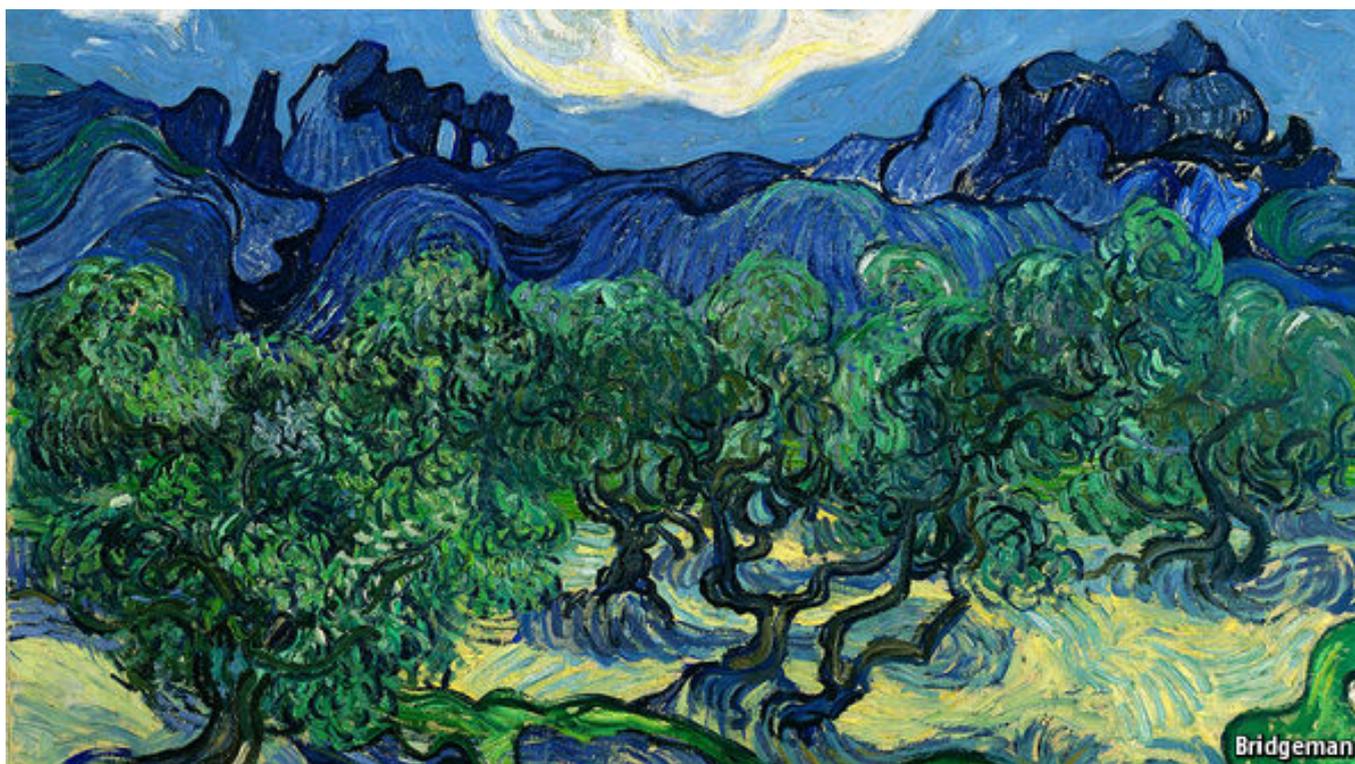


What is late style?

Why so many artists do their most interesting work in their final years

When time is precious, composers and playwrights outdo themselves



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OUT, out, brief candle! As life nears its end, thoughts can acquire urgent clarity. This truth is more perceptible among some artists than others; novelists, for example, find endless ways of disguising it. But it is so evident among playwrights, composers, and visual artists that “late style” has become an accepted critical concept. Consider the late plays of Henrik Ibsen, furiously rattling the bars of the bourgeois cage. Discount for a moment a brain-researcher’s recent suggestion that the abstraction of Willem de Kooning’s late paintings reflects the onset of dementia, and consider instead the late works of Vincent van Gogh and Francisco Goya.

Look at Goya's "Black Paintings", the most famous of which is "Saturn Devouring his Son". No falling-off in technical mastery there, but a view of humanity which is visionary in its hellishness. Look at the paintings which Van Gogh made during his days in the asylum at Saint-Rémy, such as "The Olive Trees" from 1889 (pictured). Observation has given way to a celebratory stylisation, as swirling brushstrokes reflect exuberant patterns of clouds, trees, flowers and swelling ears of wheat. For these artists "late style" meant an encounter—one terrible, the other joyful—with the hyperreal.

The term "late style" was coined by Theodor Adorno, a German Marxist philosopher, as a label for his doctrinaire view of Beethoven. For him, Beethoven's last works were the triumphant expression of a determined refusal to resolve life's conflicts harmoniously. This view was later endorsed by Edward Said, a Palestinian-American writer and academic, who—in a posthumous article in the *London Review of Books*—declared that this "negativity" of late Beethoven was actually a strength. "This lateness is a thing in its own right," Said wrote approvingly, "not a premonition or obliteration of something else."

Now musicians with very different views are wading into the lateness debate. In a recital series at the Wigmore Hall in London last year, Sir Andras Schiff played the last piano sonatas of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert. The connecting thread was a culminating aesthetic mastery. In "Late Style", a series of recitals in America and Europe through the spring this year, Jonathan Biss, a young American pianist, is presenting chamber works by three of those composers, as well as Carlo Gesualdo, Robert Schumann, Benjamin Britten and Johannes Brahms.

For each of these composers, late style meant something different. Gesualdo had murdered his wife and her lover, and spent his last days in a torment which one can sense in his crazily discordant late works. The emotional devastation of Schumann's final days becomes starkly evident in his ruthlessly pared-down *Gesänge der Frühe* ("Songs of Dawn"). The Britten string quartet which Mr Biss has chosen shows the composer delighting in an extreme—and to him quite new—economy of expression. The chaotic middle movement of Mr Biss's chosen Schubert sonata reflects the composer, who was dying of syphilis, going to pieces in rage and terror. Brahms's late works suggest a man whose emotional energy has been sapped dry; Beethoven's suggest

the opposite. What links these composers, as Mr Biss points out, is that “with each of them, something has happened to completely change their style”.

What is that something? It seems to be an amalgam of circumstance and psychology, and no composer exemplifies this more vividly than Beethoven. Deafness to the world of real sound gave Beethoven the freedom to create hitherto undreamed-of new sound-worlds, and that played into his vaulting ambition to address posterity.

Moreover, his late works were deeply symbolic, sometimes seeming, through sheer technical illusionism, to make time stand still—as though he wanted to extend his own life. In “Late Beethoven” (2003) Maynard Solomon, an American musicologist, points to the frequency—most clearly seen in the *Hammerklavier* sonata and the Ninth Symphony—with which a series of themes is tried and impatiently rejected, before the right one is hit upon to launch a finale. Mr Solomon likens this process to a search for the thread out of a labyrinth, and the liberated playfulness of the final Bagatelles indicates that Beethoven had indeed found that thread.

As Fiona Maddocks observes in “Music for Life”, an elegant collection of mini-essays published last year, people tend to over-romanticise last works, and there is some truth in that. But many great artists experience a psychological and artistic step-change late in life. For them, life’s candle burns most brightly when it is about to go out.

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