The Music of the 18th Century: A Retrospective View

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Not many months ago, I was asked by one of our younger musicologists whether I would be willing to take part in a panel discussion on the value of the music of the past. To the invitation, he added his hope that "we would not give ourselves over to jeremiads." This seemed to me to be a spiritual holdup, and I declined. But I could not forget this anticipated censorship, and pondered repeatedly its implications, severely scrutinizing my own thoughts, feelings, and judgments about music that belongs to history, regardless of whether it still forms a part of current concert and recording repertory or is relegated to the museums of graduate seminars.

I presume that by value aesthetic value was meant, as there is little to be said about historical values. These are facts. The operas of Peri and Caccini undeniably have historical value, but few of us would bemoan the fact that they are not performed today. The same can be said of the early *clausulae* or the hundreds of *canzoni da sonar a quattro*. On the other hand, we may rightfully regret that Haydn's symphonies or Mozart's *Litaniae Lauretanae* are not in the good graces of our concert managements. A number of the compositions of these two masters, however, are heard very frequently, and the recordings of their compositions now neglected by public performers are eagerly sought by music lovers.

There are different reasons, then, for the current esteem or neglect of musical works of the past, and in looking for these reasons we shall discover that they are to be found invariably in some judgment, individual or collective, reasonable or biased, contemporary or of long standing. Looking for the reasons behind the neglect of some works of Haydn and Mozart—the list of similar cases can be greatly enlarged—we find the judgment of concert managers whose aim is to ensure the largest possible sale of tickets, by appealing to the widest masses who are content to hear the same small repertory over and over again. This is a commercial judgment, neither historical nor aesthetic, and so we may dismiss it.

The reasons for current neglect of *clausulae* or *canzoni da sonar* are entirely different. While historians of music have published,

and continue to publish, monographs and learned articles about them, and textbooks point out their historical importance, surely no one would assert that they are missed in the current concert repertory. And yet, these pieces were composed by excellent musicians—learned and inspired artists—and were enjoyed in their time by large audiences. Their contemporary aesthetic value was greater than that of the present, i.e., the judgment of those artists' contemporaries about their compositions was more favorable than ours. This judgment, which we also call criticism, is a complex spiritual phenomenon, which has many sources, motivations, and influences. Criticism has a very large literature, with ramifications reaching into the fields of history, philosophy, psychology, anthropology, sociology—into almost every branch of the study of man. Needless to say, there are also histories of art criticism, and the reader is referred to a handy, highly compressed but readable specimen by Lionello Venturi.[1]

Venturi considers the criticism of visual art works. (The great advantage of his subject is that he can start with Greek antiquity—there were art critics in Athens—while musical criticism did not start until the late 17th century.) The first lesson we learn from a history of the judgment of art is that this judgment may be either objective or subjective, i.e., it criticizes the art work either from the point of view of technique—the solidity or equilibrium of a building, the faithful reproduction of the human body (the coloring of the walls or the decoration of a vase were not then yet considered as independent arts)—or from the point of view of the agreeable proportions of the façade, columns, etc., the expression of the character of Apollo or of a *diskobolas*.

Translated into musical terms, we do today judge the technique of composition in a symphony or sonata (provided it was composed by a creative musician and not by a computer or an improvising performer) and the expressions of the character of Figaro, or of the mood—here the thing becomes complicated—of Frédéric Chopin, of Harold in Italy, of the Brotherhood of Man, of a garden in the rain, or of ourselves reacting to the thematic material in our several ways.

We can readily see at this early point in our investigation of criticism—which is the only possible basis for judging artistic (aesthetic) value—that there is no difficulty in formulating an objective judgment of a musical work of the 13th or 16th century.

We know from history the technique of composition available to the composer, and we have the tool called comparison. By comparing the composer's work to similar ones by his contemporaries, we can judge his craftsmanship. As for the subjective value, that has always been, is, and will forever be a matter of *personal* judgment—predilection or aversion. There is, however, one criterion that gives us a more solid footing: the consensus-time element. If a number of generations have held that Dufay's chansons are lovely—and that includes both consensus and time—we can safely conclude that they have aesthetic value.

