

Reflections on the Renewal of Music

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When Mahler called Bruckner “half-baked” and Brahms “overdone,” he was exercising his very strong sense of skepticism regarding the value of their achievements. Obviously, judgments produced by the skeptical temper are not necessarily true for all people. Yet, for an artist, they are basic to decisions he must make for himself. They affect his views not only of the work of others but of his own as well and determine to a great extent what he will willfully take, i.e., borrow or “steal,” from another, how he will allow himself to be influenced, and what he will accept into his personal canon.

The capacity for self-indulgence is the measure of the lack of self-critical faculties, rationalizations notwithstanding, whether offered in the guise of aesthetics or not. Skepticism, therefore, is one of the primary requisites of mental awareness, the sharpness of a natural or developed acumen which tests everything in order to discover what is good or authentic. The development of critical powers leads to the capacity to make discriminating judgments without which there is no taste; and without taste there is no art. For what we call “art” is ultimately—however else it may be defined—the habitual exercise of projecting fine judgments of subtle and specific perceptions. That is why the gross, generalized, and nonspecific perceptions of today’s avant-gardists fall outside the range of art and have been dubbed “anti-art.” The self-declared avant-gardist lacks, among other things, precisely that skeptical temper of mind which develops the critical powers leading finally to taste, subtlety, grace, proportion—in a word, art.

Borges’s¹ notion that history may be the record of the infinitely varying individual inflections of a universal mind contains more than one refutation of commonly-held beliefs. Among them is the belief in the necessity or desirability of originality,² the motive force which seems to supply the energy for change itself and offers the justification for asserting the aggressive tendencies of the ego, whether in art, politics, business, etc. From Borges’s notion one can proceed directly and easily to the consideration of how influence—which produces resemblance, replication, reminiscence through emulation of manner or substance, or both—operates from one man to another, from one epoch to another, even to the inclusion of outright borrowing, i.e., exact repetition. But, then, in the case of direct borrowing, from whom is one taking if not from one’s larger self, providing, of course, one accepts Borges’s idea that each of us is, indeed, a single individual filament of a vast, interconnected cosmic nervous system, one cell of a complex far-flung organism. Narcissistic individualism, which thrives chiefly on the belief in originality and rationalizes the excesses of self-indulgence, is a kind of metaphysical cop-out.

By an act of pure fantasy the Florentine Camerata reached across centuries to the drama of ancient Greece and came up with monody and opera. If ancient Greek drama had persisted without change into the time of the late Renaissance, Baroque and subsequent opera might never have occurred. How different is modern opera from Greek drama as it was actually performed? We shall never know. But in the mental space carved out by the historical loss of the actual practice of Greek drama there grew a myth of how it was; and out of the myth and the urge to resuscitate Greek tragedy, music renewed itself. We are still living off the energies of that act of renewal.

Another of the many refutations of commonly-held beliefs implicit in Borges's idea of history is the long-cherished notion of the linear causal progression of human events buttressed in our time by the dizzying speed of the changes by which science and technology have "advanced" our civilization. To be a victim of the idea of change as endemic to the course of man's motion through time is nothing short of a curse on the artist. For it deprives him on every side of the reality and value of the past experience of human beings whose earlier contributions must be considered as valid as his own, but for different reasons, if his own are to be considered valid by others who will come later. If one wipes the slate clean of others, in order to satisfy some misguided notion of being "contemporary," one's own fate is, by the same token, equally guaranteed null and void. There is no virtue in starting all over again. The past refuses to be erased. Unlike Boulez, I will not praise amnesia.

The history of music leapfrogs its way across the centuries. The "perfect art" of the Netherlanders, overridden by monody, lives in renewed form in Schoenberg and Webern; the fugal art of Bach, overridden by the sonata, comes to life again, albeit imbued with a new psychology and purpose, in Beethoven, the master of the sonata; the ground-bass variation technique, overridden by the harmonic variation, is reborn in Brahms's Fourth Symphony; Stravinsky resurrects Pergolesi in *Pulcinella*; Webern, in his *Klangfarben* version of Bach's "Ricercare" from *The Musical Offering*, virtually writes a new work; Ives's *Concord Sonata* treats the motto of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony as an underlying presence; and so on. All acts of renewal through uses of the past renew both that past drawn upon and that present in which the act occurs. Far from being acts of weakness or signs of the depletion of creative energy, they reveal a profound wisdom about the paradox of time, which does not consume itself and its products as if it were fire, but gathers up into itself everything which has occurred in it, preserving everything as the individual mind preserves its individual memories. The myth is more important than the fact.

