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THE FUNCTION OF MUSIC IN MODERN SOCIETY¹

By CARL-ALLAN MOBERG

THE SOCIAL function of music can be considered from two points of view: that of society and that of the art of music. We must ask ourselves what it is that modern society does for the art of music and then consider how far music reflects the spirit of our contemporary society. The authorities who have charge of our musical culture, view the matter in terms of a «musical life» and have no inside experience of the art. In defining what is meant by «musical life» we might call to mind Paul Bekker's view of it as comprising all the ways, in which both publicly and privately, we can express a relationship with the art. The functional role of music can be observed in the church and in schools, where music has a well-defined part to play, and for instance, the state in Sweden, has long undertaken the responsibility of training people to fulfil these functions. How seriously this responsibility was taken is, of course to a great extent dependent on the relations between the church and state.

It is also the lot of the art to fulfil many other responsibilities towards society. Music responds to needs that are felt at all levels of society but as a general rule, and this holds good for Sweden, this has not resulted in a corresponding feeling of responsibility towards the art and its development. Thus the Swedish state takes the economic responsibility of only one orchestra, *Kungliga hovkapellet* (The Royal Orchestra) which is of course, inherited from the era of direct royal patronage. The state and the local authorities also support — indirectly and often inadequately — various other orchestras, created by concert-promoters. The state as a whole however, does not involve itself in the training of the majority of musicians nor does it concern itself with the qualifications of private teachers of music. But in our modern and highly organised society it will be more and more dangerous to leave even a comparatively small part of our cultural life untended. The neglect which in earlier centuries might have run its course without causing irreparable damage will nowadays be fraught with disaster in our more intricately balanced society. To draw an analogue

from our twentieth-century roads: The increasing number of accidents caused by careless motorists will easily be noticed by both public opinion and the authorities, but in the artistic field we are content to allow people to practise their art without adequate safeguards or without some sort of spiritual driving licence to carry the analogue to its logical conclusion.

That music has become a subject of greater social concern is due to the invention of two important media of communication, the gramophone and the radio: these have transformed all the traditional relations between the artist and the patron, and have so to speak, completely upset «the musical balance of power». They can work as destructive forces on the one hand, discouraging such things as amateur music-making, or on the other as constructive factors influencing such things as the knowledge of repertoire, the technique of playing and so on. They can also work in ways hitherto unknown. For instance they abolish the intimate conception of place in music-making: the music of great choirs and orchestras pouring out of loud-speakers very often does not correspond to the listener's conception of place and deprives him into the bargain of the feeling of affinity that fellow-listeners might give. The intermediary between the listener and the music is an electrical apparatus, and it is a well-known fact that the radio technician can add an effect NOT produced by the instruments themselves. We know also that tape-recordings are proof-read, irrelevant sounds are removed, unsuccessful excerpts exchanged for more successful ones and so on. It happens often that an aria is composed of a selection of technically impeccable extracts from a dozen recording-takes. Strauss' opera *Salome*, has been televised in a performance where pictures of Salome's physical charms, the dance of the seven veils and Salome's singing were drawn from different productions of the same scenes acted by different people. We will speak later about the artistic effect on society of this rage for perfection in technique.

The immense importance and potentialities of radio-technique in modern society is not a secret and the authorities in totalitarian states have used this means of communication for propaganda purposes. Thus music which hitherto had performed no direct social function in earlier societies, that is to say, music that was not in the service of the church or the school, music that might well be called «concert music» was also compelled to follow a well-defined political function. The German *Reichsmusikkammer* sought to suppress *entartete Kunst* and the Russian communist party erected *socialist realism* as an ideal for its composers to follow as opposed to *bourgeois formalism* and *l'art-pour-l'art* ideas current in the West. The regimentation of musicians and the harnessing of their art for political purposes is of course not

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new. It is in fact as old as organised government itself and belongs necessarily to an autocratic system. The history of Western European music is a perpetual and constant oscillation between this functional conception of music and the *laissez-faire* principle of artistic freedom and individualism; but advanced techniques enable modern extremist tendencies to appear on a more formidable scale than before.

