Music of the Common Tongue

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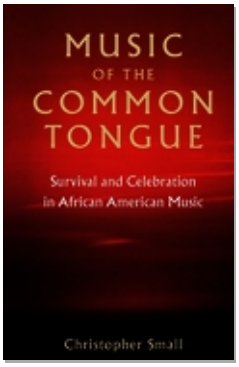

Chapter 12

ON THE DECLINE OF A MUSIC

We have now reached the point where we need to confront directly what has so far been looked at only obliquely and indirectly: the condition of the classical-music tradition in Europe and America today. Classical music in the present century has exhibited a decline in creative energy, in openness to fertilizing outside influences, and, above all, in usefulness for the social and individual concerns of those who in the past formed the constituency for creative musicians, which is in striking contrast to the riotous expansion and proliferation of Afro-American music. The decline has occurred in its most precipitous form in the years since the first world war (which seems to have been a watershed for the self-confidence of the western middle classes), but it is only the culmination of processes which have been going on for the last two hundred years or so. That it should have thus accelerated at a time when the skills of individual musicians, the virtuosity of orchestras, the splendour of great concert halls, and the production standards of opera houses, are considered to have reached new peaks is a paradox which I shall attempt to explain.

No hint of this decline is given in the many books claiming to be histories of twentieth-century music that have appeared over the last thirty years or so. They tell their story as if it were a mere continuation of those older histories of which I spoke earlier, mostly confining their attention without comment to the European classical tradition and dealing with compositions and their composers, arranged in as neat an order of influencer and influenced, cause and effect, as can be managed with limited hindsight. The story relates how

traditional tonal harmony came to the end of its resources, to be replaced by other, notably serial, means of pitch organization, how new tonal material and new means of sound production came into play, how a new emancipation of sounds and rhythms took place, how composers began looking for inspiration to other cultures and how some composers succeeded in obtaining further mileage from the resources of tonal harmony by sheer force of will and with the aid of the folk musics of their respective homelands. They tell also of the survival, often in new guises, of traditional forms such as the symphony, the concerto and opera, of the politicization of some composers (politicization seems always to mean left-wing, a right-wing orientation or one that simply acquiesces in the status quo being apparently invisible); it tells, too, of composers' tireless experimentation to find new sources of sound and new ways of organizing and notating these sounds, of their making use of the most sophisticated resources of modern technology where they have been available, and, finally, of their questioning the very basis of western music itself in order to purify and renew it.

The writers of these histories are at pains, while stressing the novelty of what has happened, to assure their readers at the same time of the legitimacy of the classical music of this century, by stressing its continuity with that of the European past. Here, for instance, is a paragraph from a widely-read *Introduction to Contemporary Music*, aimed explicitly at leading uncommitted non-professional listeners into the world of twentieth-century music: 'At three points in the history of music — as it happens, they were equally distant from one another — the forces of change were so much in the ascendant that the word *new* became a battle cry. Around the year 1300 progressive composers were referred to as *moderni* and their art designated as *ars nova*, 'New Art'. The breakthrough of this modernism produced new rhythmic and harmonic principles as well as basic reforms in notation. The year 1600 is another such landmark. The contemporaries of Monteverdi raised the banner of *le nuove musiche*, 'The New Music'; expressive melody and the dramatic concept of opera challenged the tradition of religious choral music. Similarly, around 1900 there emerged the New Music, with an explosiveness that gave

rise to many a bitter battle . . . Contemporary music, so rich in its diversity, so excitingly tuned to the spirit of the twentieth century, is the latest — and consequently the most vivid — chapter in man's age-old attempt to impose his artistic intuition on the elusive stuff of sound: that majestic five-thousand-year-old attempt to shape the sonorous material into form possessing logic and continuity, expressive meaning and nourishing beauty.'[1]

Apart from his curious idea of dating the origin of music at five thousand years ago, and the ethnocentricity of the reason for musicking given in the final sentence, the author fails to tell us of four critical disjunctions in the classical music of this century which not only set it apart from that of previous centuries but also suggest a process not of continuing advance but of retreat. These disjunctions are: between creator and performer, between producer and consumer, between classical and vernacular traditions and between composer and his potential audience (the last I believe to be a consequence of the other three). It is hard to say which has proved the most disastrous. None of the four is entirely new to our time, but each is the end result of processes that have been going on over the whole history of the tradition; they are, in fact, implicit in the very social and aesthetic assumptions on which it rests. An examination of those assumptions and of that history must wait for a later work; here I propose looking at the disjunctions themselves as they have affected the way in which musicking in the classical tradition has taken place during the present century.

The break between composers and performers I dealt with at some length in Chapter 10, and need not elaborate further, except to note the disastrous consequences of the retreat by performers from the creative act. They are many-layered. On one level, there is the impossibility of composing, and thus of performing, anything that cannot be notated; the resultant complexity of notation, often to the despair of performers who might otherwise be willing to embrace the composers' expressions, frequently conceals simplicity if not downright poverty of invention. On another level it concerns the reduction of the performer to an instrument of the composer's will, while deepest of all is the impoverishment of the

relationships and of the society that are created during a performance, since if a performer has no creative role to play, then still less have his listeners.

