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## The Experimental Years: A View from the Left

### INTRODUCTION

Late in 1960 Cornelius Cardew and I gave a concert of music for two pianos at the Conway Hall in London. The programme consisted of American music — by John Cage, Morton Feldman and Christian Wolff — and music by Cardew himself. It was my first involvement in experimental music and the first in a series of concerts which Cardew and I took around to various parts of the country. The predominance of American music in our programmes was of significance; in particular it reflected an attitude to the past which, like that of the Americans, was pure and simple: we rejected it. But at the same time we were ignorant of it: we did not understand how the music of the past had come about. We knew nothing of the changing social role that music had played across the centuries. We had no grasp of the concept of class values in relation to art.

The music of Cage and his followers embodied this anti-historical stance and naturally we took to it like fish to water. Personally, I had never been enamoured of the European avant-garde; I resented its musical dogma, its melodic and harmonic conventions alienated me, it seemed to me to be at once academic and aggressive, and it had neither wit nor soul. On the other hand, and paradoxically perhaps, in Feldman's music I was strongly aware of a *human* agency at work, of an imaginative musical mind, and the fact that the Americans had not banned certain chords and progressions from their work impressed me. True, in the last analysis they too had created artificial systems, but these did not seem to 'police' the music in the way that European serialism did.

For the experimentalists John Cage is the key personality whose influence cannot be overestimated, but in the 60s a new figure emerged in America, La Monte Young, who made an immediate and dramatic impact on the scene. Nowadays we hear only the residue and rarely the real thing: Young aestheticised or commercialised by a host of composers such as the Americans Philip Glass, Steve Reich and Terry Riley and, in England, Gavin Bryars, Christopher Hobbs, Michael Nyman and Michael Parsons. These are talented musicians, but the excitement and daring of Young's music in the 60s, to which they owe so much, was never recaptured during the 70s. Naturally there were other influences, but Young's radical single-sound aesthetic became the springboard for musical experimentation: in works such as *X for Henry Flynt* (1960), a loud, heavy sound — usually performed as a large piano cluster — repeated X times, *Studies in the Bowed Disc* for a four-foot steel gong (1963) and *The Well-Tuned Piano* (1964), each piece (or rather each process) consists of a characteristic sound in which the listener immerses himself. Young's influence has also, in my opinion, extended to the pop world, with devastating effects. 'Pioneer' groups like The Who became identified by their 'sound', not by the songs they performed, because the musical components — melody, harmony, rhythm — were obliterated for the listener by sheer amplitude. Pop was a *physical* but hardly an auditory experience. Young's music contrived to be both: the listener participated, he was not bludgeoned and rendered totally passive. The sounds were not only rich, complex and interesting; his music appealed aesthetically. People found *beauty* in it.

It was on the crest of the 'beautiful sound wave' that Terry Riley emerged and achieved during the second half

of the decade considerable notoriety and popularity. Strictly speaking, Riley's music was not single-sound music, through like the blues it created that illusion. It was not radical and lacked the purity of Young's; the components were musically and aesthetically more conventional. It thus managed to bridge the gap between the experimentalists and the pop world: the repetitive nature and harmonious quality of the music appealed to the experimentalists, but its language was modal (*A Rainbow in Curved Air*, 1966) and tonal (*In C*, 1964), it used electric organs and saxophones and it had a beat. Riley's music became an important part of the new 'underground pop' movement in the 60s.

