

MODERN MUSIC

THE WAY OF UNDERSTANDING

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“TO understand music . . .”—this is an expression which all of us, professionals and laymen alike, use constantly, for the most part without considering its precise meaning; without really knowing, even, whether this term “to understand” is applicable to music, whether we can say: “I do not understand Stravinsky,” as we say ordinarily: “I do not understand English,” or “I do not understand Kant.” What difference is there between a musical work which we understand and another which we do not? Is there, in a word, anything which can be understood in a musical work? To understand is an intellectual operation: does music appeal to the intellect? And if we say that it does, if we suppose that the intellect plays a part in hearing music, must we conclude that it determines the pleasure and the emotion which a musical composition affords? Or does comprehension follow rather upon the heels of emotion?

These are questions whose complexity and difficulty are increased by the lack of a precise terminology. When we speak of art and, in particular, of music, we feel that we can dispense with words sharply defined; we even prefer, it seems, to remain in penumbral obscurity. For is not music essentially vague, non-precise, forever in flux? How should we seize it by means of rigid concepts, rigidly articulated?

The term “to understand” can only be applied to music if music possesses some meaning. To understand any proposition whatever is to grasp its significance, to apprehend what it *means*,

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its objective value symbolized by the words which compose this proposition and the relations between these words. Those who hear a speech can react in different, often contradictory ways to the words of the speaker. From this point of view there is a complete analogy between a mass-meeting, for example, and a concert. Like the playing of the virtuoso, the words of the speaker are the product of certain intellectual and emotional conditions transformed to a series of sonorous vibrations which in turn provoke physiological and psychological reactions in the audience. But in the case of the speaker the reactions are evidently conditioned, in part at least, by the content of his speech, by the meaning of his words. They have a certain objective value of which the words are only symbols and which the audience must understand. If the speaker is urging war and part of his audience understand him to be pleading for peace, we say quite simply that they are mistaken, that they have misunderstood the speaker. Language, written or spoken, possesses a content independent of the individual reactions it arouses.

Now is this also true of musical language? Or does what happens in a concert hall reduce itself finally to the psychological condition of the player, to the sound vibrations, and to the multiple psychological reactions in the audience?

It is certain that a melody, a rondo, a sonata are stripped of all rational content; we do not put ideas and theories into music. Theories and ideas may give birth to musical works: but between these works and the psychological, emotional and intellectual soil from which they spring there is absolutely nothing in common. Language is a system of signs which we decipher to get at their meaning, and the whole value of words rests for us in this meaning. But when, on the other hand, we try to decipher the meaning of a piece of music, when we attempt to treat it as a system of signs, to pass through it to something else, we cease to listen to music: we have let the sounds escape and have found nothing in their place. In music the sound system is perceived as such, it possesses for us a certain intrinsic value. It can indeed produce violent emotions and initiate multiple associations, but nevertheless it is as a sonorous system that it persists in consciousness and is enjoyed.

This drives us to the following alternative: either music means nothing, possesses no objective content, and resolves itself entirely into sonorous vibrations that are essentially ephemeral and emotional states: or else the relationship between what we shall call briefly content and form in music is wholly different from any relationship which exists in ordinary language.

II

What, then, is the relationship in ordinary language?

It is one of *transcendence*. The ideas of discourse, the content, the sense of a sentence transcend its form, its sonorous body. To understand spoken or written language is precisely to pass beyond it to get at something else. Insofar as words are only signs, what they mean is something other than themselves. That is why one can summarize a speech or a conversation, extract the ideas and the meaning. Now it is absolutely impossible to summarize a musical work, to extract anything whatsoever from it. If we attempt to epitomize a sonata we simply get another sonata built on the same themes.

It would be a grave error to consider the themes of a symphony, for example, as its content, and to establish in this way an analogy between the development through which a writer guides his ideas and the development which a composer imposes upon his themes. The two fundamental themes of a sonata allegro in no sense "summarize" this sonata; they are not at all ideas in the sense in which we say, for example, that class warfare is the fundamental idea in the speeches of this or that socialist leader. If the musical work possesses a certain content, a significance, if it means something, its meaning is inherent in the work itself and is equally present in the whole and in each of its parts. The content here cannot be external to what we call form: it is *immanent* in this form.