There have been attempts within concert-hall music since about 1945 to involve players in the creative process, usually without much success: this is either because the players, as I pointed out earlier, are unprepared either by training or by basic assumptions for such an activity, or because of their feeling, in my opinion not without some justice, that composition is the composer's job and that he should do it. Such attempts as are made are usually called 'indeterminacy', which is defined in John Vinton's *Dictionary of 20th Century Music* by reference to 'musical material that is unpredictable before a performance.' The writer of the article goes on: 'The composer using indeterminacy may specify any degree of performer choice from arranging totally notated elements to extensive improvisation. He may ask that the performer work out all or part of a score ahead of performance (perhaps by chance operations) from materials and instructions he provides. He may also ask the performer to respond during the performance to instructions and diagrams, to actions and situations, either real or imagined. Free improvisation may be asked for in indeterminate scores, but this is a subordinate technique and not a compositional means.'[2] Clearly under these conditions the work remains the composer's (the final sentence gives the game away); the performers are allowed their improvisatory head only when it does not affect the composer's over-all control. Whatever the performers do (so long as they do not play *Sweet Adeline* or *O Rest In The Lord* as mischievous orchestral players have been known to do) will serve his conception, and there is no way in which they can transcend it — not at all the same kind of situation as that partnership between composer and performers which we noted in jazz and even in early Baroque performance. This is clear from some remarks of Stockhausen; when asked in an interview why players should need a composer at all he replied in characteristic style: 'Why does a spiritual group need a guru? Why has an atom a nucleus? Why in the whole universe is there nothing that doesn't have a centre? Why are there not only moons? Why is every planet not a sun? The composer has

to fulfil the role of gathering together those people who are good interpreters but by nature are not original sources. Why are there fountains in the world and why doesn't the water come from everywhere? I mean, I can't answer you. You would have to ask the spirit of the cosmos'[3] — who clearly has no experience of either African or Afro-American musicking. In the same interview he described the measure of independence that he allowed to the performers as 'like taking an element from its context and letting it run like a strip of sounds until I stop it again.'

Another user of indeterminate methods, who has assimilated them into an elaborate and very influential aesthetic doctrine incorporating elements of eastern philosophy, is John Cage. His avowed intention is to abolish intention: 'One may give up the desire to control sound, clear his mind of music and set about discovering means to let the sounds be themselves rather than vehicles of man-made theories or expressions of human sentiments.'[4] That, of course, is itself the expression of a man-made theory: the old Hobbesian doctrine that there is a necessary antithesis between social and individual interests. But, in any case, Cage's approach in practice, whatever he may say in his extensive writings, creates a situation in which he *appears* to let go of control while remaining very firmly in charge; in claiming to have no intention he creates a social situation such as Kafka might have invented, in which nothing that performers or listeners can do will release them from his (non-)intention. His concern for sounds seems greater than his concern for the human beings who make or listen to them. Nor does he seem to have noticed that there is nothing of any significance in his theories which does not appear, without anyone theorizing about it, in the practice of Afro-American musicians since the beginning of the present century. The procedures of these two musicians, and of others like them, might have been designed in order to prevent the creation of a society in which performers and listeners can act as autonomous, responsible human beings; if we can find a social analogue with them it might be what Marcuse calls the 'repressive tolerance' of modern industrial society.

The fact that I am able to use the words 'producer' and 'consumer' with regard to music is significant of the nature of

the second disjunction in the present-day classical music scene. These terms imply that at the centre of music is a product, which is the *raison d'être* for all musical processes that take place. The concept of art as product in fact pervades the whole of our culture today, from the inflated sums of money paid for old-master paintings to the consumer-guide function of critics' writings. It shows itself even in the title of a recent authoritative book on the sociology of art, called without apology or explanation *The Social Production of Art*[5], while in every book I have seen on musical aesthetics the starting point and the limitation is the notion of music as objects whose existence and whose characteristics, even their effect on listeners and their social function, stem from their nature as objects. Music is product, made by a composer (producer) for the listener (consumer) and marketed like any other commodity; the possible effects of mediation in performance are scarcely mentioned, nor is any other possible form of human interaction, other than the one-dimensional transaction between producer and consumer, even discussed.

We have seen how the listeners' function as consumers of music is celebrated in the ceremony of the symphony concert, in which it is made clear to them that they have no more control over, or even access to, the process of production than they have over the design and production of their car or their breakfast cereal. Their only active role — and even that is more apparent than real — lies in the power to make a choice between competing brands.

The producer-consumer relationship in classical music, like most other relationships in industrial society, is a closed one. The producers form an exclusive group, whose skills and whose status are certified by the state after a process of selection, training and examination which ensures, certainly, that all are of a certain level of skill, but ensures also that all are of the same kind and that all have submitted to the state's values. Consumers have no access to the world of the producers, of which they are afforded glimpses in the pages of glossy magazines and festival brochures and in television arts programmes; it is never suggested that they might wish, or be able, to take an active part in that world. The exclusion of the consumer is completed by the professionalization of the art;

the amateur musician (the very word has become a term of ridicule) scarcely ever gets the chance to perform in public.

Everything about the modern classical concert, as we have seen, serves to emphasise the separation of performer from listener, and to emphasise the pyramidal model of the distribution of musical ability. It is hard to say who suffer most damage from acceptance of that model: composers, who are encouraged to take an unwarrantedly exalted view of their own musical and social importance, but who suffer private agonies through their apparent inability to reach those for whom they are supposed to be creating; or performers, who are the objects of much social admiration but are condemned in perpetuity to play music without ever being able to acknowledge in public a single musical idea as their own; or 'music lovers' whose role is simply that of consumers of what others have produced; or the 'unmusical' majority, on whom that label is hung regardless of the extent to which they may participate in other, less socially elevated, forms of musicking, and who are obliged, whether they like it or not, to contribute through taxation and through the price of commodities to the support of the structure that weighs upon them.

