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# MAJOR *versus* MINOR

## SOME CURIOUS STATISTICS

By F. CORDER

**I**T will readily be conceded, I fancy, that the principal factor for colour and character in music is that furnished by the two forms of key and scale designated by the terms Major and Minor. That there are minor concords in the major key and major concords in the minor is, of course, true, and these might be systematically employed to modify the bright or sombre prevailing hue, but in actual practice this is rarely, if ever, done; a composer harmonises a bold melody



with little regard for the momentary change of character induced by the second chord. Now it has often occurred to me—and probably to others—that since the difference between Major and Minor mode both in melody and harmony is the most striking feature which music possesses, it is curious that this powerful adjunct should be so frequently disregarded and ignored as it is by composers great and small. That such is the case it is the object of the following pages to prove.

Those who teach music can hardly fail to notice the universal tendency of learners to be attracted by the minor key. Directly we begin harmonising tunes in this mode I ask the pupil which he likes best, major or minor; I get the invariable response: “O, the minor is much the nicest!” despite its restricted vocabulary and the struggles which the student has to avoid augmented intervals &c. The psychological reason for the preference is doubtless the slight sense of mystery and strangeness conveyed by the Tonic minor chord. Nature gives us a major triad attached to every note we sound; the minor triad is an artificial product of man’s invention. One might expect then, that in the early days of music, i.e. up to the middle of the 17th century, the predominance of the minor key would be very marked (without taking into account the complications caused by the use of

the early *Modes* in melody and harmony) and this is in fact the case. But I was startled, I confess, to find the great Henry Purcell, one of the most dramatic composers that ever lived, disregarding the claims of the major key to the remarkable extent he has done. Taking as the fairest test the three volumes of miscellaneous incidental music to plays, recently published by the Purcell Society—I find that while 94 pieces are in major keys, no less than 128 are in minor, these including Overtures to dramas and comedies, love songs and duets, and sets of dances. If the beautiful Lament of Dido is so often quoted as a model of appropriate colouring, what can we say, on the other hand, for a love-duet which ends in the following lugubrious fashion?

O rap - ture, rap - ture, rap - ture fond and sweet!

Handel shows much greater discrimination, using the minor mode chiefly, but not invariably, for songs of a mournful character. Such exceptions as Polyphemus's song "O ruddier than the cherry!" are not frequent, but the most remarkable example is his writing the Dead March in *Saul* in C major, and yet contriving to obtain the utmost degree of solemnity by means of hollow part-writing and great breadth of tempo. But out of 53 instrumental pieces where choice was free, 30 are major and 23 minor.

Bach seems to have had little regard for the two modes as such, modulating freely between the relative minor and major, and seldom remaining long in either. Out of 63 instrumental pieces 30 are major and 33 minor. The latter nearly always end with a major tonic chord, according to the custom of the time.

So few people know the origin of this practice that it may as well be stated here. In just intonation, such as was used up to the 18th century, it was found that the over-tones produced by a note, especially when doubled in the octave, were so strong that in churches or other echoing places the harmonic major tenth could be distinctly heard. It was therefore quite disagreeable to hear a composition end on a minor chord of any strength, while

the same chord with the third changed to major assumed a supernatural brilliancy. This explains why in some of Handel's Organ Concertos the composer has permitted the solo instrument to end with a bare 5th and no 3rd at all, trusting Nature to supply one of a better quality than he could. As is usual in music the custom once established was continued as a convention long after it had ceased to be a necessity. The name of *Tierce de Picardie* given to this unexpected major chord is of entirely unknown origin, like all the names—Neapolitan Sixth &c, given to particular harmonies.

To return to our subject, when we come to Mozart there is a great difference in the comparative employment of major and minor keys. The fastidious ear of this most perfect of musicians relegated the minor key to a proper subordinate position, and with him the major is in the ascendant to a remarkable degree. His first 32 Symphonies, for instance, are all in the major, and in the whole tale of 49 only 2 are minor. With other works the proportion is nearly as decided: thus,

MOZART'S WORKS.	MAJOR	MINOR
Symphonies	47	2
Sonatas	17	5
Vocal pieces	56	8
Songs	36	5

From the proportion of 7 : 1 being maintained in the vocal pieces it seems clear that the character of the words did not much affect the choice of mode.

Haydn's love for the major key was even more pronounced than Mozart's; no less than 92 out of his 102 symphonies being in major, with rarely any minor movement, while of the other 10 not more than 2 of the 4 movements are usually minor.

Beethoven's proportion of major to minor is about 3: 1 in his large works and considerably more in his small ones; or, in detail,

BEETHOVEN'S WORKS	MAJOR	MINOR
Symphonies	7	2
Sonatas	29	10
Quartets	13	5
Small pieces	45	8
Songs	36	5

In his songs, it will be noticed, his proportion is the same as Mozart's.

