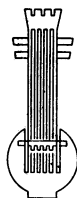


MUSIC IN TIME



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The Impact of the Era on the Interrelation Between Composer, Performer and Listener

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We are urged to revise our perception of the so called triangle: composer, performer, listener. This geometrical symbol is a puzzling metaphor. Far from being an isosceles triangle, it is in fact a chain formed by links, each one of which works according to its own conditions. Creativity is common to all three, although in different degrees. The event proceeds as follows: The composer interprets himself, the performer interprets the composer and the listener interprets the performer through his reactions to what he perceives. The third link, the listener, closes the chain by touching the first link, the composer, while radiating a feedback. As long as a composer is alive the feedback may result in new original creativity, or he may bow to the demand for cheap imitation. After the death of the composer the feedback will reflect what the Germans call "Der Zeitgeist", the spirit of the epoch.

This constellation is in no way unique to music. It is common to all the arts where a performer interposes himself between the creator and the receiver. Today we witness a short-cut in this chain when electronic music is performed straight from the magnetic band over loudspeakers, excluding any personal interpretation of a mediator. A variant of this state of affairs is the record, on which a one-time performance is recorded which will repeat itself exactly whenever the record is played. Likewise, a movie records a play, repeated exactly with every screening.

Through the three links of the chain runs the electricity evoked by the energy of the composer. His material is the sound. The sound is a purely physical event and nothing else. The sound, different from the word, can never express anything perceived by the eye from the outer

world. It penetrates the body through the ear without any message from the external world. Of course, sometimes the sound does animate associations reminding the listener of experienced accoustical events, but this is already a translation with all the shortcomings of translation. Therefore music is not an abstraction of any visible reality — it is a reality in itself, and we should not speak about music as an abstract art. On the one hand, we use the epithet “abstract” for music; on the other hand, we speak about music as a “universal language”, which it is definitely not. What information will a Chinese peasant deduce from Beethoven’s “Great Fugue” in his string quartet? At best he will describe it as “exotic music”, which means an accoustical surprise.

To make the sound a building-stone for musical transcendence mankind has developed a specific grammar for it. From now on we perceive in music two opposite qualities, so closely connected that they never can be separated: The intellectual message dealing with sound constructions, and the sensuous message dealing with sound events. Naturally, influences from the outer world can distort and disturb their equilibrium, as we will see. The decisive line is where the intellectual message meets the sensuous message. The sensitivity of composer, performer and listener develops along this thin line. If this line does not function freely and undisturbed, intellectual discipline in musical thought would lead to austerity, and healthy sensuality would turn into intoxication of the senses. Thus, Plato suggested “that a refined musical sensitivity might be the most civilizing of educational instruments. For a mind educated to musical form and an imagination refined to the finesse of musical emotions cannot remain completely gross in the contacts of life. Moral and musical taste may not be altogether unrelated. For a rational civilization would in its sensuous beauty, its emotional delicacy, and its intellectual order be very like the noblest and the best in music.”

Unfortunately this idealistic imagination of a rational civilization turned into the ugly distortion of a rationalized civilization, meant to serve the propaganda machine of narrow political interests, as well as to be an instrument for industrialization and all the symptoms arising from this process. One of those symptoms in force in our days is the so-called “affluent society”, a society which accumulated so many superfluous properties that the balance between production for the necessities of life and the spiritual edification during the time of rest is deeply disturbed. This situation created the term “entertainment”. People, no

longer able to be creative in their free time, are demanding to be entertained. Entertainment has developed into an industry infiltrating the fine arts and the minds of creative artists. We speak today about "fine arts" and the "arts of entertainment". Kant defined the latter as a mere "play, which is attended with no further interest than that of making time pass unheeded," whereas fine art "has the effect of advancing the culture of the mental powers in the interest of social communication."

As a matter of fact, today many art works contain strong elements of entertainment for the more-or-less affluent society. Let me offer one example from musical composition. Musical rhetoric in Baroque and classical style uses to a large extent sequential techniques, especially in instrumental music. A certain melodic figure is repeated again and again, each time transposed to another pitch degree. This way the repetition is easily recognizable, yet moved to other pitch relations. It is both the same and something else, it keeps the musical phrases moving, provides the virtuous performer with an ideal opportunity to show his craftsmanship, demands from the listener only a minimum of mental effort, and answers to the need for entertainment. Since then daily language speaks about "playing" a musical instrument, pointing at the playfulness in perceiving musical sayings.