But does this relation of immanence belong exclusively to music?—do we find it also in the other arts? Thus far I have employed a parallel between music and "common language" which is solely a means of communication and quite without esthetic value. But if we penetrate the realm of literature and poetry, we find that the relation of transcendence which binds content and form in

ordinary language is superseded by a relation of immanence. The word is no longer merely a sign which we decipher to get at something else that it symbolizes, but now possesses intrinsic value. Although it is easy enough to summarize the average magazine article, summary is not so easy if we have before us a page from some great writer, for his ideas fuse as it were with the words which express them—they are imbedded in, or, rather, embodied in, those words. One may, indeed, give the gist of a funeral oration by Bossuet, but this extract no longer has anything in common with the work of Bossuet. The fusion of sense and form is even more integral in verse. Thus it is as impossible to summarize a sonnet by Baudelaire as a rondo by Mozart. Here we are on the border-line of music, which is the ideal limit (in the mathematical sense of the term) of poetry. Poetry tends towards music insofar as it aspires to immanence, and fails to become music insofar as the words still retain a certain transcendent significance, insofar as we still recognize them as signs.

From this point of view, all artistic activity tends to *transform into immanent values signs having only transcendent significance*. Music is thus the purest of the arts, since it retains nothing whatsoever that is a sign or representation of some other reality outside itself.

III

When I read a text, any text whatever, I can interpret it and comment on it in any number of ways but it is impossible for me to extract anything other than its meaning, if it has a precise meaning at all. I read, for example, in the obituary column of a newspaper, that Mr. X has just died after a long illness; unless I read hastily and inaccurately I cannot possibly deduce from this text that Mr. X died suddenly. One conception alone is correct, all others false; since language possesses a transcendent content, this content can be extracted, analyzed, and made to serve as a check upon all other readings. The meaning of a musical phrase (admitting that such a thing exists) is on the contrary immanent in this phrase: it cannot therefore be checked, it cannot be detached and formulated in rational terms.

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lad over again. But it would be incorrect to conclude that music "means nothing" or that its content is vague. Untranslatable though it may be, the musical sense of the work can be extremely precise, as exact as that of a scientific work. And when I say "musical sense" I am not thinking merely of the emotional repercussions in the audience, repercussions varying to infinity, but of a certain spiritual content which belongs only to this work, which constitutes at once its essence and its form, its concrete reality, its individuality.

Nevertheless the question posed at the beginning still persists. The term "to understand" can be applied to music only if music possesses a definite spiritual content, and this content, if it exists, can only be immanent in the work. But does it exist?

It is impossible to offer a direct proof of this existence, since what this or that work signifies cannot be formulated rationally. But I shall try to show that if we deny all objective significance to the sonorous work we are driven finally to subjective conceptions that destroy music.

Either the musical work (a sonata by Beethoven, for example) possesses an objective significance, contains a definite spiritual message, like a poem, a novel, or else its text is immaterial only, and there are as many sonatas, opus 101, as there are pianists; or rather, since most pianists do not always play in the same way, as many as there are executions of the work throughout the world. But we must go still further: the execution of the sonata at the concert evidently provokes varied and contradictory reactions among the audience. These reactions, whatever they may be, whoever the auditors may be, are all equally valid. By what standard shall we judge them? What then is a musical work if denied objective significance? A system of sonorous vibrations on the one hand, and, on the other, individual emotions; and, therefore, to go one step further it is a set of black marks on paper, traced by the hand of the composer, which the player deciphers with the help of certain conventions, and which serve to construct sound waves the hearing of which evokes multiple physiological and psychological reactions. The composer of opus 101 is no more, the thoughts, the desires, the images of which the work is the product have van-

ished. There remain only these marks on paper, a sort of scheme for the player, who is perfectly free to do as he wishes. One will draw out sublimity, another what is merely amusing, a third the grotesque. The player who happens to make us laugh with the sonata, opus 101, will thus be just as right as the other who moves us to tears; only the interpreter who bores us will be wrong. Finally, we can no longer restrict the question to the sonata proper; what is true of it is also true of the interpretation by this or that pianist, on this or that day, in this or that concert hall. There remain then only the thousand varied images in the consciousness of thousands of auditors, images sublime, grotesque, farcical, dull. This is the logical consequence of the subjectivism in vogue with so many people who do not usually think matters through to the end but content themselves with a moderate and comfortable scepticism.