Now, we noted that the technical means of composition available to the 13th-century composer are a factor to be taken into account. We know from history that these means were developed slowly through several centuries from the Middle Ages on. We know that the visual arts were developed to a high degree of perfection by the Chinese, the Egyptian, the Hindu, the Persian, the Byzantine cycles of civilization, but music—with its polyphony, harmony, and abstract forms—remained to Western civilization to develop to the highest degree of complexity, and that it is unique in the history of the arts. We know that the visual arts reached a culmination and decayed together with those particular cycles. To determine the life cycle of Western art-music and assay the role of 18th-century music in it is, then, the purpose of this investigation.

Western civilization is a much more complex phenomenon than the others mentioned above. Involved in Western civilization were large territories, several languages (indeed, groups of languages), and different climates and ethnic groups. Tribes of Latin, Teutonic, and Slavic ancestry absorbed local peoples—the Celts, for instance—yet interacted upon and influenced each other, ceaselessly adopting each other's innovations, so that by and large Western civilization may be recognized as fairly homogeneous, though vastly diversified in its details. One aspect of the complexity of Western music is this constant interaction, which must be recognized by the critic before he can form a judgment. Another aspect is the presence of polyphony, harmony, and form. The critic must note whether these are rudimentary, more advanced, or in a stage of artistic perfection. This recognition of progress or advancement from the primitive to perfection is discussed by D. W. Allen.[3]

The idea of progress is basic with the majority of music historians, and it is difficult to see any other approach to a critical history of music. Allen, while not declaring for or against such a historical outlook, quotes a number of opinions regarding "progress" in musical art. It is unfortunate that Allen's book appeared in 1939 (and, except a brief preface, the text of the second [Dover] edition is unchanged), since the most important histories of music, regardless of country of origin, have appeared since 1940. These histories are almost without exception factual, not philosophical. One of the exceptions is D. W. Ferguson's *History of Musical Thought.*[3] In Chapter XIII, entitled "Retrospects and Prospects"—a stocktaking strategically placed at the turn of the 17th century, the greatest turning point in the history of Western music—Ferguson observes that at the beginning of that history Western musicians borrowed Near-Eastern pitch-relations with a text in verse of quantitative rhythm. They changed almost at once, however, to prose with qualitative rhythm, and to different pitch-relations, and not without reason: they had a different outlook in music, and "the Christian musician dealt with prose texts in which the verbal organization was relatively unimportant [unlike in poetry]. Not artistic but human sensibilities—feelings of humility, of tenderness, of religious exaltation—gave him his themes. . . ."[4]

This description of our earliest Western music makes it clear that we have a good basis for both kinds of criticism: that which judges the material and craftsmanship, and that which is concerned with the expression of feelings. If so, we can proceed with the same method and apply it to music, even if much more complicated, of a later age. Our arts, all of them, became much more complicated with the passage of time—one cannot deny that a Bach fugue is much more complicated than a Gabrieli ricercar, which again is much more complicated than a *clausula*—and the sentiments they express (if they do) are much more complicated too. That more complicated art has more aesthetic value than simple art cannot be said without qualifications; a classroom fugue is surely not as valuable as, e.g., Beethoven's *Für Elise.*

We have no difficulty in following up the advance of the technique of composition from the primitive toward the mature and ripe. Examples of a limited scope would be the advance from parallel organum to free organum, or that from Arcadelt's

madrigals to those of Marenzio and Monteverdi; of a wider scope, the advance from the 14th-century variations *De moleni van pariis* to Bach's *Canonic Variations*. To demonstrate the advance in the expression of a feeling, of an abstract thought, of literature, or of events, is difficult and debatable. Outstanding composers have expressed diametrically opposed views about it (Richard Strauss for, Hindemith against).

