modernism and Music

AN ANTHOLOGY OF SOURCES

Edited and with Commentary by Daniel Albright

The University of Chicago Press CHICAGO AND LONDON

and repaint images of the Madonna. The Modernist period, then, is no Golden Age. In the passage cited here, Krenek meditates on the role of technology in art, at a time when commercial success seems the main criterion of excellence.

Appended at the end is an excerpt from Krenek's "Music and Mathematics" (1937), in which Krenek toys with the notion of an axiomatics of music, as if a musical composition could be constructed on scientifically irrefutable foundations—a profoundly New Objectivist dream, which would seem to leave little room for the humanity Krenek espoused in 1931.

ERNST KRENEK

from "New Humanity and Old Objectivity" (1931)

The telegraph and telephone make it possible to hear an enormous amount enormously quickly about an enormous number of things, and this fact undoubtedly creates a situation where people do so, and the damage is already done. Once the idea of quantity, as a virtue, becomes rooted in culture (and applied science undoubtedly brings this in its train), it spreads like dry-rot and increases by feeding on itself incessantly. If people know they can know everything, they immediately want to know more. The press puts itself at the service of this news-apparatus, and floods the defenseless public with information. Intellectual inventions, wrung from the imagination with great effort, naturally have very little news value. Probably the best-known fact about the theory of relativity, the fact that has made the most impact, is that Einstein[74] plays the violin; this after all, is hard news.

Nowadays the radio fills in the gap between the morning and evening newspaper so that there is not a moment of silence in which anyone might become conscious of a void. . . .

The truth of the matter is that every society has its art, and the aristocrats of prerevolutionary Germany had Beethoven because they valued intellect and perhaps even had some themselves. I am not saying that as a class they understood Beethoven, even approximately, or could have met him on an equal footing intellectually, but they valued what he did enough to spend time and money on it. Today this social class no longer exists; instead we have the general public and that procures what it wants to spend its time and money on. But since its aim is to be economical with both, the goods it gets are correspondingly low in value.

Now the really essential question arises: is it possible for art to go along with this

74. The physicist Albert Einstein (1879–1955) was an amateur violinist, and even premièred Martinů's (not difficult) *Five Madrigal Stanzas* (1943). His enjoyment of the violin was to provide a motive in the Philip Glass opera *Einstein on the Beach* (1976), shortly after Einstein appeared as a tool of capitalist tyranny in Paul Dessau's opera *Einstein* (1974).

social change? The answer is bound to be no. . . . It is well known that in a majority, the standard is always set by the lowest and never by the highest, for the level is a line common to all and that is always the bottom line, not the top one.

Despite this state of affairs, attempts have recently been made, and more will be made in the future, to create an art, particularly an art of the musical theatre, which will fit the enlarged society as earlier art fitted the limited society—in other words to find a basis for an art that the general public could enter into and assimilate. In this connection I must mention my own efforts. They consisted mainly of including some parts of the rhythmic and harmonic elements of jazz in my works. The motives that led me to this now strike me as twofold. Firstly I thought that by using the jazz elements I might hit on an atmosphere which would fit the collective feeling of the age. As jazz music in practice enjoyed undisputed mastery and general validity, it seemed conceivable that from it one might derive an artistic means that after all belonged to the sphere of music, and so was capable of the most serious and intellectual development, while at the same time having a natural place in the life of modern man. This, I felt, might give me the possibility of saying something generally valid.

The second consideration was an internal musical one. As must be fairly well known, there has been a complete disruption of musical systems of organization along with the democratic opening-up of the conventions of life. At first, atonality, which tried to replace these systems, extended the range of musical means to infinity, theoretically at least, so that today there is really nothing that is musically "impossible." Every conceivable harmonic combination can be produced at any time, without special preparation, and a new organization from this quarter is not to be hoped for. So far, atonality has not proved particularly suitable for versatile dramatic presentation and in the circumstances jazz, with its stereotyped harmonic and rhythmic elements, seemed an effective protection against the ineffectual ubiquity of all musical possibilities, because it offered a sort of new convention. But there was never any idea, least of all in my mind, of its being a complete substitute for every other kind of expressive world; only if that were successfully achieved would the product really deserve the name of "jazz opera." In my attempt, as in all the others I know of, jazz was only alluded to at the points demanded by the action; apart from this the harmony was colored by its elements, thus guaranteeing the homogeneity of the whole and justifying the way I had deliberately limited the means—a protection against atonality.