IV

There is still another aspect of the question which it is impossible to neglect. If we consider only the power which music so eminently has to evoke intense reactions among its auditors, and to create among them in this way, for a few moments, a sort of collective soul, a relation then emerges between music and various other stimuli which men have always widely employed. Between the influence of music and that of alcohol, of hashish, etc., we no longer find any qualitative distinction.

Thus today we gather people about a piano and act upon them by means of sound waves; and tomorrow, perhaps, we shall get still better results by means of an electric current acting directly upon the skin. What is important is the result, is it not? All that matters is *what happens* when people are subjected to the influence of these waves, these rays, these emanations.

If music is only the art of combining sounds in a manner agreeable to the ear, in a fashion which gives birth in us to a variety of emotions, I really do not see in what way the art of the perfumer, or of the cook, is inferior. In this case we shall have to admit the possibility of those "symphonies of odors" or of gustatory sensations which the hero of *A Rebours* tried to construct, and shall have to grant them an esthetic value of the

same order as that of musical symphonies. A dish, a perfume are as able as a melody to call forth reactions of feeling, images, ideas. There is no reason to stop here: tactile sensations, odors, tastes, can stir up tempests in the soul and produce ecstasies in comparison with which the pleasures of music seem pale indeed.

And what is one to do about expression? Has not music a certain power to be found neither in a "symphony of odors" nor in a dinner?

Music is, of course, eminently expressive. The musical work is always the outcome of certain mental attitudes in the artist, conscious or unconscious, whether he wishes it or not; it always carries the mark of his personality, the burden of his feeling, of his hopes, of his spiritual experience. The need for self-realization, for self-expression, certainly plays a very great role in the desire that imperiously drives a musician to creation; and if the labor of creation holds a certain joy, it arises, in part at least, from a very clear feeling of deliverance. But this expressive character which the composer finds in music, depends precisely upon the fact that the musical work possesses a definite content. If the work had no spiritual reality (objective in relation to the emotions of the auditors), if it could be reduced to the numberless mental attitudes which it evokes, it would have by the same token no expressive power.

Now this *is* the case with combinations of olfactory, tactile and gustatory impressions: they are a means of excitation; one may, by using them cleverly, arouse the most diverse emotions; but they have no expressive value. In other words, they offer to the artist no possibility of realizing his personality, of externalizing and of liberating himself. The reason is that they have no intellectual content—"signify" nothing, mean nothing. Art, on the contrary, exists only where there is intellectuality.

If the musical work is not a direct appeal addressed to our intelligence (I take this term for the moment in its broadest sense), if it possesses no objective significance, it can find no place in the domain of art and is indistinguishable from a lover's caress or a cream-puff. This expressive power itself, which we all agree to concede to music, is only the consequence, the secondary effect of the act by which we grasp what it means. We

are thus led to the conclusion that the music does possess a spiritual content immanent in the work, which it concerns us to understand.

Still, even those who recognize that a page of music has significance, means something, are apt to regard it not as specific but general and vague, and thus they explain the powerful evocative action of this art, in which each one ultimately finds what he looks for, what he himself contributes, colored by idiosyncrasies of mind, temperament and desire. Metaphysical theories of music—Schopenhauer's among others—consider the matter always, if I am not mistaken, from this point of view: they seek to confer upon the art of sounds a certain spiritual value, a significant content, but hold that this content can only be general and not precise. I myself have upon occasion (speaking of the *Octuor* of Stravinsky) said that music contains no specific idea, not because it contains nothing but because it contains everything.

