

MODERN MUSIC

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MUSIC AS WISH FULFILLMENT

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SOME time ago I published an article entitled *Peace and Conflict in Music*, calling attention to the fact that music, like all art, is not always an uncompromising expression, exactly corresponding to the spirit of an era, that is to say an expression with the same positive or negative features of that spirit, but may be the counter-expression, a wish-picture, a flight into the opposite.

As this appears paradoxical it aroused violent opposition in some and vigorous agreement in others. Friendly opponents argued that art is always only the uncompromising reflection of life. Yet sometimes truth resides not in the obvious but in the paradoxical. That art is the uncompromising expression, the reflection of the culture of an age is a truism needing no proof. Interest can attach only to a demonstration of when and why an uncompromising, direct mirror-image is developed, for even in such a reflection the sides are always changed, left becomes right and right left. And mirror-images are, indeed, much rarer than is generally believed.

It is an error to assume that art takes nature for its model. Nature is only the raw material of art, completely formless in itself. Our concept of nature is shaped by art, formed for us by the great artists. Rubens undoubtedly found a great variety of women in fruitful Flanders, but, from a special psychological bias he favored a particular type, and since his time we have had Rubensian women. All over the world, not only in a Dutch mill, rooms lie shrouded in Rembrandt's dimness, ever since Rembrandt saw and painted this obscurity. The English land-

scape probably appeared much the same before Constable painted it, but it would be quite difficult for us to see it otherwise, after he had painted it. It would require a still greater artist to compel us to "re-see" it. We grow aware of the phenomena of nature only when such great artists have first seen, "pre-viewed" and formed them for us.

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One of the most striking proofs that whole centuries of art, through the very agency of art, have accepted the substitution of a fiction for reality, is the case of the peasant, in painting and poetry. Actually, throughout the ages the peasant has been a man condemned to the most arduous toil in the field, under sun or rain, possessing all the lesser or greater, good or bad characteristics that are inherent in a life on the soil. All the older art, especially the Dutch, from Breughel to Teniers and Brouwer, presented the peasant (when it paid him any attention) as a ridiculous figure for the amusement of the bourgeoisie, as a fool, a clown, a blockhead, never at work, always at his rowdy feasts, dancing, gorging, smoking and guzzling in general abandon. This picture endured until the end of the seventeenth century, when Watteau put Parisian society into rural trappings. With Millet and Segantini, in the nineteenth century, the peasant becomes a heroic figure, seen no longer feasting but only at his work which has been transformed into a sort of divine service. But the peasant is neither comic nor heroic.

The poetic fiction about the peasant is different again. Centuries old it has its origin, as a matter of fact, in the authority of the Greek and Roman classic poets, Theocritus and Virgil, Longus and Horace. Here he emerges as a pious shepherd, tilling his fields and tending his cattle under the blessing of the gods, always simple and good, held up as a model to the spoiled inhabitant of the cities; Daphnis and Chloe if he is young, Philemon and Baucis if he is old. This fiction has proved almost ineradicable. In the sixteenth century it was the fashionable disease of all Europe; in Italy from Sanazzar to Guarini and Marino, in Germany, in England, where Shakespeare made it a magic arabesque, in Spain, where Cervantes vainly tried to cure or

destroy it. It continued to live, be "virulent" and take on all possible forms, and it wore itself out only in the French revolution—and not even quite then.

For even in the nineteenth century fashionable sentimentality created the Swiss idyll, in opposition to Zola's horrible naturalism, which was essentially as unreal. The only one in the nineteenth century who knew the peasant and truly presented him, was the Swiss pastor Bitzius, called Jeremias Gotthelf, a genius who, because he was a local Berne poet, indeed, only an Emmenthaler, failed of international influence.



Are fictions lies? Yes, and no. Neither artistic creation nor lying is possible without fantasy, lies and art are essentially related at their very roots. This whole world of shepherds was as untrue, as deceptive as possible, but it would be absurd to claim on that account that Torquato Tasso's *Aminta* is no work of art. Fiction is fruitful, it creates art, it creates art even in music. And that brings us back to our starting point. There are times when art has directly reflected the spirit of an age; perhaps, (I say only perhaps) this has been true chiefly in early, archaic periods, when the function of art was still that of a religion. Prehistoric man sketched the outlines of the buffalo, the stag, the gazelle on the walls of his cave, to cast a magic spell on the wild beast, the object of his hunt; the Egyptian chiseled and drew, just as he embalmed, to give life eternity; the Greek created an ideal world of light, because he suffered too much . . .) There are other periods when art creates the opposite picture of the age. This perhaps is true of later epochs, which can look back on the distant perfection of earlier growths of art. Finally, there are periods when art is both at the same time, bipolar; the expression of an age and also the flight into an ideal; sick and well, positive and negative, a dismemberment and a dualism such as that from which we have not emerged since the beginning of the nineteenth century.