An interesting test is afforded by an examination of Schubert's songs, 384 of which are in major keys, a very few ending in minor

when this is imperatively demanded by the words, and 141 in minor keys, frequently ending in major, whatever the text may demand. Some of the very best from a musical point of view change so capriciously from minor to major as to defy classification. His proportion of major to minor is about 3 :: 1. By the way, Schubert is generally believed to have written 600 songs, but this includes about 60 which are only revised editions of some already published.

Much the same result is obtained from examining the songs of Schumann—at least those written before his mind became affected. The first and second volumes of his collected songs, contain 131; 93 major and 38 minor, but the third has 45 major to 20 minor, and the fourth 25 major to 23 minor. Towards the end he appeared to be able only to think of one key, D minor.

Grieg, out of 110 remarkable songs has no less than 40 entirely in minor, but with the sufficient excuse that the words are very melancholy. There is one weird specimen that begins and ends on an unresolved dominant 11th and certainly sets the strange words—"A bird flew screaming"—wonderfully.

If one mentally reviews the music of Mendelssohn and Chopin in a general glimpse one is apt to think of the former composer as peculiarly affecting the major key, and the latter the minor. This is not quite the fact, as many as 17 of Mendelssohn's *Songs without Words* being minor and an even larger proportion of his other piano works—24 major to 25 minor, while Chopin has practically an equal number of each.

CHOPIN'S WORKS.	MAJOR	MINOR
Mazourkas	23	24
Nocturnes	9	10
Polonaises	10	8
Waltzes	8	6
Other pieces	17	14

Brahms in his larger works has just as many movements in major as in minor; in the piano pieces he has 11 major to 18 minor. But his chief characteristic is so to mix up the major key and its relative minor as to convey the impression of being perpetually minor.

My object in compiling these statistics was to endeavour to find out whether the mental attitude of the great composers was consistent; whether they naturally employed the major mode for bright and cheerful music and reserved the minor as a special means of imparting feelings of gloom. I have found little evidence

of any such consistency. I was led to make this enquiry by noticing the singular absence of any such natural instinct on the part of composition students. Unless their attention is persistently drawn to the point these are prone to grope perpetually in minor keys for ideas which do not exist. For it is a startling fact that the minor scale is quite antagonistic to good melody, as the reader may easily prove to himself by recalling all his most admired themes and noting that these are invariably major. Or here is a better proof: take any collection of national songs you please and examine the contents. There is Moffat's 200 Songs of the Georgian Era, containing all the most popular strains sung at the public gardens in the latter half of the 18th century. Of these 200 only 10 are minor. Or take Boosey's Songs of England, a yet larger collection, ranging over two and a half centuries. In the first volume, containing 102 early songs, 8 are minor, and in the second, of 120 later ones all are major.

Since no one will be disposed to maintain that poets—even lyric poets—are on the whole a cheerful race, it will be clear that we shall often find bright and optimistic strains wedded to quite gloomy verse, and even this is not so incongruous as to find, as we do in the works of the great composers, melancholy music set to lively sentiments. Both are to be found in well-known instances, which, so far as I am aware, have hitherto passed unnoticed.

The words of Schubert's well-known *Serenade*, *Barcarole* and *Romance from Rosamund* are all three of pure amorous sentiment, uniformly pleasant; yet the composer, simply for musical contrast and variety, makes the music change delightfully from minor to major constantly without any justification from the poetry. And these songs are considered as among the composer's happiest efforts—even superior to many others where major and minor keys faithfully reflect the light and shadow of the words.

Again, in Schumann's fine song-cycle *Woman's Love and Life* many people regard the third number, *Ich kann's nicht fassen, nicht glauben* as the most attractive of all. This is perhaps on account of its dainty rhythm; but minor key and sprightly rhythm are singularly ill-suited to a song in which a maiden is timidly wondering whether her happiness can possibly be real. Schumann, for all his poetic fervour, occasionally let the music go its own way without reference to the words which were supposed to call it forth. In the song *Wehmuth*, (or, *The Nightingale*, as we have it in the English version), both words and music are very lovely, but they are sadly ill-matched:

Larghetto

While ev-'ry ear must hark-en O bliss-ful notes that fall! None feels his spirit  
 dark-en; she hides her grief from all.

As to music of the simple, popular type, where one would expect to find completely conventional employment of the two modes, it is quite surprising to note how frequently this has been disregarded in the most popular ballads. Henry Bishop seldom used the minor key; in his anxiety to write attractive melody he committed no great crime in setting such doleful verses as *The Mistletoe Bough* and *The Pilgrim of Love* to pleasant major tunes, but in his admired Glee, *Where art thou, beam of light?* his disregard of the mournful Ossianic sentiment is absolutely grotesque. Balfe and Wallace in such extremely popular appeals as, *The heart bowed down*, *The light of other days*, *Scenes that are brightest how sad they seem*, and *Let me like a soldier fall*, have adopted the inadequate device of substituting slow speed in the major for gloomy harmony in the minor, and of course one cannot quarrel with a melody for being too beautiful.