Let us now consider the question from a musical standpoint. I will mainly confine myself to the ideas current in Germany during the nineteenth-century because it is without doubt essential for the understanding of our time. According to Rudolf Schaefer's definition this oscillation between functionalism and individualism in the art occurs regularly and distinctly. The attitude of the young Romantics was *metaphysical* in contrast to the so-called *Affektenlehre* of the rationalistic eighteenth-century. *Affektenlehre* arose as a parallel to Goethe's theory of colour (1810) which concerns itself with the sensual and moral effects of certain colours. Art for the Romantic ranks with religion, and music is the leading art. It alone, makes us forget our sufferings and lifts us »on the wings of yearning» to the sublime, the divine — those are the words of Wackenroder. All that connects the art of music with society — the demand of creating works to order, the skill of the artisan and the craftsman, the conditions and limitations of performers, the public with their fickleness of taste or their undeveloped tastes, all this spells *inhibition* to the Romantic artist. It tortures him to barter with his art, he wants to feel independent of patronage, to be a free citizen in the world of art.

While rationalism by means of the theory of the affections (*Affektenlehre*) tries to give clarity of conception to music, the Romantic is attracted by the subtlety and variety of meaning to be extracted from the dark, mysterious language that does not reflect real, human feelings but a fantastic, magical world, far from reality, that can be grasped intuitively and symbolically but which is intellectually inaccessible. Faith ranks higher than logic: to understand is the same thing as adore. Therefore the literary interpretation of an artistic product must be a hymn, and the critic must be productive, which means at the same time creative. German romantic literature overflows with speculations about art, belletristic fantasies, the sort of chatter that you would expect to find in serial stories, amateur aesthetic and philosophical analyses together with poetical commonplaces, parallels to the transcriptions, rhapsodies, fantasies and paraphrases of romantic German music.

But this metaphysical, youthful and earnest conception of music was soon stripped of its effusiveness. Eduard Hanslick, essentially a true Romantic, turns the spiritualised musical doctrines of roman-

ticism into formalism: As the true nature of music cannot be grasped we must content ourselves with a rational explanation of its technical and formal side.

The attempts to find a scientific basis for romantic aesthetics have given rise amongst other things, to the theory of musical tensions in the impelling forces of the musical phrase that Schaefer called *energetics*. There again we come into contact with the theory of the affections and the imitative aesthetics of the eighteenth-century. The *Affektenlehre* flourished again in Hermann Kretschmar's well-known *hermeneutics*. According to the energetic-doctrine however, tones are animalistic creatures with inner impulses that would give rise to anarchy were it not for the fact that they were controlled by a formal discipline. The movement of the phrase is determined by the independent motives or ideas: these are set free according to their force in a world of music, governed only by biological and mechanical laws and bearing no relation to extra-musical factors. Here we have a new musical formalism indebted to and inspired by modern science.

This attitude was one of the most striking features of European musical thinking during the time just before the first world war and it found its principal protagonists amongst those *avant-gardists* who had the *dehumanisation of music on their programme*. In our brief survey of musical theories in Romantic Germany, we met mainly philosophers and natural scientists who indulged their imaginations in musical realms. But now the militant composers themselves are the champions of their art.