At any rate, claims of composers actually to have expressed such extra-musical topics can be met with from the Middle Ages on. Both the claims and the means of expression employed are frequently naive, in early times as well as quite recently.[5] On the other hand, such undeclared expressions of grief as Mozart's G minor symphony, G minor string quintet, E minor violin sonata; Beethoven's F minor string quartet, and *sonata appassionata*; or declared, as Brahm's C minor piano quartet, and others too numerous to mention, cannot be dismissed as pure fantasy. We shall have to take them into account.

First, however, we must look at the technical aspect of composition somewhat more closely, in order to obtain a tool with which we can judge it. Two outstanding composers have tried to do this for us. They are Hindemith and Schoenberg, and their descriptions of the act of composing perfectly define the two essential phases of composition. Hindemith uses the German word *Einfall* to pinpoint that initial phase in which a primordial musical idea or germ-motif "drops in" unsolicited.[6] Schoenberg, on the other hand, neglecting this initial impulse and starting out from almost irrelevant premises, gives searching attention to the essential technical work necessary to manipulate the *Einfall* and build a masterpiece on it.[7]

Naturally, the two phases, or elements, of musical composition will be found in musical works in different proportions or degrees. In one composition we shall find the *Einfall* more impressive, in another, the manipulation—corresponding to, and partly identical with, the objective and subjective elements mentioned earlier. It may be expected that, keeping these factors in mind, we can evaluate the music of the past with reasonable precision, using this tool as a kind of Geiger counter. We will find that its imaginary needle goes up gradually until the 18th–19th centuries, after which it goes down rather precipitously.

Historians, critics, and commentators of music try to explain music by verbal description. To the contrary, we could perhaps

try to explain our verbal description of Western music's evolution and decline with a musical analogy. Comparing that evolution and decline to the crescendo–decrescendo of the Prelude to the first act of *Lohengrin*, we could say that the music of the 18th century corresponds to the first cymbal clash in that condensed microcosm. The music, developing slowly up to that apex, culminates in that burst of energy, and after a second explosion of light—the 19th century—gradually dies away, much faster than it developed.

What are our factual criteria for this evaluation of the music of the past? Paul Henry Lang, in his encyclopedic panorama of the history of music, observes that the ties between all the species cultivated by Mozart "were close and intimate, they were all saturated with the elements of a minutely organized style which gave the classical era homogeneity unparalleled since the time of the Netherlanders."[8] In no period before or since do we find music so minutely organized or homogeneous and showing similar perfection in style and content. Ever since medieval monks changed to new pitch relations and qualitative rhythm, composers concentrated on refining them by imbuing these relations with melodic, polyphonic, finally harmonic meaning; by investing chord successions with structural power, making harmony functional; by creating organized abstract forms; by evolving melodic, harmonic and polyphonic styles, vocal, choral, and orchestral styles, and a wide array of instrumental styles in order to obtain a variety and contrast, a unity and concentration unprecedented in music before the 18th century, and not conceived by any previous civilization. To quote Lang again, "Mozart's ideas are deepened to symbols of universal significance."[9]

If our imaginary needle signals another climax in the 19th century, it is because composers of that century tried to enhance the individual, the content, the orchestral colors (and those of single instruments) to an unprecedented degree and on the highest artistic plane. But these elements are really secondary compared to thematic work, style, and form. They are characteristic of what we call "romantic" movements, such as have occurred regularly in various civilizations, always just after a high point achieved in the culture of those civilizations. If such a romantic movement has not been carried too far, or if it has not been generally accepted (in which case it is usually called "mannerism"), there is a possibility of a return to further

evolution. However, if the romantic movement is general and all-pervading in scope and significance, it signals the end of that civilization.

There was no return from the romanticism of the Ptolemaic (Egyptian), Hellenistic, and late Byzantine cultures. Each in turn spelled the end of a cultural period. The first surrendered to Greek, the second to Roman, and the third to Turkish civilization and culture.