The Scratch Orchestra, which emerged a little later (in 1969, out of Cardew's composition class at Morley College in London), was an enterprising body of performers, playing all sorts of experimental music (Cage, Wolff, Riley, Young, Rzewski and their own works) in all kinds of situations for all classes of people: for Cornish farm-workers in village squares, for the young industrial workers of north-west England and for both urban and rural communities on the continent, as well as for the music lovers who frequented the Royal Festival Hall. The SO consisted of an assortment of people from various walks of life (some of them with considerable artistic talent) and there was no more enthusiastic, more committed and more serious collection of individuals working in the field of contemporary art at that time. During the first two years of its existence the SO's performance and compositional output was prolific. At the same time the nature and intensity of these activities engendered contradictions that eventually gave rise to a crisis. Feelings of discontent and frustration had accumulated and finally, at two long and harrowing meetings in September 1971, souls were bared, reasons sought and excuses offered. The guitarist Keith Rowe and I put forward an analysis of the situation, a conscious attempt to understand and explain our predicament. Rowe and I pinpointed a fundamental disunity of theory and practice in the SO as the primary source of discontent among its members. In theory we believed in integration and being gregarious, in practice we were isolationists and parochialists; in theory we rejected the musical establishment, in practice we asked for its support (Arts Council grants, BBC television and Festival Hall appearances); in theory we wished to be 'an instrument of inspiration', in practice we appeared to many as 'a pessimistic symptom of a system in decay';<sup>1</sup> in theory we wished to build an open society, in practice we had created a closed fraternity; in theory we regarded people as a source of inspiration and in practice we were suspicious of our audiences. And so on. We willed one thing and caused its opposite: the anarchist's dilemma! The members of the SO reacted strongly to our analysis. In particular, a passage we quoted from Christopher Caudwell generated considerable discussion and it therefore seems worth quoting it in full.

In bourgeois society social relations are denied in the form of relations between men, and take the form of a relation between man and a thing, a property relation, which, because it is a dominating relation, is believed to make men free. But this is an illusion. The property relation is only a disguise for relations which now become unconscious and

<sup>1</sup> Phrases quoted from the Scratch Orchestra's 'Discontent File'.

therefore anarchic but are still between man and man, and in particular between exploiter and exploited.

The artist in bourgeois culture is asked to do the same thing. He is asked to regard the art work as a finished commodity and the process of art as a relation between himself and the work, which then disappears into the market. There is a further relation between the art work and the buyer, but with this he can hardly be concerned. The whole pressure of bourgeois society is to make him regard the art work as hypostatized and his relation to it as primarily that of a producer for the market.

This will have two results.

- (i) The mere fact that he has to earn his living by the sale of the concrete hypostatized entity as a property right — copyright, picture, statue — may drive him to estimate his work as an artist by the market chances which produce a high total return for these property rights. This leads to the commercialisation or vulgarisation of art.
- (ii) But art is not in any case a relation to a thing, it is a relation between men, between artist and audience, and the art work is only like a machine which they must both grasp as part of the process. The commercialisation of art may revolt the sincere artist, but the tragedy is that he revolts against it still within the limitations of bourgeois culture. He attempts to forget the market completely and concentrate on his relation to the art work, which now becomes still further hypostatized as an entity-in-itself. Because the art work is now completely an end-in-itself, and even the market is forgotten, the art process becomes an extremely individualistic relation. The social values inherent in the art form, such as syntax, tradition, rules, technique, form, accepted tonal scale, now seem to have little value, for the art work more and more exists for the individual alone. The art work is necessarily always the product of a tension between old conscious social formulations — the art 'form' — and new individual experience made conscious — the art 'content' or the artist's 'message'. This is the synthesis, the specifically hard task of creation. But the hypostatization of the art work as the goal makes old conscious social formulations less and less important, and individual experience more and more dominating. As a result art becomes more and more formless, personal and individualistic, culminating in Dadaism, surrealism and 'Steinism'.<sup>2</sup>

The SO responded to this text because it summed up not only their own position but that of their contemporaries, too. Many members agreed that if a solution to the problem was to be found, it would have to be within the political sphere. In finally recognising that the ideological factor in art was of fundamental importance, the SO delivered a crushing blow to the theory of 'art for art's sake', an idea with which the orchestra had hitherto managed to coexist. Political links were sought and the SO no longer existed as an autonomous artistic organisation. Study groups were set up to read the Marxist classics and those who supported the politicisation of the SO embarked on a course of self-education. The others (and it was about 50/50) drifted away to pursue their own artistic interests on an individual basis. Speaking for myself, I decided to read and study, and to think more and play less. This was not a hard decision because I no longer felt a strong commitment to a large part of the contemporary repertoire, for the reasons stated or implied in the passage quoted from Caudwell.

