

WORDS AND MUSICAL FORM

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IT is a commonly held fallacy that instrumental music is of a higher kind than vocal music in that, relying on a system of logic wholly inherent to it, it calls for no division of attention either on the composer's part or on the listener's. Division of attention for composer and listener alike arises inevitably with the introduction of words — especially in the *lied*, whose aim is to strike a balance between text and music, neither predominating in importance over the other. Instrumental music, by virtue of its singleness of aim, which is simply to be itself, is hence regarded as a freer, more autonomous and altogether nobler form of expression.

Yet is this in fact the case? Are the problems of form, balance, symmetry, in a word, coherence, that attend the writing of instrumental music truly inherent to music itself, or are they not in large measure external necessities imposed upon the composer by the extreme fluidity of his material? So far as undivided attention goes it may even be questioned whether instrumental music really commands it to the extent that is commonly supposed. A work like the *Art of the Fugue*, for example, may be heard in two quite different ways. One listener may derive immense satisfaction from it without noting any of the feats of contrapuntal skill. Another may recognize all the contrapuntal feats and yet derive none of the soul-feeding satisfaction enjoyed by his less learned fellow. This dichotomy had its origin in Bach's mind. He had quite evidently a dual purpose in composing the work; the one "absolute," the other schematic and functional. The ease with which the "absolute" side of his music absorbs and prevails over the most complex contrapuntal devices makes it dangerous to try to establish any ratio between the two. For one might conclude that the more exacting the external discipline the finer will be the "absolute" result. Such a conclusion would certainly not be welcome to composers of our own day. For rather than accept unquestioningly a given system of formal devices such as Bach found in the fugue and Mozart

in the sonata form, we aspire, at least ideally, to write music that will be independent of them all.

Yet candor must compel the composer to acknowledge that in the actual practice of composing instrumental music he is often governed by external considerations. Who has not had the experience of finding himself meandering along in the development of an idea without any notion of where it might be leading? All at once his conscience, or respect for conventions, or whatever it may be, pricks him, reminding him that he cannot let his fancy roam indefinitely. He must begin to think about negotiating a return to his point of departure. Then, if he is skillful, he will devise a purely functional passage that will be *just that*, even though it may have no bare-boned appearance of it. The aimless meandering that preceded will merge imperceptibly into purposeful logic and assume, retrospectively, a speciously logical air. Conversely, the transitional passage will retain a specious air of continuing aimlessness. That is the sort of stunt everyone admires. Mozart time and again does it in a way that is absolutely dazzling. But to claim that *all* is inherent to the musical idea, that *all* is on an "absolute" plane, that no conscience was invoked because there was never any danger of going wrong – in short, that it was no stunt at all but inspiration pure and free, would be not merely an idle boast but the height of disingenuousness.

For a composer to show a certain reticence in discussing the "stunt" side of his work is altogether another matter. He knows well that if his music has genuine value it is due to something other than the mere skillful handling of devices. If someone points these out to him with the air of having discovered an important secret, he may answer with a certain impatience, "Yes, I *did* use that device – but what of it?" The fact remains that whether concealed or apparent, whether noted by the wise or ignored by the innocent, devices of one kind or another are unavoidable, and the candid composer must acknowledge the duality of purpose that they imply.

The presence of a text introduces division of a different kind, but one may question if it be really of a lower order than the other. For indeed, if the absence of a text imposes upon the composer a need for formal devices in order to attain coherence, its presence in large measure relieves him of that necessity. The coherence is there, in the text – the formal problem is to adhere to *that*. Once this submission has been made, his music, if not completely unfettered, may yet be held together by a far more flexible and less exacting logic than that which governed it when it subsisted inde-

pendently. As the humble are exalted, so it will gain rather than lose in freedom. This is abundantly illustrated in the case of Fauré. His songs are incomparable; *Diane*, *Sélénée*, for example, will stand comparison with any music of the past. But his instrumental music is on the contrary marred by a too evident pre-occupation with form. It abounds in the formalism of endless sequences. There are secondary themes that are obviously just secondary themes, put there to fulfil a purely contingent need for contrast, rather than for their own sake. Against the common assumption that so-called "pure" forms make for greater freedom of musical expression, the evidence of Fauré's case shows that on the contrary restraints imposed by a text may leave the music in fact freer.

Coherence, and all that makes for it, is a necessary condition, rather than the ultimate aim of music. Whether this coherence was to be attained by the use of contrapuntal devices, or by a quasi-architectural balance and symmetry, or through serving a text, or by drawing simultaneously on two or more of these resources, mattered little to the great masters of the past. Are not the *Cantatas* and *Passions* of Bach on as high a musical plane as his organ fugues? Is not the music of Mozart's operas every bit as "pure" as that of his piano concertos? These are inescapable facts and they could be multiplied indefinitely. It would indeed be rash in the face of such evidence to persist in the belief in a musical hierarchy based on the presence or absence of words.