Music of the Common Tongue

Christopher Small

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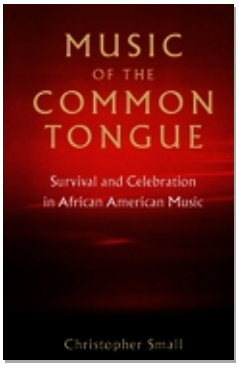

Chapter 2

ON THE RITUAL PERFORMANCE

In a highly critical article on modern American painting, the journalist Tom Wolfe once wrote: 'Frankly, these days without a theory to go with it, I can't *see* a painting'.[1] He was right in a more general sense than perhaps he knew, since each of us brings to the processes of both artistic creation and the contemplation of art works a number of notions which, although it might be dignifying them too much to call them a *theory* (since for the most part they are unexamined and even held unawares), do nevertheless add up to a set of assumptions and values. Since I intend in this book to examine critically some commonly held assumptions concerning the nature and function of the art of music, it seems only fair to make the reader aware of my own premises, in so far as I myself am aware of them (since it is not possible ever to become consciously aware of *all* the assumptions on which one operates). I must ask the reader therefore to bear with me while I rehearse and enlarge on them; they are simple but they are also, I believe, profound in their implications, not only for our approach to the art of music, but also (since what I might call my pre-assumption is that the way in which we approach music has a bearing on the way in which we approach the business of living) for our very lives themselves. These assumptions are open to either verification or falsification in the best scientific manner by reference to the musical experience which every single one us has had, and it is indeed vital that the reader should bring the evidence of his or her own experience to bear on what I have to say, since that can in itself be a first step towards reclaiming the musicality and the power of musical judgement that belong to all of us.

My first assumption is that *music is not primarily a thing or a collection of things, but an activity in which we engage*. One might say that it is not properly a noun at all, but a verb; the absence of a verb in English, as in most European languages, to express this activity is significant, and may point towards the European attitude to the making of music which I discussed in the previous chapter. Certainly the conceptual gap is interesting. I intend using, in this book, from now on, the verb 'to *music*' (after all, one can say 'to dance' so why not?) and especially its present participle, '*musicking*', to express the act of taking part in a musical performance. In order to narrow the gap that is assumed to exist between performers and listeners in European musicking, I define the word to include not only performing and composing (what is composition but the preparation of material for performance?) but also listening and even dancing to music; all those involved in any way in a musical performance can be thought of as musicking. My coining of this verb should not be put down to perversity, eccentricity or an attempt to be clever; it will simply clarify the discussion that follows. I shall be using it throughout this book without further apology or explanation.

We have seen how European musicians are inclined to consider music as entities; it is in the present-day classical tradition of both performance and composition that we find that this attitude has completely taken over the musical process. Classical musicians and listeners alike today view music as things — treasured symphonies, sonatas, operas, tone poems and concertos handed down to us from a glorious past, as well as those musical works which are offered to audiences by present-day composers. On the one hand, the act of composition is seen as the bringing into existence of one of these sonic objects, a process which does not concern the listener any more than does the making of the radio on which he may be listening to it. On the other hand, the act of performance is seen as rendering a service to those objects, which are assumed to have an existence over and above any possible performance of them; the performer burnishes them and presents them as best he can to an audience whose task is to contemplate them, in stillness and silence. It is never suggested that either performers or listeners have a creative

role to play in the proceedings; the music-object is complete before either of them gets to play or hear a note of it. Writings on music in this tradition concentrate their attention on the nature of these objects, on those who created them and on the circumstances of their creation, while the act of performance, on the other hand, receives remarkably little attention; there is not even an entry under 'Performance' in the 1981 edition of *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. This may be due to the evanescence of performances, as opposed to the permanence of the musical score, which can be taken out of time and studied at as much leisure as it appears to warrant; performances, on the other hand, can be studied only in real time, as they pass. Further, objects can be duplicated, while every performance is unique, if only because it takes place in a particular place at a particular time.

This state of affairs in all probability did not always exist; Bach clearly regarded his church cantatas simply as something for the choir to sing next Sunday (Evan Parker's phrase 'improvising on paper' sums up the process neatly),[2] while Mozart, for example, seems to have regarded composition as the provision of something to play; it is significant that the occasion for the performance of nearly every work of his is known. And here we have the first statement of what will become an important theme of this book: the idea that the great musical works of the European past, while coming down to us more or less unchanged, have nonetheless had their social function, and thus their meaning, altered by the changing nature of the situation in which they are performed today.

It is, then, the *act* of musicking that is central to the whole art of music the world over. In most of the world's musical cultures this is taken for granted without even having to think about it; it is only the dominance of the classical tradition in the west that obliges us to state it so bluntly. It follows that whatever meaning there is in music is to be found in that act rather than in the actual works themselves, and it is therefore of the musical event rather than of the musical work that we should ask our questions: the really interesting one is not, 'What does this composition mean?' but 'What does it mean when this performance takes place at this time, in this place,

with these musicians, before this audience?.' The performance may or may not be of a pre-existing composition; in most of the human race's musicking the acts of composition and performance are simultaneous, while there may not necessarily be an audience at all apart from the performers. The answer to the second question may well be different from that to the first, and, in the case of a written composition, will change considerably during the history of its performance, becoming often quite different from that which its composer envisaged. Consider this: 'The pious Bach, were he to return to us today, would, after recovering from his astonishment at seeing his music performed at all, probably be scandalized to witness the routine annual revival of his *St Matthew Passion*, conducted by a Catholic, Jew or unbeliever, for the aesthetic edification of a miscellaneous population in Carnegie Hall for an admission fee of $3.60, federal tax included. This *Passion*, like the several hundred religious cantatas, was conceived as an integral and inseparable portion of the Divine Service'.[3] Further, he would probably find that most of those present would be quite unable to understand his indignation.

We should notice that, if the act of performance contains the central meaning of music, that does not mean that what is played is without significance; what is played is clearly a part of the act of performance and must be taken into account. The second question thus does not negate the first, but rather subsumes it.