What follows below is a conglomeration of doubts and dogma which inform my present attitude not only to experimental music but to all music. The *general* nature of these considerations also reflects my stance against the idea of the autonomy of music.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Caudwell, *The Concept of Freedom* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1965), pp. 11-13.

## THE IDEOLOGICAL FACTOR

A study of music presupposes a study of man. Art is an active socio-historical *process* produced by the tension between changing social relations and outmoded consciousness. Works of art do not drop out of the heavens into the minds of geniuses. Nor can any individual work of art claim eternal life. A study of the *re-creation* of works of art is as necessary and illuminating as a study of their creation. True, Greek art survives, but nothing survives in the same form. Greek art as the Greeks understood it is dead because Greek society is dead.

Means and relations of production determine men's ways of life and condition, which in turn determine their psychology, their modes of thought and emotional make-up. These factors determine their works of art; social psychology is expressed in works of art as the cultural tastes of a given period.

Every poetical work is an integral unity, in which sounds, ideas, imagery, etc. are component parts synthetically united. On the other hand, it is also a unity from the sociological viewpoint, since all the component parts and their synthesis taken together are *ideological reflexes* of a definite period and a definite class.<sup>3</sup>

## CLASS

Much remains incomprehensible if we ignore class relations and class struggle. The artist will necessarily integrate the experience and voice the consciousness of that group whose experience in general resembles his own. Moreover, it is through *social* experience that our class attitudes can be changed: the individual psychology is a social creation. Beethoven was an ardent republican whose music served as a kind of rallying point, a sense of common experience and kinship, for all anti-feudal minds, for all who welcomed the conflicts of the time and found progress in them. Still in the context of class antagonisms, art can be used by one class as a weapon to help subjugate another. Writing in the 30s, Caudwell described "Bad" art, "affective massage" which is offered to the masses, arouses and satisfies the instincts without expanding consciousness, perhaps even deadening consciousness, thus helping to keep people adjusted to an unpleasant economic situation.<sup>4</sup> It thus thrives on the immaturity of its audience, hence the youthful appeal of much bad pop music. There are also examples of elaborate, 'high-falutin' contemporary art music which fall into the same category and to which I shall refer later.

In terms of the appreciation and even the definition of music, members of a social group are taught what is considered good or bad music, beautiful or ugly music and proper behaviour towards music; for example, some groups listen to music in silence, others engage in all kinds of noisy activity while listening. In this sense, aesthetic emotion is deeply influenced by social and cultural factors, insofar as some people have learned from other people what to listen *for* in musical sounds and patterns: they are taught the language. It follows that conceptions of music as a 'universal language' are wholly idealistic. What is regarded as 'music' and what qualities are ascribed to it are matters of social convention which vary in time, in geographical location and according to class. At a school in the East End of London, children bracketed together most of the Western art music of the last 400 years and described it as 'bleedin' opera'. A piece like Debussy's *La Mer* they did not regard as being music at all. This phenomenon cannot be understood simply in terms of the children's 'ignorance'; ideas about music are intertwined with and underpinned by more general ideas

<sup>3</sup> From an address given by N. I. Bukharin to the First Soviet Writers' Congress, published in English in 1935 and quoted in David N. Margolies, *The Function of Literature: a Study of Christopher Caudwell's Aesthetics* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1969), p. 96.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Margolies, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

and beliefs with regard to other spheres of life, such as religion, work and leisure. They are also related to concepts of morality, human dignity and utility.