In his *Entwurf einer neuen Aesthetik der Tonkunst* (1906) Ferruccio Busoni firmly proclaimed the autonomy of music. »The art of music was born free and it is its destiny to remain free.» He stressed its consistency and universality since there are only external things — words, titles, situations, interpretations — that divide it into categories such as church, operatic, symphonic and chamber music and he maintains categorically that music must free itself from the sensual and the subjective and become »absolute» music. It was this endeavour as well as the total indifference of the new music to the needs of society that makes Arnold Schoenberg in his *Piano pieces, Op. 19* (1911) leave the realms of tonality and impel him to deny self-evident things such as a tonal centre, cadence, consonance and architectonical structure. »The comprehension of music ought to be dematerialised, to be emancipated absolutely from the world of the familiar, the common-place and the traditional.» Thus writes H. H. Stuckenschmidt in 1951. In free atonal music therefore the octave interval and the major and minor modes are avoided throughout because they are too full of expression

and associations, and consequently would prove poor components of the new music.

The neo-classical movement with its so-called new objectivity could be regarded in the light of a more humanistic art, since it has its roots in the endeavour to utilise the formal patterns of a well-trying humanistic art. Certainly neo-classicism has been conscious of a responsibility to society and it has been closely connected with the increasing volume of historical research into earlier epochs of music. But it is open to abuse and easily gives refuge to cold irony — *l'art pour l'art*, «spiel» music, and what is called disinterested or disengaged music, music which is not emotionally involved in human affairs. Hindemith has been accused of composing such indifferent and futile music in his opera, *Cardillac*, where dramatic action and music go side by side like two lines very seldom converging. This finds its parallel in the so-called pure vision of Cézanne, while in Stravinsky the «classical» and objective features are very often accompanied by something mechanical that he is never quite free from.

Another tendency that in its consequences might constitute a serious menace to the humaneness of music is the cult of the «exotique» fostered by French impressionism. Here we no longer meet with the innocent spicing of a phrase with colour, e. g. Gluck's Chinese music and Mozart's smart Turkish colours in *Die Entführung* and which still lend Debussy's music a rather innocent «boudoir» touch of sensuality similar to the sonorities of the Javanese Gamelan orchestra. This holds good for Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* (*The Rite of Spring*) where one might speak of the realisation in musical terms of an archaic and barbaric rite informed throughout with a savagery and violence of great imagination. But it is to be feared that the elementary, human, heathen primitive culture is not what has most attracted modern artists, but instead the appeal of its barbarism and savagery. In this connection Hans Sedlmayr reminds us of the fact that the artistic products of lunatics and uneducated people have been cherished in a very suspect manner. Children's drawings for instance, are of course, of interest from a psychological point of view but not from an artistic. But the modern so-called *Neutöner* pride themselves in knowing nothing at all about the musical technique of older periods. They also compose works showing it, and are supported in a way that older and more competently trained composers would never dream of or even hope for.

Although modern music in principle is anti-programmatic and anti-naturalistic it is characteristic that it does not shrink away from the imitation of the world of machinery and advanced techniques. Stravinsky's mechanical rhythms or the repetitive rhythm of a work such as *Bolero* of Ravel, do not only consist of transferring primitive human

and suggestive rhythms, it is much more of a deliberate homage to the machine, the spiritless technique of a robot's motion. Iron-casting inspired the Russian, Alexander Mossolov in his famous orchestral work, *Steel Foundry* (first performed in 1931) and the score includes tin plates mounted on stands amongst the percussion department. Honegger paid tribute to the enchantments of speed in his symphonic poem about a locomotive, *Pacific 231* (1923) and the list could be extended almost *ad libitum*. The irresistible attraction that the modern composer feels towards the unorganic stands out in marked contrast to the naturalism of earlier periods. Above all, the modern composer strives to avoid any taint of sentimentality.

Still more ominous however, are those trends in modern art that point not only towards a dehumanisation of music but embody a directly *dehumanising attitude* in that the work of art holds up human beings to scorn and contempt. Hans Sedlmayr has exposed this tendency with relentless consistency in his profoundly disturbing book *Verlust der Mitte*. As Picasso in much of his work aims at the breaking-down of the human form into mere lines and strokes or the representation of human experience in cubistic terms, expressionist music aims at the psycho-analytical dissection of what is warped, stunted and pathological in the human mind. Here we may content ourselves with mentioning only one brilliant and penetrating study, *Wozzeck* of the Viennese, Alban Berg (first performed in 1925 in Berlin after 137 rehearsals). In its turn it was stylistically anticipated by the opera *Glückliche Hand* by his teacher, Schoenberg. Stuckenschmidt speaks in very admiring terms about the composer's «hyper-tropic imagination» that had long nurtured a predilection for the nocturnal, demoniacal and subconscious.