The second assumption is equally simple: *everyone, every normally endowed human being, is born capable of musicking*. The gift of music is as natural and universal as the gift of speech which it so resembles. In many if not most of the world's societies it is assumed that to take part in a musical performance and to dance is as commonplace as to take part in a conversation, and indeed, talking, singing and even dancing may flow into one another as elements of daily social intercourse. John Blacking, in his account of the Venda of South Africa, says of them that they 'learn to understand the sounds of music as they understand speech,'[4] while J.H.K. Nketia says of African communities that 'every member of a community could be involved in one or more of the musical events that take place in community life.'[5] Of the Maori of New Zealand, Elsdon

Best said: 'The Maori folk composed songs on many different occasions when we would never think of doing so. If a woman was accused of indolence, or some other fault, by her husband, she would in many cases retaliate, or ease her mind, by composing and singing a song pertaining to the subject. In the case of a person being insulted or slighted in any way, he was likely to act in a similar way. Songs were composed for the purpose of greeting visitors, of imparting information, of asking for assistance, and many other purposes of an unusual nature from our point of view. Singing entered largely into the social and ceremonial life of the people and in making a speech the Maori breaks readily into song.'[6] Margaret Mead tells us that in the Balinese *gamelan* orchestra the leading metallophone player may be a child so small that he needs a stool to reach the keys, and comments: 'In a continuum within which the distinction between the most gifted and the least gifted is muted by the fact that everyone participates, the distinction between child and adult — as performer, as actor, and musician — is lost except in those cases where the distinction is ritual, as where a special dance form requires a little girl who has not yet reached puberty,'[7] while Colin McPhee says simply that in Bali 'music is above all a popular art'.[8] And finally, the great pioneer musicologist Curt Sachs: 'Every Eskimo must know the art of composition, and in supreme contempt, a jealous Eskimo woman would sneer at her rival, "She can't dance, she can't even sing".'[9] One could multiply such examples, but those will suffice.

Apart from the evidence from other societies, we should note that the entire popular-music industry is based on this assumption, at least as far as the ability to understand the music is concerned; no-one is excluded through being unable to comprehend what the musicians are doing, and no-one seems to need formal instruction in order to do so. But in addition, it is no less certain that everyone has the power to create something of his or her own, in music as much as in speech. The assumption of universal ability to create does not have to mean that everyone is equally gifted, either in speech or in music; we accept without difficulty the idea that some are more gifted with words than others, so that we have poets, orators, writers and bards, and in the same way it is not

difficult to imagine that some are more gifted musically than others while still acknowledging a bedrock creativity in all. As with speech, what the individual does in music is couched in a language that has to be learned, but that learning takes place not in a formal situation but in the encounters of everyday life. There are vernaculars of music, no less than of speech, which everyone knows how to use; those who believe themselves incapable of 'speaking the vernacular' in music are that way because they have been taught — too often, alas, in school — that they cannot.

For this assumption of universal musicality is at odds with an unspoken assumption that is fostered in schools and other formal educational institutions, and encouraged by the official arbiters of the arts in our society, of a kind of pyramid of musical ability. At the top of the pyramid, tiny in number and exceptional in the nature and extent of their gifts, are those who are capable of a genuine creative act: the composers, who, it is assumed, require many years of arduous study before they can put those gifts to use. Below them, more numerous, are the performers, also a gifted and admired group, if a little lower in social esteem than the first. They do not for the most part believe themselves capable of a creative act (the two abilities *may* be found in the same person, but never at the same time; a performer who also composes will consider himself bound when working in the former capacity to respect to the letter the text which he has provided in the latter), and indeed are inclined to react with displeasure when called upon by the composer to make any creative gestures during a performance. In the classical tradition are to be found a large number of professional musicians who have never, in the course of their entire careers, made a single composition, or even a public creative gesture, that they can call their own. Mozart, for one, would have been puzzled by this state of affairs, since he regarded it always as part of his brief as a teacher to teach composition as well as instrumental skills, even, as his letters often remind us despairingly, to the least talented of his pupils.

Below this layer of the pyramid are those whose lot it is simply to contemplate and 'appreciate' the music objects created by composers and presented by performers, that large

group who call themselves 'listeners' or 'music lovers', and who do not imagine, even though there may be among them many competent amateur musicians, that they might ever take part in a public performance, so completely has the culture been taken over by professionalism. Again, Mozart and his contemporaries might have been surprised at this division, since the audiences to whom they played and for whom they composed expected to take part in the performances; a fully professional orchestral concert was a rarity in Europe up to the middle of the nineteenth century. These 'music lovers' are still in a minority in the society as a whole; the Chairman of the Arts and Recreation Committee of the Greater London Council estimated in 1983 on a potential audience for the London concert halls of about a quarter of a million out of a population of about seven million in the Greater London area[10] — about one in thirty, which is probably an over-estimate considering that the catchment area for those halls is actually much larger than just London itself.

Below this again are the remainder of the population, that majority to whom it would appear that classical music has nothing to say, despite the establishment in schools over several generations now of music appreciation classes. Appearances are deceptive, but an image not unlike that of the pyramid exists in the minds of most westerners, and most are fairly sure of the place they occupy in it, even though the boundaries of the layers are not quite as clear-cut as I have suggested. But such is the power of the image, which is instilled through the state education system and other bearers of the official values of our society, that there is a large number of people who, for whatever reason, have not become assimilated into the upper levels of the pyramid and believe themselves to be unmusical, 'tone-deaf' (whatever that might be) or otherwise unfit to take part in any musical activity whatsoever. It is, of course, pernicious nonsense, because every human being is born with the gift of music. It is one of the qualities that make us human, and we are less than fully human to the extent that it remains underdeveloped in us or is allowed to atrophy.

My third assumption is this: *since musicking always takes place in a social context, its meaning has a social as well as an individual*

dimension. Or, to be more accurate, the social and the individual meanings of the act of musicking are intertwined, being concerned with the participants' feelings of their own identity, of who they really are. The social dimension arises from the fact that individual identity, who one is, is based on relationships; who one is is how one relates, to oneself, to other people, to the natural and even to the supernatural world, and musicking is concerned with the exploration, the affirmation and the celebration of relationships.

