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THE CLASSICAL INFLUENCE IN ROCK

It has become an accepted part of the trendy eclecticism of Rock for critics (especially those who wish to establish its claim to the status of an art form) to see the influence of classical composers on Rock musicians and for the musicians themselves to employ the themes and techniques of European art music in their work. While it is impossible to deny that these influences exist, their positive contribution to Rock is open to dispute.

The only Rock musician who has consistently integrated classical elements into his style is Frank Zappa. In writing for the group "The Mothers of Invention", he employs classical themes and techniques in an irreverent and often obscene mélange of sound and music with the aim of attacking the conformist and repressive attitudes of contemporary American society - "the plastic people" and the "brain police". Zappa was writing "serious" music in his teens and, according to a recent spokesman for the

R.P.O., has produced serious music of a high quality. His attitude to this music, however, is as irreverent as his attitude to early rock 'n' roll, "highschool" pop, vaudeville, jazz and the other idioms which provide raw materials for his compositions.

Many other musicians, however, have used classical music not as an integrated element in their styles, but as a substitute for a genuine understanding of the Afro-American roots of Rock or as a mere surface colouring. English groups, sometimes culturally remote from the influences that moulded Rock, are particularly vulnerable to the first charge. In Jon Lord's "Concerto for Group and Orchestra", the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra performs a dispirited pastiche of various styles of European art music while the group produces a gutless parody of Rock. The Nice in "Ars Longa, Vita Brevis" produced possibly the most pretentious music of the 1960's, in their self-conscious and incongruous use of Bach and Sibelius. The work of the Pink Floyd is a partial exception, but from the evidence of their latest LP "Atom Heart Mother" it seems that the delicate balance in their use of electronically produced sound between originality and pretension has been upset.

The influence of classical music on Rock, has in fact, been slight and mainly detrimental. Jazz and rock musicians, working within idioms and traditions whose formative influences are similar and making common responses to situations have had great mutual impact. Thus Dave Crosby's assimilation of Coltrane's music in 1967 was an organic and natural development of his own style. Any serious attempt to absorb classical music, on the other hand, is likely, on present evidence, to result in an emasculated pastiche or in a sophisticated intellectual exercise which negates the vital and creative musical intelligence which is the essence of Rock.

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