It is in opera that we should look to find most attention paid to the fitting employment of the major and minor modes; yet here are also plenty of incongruities to be found. As already pointed out Purcell and his contemporaries show little discrimination in the matter. Gluck's pathetic air, *Che faro* is the C major-est of tunes to the B minor-est of sentiments, and in Italian opera it may be taken for granted that the *scena* of a broken-hearted heroine, though occasionally it may begin in plaintive minor, will invariably conclude with brilliant fireworks in the major. I cannot recall a single instance of a striking Italian melody in the minor; Verdi has set the most harrowing situations to the most dashing major strains, and that glorious melodist, Charles Gounod, appears to have abjured the minor altogether, whatever be the

dramatic situation. With the exceptions of the two songs of Mephistophiles in *Faust*, the orchestral Salterello, and the famous Funeral March of a Marionette, I do not think there is any minor music at all by this composer, unless it be in the little-known last operas. Most striking of all is the paucity of minor key existing in Wagner's works. In the earlier operas the only example of any note is Senta's Ballad, the second subject and coda of which are in major; in *Lohengrin* there are 20 powerful major melodies to 6 minor ones, these latter being entirely associated with the wicked Ortrud and Frederick. The Preludes to *The Valkyrie* and *The Dusk of the Gods* are indeed weird colour-pictures in appropriate minor, and the yearning Prelude to *Tristan and Isolde* seems to be more or less in A minor, though that key is never confirmed; but Wagner's chief characteristic is his power of using prodigious numbers of minor chromatic discords in a major key, (the reverse of this procedure is not possible) so that the texture of his music is always felt to be stern, but yet major. Minor cadences he employs with unerring appropriateness.

On examining the harmonic material of the two modes it will be noticed that the major key contains three minor common chords, while the minor key has only two. But those in the major key are all on the weak notes of the scale, while those of the minor are on two of the strongest, and this it is which differentiates their character so greatly. Consequently the attempts made by composers to hover between the two generally result in a vagueness which is seldom effective. There is a curious instance in the popular B flat minor Scherzo of Chopin. Here only the opening bars are in the key named, and the effect is that this is really only a feint, and we are on the submediant of D flat. In that key we continue and finish, so that the piece is almost mis-named.

There is a great deal of mere follow-my-leaderishness about ordinary composers. It is curious to notice, for instance, how many have written their first Trio in C minor or their first Symphony in C major—apparently simply because Beethoven did so. The fact that the opening subject of a violin concerto is of much less importance than the second may help to account for the immense preponderance of the minor key in works of this class; 14 of Viotti's 18, 6 of Rode's 8 and all of Spohr's 11 are in minor keys. And the proportion is not very different in Pianoforte concertos. The melody of a second subject, even if of poor invention, will naturally stand out better by contrast with a minor first subject. And contrast is the most important factor in music of any scope. It is all very fine to babble about "self-expression," but art must



be governed by conventions and laws, which will be modified from time to time, but which can never be wholly defied.

A few more technical remarks in conclusion. Where an instrumental piece begins in minor and has sections in major (the principal second subject is usually major), the problem of how to finish effectively is surely a very simple one. Taking Weber's Overture to *Der Freischütz* as a typical example, is not the burst into the major at the Coda everything that could be desired? Wagner's *Flying Dutchman* Overture illustrates the same point. But it is not uncommon to find composers recapitulating their second subject in the tonic major and yet desiring to end in the minor. This always seems to me quite pointless, a hopeless anti-climax. Either you want the final impression to be gloomy or bright: if the former, do not have your second subject in the tonic major at all, but in some other key; if the latter, why discount your best effect? Perhaps the most curious instance of this perversity is to be found in a pianoforte piece by the brilliant Mendelssohn—the last man one would deem capable of such a lapse. No. 7 of his Seven Characteristic Pieces (op. 7) is a dainty, vivacious Scherzo in E major, bright and gay throughout. At the very end he had the unhappy idea of finishing with four bars of broken-chord arpeggios in E minor, with the result that he simply spoils the piece and nobody cares to play it. On the other hand, in his charming little Scherzo in E minor (op. 16, No. 2) he ends with a similar passage, but changing from minor to major, and the effect is that of dawn after a fairy revel; nothing can be more satisfying to the ear.

It is in large symphonic movements where the composer's taste, prompted by the mere whim of the moment, is apt to mislead him, and I could cite numerous instances in would-be lofty works where a movement heard for the first time (this is where it tells!) has failed to make any distinct impression, for no other reason than this. Glasounow's B flat minor Sonata has a first movement which is very near being one of the great pianoforte works, but by clinging too closely to conventional methods he has ruined it. The noble second subject is recapitulated in the tonic major, and he then works up a mournful impassioned Coda in B flat minor again. Result: anti-climax and dissatisfaction. On the other hand, one of Schumann's most brilliant efforts is the Overture to *Genoveva*, where the Coda makes such splendid amends for the gloom of the preceding music.

No, you can never afford to defy this obvious truth: Major after Minor is always good; Minor after Major is always weak.

To turn a stale convention into a new beauty is artistry; to discard one merely by way of doing something new is simply a betrayal of weakness.