## MUSIC AND IDEAS

I cannot agree with Hans Keller — whose messianic belief in the autonomy of music has led, quite logically, to his 'wordless analysis' — that the 'laws of musical thought are definably different from the laws of conceptual thought'.<sup>5</sup> In fact I doubt that any such line of demarcation can be drawn up: the boundaries between musical and conceptual thought are fluid and music therefore enjoys a *relative*, not an absolute autonomy. To be sure, the ideas which music embodies are not

the ideas which may be found in a scientific tract, but commentaries on a society showing what it means to live in it. They embrace developments in sensitivity, in the human's awareness of his own powers, and in the situation of internal freedom, as conditions change in the external world. In this way music joins the other arts in creating social consciousness, or the individual's awareness of the internal life he shares with society, and in revealing the internal history of society.<sup>6</sup>

Non-musical ideas, ways of thinking, even whole philosophies, inform musical composition. A definite relationship can be shown to exist between mechanical materialism and post-Second World War serialism. Mechanical materialism regards nature as a passive object, not as something subject to man's activity or the antagonist of his striving, but as something self-contained, shut in by its own necessities. On the one hand there is man, the subject, desirous, active, spontaneous and free; on the other there is the object, nature as known by man, a machine contemplated in splendid isolation. Thus subject and object are mechanically separated; their dialectical (that is, mutually determining) relationship is ignored. Mechanical materialism acknowledges the existence of the objective world but sees man's relationship with it as a one-way affair.

The parallel with serial composition is striking. According to the post-war serialist composer, his composition is a piece of nature obeying determinate laws (the series) so designed as to satisfy his wants (his artistic conscience) and to create use-value (for the art market). This self-contained work of nature fulfils a 'plan'; the plan is the composer's desire. The serialist composer cannot imagine himself free if the spontaneity of human desire on the one hand and the independent mechanism of nature on the other are in any way infringed. This preoccupation with the perfection of the object led to *total* serialism, where the performer was supposed to reproduce mathematically precise notations faithfully. But what happened was that the increasing demands of the notation engendered a proportionally increasing inaccuracy in performance. The contradiction was insoluble; the 'solution' which was eventually found merely intensified the composer's dilemma. By an iron logic, preoccupation with the object was transformed into preoccupation with the self, as in the cases of Stockhausen and, in a more subtle way, Cage: from Stockhausen's first four *Klavierstücke* (1953-54) to *Aus den sieben Tagen* (1968); from Cage's *Music of Changes* (1951-52) to his highly subjective dictum — 'Listen — you will hear music. Perform — you will make music.'<sup>7</sup> So the contemporary composer (and here we are talking about probably the two most influential living composers) abandons the object and seeks refuge and resolution in the subject (idealism, subjectivism, 'doing your own thing' and so on).

<sup>5</sup> Hans Keller, *1975 (1984 minus 9)* (London: Dobson, 1978), p. 141.

<sup>6</sup> Sidney Finkelstein, *How Music Expresses Ideas* (New York: International Publishers, 1976), p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> John Cage, *Silence* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1966).

In both Stockhausen and Cage there is a remarkable consistency between their writings and their music. The writings render verbally explicit the ideas expressed in the music. For example, Cage's atomistic world outlook clearly relates to his compositional method for the *Music for Piano* series composed between 1951 and 1964 (random, individual notes and random relationships). That these two composers have an ideological standpoint cannot be denied, though its interpretation is naturally a matter for debate.

To some, my interpretation of Stockhausen's music and the metaphysical jargon in which he presents his ideas verbally may seem hardboiled and ungracious, but when the late Mao Tse-Tung described idealism and metaphysics as 'the easiest things in the world, because people can talk as much nonsense as they like without basing it on objectivity or having it tested against reality',<sup>8</sup> he hit the nail on the head. The banality of, say, *Hymnen* (1966-67) or *Klavierstück IX* (1954-61) (which Cardew rightly described as a 'weak, aesthetic version' of Young's *X for Henry Flynt*)<sup>9</sup> corroborates one's worst suspicions.

I therefore cannot take the idea of 'communion with the supernatural' at its face value; Stockhausen invokes it, I suggest, precisely because communion with the real world is impossible for him.<sup>10</sup> Similarly 'a vehicle to discover their inner selves' is, on the contrary, a vehicle to intensify the audience's feelings of separation, isolation and alienation from their fellow human beings. 'Discover what they have forgotten about themselves' exemplifies the old romantic yearning for a paradise lost, and the reference to going 'through the eye of a needle' is similarly a regression, the dream of returning to the primitive state. And when Stockhausen refers to the 'spirit of the cosmos' as a source of knowledge and enlightenment, I suggest that we would be more likely to be able to determine the origin and context of many of his ideas if we were to investigate the spirit of the art market and in particular the characteristic 'star' system that forms an integral part of it.

