

MODERN MUSIC

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ABSTRACT METHOD AND THE VOICE

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IT has remained for our age to introduce into art the concept of abstractness as a direct mode of expression. This idea has found its most immediate application in the so-called non-representational school of painting - painting conceived in terms of only pure design and color. Esthetic purity is its aim, and the ideal goal towards which it strives is that self-inhering perfection so striking in music and so sought after in all other arts. This aspiration in itself is by no means new. The symbolist movement in France regarded music as the archetype of artistic perfection; Mallarmé, its chief, with unequalled subtlety and concentration posed before his generation the ideal of a poetic language refined to the condition of musical purity. Walter Pater, to go further back, laid down the dictum that all art aspires to the law of music. The implications of abstractionist art however, go far deeper than its professed aims. If by its esthetic ideals it can be related in some degree to the past, the methods by which these ends are now sought reflect a new and unprecedented trend.

Much more significant than the avowed aims, is the spirit of almost surgical directness with which the abstractionist proceeds today. The older schools of art worked with and through the given materials of a form; accepted them in all their varied interplay and only by the intensity of their inter-penetration and fusion achieved a sense of wholeness and purity. The latter-day purists operate directly on the materials. By a drastic excision of those elements which by their diverse interests seem to interfere with their scheme, they hope to certify the purity of the whole artistic process. This purity is highly synthetic, achieved only at the expense of age-long associations deeply rooted in human experience. But that does not deter

the abstractionist. For the materials of an art are no longer regarded by him as constituting an organic world of their own – a microcosm formed out of the interactions between a given medium and the whole complex of humanly-determined response association and need. This world, all compact of spirit and matter, has now been reduced to the general level of a pure anonymous material over which the arbitrary will ranges.

The tendency towards abstractness runs far beyond the confines of a particular school. The painter who resolves the tensions and limitations inherent in his art by banishing all traces of concrete subject-matter is only a crystal example of a general line of thought. Every art today has felt the impact of the trend towards an abstract handling of its materials. That the results take on a kind of algebraic character would not displease its practitioners. Mathematics itself could only operate freely once the abstraction from particular numbers had taken place; the abstractionist in art would like to acquire a similar freedom and generality by extricating his materials from their closely-interwoven human context.

In music itself Schönberg's later style reveals just such a tendency at work on the very innermost musical materials. Only a sense of abstractness may be ascribed to this art; to the remote baffling plane on which his system unfolds, void of all natural contexts by which the musical ear orients itself. For music, too, is deeply rooted in human associations chief of which is the natural response of the ear to the fundamental relations of the overtone series. But in Schönberg's art every vestige of the common triad must be carefully eliminated from the scene, lest its immediate concrete effect on the ear disrupt the whole intricate deployment of the musical texture.

III

The general bias towards abstract methods has seemed to find confirmation in the self-sufficing perfection of the pure instrumental forms of music. As Tovey has pointed out, the absolute forms of instrumental music only offer the conditions under which perfection is most easily attained and appreciated. By an incorrect inference, these more favorable conditions have come to be regarded as the sole channels through which musical purity may be approached. This fallacy has found a ready acceptance, and has helped to crystallize a very rigid notion of musical purity. Under its influence a hyper-sensitive kind of antisepticism towards the presence of so-called extra-musical elements has developed.

In the treatment of the voice this prejudice has had a particularly

noxious effect. The naturally accepted inter-relationships of music, voice and text are examined with zealous scrutiny, the natural concomitance of tone and speech questioned, and the voice as a pure musical organ opposed to the voice as progenitor of speech. Once the traditional relationships of voice and text were questioned, a substitute approach had of necessity to be found. It was inevitable that the really barbaric proposal be made to frankly sever the natural ties of voice and word, to present the voice as pure tonal instrument. The advent of the human voice in a musical form, however, is too powerful in psychological import to serve as a mere instrument. If, on the other hand, the voice becomes a protagonist in the musical scene, then our deepest convictions require that words complete the dignity of the occasion; instead of that anomalous "vocalise" which an artistic fiat has thrust upon us.

