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Taste, Snobbery and Spiritual Style in Music

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The writer uses his own autobiography as a professional musician in order to illustrate how musical tastes and prejudices are formed and discarded. He describes his life as a choirboy, a composer, an adherent and a rejecter of the avant-garde, and a seeker after the spiritual aspects of music. He questions the Platonic doctrine that music has an effect on morality, admits his own lack of authentic inspiration, and suspects that it is generally shared by modern composers. But the classics of the Western tradition continue to serve him as a source of quasi-religious wisdom. He realises that this 'spiritual style' at which he has arrived is an individual affair, and urges the reader to make a similar self-analysis.

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Since I have compiled, translated, and written so many pages about the speculative and spiritual aspects of music, people sometimes ask me about my views on the practical aspects as well, and especially on the connections between the three. They want to know, for instance, whether I regard any particular type of music as superior, when judged from the principles of the Pythagorean tradition? Is there a spiritual hierarchy in music? Was Plato right in wanting to control the music of his Republic, and if so, what are the implications for today's music?

As I brood on these questions, I feel a profound scepticism about any general claims or dogmatic statements. I realise the degree to which one's musical preference is affected by one's personal history, and especially by the trio of influences: taste, snobbery, and spiritual style. Taking my own case as a specimen, I invite the reader to make an analogous review. However different his or her history may be, the exercise of self-knowledge is bound to be revealing and rewarding.

My first musical life was as a choirboy at Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford, and the Anglican choral tradition my first repertory. As I recall it to memory, my immediate instinct is to classify it. I want to put at the top the Bach motets and Renaissance masses, and far beneath them those early twentieth-century anthems, constructed, as I now know, from purloined hunks of Mendelssohn and Brahms. Yet if I am to be honest, I must admit that Stanford in G, Balfour-Gardiner's *Te lucis ante terminum*, or Vaughan Williams' *Rise, heart, thy Lord is risen* meant far more to me than the then featureless plains of Lassus or Byrd. Those specimens of Edwardian sublimity gave me the peak experiences of my childhood, and they would still uncork a flood of emotion if I were to wallow in them again.

What lessons do I draw from this? First, that I must beware of the snobbery of music historians, for whom Romantic English cathedral music is so insular and derivative as to be negligible. Second, I must allow that other repertories which I hear as tawdry and provincial may be vehicles for somebody's peak experience.

Edwardian music may be of minor value, but the Anglican cathedral tradition to which it belongs is among the world's great Gesamtkunstwerke. Blessed with one of the most benign forms of Christianity and with a wealth of history, architecture, ritual, hierarchy, curious customs, and music, it could have been a haven for the

rest of my life. But in time I deliberately cut my emotional ties with that world, renouncing the pleasures of nostalgia. Immensely grateful as I was for having been raised in a sort of musical Arcadia, I had to become free from it if I was to become true to myself.

At thirteen I went to Radley, where my musical life found a new focus. For the next ten years (approximately the 1960s), most of my spare time and creative energy went into composing and getting my compositions performed. The way I learned composition was through writing pastiches in various musical styles. My undergraduate course at Cambridge covered the styles from 16thC counterpoint to about the level of modernism found in easy Bartók. At that point, the borderline between pastiche and original composition became very hazy. On the strength of my own experience, I doubt that there is really a borderline at all.

Unlike their ancestors, contemporary composers have to start just as I did in my student exercises: by drawing the boundaries of the style that is to be used, and working within its boundaries. The implication, which did not exist in the past, in that there are other styles, equally valid, which might have been chosen. Moreover, it is commoner today than in the 1960s to recreate deliberately a style of the past. One is tempted to wonder whether most modern composition is little more than pastiche?

Creative Education

What is the creative process involved in writing musical pastiche? I believe that it is indistinguishable from most composition, in that one forms a conception of the piece as a whole, then works through it, listening inwardly for ideas or else discovering them at the keyboard, evaluating each idea in the light of the style and the rules of its discourse. The excitement and creative intensity I brought to the writing of a four-part fugue in Bachian style was genuine composition. So was the tribute of imitation I paid to whatever composer was my hero of the moment. Only the ground rules might differ. In the case of Benjamin Britten, whose successive works amazed me in each being so different in conception from the last, the key to pastiche was to think up an idea as novel as one of his. I would lie awake juggling poems and instruments, in search of a totally original idea for a song-cycle. Once the idea was there, the notes would follow with more or less coaxing, as one knew what would fit and what would not. In the case of avant-garde music, the conception was everything: one had to make a kind of piece that had never been heard before, mindful of Stockhausen's requirement for a young composer: 'Invention – and that he astonish me.' That, too, was pastiche, in that I was choosing a style and channeling my invention into it.