Cage's world outlook is quite explicit and there is no need to spell it out here. My point is that far from being an autonomous art, music expresses ideas about the world, and it is just those composers whose music embodies particular ideas in a convincing fashion who are taken up by society. Marx and Engels make clear the wider context in which this takes place:

Inssofar, therefore, as [the ruling class] rule as a class and determine the extent and compass of an epoch, it is self-evident that they do this in its whole range, hence among other things rule also as thinkers, as producers of ideas, and regulate the production and distribution of the ideas of their age: thus their ideas are the ruling ideas of the epoch.<sup>11</sup>

To discover other reasons for the propagation of the music of these composers, a note-by-note analysis may provide part of the answer but certainly not the whole truth; greater insights will be gained if we examine the *effect* of the music, its social role and its consequences. I do not believe in the neutrality of music. Neither did Beethoven, who expressed the wish that if social conditions were improved, his art should be used for the good of the poor. Nor did Schoenberg, who said 'I think

<sup>8</sup> *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1966), p. 212.

<sup>9</sup> Cornelius Cardew, 'One Sound: La Monte Young', *The Musical Times*, vol. 107, no. 1485 (November 1966), p. 959.

<sup>10</sup> 'Spiritual Dimensions: Peter Heyworth talks to Karlheinz Stockhausen', *Music and Musicians*, vol. 19, no. 9 (May 1971), pp. 32-39.

<sup>11</sup> *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, The German Ideology Part One, with Selections from Parts Two and Three, together with Marx's 'Introduction to a Critique of Political Economy'*, ed. C. J. Arthur (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1974), pp. 64-65.

[composers] are in the first instance fighters for their own musical ideas. The ideas of other composers are their enemies.<sup>12</sup>

### INDIVIDUALISM AND THE POLITICAL FACTOR

The previous quote is a militantly *individualistic* statement. First of all, let us not confuse 'individualism' with 'individuality'. They are not interchangeable. There is a world of difference between 'individuality' (strongly marked individual character) and 'individualism' (self-centred conduct, feeling; egoism), and we can therefore distinguish between the 'individuality' of the *Eroica* Symphony, the inoffensive 'individualism' of Schubert's *Winterreise* and the extreme 'individualism', the solipsism of Stockhausen's *Aus den sieben Tagen*.

On the Left the critique of 'individualism' is this: that one man's individualism is another man's de-individualisation. For example, an extremely individualistic score can lead to frustration and despair on the part of the would-be performer. And if audiences are bored or alienated it is often the *individualism* of much contemporary music that renders it unintelligible. But there is a political issue at stake here of fundamental performance. Ideologues of the Right (Christopher Booker, Paul Johnson, Hans Keller, Bernard Levin) have introduced a simplistic, individualistic/collectivist dualism. On this basis these gentlemen and their allies and masters in the media are laying siege to the collective ethos as part of an overall political strategy. The aim is to undermine and weaken the unity of purpose and the collective action which have been of necessity the *modus vivendi* of the majority. Keller, the musician, seems overwhelmed by a kind of panic or hysteria, with the inevitable Freudian overtones: he writes of '... the new left's commitment to violent collectivism, its regression to infantile depersonalisation and dehumanisation unnoticed by the victim... multiple regressions to group and gang behaviour under quasi-parental protection'.<sup>13</sup> What this outburst typifies is a *class* reflex to Left politics and in particular to Marxism, which E. P. Thompson described in *The Observer* last year in reply to an article by Conor Cruise O'Brien:

I find Dr. O'Brien's lampoons against undefined Marxists, his tabloid style, his roads to ruin and his abyss, the tell-tale signs of an on-coming *grande peur*. Historians have not invented the *grande peur*, this is a real event, a psycho-social class spasm of irrationality analogous to the displaced sense of 'threat' in the neurotic personality. When it comes it can claim many victims, but the first victim of its formless passions is always the reason.<sup>14</sup>

We can see clearly, too, how Keller's politics inform his judgements on music, and his book *1975 (1984 minus 9)* provides many examples of the following variety: 'The metaphysical and/or psychological/operatic composer's utterances are of individual discoveries, whereas the Marxist, and quite especially the neo-Marxist, makes a collectivist statement for the purpose of propaganda.'<sup>15</sup> Perhaps, on reflection, the sheer intellectual crudity of this 'thought' embarrassed Keller, for in another passage he tries to free Nono and Shostakovich from the 'professed truth', the 'transpersonal dogma' of Marxism, and from the stupid masses: 'It follows ruthlessly that all Marxist music that does not go beyond its intentions (as

Nono's or Henze's or, of course, Shostakovich's does) is music by the stupid for the collectively stupefied.'<sup>16</sup> Add Hanns Eisler to the group and Keller would probably spirit his Marxism away too: no easy task! After a recent performance of Eisler's chamber cantata *On the death of a Comrade* (1935), I reflected on its attitude towards the individual. Brecht's text is concerned with the individual and *others* not opposed or separated, but as a unity: 'To be together without fear, that's the start. We must stay together and must not allow ourselves to be separated... *Truth and brotherhood* shall replace the rule of lies.'<sup>17</sup> Brecht describes the death of an *individual* whose last thoughts embraced *others*. By contrast, Keller and other ideologues of the Right isolate and idealise the 'individual', who is separated from and opposed to 'others'. This dualism is precisely what characterises the relation of the contemporary composer and his audience.

### THE RELATION OF MUSIC AND SOCIETY

In his paper on 'Music Historiography in Eastern Europe', Georg Knepler, an East German musicologist, made the following observation:

Neither the common chord nor the prohibition of parallel fifths can be directly deduced from the social conditions of the society in which they originated; nor can they be separated from that society and reduced, say, to the workings of eternal laws of nature.<sup>18</sup>

The relation of art to society is a formidable subject, but part of a letter Engels wrote in 1894 might serve as a useful starting point.

The further the particular sphere which we are investigating is removed from the economic sphere and approaches that of pure abstract ideology, the more we shall find it exhibiting accidents in its development, the more its curve will run in a zig-zag. But if you plot the average axis of the curve, you will find that this axis will run more and more nearly parallel to the axis of economic development the longer the period considered and the wider the field dealt with.<sup>19</sup>

What these two statements imply is that a highly complex network of psychological, cultural, ideological and economic phenomena has to be taken into account in dealing not only with the art in general of a particular period but also with the individual art work. For example, the notion of 'objective and subjective culture' is particularly relevant to present-day society where there is an apparent abundance of musics to enjoy. 'Objective and subjective culture' denotes what is objectively available at any given historical moment and to what extent social classes, groups and individuals make use of this availability.

### ANALYSING MUSIC

The fact that music enjoys only a relative autonomy, that an anthropological category underpins all form and content, is anathema to the positivism of contemporary analysts who treat music as a self-contained, closed entity. The work is 'analysed' simply by showing the various harmonic, motivic and textural relationships within it. All the motivic material is derived from within the piece and the source is somewhere at the beginning. As befits a

<sup>12</sup> Arnold Schoenberg, *Letters*, ed. Erwin Stein, trans. Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), p. 265.

<sup>13</sup> Hans Keller, 'Thinkers of the World, Disunite!', part 3, *Books and Bookmen*, vol. 21, no. 1 (October 1975), p. 57 (part 1 in vol. 20, no. 9 (June 1975), pp. 27-31; part 2 in vol. 20, no. 12 (September 1975), pp. 15-17).

<sup>14</sup> *The Observer* (February 4, 1979).

<sup>15</sup> Hans Keller, *1975 (1984 minus 9)*, p. 254.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 255.