I am convinced that the polyphony of the Middle Ages is the result of a fiction. It is not correct to ascribe its origin to the

"latent feeling for harmonious relationships." Polyphony and harmony basically have no connection with each other. What happened was that in some monastic schools the attempt was made merely to combine several given melodies, not to find a new appropriate form for any given one. Of course, religious, mystical conceptions played a definite part. But polyphony was engendered not out of the people or the race but from the studies of the monasteries. Above all it was not something that grew up; on the contrary it was fashioned. In this connection it may be observed, as in many other instances in art, that things grow after they are created, and not vice versa, exactly as the folksong first grows, only after it is constructed of various items. It was only after the principle of polyphony had been discovered, after the crude combination of melodies had proved increasingly successful, that there was developed a feeling for the harmonious relationship of these melodies. The whole history of the music of the Middle Ages can be presented as the story of the weakening, lessening, and subordination of the polyphonic principle in favor of the harmonic; as a struggle between spiritual, mystic, abstract polyphony and material harmony. The whole history of music itself is a back and forward flowing of the stream between the two poles. And this back and forward flow does not by any means always correspond to the ebb and flow of the cultural, political, social, streams of any period.



I have already said that art is not the imitation of nature but the embodiment, the form-creator of nature. In music obviously there can be no talk of imitating nature; music is autonomous, it belongs to another spiritual world, a different sphere of fantasy from other arts. But it is especially in music that the phrase "imitazione della natura" has played a quite extraordinary role. This phrase is a pure fiction. It first appeared in the sixteenth century, as a rule of art, and naturally, like all Renaissance rules it was influenced by the classic. Music too must be made to "imitate," must present a picture like painting, and the more direct, the more naive, the better. Everyone acquainted with the madrigals knows to what fantastic "designs" the music of that

age can rise, to what apparently childish painting the musician abandoned himself. In the second half of the sixteenth century these direct descriptions are recognized as childish and create a demand for a new, a different "imitation of nature," namely the imitation of different states or changes of the spirit. But the appetite for descriptive music did not permit satiety. For hundreds of years, it preserved its vital, creative force. The whole art of the cantata of J.S.Bach, even a large part of his instrumental works, is inconceivable without this fiction of descriptive music. And I am afraid that today, in our esthetic and puristic age, we erroneously interpret as symbolic or mystical what Bach quite naively meant to be descriptive.



That music is in no way the picture, the direct expression of life, is perhaps most strikingly illustrated in the music of the Renaissance. The "life" of that period was in reality one of great excitement. America was discovered, and this discovery filled the Old World with mounting unrest. Between the great political powers, between France and Spain, the battlefield is prepared—and England emerges as victor. The world of feudalism is destroyed by bourgeois rule, by trade; the social upheaval has its counterpart in the all-prevailing religious turmoil, no one is sure of his physical existence, every man must make his decision, even in spiritual matters.

Nothing of all this appears in music. The adjustment between polyphony and harmony is completed without apparent struggle, with no convulsions. In this violently aroused world there exists a music that seems to have but one goal, purest tone to assuage all passions, to resolve everything discordant in blessed harmonies. Like a phalanx of angels, music hovers over everything earthly. No matter how unsatisfactory Raffaello Santi's *St. Cecilia* (in the gallery at Bologna) may be as a work of art, the idea of the picture is true to the meaning of the age and corresponds to it. This music is completely undramatic in an era crowded with drama to the point of explosion. A long time, almost a whole century elapsed, before any element of unrest appeared in the music of the Renaissance, before its almost un-

ruffled surface (for any stirring was felt only in the depths) is troubled by a stronger puff of wind, before Renaissance music develops into baroque music. And this unrest is first apparent only after the political and spiritual excitement of the century is lessened, after the counter-reformation has taken a firm position against the Reformation (in other words the revolution in the religious field), when Europe is again secure after the victory against the Turks at Lepanto, and while it is still enjoying civil peace before the storms of the seventeenth century.



