

## *Ethnology and Music: A Philosophical Consideration*

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If the Idea reveals the style of a thing according to its characteristic features, then Art, which involves the faculty of imagination, requires as a creative process an ordering of its elements. Thus, we can understand that musical art consists of the ordering and clarification of its elements, which of course are manifold. These elements comprise the physical scale, which is part of the phenomena of sound and acoustics, just as they also include human, ethnic, social, intellectual, and spiritual factors. Acoustical factors give rise to the technical aspect of music, which obeys the laws of an experimental science. Human elements lead us to intellectual, psychic, philosophical, and metaphysical considerations, which characterize a style or, more properly, an aesthetic. The sum of the scientific and aesthetic factors gives us the work of art to a greater or lesser extent, according to its predominating elements, characterizing different cultural levels which vary from the purely folkloric or popular to the most learned expressions. The nature of the musical problem is, then, a multifaceted one of universal significance, since any one of its elements, whether on a technical or an aesthetic level, requires the most serious consideration. Musicology tries to include all of these elements within a historical framework.

The foregoing considerations make one think that just as, from a technical standpoint, sound requires silence in music, so, too, from an aesthetic standpoint, does music require an ethnic ethos. Silence and ethos are implicit elements in the musical work (composition), and theorists and composers, especially, must be aware of them.

Consequently, the ethnic significance of a musical work is in itself a complex of problems which in turn comprises another scientific field of investigation; but at its base we can see multiple musico-aesthetic tendencies, determined by spheres of influence which are of special importance. Here ethnology, which treats all races, comes closest to ethnography, which puts its emphasis on each of them individually.

Ethnographic complexity is augmented in today's world by the ease of interchange and racial mixture. In Latin America the indigenous Indian population has had a special influence through its admixture with the European and the African. Cultural complexity becomes even more bewildering when we consider internal and external environmental factors, which are in turn affected by social influences, civilization, and culture.

Musical manifestations of ethnic conglomerates vary and are determined by the requirements of particular moments in history. These determinants create typical expressive characteristics which can be ascertained through detailed studies.

Today, it is almost impossible to find a pure ethnographic characteristic, especially in civilized areas. Nevertheless, as a natural reaction to the fact of

cultural dissolution, there appears a reinforcement of traditional local values which, although they may be artificially preserved, constitute in any case an ethnic phenomenology. Such is the case with folklore, which develops spontaneously out of this basic feeling of the worth of the local community. Popular music, on the other hand, is more a case of transplantation and the influence of a new emotional environment such as has developed, for example, in the Andean airs, which have a Spanish flavor, and the Negro spirituals, which are African in essence. At this level of ideas we can also see certain applications to learned musical culture, when someone takes local elements from another area and assimilates them into his musical work. To this can be attributed the fact that, as is frequently the case, French musicians can write in the Spanish style, Czechs in the American, or Germans in the Oriental.

Having left the field of folklore, which is often confused with popular music, we see that musical ethnography is a phenomenon of cultural dis-involvement, in which ethnic authenticity is more or less relative in spite of the fact that its aesthetic value may be indisputable.

Because of this relativity, not a few composers appreciate the musical manifestations which are today called nationalistic and which historically underwent a special development in the first decades of the present century. Undoubtedly, the distinguishing mark of these works was due to the sum total of their ethnographic significance combined with a high technical level of musical development. For Arnold Schoenberg their importance derived more from the culture of the composer than from local ethnic values. In his book *Style and Idea* he said:

... The *Thème Russe* is certainly very pleasant. But that there now exists Russian music is due to the advent of some great composers. Were this not the case, great Irish or Scotch symphonies should have been created, because the folklore of these peoples is of an unsurpassed beauty and full of striking and characteristic traits. On the other hand, some smaller nations whose folk music is not as extraordinary have succeeded in placing in the history of music and into the minds of music lovers representatives such as Smetana, Grieg, Chopin, Liszt, Dvorak and Sibelius. Characteristically enough, Sibelius contends that his music is not based on national folk music, and I guess that Grieg's also is not. Chopin's rhythms are often derived from Polish dances, but harmonically and in part melodically neither his music nor that of Liszt (or much of Smetana's) differ essentially from Western and Central European styles of their day.<sup>1</sup>

What Schoenberg averred, of course, admits of much argument on several points, just as does his statement that the purely folkloric "has been unable to penetrate the wall separating folk music from art."<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the fact of folklore's acceptance as a basis for artistic elaboration is important, with the appreciation of its substantial ethnic value or, in simpler terms, its national-

istic value left to the judgment of the composer and the listener. But here we are already in relativistic and, of course, emotional territory.

Yet the ethnic question is not only a problem of the adaptation of the work to local color. Each human work carries within itself a complex of intrinsic ethnic elements, because no man can escape from his own origins, with all their influences and consequences. (From this point of view, psychology is a part of ethnology and would form another chapter of the study.) Hence the same music which is called "pure" has an ethnic value that depends directly on the individual who creates it or which, in other words, makes the music of an American, American, or of a Japanese, Japanese. This circumstance, considered in the light of concrete instances, has given rise to what is distinguished by schools as German symphonic style or Italian opera. This is an important consideration, precisely in the evaluation of a work of art in relation to a people and a culture and in the appreciation given to the artist, even though his work may apparently not be of the type which can properly be called nationalistic. Unfortunately, this idea is not obvious to the chauvinistic mentality, but, in any case, the work of the artist, if it is to be understood in this way, is always patriotic by nature and universal because of the qualities that all men share. Johann Sebastian Bach is admired as a German composer, but he is also a musical prototype of humanity.