It is not at all true that this is the "Age of McLuhan" any more than it is the "Age of Schoenberg," or "of Stravinsky," or of anyone else. This is the cliché language of the media and of simple-minded critics and historians

who need to pin tags on phenomena. Nor is it at all true that there is a single tradition which operates along the track of a main line with station stops at Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, etc. If one can accept in whole or in part the idea of a universal mind, endlessly producing a repertoire of recurring images and forms, one immediately appreciates the rule of human conduct and culture: an emergent procession of varieties of parallel, simultaneous patterns of living and believing, frequent juxtapositions of opposites in these patterns, frequent and violent overt conflicts between such patterns, subtle conflicts and tension between related but different patterns, and so forth.

Like every other time, ours is a vast mix which refuses to be reduced to neatly packaged verbal categories. If Brahms does not belie the "Age of Wagner" concept, then Debussy does; if not Debussy, then Verdi; and so on. Verbal consistencies are not more fruitful than aesthetic ones. (Music, like existence itself, is susceptible to description but not to analysis.) To insist on either verbal or aesthetic consistencies is to limit the world at any given moment of individual perception only to what that individual eye can see, ear hear, mind perceive; it is to refuse, especially, the contradictory evidence of other observers and other consciousnesses which are equally limited. Like the 19th century, the 20th presents us with nothing but contradictions, and only the partisan thinks he sees clearly.

Schoenberg probably suffered more from a sense of ongoing linear change and the pressure of historical consciousness than any other major composer of the 20th century. He was overly concerned with his ultimate position in history and as a result became too self-conscious about how he worked, how his work affected others, etc. History has nothing to do with creation and is not a sufficient motive force for a man's actions. When it enters the stream of consciousness and becomes a criterion for the evaluation of oneself and others, it tends to corrode and destroy. Taken as an abstraction, history is a constant danger to human thought and life.

In his story "The Aleph,"³ Borges describes a poet and his work, in a way the very model of a certain variety of contemporary composer, in these words: "He read me many another stanza, each of which obtained his approbation and profuse commentary, too. There was nothing memorable in any of them. . . . I realized that the poet's labor lay not with the poetry, but with the invention of reasons to make the poetry admirable; naturally, this ulterior and subsequent labor modified the work for him, but not for others." Like a stain on the tissue of time, the self-indulgent verbiage of proclamation and justification will remain as sometime documents of our collective confusions; but the work which it attempted to make "admirable" will have long since faded from the field of memory.

The desperate search in the second half of the 20th century for a way out of cultural replication, i.e., being influenced by others, borrowing, leap-

frogging, etc., has let loose a veritable Pandora's box of aberrations which have little or nothing to do with art, but everything to do with being "successful" historically or commercially. Even the critics, no longer willing to be left out or behind, have joined in the hue and cry for "the new"; they celebrate and rationalize it. Self-indulgence is now the rule. By a series of typical paradoxes only powerful creative spirits like Brahms, Mahler, Bartók, and Stravinsky remain skeptical of everything but authentic values and, therefore, continue the process of cultural replication by refracting all previous music through their individual, particular natures; the avant-gardists, wanting to start all over again, make anarchic hash of music, partially by invoking the philosophies of the East and doctrines of noncausality and indeterminacy, among others.

What was advertised as the "exhaustion of tonality" at the end of the 19th century, descriptions by historians beginning typically with *Tristan* and tracing the demise through the new Viennese school, may simply have been an incapacity on the part of composers to continue to produce a viable tonal music which could stand comparison with the best work of the 18th and 19th centuries. Even if we grant the emergence of new perceptions and sensibilities, it does not follow that authentic values must be cast aside every time a new device or procedure is discovered. Culture, like time, its guardian, proceeds by slow accretion and eventually absorbs everything of value. By the same token nothing of value is ever lost. This is the only faith that a serious artist can live by, provided that he has made something worth preserving, even though he will never really know the fate of his work.