The third disjunction, between classical and vernacular traditions of music, is in our time so taken for granted that it tends to be thought of as universal and God-given; it is of course neither. This does not mean that there was in the past no distinction between the two traditions, but they overlapped with, drew upon and nourished each other. That climactic period in the history of the classical tradition that is called the Viennese classical period recognized this; not only were the melodic and harmonic styles of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and, especially, Schubert, as well as of their contemporaries, based upon Austrian folksong but their music fed back into it. Any one of those masters could, and did, create music for dancing (which today we listen to, still and silent, in concert halls — the masters themselves would not know whether to laugh or to cry were they to see us) without any compromise of their standards of inspiration or craftsmanship. If dance music was wanted, then it would be the best dance music, no less than the best mass, concerto or opera. In each case the musician considered his audience and composed for it and for

the occasion of its performance. Mozart wanted his music to be popular, and why not? since popularity meant financial security and he was an ambitious man with a special skill and a family to support, and with a touchy pride in the knowledge that he was the best in the business. He was delighted when his music pleased the audience for whom it was composed (the words 'pleased' and 'failed to please' occur again and again in his letters). Here he is writing to a friend from Prague in 1788 after a performance of the very successful production there of *The Marriage of Figaro*; he described how he went to a ball but, being too tired to dance (he must have been very tired indeed, for he was a skilled and enthusiastic dancer) he sat and watched: 'I looked on with the greatest pleasure while all those people flew about in sheer delight to the music of my *Figaro* arranged as quadrilles and waltzes. For here they talk of nothing but *Figaro*. Nothing is played, sung or whistled but *Figaro*. No opera is drawing like *Figaro*. Nothing, nothing but *Figaro*. Certainly a great honour for me!.'[6] Mozart's melodies, like those of many other 'classical' musicians, became part of the vernacular tradition, not only played by village bands and café orchestras, not only eaten to, danced to and sung the length and breadth of Europe but also without doubt having their influence on vernacular musicians and on their musicking.

The nineteenth century saw a drawing apart of the two traditions. The cyclic movement of earlier centuries was reduced to a one-way traffic only, as classical composers drew upon the musical vernacular in support of a political and cultural consciousness that was essentially middle-class; for the peasants and the lower orders the creation of the new nation-states of Europe was just another cross they had to bear. Very little of the 'nationalist' music of the nineteenth century struck any answering chord among vernacular musicians; in any case Smetana, Dvorak, Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Borodin and Grieg were drawing upon vernacular traditions which even in their time must have been in full retreat in the face of industrialism (it is a curious fact that none of the classical music of the time shows the slightest awareness of the fact that the whole of Europe, not excepting Russia, was industrializing explosively throughout the nineteenth century). By the early twentieth century the new

generation of nationalists — Kodaly, Bartok, Vaughan Williams, the young Stravinsky, and even, in their own ways, Ives, Copland and Villa-Lobos — were drawing on rural traditions that were dead or dying, their existence continuing for the most part (it is where both Stravinsky and Vaughan Williams obtained most of their folk material) in the pages of published collections. One might see this exploitation of the old cultural forms of a peasantry whose way of life was being brutally transformed by rural industrialisation as signs of a middle-class nostalgia for an ancient and stable European social order which never did exist — the same social order, in fact, as that which we see presented on the stage in innumerable nineteenth- and twentieth-century 'folk' operas.

As the mine of European musics became exhausted, many recent composers have turned to new sources of new sounds to revitalize their inspiration, in particular to the musical cultures of the Orient, as well as to the Afro-American tradition; if African music has so far escaped their attentions, it is probably in part because of the aura of 'primitiveness' that still in most European minds surrounds Africa and in part because of the difficulty of dealing with African polyrhythmic concepts. There is little sign in contemporary western classical music of any genuine understanding of Oriental music, that is to say as modes of performance involving people rather than as abstract systems of sounds, as musicking rather than as music. Stripped of the verbiage which so often accompanies the performance of such works (its shallowness is revealed in two famous photographs from the 1960s, one of Cage sitting at the feet of a Zen master, the other of Stockhausen with a group of Japanese Nō-play actors, both wearing identical solemn expressions of inadequately concealed incomprehension), these quarryings of exotic musical styles without regard for their social content have been at best as frivolous as the attempts made earlier in this century by western visual artists to use the forms of African sculpture, in complete ignorance of its social and ritual meanings. At worst they can be seen as a mode of further western exploitation of the whole world, of that Orientalism of which Edward Said says: '*is*, rather than expresses, a certain *will* or *intention* to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even

incorporate, what is manifestly a different (or alternative and novel) world.'[7] There is, and indeed can be, in these essays in Orientalism no genuine attempt to enter into and accommodate to that world in a way that might make for genuine comprehension and learning; all is brought back, like the spoils of earlier forays which fill the ethnographic museums of the west, to be exhibited proudly in those musical museums which are concert halls.

Nor does the classical tradition's response to Afro-American music show any more genuine attempt to understand it on its own terms. Afro-American music has in fact been colonized, and serves as raw material for exploitation, a novel flavour to be used when the composer feels like it. I have already commented on Stravinsky's uncomprehendng attempt to exploit ragtime; Aaron Copland's remark concerning his own jazz-tinged Piano Concerto of 1926, that he had 'done all he could within the limited emotional scope of jazz', quoted with clear approval in a recent talk on the BBC's classical-music channel, sums up as well as anything the prevailing attitude amongst classical musicians. The one notable work which does to my ears sound like a genuine attempt to come to terms with jazz's cultural premises (sounding in places remarkably like a thirty-year anticipation of the 'cool' jazz of the 1950s) is Darius Milhaud's ballet *La Création du Monde*, of 1923. It had no successors, since, as William Austin says, 'By 1926, when Milhaud next visited America, his interest in jazz was exhausted.'[8] George Gershwin is a different case altogether, for despite the classical training which he underwent in common with many of the other 'Broadway masters' of the time, he came as a practising musician to classical composition only after considerable experience in Afro-American music; the small number of concert pieces he created before his premature death in 1937, and especially his opera *Porgy and Bess*, give a hint of a genuinely popular concert and theatre music, of a kind that Mozart would have understood. In general, however, the attitude of classical musicians towards the Afro-American tradition has been at best of incomprehension and condescension, at worst of violent antagonism.