Relationships are built at every stage into the musical act, relationships not only between the sounds created but also between the participants — among the performers, between performers and listeners (assuming that there are listeners), and among the listeners. In an earlier book I attempted to show the ways in which musical forms and techniques (that is, the ways in which people go about making the sounds of music) in a particular culture reflect, and in turn influence, the ways in which the members of that culture view themselves and their relation to the world, and I explored this idea in some detail in the case of western classical music. What I said there I still believe to hold good, but it needs to be extended to the consideration not only of the sounds but also of every aspect of that social event which is a musical performance. We therefore need to devote a little more space to this topic.

All of us derive a good deal of our feelings of who we are from the response which other people make to us; how they react to what we say and do is a major shaping force on our sense of identity (I suspect that Robinson Crusoe's greatest problem alone on his desert island would have been in convincing himself of his own existence). In western society, the most obvious medium through which we explore those responses, and make our own initiatives, thereby establishing our relationships with other people, is speech; but in many other cultures, notably those of Africa, which remain strong in the inheritance of black Americans, music and dance and what we generally call the performance arts are no less important. I believe that they play an important, although generally unrecognized, part in the relationships of Europeans and Euro-Americans as well. But, since speech is a mode of everyday communication to which westerners are more

accustomed than they are to music, let us look briefly at some of the aspects of such an everyday matter as a conversation.

Conversation is by its very nature what we might call improvised, that is, it involves a strong element of spontaneous action, either initiatory or as a response to the initiatives of others. But the spontaneity is never total; in the first place we require a mutual acceptance of the rules of the language before any contact can be made. This acceptance will probably be, at least as far as native speakers of the language are concerned, tacit and even unconscious, but is no less necessary for that, since there can be no meanings without rules. Those rules are not only those of the verbal language, its grammar and syntax; when we converse we use also vocal inflection, physical gesture and posture, all of which contribute to the establishment of a relationship with our interlocutors. None of these is invented from scratch; all consist of pre-existing materials — words, tones, gestures, bodily postures and so on — which are organized according to rules and which need to be learned. Further, not even the arrangements we make of these materials need be new; most conversations consist largely of a common stock of phrases and utterances, quotations, clichés and references, which are often merely permutated.

Conversation is seldom if ever wholly about its ostensible topic, but is concerned primarily with the establishment and the exploration of identity. Each participant is affirming who he or she is, exploring the implications of that identity, sometimes trying on an identity to see how it fits, and at the same time sensing and testing the responses of others to that affirmation. Thus identity is not static, but develops and evolves along with the relationships which are at the same time established within the group of interlocutors — relationships not only of liking and disliking, but also of dominance, submission, equality, dependence and so on. These relationships are mediated by the kind of language adopted, not only of words but also of vocal inflection, posture and gesture, as are the degrees of intimacy sought or achieved: lawyers or doctors discussing a case, debaters on a platform, strangers on a train discussing the weather, newly-met lovers talking across the pillow, a long-married couple in the bed they have shared

for thirty years, teachers in a staffroom, drinkers in a bar, the monarch 'chatting' with subjects, actors performing the playwright's lines, slave talking to master, master talking to slave — all of these serve to affirm and to reinforce identities and the kinds of relationship that exist between the participants — and the spectators, should there be any. All contain preformed material in various ways and proportions and represent a balance between premeditation and spontaneity — or, rather, the spontaneity is mediated through the preformed elements. None of those encounters would be possible without the existence of an agreed language, not only of word and syntax but also of vocal inflection and bodily gesture.

All of this activity is very important to the individuals concerned; in fact, we might say that it is the most important of all human activities, since it involves the central concern of human life: the quest for who we really are. There are other forms of encounter too, through which we explore various aspects of identity: sports, fighting, even crime — and artistic activity, above all perhaps musicking and dancing, through which relationships and identity (the two are the obverse and reverse of each other) are explored, affirmed and celebrated, on perhaps a more profound level, in that the process is less conscious, than in talking. As Alan Lomax has said: 'The performing arts acquire their quiet and unobtrusive authority in the lives of men precisely because they carry their message about social structure beneath the surface.'[11] It is for that reason that the relationships established during that human encounter which constitutes a musical performance are important indicators, on the one hand, and shapers on the other, of the sense of identity of the participants. Of course, identity is a complex and subtle affair, and it is not static but dynamic; all of us wear a number of identities depending on the social situations in which we find ourselves, and we try on from time to time many more to see how they fit. Some will appear even to be mutually contradictory, though the contradictions, we may assume, must be integrated at a deeper level of the personality.

A musical performance, like a conversation, consists of a mixture of preformed and spontaneously generated material,

which is manipulated according to rules, which are the grammar and syntax of the musical style. No performance is completely without spontaneity but none is without preformed elements either; all musicking, like all talking, can be thought of as existing on a spectrum between these two extremes. Again as in talking, the extent to which the performance is governed by the preformed material will determine the relationships that are established between the participants; the more predetermined it is, the lesser will be the intimacy that is sought and attained between them. To show what I mean, let us look at one or two kinds of musical performance, to see what kinds of human relationship are brought into existence through them.

The kind of performance in which preformed elements are at a maximum and spontaneity at a minimum is probably a professional symphony concert as it takes place in a great concert hall in a western city. The building itself is interesting, since it will have been built, and be maintained, at considerable expense, a showpiece set aside entirely for the performance of music, as nearly soundproof as possible and visually isolated from the outside world; its very nature tells that what is to take place there is an occasion set aside from everyday life. Leaving the foyer, where socialization can take place, we enter the performance space itself, which also, before a note has been played, tells us much about the nature of the event which is about to take place. The seats, in their orderly rows, do not facilitate socializing; this is clearly not a place for conversation, or for communication between members of the audience. The rows are curved and the floor raked to centre the lines of sight on the middle of the performers' platform, to which we, the audience, have no access; the social barrier which separates us from the musicians is more insurmountable than the actual physical barrier which is formed by the edge of that platform. As we wait for the appointed hour (classical concerts start dead on time, latecomers being excluded until an interval) the musicians come on to the platform, having entered the hall by a separate entrance and having remained out of our sight up to this point. They are dressed in uniform style, which reduces their individuality, and they ignore the audience, taking their seats casually and tuning their instruments without so much

as a gesture to acknowledge our presence. On the conductor's entrance they come to attention, and from then onwards there is no mistaking that he is in charge of the proceedings; as long as he is on the podium no further direct communication takes place between players.