Now it seems to me that we are on the wrong track here, and that our error is linked with that other fundamental one of confusing the repercussions of music in us—our individual and variable reactions when confronted by a melody—with its significance, its spiritual content. I turn again to the example of the obituary notice in a newspaper. It is read by thousands. Their reactions are evidently very different, varying with the degree of acquaintance with the man now dead. The announcement of this death will be differently colored for each, will carry a burden of varying images and associations. And yet the content of this announcement is *one*, and all the emotions which it can arouse are conditioned by an act of intellection. In the case of the musical work, the content cannot be extracted from the form, the very body of the work; for content in music, as we have pointed out, is immanent in the form.

Everything that floats about a page of music is vague and indefinite; but if it is impossible for us to define, this is not because its significance is too vague and general; on the contrary, it is because it is *too concrete*. Describing a prelude by Chopin we meet the same difficulty which confronts us when we attempt to define an individual being. The meaning of this

prelude is its very aspect. We are dealing with something absolutely unique, and this is the explanation of our impotence in the presence of a musical work, impotence analogous to that which we feel when we seek by formulas, howsoever flexible and subtle, to represent a living being: this Jean, this Pierre, whose very name is a general symbol which does not cover this *hic et nunc*. Only direct contact, intuition itself, can unveil the living being. The musical work also must be seized directly. If the content of music would admit of generalization, a knowledge of it would for that very reason be easy, no matter how fluid and indefinite this content might be.

In the arts where form can to some extent be distinguished from the content (the plastic and poetic), such knowledge is possible, even though it always remains approximate, since the soul of every artistic production is after all fused with its body, as our bodies and souls are fused. The art of sounds alone succeeds in achieving an *absolute* fusion and in creating values, ideas which are concrete beings, personalities whose essence is, so to speak, one with their appearance. From this point of view, therefore, music is the least "modest" of all the arts; she offers herself to us altogether, for she has nothing to hide—her most cherished secret is precisely her surface.

V

Thus it must be admitted that every musical work possesses a certain spiritual content, definite and concrete, immanent, consequently impossible to formulate in rational terms. The emotional influence of the work, its expressive power, depends upon the act by which we grasp its objective content: to be moved by music we must first understand what it means. A reading of Spinoza's *Ethics* can arouse profound emotions in us, but they represent only our individual reactions to the ideas of the treatise, ideas which we must first of all understand, and which are independent of our mental attitudes. The only difference between the work of Spinoza and the sonata, opus 101, is that we can examine the content of the *Ethics* apart from the form, while in the case of Beethoven or of any other musician this operation is forbidden. We are thus led to the con-

clusion that "musical comprehension" presents certain peculiarities; music is not a symbol like written or spoken language, but is the very thing itself which it is necessary to understand.

Before analyzing further the sense of the term "to understand" as applied to music, I should like for a moment to consider the sensuous pleasure which music affords, for a good many people regard this as the primordial element of the art, completely independent of intellectual processes. Indeed to many acute minds it seems possible to enjoy music physically, without at all understanding it.

The question then is whether this pleasure is essential, whether it is inherent in all musical perception; in a word whether we are dealing here with a primary or secondary element. Even if it should be established that the hearing of a work is unfailingly accompanied by physical pleasure, it might still be true that this pleasure is caused by something else.

It is necessary, moreover, to rigorously distinguish this sensuous pleasure from the joy, *sui generis*, which every work of art affords, and which contains, esthetically transmuted, the negative, enervating emotions that in real life we seek to avoid: melancholy, despair, etc. This joy has an intellectual aspect and differs in kind from relatively simple sensuous pleasure.

I say "some," because it would be inaccurate to assume—and this answers the first question posed above—that physical pleasure, sonorous delight, is essential to the hearing of music. At different epochs, with different composers, it has played a role more or less important; but it is impossible to see here the *sine qua non* of esthetic emotion, any more than for the other arts. Certain composers offer us this pleasure of the senses, but the productions of others are cold and austere and seem to tend towards an ascetic art from which all physical voluptuousness would be banished. In the number of the *voluptueux* one might place Mozart, Couperin and most of the clavecinists, Rossini and the Italian masters; among the romantics, Chopin particularly; closer to ourselves, Debussy and Ravel; among the young men, Poulenc.

