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Music of the Common Tongue

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PREFACE TO THE 1998 EDITION

Music of the Common Tongue remains my favorite of my three children, and to see it take its place alongside the other two in this Music/Culture series is a source of great joy to me. It was my second book (always the hardest to write), and it took me six years' hard and often despairing slog, not a minute of which do I now regret. It went out into the world in 1987 defaced by any number of editorial and typographical slip ups, with whatever virtues it possessed concealed by unsuitable cover designs and without the slightest ripple of publicity to help it on its way. Yet it has survived, and now it has been taken up by a sympathetic publisher and is being sent out once more, this time properly dressed and with the worst of its blemishes removed, ready to embark on what I believe will be its proper trajectory. I could not hope for more; to make it entirely as I should have liked it to be would have necessitated resetting the entire long text, a task which would be beyond the already generously allocated resources of its new patron.

In the Introduction to the book I said that I intended it as a tribute, to those known and unknown thousands of musicians (and as always I meant by that word all those who perform and compose, not just those who make their living from doing so) who created that way of doing music 'to which we can only give the awkward name of "Afro-American"'. That phrase, like the rest of the book, was written twelve years or more ago; these days, of course, we do not give anything or anyone the name of 'Afro-American', and I can only apologize to African American readers of this book, and to anyone else who might be offended by it, for what has become in the intervening years a solecism. Like the British spelling and the overlong paragraphs which make the book less reader-friendly than it might otherwise be, its use

in this new edition is a consequence of having been unable to reset it. Those readers who notice that it has been corrected on the title page will, I hope, take the desire for the deed in the body of the text.

As I said, I intended a tribute, and an affirmation that 'by any reasonable reckoning of the function of music in human life, the Afro[*sic*]-American tradition is the major music of the west in the twentieth century'; and in order to support that affirmation I needed to engage in a consideration of what *is* the function of music in human life. It was there that the two alternating streams of discussion that give the book its structure had their origin.

But I discovered that those twin streams made it possible to interpret the book in another way, as being *primarily* a discussion of the nature of the music act and of its function in human life, with African American ways of doing music adduced only as an example in point. Fair enough; even though that was not my intention, if that is how readers choose to interpret me I cannot tell them they are wrong. But it also seems to leave room for another interpretation, which was made by so many reviewers when the book was first issued that I must comment on it. Somehow I seem to have given the impression that I think of African American and European classical music as being entirely separate streams, and that like Mowgli's four-legged friends I make a clear-cut distinction which somehow carries a moral or ethical load: African American good, European classical bad. Further (and in spite of what I thought was an explicit denial), I was maintaining that the former was in a state of perfect health while the latter was degenerate, its 'ossification', as one critic put it, 'contrived by a threatened if not wilfully malign Establishment'.

It is true that I devoted a chapter to the 'Decline of a Music'. I see no reason today to modify my opinion on that; the decline has become if anything even more obvious in the ten years since I first remarked on it. But I did not welcome the news then, if news it was, and I do not rejoice over it now. I certainly did not and do not subscribe to any mind-boggling conspiracy theories to explain it, and I continue to listen to performances in the European classical tradition

no less than in other traditions and to play as many of the works of that tradition as my modest piano technique will permit. As for the other interpretations of my book, I can only affirm what my historical chapters must surely make abundantly clear: that African American music is the offspring of both Europe and Africa, and that like all offspring it partakes of the nature of both parents even if it is not the same as either.

Apart from that I think my book is perfectly able to look after itself.

I cannot let this opportunity pass of thanking the editorial and production staff of Wesleyan University Press and UPNE for their helpfulness, good humor and efficiency, and above all I want to thank Robert Walser and Susan McClary for their vision and the support they gave, which revived my flagging energies. Had they not listened, one afternoon on a terrace looking over the roofs of Sitges to the sea, to my complaints about the fate of my two books, those books would today be in limbo, while the third would remain a muddled bundle of manuscripts and computer files.

Sitges, Spain
February 1998

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