

J. A. Westrup

If historians are to be believed, the world was once a tidy place. The Age of This, the Century of That—how simple it is, and how easy to remember. In spite of war, pestilence and industrial unrest, the life of men shaped itself into patterns which are neat and comprehensible. The history of music is no exception. If it were, students would find it hard to learn. But we know from our own experience that neither life nor music is as simple as that. Paradoxically, the very attempt to discern a pattern blurs the facts; and the facts have an uncomfortable habit of making us revise our judgments. If we say that the 18th century begins with the Baroque and ends with the Rococo, with the Mannheimers hovering in between, we have established a convenient system of mnemonics, on to which we can hang the works of individual composers. But where did the Baroque end and where did the Rococo begin?

A mere glance at chronology is sufficient to shake up our ideas. When Handel was writing *Messiah* Johann Stamitz was establishing his reputation. In the 1740's Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach and his father were both publishing keyboard music. When Telemann died Haydn had been in the service of the Esterhazy family for six years and was already known as a composer outside Austria. The year 1733 is particularly interesting. Handel, after the success of *Esther*, was embarking on a series of English oratorios. Rameau, at the age of 50, produced his first opera. Pergolesi wrote *La serva padrona*, blissfully unaware that nearly 20 years later it was to cause such a ferment in the French capital. And J. S. Bach, having written nearly all the cantatas that St. Thomas's needed, could relax, apart from occasional commitments, and settle down to writing what he wanted to.

National styles have been neatly tabulated, and indeed the differences between French and Italian music were the subject of vigorous discussion at the time. But national styles had an awkward habit of crossing frontiers. It is true that when French composers wrote *airs italiens* the result would hardly have deceived any Italian, and when German and English composers professed to write in the Italian style they were apt to go through

the motions without capturing the genuine accent. But a great master like Bach could incorporate both the Italian and the French styles in a single work—the first Brandenburg concerto—and produce something which, to our ears at least, sounds completely consistent.

Our judgment of Bach has suffered to some extent from the views of 18th-century writers, and this has affected our conception of 18th-century music in general. Burney's opinions are well known:

Sebastian Bach . . ., like Michael Angelo in painting, disdained facility so much, that his genius never stooped to the easy and graceful. I never have seen a fugue by this learned and powerful author upon a *motivo*, that is natural and *chastant*: or even an easy and obvious passage, that is not loaded with crude and difficult accompaniments.

Sebastian Bach is said, by Mr. Marpurg, to be many great musicians in one: profound in science, fertile in fancy and in taste *easy* and natural.

Burney disagrees with this view, on the basis of the organ works. Finally the most familiar passage:

If Sebastian Bach and his admirable son Emanuel, instead of being musical-directors in commercial cities, had been fortunately employed to compose for the stage and public of great capitals, such as Naples, Paris, or London, and for performers of the first class, they would doubtless have simplified their style more to the level of their judges.

A misjudgment, we feel, but a misjudgment based on a vast ignorance of Bach's music. We generalize from it by saying that Bach was regarded as old-fashioned in his lifetime and for many years afterwards. Some people would say that Bach actually was old-fashioned and on this base a whole philosophy of appreciation.

The facts are simple. No one in Bach's lifetime had the opportunity to know the whole range of his music as we know it today. Only those in his immediate vicinity had the opportunity to hear the orchestral suites, the concertos and the cantatas. Those who did would have recognized that much of this music was as up-to-date as anything written by Carl Philipp Emanuel. Bach came to be regarded as the supreme representative of the Baroque because the world got to know him through his fugues. Here indeed is profound science, but the same is true of the fugal movements of Haydn, Mozart, Schubert, and Beethoven. Fugue

has never been old-fashioned, because it appeals to a composer's instinct to flex his muscles. But to the ordinary music-lover it has always seemed a severe form of composition. That is why a generation that knew little of Bach beyond his fugues was willing to show respect to his science but was hardly aware that he was fertile in fancy or that his taste was easy and natural. Even today there are those who regard the *Coffee Cantata* and the *Peasant Cantata* as exceptions in his output. The old man, they say (Bach and Handel are always referred to as "old"), was relaxing from his normal severity. The other secular cantatas may be admitted as further examples of a simple, jolly form of music-making; but little account is taken of the movements that were transferred to church cantatas. And in a discussion of the church cantatas it is the austerity of *Christ lag in Todesbanden* or the elaborate counterpoint of *Ein feste Burg* that are regarded as typical. Yet there are hundreds of movements in these cantatas that present us with gay tunes and lively rhythms, without any of the complexities associated with Bach's name. If he had cared to, or if he had had the opportunity, he could have been as popular as Telemann. In fact, he deserved a far bigger reputation. Telemann had ideas but did not know what to do with them. Bach had the unique power of working the mine of his invention to the best advantage.