But here we are in the domain of personal taste, of subjective impressions and judgments which allow of no discussion: this

or that composer whose sonorities ravish our ears will seem to others dry, hard and painful. And the very composer who offered us only severe, intellectual joys seems suddenly a sensual enchanter, and vice versa. It is certain that we appreciate Debussy in quite another fashion than did his first admirers. Wagner cannot on the whole be classed among the "hedonists;" and yet certain episodes of the *Tetralogy* or of *Tristan* afford the ear a genuinely physical pleasure. This pleasure, on the other hand, we now feel but rarely on listening to the music of Beethoven, though in the past it was otherwise. In a word, the sonorous delight which certain composers dispense so generously and others seem on principle to avoid (without always succeeding), is an unstable and capricious thing. In any case it would be as ridiculous to banish it from music on the pretext that it degrades (the sensuous charm of a *Nocturne* by Chopin or of a *Prelude* by Debussy does not at all weaken the spiritual significance of these passages) as it would be to insist that it be always present, denying all esthetic value to works which are not ingratiating.

Musical emotion then, can develop in the absence of all sensuous pleasure, and even when the first hearing is painful. But is even this pleasure an immediate sensation, pure of all intellectual alloy? Is it of the same order as the pleasure a well prepared dish affords us?

Experience and reason alike show us that the pleasures of sound are but faintly analogous with the pleasures of taste, of touch or of smell, since they involve a comprehension of the work from which they derive. In order that music afford us a sensuous physical pleasure, we must first have understood it. This pleasure, supposedly simple and direct, is the result of the intellectual grasp of a sequence; to delight in a succession of sounds, a melody, as we delight in a well cooked dish, we must apprehend the relations between these sounds. The physical charm of a Debussy, for example, can be felt only when one begins to find one's bearings in his music; and there undoubtedly are still people for whom the *Cathédrale Engloutie* is nothing but a chaotic medley of chords, who will never find in it any delight. If some sonorous combination happens to tickle their

ears agreeably, the next chord, for them unrelated to the preceding, will immediately shatter the charm. For the person who understands, on the contrary, the pleasure is born precisely of this passing from one sonority to another, each acquiring its whole value only in relation with those which precede and follow. The pleasure an uncomprehending auditor may happen to find in one or another of these chords does not differ essentially from the pleasure afforded us sometimes by the vibration of a telegraph wire, the murmur of a brook, etc. It is not a specifically musical, esthetic pleasure; it is merely one of the more or less agreeable sensations which our environment often offers, sensations that awaken vague images, fugitive emotions, and conspire to keep us in a certain state of well-being but which have nothing at all to do with art.

VI

If I dwell so insistently upon the distinction to be made between the complex reactions of those who hear a musical work and the act by which they grasp the meaning immanent in its sonorous body, this is because the attention of critics and estheticians is ordinarily concentrated upon these individual reactions in an effort to determine the laws which govern them. These laws exist, perhaps; for the constant physiological and psychological action of certain intervals and certain timbres seems indubitable. We are familiar with the theories so widespread today, which hold the musical work to be an ensemble of dynamic schemes acting upon us according to a definite rhythm: tension-resolution. There is certainly truth in these theories, but it cannot be too often repeated that psycho-physiological experiments and considerations neglect exactly those esthetic facts which most need explanation; the specific element which distinguishes our reactions to a musical work from those which the flux of real life provides.

For the rest, we must recognize that a large portion of a concert audience, a much larger one even than we think, does not listen to the music, does not even know what it means to listen to music: for them music is merely a stimulant which plunges them into vague reveries to which they abandon themselves

more or less unconsciously. It would greatly surprise impassioned "amateurs" to be told that to listen to a work is to be active, to accomplish a task sometimes actually painful, demanding a certain preparation, and that their exclusively passive attitude towards the sonorous text prevents them not only from grasping its meaning, but also from enjoying the specific pleasure it might have imparted had they followed attentively, instead of giving themselves up, like opium smokers, to the play of their imaginations.