We live within two distinct yet interrelated realities: the world of nature which includes man as a biogenetic reflection of nature's urge toward consciousness, and the world of man which includes art as a spiritual reflection of that self-awareness nature has given him. Art is neither a mirror nor a substitute for the world. It is an addition to that universal reality which contains natural man and shows the infinite varieties of ways that man can be. William Faulkner put it much more simply when he said that art was a way of declaring that "Kilroy was here." However we phrase it, art preserves the reality of man's presence on earth. It is part of his urge toward the physical survival of the race and the spiritual immortality of the individual. Its fantastic nature does not change this striving one iota. On the contrary, it intensifies, confirms, and purifies it; for man, though he may be a failure in the realms of social and political order, is primarily and essentially a craftsman and maker of symbols and metaphors. This is his true gift, his real nature.

What cannot be remembered cannot be preserved. The true intent of art is to preserve human consciousness. The Homeric epics and the Old Testament—to cite just two examples—existed, we are told, in centuries-old oral traditions before being written down more than 2000 years ago. If the dislocation of tradition which afflicts us had befallen the ancient Greeks and

Hebrews, we would not know the poetic glories of the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* or the vast sweep of human experience recorded in *Genesis* through *Deuteronomy*. We would be bereft of two of the richest sources and deposits of human metaphor and symbol. Why, then, do composers today think that music which they admit cannot be remembered earns them, merely because they wrote it, the right to preservation and transmission? They produce for obsolescence while secretly hoping for immortality.

It is curious that *Le Sacre* is the subject of rhythmic analysis, *Wozzeck* of structural analysis, and more recently *Lulu* of harmonic and intervallic analysis, not to speak of rhythmic and metric analysis. They are treated as though the balletic and theatrical impulses which brought them to life are as nothing compared with the formal designs and patterns which articulate their audible surfaces. The primal energy and sensuality of *Le Sacre*, the heartbreak of human noncomprehension and the cruelty of the human condition which are basic to *Wozzeck*, the heartlessness of lust, the poison of soullessness depicted in *Lulu*—all this is disregarded as though it were of no account. The passions of man, which are the very heart of theater and theater music, seem to escape or to embarrass those who write about music today. The gestures which embody dramatic functions and form the real and audible stuff of music remain, analysis notwithstanding, the only reasons why these works have entered their respective repertoires and will undoubtedly remain there. As obvious as all this is, or ought to be, it is completely overlooked by legions of composer-theorists who are lost in the labyrinth of academic abstractions.

There can be no justification for music, ultimately, if it does not convey eloquently and elegantly the passions of the human heart. Who would care to remember the quartets of Beethoven or Bartók if they were merely demonstrations of empty formalisms? What claim would Chopin have on us if he had merely given us the abstractions of shape, gesture, and motion through time? Debussy was being celebrated only a few years ago as one of the patron saints of pure instrumental timbre as a compositional virtue. How he would have writhed to be reduced to the size of his idolators! More recently, interest has been shown in Varèse's penchant for symmetry. All well and good; but one could hardly claim that this describes or explains in any meaningful way the passion, bite, and force of his rhetoric, the real reasons we value him. The insistence by all on ignoring the dramatic, gestural character of music, while harping on the mystique of the minutiae of abstract design for its own sake, says worlds about the failure of much new music. Like mushrooms in the night, there has sprung up a profusion of false, half-baked theories of perception, of intellection, of composition itself. The mind grows sterile, and the heart small and pathetic.

The enlargement of mental perspective teaches us that consciousness,

whose core is the central nervous system, is radial, not linear. Earth-time embraces man through his entire slow, tortuous advance up the ladder of evolution. No matter how far up that ladder he may climb, no matter how far away from his beginnings he may find himself as the decades, centuries, and eons elapse, he will bear within him all that he ever was. What profit is there, then, for man to shorten his perspective to man-time, that tiny scale of measurement by which men count their days and actions? Man-time is a distorting mirror in which, by ever so slight a shift of position, men can create false images, reduce the significant to smallness, inflate the insignificant to largeness. Music without a cosmology will not move the soul; nor will it illumine the heart.