The experience gave me some insight into the question of originality in music. It was not very difficult, and not at all praiseworthy, to be original when that was one of the main features of the style. However, it would not have been so easy a couple of hundred years ago, when originality was not the general rule, while in the era of plainsong, it would have been downright silly.

As I have implied, my course as a composer led me on an evolutionary course through twentieth century music. While I was a choirboy, the last word in modernity was Herbert Howells, whose service-settings provoked predictable puns from the Dean and Chapter. On a trip to Paris, I insisted on going (twice!) to Poulenc's

Dialogues des Carmelites, sensing that here was something beyond my limited musical world. Wanting to hear more sounds of that sort was my motive for beginning to compose as I entered my teens.

Ten years later, after writing heaps of music in many different styles, I was making pastiches of Lutoslawski, Carter, and Cage. How do you make a pastiche of Cage? The answer at the time seemed to be that you did the most outrageous thing you could think of. But after that, there was nowhere left to go.

This episode of being a composer was highly educational and a great deal of fun. But the real lesson came at the end. While writing my doctoral dissertation at Cornell University I discovered oriental and esoteric philosophy, and in the spiritual turmoil caused by this encounter, I saw my heap of compositions for what they were: the exercises of a clever imitator, a semi-original inventor, and an egoist whose biggest thrill came from having people perform his own music. I realised that composition could and should be something more than the process I have described. The concept of inspiration returned from its long banishment as a sentimental relic of Romanticism. I realised with the force of a thunderclap that I had never known inspiration. Not once had my inner ear been visited with sounds that clamoured to be given out to the world. The source of my music was obviously not the world of spiritual realities, but merely my ego.

Along with that revelation came the certainty that my fellow modernists, even famous ones, were no different in kind. The whole movement now appeared phony to me. There seemed no further reason either to compose or to listen to the effusions of anyone else's ego. So I turned back the clock and cultivated 'early music', devoting myself to recorders and viols. I also stopped doing the abstract and surrealist painting that had been my hobby, and, rejecting the whole concept of originality, started copying religious icons while repeating mantras.

Seeking

Looking back, that attempt to return to a 'sacred art' seems to me the phoniest thing of all. I did it because I thought I ought to, which was a far worse motive than the youthful egotism that, now I have students of my own, no longer seems so reprehensible. However, my born-again lifestyle did lead me to explore the third mode of musical activity, after composing and performing: that of the listener. Listening to music blended with the practice of meditation, as I discovered states of absorption that my naturally active and analytical mind had hitherto concealed from me. I began to listen for spiritual qualities in music, rather than for intellectual and emotional ones. Not surprisingly, I found them at their peak in Renaissance polyphony, in the late works of Beethoven, and in the music of India.

This level of musical experience opened up further after a traumatic accident, from which the only place I could find solace was in Mozart. Quite spontaneously, I discovered a hierarchy of states of listening that I associated with certain locations in the body. I explained these in my book *Harmonies of Heaven and Earth* and in several workshops during the 1980s. They had to do with states of self-identity with the music, free from associations, words, and visual imagery. Now at last I felt that I was giving music its due, by raising it to the status of a meditative or yogic technique.

These exercises worked best with instrumental music, or with non-rhetorical vocal

music such as Renaissance masses. They did not work well with music that was never intended to be listened to in that way, thus excluding madrigals, Lieder, all opera but Wagner, and all popular music whatever. Consequently I classed these other musics as 'lower' or merely aimed at pleasure. At the same time, I rejected atonal music as denying the harmonic nature of reality, while pop music and jazz were too vulgar to merit any consideration from the spiritual mountain top.

I see now that in my zeal I was confounding the three elements of my title. My taste had narrowed to a musical world bounded by Monteverdi at one end, Debussy at the other, and heavily weighted towards keyboard music from Bach to Chopin. This was the music I most enjoyed to play and listen to. My spiritual practice had come to focus on abstract concentration, for which this music was a useful prelude. And an elitist musical training had imbued me with a snobbery that was all too readily transferred to the spiritual domain.