The best example of the fruitfulness of a fiction is to be found in the history of the opera. The Florentines and pedants who wished to revive the classic music-drama, knew practically nothing of this Greek drama. Just because they knew so little they assisted at the birth of a really modern creation. But it was only an assistance. For the more powerful the creator who busied himself with their ideas, the farther away he moved from them. After only forty years, there appeared, chiefly in Venice, a living opera, no longer in the least related to the philologic or archaeological bees that the Florentine camerata had in their bonnets. This philologic bugbear, which one could also term the false platonic concept of the classic music-drama, this fiction has always either disturbed or stimulated the development of opera. Most frequently both at once. The so-called reform opera of Gluck is no more like its fictitious model than an opera by Rameau, Scarlatti, or Piccini. Nietzsche has already pointed out that Piccini could have made a good case against Gluck. And certainly the "opera buffa", which never did and never could base itself on antique models might be justified against the "opera seria," Rossini's *Barbiere* against Spontini's *Vestale*. What damage, what creative damage, this fiction of the antique drama has brought to the history of opera! Even Wagner is its victim. It is this fiction perhaps which is the source of all that his opponents have found false. Wagner deals with domestic conflicts in all his operas, not only in *Meistersinger*. *Lohengrin* is about the impossibility of marriage between a genius and his wife who wants to discover the "secret" of this genius; *Tristan* is a not

unusual tragedy of adultery; *The Ring* is concerned with the curse of unjustified possession. He invested this all with a heroic, legendary, mythical aspect, intensified and disguised it, because heroic music is not quite appropriate to domestic conflict. But behind this interpretation there is always the fiction of the ancient drama, and the fiction of its effect: the religious unification of an audience by art. In the nineteenth century, after one hundred years of rationalism, the work of art is to exercise its cult-function as it did twenty-three centuries ago! This might well be recognized as the triumph of fiction. The supporters and opponents of Wagner will never come to agreement, because the first see in his work the fulfillment of this fiction, the revival of the ancient drama "in a German spirit," see in Bayreuth a new Olympia, while the others admire in this work of art only the extremely individual, extremely Wagnerian creation.

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Wagner is the prototype of the romantic. But for romanticism as a whole, art, and especially music, is a double fiction, the expression of the spirit of a time, and its opposite. Romanticism is bipolar. It is untrue at its very foundations, since it uses art principally as a function of life; and art in the nineteenth century is no longer the natural flowering of culture but something twice removed, something dissolved from it, separated; a fictitious world set over the real, godless existence of individuals and nations. That does not hinder the artist from still producing a wonderful, impressive art. But since art has become a personal concern of the artist, it is frequently a flight from reality. Wagner's *Parsifal* is a perfect example of this bipolarity. Flight from materialism expressed with all the deceptive means of materialism! The preaching of holy asceticism in the opera theatre! The teachings of St. Francis presented to the tardy, tired, industrialized, newspaper-reading man of the nineteenth century! Art as a substitute for religion. Truly, the fictitious role of art in the previous century could not be more clearly demonstrated.

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Our "new music" too, is in large measure the product of wish-fulfillment, a fiction. Let us forget for the moment that art in the

twentieth century art is a much more artificial, unanchored concern than in the nineteenth; that its whole existence has grown more unreal. How can we succeed truly in creating an art that expresses the age? We are living on a huge artistic heritage from the past; the living creation depends on this heritage as a little baby on a powerful father, grandfather and great-grandfather, and, as in all families, everything that great-grandfather, grandfather and father say is regarded as the only truth, the only good, the only beauty, while the baby naturally gives us Dadaism, if not worse. The only real expression of our age is probably the *Gebrauchstanz*, and it is just like us, nothing to boast about; perhaps we have not succeeded in making anything noteworthy of it because we too have considered it a despised baby. Our radio lives nine-tenths in the past. And the face of our "new music" is the wish for, not the fulfillment of, simplicity, truth, "objectivity." It is purely a reaction against romanticism, in no way yet a victory over romanticism. How could such a victory be made possible? Are we not carrying a still larger burden from the past than our forbears? Are we not more restless, dual-natured, one might say more diffuse? Our music too is certainly not the hundred percent mirror-image, the expression, the symbol of the time-spirit, but its wish-picture. However—who can tell—perhaps the wish, as in so many past ages, bears tokens of strength.