

FILM AND TV MUSIC



LUST FOR LIFE

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LUST FOR LIFE

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Hollywood has not exactly achieved world fame for the historical accuracy of its film biographies, as the carefree manner in which it often juggles historical facts with sheer fantasy to suit its own dramatic purposes is its Achilles heel, where it can be — and usually is — attacked. *LUST FOR LIFE*, however, is a notable exception. It is most gratifying to see Hollywood come up with a film biography, which not only captures the dramatic highlights of a great painter's tragic life but also with painstaking research remains absolutely factual and correct on historical data and characterization of the *dramatis personae*. This was based on Irving Stone's now world-famous novel of the same name, written for the screen by the brilliant Norman Corwin, produced by a man of impeccable taste, John Houseman, and directed by an artist of his own merit — Vincente Minelli. The result of the collaboration is a moving drama of the tormented life of Vincent Van Gogh.

From the composer's point of view, the first problem was — as it always is with historical subjects — to find a suitable style. In concert music one always expresses oneself, but in dramatic music, and especially film music, where its most important function is to serve and help the drama, each subject, each period, needs its own style. In a present day film drama the composer can safely use his own contemporary idiom, as this will undoubtedly be the most appropriate, but for a period picture (even if its setting is only 75 years ago) a suitable style has to be found, which forms a homogeneous unity with the pictorial happenings of the photoplay. Berlioz writes somewhere that with each dramatic subject he attacked, he had to change the style of his musical expression. That in spite of this, his own personal idiom always came through goes without saying, as a strong and individual personality will always shine through, no matter how it is disguised.

The music that Vincent Van Gogh knew and liked was the high romanticism of the Wagner-Liszt-Berlioz school and its numerous satellites in France and Germany. His early impressionistic and pointillistic style, however, (under the

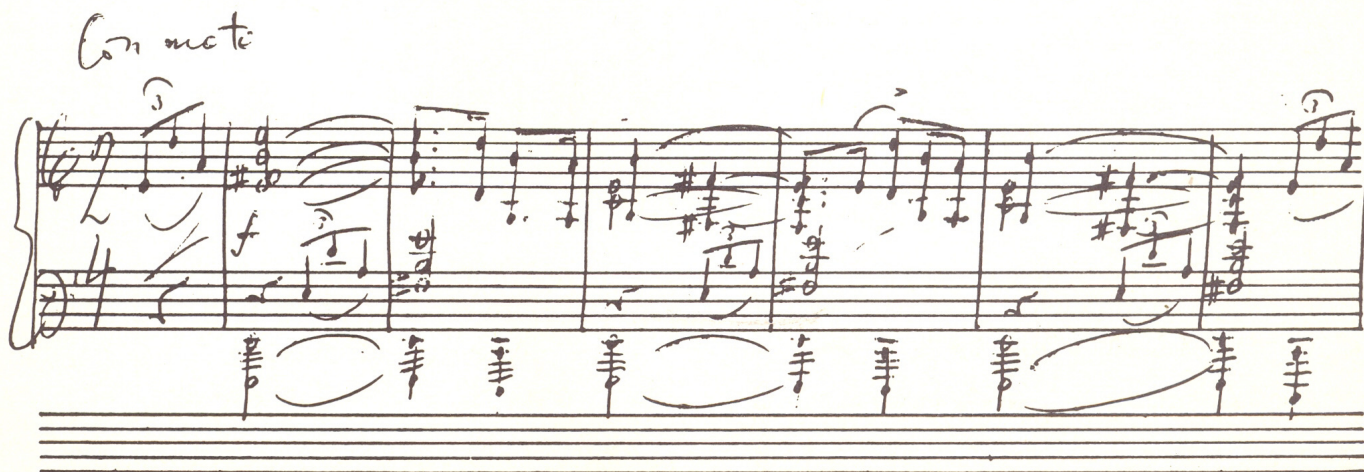
influence of Pissarro and the neo-impressionistic Seurat) corresponds musically with the impressionism of Debussy, although Van Gogh himself could not have known his music. There is a twenty-five year time-lag between pictorial and musical impressionism. The first important impressionistic orchestral work (inspired by the symbolistic poet Mallarmé) is Debussy's "*L'Après-midi d'un Faune*", which had its first performance in 1894 — four years after Van Gogh's death. However, the emotionalism of the musical *fin de siècle*, the daring harmonic and orchestral palette of Debussy corresponds — to my mind, at least — with the early style of Van Gogh, and gives a point of departure for further development as his own style started to develop, too.

There is an interesting similarity, which should be mentioned here, between the short, troubled, ecstatic lives and creative methods of Van Gogh and Hugo Wolf, who were contemporaries. Both were more or less self-taught artists, fighting unsuccessfully for recognition, existing in utmost poverty, highly strung, hyper-sensitive, irritable, querulous, eccentric, over-emotional; leading lives of extreme exaltation, when masterpieces came into being in the shortest period of time (as produced in a trance) or of utmost dejection, when long periods went by without producing anything. Both lost their reason, were confined in insane asylums, and both tried to commit suicide, in which only Van Gogh succeeded. The parallel stops here, however, as Van Gogh was a more progressive artist who broke entirely new ground, whereas Wolf, under the spell of his hero-worship of Wagner, did not develop a new harmonic or melodic language. The key word of Van Gogh's entire creation is subjective emotionalism or emotional subjectivity, and in the picture this had to be underlined and complemented musically.

