

THE "CONSERVATIVE REVOLUTION" IN MUSIC OF THE 21st CENTURY by Josef Tal

to be recorded: Thursday, 29th January, 1976, 1500 - 1700

The title of my talk is partly quotation and partly personal concern. The quotation is from a speech of the Austrian poet Hugo von Hoffmannsthal who, as early as 1924, spoke of the necessity for a 'conservative revolution'. In the turbulent years following the first World War, much that was dilapidated was pulled down ruthlessly, burying in this way much that was valuable. Basically, nothing has changed in these violent reactions. No major war has brought with it an easing of tension, thus rendering the few attempts at a new order more and more shortlived, <sup>to be</sup> followed by even more aggressive reactions. The call for a 'conservative revolution' was directed against a misuse of the past, <sup>which</sup> was not valued any longer, even though such a call could determine the future. Since no real innovation is possible without the past, the call is also directed against the waste of each 'yesterday', against the mania for sensation which dissolves everything 'modern' into something 'fashionable'. The ideal to forget involves a lack of responsibility which, in its turn, is reflected in the work of art.

It is not my intention to mourn the golden past. As a composer I am only seeking relevant clarity. A militant avant-garde movement, which almost for the whole of this century has chosen to ignore its origin, has pretended to be an end in itself, seems indeed suspicious. As a composer I set myself the task to compose. I compose because I compose: this reason loses its sense if it isn't linked to a specific purpose. Put very simply, the purpose is to communicate, and with it the desire for a reaction - a feed-back which must have an influence on the next utterance. In this way, continuity is guaranteed ad infinitum.

The quality of this chain of communication is decisive for what we call culture. Here is an example of contemporary interest: compare the vitality of Schoenberg's 12-tone technique with that of traditional tonality.

As a system of 12 notes related to each other in a single succession, serialism is, today, a historical reflection of past theoretical endeavours. Now, for many centuries research had been made on the theory of tonality; the subject was expounded and new formulations sought; and what set in then was what Dr. Newman, a disciple of Jung, called 'sclerotic consciousness' - a petrified consciousness. Gradually, tonal theory lost its connection with practice, because later on, the theory followed the conditions of mechanically functioning rules which had long lost their significance. Tonal consciousness was thus doomed to sclerosis and resulted in a reaction which Dr. Newman called an 'irruptive consciousness', an uncontrollable activity embedded deep in the sub-consciousness. The craving for mystic and magic coefficients of the sub-conscious became so strong that it seems to have flooded our century. Schoenberg's 12-tone theory drowned in the flood with frightening speed, even before the essence and the significance of his thought had really been grasped. In the fifties, many composers were not familiar with the 12-tone technique, yet at the same time they were already conquered by total serialism. Through methods of quantification, every spontaneous experience of creative man was thus nipped in the bud. Again a natural reaction ensued: the irruptive sub-conscious broke out once more with an intensity never experienced before. Dreams, free of theoretical manipulation, brought about false hopes of discoveries full of new experiences. But even such an imaginative dream has to be produced. When imaginative dreams are to be communicated to the demanding listener, clumsy clichés have to be produced which are easy to perceive and which can be thrown away like rubbish, daily refuse. Naturally, clichés may be produced on a higher level, but the bulk remains hacknayed. The result is that the public with whom the artist has to communicate, whether it wishes to or not, is again duped by a bad system. In this way, ethical standards are pulled down more and more.

Mac Murry says in one of his lectures: "The artist does not act by impulse, still less by the compulsion of rules, but by the nature of the reality which he apprehends". I should like to try to relate this proposition to the process of musical composition.

I have just mentioned that total serialism - just as each total system - nips in the bud any unconditional experiences of man. In music such naive experience is related to the acoustic environment. The unhindered appreciation of perceptions coming from the sense of hearing must in no circumstances be disturbed through a total or a petrified system of education. On the other hand, these experiences should be organised and controlled, as they are the raw material that is to be turned into the finished product. Discipline cannot be separated from the spontaneous perception of the senses, and if the raw material is not intelligently used, it will quickly disintegrate. Therefore, discipline helps the composer in his aim to formulate his message. From this regulated processing of raw material, the ethical standards of the message can then be deduced. The whole process is made up of many single activities; they all determine the degree of complexity and reflect the desire for an artistic creation.

I would now like to add some remarks about electronic music. It is here that misunderstandings appear in the most striking manner. This is perhaps forgivable, as two circumstances tend to overshadow the creative act of composing - at least in the eye of the beholder. First, there is the over-emphasised technological manipulation of this music - a novelty for the composer and the listener, which attracts a disproportionate part of attention. Secondly, there is no notation of this music, which would oblige the composer to give account of himself to others and indeed himself.

This situation corresponds to a tabula rasa. However, electronic music, as an existing fact, has to be mastered. Here again, our observations seem to show the necessity for a "conservative revolution". First of all, the technological aspect must find its proper place. The word technology, as we use it in our daily language, has completely lost its Platonic significance. It was chance, or maybe it wasn't, that in the same year of 1924, in which Hoffmansthal coined the expression "conservative revolution", the engineer Max Eyth published a book entitled "Living Forces". In it he said this about technology: "Everything that gives form to the spirit may be called technique. Technique is all that makes a man's will take on physical shape. And, whereas this includes an infinite variety of forms of expression and possibilities of being, and in spite of the chains which shackle the world of matter, technical skill has been imbued with some of the boundlessness of the purely spiritual". Well, it is high time that we referred to technology not only in connection with the use of electrical household appliances. Technology includes, for instance, the utilisation of a tape-recorder on which sounds are manipulated by means of mechanical combinations; the ensuing surprise effects are meant to make sense as a musical composition. Technology is in itself a creative activity.

Coming back to music, orchestral instrumentation is also a creative technological process with acoustic material. To master orchestration means to be able to compose single notes, which is a spiritual decision as any other. Naturally, this is the point of departure for a composition with electronic instruments - which don't produce standard notes, as does the violin, the flute, the trumpet etc.; the note in itself is already part of the musical invention of the composer. Moreover, the time relations of the notes to each other, which contribute to the definition of the configuration in question, are no longer dependent on the manual virtuosity of the interpreter, but entirely on the possibilities of perception.

The composer is thus at the same time his own interpreter. At this point the lack of notation becomes specially noticeable. Indeed the signs of musical notation, are more than the graphic symbols of sound. By way of optical perception, these symbols are combined with the inner spiritual hearing and have a high degree of stimulating influence on the interpretation. Musical graphics, on the other hand, which as such can certainly have a value of their own, do not combine with the already fully conceived thought and, at best, rely on the interpretation of approximate values. A solution of the problem of notation of electronic music is an acute necessity for the music of the 21st century.

And now, let me give an illustration from my compositions for electronic music. I don't give this example because I consider it a model or prototype. My only purpose is to demonstrate the problems which I try to tackle. The weak points will, I hope, show the strongly vibrating nerve of the imperfect. Clemenceau said about the formulation of his sentences: "Well-formed sentences are like women of perfect beauty. They are admired but not coveted ... Sometimes I happen to write down sentences with a subject, a verb, an object ... They come as smoothly as if one were gliding over a carpet ... Yet, I have to return to them and re-write them in a rather imperfect way, because a living and a vital creation is imperfect. And above all, one has to write in a vital way!"