A remarkable attempt to bring about an understanding

between vernacular and concert musicking, to create in effect a vernacular concert music, was made after the second world war by a group of Greek musicians (that it should have come from a society that was most tragically riven by violent conflict is perhaps not without significance) of whom the best known are Mikis Theodorakis and Manos Hadjidakis. These musicians worked in the low-class *rebetiko* style, from the bars and dives of Athens and Piraeus, whose favoured instrument is the bazouki, refining and elaborating it as the basis of a popular concert, dance and especially theatre music. Hadjidakis in particular pioneered a musical form which is a kind of suite, of up to twenty short pieces, all popular in style and each quite simple, which cumulatively build to a powerful and beautiful, often tragic, totality, of a kind which orthodox classical music in our time seems unable to achieve; the finest of these which I know is *Lilacs Out of the Dead Land*. Despite the popular success of many of their works throughout Europe (aided no doubt by Theodorakis's well-publicized stand against the Greek Colonels), or even perhaps because of it, the international classical-music establishment has not wanted to know about them; neither of those musicians is mentioned in any of the histories of twentieth-century music that I have seen, and neither rates an entry under his own name in the *Dictionary of 20th Century Music*; nor have I heard a note of their music on the BBC's classical-music channel.

Understandably, any idea that the classical tradition might feed back into the vernacular is well in the past. About the only fragments of classical music from this century that have become established in the vernacular in Britain have been vehicles for crude patriotic or right-wing sentiment: *Land of Hope and Glory* to Elgar's first *Pomp and Circumstance March*, Parry's setting of William Blake's *Jerusalem* (what Blake would have had to say about the hijacking of his poem by the British Conservative Party is a matter for conjecture) and an odious patriotic hymn, much sung in British schools, whose words I shall spare the reader; it is set to the big 'Jupiter' tune from *The Planets* of Gustav Holst.

Today the disjunction is complete; with very few exceptions, all of them relegated to the fringes of concert life, contemporary composers of classical music have cut themselves

off from those vernacular sources which nourished the inspiration of their predecessors. The two cultures are not only separate but also mutually antipathetic. But while the cutting-off has been bad for the whole of western music making, it has been disastrous for classical music; just as it is arguable that the explosive growth of western technology has been a response more to scarcity than to plenty, so it is possible to view the large number of disparate styles in present-day concert music as evidence more of a desperate search for that common idiom which comes naturally when classical and vernacular musicians are able to interact freely than it is of any real creative vitality. The technical revolution which followed the 'exhaustion' of tonal harmony (it is alive and well elsewhere) has undoubtedly given rise to sonic structures of great interest and sometimes even beauty, but those glittering and ingenious sound-objects remain, for want of a clear understanding of the meaning of the act of performing them, only ever more gorgeously-coloured and intricate toys for the diversion of ever more frivolous audiences. Those audiences cannot be anything other than frivolous, for they are never permitted to be more than spectators of the musical act; being denied any active role in that creative gesture which is a musical performance, they can have no part either in the creation of that society which the performance brings into existence. That society which has been created for them has been called the Society of the Spectacle, of which Guy Debord says: 'The spectacle presents itself as something enormously positive, indisputable and inaccessible . . . The attitude which it demands in principle is passive acceptance which in fact it has already obtained by its manner of appearance without reply.'[9] Although Debord's comments refer to the wider society of the industrial state, they fit that of the modern concert hall with remarkable exactness.

If audiences are powerless to affect performances, that powerlessness is in proportion to the arrogance of composers, an arrogance which mirrors that of scientists, upon whom, rather than the poets of the nineteenth century, they model themselves and their activities; Edgard Varèse once said 'Scientists are the poets of today' — a silly remark which is

nonetheless indicative of a state of mind. Just as do scientists, composers present us with the result of their researches, ready-made and unasked-for; take it and like it, we are told from the subsidized eyrie, it is good for you. The arrogance, I hasten to add, is as much institutional as it is personal; composers, like scientists, are in the main decent enough men and women. But in present-day concert life not only the publicity and the media attention but also the very nature of the relationship with players and audience turn every performance of a composer's work, willy-nilly, into a monstrous ego-trip, which seems to have led some composers, at least, to believe their own publicity and to take an exaggerated view of their own importance in the world.

For all its technical sophistication, there is nothing new in the view of the world and of human relationships offered by 'the new music', since all the relationships of the concert hall reproduce in if anything intensified form those of the industrial state. Indeed, there is something impoverished about the human values embodied in the performance of most contemporary music (a parallel again to the values held by their models, the physical scientists); the wheels spin most ingeniously but do not engage with any real social or emotional load.

The impression of social naivety is, for this listener, always given most intensely in the performance of those musical works whose composer has attempted to engage explicitly with social concerns, and most especially when the composer strikes left-wing or populist political attitudes: the stage works of Henze and Nono, Berio's anti-capitalist and anti-bourgeois pieces, Stockhausen's essays in cultural ecumenicism, as well as works such as Pousseur's 1968 orchestral piece *Couleurs Croisées*, in which the song *We Shall Overcome* serves, as the composer himself says, 'as a matrix from which the whole composition is strictly derived . . . In particular, it is projected through a whole system of melodic-harmonic fields, beginning with a disjunct, chromatic expressionist musical reality and ending . . . in a diatonic state which is relatively, hypothetically, at peace'[10] and Frederick Rzewski's *Attica* and *Coming Together* of 1972, in which the words of inmates involved in an American prison riot are used with (again quoting the

composer) an 'attempt to heighten them by underscoring them with music. There is therefore a certain ambiguity between the personal, emotional and meditative aspects of the texts, which is enhanced by cumulative repetition, and their wider political implications. I believe that this ambiguity can be either a strength or a weakness in performance, depending on the degree with which the performer identifies personally with the revolutionary struggle taking place in America's prisons and the world at large.'[11] It would have been interesting to hear the reaction of George Jackson or of Martin Luther King to a performance in a concert hall of these pieces.