The cosmogony of the ancients and primitives, expressed in magic, rites, and rituals, which invested the world around them with signs and symbols of the unknown, paradoxically ensured the survival of these peoples; for through their seemingly unsophisticated notions they preserved the sense of awe and mystery in the face of a cosmos into which man had seemingly stumbled. And we? Because we have lost that precious sense of the magic and mystery of existence, we have no cosmogony. (Physics and astronomy are poor substitutes.) Because we have no cosmogony, we are finally, but surely not suddenly, faced with the problem of whether man can survive his own thoughtlessness and arrogance, his collective *hubris*. Mahler was the last composer to intuit that music belongs to cosmogony and is supported by it. What was it Beethoven was supposed to have said? "Music is the one corporeal entrance into an incorporeal realm which comprehends us but which we cannot comprehend." Even if we suppose that Beethoven did not say it, would the statement be less true?

The renewal of music depends on the renewal of the art of composition itself. If we value Wagner and Brahms for the power of their harmony, why, then, have we given up harmony? If we value Mozart and Chopin for the elegance of their melodies, why, then, have we given up the melodic line? If in the combination of many voices a radiant polyphony emerges, why have we given up counterpoint? Ballet cannot exist without rhythmic pulsation and periodicities any more than opera can exist without the accompanied aria. Both are rooted in myth, fairy tale, real or imagined history, the embodiments and extensions of man's passionate nature. Nontheatrical music is not necessarily less dramatic. It must still move and touch us. The enlargement of the timbral palette is made at the sacrifice of the melodic phrase, the rhythmic period. If there is value in this enlargement it will come only with its direct and concrete association with discernible, memorable melodies and rhythms, polyphonic combinations, and textural composites which articulate that longing for a reality which is man's best and perhaps only true claim to existence. History will not help us; but the past, which is ever-present, can.

The renewal of music is linked to the survival of man. In his prophetic introduction to *Magister Ludi*, published in 1946, Hermann Hesse refers to the treatise of an ancient Chinese philosopher who describes “the music of decline” as a reflection of the chaos and disorderly state of men’s affairs. It is painful, to say the least, to consider that ours may be or, in fact, is such a “music of decline.” Man the human being must learn to reconcile himself to a universe in which he is or is not a welcome guest (how can one tell?) simply in order to survive physically—which means acknowledging the limits of his biogenetic nature, as well as the delicate balance of nature itself and his relation to that balance. In the same way, man the musician must learn to reconcile himself to the limits of music which inhere in his central nervous system and to stop torturing sound into shapes and gestures whose meanings, if they have any, suggest that man has lost the power of musical speech and has reduced himself to inarticulateness. To sing is to project the subtle inflections of the human psyche; to dance is to project the subtle inflections of the human body and its musculature. The renewal of music lies in the direction of reasserting both, simply and directly.

The gestures of 20th-century music do not invalidate those of the 18th or 19th centuries, any more than Western music invalidates Indian music, or vice versa. When authentic, they are extensions of the psychology of musical expression. In no way can it be claimed that they supersede the vast continuities, the grander and more serene gestures of tonal music. They are primarily investigations of previously unexposed and unexplored areas of the human psyche and have value in so far as they articulate those areas of sensation, feeling, and emotion with clarity of means and eloquence of utterance. These narrow-chested gestures of our time often tend to be peripheral to the major, earlier gestures of music and describe, as it were, a series of vague and tenuous probes and lines of movement, extending from the ghostly shadowlands of the surreal to the gravity-free, time-frozen sensations of cosmic space-longing, from the randomness of causality-free projections to the overdetermined, tightly woven structures of total organizations. There is no contradiction in suggesting that the renewal of music depends on the fullest possible use of the human imagination, the only recognizable limit being the central nervous system, which potentially includes, therefore, all the gestures, old and new, of which music is capable. Translated into practice, this would mean the use of every device and every technique appropriate to its specific gestural repertory in combination with every other device and technique until theoretically all that we are and all that we know is bodied forth in the richest, most diverse music ever known to man, *ars combinatoria*.

NOTES

¹ Jorge Luis Borges (b. 1899), Argentine poet and philosophical essayist. In “Pascal’s Sphere,” which appears in *Other Inquisitions, 1937–1952* (New York, 1966), pp. 5–8, Borges

remarks: “Perhaps universal history is the history of the diverse intonation of a few metaphors” (p. 8).

² A unique discussion of the belief in the necessity of artistic originality can be found in Leonard B. Meyer’s *Music, the Arts, and Ideas* (Chicago, 1967), especially pp. 54–67, 188.

³ *A Personal Anthology* (New York, 1967), pp. 138–54.