

Music Critics: *Quaerendo* *Invenientis*

I can already see readers rolling their eyes at the possible outburst of a sour grapes composer, reacting to a negative review. Actually, I plan to discuss the nature of music reviews, both good and bad. First, there are a few facts to keep in mind: 1) a concert may have a few hundred or thousand people in the audience, while the review might be read by many thousands, especially where there is no trashcan on the internet. 2) If the work reviewed is a new piece, the critic's audition is a first-time event, unless the review is of a recording. 3) Very few critics request scores of new works from composers, so performers and composers are at the mercy of the potentially unsophisticated ear of the critic. 4) All reviews are subjective judgments by definition; however, the remarks in a review, whether laudatory or damning, objectify the personal opinion. Perhaps this is acceptable in this era of "alternate truth," but the weight of reviews has to be scaled against the measure of historical distance. Also, critics tend to pile upon one another in group praise or opprobrium. All of a sudden "John Adams is the most important American composer." This is the kind of hagiography that awakens my disdain and dismissal of most criticism. The critical remarks of Robert Schumann or Edward Hanslick resonate, because time has provided some proof of the accuracy of their judgments. Everyone has run into snippets

from the Lexicon of Musical Invective of Nicolas Slonimsky, which reports bad reviews of consummate masterpieces. So, let us proceed to create a framework for the proper study of music reviews.

All criticism in the arts is journalism, and whether it can ascend to the rarefied clouds of philosophy or sociology is only a matter of time. Journalism is news, a reportage of a contemporary event. Whether most criticism ascends to the level of Pepys Diary is the open question. One of the most famous diatribes was against Gustav Mahler and his symphonies. Until Leonard Bernstein revived the works with the New York Philharmonic in the 60's, even noted historians like Paul Henry Lang (*Music in Western Civilization*, 1941) warned listeners about Mahler. When it comes to the criticism of contemporary music, many perverse factors come into play. In the nineteenth century, elaborate musical works occupied the center stage of public art, much in the way that movies function today. That means that here was intense scrutiny of the latest creations, often at the expense of older pieces of music that departed from the repertoire. A good case in point would be the piano concertos of Mozart. A hundred years ago only K466 was widely performed, and the other twenty six concertos lay fallow. As performing organizations became wilderness survivors in the jungle of public performance, a so called "standard repertoire" emerged- music basically encompassing that written between 1800-1875. New compositions and their premieres were put into a separate category: premieres became the most important and often the only performances. Stretch this on a framework of

“The Idea of Progress,” as outlined in the 1931 book by J.B. Bury, and a preconceived opinion of new works began to be colored by their apprehension of their novelty. It was in this atmosphere that the work of composers like Richard Strauss and Ralph Vaughan-Williams became perceived as “old fashioned” and mired in the outworn aesthetics of the past.

Today, in the world of contemporary classical music, most critics tend to focus on the “flavor of the month,” works that have sounds unheard in the past. They ignore whether the structural principles of a piece are new or original and merely focus on the local events. In reaction, many contemporary composers began focusing on local events at the expense of the larger picture: each piece is an assemblage of separate scenes. The interesting thing is that this anomaly spread across many divergent and often conflicting music styles. This disease equally affects the music of Boulez and Glass, two styles that appear to be in opposition to one another. Theme gives way to musical gesture and melody is supplanted by figuration. Motor rhythm becomes meaningless without a corresponding harmonic rhythm, the rate at which harmonic events occur. Also lost is motivic generation, which usually functions as a kind of series of musical signposts. Even in the pre twelve-tone works of Schoenberg and Webern, the purpose was served by a series of thematic cells which assume a quasi harmonic identity.

The upshot today is that composers’ choices of materials are often driven by a desire for cultural

acceptance within the narrow framework of an orthodoxy. The situation is aggravated by the preservation of contemporary music in university departments of music and specialist performing organizations. When the composers of the “Second Viennese School” initially had their works performed, critics had to stretch their ears to take in the new input. Once so acclimated, they never went back, meaning that any tonal music written after WW II could easily be trivialized, compared to the overtly complex music of Mainstream Modernism. Since most critics are not composers, the dirty little secret that this music is easy to write and requires no inspiration, is unknown to them. Returning to the local vs. long range perception of musical events: it is the inherent drama of expectation that makes the great music of the past interesting and compelling. A string of striking musical events never rises in dimensionality to the level of a symphony of Beethoven, because nothing ever builds to anything else. So, composers are supposed to shock rather than move the listener, because they can’t do anything else. Recently, I was shaken with boredom, hearing the slow movement of Christopher Rouse’s Fourth Symphony. This desperate attempt to resurrect the pale ghost of *Americanische* composers like Roy Harris led me to another conclusion: today’s tonal composers must avoid the perception of quaintness of music of the past. We must be as original as a Rafa Nadal serve, or go back to the morass of amateurism. Is it, then, possible for a contemporary composer to make historical stylistic reference? In certain cases of what I would call “niche” composers, like John Tavener and Arvo Pärt, their styles are successfully

reflective of the ancient past, filtered through the sieve of genuine modernism.

Unfortunately, there is no vaccine to cure music critics of the “avant-garde” disease, meaning that contemporary tonal music will forever be marginalized and deemed superficial. That would mean, of course that important experimental musical essays, like the “After” concertos of David DeBoor Canfield would be tossed aside. Speaking as a composer of tonal music since 1976, I think that my use of triadic harmonies is at variance with their usage in the past. The kind of long range tonal inevitability that marks traditional tonal works of the last century is not really a part of my arsenal. The tonal complexes in my music are more like free associations that may or may not have stylistic references to the past.

What I have laid out here appears to be a persistent dilemma for any composer who wants to write tunes, which explains why so many niche composers today, like Eric Whitacre and Dale Trumbore, write vocal and choral music. Text driven music has a built in linear logic which is not necessarily present in purely instrumental music. Opening up the issue: the mission of today’s composers has to be an expression of the times in which we live, and the extrapolation of those works must carry over to later times with different values. When I was a graduate student in the 1960’s twelve-tone music was *de rigueur*, and I remember being told in a seminar: “This is the way music will be written in the future.” Like many of the predictions of so many world’s fairs, this one has fallen on hard times. I

would say that the impending chaos of free atonality is a worse alternative, kind of like cooking out of the prepared food aisle of a supermarket.

Think of the works of Chopin or Ravel, which owe very little to the distant past but which seem so right in themselves. Good music has to have an intrinsic logic, but that logic must not merely be imposed: it must grow out of the organic nature of the piece itself.

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