Looking back on the results, one is bound to be aware that works of this kind were only connected with the general public "atmospherically"—that is, by being reminiscent of the familiar pop-style—while their real artistic value remained irrelevant and obscure. Nevertheless it must be admitted that in this sphere the good is still usually more successful than the inferior, while just the reverse seems to be true of operetta, for example. The amazement and agitation I caused by showing a station and having

somebody telephone on the stage have since died down, and there is not much point now in going into the programmatic interpretations people read into these things. There have always been naturalistic operas, and the props, if they are no more than that, are probably the least important symptoms of an attitude of mind. From any moderately reasonable point of view, my *Jonny spielt auf* is one of the unhappiest examples to quote in connection with Neue Sachlichkeit, "new objectivity," for although new objects occur in it they do so only as objects surrounding present-day people, without proclaiming any positive attitude concerning them. Nobody prays to the engine or lauds the virtues of the telephone; these things merely play a subordinate, functional role as props needed by the action, and there is no more reason why a present-day work should do without them than why a drama taking place in the past should do without the modern props of that age.

But there are other efforts along these lines which must be taken much more seriously; in them the essential thing is not just using daily objects for personal reasons, as in *Jonny spielt auf,* but assenting to everyday aims as such. Of course it is true that anything can be made into artistic material, but it is essential that the object should stand in a dynamic relationship to man. The object must release a feeling;[75] to apply this to the complicated conditions of a theatrical process, the object must be an obvious vehicle of dramatic movement within the course of an emotional pattern translated into action. For example, the fact that there is a telephone means absolutely nothing artistically; however intensely the instrument is accepted, as it may be by many people, this cannot give any occasion for artistic creation. For even if you wanted to address a poem to the telephone you would have no choice but to gear it to man's use of the machine, its position in man's life; and to get the emotional content needed for the poem you would have to examine whether and how the fact of telephoning plays a part in the expression of man's inner life. Description alone is not enough, and even a list of all the component parts of an aeroplane would not add up to a Homeric epic.

On the stage the telephone can only be used as a prop, a characteristic feature of a milieu, as stage-coaches, distaffs, shepherds' crooks, spears and swords were features of other milieus, and no one milieu is *a priori* better than another. Nothing further can be derived from this—no theory, no aesthetic position, no dogma, nothing to gladden the heart of the philistine thirsting for knowledge. But the Neue Sachlichkeit I have criticized puts the prop in the center of the picture and so reflects the situation described

75. Compare T. S. Eliot in 1919: "The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative"; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked" (*Selected Essays* [New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1960], 124–25).

above—the fact that the technical devices created by man have long since become ends in themselves and reduced their erstwhile masters to servitude. Instead of machines serving us silently and exactly, and setting us free to find ourselves more quickly and easily, they get in our way and themselves become the monuments they have destroyed, for which we have such an ineradicable taste. The divine in man has been replaced by the fact that he can travel faster than a bird flies; and in the advertisements, the inventor of a new kind of engine rivals the creator of the world.

We now have the "rhythm of the age" and so know all the less about the rhythms of music; we are bored to death with the "tempo of the age," but nobody is allowed to fall behind. Now I conceive of a work of art as the intellectual form of an emotional content, and so can see little point in an art which rejects emotion as too human and not mechanical enough, and intellect as too exhausting. However, the "easiness" of an object is one of the first conditions of its intrinsic value in this age. As I indicated, we are dealing with a race of overworked and distrait consumers. . . .