The naivety of such posturings is cruelly exposed when they are compared with the streetwise sophistication of black American musicians and their musicking. It is a dangerous and irresponsible naivety, which conceals from the composer — and his audience — the fact that he is serving the values, and thus the interests, of those to whose advantage the modern state is organized; no matter what message the composer may *think* he is conveying, the act of performance within the structure and the conventions of the concert hall or opera house carries its own message. It is not that the medium *is* the message, or even that the medium conveys a message that can swamp that which is intended; rather, it is that anyone who genuinely desired social change would not subject his message to such an conservative medium as the concert hall. For those who are happy to serve the values of the modern state, there is of course no problem, but I wonder if those who seek to use the concert hall and the opera house for the expression of revolutionary or populist sentiments really understand what it is they are doing. For in order to gain entry to that culture which is incarnated in the buildings and in the events that take place within them, it is necessary, whether one realizes it or not, to submit to the values which they were built to celebrate. That is the price exacted for the subsidy given by states and wealthy organizations to classical musicking: that the performance celebrate those values which legitimize the position of the privileged of the state. It is a trap into which not many vernacular musicians, whose noses are being constantly rubbed in the realities of power and of money, are likely to fall

— not, at any rate, without being aware of what they are doing.

Perhaps it does not matter too much, for this is where the fourth disjunction comes into play; what contemporary composers, and those who perform their music, do, would appear to relate to the concerns of only a small minority of even that minority of the population who enjoy the ceremonies of the concert hall and opera house, or who buy records of the music that is performed there. I have already remarked that most concert goers shun the offerings of contemporary composers, preferring to hear pieces that are the work of dead, and usually long-dead, musicians; we need now to investigate more fully this phenomenon and the reasons for it. Certainly little has been added since about 1920 to the repertory of pieces that are regularly played in concert halls and opera houses, and nothing that has been added has attained to anything like the popularity, as measured by frequency of performance, of the 'immortal masterpieces' of Beethoven, Brahms or Chaikovski, or of Verdi, Wagner or Puccini. It is not possible to invoke any 'inevitable timelag' which is supposed to be required for the assimilation of new works; the composers I have mentioned did not have to wait for anything like the length of time which has already elapsed since the first performances of such critically acclaimed works of the twentieth century as Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912), Varèse's *Arcana* (1927), Berg's *Chamber Concerto* (1925), or even Boulez's *Le Marteau sans Maître* (thirty years old in 1984) and Messaien's *Chronochromie* (coming up to 25). Those who champion 'the new music' await its assimilation into the repertory much as the early Christians awaited the Second Coming, greeting each new performance as the first rays of a new dawn. But in fact the only music composed since World War I which has found anything like general acceptance with concert goers is that which, like the later works of Rachmaninov and Sibelius (and even the latter are a bit modern for some) shows an obvious affinity with the world of nineteenth-century romanticism.

The virtual freezing of the repertory has had the consequence that a concert very rarely furnishes any new musical experience at all. The number of composers whose work is regularly played in orchestral and chamber-music pro-

grammes is not large, around fifty at most, with a few others represented by perhaps one or two, often immensely popular works; Bruch's First Violin Concerto and *Scottish Fantasia* and Dukas' *Sorcerer's Apprentice* come to mind. It can be, and often is, pointed out that there are always generations of young people for whom these composers and their works are new; this is undoubtedly so, but hardly seems to justify giving over the whole of modern concert life to them. As Arthur Loesser says: 'Programs consisting largely of twice-sifted masterpieces may, of course, appeal more readily to people of wider culture and greater discrimination than those that dwell mostly in the froth of fashion. Nevertheless, too persistent a preoccupation with the past, even with its glories, is an elderly posture, one of diminishing hope. Old music could seem new to the ever-resurgent generations who had not heard it before; still, on the whole, what a "classical" program gains in "taste" it loses in living force.'[12]

The human need for novelty, however, remains, and is met, first, by the researches of musicologists into ever more obscure corners of the past repertory, exhuming works and even composers who served their times and their occasions and might have been happier to be allowed to rest in peace. The rediscovery of the Baroque in the 1930s and 1940s must have been, at least in part, the first major response to the freezing of the repertory, while today, one after another, the works of old musicians, previously just names in history books, are being brought out of the libraries and restored to the consciousness of classical-music lovers. But such quarrying of the past for the semblance of new musical experiences must come, as with all strictly non-renewable fossil resources, eventually to an end; although possibly still containing untapped fields for exploitation they are not inexhaustible, and already musicologists are reduced to the rediscovery of forgotten English cathedral organists and German kapell-meisters (mercilessly mocked in Peter Schickele's P.D.Q. Bach, 'history's most justly neglected composer') and even to making notional completions of incomplete or mutilated works which up to now have stood as they are, for example Mahler's Tenth symphony and even Schubert's Eighth, known to generations as *The Unfinished*. Anything will do that is

new to the ears of audiences but bears the reassuring stamp of the familiar musical language and gestures. Another means of meeting the quest for novelty lies in the reassessment and reworking of familiar masterpieces with a view to restoring 'authenticity' (a chimera if ever there was one) with the use of period instruments, or copies of them, and scrupulous research into performance style (style, that is, viewed narrowly as the realization in sound of the composer's notations) and elaborate care taken to recreate the piece exactly as the composer intended — in all but its most vital aspect: the purpose and the kind of occasion for which it was composed.

All this activity is fed happily by record companies, so that record collectors who have just completed buying their boxed sets of all 104 symphonies of Josef Haydn find themselves faced with having to buy them all over again on CD with authentic instruments. It is all good for business, but it would seem to reveal a massive ebbing of confidence. No music, it seems, will ever be as good or as satisfying again as it was up to the time of the first world war; the book of creation, if not exactly closed, is being filled with writings that are either unintelligible or repellent or both. We are forced to ask whether a culture able to take full advantage of present creativity would feel obliged in this way to nit-pick at its past, and to try to discover what might be the reason for such a state of affairs, which contrasts so sharply with the ceaseless creative activity, and the ceaseless demand for new experiences, in the other western musical culture with which the classical tradition coexists so uneasily.