General and all-pervading romanticism is a sign of decay. It ushers in a period of individualism which discards classical conventions. Unattractive as conventions are, they provide the composer with a guide line: with a valid—because generally accepted—set of principles that guard him and prevent his slipping in the quicksand of experiments. Only exceptional geniuses like Josquin, Monteverdi, or Beethoven could successfully throw conventions overboard, because their artistic judgment, their foresight and instinct, were strong enough to make them perceive the limits of their material and stop at the threshold of the absurd.

Composers in the 19th century introduced innovations and changes in music to such an extent and at such rate of speed that by the end of the century the form, technique, purport, and meaning of music would have been unrecognizable to Haydn or Mozart. For not only was their great achievement, the sonata form, discarded by Berlioz, Liszt, and Wagner, but thematic work—i.e., deduction—was replaced by the leading-motif technique—or induction. Haydn's great work in defining and dramatizing tonalities was undone, and a tonal ambiguity was attained through chromaticism, creating a situation in which the listener never knows exactly where the composer stands and whither he moves harmonically, as every dissonance leads to a choice of two or three directions. The objective attitude of the classics was discarded early in the century by Chopin and Schumann in favor of a highly personal approach, in which subtle changes in the composer's moods are expressed instead of general emotions common to a nation, a period, or even to humanity.

The founding of nationalistic schools and styles fragmented the heretofore unified Western styles. In quick succession there appeared program music, descriptive music, realistic and impressionistic music, primitive and futuristic music. Over-

sophisticated (Hugo Wolf) and undersophisticated (Dvořák) music rubbed elbows with music of huge proportions and epic length (Bruckner, Mahler) and miniatures (Satie). The surface of the earth was scoured for exotic local color (Balakirev, Rimsky-Korsakoff, Bizet, Delibes, Debussy, Puccini).

With the advent of the 20th century, the main stream of Western music broke up into rivulets, like the delta of the Mississippi which moves sluggishly to its end, with individual strains—struggling fiercely for survival by dint of individualistic styles—still recognizable. But these individualistic styles lead to dead ends.

The iridescent color patches of the impressionists led to saccharine sweetishness; in polytonality and polyharmony the several keys lost their fine psychological meaning and became chaos; no composer can be expected to continue where Richard Strauss left off—either in post-romantic sound or the description of a toothbrush—and dodecaphony, a system that promised a new life, is already dated. It is dated because of the feverish search for effect, for a *frisson nouveau*. Even Bartók, who never lost his firm footing in music, led to a dead end, because his feat, the assimilation of folk-music, was a personal feat that can only be repeated, not continued. We have reached the end of the road.

Lang entitled the last section in his book "The decline of the West?" Although he ends on an optimistic and hopeful tone, there is no doubt that he wrote a *complete* history of Western music.

It is difficult to resist the urge to quote Warren Dwight Allen, who ends his Preface thus: "Getting down on our knees, we need to pray that we may have a Future, after all, a future in which music and the arts may still flourish, and in which Man may have another chance."[10] Are these jeremiads? No: they are history. Anything else would be hope, prayer, or propaganda.

NOTES

[1] *History of Art Criticism*, 1936, Dutton.
[2] *Philosophies of Music History*, 1939, Dover edition, 1962, 286ff.
[3] New York, 1948.
[4] *Op. cit.*, 237.
[5] See Hindemith's remarks in *A composer's world*, Cambridge, Mass., 1952, 31f.
[6] *Ibid.*, 57ff.
[7] Schoenberg: *Style and Idea*, New York, 1950, Ch. IX, Criteria for the evaluation

of music, especially pp. 159ff. It is interesting to note that, while the statements referred to are true flashes of insight, some of the reasoning of both composers is debatable, to say the least.

[8] *Music in Western Civilization*, New York, 1941, 625.

[9] *Ibid.*, 624.

[10] *Op. cit.*, ix.