Exactly because of this communication of the artist in his work, A. Schmarsow (cited by Ortega y Gasset) declared that art is "an explanation created between man (as an individual) and the world, a spiritual operation as necessary as the religious or scientific reaction,"<sup>3</sup> which in the case of music history results in the fact that it transforms itself even more into a history of the ethnic emotions, with all the implications of a humanity which confronts the cosmos. Here, once more, enters the function of art, which cannot be a simple "game" or "sumptuary activity" without obeying creative psychic needs in conformity with the universal range of the world views of peoples.

The German "Können" or the "ability to do" is the ethno-artistic ability of man in the representation of his ideas, which can surpass imitation in order to lead to a prophetic plan that, as Johannes Lotz would say, causes the artist, in spite of all limitations, to surpass himself, rising up as a prophet and glorifier of Being among men, and having in his true aspect something holy.<sup>4</sup>

The ethnic and psychological configuration is important to this discussion since its diversified aspects are the work of specialists. Although the first term refers to the community and the second to the individual, no one fails to grasp the fact that the individual is part of a community which in itself is ethnic. For this reason, it sometimes becomes difficult to make a conceptual or even a scientific distinction. Moreover, the existence of an ethnic psychology and, therefore, a collective or social one can also be understood. Sociology is, consequently, another of the factors added to the complex of aesthetic and artistic events. On this point Alphons Silbermann, in his book *Wovon lebt die Musik*, says that "while some unite aesthetics and psychology as

a disordered conglomeration, others attempt to treat the work of art through a mixture of aesthetics and sociology and often include aesthetics, sociology, and psychology.”<sup>5</sup> Hippolyte Taine attempted to understand the history of the beautiful and the beautiful itself through the elements of culture, ambience, and time. And he arrived at a socio-aesthetic method which, going further, searched for the basic functions, the basic motive forces of art itself; in the process he mixed together all the problems of the origin of art with an investigation of the social mission of the artist.

We would depart from our proposition if we wanted to enter into this dispute, even if only to clarify that which differentiates schools of thought which try to explain artistic phenomena in the light of pure aesthetics or intermingled with ethnic, sociological, and psychological points of view in accordance with the specialty and predilection of the individual thinkers. In any case, it is obvious that the subject is interesting because of this same complexity and interrelationship of its elements, to which we add historical development.

All the components, whether technical or aesthetic, are important in a musical work. And among them the ethnic implications do not cease to play an important part in the work itself, inserted as they are into this double current which runs from the material to the immaterial, from science to spirit, from man to God. This is because absolutely all the good (and the beautiful is good) obeys the harmonic laws of the universe, which, in the last analysis, constitute a state of divine contemplation, that is, contemplation of truth. If we did not think in this manner, our considerations would have a simply mundane value, determined by the “production” and “consumption” which characterize human materialism. Music (as can be easily understood) does not reduce itself to these material masters; it shows a “splendor of intelligibility,” or a *splendor veri* according to the Platonists, in which, as the Aristotelians say, the effect can be traced back to a cause.

At any level of human thought, and this time through the study of aesthetic components as they relate to music (as do ethnic aspects), one concludes that, in surmounting obstacles to the consideration of transcendental or metaphysical explanations of art, as Edgar Allen Poe so beautifully expressed it in his essay *The Poetic Principle*:

... We still have a thirst unquenchable . . . This thirst belongs to the immortality of Man. It is at once a consequence and an indication of his perennial existence. It is the desire of the moth for the star. It is no mere appreciation of the Beauty above. Inspired by an ecstatic prescience of the glories beyond the grave, we struggle, by multiform combinations among the things and thoughts of Time, to attain a portion of that Loveliness whose very elements, perhaps, appertain to eternity alone. And thus when by Poetry—or when by Music, the most entrancing of the Poetic moods—we find ourselves melted into tears—we weep then—not as Abbate Gravina supposes—through excess of pleasure, but through a certain, petulant, impatient sorrow at our inability to grasp

now, wholly, here on earth, at once and for ever, those divine and rapturous joys, of which *through* the poem, or *through* the music, we attain to but brief and indeterminate glimpses.

The struggle to apprehend the supernal Loveliness—this struggle, on the part of souls fittingly constituted—has given to the world all *that* which it (the world) has ever been enabled at once to understand and *to feel* as poetic.<sup>6</sup>

(Translated from the Spanish by Léonie Rosenstiel)

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> New York: Philosophical Library, 1950, pp. 197–98.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198.

<sup>3</sup> José Ortega y Gasset, *Obras Completas*, 4th ed. (Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1957), Vol. 1, p. 191.

<sup>4</sup> Johannes Baptist Lotz (1903– ). German transcendentalist philosopher, author of *Das Urteil und das Sein, eine Grundlegung der Metaphysik* (Munich: Verlag Berchmanskolleg, 1957).

<sup>5</sup> Regensburg: Gustav Bosse Verlag, 1957, p. 22. English translation by the editor.

<sup>6</sup> Robert L. Hough, ed., *Literary Criticisms of Edgar Allen Poe* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), pp. 39–40.