If we accept that musicking is a ritual activity in which the identity and the values of the members of a group are explored, affirmed and celebrated, then a symphony concert is a ritual which performs this function for the members of the middle and upper classes of industrial society; many social surveys taken in a number of countries have shown that the overwhelming majority of both performers and listeners who take part in symphony concerts qualify in terms of income, formal education and social attitudes for membership of those classes, today fused in a single elite whose social and artistic leadership is not allowed to be questioned. As a ritual, it is, to use the ideas introduced in Chapter 2, a celebration of

the 'sacred history' of those classes, and an affirmation of faith in their values as the universal and abiding stuff of living. As these values, and those of industrial society in general, come increasingly under attack both from social critics and from the pressure of events, so the concert becomes more important as a way of affirming a belief in stability in an unstable world. The lives and the personalities of 'the great composers', their sufferings, their triumphs and their defeats, their loves and their hates, all embodied quasi-autobiographically in those psychodramas which are symphonies, concertos, sonatas and tone poems, are paradigms for that belief, which is reaffirmed every time their music is played before a paying audience in a concert hall. Beethoven's triumph over his disability, the death- and work-obsessed Protestantism of Sebastian Bach, the warm rational Enlightenment optimism of Haydn, Vaughan Williams's vision of a pastoral England that probably never was, Schubert's insouciant but doomed bohemian existence, Elgar's espousal of the uneasy imperialist extravagance of Edwardian England (comforting to an England presently in disastrous decline) and, perhaps most significant of all to the late twentieth century, Mahler's outward success and inner alienation and misery — these and other past musicians are models for the values and the experience of their audiences.

The 'history of music' as perceived by the average music lover is a mythological landscape, peopled with heroes and their adversaries, tasks to be accomplished, tricks of fate to be overcome, destinies to be fulfilled. However rationally musicologists may present that history, however obsessively they may order and date them, in the catalogues of Köchel, Longo, Deutsch and Hoboken, the works of the classical tradition remain obstinately, in the minds of most music lovers, outside historical time; no other assumption could induce a moment's credence for the idea commonly held that these are 'immortal masterpieces' that will last as long as time. The violence of many music lovers' reaction to the mere suggestion that the works of Bach and Beethoven may not be in the literal sense immortal, but will one day cease to have meaning for performers and listeners and will simply disappear, testifies to the power of the myth. Nor can the ritual

of stability afford heroes who are alive in the present; like Theseus, Maui, Arthur, Gilgamesh and other civilizing heroes, 'the great composers' belong in the time of myth, and their works must live for ever.

Even the much-trumpeted 'raising of performance standards' (that is, the insistence on ever-greater precision in the execution of the notations and the development of ever-greater digital dexterity to meet its demands) over the last few decades speaks of an obsessional need for accurate performance of the ritual, in default of which the whole ceremony is rendered invalid. The obsession is understandable; as our grasp of present events becomes more precarious, so we tighten our grip on the past with a magical ceremony to keep things as they have been (or as we *imagine* them to have been) and avert the catastrophic changes we fear. The quest for 'authenticity' in performance can be seen in the same light; the 'sacred history' of the culture which, as Eliade has said, 'must be carefully preserved and transmitted intact,'[13] has become fixed and rigid, in a way it does not seem to become in non-literate cultures, leaving little room for creative development. The urge to fix and to preserve intact has an ally in the gramophone; Stravinsky, for example, tried to capture his own performance of every one of his works on disc so that future generations could know exactly how they should be played. What Haydn would have thought of that we can only speculate. For the most part, musicians and listeners in other cultures, including the Afro-American, don't give a damn about preservation, being much too busy with the present process of creation; if pieces survive, well and good, but it does not matter too much. If they were to think about the matter at all (and there is no particular reason why they should) they would probably feel that there was plenty more where that came from.

That it was no part of the intention of, say, Beethoven that his great symphonies should become part of a ritual of the twentieth-century industrial state is obvious. Seated in the regimented comfort of the modern concert hall, it is difficult to imagine these works, and others from the past that are performed there, as having been heard in any other kind of setting or as serving any other purpose, but the fact is that all

but the most recent have been wrenched out of the social context for which they were intended, and the varied and complex social meanings of their performance have been reduced to a single meaning to serve the values of the powerful in present-day society. Musicians, of course, have always tended to gravitate towards centres of power — after all, that is where the money is — and to celebrate the values of the powerful, but in the past those centres of power were not centralized or unified, nor were the events of which the performance formed a part of one kind only. Music which today is heard in the bland — but *not* neutral — conditions of the concert hall might have been originally heard in a medieval church as part of its liturgy, in an eighteenth-century German bourgeois household during a wedding festivity, in a sixteenth-century French academy open only to members, in the drapers' hall of a nineteenth-century German city, in a sixteenth-century English cathedral, as a background to elegant conversation and eating in an eighteenth-century German court, as an ornament to the river trip of an eighteenth-century English king, as part of a gathering of friends in the apartment of an obscure nineteenth-century Viennese musician, as part of the coronation festivities of a Holy Roman Emperor, as accompaniment to the dancers in a nineteenth-century Viennese ballroom, as part of the solemn Good Friday obsequies in a provincial German church, at a fashionable aristocratic salon in Paris or a rival *haute-bourgeoise* soirée just before the first world war. None of these events took place in a space that was purpose-built for the performance of music, in none of them was music the primary object of the coming-together of musicians and listeners, in few of them would the performing musicians have been all professionals, and to none of them could one gain admission by the purchase of a ticket. With the hijacking of these, and countless other forms of musical encounter, to the modern concert hall, an enormous number and variety of social meanings has been reduced to one — and that meaning, as I have suggested, is one of defence, of holding on to what one has, rather than of enterprise and the exploration of new territories of the spirit which was embodied in the original performances, and which has animated Afro-American

musicking in the present century.

