and art criticism” (p. 284).

Before we consider the implication of this article for our topic of live musical performance, we should clarify the meaning of the crisis in the title. The Arbaughs provide a succinct and accurate interpretation:

The crisis for any artist is the issue whether he will succeed [in the worldly sense] as an artist. A crisis in the life of this given actress was the uncertainty whether she could again successfully [i.e., convincingly – because of her more mature age] take the role of Juliet as she had once done, nineteen years before. (Arbaugh & Arbaugh, 1968, p. 283)

Kierkegaard begins with a realistic appraisal of the artist’s life in that he believes that it is not as enchanting as the public or even the aspiring artist thinks it is. He reveals this point of view very effectively with the following quotations by first conceiving

the most favourable situation possible ... let us imagine an actress who possesses everything she needs in order to be absolutely of the first rank; ... she is fortunate enough ... not to become the target for one or another spiteful person’s persecution. (Kierkegaard, 1848/1967, pp. 76-77)

In the latter part of this quotation, Kierkegaard reveals his awareness of the typical newspaper critic’s ability as being “appallingly shabby.” Thus, even if a great artist is fortunate enough to escape a critic’s “persecution,” at best the artist’s life is an unforgiving one consisting of a demanding, inflexible schedule and having to constantly undergo

the newspaper critic’s total repertoire of platitudes and s-turns of phrase, as they can with special emphasis be called, since the same phrases keep turning up .... She [the actress] will really feel what she has doubtlessly realized often enough, just how fatuous all this is, and what a mistake it is to envy her this burdensome splendour. (Kierkegaard, 1848/1967, p. 77)

These are not encouraging observations, but are certainly realistic and important considerations for any young artist who is considering a performing career.

Another significant issue for the artist is that of the youth cult. Musicians particularly suffer from this form of discrimination; although there is certainly every reason for youthful performers to perform, this cult should not exclude the mature artist who may very well begin a career late in life. Sviatoslav Richter would be an example of a great artist who began his career late in his life by pianistic standards of today and succeeded.

Kierkegaard also points out the irony of the converse of this form of prejudice:

How burdensome and painful in one’s sixteenth year to have to endure hypocritical genuflections and declarations of love in the form of art criticism from bald and half-witted old reviewers; and how bitter later on to have to put up with the impudence of gallantry! (1848/1967, p. 78)

We would like to think that standards have changed today and that this type of hypocrisy does not occur; unfortunately, this is not the case.<sup>1</sup>

This is especially true of the male-oriented bias which takes place with an aging female performer; i.e., that males are supposed to become handsome or distinctive with age, whereas females are condemned to age with age. The result of this age discrimination against females leads to the hypocrisy of the ‘impudence of gallantry’ at its best and downright cruelty and oppression at its worst.<sup>2</sup> (Kierkegaard, 1848/1967, p. 79)

The second part of Kierkegaard’s article is an attempt by him to discuss what a talented artist must possess in order to be worldly successful and recognized as a great talent: “She is in possession of – well, what it is that she possesses is very difficult to define, just because it is something indeterminate, which nevertheless asserts itself overwhelmingly and demands an unconditional response” (Kierkegaard, 1848/1967, p. 81). An “unconditional response” I take to be the critics’ and public’s unanimous agreement and response to a major talent in a performer. With great brilliance and uncanny insight Kierkegaard lists these possessions in the following order: luck, youthfulness, soulfulness, right rapport with the tension of the stage, and definable possession.

Kierkegaard revealed a great sense of reality in starting out with the possession of luck as a prerequisite for success for even the most gifted performer. He maintained that it was not even enough that luck was merely on her side, it had to be “at her beck and call: If she cannot be said to possess this luck, it is only because she is possessed by it. It attends her wherever she goes and wherever she stops, in everything she undertakes” (Kierkegaard, 1848/1967, p. 73). This is an especially vicious truth in our age.

Kierkegaard warns us that youthfulness as an indefinable possession is not to be taken in the statistical sense; rather, we should think of it in terms of the restlessness and unlimited youthfulness pertaining to essential genius. The Arbaughs write that

an existential aesthetic theory develops. In harmony with Hegel, S.K. thought of art as an observing of *timeless* principles in a medium, and of an actress as being possessed by an enduring ‘idea.’ She does not possess one element of genius in youth and another in maturity; instead the genius

which is potential in youth undergoes metamorphosis in a reflective self-self-realization [The Crisis, p. 89]. Her genius is not that of a 'damn lively girl' but a feminine youthfulness over which time has no power. It is vivacious originality, exuberance and assurance, inexhaustible playfulness [The Crisis, pp. 87, 91, 74]. (Arbaugh & Arbaugh, 1968, p. 284)

In her movements or in her very repose, we the audience can sense this restlessness and tirelessness within the context of exuberance and the seemingly incongruous quality of absolute reliability of playfulness and liveliness.