Nothing was further from my mind than to imitate Debussy's style for this picture, but the timbre of this score is that of France at the beginning of this century. The main musical themes of the picture are the following:

The theme of yearning and seeking which characterizes musically Vincent's eternal search for the infinite and unreachable. It can be heard first under the credit titles.

(Ex. 1.)

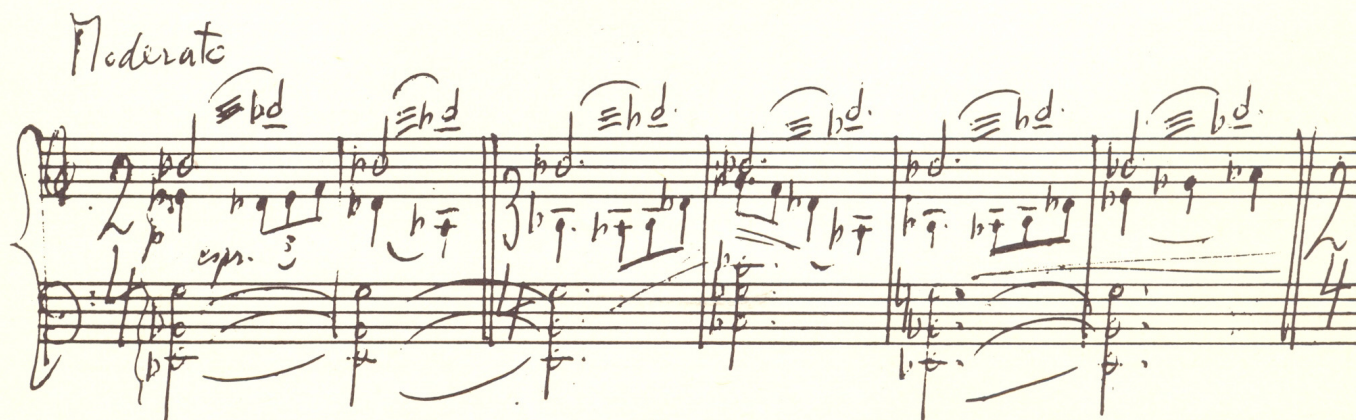




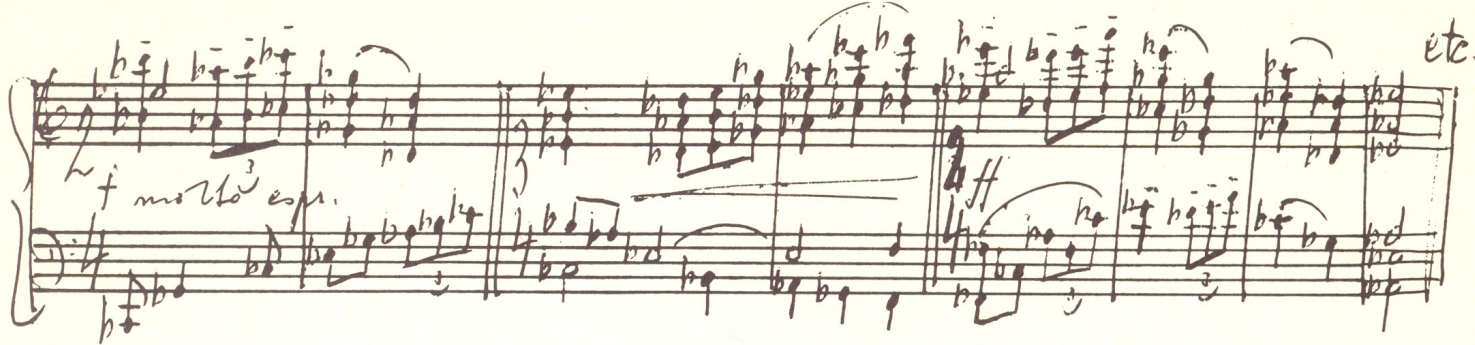
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The theme of achievement, developed from the second half of the first theme, tries to convey the beauty and contentment of creation.

(Ex. 2.)



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The theme of brotherly love, which returns with every narration by Vincent's brother Theo as he reads Vincent's letters, is played with a solo cello. It expresses the serene, unselfish and unique relationship of the two brothers.

(Ex. 3.)



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The theme of Sien (Christine) the woman of the streets with whom Van Gogh lived for two years, is nostalgic and tender, as for a while she meant fulfillment and haven for him.

(Ex. 4.)



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Gauguin is characterized musically with a self-assertive and determined theme, as, in contrast to Vincent, he was selfish, ruthless and knew exactly what he wanted.

(Ex. 5.)



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Postman Roulin's friendly and jovial character is underlined with a bassoon solo.

(Ex. 6.)



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Kirk Douglas as Van Gogh with Niall MacGinnis
as Postman Roulin.

The madness theme, a distorted variation of the theme of yearning, first appears after a quarrel between Van Gogh and Gauguin. It gets fully developed later in scenes such as the ear-slashing incident and in the ensuing scenes of his confinement of the asylum of St. Remy and the sanatorium of Dr. Gachet at Anvers-sur-Oise, where Van Gogh ended his tormented life. The final scene brings back the theme of achievement in a more transfigured mood.

(Ex. 7.)

Allievo moderato

etc.

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