It is even possible that those superb concert halls and opera houses of which most large cities in the wealthy west are so proud, built generally with no expense spared and often at the leading edge of new building technology, as well as those superbly disciplined organizations that are orchestras, chamber-music ensembles and opera companies, can themselves be seen as symptoms of the decline in creative energy. We can obtain a clue to this from Northcote Parkinson's jokey but fascinating book *Parkinson's Law*. In the chapter 'Plans and Plants', he describes a visit to a kind of business organization common enough today, which is housed in a magnificent building: 'from behind closed doors will come the subdued noise of an ordered activity. A minute later and you are ankle deep in the director's carpet, plodding sturdily towards his distant, tidy desk. Hypnotized by the chief's unwavering stare, cowed by the Matisse hung upon his wall, you will feel you have found real efficiency at last.

'In point of fact you will have discovered nothing of the sort. It is now known that *perfection of planned layout is achieved only by institutions on the point of collapse* . . . During a period of exciting discovery or progress there is no time to plan the perfect headquarters. The time for that comes later, when all the important work has been done. Perfection, we know, is finality; and finality is death'[14] (My italics). There can be no doubt that the great concert halls, and the organization that is necessary to run them, impose a particular character on everything that happens within them, creating in particular severe limitations on innovation; it is not surprising that the most interesting and innovative musicking of today should be taking place, as probably it always did, in unsuitable places with such facilities as they possess impoverished and probably inadequate. With such places Monteverdi and Buddy Bolden must have been familiar; it is there that it is possible for musicians, listeners and dancers to hammer out new musical styles, and new social relationships, together.

The flattening-out of the social function of classical music has meant that composers who work for the concert hall have for the most part abandoned the music of popular entertainment, of popular theatre, films and television, of popular

dance and of social occasions in general, either to vernacular musicians or else to specialist colleagues who are prepared to weather the contempt of the high-art world for the sake of the financial rewards and of the wide exposure their music will receive. It is interesting, for example, that Max Steiner and Erich Korngold, two of the most prolific and, through the Hollywood films with which they were associated, probably most heard orchestral composers of the twentieth century, receive no mention at all in most histories of twentieth-century music. It all looks like a calculated retreat from any attempt either to make music of any kind of direct social usefulness or to woo and win an audience, the esteem in which a composer of 'new music' is held by the critical establishment being in something like inverse ratio to the extent to which he makes the attempt. That Mozart and Haydn would not have dared, even if the idea had occurred to them, to ride roughshod over their audiences' preferences is obvious; they simply would not have eaten.

There is an audience to be won, though a small one, a minority within a minority, which is apparently able to use performances of 'new music' in the service of its self-definition, and for whose members such performances are capable of constructing social relationships which satisfy some ideal that they hold. It is a seductive ideal that is celebrated, of a highly rational, centralized society, a society in fact, of the technological fix, but it is fundamentally no more than a naive celebration of technique which does not require or even consider any change in social relationships; what such musicking does is place both performers and listeners in an even more subservient position than before to the will of the composer, even more completely relegated to the role of spectators at processes they do not, and are not expected to, understand — a model, in fact, of political processes in contemporary societies, not least in those which call themselves democratic. The audience is necessarily small, since it defines itself in terms of exclusion of even the majority of classical-music lovers, for whom the all-purpose term of abuse, 'bourgeoisie', is used. Tom Wolfe, in his study of the modern movement in architecture, describes the exclusion thus: 'Composers, artists or architects in a compound began

to have the instincts of the medieval clergy, much of whose activity was devoted exclusively to separating itself from the mob. For mob, substitute bourgeois — and here you have the spirit of avant-gardism in the twentieth century. Once inside the compound, an artist became part of the clerisy, to use an old term for an intelligentsia with clerical presumptions.'[15]

Wolfe's proposition, that contemporary classical musicians, like their colleagues in the other arts, have, in collusion with their audience and with those who hold the pursestrings, built themselves into a compound within which they can regard themselves as 'having access to the godhead, which in this case was Creativity,'[16] deserves some attention. What is not widely understood today is, first, that what we today call 'classical music' is a conflation of ways of musicking that were affirmations of identity for a large number of different social groups at different historical times; practically the only thing they had in common is that they were literate and that they were associated in some way with contemporary centres of power in European society. And, second, that those groups have always had an element of exclusiveness about them, even if some were more exclusive than others. It was only with the spread of music publishing in the eighteenth century, of public concerts in the nineteenth, and of records in the twentieth, that the music first heard in the *châteaux* and *Schlossen* of the aristocracy, and in the salons of the rising bourgeoisie, became more widely available; up to that time, if one were to attend the performances at which the music was heard one had to belong to that social circle.

There is nothing extraordinary about this, since musical performance has always been a way in which members of social groups have affirmed their identity, and exclusion has always been an element of that identity. But with the spread of what we can crudely call bourgeois ideals and their cognate, industrialism, across the whole world, and with the takeover of the entire history of literate European music, and its conflation into what we equally crudely call classical music, to serve the value system of industrial society and of those who benefit from it, the differentiations and exclusivities which were still present even in the nineteenth century (for example, the two rival traditions, that popular tradition which em-

phasised improvisation and virtuosity, as represented by Liszt, Thalberg, Meyerbeer and Rossini and that of 'serious' composition as represented by Schumann, Wagner and Brahms) have been merged into an amorphous corpus of 'great music'. Anyone today who possesses the price of a concert ticket or of a gramophone record can gain admission to the 'World of the Great Composers', as the record-club advertisements so picturesquely put it. Exclusiveness has to be gained by other means, and it is appropriate that those who consider themselves intellectuals should define themselves by references to musical performances that are too 'difficult' and complex for the ordinary music lover (it parallels in a way the aristocratic practice of self-definition through eating game meats in so rotten a state that the fastidious middle classes will not touch them) — and then that they should insist that this way of musicking is the natural and inevitable successor of that of 'difficult' composers such as Beethoven and Mozart who, the story goes (it is quite untrue) were also understood in their own times only by a small coterie of intellectuals.