Taste is a horizontal distinction, circumscribing an area of preference like a garden fence, which (in England if not in the USA) does not imply hostility to the neighbours. Snobbery, on the other hand, is a vertical distinction, in which one regards one's own natural or acquired tastes as superior. It was an awareness of history, gained by teaching the entire Western repertory, that kept my mind open and prevented me from confusing subjective tastes with objective standards. Historians of former times did just that, in blissful unconsciousness. Applying the theory of evolution, they regarded Medieval music as a kind of Neanderthal stage, striving for a 'perfection' that would only be attained with the music they themselves could enjoy. At the other end of history, some pontiffs and pundits today condemn atonal music as a symptom of hyper-intellectuality, decadence, or contempt for the natural order. Usually they have heard very little, and know even less about it: they are rationalising their own distaste. The lesson they need to learn is one that barely anyone was in a position to learn before the twentieth century: that of self-awareness, in which the self and its prejudices are no longer the subject, but the object of knowledge.

Inner Development

As soon as one moves from the academic study and the everyday enjoyment of music into the realm of conscious work on oneself (which I prefer to the laden term 'spiritual'), one has to uncover mercilessly one's bondage to family, class, race, and circumstance, in order to approach one's inner reality as a human being independently of all these. It does not mean that one will ever escape one's background, any more than one escapes the body one is born with or the character delineated by one's genes or horoscope. But one can begin to objectify them, instead of identifying with them unthinkingly. That is one small service one can do for a world crammed with people whose misplaced loyalty to tribe, nation, race, or class serves to cleave the human family apart.

One consequence of entering on the path of conscious work is that one's tastes and preferences have to be re-evaluated, whether these concern one's friendships, religion, diet, or aesthetics. The ordinary person reads and listens to whatever pleases them. The conscious person may do the same, but it is in full knowledge of why he or she is doing so. Does one listen habitually to a certain type of music only because

one wants certain prejudices, certain loyalties, reinforced? The answer may be that one needs a type of psychic nourishment that only a certain music can provide. Some people need the Dionysiac experience of rock and roll in order to achieve balance in their psyches. But if they are consciously working on themselves, this will be a deliberate decision, like taking the Dionysian initiation in ancient times, and not a mere following of the crowd and its commercial exploiters. Others have every reason to prefer New Age music for its calming effect and the devotional atmosphere that it can create, at its best. For some, 'sacred art' is the byword, as they make a stand against the secularism of modern art and life. Then again, there is the whole world of non-Western music, whose various traditions go naturally with the adoption of non-Western spiritual paths.

I have had memorable experiences from practically every type of music, sufficient to persuade me that everything is good for those for whom it is good. I keep this phrase at hand, like a talisman, for the occasions on which I am too ready to censure. This puts me at variance with wiser men such as Pythagoras, Plato, and the sages of ancient China, who believed that musical taste was too serious a matter to be left uncontrolled. They were certain that as a people's music is, so their society will be. Healthy music, they said, is both the symptom and the cause of a healthy community, while ugliness and depravity in the arts betray a like state in the collective soul. They applied the same axiom on the individual level: a person will supposedly come to resemble the kind of music that attracts him or her. Music, in short, was believed to have a moulding influence on mind, soul, and body, and it was consequently not a matter of indifference what sort one chose to expose oneself and others to.

The theory that a nation resembles its music was a seductive one, but it will never recover from the events of this century. No nations were richer in their musical heritage, nor more devoted to it, than the German-speaking ones, and among their citizens none were more expert musicians than the Jews. The Platonist would have thought it a perfect set-up for good government and harmonious relations. A second example: after World War II, it was the rulers of the Communist bloc who were most careful to shield their people from the influences of jazz and Western pop music. Wholesome folk music and romantic realism was what they liked, and what they thought best for the masses. But it was rock and roll that played as the Berlin Wall came down.

Universal Characteristics

I cannot take musical Platonism seriously any longer. Music, like religion, is a neutral source of energy that can be either used or abused. Neither one guarantees the enlightenment of humanity or the happiness of all beings. They only contain that potential when coupled with the basic good will that is humanity's greatest, if not its only need.

If I am under no illusions as to the moral value of classical music, I still feel a professional obligation to it. As a survivor of what is increasingly a minority culture, I have a responsibility to stand for and speak for the Western tradition, from Magister Leoninus to Pierre Boulez, and in a broader sense from Homer to Umberto Eco. I may not like all of it, and I certainly do not think that it is the only or the best

way of being. But having been born and bred into it, I feel that I must pay my dues by teaching the appreciation of 'high' rather than 'low' art – if only because the latter and its votaries can look after themselves without being taught.

