

A Composer Reacts to Musicologists

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In considering the interrelationship between musicologists and composers on the musical scene, I tend to think in broad generalities and to appreciate greatly the impact of research carried on in the past generation or so. This aura of warmth toward musicologists and their work is undoubtedly due to the kind of music history study to which I was subjected in my youth. This study, it should be added, took place about a generation ago with professors who used texts, such as Waldo Selden Pratt's, that have by now been supplanted. In these texts Leonin and Perotin were little footnotes in fine print, if any mention of them occurred at all, and the Bamberg motets had not yet found their way via Pierre Aubry into many books. There were precious few recordings of nonconcert music, and one had to get pretty far off the beaten track to locate any scores that were not in the standard repertory. Fortunately, just before that era, there was a flowering of musicological research; and by the time I was engaged in what might be called the advanced study of music, some aspects and periods of music history had been better dealt with, and more and more material was being made available in print and on recordings. As a graduate student, I was lucky enough to gain access to excellent libraries, such as the Sibley in Rochester.

While I was still in this formative and impressionable stage, I saw and heard various kinds of music that excited me and made me realize that there had been ways to achieve musical expressivity different from those I had known, ways other than the tonal means of the stylistic periods of the 18th century, or even the practices of the Hindemiths and Bartóks of the 20th. I was entranced, for example, by the unpulsed melismas of the Notre Dame composers, the fresh harmonic unconcern of 13th-century motets, and the self-conscious sonorities and literary-musical form of Gesualdo, just to mention three disparate examples. Without the expansion of interest in musicological research that has been, at least in terms of long-range history, a fairly recent development, this music would not be available.

There is one other thing I must say by way of prefatory remarks, namely, that composers, among all the segments of the professional music population, are the least subject to categorization, although they often segregate themselves into cliques. Even though they are almost all eclectic and usually erudite in some fashion, they feed their creative impulses in different ways. Some composers draw almost entirely upon the very recent past and shun older traditions and techniques. I have known only one person who could be called a nonliterate but "useful" composer, and he created pieces chiefly for the theater. Although he was almost entirely illiterate, he was able, by ear and instinct, to come up with electronic tapes done with Buchla patches. Composers, made as they are from such varied and individual component traits, will react differently to and with musicologists, and occasionally some

will not respond at all. A good many other composers, and I think I am one of these, tend primarily to react, hot after information, but also to push specific scholarly information back somewhere into the recesses of the intellect. They float the iceberg of data so that only the factual tip is visible, while the effective mass which becomes idiomatic influence is merged synthetically into a part of the general personality profile. In my opinion, most composers do not believe that any amount of theoretical analysis can describe a good piece completely, or that any amount of historical research into a given period or style can explain the usefulness of that material to them. But I, for one, still rely heavily on information gleaned from the research or thoughts of others.

The universities and colleges, which, as a group, provide an important protective umbrella for the arts in the United States, offer an arena for easy communication among composers, performers, and music historians. Solely from my own experience, I think that, for the most part, the contacts are functional and travel primarily in one direction—outward from the musicologist. Perhaps this is a normal meaning of research and scholarship. A performer, let us say a pianist, might find, through someone else's research, certain works of Wagenseil, Cannabich, or Soler which he wants to present in public. He may, on the other hand, discover something in the jumpy little rhythms of Landini that he can sense and project in a 20th-century piece. Although musicologists are performing early music in concert halls and salons more frequently than they used to, the taste for living music history often seems, at present, to be largely missing. I remember talks I had with Hans David over Roman dinners in which I felt that he took little from me except chatter and amusement, since he admittedly cared nothing for any music of the past century and a half. He, on the contrary, was stimulating for me, as he talked, for example, about *The Musical Offering* and made it more accessible to me. I still refer to his edition of the work. From what David said, I gathered that his work on Bach was pretty much a straight research job and that Bach's music was a little late stylistically for his own preferences, and a bit decadent at that!

I like to say that once upon a time I, too, was a musicologist for a while, but I doubt that I properly deserved the label in terms of career professionalism. Yet I carried the designation publicly, and my topic was contemporary Spanish music, one that led me into earlier music and into nonmusical but tangential fields as I acquired a background in the subject. Having read just enough about recent events in Spain to know that something was afoot which was new and vital and very different from flamenco and other folk-provincial music, and also different from DeFalla and Granados, I had developed a "research curiosity." I could not satisfy this curiosity readily at a distance, since practically nothing pertinent and recent about Spanish music had been written in the English language except for one article by Arthur Custer, in *The Musical Quarterly*.¹ I applied for a grant to go to Spain and lived there for two years while engaged in "research." As a composer and a

“nonprofessional” musicologist, I had some trouble getting myself hyphenated, i.e., becoming a composer-musicologist. On the musical scene one is always one or the other.

