MODERN MUSIC: QUO VADIS?

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It has been 28 years since the late Donald J. Grout, known to all students of western musical history as the undergraduate bard, labeled the main currents of the first half of the 20th century.[1] In one chapter entitled "20th Century Music," the last of 20, Grout singles out folklorism, neoclassicism and dodecaphony as the main directions in early 20th century Europe and America. The "triumvirate" is not disputed, but rather, quite widely accepted among scholars, composers and teachers.

Do the labels still hold in the second half of the century? Trends of the post-World War II era suggest that they do; but also, that they are perhaps not in equal balance and that the labels encompass much more than originally suggested--that and more.

One of the major phenomena of the century, one dealt with lightly or not at all by "conventional" historians, is the change in relationship between what H. Wiley Hitchcock calls the "cultivated" and "vernacular" traditions, *i.e.* the European tradition of "art music" as opposed to folk and popular traditions handed down orally or by performance practice.[2] Not to observe this change is to miss the contemporary boat.

No longer in the 20th century a conflict of the genteel versus the crude, the relationship between the two has grown in significance. One does not perhaps outweigh the other; rather, each has had the most profound impact upon the other and in certain areas, has enhanced one another's development.

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There seems no need to belabor the observation that contemporary technology has disseminated new styles with greater speed than ever. We don't need to walk 83 miles to Lübeck as did Sebastian Bach, to hear the world's greatest living organist. Today's musical star is to be had in our living rooms and libraries, as well as in our concert halls. In unprecedented fashion, it's all at our fingertips--turn on the VCR, the laser disc, the computer; it's there for the taking, from the "Spring" Symphony to Springsteen, the choices of both new AND old have never been wider, and while like Stravinsky, we may tremble before the possibilities, we've never had it so good, quantitatively speaking.[3]

Why, then, the uneasiness in our time? Why do those nurtured in more historic and classic traditions look askance at the phenomenon of rock, while teen boppers wonder whether or not a composer over 30 (*i.e.* dead more than 30 years) is to be trusted. It is a curious phenomenon of our century that historicism is so widely revered and practiced. The common-place musical program of the previous three centuries stressed new works. Only in our own time, since about mid 19th century, have we been so preoccupied with music of the past. In any case, we now have greater access than ever to the music of history and of the present day.

A point of departure for understanding attitudes of today may be found in a study by Professor Leonard Meyer of the University of Chicago.[4] This study was published 12 years ago under title *Music, the Arts and Ideas*. It was the first attempt to evaluate directions in contemporary music and to relate these directions to those of the past. Some issue, though not significant, has been taken with Meyer's viewpoint. It is still the most recent basic work in contemporary aesthetics. While we can't dissect this copious work in detail, let's look at a few of the main points.

Meyer assents that, since the Renaissance, a kinetic-syntactic mode has dominated traditional western music. This music is goal directed, comprised of tones all of which can be seen in some kind of functional relationship to each other.

Music, like language, has depended upon existence of an ordered probability system, a stochastic process, which serves to make one musical event relevant to another. For communication, symbols used have to have some significance or implications for both composer and listener.

As a piece of traditional music unfolds, the numerous possibilities for direction and development are gradually narrowed. As more tones, more rhythmic relationships are added, possible communications become more limited and a pattern begins to emerge--based on experience.

The pattern is built by a specific ratio of predictable events to unpredictable events. In fact, Meyer would assert that early stages of a style are marked by excessive reduncancy, while later stages are manneristic and marked by active pursuit of less common or probable facets--at least this pertains to style up to our time.

This ratio of predictable to unpredictable is expressed by Meyer in formula of information redundancy and, at height of given style, this ratio is in balance. Absence of redundancy means presence of information and vice versa.

Meyer perceives in our time a change in the direction of reduced redundancy and increased information. Some issue can be taken with that: Steve Reich's exercises in perpetual motion; Terry Riley's dirge, "In C," are so redundant as to drive one up the wall. But in general, Meyer's thesis, as of 1968, seemed accurate and, if somewhat one-sided, still is.

What Meyer did not discuss is the equally profound change in the opposite direction: in the popular realm, the direction of increased redundancy and decreased information. Music intended for an educated, cerebral elite has its counterpole in music

accessible to the majority, a truism whose comprehension is essential for understanding the contemporary scene. Even his three music types or categorizations reveal to some degree this dichotomy.