<sup>17</sup> Trans. by John Tilbury of the text of Hanns Eisler, *Vier Cantaten* (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1973), pp. 22-23.

<sup>18</sup> *Perspectives in Musicology*, ed. Barry S. Brook and others (New York: W. W. Norton, c1972), p. 231.

<sup>19</sup> Letter from Friedrich Engels to H. Starkenburg, January 25, 1894, *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Selected Correspondence*, ed. S. Ryazanskaya, trans. I. Lasker (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 2nd edn, 1965), p. 468.

positivist analysis the source or 'basic theme' is regarded as 'given'; that is to say, it is left out of the analysis. There is rarely any attempt at a genetic investigation of the source material; the point of commencement, the 'zero situation' of a composition is ignored by the positivist analysts. But if, as Schoenberg claimed, the genius learns only from himself, then only the heavens can lie beyond the masterpiece and the lowly analyst finds himself analysing an immaculate conception.

Suppose, however, we adopted the methods and the impartiality of ethnomusicology and abandoned our overblown and presumptuous theories of genius and 'universal music', which play no part in the history of folk music (or can it be that throughout the centuries the poor have produced no musical genius?); suppose we viewed the musical achievements of our own barbarous tribe as dispassionately as we do those of the Yoruba of West Africa, among whom works of art appear clearly as products of society rather than as personal creations. If such methods and approaches enabled us to describe the social function and the socio-psychological function of art music in Western society, they would already have answered questions of fundamental importance.

### LISTENING TO MUSIC

To most people music implies at least two levels of articulation, each of which is comprehended or simply thrown into relief by reference to the other. This *referential* process lies at the heart of our musical comprehension. The first level is found precisely in the hierarchical structure of *socially* evolved musical scales constituting something analogous to language. The elements of the second level — the choice or arrangement of sounds according to a given technique or style — must already be endowed with meaning. They must have been systematised at the first level so that there are *a priori* conditions of communication. The first level consists of real, if unconscious relations. The modernist composer, however, has abandoned the first level of articulation and attempts to operate on only one level. Thus there is no *referential* system as in modal and tonal music, or the music of all other known cultures. What is the effect of this on the listener? One strives to share in the music's impulse, to respond to the power of its internal logic. But in this music the impulse often appears arbitrary and the logic is that of a game. The harmony has no discernible structural function, as in tonal music, and the melodic elements are now being asked to play a more fundamental role to compensate for the loss of syntax. If the piece is to succeed, these elements must be invested with extraordinary significance, a superhuman feat which perhaps only Schoenberg has achieved with any consistency, and this probably because of the traumatic nature of his message.<sup>20</sup>

### THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE

What then are the tasks facing committed young musicians today? Eisler recounts a story of his encounter with young English composers in London in 1961 on the occasion of a performance of his *Deutsche Sinfonie* (1934-47).<sup>21</sup> During his stay in England, Eisler met several prominent young English composers and listened to tapes of their music. The differences between the pieces seemed to him to be minimal; they were all basically on the 'doom and gloom' theme, sometimes made explicit through words. Tempos were *largo*, *poco largo*, *molto largo* and so on. When an *andante* passage came along Eisler was delighted. These were gifted young people with a real

<sup>20</sup> For a more extended critique of serialism on these lines see Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'Overture', *The Raw and the Cooked*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969); see also the admirable theory of foreground and background in music in Keller, 1975 (1984 minus 9).

<sup>21</sup> Hanns Eisler, *Materialen zu einer Dialektik der Musik* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1976), pp. 307-309.

feeling for musical sound, but at one point he felt obliged to tell one young man that his music was so unremittingly sad he could hardly bear to hear any more. He asked him to go away and write an *allegro*, suggesting that with so much sadness his music was too one-sided. When the composer insisted that he was incapable of writing an *allegro*, Eisler told him to go for a walk and observe the world and that he would find an *allegro*. He probably did not intend his words to be taken literally but we can see what he was driving at. Unfortunately few of our composers today have heeded Eisler's advice. On the contrary, they wring their hands in despair, or worse still they create a fantasy world of game-like activity which provides a precarious retreat where they can hide not only from the real world but also from their real selves. I have heard some contemporary *allegros*, but the music has usually been silly and I do not think that is what Eisler had in mind. He once wrote:

A composer is not 'progressive' simply because he uses the twelve-note method. The content of his music must be progressive. This means that the composer, through his music, must address himself to the problems of contemporary society.<sup>22</sup>

The student, too, through his study of music, should address himself to those problems. I have already intimated the kind of musical study I believe would bear fruit. Investigate the *content* of music. How can the history, sociology, psychology and the analysis and aesthetics of music be made to ask each other more exact questions? Should not students spend less time and energy on analysing the note-to-note procedure of Maxwell Davies's *Symphony* and considerably more time on trying to understand why contemporary British culture needs and promotes certain composers, and why, for example, the performance of a new *Symphony*, unloved by millions, should warrant publicity on national television news? Form study groups and organise seminars. Review the various critiques of current and fashionable trends in contemporary music. Initiate a reassessment of serialism, for example, with reference to its proponents (Schoenberg, Leibowitz, Perle, Rufer, etc.) and to its critics (Bush, Cardew, Eisler, Hindemith, Lévi-Strauss, Marotheny, etc.). Always *know* the object of criticism. Never degenerate into philistinism. Subject your ideas to the criterion of practice. A lot of talk about art is abstract and formalist. It is tempting to use abstractions to obscure the true nature of our musical activity and they form a kind of escape route from the real world. We can dream of cosmopolitan audiences, universal music and posterity, but these are question-begging concepts. For what audience are we performing? Whose needs does this music serve? For what kind of 'posterity' am I composing?

Look for ways in which you can serve your local community with music. For example, there are plenty of old people's clubs you could contact. But never play down to people: talk about the music, create a congenial atmosphere and try to raise standards. If you have a political commitment to the Left, contact political societies at universities and trade union groups, and offer programmes containing some works with more explicit political content (Berio, Britten, Bush, Cardew, Eisler, Henze, Nono, Prokofiev, Rzewski, Shostakovich, Wolff) and initiate discussion. Above all, put your music to use.

Finally, in the light of my previous comments, I guess it would not be hard to deduce my present attitude towards experimental music. My disenchantment began when it finally dawned on me that this music bore precious little relation to the real world. Primarily its relation was to *other* music to which it responded at best with wit, charm and irony (as in the work of Gavin Bryars, Howard Skempton and John White) or at worst with a shrug, a giggle or a raspberry.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

Bryars has correctly observed that much experimental music does not involve compositional argument. This lack of musical argument reflects the quietist philosophy which constitutes an important ideological component of experimental music. It presents a façade of neutrality, of disinterestedness, a 'take it or leave it' stance which is disarming. To attack it is like attacking a defenceless person, unless of course one considers its apparent neutrality a sham. In the 60s many composers of experimental music moved towards repetition and 'harmony', creating a haven for disenfranchised musicians within the new flower culture, a rallying-point for drop-outs who required from music a more developed, more sophisticated aesthetic than pop music provided.

Experimental music provides therapy; it has no other role because it is not developmental. It provides a certain *content* which is in demand, and in this sense it has cornered part of the contemporary music market. The rich and complex psychological states of previous music (of, say, late Beethoven) are ironed out, 'normalised', made fashionable to fit smugly with the anaesthetised demands of an average culture. The modern audience above all demands therapy and so *extracts* from a work that which may serve a therapeutic purpose. In the case of experimental music the reductive process has already been completed by the composer, the music is pre-packaged and the customer receives the prescribed form of satisfaction.

C

Experimental Music and Therapy

Experimental music is a form of music that is not primarily concerned with the creation of a new sound or the exploration of new timbres. It is a form of music that is primarily concerned with the exploration of the human voice and the human body as instruments of music.

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Example 1

chant (phrase mark indicates that the note lasts the length of one breath)

high flutter

vocal fry (the rate varies as shown)