

MODERN MUSIC

THE CRISIS IN FORM

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DISARMAMENT appears to be one of the most pressing questions of our time. There is an effort today to root out the very possibility of war. But I have no intention of expressing an opinion here on this political problem or of attempting its solution; I do not know whether military disarmament, if materialized, will lead to universal peace. However I do know that the musicians of our time have outstripped the politicians. Without a single conference, complete disarmament has been effected on our musical planet during recent years. This disarmament has proceeded under the slogan of "neo-classicism." It will *not* lead to a lasting peace. Indeed I do not doubt that in a short time a new militaristic era will be inaugurated with new fighting methods for new conquests in the domain of musical space and time.

But this is a matter for the future. At present we find ourselves facing a cycle which has closed a great historical period and which includes the ruin of classical principles, the inception and flowering of modernism, the anarchy at the moment of its decay, and finally the recent return to classical traditions. It is my intention to trace the transformations which have been effected in the musical consciousness of this period, in relation to the fundamental and most complicated musical problem, that of form. Such an investigation demands an historical perspective.



The end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century found Berlin the world's musical center. Domination by

Germany's musical culture, at that time still unshaken, was based on German classicism. Its spiritual power was created by the titans of music, Mozart, Bach and Beethoven. Brahms was a genius who merely interpreted the spiritual sense and creative significance of what these three had produced. That very fact explains the recent re-valuation of Brahms and our return to him. It would be strange indeed if this return had not taken place, since the universal method so firmly established today is nothing more than an interpretation of the past. The work of Brahms is a creative commentary on the highest synthesis of German music, and herein lies its significance. The individual poetry of this music, with all its charm, is secondary. Its principal power originates in its transference of the achievements of German classicism from the national to the cosmopolitan plane, effected through the apparatus of musical thinking which Brahms created and which was the most perfect and developed of its time. He built the bridge which links German classicism to the universal method of composition today, though his method was in no sense modern. Yet Brahms was bound to be reinstated by virtue of his interpretative significance, which is primarily methodological.

I should add here that I consider methodology a living organizing force. The evolution of method is the evolution of art. The nature of art is firm and immutable, only the method changes. The nature of art is the same with Zurbaran or Henry Rousseau; their methods, related to their respective historical periods, are different. Through a clever and skilful violation of an old canon, a new canon and with it a new method are sometimes born. A slavish subordination to canons established in the past destroys the possibility of an evolution of method. Thus academism and epigonism are born. Incompetent or foolish infringement of the old canons leads to anarchy.

In our time we have witnessed an attempt to create a universal method, a sort of lever of Archimedes. The canons of various masters have been adjusted to modern times by the substitution of interpretation for immediate creation. It is natural that Brahms (rejected by impressionists) should be restored by the "neo-classicists." "Neo-classicism" at its best attempted to create something new through the interpretation (not imitation) of that

music of the past which seemed most to conform to the present. Brahms was the last integrated musician of the nineteenth century. After him came disintegration and modernism. Paris usurped the dominant position of Berlin. The German capital's influence suffered its most violent setback during the time of Debussy. However the French musicians could not overcome Germany's dialectics: its historic system of development. Though rejecting it, they could not create a new Latin dialectics. Impressionism is by its very nature un-dialectic. But pure instrumental music is and, similarly, must be dialectic. Therefore, new ways of overcoming the dialectics of German classicism were needed to affirm the new order.

Russian music lent an impetus in this direction. While it did not overthrow German dialectics it did not leave the problem entirely unsolved. Russian music revived dialectics as a method of composition after it had long been rejected in Wagner's time and later by the modernists, a loss which had resulted in a rupture between the old and new German music. Germany's vital new movement began with a return to the path of dialectics, but under the direct influence of Russian musical culture. In recent years the German musicians have directly related Russian dialectics to the elements of their own musical language and material. The main value of Russia's music is at present extra-territorial. What is now developing within her borders, as compared to the music of the entire world, has again the provincial character of an "initial accumulation." But the pendulum may swing between Paris and Berlin indefinitely.

On the plane of this perspective the central position remains unoccupied. Is then a synthesis of two musical cultures—Latin and German—possible? So far it has not been achieved. If it is absolutely impossible, then there will be a more acute conflict than ever. Which will be the conqueror and reconciler? Is Russian music destined to play this part? Or will an entirely new musical culture grow up on some new soil? This, too, is possible.



Brahms quite consciously linked himself with the classical tradition because his greatest fear was a break with the classical

contemplation of the world and the loss of a sense of unity. But on the other hand he was not hostile to the individualistic elements, which were already at work during his period, destroying the integrated classical heritage of the past century. Out of this contradiction of impulses his musical form was generated. It is neither classic, academic nor epigonic but represents a combination of all three. On the whole his form is arbitrary. Only part of the elements in its construction are based on a traditional foundation. Brahms attempted to reconcile classicism with romanticism, but was only partly successful. He is more firmly connected with the latter tradition than with the former. Towards the end of his life he tried to escape the acute discrepancy between classicism and romanticism by depending exclusively upon his formal mastery. This brought him to academism. . .