This "new objectivity" has led to another, equally doubtful venture in the specific field of music. I mean the musical guilds and societies with their amateur music and Gebrauchsmusik. This is a predominantly German movement which sees, quite correctly, that today there is no society as a culture-medium for music, and so is trying to use the "general public," as I call it, as a culture-medium instead. Its promoters are rightly trying to build up a new amateur-structure, but unfortunately they are doing it by trying to get down to the sunken level of present-day people. In other words, this is another attempt to combat the "de-animation" of life on the ground of that very de-animation, and to compete with the "convenience" of present-day objects. The error is that in the cultural field one does not have to compete in convenience—only in love, talent and effort. Imagine trying to write music so easy to play that even a distrait, overworked and unimaginative consumer feels inclined to buy! . . .

Nothing has really been done about meeting the spirit of the age, in any of these ways. If earlier art epochs fitted the spirit of their ages, it was because age and spirit were not such opposites as they now are. I am not trying to advocate any one trend, or condemn any other, because really there are no trends. We know that the truly great works of every age are essentially alike, whatever historical "movement" we neatly fit them into on the grounds of their equipment or some unimportant individual traits. Just as Expressionism, as a movement, perished because of the daubers who thought every ill-splashed canvas was an example of abstract painting, so Neue Sachlichkeit is dying of the support given by those who believe that every postcard is a work of art, that writing a drama consists merely of setting four out of five scenes in a brothel and filling them with the coarser swear-words. Fortunately a new movement will soon emerge and then we shall see that the good works of this period are still good even if nobody knows that they were once supposed to be Neue Sachlichkeit, or why.

It is humanity, directness, uniqueness, the originality of the experience that make a work of art, not the subject-matter, or the intention behind it, or the artist's attitude to an ephemeral public. "Objectivity" is a process but not something to express, and to this extent every art, however Romantic, is "objective" if it is good. For if so, it aims at expressing itself clearly, and this is the essential thing about every usable artistic method, whatever intellectual purpose it may be devoted to; in so far as any art attains this clarity it may be called "objective." Consequently I would like to mention the old Sachlichkeit, the good old Sachlichkeit of Sophocles and Goethe, Shakespeare and Novalis,[76] Monteverdi and Schubert. And humanity, in the work of art the fact that it centers on man and the things that always affect him—love, faith, hope, passion, intellect, grace—this humanity should only be new because we of today have to recapture it anew. The battle of the spirit cannot be settled on the level of the inanimate object.

From *Exploring Music: Essays by Ernst Krenek,* trans. Margaret Shenfield and Geoffrey Skelton (New York: October House, 1966), 49–50, 53–60.

ERNST KRENEK

from "Music and Mathematics" (1937)

In this general form [i.e., sound as a symbol of spiritual reality] our engagement of music with mathematics touches on the domain of the so-called *axiomatics.* By that term we understand that sort of mathematical science which proves that no absolute validity is attained from the systems of arithmetic and geometry, but that validity depends on determinate presuppositions which are set down in axioms. An axiom is usually defined as a proposition that is true and whose truth is immediately evident, but that cannot be proved—moreover on account of its certainty it does not need to be proved. To my mind the shedding of new light in this area is one of the most magnificent results of modern mathematics, and I can never reread the crucial sentences of the first section of David Hilbert's *Foundations of Geometry* (Leipzig 1922)[77] without the characteristic trembling, aroused by encountering fundamental knowledge. Hilbert says: "We think of three different systems of things: the things of the first system we call points and denominate with A, B, C . . . ; the things of the second system we call lines and denominate with a, b, c . . . ; the things of the third system we call planes and denominate with α, β, γ. . . . We think of points, lines, and planes in certain reciprocal relations and denominate these relations through words such as 'lie,' 'between,' 'paral-

76. Novalis, pseudonym of the German Romantic poet Friedrich von Hardenberg (1772–1801), whose "Hymns of Night" influenced the rhetoric of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde.*

77. The mathematician David Hilbert (1862–1943) hoped to devise a set of axioms sufficient to generate the whole of mathematics, but Kurt Gödel proved that this was impossible.