What kind of relationships, then, are being established during this event? Among the audience, during the performance, no communication takes place; each individual sits still and quiet, alone with the music even though that person is among the two thousand or so people who may be present. It is his or her task to contemplate the sounds that are being made by the orchestra, and while of course a good deal of mental work is being done to make sense of the sounds, his or her role is essentially passive; nothing he or she can do, short of rioting, can affect the course of the performance. Communication is in one direction only, to each individual separately. Among the orchestra, relationships are formal, hierarchical and entirely functional, depending only on the job to be done; neither friendships nor dislikes play any part in the musical task to be done. During the performance they have all in any case to be mediated through the conductor, who alone has the power to respond spontaneously to the written notes. Those written notes, those messages from a probably long-dead individual, control the actions of everyone on the platform, but only the conductor has before him the complete picture of what the composer intended; the players see only their individual parts of the whole operation. The modern professional symphony orchestra is in fact a very model of a modern industrial enterprise, devoted like all industrial enterprises to the making of a product, a concert, which is advertised and marketed like any other commodity to the consumers, the audience. The whole enterprise is under the direction of a dominant tycoon-figure, the conductor. The relationship of performers to audience is thus that of producers to consumers, with all the limitations which are placed by that kind of relationship on the possibility of human encounter; the consumers, as with any other industrial product, have no say in its nature, their only choice being either to buy or not to buy it.

The relationships established during a modern professional

symphony concert are therefore those of modern industrial society: the orchestra is a group of individuals who, it seems, can be welded into a productive unit only by the abdication of the individual will to a superior authority; the audience to whom the concert is sold is a group of solitary individuals, whose power to show approval or disapproval can only be exerted after the performance is over. We shall see later that the musical works presented at these events are highly individualistic in nature, being concerned with the emotions and the spiritual progress of an individual soul and they are addressed to the emotions and experience of the audience as individuals; no direct encounter between performers or between listeners is either required or expected. As with many other products of industrial society, we may marvel at the brilliance of the works that are presented in this way and of the way in which they are presented, while noting that the price exacted is a high one in terms of individual autonomy and creativity.

There are, of course, more intimate encounters within the classical tradition; the performance of chamber music may be, within limits, a more convivial affair. A quartet of friends, for example, who sit down in the home of one of them to 'play the thoughts of the absent fifth known to them only through the music'[12] is much more self-directed than the orchestra; the players are able to work out their own response to the notations before them, discussing and arriving at an agreed interpretation, while others who are present may also make suggestions. But the players' actions remain under the control of the composer through his notations; their responses to one another in that human encounter which a musical performance *is* are still mediated through the written notes, which establish and maintain a distance between them and prevent too intimate an engagement — an engagement which they clearly, if not consciously, do not want, or else they would not be taking part in this kind of music making. The musical score provides an immutable given factor to the encounter and accords to it a measure of safety while preventing it from attaining an unwanted intimacy. Thus do styles of musicking evolve in conformity with the favoured styles of encounter of various social groups. The relationships of the string quartet,

as with other kinds of classical chamber musicking, may be seen as an exploration, an affirmation and a celebration of the ideal personal relationships of a particular group within western society. The professionalization of chamber-music performing groups, and their removal from the chamber to the concert hall, has of course introduced a further distancing into the encounter, in line with the homogenization of human relationships brought about by the industrial society of today.

We shall see later how non-reliance on a score opens up a new realm of possibilities for relationships, both among players and among listeners and between the two groups of participants, tending to break down the gap between them and to encourage a greater intimacy of encounter. For the moment, it is sufficient to say that in all musical performances, as situations in which human beings encounter one another and try to create meaning from those encounters, it is the relationships that are established between the participants which constitute the most important element of that meaning.

This brings us to the fourth assumption, and the most difficult to expound. *Those relationships which are established in the course of a musical performance are of two kinds: first, those which are created between the sounds* (this is a matter of the forms and the techniques used by the performers — the ways in which they go about the making of the music) *and, secondly, those which are created among the participants*. These two sets of relationships are not necessarily congruent, but there is necessarily some link between them; one might say that the link is flexible but not infinitely so. Both sets of relationships are governed by those rules and conventions of language which, as we have seen, are on the one hand necessary if any meaning, any relationship, is to be created, while, on the other, by structuring the relationships, they prevent a totally intimate engagement between the participants. This is a perpetual paradox of all human relationships and communication, which in most societies is accepted as a necessary and, indeed, creative element of life; it seems to exist in particularly acute form in modern industrial societies of all political complexions, probably as a result of the destruction of old intimacies by

the ruthlessly instrumental, functional relationships of industrialism.

Of the two kinds of relationships established in a musical performance, I explored the first, at least from the point of view of western classical music, in my book *Music, Society, Education*. I cannot repeat that exploration here, but, to summarize, I tried to show that the relationships established between sounds — that is, the forms and techniques of the music — in that tradition model the relationships of western society during the period when tonal harmony was dominant, and that the attitude to sounds in that tradition reflects in particular the scientific worldview which has increasingly dominated the west since about 1600. Relationships between sounds in music, in other words, mirror relationships between people.

We shall find comparable mirrorings in the techniques of the music which I shall be examining in this book. But it is the second half of the proposition that I need to discuss more fully here. One of the characteristics of improvised musicking is that any music-object, in so far as it comes into existence at all, is completed only at the moment when the musicians stop playing, so that its existence also ceases at that moment, other than in the memories of the participants. In this case we can assume the ideal instance of complete congruence between the relationships established between the sounds, on the one hand, and those between the participants on the other, since the acts of composition and performance are not separate but are subsumed into a single gesture. If there is any lack of congruence, if, for instance, the players improvise in a way in which the listeners can find no order or meaning, the latter will resolve it by either calling the players to order or by leaving. The situation, in other words, is negotiable.