How this collusion between composers, sponsors and audience came about is an interesting history. It climaxed in a brilliantly successful takeover by a group of aggressive and ambitious young composers of the summer school at Darmstadt, in West Germany, which was founded in 1947 with funds provided by the city and by the American occupying forces and was aimed to restore the continuity of German classical music with that of the rest of Europe after the disruption caused by twelve years of Nazism. That aim was rudely thrust aside and Darmstadt became a showcase for the work of those young composers and their like-minded friends. Other more conservative musicians were left stranded like beached whales by the rapidity and the completeness of the takeover; even the august Stravinsky was obliged, in order to retain his credibility, to adopt the young lions' compositional methods and pay his tribute to their idol, Anton Webern, an eccentric, fastidious master who had been conveniently killed just after the end of the war and could not protest at the unwarranted weight placed upon his beautiful but fragile music.

The key to their success lay in their gaining not only access

to, but virtual monopoly of, the sources of subsidy, which in this case were West German Radio, the Donaueschingen Festival (a lavish annual affair financed by a music-loving family of aristocrats and Southwest German Radio) and, later, broadcasting networks and academic institutions in Europe and America, most of which were dragooned into lending support by the fear of seeming antiquated and out of touch. Once they had invested in 'the new music' they were naturally enough interested in protecting their investment and were happy to act as propagandists for it. The way in which the takeover was managed in the first place is not clear, but it shows clearly the coincidence in values between subsidizer and subsidized which we noted in an earlier chapter. There would not be too much significance for the rest of us in this coincidence, if the money was the sponsor's own and the musicking was sponsored for his own pleasure and that of his friends; but when the money is public, and is being used to support public musicking, then the question of values does become publicly important. There is no space here to investigate the number of unexamined assumptions that underlie the subsidizing of contemporary composers and of those who play their music, but we note that subsidy does make it possible for musicians to sustain a posture of intellectual independence and artistic commitment which, to put it no more strongly, does not always accord with the facts. Successful contemporary composers are able to insist on the musical and social necessity of writing as they do, at the same time pointing out the personal and private nature of their inspiration, considerations against which the need to please an audience is at best secondary, and this is the result of their having persuaded those who hold the pursestrings that theirs is an activity which supports the sponsors' values — which, of course, both parties may sincerely believe are true values.

I venture these comments on present-day classical music not simply as what advertisements call 'knocking copy', in order to make the product I am selling look better by comparison, but in order to set the record straight, in that those who practise, listen to and sponsor classical music in our time are in the habit of presenting it as the one significant 'serious' musical culture of the west. It is this claim that must

be exposed if we are to perceive where the true human centre of western musicking today lies. For the fact is that the classical tradition, which over the past sixty years or so has produced works of undoubted ingenuity and even occasionally beauty, has failed signally to articulate values or to create a community that is of use to more than a relative handful of people today. Its failure has lain, not in musical technique, but in those human relationships which are brought into existence whenever music is performed, and that is a grievous failure indeed. For music is, first and foremost, performance, which is a collaboration between performers and whoever is listening, and maybe dancing; those human relationships which the performance brings into existence are inescapable, and if we ignore them in our quest for ever more ingenious and elaborate objects, then they will become distorted and sterile, just as they do in the wider society of which the performance is a model.

This is what I believe has happened in the classical tradition today. In the first place, we have a sizeable audience (still, however, a small minority of the population) which concerns itself with the performance and the contemplation of a number of sound-objects bequeathed to us from the past, and an extensive quasi-industrial apparatus to provide them with those objects; there is no taste for adventure there, only a retreat from new experience and a fear of change. And in the second, we have musicians driven by a kind of technological imperative to create ever more complex and esoteric works whose performance creates a model of centralized power and authority. Together they present us with the twin faces of the industrial state today, its fears and its drives, and, above all, the poverty of its relationships. There does not seem to be any way out; composers cannot abdicate their authority, or they would no longer be composers, and in any case performers would be unable to play without them, having never learnt how to become autonomous musicians able to take responsibility for what they play, and having nobody to show them how.

The whole massive apparatus is kept alive through injections of subsidy, so that the majority, who have no interest in any of it, are obliged to pay for the support of the

musicians, as well as for the buildings and institutions with which they are associated; even the money that is given by Ford, Eastern Airlines and Texaco, among others, comes not from nowhere but from the price of cars, airline tickets and petrol — and from those tax deductions for which the taxpayer ultimately foots the bill. Take away that subsidy and most of the structure would collapse, for it has little genuine base in human lives. What remained — probably mostly amateur, which is to say, people making their own experiences — might be the healthier for it; in the greatest period of the classical tradition, after all, the majority of the musicking, both public or private, was carried out by amateurs, with professionals functioning as leaders and pacemakers in the common task. But perhaps that time can never come again — not, at any rate, in such a way as to preserve the relationships that are embodied in present-day classical musicking.

The one thing that the vernacular musician cannot forget is his relationship with his audience; it is ironic that for that he is despised as 'commercial' by the classical-music establishment. Conversely, that audience expects to be able to relate directly, on a personal level, with its musicians. This direct relationship, however distorted by the forces of commercialism, however over-eagerly it may sometimes be sought by musicians, however insincere, even hypocritical, it can on occasion become (hypocrisy being the tribute paid by vice to virtue), can nevertheless come genuinely into existence for the duration of a performance and provide a vision, however fleeting and partial, of a society whose values are a genuine alternative to the present destructive and dehumanizing society of the industrial state. The presence of those alternative values in western music today can almost always be traced to the musicking of black people in the Americas; in the next chapter we shall see once again this presence in action.

NOTES

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