The illusion of the stage and the intently gazing eyes [of the audience] are a great burden to bear, as is quite evident when there is a lack of rapport with the audience. Where rapport does exist, the burden is still present but it becomes light. Tension may make the actress anxious prior to the performance of the play, but under the pressure of the stage she is 'light as a bird just set free' [The Crisis, p. 78]. (Arbaugh & Arbaugh, 1968, p. 283)

All of this has to be maintained with an absolute, secure technique. Kierkegaard makes a subtle, psychological observation that the live performance must project the absolute assurance and exuberance of the actress to reassure and soothe the audience away from negative anxiety.

Kierkegaard approaches an uncanny sense of the universal sense of art in his defining of the indefinable possession of soulfulness. The following is sheer poetic imagery:

This means that in the temper of her immediate passion she is attuned to thought and idea; that her still unreflective inwardness is essentially in league with ideality; that every touch of a thought or idea strikes a note, giving a full-toned resonance; that she is an original, specific sensitivity. (Kierkegaard, 1848/1967, pp. 76-77)

I think that Kierkegaard succeeds in conveying the indefinable sense of the illusive possession with this striking imagery of a "note, giving a full-toned resonance." He approaches an uncanny sense of Curt Sachs' universal or commonwealth of art in the artistic and unique individuality of a charismatic personality in his defining of the indefinable possession of soulfulness.

As we continue along in the article, we find that Kierkegaard discovers an extremely subtle observation in the mechanics of tension. It is a difficult paradox to observe in the live performing arts. Even practitioners are not always consciously aware of the actual mechanics involved. Kierkegaard expresses the concept in this quotation: "she is in the right rapport with the tension of the stage .... Thus [from the dialectic of tension] the lightness is

invisibly grounded in the strain produced by the tension, but this strain is neither seen nor suspected; only the lightness is revealed” (Kierkegaard, 1848/1967, p. 77).

Thus, the paradox of dramatic technique of relaxed tension applies the minimum of tension or the maximum in relaxation possible to produce the most emotive tension or lightness. In other words, in our modern concept of technique – in music and all the performing arts – we use the minimum of tension or its equivalent, that is, the maximum in relaxation – to produce the most emotive tension in the music performed.

Kierkegaard goes on to give an explanation of anxiety as well in the context of tension of the stage:

In the tension of the theatre this anxiety marvellously manifests itself as potency. The notion that an artist must not be anxious is in general very narrow-minded, and to be without anxiety is above all a false indication of artistic greatness. For the more powers he possesses, the greater is his anxiety so long as he is outside the tension which exactly corresponds to his powers. (Kierkegaard, 1848/1967, p. 78)

This particular possession does not relate to technique as it relates to the aesthetics of tension and its relation to anxiety in live performance. He writes that, although the actress may be anxious in the wings, she will conceal but not repress her anxiety on stage in order to receive her freedom. Such is the potency in live performance of a positive anxiety.

The final possession is the most unremarkable in that it is a definable possession, albeit an absolutely essential one, which amounts to what we would call the craft or the nuts-and-bolts of technique. Although, Kierkegaard is alluding to dramatic technique as such, his observations concerning technique, articulation, and projection are appropriate and universal to all the live musical performing arts – instrumental and vocal:

Her definable possession is of course easy to specify. She has not only natural grace, but also training. She possesses, as a subordinate aspect of her art, the larger part of a dancer’s whole stock-in-trade. Her diction is correct, exact; her voice is not abused, but cultivated, ... projecting ... from herself without inhibition. She articulates superbly, even when she whispers ... she knows how to use the voice, and nothing testifies more to her qualifications than the way she is able to use it even in the insignificant lines, the casually dropped conversational digressions. (Kierkegaard, 1848/1967, p. 79)

How remarkable that Kierkegaard understood the importance of technique as being a subordinate tool that functions as a secondary servant of art at a time in the history of music when technique and bravura at times could overstep

its legitimate subsidiary function! What is even more interesting is that his quotation would apply logically to either an instrumentalist (albeit in a metaphorical manner) or to a vocalist of lieder or opera. Only the greatest artists can truly sustain and project a true pianissimo or whisper.

In the third part of "The Crisis," Kierkegaard makes two points; he states that as famous artists age they become labelled or branded because of the majority of people and critics who deceive themselves through habit:

Of all sophists, time is the most dangerous, and of all dangerous sophists, habit is the most crafty. It is already difficult enough to notice that one is changed little by little over the years. But the fraud of habit is that one remains unchanged, that one says the same thing, while in fact he is utterly changed and says it in an utterly different way. (Kierkegaard, 1848/1967, p. 81)

Fortunately, this is less true in our own time because recordings, frequent recitals, and live broadcasts allow us to keep in touch with an artist's development on an unprecedented scale in the history of musical performance. However, if such perception and sensitivity to artists' permutations of expression or stylistic changes does not take place today, Kierkegaard would probably agree that it *might* occur with the death of these individuals in finally jolting us into a more sincere reassessment of their metamorphosis. With the death of an individual artist the fraud of habit is robbed of its catalyst.

