I have no ear.--

Mistake me not, reader,--nor imagine that I am by nature destitute of those exterior twin appendages, hanging ornaments, and (architecturally speaking) handsome volutes to the human capital. Better my mother had never borne me.--I am, I think, rather delicately than copiously provided with those conduits; and I feel no disposition to envy the mule for his plenty, or the mole for her exactness, in those ingenious labyrinthish inlets--those indispensable side-intelligencers.

Neither have I incurred, or done any thing to incur, with Defoe, that hideous disfigurement, which constrained him to draw upon assurance--to feel "quite unabashed," and at ease upon that article. I was never, I thank my stars, in the pillory; nor, if I read them aright, is it within the compass of my destiny, that I ever should be.

When therefore I say that I have no ear, you will understand me to mean--_for music_.--To say that this heart never melted at the concourse of sweet sounds, would be a foul self-libel.--"_Water parted from the sea_" never fails to move it strangely. So does "_In Infancy_." But they were used to be sung at her harpsichord (the old-fashioned instrument in vogue in those days) by a gentlewoman--the gentlest, sure, that ever merited the appellation--the sweetest--why should I hesitate to name Mrs. S----, once the blooming Fanny Weatheral of the Temple--who had power to thrill the soul of Elia, small imp as he was, even in his long coats; and to make him glow, tremble, and blush with a passion, that not faintly indicated the day-spring of that absorbing sentiment, which was afterwards destined to overwhelm and subdue his nature quite, for Alice W----n.

I even think that _sentimentally_ I am disposed to harmony. But _organically_ I am incapable of a tune. I have been practising "_God save the King_" all my life; whistling and humming of it over to myself in solitary corners; and am not yet arrived, they tell me, within many quavers of it. Yet hath the loyalty of Elia never been impeached.

I am not without suspicion, that I have an undeveloped faculty of music within me. For, thrumming, in my wild way, on my friend A.'s piano, the other morning, while he was engaged in an adjoining parlour,--on his return he was pleased to say, "_he thought it could not be the maid_!" On his first surprise at hearing the keys touched in somewhat an airy and masterful way, not dreaming of me, his suspicions had lighted on _Jenny_. But a grace, snatched from a superior refinement, soon convinced him that some being--technically perhaps deficient, but higher informed from a principle common to all the fine arts,--had swayed the keys to a mood which Jenny, with all her (less-cultivated) enthusiasm, could never have elicited from them. I mention this as a proof of my friend's penetration, and not with any view of disparaging Jenny.

Scientifically I could never be made to understand (yet have I taken some pains) what a note in music is; or how one note should differ from another. Much less in voices can I distinguish a soprano from a tenor. Only sometimes the thorough bass I contrive to guess at, from its being supereminently harsh and disagreeable. I tremble, however, for my misapplication of the simplest terms of _that_ which I disclaim. While I profess my ignorance, I scarce know what to
_say_ I am ignorant of I hate, perhaps, by misnomers. _Sostenuto_ and _adagio_ stand in the like relation of obscurity to me; and _Sol_, _Fa_, _Mi_, _Re_, is as conjuring as _Baralipton_.

It is hard to stand alone--in an age like this,--(constituted to the quick and critical perception of all harmonious combinations, I verily believe, beyond all preceding ages, since Jubal stumbled upon the gamut)--to remain, as it were, singly unimpressible to the magic influences of an art, which is said to have such an especial stroke at soothing, elevating, and refining the passions.--Yet rather than break the candid current of my confessions, I must avow to you, that I have received a great deal more pain than pleasure from this so cried-up faculty.

I am constitutionally susceptible of noises. A carpenter's hammer, in a warm summer noon, will fret me into more than midsummer madness. But those unconnected, unset sounds are nothing to the measured malice of music. The ear is passive to those single strokes; willingly enduring stripes, while it hath no task to con. To music it cannot be passive. It will strive--mine at least will--spite of its inaptitude, to thrid the maze; like an unskilled eye painfully poring upon hieroglyphics. I have sat through an Italian Opera, till, for sheer pain, and inexplicable anguish, I have rushed out into the noisiest places of the crowded streets, to solace myself with sounds, which I was not obliged to follow, and get rid of the distracting torment of endless, fruitless, barren attention! I take refuge in the unpretending assemblage of honest common-life sounds;--and the purgatory of the Enraged Musician becomes my paradise.

I have sat at an Oratorio (that profanation of the purposes of the cheerful playhouse) watching the faces of the auditory in the pit (what a contrast to Hogarth's Laughing Audience!) immovable, or affecting some faint emotion,--till (as some have said, that our occupations in the next world will be but a shadow of what delighted us in this) I have imagined myself in some cold Theatre in Hades, where some of the _forms_ of the earthly one should be kept up, with none of the _enjoyment_; or like that--

--Party in a parlour,
All silent, and all DAMNED!