When a performance takes place of a pre-existing musical work, whose identity is presumed to be independent of any possible performance of it, it is then that a gap begins to occur which can become wider over the subsequent performance history of the piece. For most musical works of the past we can assume that at the time of their first performance there was a congruence (it could be that the initial unfavourable reception

given to some of these works, which have since become staples of the classical repertory, may be accounted for by the fact that congruence took a little while to evolve), since it was by catering to the needs of their contemporaries that musicians made a living. The survival of these works in unchanged, or virtually unchanged, form (given today a slighly higher overall level of pitch, more accurate intonation especially in the wind instruments, and the difference in tone produced by wire and nylon rather than by gut strings), obliges us to ask of the musical work the question that I introduced earlier: 'What does it mean when this work is performed in this place, at this time, with these musicians, before this audience?'. If, for example, we consider a symphony by Beethoven, perhaps the Third, the so-called *Eroica*, which was first performed in Vienna in 1804, we can gain a better understanding of this question.

In its time this work was a revolutionary piece, cracking open the traditional eighteenth-century forms of the symphony in a way in which even Beethoven's first two essays in the medium had not, and introducing a breadth and freedom of concept hitherto unknown; to judge from recorded reactions, it excited, puzzled and disturbed its original audiences in about equal proportions. That Beethoven, no stranger to the revolutionary rhetoric of the times, was metaphorically sweeping away the old regime of Europe and celebrating a new society must have been in the minds of his listeners, especially the members of the rising bourgeoisie, themselves bursting with ideas, creativity and libertarianism, with the French Revolution of 1789, which was essentially a bourgeois revolution, already under their belts and looking for new worlds to conquer. Played in a theatre (the purpose-built concert hall is a nineteenth-century invention) by an orchestra largely amateur with a stiffening of professionals, under the direction of the already hard-of-hearing composer, the piece must have contributed to an occasion of a very different kind from those of today, under the concert-hall conditions I described earlier. Today's audience belongs essentially to the same social classes as those of 1804, being overwhelmingly middle-class — a fact which has been confirmed by many social surveys in a number of countries — but today it is on the

defensive, its position and values under attack. It is the defender, not the assailant, of the status quo. To a modern audience, the act of performing this symphony, nearly two hundred years and heaven knows how many performances later is no longer disturbing; rather, in its familiarity it has become almost cosy, certainly reassuring, telling us that things are as they have been and will remain so. Beethoven's mighty gesture of attack has become a mighty gesture (for the work remains a work of genius) of defence.

This change of meaning over time affects all art-objects, not just musical works. John Berger has written about paintings: 'It is a commonplace that the significance of a work of art changes as it survives. Usually, however, this knowledge is used to distinguish between 'them' (in the past) and 'us' (now). There is a tendency to picture *them* and their reactions as being embedded in history and to at the same time credit *ourselves* with an over-view, looking across from what we see as the summit of history. The surviving work of art then seems to confirm our superior position. The aim of its survival was us. This is an illusion. There is no exemption from history. The first time I saw [the Grünewald Altarpiece in Colmar] I was anxious to place *it* historically. In terms of medieval religion, the plague, medicine, the Lazar house. Now I have been forced to place *myself* historically.'[13] I take it that what Berger means is that, while the picture has not changed since Grünewald painted it in 1515, the meaning of the act of viewing it has. How much more so this must be when an act of performance has to take place before the work can come to actuality.

The gap that time inexorably opens up between the two meanings, and the way in which that gap can bring about a dangerous distortion of the function of artistic experience, making it an actual impediment to later generations in their task of structuring and making sense of their experience, is something that is understood by Africans. Dennis Duerden, in his study of African art and literature, writes of African attitudes to their sculpture that 'it is better that it should be eaten by ants or decay to be replaced by the most contemporaneous expressions of what the society thinks, that it should slowly disappear, instead of existing as evidence of

what society was like historically. In the same way the old men are encouraged to take their memories with them to the ancestors. They may not impose them on their heirs who wish to be free to fulfil their own destinies . . . It seems that the . . . societies not only remember creative events and forget destructive ones but deliberately refuse to adopt symbols which will last long enough to be destructive to the existence of those societies.'[14] He goes on to extend this argument to literacy in general: 'I also suggest that it is this aversion to permanently and universally translateable symbols for the structure of the present . . . that accounts for the African societies' aversion to the use of writing, to symbols becoming recorded signs'.[15] What Europeans, then, consider to be signs of African 'primitiveness' — the lack of fixed cultural symbols such as monuments of architecture and sculpture (he goes so far as to suggest that the famous Benin bronzes, exceptional in African art in their permanence, were the product of a society that had become fixed and rigid in its social forms), of written records and musical scores — are in fact the result of a deliberate social and artistic strategy. To them, it is the creative process that is alive, while created objects are a dangerous legacy which for later generations can stand in the way of self-realization. Tennyson seems to have had a glimmering of the same truth when he made the dying King Arthur say to Sir Bedevere,

> The old order changeth, yielding place to new,
> And God fulfils himself in many ways,
> Lest one good custom should corrupt the world.[16]

The connection, then, between the relationships within the art-work itself and those created by its performance is flexible; the same musical sounds can be made to serve very different social purposes, as we have seen with the *Eroica Symphony*. But although the link may be flexible, it is not infinitely so; sooner or later it will break. It is perfectly possible that some time in the future a performance of a symphony by Beethoven, or anyone else for that matter, may no longer serve to create any desired or even significant social relationships, and in that case it will no longer be performed. And of course for the

majority of people, even in western society, it is doubtful if the link ever formed in the first place; if most people do not look to classical performances for social meanings or feelings of identity, but instead to other kinds of musicking, it is not through any inability to comprehend them, but because they do not view human relationships in the same light as do those who use classical performances to support their feelings of identity. Looking further afield, one would not expect Africans to have much use for such performances, with their singleness of rhythmic perspective, their lack of bodily involvement, their separation from their everyday life and experience, as models for their own pluralistic and involved sense of who they are. On the other hand, it is not surprising that Africans today, who on the whole show a remarkable lack of interest in western classical music, in comparison with the industrialized Japanese, the South Koreans and even the Chinese, should find Afro-American styles of musicking useful as a means of coming to terms with themselves in a world dominated by European industrial values.