Meyer divides music today into three categories: Traditional, Formalistic and Transcendental.

Traditional art is just that, rooted in prior experience--it *represents* reality, according to Meyer. The concept presupposes the absence of any desire to experiment. Perhaps the later works of Hindemith and the American, Samuel Barber, belong to this category.

Formalist art *constructs* a reality; it depends upon elegance of design, ingenuity of process, precision of rhetoric, a droitness of language. The works of Schoenberg, Elliott Carter, George Rochberg and George Crumb can be posed as examples.

Transcendental art *presents* reality: it involves chance or improvisatory elements: the event cannot be foreconstructed; it happens. The representative composers of this direction are, likely, John Cage, Lukas Foss and Stockhausen.

Two of Meyer's three trends can be seen as extensions of Grout's three: traditional art as the continuation of folklorism, traditional and formalist art as a meeting ground for neoclassicism and formalist as an extension of dodecaphony. The last, transcendental, would appear to be symptomatic of the post war swing of the pendulum, away from formalism more than tradition, away from Grout's traditional categories to a freer expression. It is this uncharted (literally and figuratively) territory that may most accurately reflect the changing relationship between old and new, serious and pop. Today's composer wants to communicate, not stun or impress.

Integral serialism as an outgrowth of Schoenberg's twelve tone technique, flourishing during the 50s and 60s in the works of Milton Babbitt, Charles Wuorinen and others, has become a lame duck. Neoclassicism, or what Theodor Adorno labeled "music about

music," was so closely associated with Stravinsky, that that too has grown rigidified as the 70s have given way to the 80s.[5] New music is to an increasing degree, about reality.

We have seen neither the abandonment of structure, nor that of evocation of elements of the past. But they seem geared to a broader purpose and audience. As the 19th century artist had to consider his new, expanded middle class audience, today's composer must be aware of a still wider audience for whom classical music is but one of many types and styles.

The 80s are an era of fusion: of ivory tower with accessible expression, of old instruments with new, of classical with jazz with rock with pop with folk, etc. It is no happenstance that broader, and younger, audiences know who Philip Glass and Laurie Anderson are, but have no identification with the Columbia-Princeton School, Boulez and other of the "post avant-garde."

It can be safely predicted that composers of today will bring into question the entire concept of "classical music" and what that means. It refers to an increasingly narrow and circumscribed body of music on which one ostensibly needs an early weaning for full appreciation. Today, less than ever, does the label have a broad or viable applicability.

Rightly or wrongly, the days of writing for an esoteric few have come to a close. Today's composer DOES care if you listen, Babbitt's infamous title notwithstanding.[6]

Homage to tradition is paid by Lukas Foss' and George Rochberg's procedures of "leakage" or quotation. The sound mass explorations of Georgy Ligeti, Krystof Penderecki and George Crumb are a formalist extension to inclusion or realities of Hiroshima and Spanish symbolism. John Cage's transcendentalism, regarded in the 50s as a bad joke and later as a vehicle for cult worship, is now seen as the major progenitor of art as process, an event in which all present are participants.

No style is going to "win" over others; only attitude will

prevail. You may be sure that the composer who gives genuinely of his total experience for the purpose of genuine dialogue with listeners, is the name you'll hear in years to come. Tomorrow's composer is always alert and responsive to all signals around him; he will not dismiss a category of music *per se*, but will choose wisely among them all and find that avenue which offers best possibilities for a unique experience.

END NOTES

1. Donald J. Grout, *A History of Western Music*, New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1960 (3rd ed. 1980), 684.

2. H. Wiley Hitchcock, *Music in the United States: an Historical Introduction*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969 (2nd ed. 1974), 51.

3. *Igor Stravinsky, An Autobiography*, New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1962 (original French ed. 1935), passim.

   Stravinsky here discussed the dilemma of choosing an appropriate compositional direction when so many are possible.

4. Leonard B. Meyer, *Music, the Arts and Ideas*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967. Chapters 7 - 9 passim (see charts pp. 119 and 222).

5. Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, New York: Seabury Press, 1973 (trans. A. Mitchell Culver and W. V. Blomster), 206.

6. Milton Babbitt, "Who Cares if You Listen?" in *The American Composer Speaks*, ed. Gilbert Chase, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1966, 234-46.