Above all, those insufferable concertos, and pieces of music, as they are called, do plague and embitter my apprehension.--Words are something; but to be exposed to an endless battery of mere sounds; to be long a dying, to lie stretched upon a rack of roses; to keep up languor by unintermitted effort; to pile honey upon sugar, and sugar upon honey, to an interminable tedious sweetness; to fill up sound with feeling, and strain ideas to keep pace with it; to gaze on empty frames, and be forced to make the pictures for yourself; to read a book, _all stops_, and be obliged to supply the verbal matter; to invent extempore tragedies to answer to the vague gestures of an inexplicable rambling mime--these are faint shadows of what I have undergone from a series of the ablest-executed pieces of this empty _instrumental music_.

I deny not, that in the opening of a concert, I have experienced something vastly lulling and agreeable:--afterwards followeth the languor, and the oppression. Like that disappointing book in Patmos; or, like the comings on of melancholy, described by Burton, doth music make her first insinuating approaches:--"Most pleasant it is to such as are melancholy given, to walk alone in some solitary grove, betwixt wood and water, by some brook side, and to meditate upon some delightful and pleasant subject, which shall affect him most. _amabilis insania_, and _mentis gratissimus error_. A most incomparable delight to build castles in the air, to go smiling to themselves, acting an infinite variety of parts, which they suppose, and strongly imagine, they act, or that they see done.--So delightsome these toys at first, they could spend whole days and nights without sleep, even whole years in such contemplations, and fantastical meditations, which are like so many dreams, and will hardly be drawn from them--winding and unwinding themselves as so many clocks, and still pleasing their humours, until at last the SCENE TURNS UPON A SUDDEN, and they being now habituated to such meditations and solitary places, can endure no company, can think of nothing but harsh and distasteful subjects. Fear, sorrow, suspicion, _subrusticus pudor_, discontent, cares, and weariness of life, surprise them on a sudden, and they can think of nothing else: continually suspecting, no sooner are their eyes open, but this infernal plague of melancholy seizeth on them, and terrifies their souls, representing some dismal object to their minds;
which now, by no means, no labour, no persuasions they can avoid, they cannot be rid of it, they cannot resist."

Something like this "SCENE-TURNING" I have experienced at the evening parties, at the house of my good Catholic friend _Nov----_; who, by the aid of a capital organ, himself the most finished of players, converts his drawing-room into a chapel, his week days into Sundays, and these latter into minor heavens.(1)

When my friend commences upon one of those solemn anthems, which peradventure struck upon my heedless ear, rambling in the side aisles of the dim abbey, some five and thirty years since, waking a new sense, and putting a soul of old religion into my young apprehension--(whether it be _that_, in which the psalmist, weary of the persecutions of bad men, wisheth to himself dove's wings--or _that other_, which, with a like measure of sobriety and pathos, inquireth by what means the young man shall best cleanse his mind)--a holy calm pervadeth me.--I am for the time

--rapt above earth,
And possess joys not promised at my birth.

But when this master of the spell, not content to have laid a soul prostrate, goes on, in his power, to inflict more bliss than lies in her capacity to receive.--impatient to overcome her "earthly" with his "heavenly."--still pouring in, for protracted hours, fresh waves and fresh from the sea of sound, or from that inexhausted _German_ ocean, above which, in triumphant progress, dolphin-seated, ride those Arions _Haydn_ and _Mozart_, with their attendant tritons, _Bach_, _Beethoven_, and a countless tribe, whom to attempt to reckon up would but plunge me again in the deeps.--I stagger under the weight of harmony, reeling to and fro at my wit's end;--clouds, as of frankincense, oppress me--priests, altars, censers, dazzle before me--the genius of _his_ religion hath me in her toils--a shadowy triple tiara invests the brow of my friend, late so naked, so ingenuous he is Pope, and by him sits, like as in the anomaly of dreams, a she-Pope too,--tri-coroneted like himself!--I am converted, and yet a Protestant;--at once _malleus hereticorum_, and myself grand heresiarch: or three heresies centre in my person:--I am Marcion, Ebion, and Cerinthus--Gog and Magog--what not?--till the coming in of the friendly supper-tray dissipates the figment, and a draught of true Lutheran beer (in which chiefly my friend shows himself no bigot) at once reconciles me to the rationalities of a purer faith; and restores to me the genuine unterrifying aspects of my pleasant-countenanced host and hostess.

(Footnote 1:
I have been there, and still would go;
'Tis like a little heaven below.--_Dr. Watts_.)

(The end)
Charles Lamb's essay: Chapter On Ears

By Charles Lamb