Again, a person may relate, both as performer and as listener, to more than one kind of musicking, but his or her flexibility will not be endless; identities may be multiple, and musicking is a wonderful way of trying on new ones, but the possibilities for any one individual are not infinite. And, conversely, the same performance may, at one and the same time for different people, serve different senses of identity — but, once again, the number of different identities a performance will support is not infinite, and, in fact, perhaps because participants tend to select themselves, there is a tendency for a performance to draw people together into a common identity.

We can deduce from this that, if as participants we enjoy a performance, we do so first because we feel that our sense of identity, our sense of who we really are, has been strengthened, and feel more intensely and knowingly *ourselves*, and, secondly because we feel that we have been, for the duration of the performance, in the company of like-feeling people, in an ideal society which musicians and listeners have together brought into existence for that duration of time. It is not just a tautology to state that, within a given musical culture, the

better the performance, the more it will be enjoyed by the participants; it is important, and comprehensible in the following terms. Given the common concern musicians and listeners have in bringing into existence an ideal society, a set of ideal social relationships, then the more subtly, comprehensively and imaginatively the relationships between the sounds are explored, the more it will strengthen the feeling that those social relationships are valid and important, and will thus intensify the participants' sense of being and well-being.

The key, of course, is in the meaning of the word 'better'. In one musical culture, quality may lie in the accurate and sensitive realization of a difficult score for the benefit of a group of passive listeners; in another it may lie in the extent to which everyone participates, in a church service, a party or a patriotic rally; in a third it may lie in the ingenious rhythmic invention with which the musicians entice everyone present into the dance and support their dancing; in a fourth in the way in which a singer takes command of a group of listeners as she sings for the thousandth time an ancient ballad known to all; while in a fifth it may lie in the way in which a leader and chorus call and respond to each other in mutual encouragement and involvement. Each of these kinds of performance involves a different concept of excellence, and each brings into existence a different kind of society, about which one may make two generalizations: the first is that the more actively involved everyone present is in the performance, and the fewer spectators there are of the musical process, then the more unified that society will be; while the second is that the less dependent the participants are on pre-existing material, including written notations, the more directly and intimately they will be able to respond to one another (though, as we have noticed, there are limits, in that no meanings, or relationships, can be created without some rules; trying to discover how few and minimal rules are necessary has always been an important quest for some musicians).

Thus the participants in a symphony concert are bringing into existence, for the duration of the performance, an ideal industrial society, in which each individual is solitary and autonomous, tidy, disciplined and stable, punctual and

reliable, the division of labour is clear, the relationships are impersonal and functional, and the whole is under the control of a charismatic figure armed with clearly defined authority. The music played is drawn from a repertory which, like the ideal industrial culture, is standardized the whole world over and played in a standard manner; it is a repertory of musical works which themselves either celebrate the individualist values of western industrial culture or can be forced into that mould: it consists of abstract dramas of the individual soul through which performers and listeners alike can participate vicariously in the processes of becoming and overcoming, or else of abstract dances, many of them hijacked from more dancing cultures, in which the performance invites us implicitly to do what the concert-hall conventions prohibit us from doing, or else of abstract landscapes, of fantasy Españas, Americas, Hebridean Islands or pastoral Englands of nostalgia or of the tourist imagination. Above all, it is a society in which producers and consumers of the commodity, music, fulfil clearly defined and separate roles. In the ceremony called a symphony concert, which brings this ideal society into existence, the values of performers and listeners, and their sense of who they are, are explored, affirmed and celebrated. It need hardly be said that, for those who do not share these values, neither the concert-hall ritual nor the symphonic drama is likely to be of much interest.

I shall be looking in later chapters at other musical celebrations of identity; I have already raised some questions to which I will propose some tentative answers, in particular 'Why are we moved by music?' and 'What do we mean by beauty in music?' These are, as I am only too aware, questions which have absorbed the attention of aestheticians and philosophers for a long time; if I believe I have anything useful to contribute to them, it is because I am convinced that our important concern should be not music but musicking, and I ask the reader to keep this in mind as we proceed.

To the first question I can propose the answer: We are moved by music because musicking creates the public image of our most inwardly desired relationships, not just *showing them to us* as they might be but actually *bringing them into existence*

for the duration of the performance. This will clearly involve our deepest feelings, and thus the act of musicking, taking place over a duration of time, teaches us what we really feel about ourselves and about our relationships to other people and to the world in general, helping us to structure those feelings and therefore to explore and evolve our own identity. Clifford Geertz has said: 'In order to make up our minds we must know how we feel about things; and to know how we feel we need the public images of sentiment that only ritual, myth and art can provide'.[17] And again: 'Human thought is basically both social and public — its natural habitat is the house yard, the marketplace and the town square. Thinking consists not of "happenings in the mind" (though happenings there and elsewhere are necessary for it to occur) but of a traffic in what have been called . . . significant symbols'[18] — or, as Alice might have said, 'How do I know what I feel until I hear what I play?' In musicking, in fact, we are being touched in the deepest parts of who we are.

The musicking that moves us most will be that which most subtly, comprehensively and powerfully articulates the relationships of our ideal society — which may or may not have any real, or even possible, existence beyond the duration of the performance. The ambivalence of the emotions which such musicking arouses in us, posed between joy and melancholy ('I am never merry when I hear sweet music,' said Jessica) can be seen as a response to the realization of that fall from perfection which is present as an element of virtually all cultures and religions. The ambivalence reflects the simultaneous experiencing of the ideal and the impossibility of realizing it — at least in the present, since some musicking *is* about possible earthly societies, and some, as for example when the black slaves sang spirituals and even when modern black Americans continue to do so, about a heavenly and a possible earthly society at the same time. At the same time the musicking can exhilarate us with a vision of that ideal which is not just intimated to us but actually brought into existence for as long as the performance lasts. While it does we *can* believe in its realizability, and the exhilaration and the joy, outlasting the melancholy, can persist long after the performance is over. This is not surprising, for it confirms us in our *feelings*, which,

as Geertz says, we must know before we know what we *think*, about what are right and true relationships.