For similar reasons, I feel no responsibility toward the spectrum of tonal and meditative music favoured by the spiritual schools of today: I mean the music that ranges from Arvo Pärt through Gurdjieff's piano pieces to New Age improvisations. This music is intended as a vehicle for experience: for transporting the listener to various meditative, devotional, and even mystical states. Much of it recreates a mood not unknown in classical Western music. I welcome a return of these moods, though I do not think that it takes a genius to create them. Given an audience hungry for this kind of experience, a pastiche of the style will suffice, and very minor talents will rise to the top in a 'name-brand' society that likes to recognise the labels on its products.

The use of music as a vehicle to take one somewhere else is perfectly valid. History and the study of other cultures show that it is quite rare for music to be anything else. But it is precisely those rarities that I value. I am not personally interested in those devotional and mystical states to which I know music can lead, because my spiritual style is now otherwise. Above all, I want to know what I am, what sort of world I am in, and why we are all here.

Religious people and mystics find answers to these questions in their own way, but their answers rarely satisfy me. I have come to the conclusion that there are answers to be found not only *through* music but *in* music. The more elaborate classical musics, especially that of the West with its unique harmonic language, contain what I can only describe as a teaching, at once human and cosmological. From the composers to whom none would deny the gift of inspiration I receive the distinct conviction that I am learning truths that cannot be expressed in words or images. Their music tells me something absolutely essential about the human condition and about the structure of the universe: something that all scripture and philosophy has failed to convey to me.

The best definition I can give of it is that music is an idealised mirror of human life. It offers a spectrum of rich emotions – not all of them pleasant – contained within elegant structures, just like the soul inhabiting the body. Foremost among these emotions are the many shades of love, from eroticism to compassion (the latter especially in Beethoven). But none of it is absolutely serious: it is all presented within the context of a game or play. Moreover, the listener or performer, however enraptured, may remain as an untouched witness of all the emotions, or structures, and dreams, like the higher self or spirit from whose point of view they are all *maya*, or illusion. Conversely, there are many worse ways to interpret life than in musical terms, as one traverses its concords and discords, its polyphonies, surprises and inevitable final cadence.

I am not so certain of the cosmological secrets latent in music, but I believe that there is a link with physics and mathematics that future ages will discover. The plain fact of number, at the basis both of music and of the physical world, is obvious enough. But the particular combinations that lead to a satisfying composition in one, and to living matter in the other, remain unexplained.

All must be present in the more highly developed non-Western musics, particularly those of North and South India. If my training had made me familiar with those musical languages, I don't doubt that I would derive as much illumination

from them. But this is not the case. Indian music for me is more of a vehicle than an object of intelligent contemplation. Yet I always feel envious of that tradition for its unity, so different from the shattered situation in the West. In India all musics, popular and classical, vocal and instrumental, determined and extemporised, are based on a common fund of melody and share in a single, yet hierarchical vision of what music should be. It is the image of what we have sacrificed in order to have our multiplicity of musical worlds that can include hymns and rock songs, fugues and blues.

Lastly, I have to ask myself why I do not seek for this wisdom in that atonal music to which I once lent all my energies, and which is the natural conclusion of the Western adventure in musical evolution. My answer has to be the same as in the case of non-Western music: for all that I once spoke it, I do not know the language well enough. I have never reached the stage of easy recognition of serial structure that would make a Webern song as accessible as one by Schubert. I could demonstrate on paper the inevitability of every note, but I cannot perceive it without visualising a keyboard, notation, or some visual aid. I strongly suspect that many professional musicians are no better at this than I am. I also think that many atonal composers are doing no more than I was when I aspired to their company: they are just better at it. This leaves me listening to their music purely as sounds, whose choice, groupings, and contrasts I can enjoy in an æsthetic way. These sounds, especially in live performance, can be captivating and extremely beautiful. Even when they are ugly, I am enough of a Cagean to appreciate the value of taking each moment on its own unjudged merits. But it will always be a relief to turn from that razor-balanced state to question again the mysteries of Couperin's *Ordres*, Debussy's *Préludes* or the Art of Fugue. Here my musical wanderings have brought me to at least a temporary home, suitable to a spiritual style that turns from authority and mere belief to immediate and tangible experience.

Here I willingly sit at the feet of masters who reveal the most authentic reality I know.