

The Concept of Anticipation: A Follow up to “Music Critics: *Querendo Invientis*”

As we enter the second decade of the twenty-first century, I started to thinking about why the music of the last generation is so boring. I suddenly realized that an essential element to classical music, which was disposed of in the last generation was the concept of anticipation- long range payoff in drama. Beethoven, of course had it in spades. Just think of the storm in the Pastoral Symphony: after all that noise he had to come up with a top 40's winner, and he did. The ultimate wizard of anticipation was, probably Wagner, who managed to keep us guessing for at least 17 hours in the Ring.

It seems to me that as the 20th century progressed, more and more composers started to live in the present, casting off long range anticipation for the immediate excitement of the immediate event. This observation sounds a lot like the way that people live today on their credit cards. The essential creative problem is that the immediate event does not add up to the ultimate payoff (think “An die Freude”). Getting back to Wagner: the opening Eb arpeggiated passage and its surprising resolution anticipate the opening of *Götterdämmerung*, some 11 hours later. I am sure that playwrights like August Wilson have the Finale in mind before even starting Act I. We might ask the question: why have composers abandoned this dramatic scenario?

The answer is complicated. The most obvious is that tonality, which has this multi-layered structure, was mostly abandoned. There are more perverse reasons, which are tied to the cultural shifts among the elite. “I want it now!” This is the world in which we live. Lining this up in the world of art, it does not work, because real time is irrelevant in the creative process. A work could occur instantly, or take decades to fulfill. All mature artists know this, but few critics or audiences ever address the creation genesis.

In the Andrea Bedetti CD liner notes of the Complete Works for Violin and Viola of Salvatore Sciarrino, the author states: Among the

indisputable achievements of contemporary music is the compelling one concerning the static contemplation of sound, slowly forming over time inside those who internally imagine in order to subsequently create and manifest it through a physical act.” (transl. Athena Corcoran-Tadd). As an indictment of what is wrong with Mainstream Modernism (although that was not Bedetti’s intent), I could not say it better. If the main focus is on the present event, then long range dramatic anticipation is nearly impossible, as well as real tunes, which have made up the vast majority of musical materials of the last thousand years.

I can see many who would say, well, artists are merely reflecting cultural change. This is true, but, in the long range, does it have any sustaining value? Just because a majority of electoral votes went to Donald Trump, did he become that leader of the Free World? There may be a surpassing truth which takes more time to unfold; so, it is possible that in 2017 we cannot really see the entire picture. Assuming that artistic creativity, in order to transmogrify into eternal truth, must somehow leap over the bounds of cultural miasma, if it is there, a speak with the voice of eternal truth. I now remind the reader of the Italian Renaissance, a time of the worst religious persecution and the most absolutist monarchies and dictatorships.

The mission of the artist, then, becomes kin to the Biblical prophets of old: we must anticipate the wrath of the Pharaoh, as Moses and Aaron in Exodus. Maybe we will not order plagues, killings and locusts., but if we are possessed of magic, we will turn our rods into singing serpents. At this point I have to divide my message between the consumers of art and the creators. I think that the onus is meted out between the two groups. I would like to start with the composers. The creation of unique sound events occurs at the expense of large-scale drama. In addition, it is easy to make noise, but difficult to create a melody, even one as fragmented as those used by Anton Webern. In the avant-garde works of today, thematicism seems to have moved into a forbidden area, almost in direct opposition to the composer’s goals. The dilemma presented ranks an individual sound event over the subsumed contour of a phrase or group of phrases.

I remember as a student hearing George Rochberg discussing this process as having to do with some natural biological perceptive mechanisms. As far as he was concerned, the preservation of the musical phrase is essential for the listener to understand music. It is almost as though the

concept of “understand” has been redefined to include shocked reactions to unfamiliar events. Getting back to real time vs. the creation of “relative time” (another Rochberg concept), if the listener is not drawn into this special temporal relationship, the real magic of music never occurs. Rochberg also talked about memorability as a chief trait of musical ideas. In my own pieces, I used this concept when I decided around 1980 to work on an entire piece in my head, not writing it down until it was complete, at least in its general outlines. Anything I would forget was probably not worth preserving and would fail the test of memorability.

There may be another factor at work: with the democratization of the arts, allowing politically correct, temporarily novel sound sculptures, and music which seems to progress in fits and starts, the burden of doing what came so naturally to the likes of Mozart and Stravinsky is removed. I would direct the reader to descriptions of the work of Du Dun, who won this year’s Pulitzer Prize. It is an opera dealing with the sexual trafficking of women. While not objecting to the importance of the topic, I would wonder about the long term affirmation that would come with grappling with moral-social problems as an opera. In the past, such hot topics as those unfolded in Britten’s *Peter Grimes* or *Billy Budd*, are presented in graphic detail, but the works themselves become parables for the human condition itself. I don’t know Ms. Dun’s piece; all I can hope for is that she has at least attempted to go beyond PC.

Anyone can be a composer or painter, because true craft has been cast off in favor of the immediate gratification of bursts of sound events, which don’t add up to anything of substance. That is why the music of Mainstream Modernism is largely so boring. Somewhere in the fabric of my arguments is the decision by composers to dispense with tonality. This process began after World War One and has gone on unabated for at least 100 years. Does that make it the “correct” path? I think not: removing the onus on composers to create tunes is really a two-edged sword. Sure, the music is a snap to create, but it also becomes disposable and instant detritus of our present culture. That would mean that whatever relevance that the music may have now will be lost, because the concomitant extrapolation to more universal human values never occurs. If I were to guess, I would say that at least two generations of music will be disposed of by the future culture and the body of work will be looked upon as mere curiosities.

There are some critics who would say that the level of abstraction in a musical work has always been a part of the generative process, regardless of cultural associations. I would agree, but in the past, the nuts and bolts of musical structure were often concealed, and it was not necessary to have this knowledge to appreciate a piece of music. Far more significant is whether the listener can connect with any of the ideas. Traditional cultural reference also allows for the injection of humor and familiarity, both of which ground a piece of music in a kind of humanism. Say it that many composers deliberately present the unfamiliar as a stand in for the truly creative (I have dealt with this hot topic in my 2015 interview in Fanfare Magazine, “Novelty versus Originality.”) In the course of my argument, things can get pretty sticky: consider the ineluctable conclusion to my remarks. There really is no permanent music except that which is grounded in some kind of tonal identity. Personally, I believe this, although as a teacher of composition I never tried to limit the kinds of techniques that my students wanted to employ. I would hope that on their own, they would gravitate toward techniques that would ground the work in some common experience. To compel the fledgling artist to write “people’s music” would be to resurrect the kind of “Chinese Cultural revolution” or Soviet mentality that almost paralyzed the art of those two countries, in the 1950’s.

I think that I have set a worthy but difficult task before the artist and audience. Don’t create something, just because it sounds weird and shocking. Don’t applaud artworks that are pretentious and boring, because we have been told that they are “important.” I have one last point: traditionally, composers have written for amateurs and musicians of limited technical gifts, the opposite of the often needlessly fussy structures of the avant-garde that require the highest levels of virtuosity to execute. I have tried to create some *gebrauchsmusik* in my catalog, because the limitations imposed keep me honest. If I can’t write anything simple, maybe I am hiding behind needless complexity. Sometimes complexity is essential. Witness the music of Beethoven’s Late Quartets, some of the most complex music ever written. However, the attractive surface and the great tunes permanently affix the pieces in the listener’s memory. Remember at the premiere of Op. 130, each movement was encored as a result of audience approbation.

Paul Reale, Spring, 2017.