We have seen that there is no agreement on the nature of the the ideal society — what would be heaven for one might be hell for another — which is why we find that the more fragmented a society is, the greater are the number of different kinds of musicking that go on in it, while the deeper the social and political divisions, the less understanding will there be between the various musical cultures. Musicking is not necessarily a unifying force at all; on the contrary, it can articulate and even exacerbate social divisions. On the other hand, identity is a complex and often apparently contradictory business, and musical cultures may take root in unexpected places, as can be seen in the adoption by white London skinheads, a group with a reputation for racial violence, for a brief period in the early 1970s, of reggae, recently arrived from Jamaica, and of some of the style and mannerisms of black youth.

We can also come to understand better the question of musical beauty if we keep the essential nature of music as *act* clearly in mind; there can be no such thing as a beautiful piece of music aside from that act. We can call it beautiful only if it makes possible beautiful performances; certainly there is not much beauty in a score. And, secondly, in order to find a piece beautiful in performance we need, not only to find the society that the performance brings into existence congenial, but also to feel a congruence between the nature of that society and the means adopted to bring it into existence (clearly, we are back to the fourth assumption here).

We see why there can be no absolute standard of beauty, but also why within the classical culture there is general agreement about what are its most beautiful works. We also see why, if we feel the performers are not doing their best, beauty will fly out of the window, no matter how we may love and admire (that is to say, have in the past experienced beautiful performances of) the work being played — and why, conversely, we can always get a glimpse of beauty if the performer, however inept, is doing his honest best; I should go so far as to say that anyone who cannot do so has no conception of what music is all about. I can also find it possible to like a musical work while

finding certain performances of it thoroughly objectionable. This is of course not just an 'aesthetic' matter but a political and a moral one, which is what considerations of beauty generally boil down to; certainly I find that there is little genuine beauty to be found in modern concert-hall performances, no matter how technically brilliant or even expressive, of the great works of the past.

Whether those great works can be reclaimed from the concert hall is an open question. Perhaps performances by amateurs, playing for love, may do so, but I am inclined to doubt it. Perhaps only when we learn to love the creative act more than the created object, as the great creators themselves did, shall we be able to arrive at a true understanding of their achievement — and then we need not place such reliance on the objects anyway, being content, like the Africans, to let them slowly disappear, as the old men take their memories to the ancestors. Harry Partch has commented:

> 'It has been said that because more people hear Beethoven in twenty-four hours (on the radio) than heard him in his whole lifetime the people have music . . . We can say, yes, and a citizen doubtless sees more policemen now in twenty-four hours than Beethoven saw in his whole lifetime. The people have more music, and *ipso facto* they are more musical? The people have more laws, and *ipso facto* they are more lawful?
>
> 'Beethoven is a value that may be expected to persist because he has had value for generations of human beings. The point is not the value of Beethoven but whether in our schools of serious [*sic*] music we shall confine ourselves to finer and finer degrees of perfection in the "interpretation" of past treasures, whether we shall go on devouring or unconsciously absorbing vibrating frankfurters to that point of melomaniacal satiety at which our appetite vanishes, or whether a few of us will chuck the music, turn off the radio, and go into the kitchen and cook ourselves a nourishing meal.'[19]

Well, yes, but we should remember that Beethoven's music has had value for a not very large number of generations — perhaps a dozen only since he died in 1827 — few even in terms of the recorded history of European music, and a mere

eye-flash in terms of the unknown and unknowable million-year history of human musicking. And, further, all of those dozen or so generations have been part of that quite small sector of the human race which subscribes to certain ideals and assumptions concerning the individual, society and their relation to nature. When these change, as they inevitably will (we have to remind ourselves that we stand, as Berger says, not at the summit of history but perhaps only somewhere near the start of the game), the message of Beethoven's music will quite likely no longer be of any great concern or value; even the very idea of a 'great composer' might arouse nothing more than a patronizing smile. We should remember, too, that Beethoven's music is, even today, of no great interest to the majority of people even within western Christian-scientific-industrial society (that is to say, to those who are not and never have been the beneficiaries of that society), let alone the still overwhelming majority of the human race who have never subscribed to those ideas or those assumptions, even if they have had their practical consequences, from sweatshops to heroin to traffic jams to Agent Orange, wished upon them.

The greatness of Beethoven lies not in any absolute values which performances of his works may embody (every musical performance, of course, embodies some universal human values, just as does every human individual) but in the power, subtlety, authority and comprehensiveness with which such performances explore, affirm and celebrate the values and ideal relationships of European society. Performances of his works today bear witness to the continuing power of those values and relationships in the minds of those whom we can crudely call the middle classes, even if today's performers and audiences take part, no longer for stimulation or for encouragement in the task of turning society upside down, but for reassurance and for encouragement in the task of keeping society as it is. The most powerful evidence for this assertion lies in the amount of money which those, such as the modern state and wealthy business and industrial organizations, who have an interest in keeping society as it is, contribute to the support of classical musicking. In taking part in such performances, especially in the absence of any credible counterbalance from contemporary classical com-

posers (who have nothing more to offer than a technological fix, that is to say, a change in technique which conceals a lack of reconsideration of underlying values) today's classical performers and listeners reveal a dangerously backward-looking cast of mind, even nostalgia (the most dangerous of communal emotional states) and an unwillingness to come to terms with the contemporary world and its pressures for change.

We can now suggest briefly what it is that a person taking part in a musical performance is actually doing. I suggest that he or she is doing three things, which are interdependent and equal in importance, so that any order of enumeration is quite arbitrary:

1. He or she is exploring, affirming and celebrating a sense of identity;
2. He or she is taking part in an ideal society which the participants between them have brought into existence for the duration of the performance;
3. He or she is modelling, in the relationships between the sounds he or she is making, listening to or dancing to, the relationships of that ideal society.

All of this, I must repeat, takes place beneath the surface of consciousness; as Lomax says, it is the power of the performing arts that these messages are transmitted and received in a way that is not necessarily conscious.

Two other points follow: first, no musical tradition or culture is inherently superior to any other. Within a given musical culture there can clearly be some musicking that explores its values better than others, and some musicians who are better at that exploration than others, but if the function of the musical act is to explore and celebrate identity, then the merit of each musical act must be set against the values of its own culture and that alone. Those who maintain, or, more commonly, just assume, as adherents of western classical music tend to do, that their own musicking is in its very nature superior to any other, can only mean, finally, that they believe *themselves*, by virtue of the culture to which they belong, to be inherently superior to all others.

