

MODERN MUSIC

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POETRY, MUSIC AND TIME

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IF there is one aspect of poetry that students of it seem to prize above every other it is that summarized by Walter Bagehot when he said "a poem should be emphatic, intense and soon over." A keenly developed taste in poetry means nothing so much as the faculty of picking out a single stanza or line, or even a single word, in which the very quintessence of the poem is somehow expressed. One of the chief pleasures of reading good literary criticism is to observe this faculty at work, like a magnet drawing iron filings out of a dust-bin. It might be defined as a concentrated power of discrimination seeking out concentration of expression.

In music, higher criticism appears to follow the opposite course. For if what chiefly delights the student of poetry is the flawless stanza, the single line that opens vistas in the mind, or even the telling epithet, the musician saves the cream of his admiration for the *long flight*, the sustained melody, the quasi-architectural nobility of massive forms.

It may seem arbitrary to pair together these opposite values, as though each had a parallel bearing on its respective field. Indeed, there are long poems such as *Paradise Lost* or *The Wreck of the Deutschland* which are as remarkable for the scope of their design as for the incidental beauty of isolated lines. And, too, there are works of music, such as *Pelléas*, in which the design, impeccable though it is, is subservient to the inexhaustible beauty of detail. The fact nonetheless remains that no responsible musician has ever required of music that it should be "soon over." Nor has poetry, so far as I know, ever been praised, as was Schubert's music, for "heavenly length."

A somewhat complex reason for this concerns the relation of time to poetry and music. Time is indispensable to both and yet in poetry it

has what might be called only a *limited plasticity*. That is to say, time, for the poet, is already roughly subdivided into units of varying length. He must reduce his thoughts to words and it is of the very nature of words to be short or long. Shorten the *oo* in *moon* and the word loses that roundness which we associate with the object signified. Or lengthen the *i* in *spite*: the word at once loses its *spiteful* character. In words, which are the irreducible units out of which poetry is constructed, sound and duration are merged into a single essence. In music, sound and duration are no longer confounded in their essences. The character of a note is on the contrary quite timeless. A long-held E_h is neither more nor less E_h than when it is played *staccato*. Though manifested in time it is not of time. It may be objected that a single note (especially if one leaves out its overtones, which I have for the moment no objection to doing) has no musical character apart from its context with other notes. I agree that it has none, in the sense of a character that one can admire or enjoy for its own sake, as one can admire and enjoy words like "moon" or "spite." Nevertheless it has what philosophers call a *quiddity* or essence of its own, differing from all others. It is, one might say, colorless and tasteless like water, yet, like water, there is nothing else exactly like it. E_h means nothing, implies nothing, produces neither pleasure nor pain; but in its own crystalline and unmistakable way it is what it is. No one with "absolute pitch" will ever mistake it for E_q or D.

Its *duration* is something else again. This *otherness* of the time element in music has led certain theorists to the opinion that time itself has an ontological status similar to that of pitch. It is as though Pitch had said to Duration: "If you will let me be just what I am I will let you be just what you are, and together we shall make music." With their respective territories thus clearly defined, time is then free to develop that essence which is proper to it, namely *rhythm*. For just as duration does not impinge on the character of pitch, neither does pitch impinge on the character of rhythm. A dotted-eighth rhythm has precisely the same character, as rhythm, whether it is played in the bass or in the treble, on a piano or on a drum.

Poets might object to this seeming attempt on the part of music to monopolize rhythm. They will tell you how they sometimes begin a poem with nothing but the beat of a certain rhythm in their minds. But it is not that music claims the monopoly of rhythm. It is simply that in music alone does rhythm become completely self-defining and articulate. What I have called the *limited plasticity* of the time element in poetry becomes, in music, the *unlimited plasticity* of pure duration.

It therefore follows that the time occupied by a musical work is an intrinsic part of its structure and essence; and this explains, I think, why it is necessary to judge music as a whole, and why the critical approach, valid for poetry, that consists in searching out details of special and isolated beauty, will seldom disclose the true secret of music.

There is another simpler reason for it too. The poet works in a medium that has many other uses besides those of poetry. The composer's medium, on the other hand, has no other use than that to which the composer puts it. Thus, if poetry is a sort of pinnacle on the edifice of language, music is a whole edifice. That is perhaps the reason for the weight of a poet's influence having so little relation to the size of his output. Compare the known work of poets like Gerard Manley Hopkins, A. E. Housman or Paul Valéry with that of any composer of comparable standing. The disparity is certainly striking. Moreover if you ask a poet about his method of work he is apt to tell you that he writes poetry only when he has "something to say." One may even detect a certain *hauteur* in his tone, implying that if he did otherwise he would be no poet but a mere hack. Composers, when they are questioned about this will, on the contrary, generally agree that continual writing, whether they have anything to say or not, is for them the most fruitful way to work.

I note this in no disparagement of poets. The man who sets the spire on the cathedral certainly has a very important job, and one for which he must be peculiarly fitted. Yet his assignment is not an enviable one, and this chiefly because he must spend so much of his time waiting around until the cathedral, all but its spire, is finished. The composer, since he is responsible for the whole building, can keep himself busy one way or another the whole time.

Mallarmé once said that "a poem is made with words, not with ideas." I respectfully submit that this is no more than a half truth. The other half of the truth is contained in Jacques Maritain's statement that "the work of art has been thought before being made, it has been formed and molded and ripened in the mind before passing into matter." If Maritain was evidently thinking of philosophy rather than of art, Mallarmé was just as evidently thinking of music rather than of poetry. For words are the poet's *matter*. Yet words suggest ideas. They cannot help it. It is the happy privilege of the composer, rather than that of the poet (who sometimes envies him) or of the philosopher (who wants to know "what about his *ideas*") to think directly and undistractedly in terms of his material medium.