Handel is another example of a composer who will not fit into a pre-cast mold. It is easy enough to say that his arias conform to types; and it is undeniable that the same idioms, the same procedures, recur again and again. Yet no one can ever say confidently at what point an introductory ritornello is going to reach its cadence; and if "V'adoro, pupille" in *Giulio Cesare* is to be called typical, one is tempted to ask, "Typical of what?" The range of Handel's imagination was immense, and both his early and his later works are full of surprises. I have never forgotten having heard the cantata *Apollo e Dafne* for the first time. This struck me then, and strikes me still, as something unique in 18th-century music. But similar discoveries are waiting for anyone who is willing to make a pilgrimage from *Esther* to *The Triumph of Time and Truth*, not least in those remarkable recitatives with orchestra, where the whole fabric of 18th-century conventions is torn aside. It is a pity that *Messiah* has so long been established as Handel's outstanding masterpiece. It is far from being typical of him at his best, and includes several

movements which would be regarded as tedious if they occurred in any other work.

The truth is that the leading composers of this period were first and foremost individuals. This is recognized in the case of Domenico Scarlatti, because his idiosyncrasies are more immediately apparent. But Bach and Handel were far more versatile, and the same is true of Rameau. Not one of these three contemporaries can be fitted into a convenient pattern. They could all be conventional at times, and it is their conventional moments that cause them to be labelled "Baroque" composers. But all three were constantly sending out sparks of imagination which resulted in unpredictable music—unpredictable because if it could be predicted, we should be men of equal stature.

The same is true of the later 18th century. Any industrious researcher can produce a comprehensive dissertation on chromaticism in this period. But this will not explain the miraculous effect of Ilia's first aria in *Idomeneo* or the minuet of the *Jupiter Symphony*. Nor will research, however thorough, explain the apparent contradictions in Mozart's music—how, for instance, the year 1791 could include both "Ah perdona" in *La clemenza di Tito* and the duet for the two armed men in *Die Zauberflöte*. In a sense the duet for the two armed men is as old-fashioned as anything in Bach; but at the same time there are plenty of arias in Bach which have the same simple charm as "Ah perdona." The neat garden-plot of 18th-century music presented by historians is much more a wilderness of second-rate growth, in which a few marvellous flowers bloom all the more brightly in contrast to the drabness around them. The second-rate composers are often referred to as "interesting"; but Bach, Handel, and Mozart are more than interesting, they are men whose music has enriched the lives of thousands.

If we try to relate their music to their personality we are baffled, either because we do not know enough or because we know too much. Any attempt to reconcile Mozart's bawdy correspondence and his music is doomed to failure. Even when he is being serious in his letters he does not impress us as a young man of outstanding intelligence. It is equally difficult to relate these composers to their environment. Handel's operas may reflect the taste of aristocratic audiences, but there is no notable difference of style in his oratorios. It has for long been fashionable to talk about Haydn's *Storm and Dragg* period. But there is

no evidence that he ever read the relevant literature. The violence of the symphonies to which the label is applied is clearly an expression of his own state of mind. The reasons for this are obscure; but at least there is no need to look for external causes.

It is perhaps a good thing that we shall not be able to read the history of 20th-century music as it will be written 200 years from now. Even now there are signs pointing to eventual generalizations. It is not uncommon for Debussy and Ravel to be linked together, and the time may come when Elgar, Mahler, Puccini, Schönberg, and Stravinsky will all be regarded as typical of the present century, though there may be an artificial dividing line similar to the magic year 1750. It is a depressing thought, but not more depressing than traditional attitudes to the music of the past. There is still time to escape from them before the computers take control.