Bach was highly sensitive to this automatic procedure in musical composition. Sequences by Bach are always interwoven with single outsiders, forcing the sequence to a new pitch relation, and in this way avoiding automatization and the "passing of time unheeded". Bach went so far as to take a number of concerti, composed by fellow composers and amateur composers of his days, arranged them for harpsichord and corrected, *inter alia*, many places of dull, sterile and automatic sequences. Most of the rearranged concerti are by Antonio Vivaldi, Benedetto Marcello, George Philip Telemann, to mention only the most famous names of those days. The point in this connection is that Vivaldi, for example, became once more one of the most popular composers in our time. The public at large, confused by the evolution of musical language in the 20th century, welcomes enthusiastically the revival of such pleasant, doubtless brilliantly-formulated works like those of Vivaldi, especially as the contents of fine art and easy entertainment are so closely connected. Moreover, recent trends in contemporary music try consciously to reestablish communication with the unsophisticated listener by reintroducing Vivaldi-like sequences into

the musical rhetorics, overlooking the fact that the sequence technique had good reasons in the concept of tonal music in the Baroque and classical style, but is a transplanted foreign body in late 20th century musical thinking.

This report on the adventures of the sequence in the music of Western civilization shows clearly the responsibility of the performer as mediator between the composer and the listener. The pressure of the public on performer and composer to fulfill the listeners' desire for entertainment has no limits, and causes them to avoid the resistance of the easy-going listener. This, in fact, is the impact of the era on the interrelation between the three links of our chain. Every link shares his part in it. The level of culture is measured by the quality of the demands. In the "impact of the era" I am not referring only to occurrences in our days. It started a long time ago. The accumulated problems are now heading for a climax or crisis. By way of preparation for that day let me quote a passage from the famous treatise "The Beautiful in Music", by Edward Hanslick, written in 1854: "The majority of people listening to music float in a sort of singing void. They perceive only emotionally the happy, quick, or the slow majestic flow of the music, and if they listen to several pieces of the same general character they feel only what those pieces have in common, not the difference in construction, the particular and individual qualities of each piece... If the listener does not remain conscious of the craftsmanship, the form, the art of music he hears, then as he is more securely bound by the enchantment of sound, and as the intensity of his enchantment grows it comes to owe less and less to the composer. The number of those who hear, or rather who feel, music like this is very great. As they let themselves be overwhelmed by the elemental power of music, while they remain passive and limp, they seem affected by some super-sensual excitement whose nature is but vaguely influenced by the general character of the music they hear. This attitude towards music is not so much aesthetic as pathological."

This was written approximately 130 years ago. Already then, in the middle of the 19th century, the actual situation of the average music consumer of today was clearly foreseen. Communication between composer, performer and listener exists only insofar as the listener's habit is satisfied. The New York Times recently published in its "Arts and Leisure" supplement an article by the writer Edward Rothstein, who explained the childlike habits of the broad mass of listeners from

the psycho-analytical point of view. This is not the place to go into those details, but something is happening in our days which helps to develop childlike habits into the demands of adults. I refer to the technological progress in cable transmission and the subordinate audio-visual media. The world at large will be and is already to great extent in the TV box of our living room. Environment will change its significance and importance. Focusing on music, we must realize that our musical education systems are lagging dangerously behind mankind's needs. The basic attitude to programs of musical studies on all levels are plainly reflected in the contracted aesthetic habits and thoughtlessness. A few outstanding personalities can only influence individual students who come in contact with them. The broad mass of the music consumers who enjoy musical language in all its presentation, concerts, records, TV, radio, etc., must be guided, carefully directed into the world of musical thinking, and be prepared for a healthy and fruitful exchange of ideas between composer, performer and listener. The media of contemporary mass communication are the obvious instruments to attain this educational goal. To fail to do so will deal a fatal blow to musical education towards the new century. It would amount to holding fast to narcissistic interests, utilizing the present confusion of the consumer. "The impact of the era", the subject of our conference, demands from us a great responsibility.