Other artists, whose keener sensibility makes the first solution inadmissible, have paid a divided tribute to abstract logic and human necessity, by relegating the word to an inferior order amid the pure world of musical forms; voice and word are permitted to live out a somehow carnal and impure existence under rigidly-determined restrictions. Stravinsky, in his famous pronunciamento that the text be regarded as purely phonetic material, and that the composer concentrate on the syllable rather than the word has provided that form of compromise solution. Curiously enough, Stravinsky's desire to clear the musical path from the "domination of the phrase" by decomposing words into a pre-digested array of syllables, betrays in the end a lack of confidence in the wonderfully absorptive powers of that absolute musical logic he so adores. In the very high-tides of pure musical culture there has never been the least indication of such an attitude. In the period whose musical practices in such matters Stravinsky invokes to validate his own claims, Palestrina declared that he aimed to give a living spirit to the words – *il dare spirito vivo alle parole*. The Church itself took a stand quite the reverse of what Stravinsky has attributed to it. The Council of Trent warned – not against the domination of the word – but precisely against its degradation to the position of a mere syllabilized prop for unreflecting overelaborated contrapuntal practices.

Since Palestrina's day, the increasing range of musical art, its ability to project viable structures purely out of its own resources, has confirmed its fully independent status. But this independence, for all its brilliant manifestations in the absolute forms, has not narrowed the original confluence of word and music – a confluence that had helped sustain music

through its first struggling formative stages. With increasing musical resources the vocal forms have taken on ever-increasing depth and motivation. Only the subtler, more varied implements of a highly developed art could fully explore the inter-relation of word and music, their hidden affinities, the parallel currents and counter-currents of musical and poetic design.

That an artist like Stravinsky should ignore this wealth of treatment in favor of a narrow, limited use of words bears testimony to the compelling influence of abstract trends of thought today. It is perhaps ungrateful to cavil at the man who, more than anyone, has helped to clarify the syntax of modern musical practice, and to re-establish its continuity with the mainstream of Western musical thought. Perhaps, in the last analysis, Stravinsky's adherence to the current notions of musical purity was unconsciously motivated by the need to rigorously focus his attention on an exclusive problem: the formulation of a modern musical dialectic as strictly determined in its inner coherence as a Bach fugue. That has been an important task today. But the need to accomplish this task under the most favorable possible conditions should not blind the composer to the fact that this dialectic may be freely applied to various forms; and that in conjunction with a natural unforced treatment of words, it is still operating in an entirely legitimate and pure sphere.

III

The final import of the human voice in the creation of sound musical values, can be clearly seen in a study of its relationship to that locus classicus of abstract method: the music of Schönberg. First of all, it is only in the realm of purely instrumental media that this music could fulfill its least requirement. To permit himself the luxury of ignoring the natural limitations of the human ear, the composer must lean the more heavily on the purely mechanical attainments of modern instrumental technic. The nature of the voice however poses a serious obstacle to such methods. Conditioned today, as centuries ago, by its inherent physiological structure, it cannot by an arbitrary mutation of musical values assume for its own the complex norms of atonal music. To whatever virtuosity the art of singing attains, the pure melodic syntax out of which our musical language first took root, is always present with it as a natural heritage. Out of these inherent limits the voice may not be abstracted. It may develop rare and complex patterns; but the natural economy of the voice will always measure out the degrees of complexity with a scale of psychological values.

Least of all is the voice in a position to equate the simple and com-

plex, as an instrument of fixed pitch might. To the composer abstractly inclined, the keyboard instruments are of course ideal. The most complex melodic and harmonic relationships cost as cheaply as the simplest, so to speak. The psychological weight however that the voice inevitably attaches to the more complexly drawn pattern, comes as a serious intrusion into the abstract scheme; serves as an unwelcome warning from the human hinterland that these algebraic formulations are not its natural language.

Under such a compulsion to negate the natural values of the voice, the abstractionist composer has done more than deprive himself of a rich medium of expression. With the same stroke he has also eliminated the whole measure out of which instrumental composition itself has always derived its richest rhetorical values. More is at stake than the obvious analogies of vocal and instrumental practices: the cantabile, the portamento. The entire contexts of the speaking and singing voice – all the variety of articulation, the play of phrasing, inflections, rising and falling tension – these and innumerable more are shadowed forth in instrumental music. Gifted composers and performers have always understood this. With the ideal of the human voice continually before them they have always known how to project into instrumental patterns the expressive content of a vocal measure.

In this larger sense, the voice, whether actually present in a musical form, or radiating only an indirect influence, acts as guardian against a mechanical dissolution of musical method. Delicate link and mediator between an endless world of pure sound and an inner one with its own incommensurable depths of nuance, design, and feeling, it remains a safeguard against the limitless abstractions that would otherwise ensue. Whatever degree of complexity the future art of music may attain, the presence of the voice in a vital relation to that culture will always guarantee to the language of pure musical design the living inflections of an essentially human art.