This anti-human tendency also appears in various forms in post-war Germany and France, for example in the twenties we encounter in the music of the young Hindemith, a stressing of sexuality, the ridiculing of all traditional musical values, sardonic grinning and vulgarisation inspired by the contemporary music-hall and circus — truly an *Entgötterung der Musik* — if we borrow a book-title from that time. This tendency cannot be explained merely as an irresistible impulse to *épater le bourgeois*. «Among the qualities that have distinguished the attitude of the modern artist» writes E. A. Jewel (quoted by Sedlmayr), «are revolt, cynicism, sardonic humour, perversity, disillusion, despair. And all of those have come straight out of the soil of our twentieth-century culture. If there is something terrible and even sometimes frightening in modern art, the roots of this dark passion draw substance from deep places in the social soul, as do likewise the roots of wisdom, goodness and beauty.» Music — as well as the other arts — has faithfully reflected the anti-social tendencies of our time, and has, even in

doing so, surpassed the limits of its natural means of expression. If modern society shows serious signs of illness in its organism — and many would have us believe this — then it is evident that this sickness will embrace music and the arts.

What is said here of course, does not imply criticism of the aesthetic or technical aspects of contemporary music nor of its great creators. Nor must these criticism be interpreted as to deferring to a superficial traditionalism or a timid conservatism. But it is from the fruits of a tree that one can judge its quality and the products of the modern extremists prove that this art with all its remarkable aesthetic and technical experience is going very much astray. When art proclaims itself free from every religious and social bond, there is a risk of it losing its own soul. It turns against itself and its own origins in zealous destructiveness just as our atomic techniques threaten to do with the whole world.

How did we get that far? The reasons for the cultural crisis, of which the musical crisis forms but a small part, cannot be wholly explained not even in purely musical factors. I will only dwell here upon two elements that seem to me to be of importance when we are to judge the causal hinges of the musical crisis. One is the *institution of giving public concerts*, i. e. the organising of musical programmes carefully planned in advance and paid for by a public audience. It is not necessary to point out that this system came into being during the eighteenth-century, having grown from the private music-making of amateurs or opera singers. By going to concerts a large audience gets used to listening to music as an end in itself. They go to concerts that comprise works drawn from completely different social milieux, the church, the court, the opera, the home, and drawn from different periods of time, but that are divorced in their new context from their original social function. On our concert programmes works from ceremonies, official occasions and solemn receptions are put together with the same freedom as the endless row of artistic fragments taken out of their natural surroundings and assembled again in what Sedlmayr calls »the dazzling asylum of orphan *objets d'art*.» If we want to follow his train of thought in our own sphere, we might call the concert halls places where aesthetics are the cult, the artists are its clergy, and the concert programmes achieve a musical and psychological uniformity when performed together, so that a Palestrina Mass, a Beethoven symphony or a parody work of Stravinsky is judged according to a common aesthetic yardstick. Only when we have realised this process of equalisation, will we wholly understand Busoni's words: »There is no church music in itself, but only music connected with a religious text or played in a church. If you

change the text, the music will obviously change. Remove the text and there will be left — as an illusion — a symphonic phrase. If you add a text to a string quartet phrase, there will be an opera-scene, play the first phrase of the Eroica as an accompaniment to an American-Indian film and the listener will hardly be able to recognise the music.» The validity of Busoni's conception of art and — to mention another name — that of Stravinsky's needs no more comment than this quotation.