Brahms is interesting to us because while living in the borderland between two epochs, he carried within himself all the potential conflicts which came to such clear fruition in the contradictory tendencies of modernism. After Brahms the problems of harmony (and, later, of rhythm) were for a long time foremost. They were inherited by modernism in a direct line of succession from the past. The romanticists, even in their homophonic style, still attempted to balance the three principal elements of music—melody, rhythm, harmony—as far as possible. But even with the romanticists, harmony began to acquire a predominant significance. During the last decade of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, harmony became the pivot around which all musical creation of the time revolved. Priority of harmony was established at the obvious cost of rhythm and afterwards of melody. All this led eventually to the atrophy of polyphony as was most acutely marked in the impressionists. Polyphony, in so far as it was preserved at all in their music became merely a function of harmony. There developed an obstinate tendency to transform polyphony by harmonic verticalities. A too refined harmony and the atrophy of a live polyphony brought rhythm to a state of complete paralysis. A cult of oversubtilized chordal combinations was followed. Rhythm lost its primary significance as a constructive principle; its role was reduced to a means of static perception of those combinations.

The excessive refinement of harmony and, as a result, the loss of rhythmic substance shunted music up an obvious blind alley.

Then the reverse process began. The aim of the composer became the stabilization of harmony, the reanimation of rhythm. A new tendency naturally appeared, "polyphony at any cost," and soon became predominant. Rhythm was quickly restored to its rights. After its long restraint polyphony again acquired an elemental character and broke through with impetuous strength. But, in contradistinction to the past, the result of all previous harmonic explorations was expressed in the newly generated form. Each of the three elements of form—rhythm, harmony, melody—acquired a new meaning differing from that of the classicists and romanticists. Based on a free harmonic intonation, the new form destroyed the principle of tonality and the tonico-dominant interdependence on which rested the equilibrium of traditional form in classicism and romanticism. It rejected this unity and inexorably moved towards an extreme non-equilibrium, opposing it to the principle of bringing the form to a state of perfect rest. This method disturbed the heretofore unshaken foundations of musical language—mode and tonality.

The result has been an arbitrariness in which the mere fancy of one composer or another produces an infinite number of individual and artificial modes. Just as the harmony of the impressionists led to a dead end, so atonal polyphony substituted a mixture of idioms for a single musical language. Rhythm consequently lost its classical significance as an element in organizing musical speech and, subordinated to form, became a self-contained principle of composition. An accumulation of rhythmic and metrical wealth, unknown before this time, was piled up at the cost of the purity of musical language. Varying from the traditional metrical construction of form, a new form based on a free rhythmic manipulation of tones was born. To use arid, formalistic language, the bar-line ceased to depend on the strong or the weak beat. Metre was completely segregated from rhythm. The shift of the bar-line resulted in a most subtle elaboration of both.

We have traced the consecutive evolutions of form. The first was founded on the basis of harmonic intonation, the second on

the basis of rhythmic intonation. It is difficult to establish true perspective when dealing with a past so near. While projecting the scheme of evolution, we can merely trace the front line, that of the most advanced manifestations. It should be borne in mind that along the second line, a number of modern tendencies are still confused and belatedly experienced. But this later order of creations can neither change nor add anything to a form which has already acquired its extreme expression. We now approach the recent years, the period of "disarmament," after musical art reached the peak of polytonal and polyrhythmical form.

The method of "neo-classicism" was a polemic one. "Neo-classicism" was real only insofar as it was erected in opposition to modernism, which had completed its cycle. As soon as the acuteness of conflict was tempered, the majority of compositions created by the "neo-classicists" lost their significance. Their absolute musical value, with few exceptions, was small. When the impression of surprise and of contrast with modernism wore away, there remained only an imitation of earlier works.

The "neo-classical" movement degenerated to pseudo-classicism. Out of the polemic form there grew an epigonism and parasitic dependence on the past. The fruitful result of the polemic method was the craving for a new equilibrium of form. A process the reverse of modernism was inaugurated. After the extreme non-equilibrium created by modernism, all efforts were exerted to bring form to a classic balance and rest. This is the most recent tendency. The unaccountable imitation of the past has reached Homeric proportions. It will be inevitably liquidated in the near future. But after it dies a new form will grow up from a seed dropped during this period. What I have called the polemic method was erroneously termed "neo-classicism." The new classicism has an unknown future; the method of our days is merely its forerunner.



During the entire historic period which we have analyzed, the problem of form, not some sort of ideology, has always been the central pre-occupation in musical art. The problems involved in musical creation have been steadily reduced to this one, until

the general questions of form have in their turn been reduced to a narrow professional formalism. The substitution of formalism for an investigation of form is more widespread today than ever before. Speaking now of the "problem of form," we come back to the terminology which was in vogue at the very beginning of this period. "Form" was then opposed to "content." Esthetics at the opening of our century was much concerned with the question of their inter-relation and relative priority. The outcome of this long-forgotten controversy was an acknowledgment at the time that form is inseparable from its content. Today the synthesis of form and content is beyond debate. But in the progressive march of events, the original conception of "content" has been gradually eliminated and finally rejected.