His second point has to do with ostentatious seclusion of the artist. This was more of a problem in the 19th century than it is in today's society. The contemporary artist is forced to perform constantly because of the demands of publicity; nevertheless, there are living actors who are prey to this kind of vanity (perhaps Marlon Brando) or psychological necessity (Greta Garbo?). As always there are exceptions, but in general Kierkegaard feels that

the absolutely unselfish servants of the truth ... have always followed the practise of moving about people a great deal. They have never played hide and seek with the masses in order again to play the game of bedazzlement by exhibiting themselves on rare occasions as the objects of stunned amazement ... [instead] they have on the contrary deceived in the opposite way, that is, they have passed judgement on the world by seeming insignificant. (Kierkegaard, 1848/1967, p. 82)

Kierkegaard ends this section with a restatement of the first idea and leads us into the last (fourth) article with the idea that time for the performer really begins with the manifestation of the metamorphosis of the mature artist. Although time destroys youthfulness, the performer can now relate to his<sup>3</sup> ideal in art as its servant. Thus the metamorphosis manifests itself

at some more mature age when time has taken away the happy accidents of his youthfulness, so that he will now relate himself to his idea in a purely ideal way .... Those who only have a taste for the happy accidents of his early youth are lacking in aesthetic cultivation, and therefore do not discover that these delights belong to the accidental, the transitory, while the genius and the relation to the idea are the eternal and the essential. (Kierkegaard, 1848/1967, p. 87)

Kierkegaard points out that when an actress reaches the age of maturity she is then precisely ready to take on a youthful and demanding role such as Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet* because she now possesses a distance in age from her subject. To take the converse of this in a musical context would be akin to a 12-year-old pianist performing Beethoven’s “Hammerklavier” piano sonata. In other words, it takes maturity to deal with transcendent maturity and it may take even more of this metamorphosis to deal with the ultimate and youthful innocence of a work such as any Chopin nocturne. It was precisely for this reason that Claudio Arrau considered the nocturnes the most challenging in the repertoire of Chopin. Kierkegaard explains this with a notion reminiscent of Wordsworth’s “Recollection in tranquillity.” But this recollection can only take place if

time has asserted its right; there is something which has been consigned to the past. But then again an ideality of recollection will cast an illumination of the highest sort over the whole presentation, an incarnation that was not present in those days of the first youthfulness. Only in recollection is there absolute rest, and therefore the still fire of the eternal, its incorruptible glow. And she is soothed in the eternity of her essential genius. (Kierkegaard, 1848/1967, p. 89)

In concluding his article, Kierkegaard compares his metamorphosis to another in order to illuminate the former. This latter “metamorphosis of continuity” he calls “direct perfectibility and potentiation.” Thus the actress represents this metamorphosis of continuity and is able to withstand temporality by enhancing ideality. “This provides absolute tranquillity in the spectator, for the youthfulness of the seventeenth year is indeed fragile, but perfectibility and potentiation are absolutely dependable” (Kierkegaard, 1848/1967, p. 91). In this most eloquent way, Kierkegaard puts to utopian rest the discriminatory practice of the youth cult and paved the way for all performing artists within the realm of his aesthetic philosophy.

It must be emphasized that “The Crisis” demonstrates Kierkegaard’s prodigious ability to deal synchronically with aesthetic philosophy of existence at both metaphysical and pragmatic levels. It also reveals his ability to view women as individuals in the realm of art. Here he is able to make the

exception and grant women full equality in both the categories of eternity and temporality.

#### NOTES

1. Witness the example of 16 and 17-year old winners of international music competitions: They are exposed to this kind of hypocrisy at the expense of their own artistic development and that of their 'older' and perhaps more mature counterparts who are excluded from a career because they are already deemed by a jury to be too old! Although, a very few of these young winners go on to become great artists, such as Vladimir Ashkenazy, most are tragically lost and forgotten in the concert world because they were not allowed to develop their talents at a pace commensurate with their ability, repertoire, and level of maturity
2. Heiberg's wife, a mature actress, was to play Juliet in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* as she had once done, nineteen years before at the the age of seventeen, but lacked the confidence to do so, because she already felt to be too old for the part. Kierkegaard urged her to play the role because he felt that that the youth cult should not prevent her from giving a mature and therefore more satisfying performance of Juliet.
3. I use "his" because Kierkegaard shifts away from the actress into the masculine person to discuss the above in general terms.

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