But to return to the question of public concerts. If we confine ourselves to the technical domain only, the twentieth-century has intensified demands on the performer since his work must withstand comparison with the work of internationally famous artists heard via the radio and gramophone, and has also professionalised the craft of music criticism. It is not necessary to stress the great value of these developments; but at the same time we must not forget that there exists only a difference of degree (and not of nature) between the well-rehearsed and technically advanced standard of the modern concert programme and the spiritless »rage of perfection» of modern radio technique that forbids a speaker to clear his throat and puts the sissors to any extraneous noises on the recording-tape. Something of this same spiritless and mechanical outlook informed Stravinsky when he originally scored *Les Noces* for pianolas in order to exclude any possibility of the interpreter placing himself between the composer and listener. Are we not in this respect becoming the slaves of technique instead of its masters? Is not our endeavour after perfection a demonstration of an *inhuman* attitude to our art?

The other factor of importance when considering the modern crisis in music is the emancipation of our consciousness from the sterile climate of the equal-tempered system. This system was the solution that the eighteenth-century found to the long-burning problem of uniting the old polyphonic concept of music and the newer homophonic one to permit effective modulation. Equal temperament which was the final outcome of the eighteenth-century involved »correcting» the size of the intervals within the range of the octave with the result that they all had to diverge from the natural scale. What a revolutionary effect this measure — necessary as it was at that time — had on the development of the art, has yet to be fully investigated.

However there are a number of reasons for believing that the attraction of the equal-tempered system is declining. The traditional means of expression had admittedly reached a point of exhaustion before the first world war and its outbreak brought the crisis in musical language to a head. The harmonic art that dominated the nineteenth-century was shaken in its foundations by the Wagnerian style (the so-called

Tristan crisis). Max Reger tried to synthesize the harmonic subtleties of the new language with the contrapuntal dexterity of the baroque. Further development on these lines was impossible. Others have tried to achieve results by renewing the basic language in another direction. This is apparent in the development, most important in the French impressionists, of hexatony (that is the division of the octave into 6 whole-tone intervals) as well as another experiment which enlarged the available vocabulary by intervals less than the half-tone (semitone) which is known as microtonality. Both these phenomena can be said to reflect the influence of non-European tone systems on European composers. Hans Pfitzner — the last romantic as he is called — declared quite frankly and categorically that such efforts were an indication of musical impotence, a recognition of an incapacity to produce essential works of art with the same language that older masters had used with success.

One could think that the solution might lie in an escape from the trammels of the equal-tempered scale. It is possible that this path would have been followed if the twelve-tone system had not found a last refuge in the music of Arnold Schoenberg, who stubbornly keeps to our traditional tempered system but denies the mutual relationship between the individual tones, a fundamental concept in European music ever since the middle ages. This phenomenon is the more peculiar since the tempered scale arose from the necessity to procure effective modulation and these traditional tonal relationships that govern the tempered scale, are not acknowledged by the protagonists of atonality. This might of course, be explained as a sign of the close relationship between atonality and *l'art pour l'art*.

It was on the theories that J. A. Yasser described in his works on the evolution of tonality and the concept of super-tonality, that Kurt Blaukopf based his account of the »sociology of our tonal systems» — an account that is debatable in many respects. He tried to prove the existence of an interaction between our tonal systems and society and he maintains that music undergoes a definite transformation as society and its ways of thinking change. Atonality he sees as an expression of the incompatibility of a traditional set of musical concepts and the demands of an expanding musical consciousness, an attempt to create a superdiatonic system, including a number of overtones not yet used in the history of European music (as also Schoenberg pointed out, *Harmonielehre* p. 25, note).

There may be something in this theory; but atonality still retains the equal-tempered system and in fact cannot do otherwise, if it is to remain true to its own speculative nature. For at the very moment that atona-

lity frees itself from the anchorage of the traditional tempered scale, the whole system of formulae, erected with such care, will crumble into pieces.

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