How is this conscious or unconscious refusal of creative artists to express their relation to the world and life to be explained? What are the springs beneath the herd-like tendency to create an irreproachable but shallow form? The principal cause seems to be a loss in the spirit of music and the wreck of humanistic culture. Art has become the expression of that mechanization of life which has gripped the world. The extreme individualism of the end of the nineteenth century was the last explosion of humanism. Then materialistic culture gave birth to its own "objective" or impersonal style. Art has submissively reflected the pathos of anti-spirituality which marks our time. It has declined to the production of well or badly executed objects. It is time to realize now that in art the necessity for things which lack a spiritual aspect is relative and questionable. A composition should be absolutely necessary even if when it is born this necessity is realized by few or none. The imperativeness of a work of art lies in its spiritual charge.

Locked up in a narrow and specifically professional sphere, modern music excluded itself from the spiritual plane of life and was ruled by a rigid causality. It began with a reaction against the epoch whose music neglected form and at the same time was rhetorical and questionable as to its spiritual wealth. This reaction was legitimate; modernism at first pursued the goal of unity of form and content in some new aspect. But further development gave a decided predominance to the formal element. The entire

complex of spiritual values came to be regarded as something leading the thought and desire of the artist away from the single important objective, the search for new form. Here a break manifested itself between reality and the artist. With the manipulation of form and matter outside the boundaries of living ideas and feeling, abstract quantities were created, not living art. The emotional elements, organically working in the creative subconsciousness, came to be regarded as a hostile power which must be curbed in order not to stray into foreign provinces or be diverted from the fundamental goal. Whatever was not a direct embodiment of abstract form was called "extra-musical."

Thus there appeared the "constructive" esthetics which created an abstract music through an impersonal form, detached from any sort of emotional or ideal sphere. By a facile self-deception this music was called "pure." Is it possible that we will have to return again to the concepts of "pure" and "impure" music? Modern music has not at all elucidated this problem. At any rate it is clear that the notion "pure music" does not coincide with the idea "objective music." The latter is no more than an arid mechanized structure which has not yet created a work of art, but only experiments. The process of struggle for "pure" form and matter, along with the banishment or subordination of the spiritual elements, has brought modern music a pyrrhic victory. As a matter of fact, the whole extra-musical sphere has ceased to exist for musicians. The process of "purging" form has now played itself out. The renunciation of "content," so destructive of creation, reaps vengeance through the rebellion against the musical matter as such. *The dualism of form and content has now been reduced to the conflict between matter and its elaboration.* In its present state, the problem of form is condensed to a struggle between the fact and the process. The fact is the tonal material; the process—the elaboration of the material—has asserted itself as its own goal. In the struggle for self-affirmation, the process has begun to eliminate the tonal matter. In modern music nothing happens today even in the purely musical sense. A modulation serves to create the impression of an event. The musical fact has been reduced to an interval. Now if the interval too should be eaten away, the dif-

ference between music and any organized noise would cease to exist. One comes to the conclusion that the primary substance of a composition is nothing but an interval, and that the (formal) power of a composition expresses itself most convincingly in the flexibility of the interval. If it is lifeless, the music has no value, no matter how brilliant the craftsmanship of the composer. The power of an interval is the unfailing indication of the value of the tonal matter; everything else is relative. . .

Here we must stop. We are now at the brink of the abyss to which music has been brought today by the formal method. It is already apparent that we can move no further in this direction. Creation of a form for its own sake is merely academism in the newest fashion. It is sad to come to such conclusions but it is equally sad to observe what is happening to modern musical creation. Genuine, living, fresh and original music today must be sought in the "catacombs" of modern life; whatever is born in daylight is destroyed by formalism, scholastics and schemes.

Where is the way out and what are the perspectives? Without making undue prophecies, one may clearly see that the key to a new form of the future lies in the restoration of the lost equilibrium between form and content. Renunciation of the fetish of form is the only way forward. Spiritual forces are necessary. When the world will again be fired with the spiritual, the spirit of music will be simultaneously restored. The wine of new music will be poured into the old leather bottles. Matter will return to its original position in the world—a subordination to the spiritual plane. New form will be born only when it is organically necessary, not by artifice. The evolution of a method, as we have said before, is organically connected with the live evolution of form. Form is always created anew without any prescriptions or repetitions of the past but exclusively in that singular comprehension of the world which alone distinguishes a real artist from an artisan. For those who think in this fashion, the world is not something given and fixed once and forever, but is created anew in every moment of its existence.

Emitte Spiritum tuum et creabuntur.

Et renovabis faciem terrae.