The second point is that it is not necessary to belong to a given social group in order to enjoy its musicking; were this

not so, no traffic whatsoever could take place between cultures. What *is* necessary, however, is for the outside participant to feel some empathy with the people whose musicking it is, to feel some comprehension of and sympathy with their values, even if that sympathy is not fully conscious. Further, the musical understanding achieved by the outsider will be commensurate with that understanding and sympathy and no more. This can explain the often crass condescension shown to black American musicians by some white critics who appear genuinely to enjoy their music. Conversely, when some musical interaction does take place between members of two cultures or social groups, it must mean that those of one group feel some empathy with, perhaps even admiration for, those of the other and for their values, that they see something in the lifestyle that appeals, and fills a gap in their own lives — even if, as is often the case, there are considerable surface antagonisms between the two. This empathy has in fact been a major factor in the musical fusion which is the subject of this book.

Finally, the whole of the foregoing can be summed up in different terms: *a musical performance is a ritual in which is acted out the mythology of a social group*. To understand this, we need to consider what is meant by the two words 'ritual' and 'mythology', especially as both have had their meanings so debased in modern usage that it is necessary to explain them. In common usage, to call an action or an event 'ritualistic' is to suggest that it has lost any meaning that it might once have had, and that the participants simply go through accustomed motions; but ritual is in fact an action which dramatizes and re-enacts the shared mythology of a social group. It is as essential a part of human social life as is eating (and indeed a meal is an event which is itself loaded with ritual significance, as Mary Douglas has pointed out).[20] It is an essential part of the human quest for meaning, without which there would be no point in eating, or living, at all.

Ritual, according to the anthropologist Mercea Eliade, celebrates the 'sacred history' of a culture — its creation, the coming of the civilizing heroes, their 'demiurgic activities' and finally their disappearance. 'The sacred history — mythology — is exemplary, paradigmatic; not only does it tell how things

came to be but it also lays the foundations for all human behaviour and all our social and cultural institutions.'[21] Myth, in fact, is not to be understood literally as history at all, at least not in the modern sense (though even modern history shades off into myth more often than is appreciated); through its narratives of how things came to be we learn how things are and how they should be. It sets out desirable relationships, between person and person, group and group, and between humanity and the natural and even the supernatural world. Eliade gives also a clue to why in our society we undervalue myth and ritual, even though our lives are shot through and through with them, in that he explicitly confines his examination of ritual and myth to what are called 'primitive' or 'traditional' societies. 'Modern man's originality', he says, 'his newness in comparison with traditional societies, lies precisely in his determination to regard himself as a purely historical being, in his wish to live in a basically desacralized cosmos.'[22] In other words, modern westerners believe themselves to have become divorced from, and even to have outgrown, the beliefs and ideals that shaped the lives of earlier generations, as well as of present-day 'primitive' or 'traditional' societies, to have outgrown, in fact, both myth and ritual. The very use of the former word to signify an erroneous belief is another sign of this state of mind, although the literal truth or otherwise of a myth is actually irrelevant, since it is through its usefulness in shaping our lives and conduct that myth reveals its value; it is only in a moral or a spiritual sense that it can be described as true or false.

Westerners, then, tend to believe themselves to have broken through into a purely secular universe. Eliade himself is doubtful whether this is in fact true; I am certain it is not, that modern westerners are just as much dependent on their mythologies as any members of 'traditional' societies. Nor is there any need to think of myths as relics of a more primitive stage of development, or even as what Max Müller called the 'dark shadow which language throws upon thought and which will never disappear until language becomes entirely commensurate with thought, which it never will.'[23]

Myth, and its cognate activity, ritual, is an essential means by which we grasp the multidimensional nature of reality and

give that nature its full significance in our lives; it is interesting that as the researches of physicists become more and more arcane, their language has become more and more that of myth as the only way in which they can apprehend the multivalency of the world in which they move and can resolve its contraditions (it gives one to wonder whether it is not in fact their own minds they are exploring). To the extent that we suppress an awareness of our myths modern westerners are doomed to remain even more in thrall to them than those 'primitives' whom we are pleased to patronize. Our society is shot through and through with myth: a whole mythological system concerning the absolute value and the mysterious efficacy of money which has been embodied in the most practical of ways in the policies and programmes of successive governments; another concerning the power of scientific knowledge and its ability to save us from nature and from ourselves; in Britain the sacred words 'Dunkirk', 'the blitz' and 'El Alamein', which conjure up a whole mythology that I am not sure the British would not be better off without.

To repeat: all musical performances partake of the nature of ritual, the acting-out of desired relationships and thus of identity. It is not difficult to recognize this ritual function in musical cultures that are remote from our own; the western anthropologist will certainly assume such a function when observing the musicking, generally inseparable from dancing, of some remote tribal people, while the western classical music lover may well do the same thing when observing a rock concert, calling it a 'tribal ritual of youth' or some such. It is always less obvious when we come to consider musicking that is closer to us; the same music lover will probably find it hard to accept that his symphony concerts, opera performances and chamber recitals are no less rituals of a particular social group at a particular point in history, preferring to believe in their absolute value and permanent significance. But this permanent significance is apparent only to one who sees the value system of the western middle classes, the official values which serve to validate the industrial state for those who are its beneficiaries, as itself absolute and permanent.

The observant reader will notice that I have said nothing about the effect of economic factors and specific power

structures on western musicking today, let alone the effect of twentieth-century media such as records, radio and television. These factors and these media pertain to the next stage of my discussion, and they will appear in due course; what I have set out so far is what I believe are some general meanings of the act of musicking, regardless of economic or technological factors. In so far as musicking is universal to the human race I consider this chapter a necessary ground-clearing operation, which is all too often neglected by those who discuss music as a social institution. It is in fact the ways in which the special conditions under which Africans and Europeans encountered one another in the Americas shaped the musicking of both black and white Americans, and from them that of virtually the whole world, that is the subject of this book. In this exploration I shall be keeping in mind the assumptions set out in this chapter, and I ask the reader to do the same.

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