It was stimulating to have the fertilization from two directions, to be both the giver and taker, to bring my composing experience to bear upon the new material, at the same time to accept some influences, and, all the while, to accomplish my main purpose of obtaining the information I wanted and writing about it. A good deal of the research was almost journalistic, since it dealt with active composers and conductors and involved interviews with the Ministry of Popular Culture personnel. I did, however, spend much time in certain archives, such as those of the National Radio-Television. One peripheral pleasure was having my articles relating to Spanish musical life published almost immediately. This probably parallels the satisfaction a careful historical researcher gleans from having the results of his work appear in print.

My involvement with Spain became more intense than I had anticipated, partly because my introduction to the core of musical happenings was immediate and spontaneous, but more importantly because of the unique characteristics of Spain’s music history, past and present. The most striking fact I found is that composers in Spain have partially skipped a phase of development that was pronounced elsewhere: the epoch of Stravinsky, Hindemith, and Bartók. In composers such as Luis de Pablo, Cristóbal Halffter, and Carmelo Bernaola, the schism with the traditions of DeFalla and Granados is complete, and there was no generation of preceding composers to bridge the idiomatic gap between the national-folklore tradition and what is termed the current international avant-garde. Undoubtedly, some of the reasons lie in the political-economic realm—Spain’s internal difficulties in the 1930’s and 1940’s.

Other explanations have to do with deeper and more permanent conditions. Spain has undergone a unique national development, having its own wars at its own times, and not participating openly in this century in the major international conflicts. Its music history has been its own as well. There were high points in the 16th century and bright moments in the 17th. The 19th century saw no great parallel to the growth of the symphony and opera that occurred elsewhere. Spain has had orchestras of international repute for only about half a dozen years, and the most significant event in this realm has been the founding of the National Radio-Television Orchestra. Furthermore, in Spain nationalism versus internationalism is not so much the real issue; rather, it is provincialism versus modernity.

Whether it is healthy or not, perhaps the outstanding feature of Spanish culture has been, after all, the artistic autonomy of the provinces. To be the most distinguished composer, the most revered of one’s own province, has been the goal of many otherwise unknown Spaniards, and this ambition must at least have kept creators in touch with audiences. I would venture to say, for example, that Cabezón was concerned mostly about the status he

had in Burgos! Certainly this individuality of the provinces has made possible the most varied and colorful folk-related music in all of Europe. For the past few years Spain has been changing rapidly; she is now in a period of tremendous growth and is joining the modern world. There are those who nostalgically resist this direction, but I prefer to think of the changes as a sort of renaissance.

My involvement in my main research effort and inevitably related subjects was intensified by the scrambling of my historical preconceptions. Most of us are oriented toward the Germanic view of history as logical movement and growth through historical necessity. Causes and effects can be discovered in Spanish history as well, but they are less apparent and more evanescent. Some events even appear to occur only by chance.

It is not my intention in this article to give a detailed account of what I found in Spanish music, for I have written much of this information in other periodicals.² My aim here is to indicate the satisfaction I found in being my own researcher.

I cannot quite understand the vitriolic competition and violent disagreement that is often evident between some composers and some musicologists. Composers should not be unduly concerned or upset by musicologists' occasional tendencies toward limitation and microscopic focus. Research, taken as a totality of its little pieces, should expand vistas. In any event, a good piece of research can either be used or ignored.

I have one concluding thought relating to vistas, perspectives, and the proper influences of musicological research. In all other areas of historical-scholarly research, particularly those concentrating upon sociological, economic, and political questions, certain titans of scholarship have appeared on the scene who not only exposed the results of their research but were also able to synthesize their thinking to such an extent that they influenced the course of human events. This must be the ultimate task for musicology, too.

NOTES

¹ "Contemporary Music in Spain," *The Musical Quarterly* 51 (January 1965): 44-60.

² "Report from Spain," *The Musical Quarterly* 52 (July 1966): 380-83; "The New Dada in Spanish Music," *Antioch Review* (Spring 1967); "Report from Spain," *The Musical Quarterly* 53 (October 1967): 576-80; "El nuevo dadaísmo en la música de España," *Humboldt* 33 (1968). Also a series of reports from Spain during 1966-68 for *High Fidelity/Musical America* which included "In Spain, New Music on the Rise," 16 (August 1966): MA 18-19; "Notes from Our Correspondents. Madrid," 17 (April 1967): 18-22; and, with A. de Larrocha, "Granados," 17 (December 1967): 56-58.