It would be false, nevertheless, to conclude from this that the comprehension of music necessarily demands a knowledge of musical technic and that it is impossible to appreciate a musical work, to grasp its meaning, without possessing the elements of what one might call the musical grammar. There is an ambiguity here, it seems to me, which it is absolutely essential to dissipate. To understand a page of music—a sonata by Beethoven, a rondo by Mozart, a fugue by Bach—is not the same thing as to be able to make a technical analysis of these pages. One may understand form, harmony and counterpoint and still remain deaf to the work of which every element is perceived and named. I do not say that a knowledge of musical technic does not aid in comprehension; but we do have two absolutely different operations here.

The history of music and of musical criticism proves this to us conclusively. It is needless, I suppose, to cite examples of the total lack of comprehension often exhibited by the most learned theoreticians when confronted by musical productions which they were nevertheless perfectly capable of analyzing step by step. And we may remember on the other hand the discoveries made in music by men wholly without technical knowledge: it was not the conservatory professors who discovered Wagner, Debussy and Stravinsky for us. One may be an excellent grammarian, and still be at a loss before a sentence of this or that obscure writer—even though one can perfectly well point out the subject, the verb, the complement. But in ordinary language the words and their relations have a symbolic character; there is nothing surprising then in the fact that grammatical analysis is sometimes insufficient to give us imme-

diately the logical significance of a sentence: if the meaning of but one sign escapes us the sentence no longer has any sense for us, no matter how clear it may be syntactically. Now since it is conceded that a musical work is not a sign, it is then pertinent to ask why its structure does not give us its meaning directly, and why, moreover, its meaning is often revealed to those incapable of analyzing the work formally.

This difficulty is superficial only; it is obviated as soon as we examine the problem closely. To understand a melody, a phrase, a musical work, is to perceive its unity; in other words, we understand a series of sounds when we succeed in making of this series a system, a coherent whole. And it is in this whole alone that each of the moments of the sonorous flow which we follow so attentively acquires its full value and its reality. The difference between the man who understands music and the man who does not, is simply this: the first perceives a system of complex relations, the second perceives only isolated sounds. For him who comprehends, an isolated sound is only an abstraction; the reality is the system which integrates these sounds.

An organism is not a mere composite of two arms, two legs, a torso, etc.; these very members exist only in an individual whole and as functions of this whole. In the same way the slightest melody is not a mere composite of sounds disposed in a certain order, according to a certain rhythm, but is an entity of a particular sort, unique, inimitable, lending its essential character to each of the elements which analysis reveals. Just as the word *luxe* in the celebrated verse of Baudelaire possesses unique sonority and a significance absolutely different from what it might have in a fashion report, so the sound which we call *do* changes altogether in passing from one musical composition to another; we may say, in brief, that we are never dealing with the same sounds and that there are as many *do's* and *re's* etc., as there are musical organisms.

This sonorous flood which vanishes as soon as it is born we grasp, in so far as we understand it, as a certain stable, definite and objective reality. But this reality does not transcend the sounds: it is what constitutes their immanent unity, what gives them a precise significance. We see now why analyzing a musi-

cal work is not the same thing as understanding it. Technical analysis gives us at best only the abstract formula of a work, and thus reduces it to a certain type; while to understand a piece of music is to recreate its unique personality as it first emerged in the mind of the composer.

This recreation does not require a memory capable of retaining the whole of the work from beginning to end, something very few can do. The synthesis proceeds progressively, moving with the flood of sound, each moment of which thus bears, in a sense, the accumulated burden of the preceding moments—not because we *remember* them, but because we perceive each of them as direct functions of those which have preceded. Having come to the end of the piece, we have perhaps forgotten the beginning and might in any case be unable to reconstruct it, but the work well understood is found again and exists integrally in the concluding chord: a person entering the hall at this moment would hear merely a simple perfect chord, but for the rest of us who have integrated it in a definite system it possesses a specific sonorous value.

If we regard the matter from this point of view, the diversity of reactions among an audience in the presence of a musical work and the varying avatars into which different interpreters shape this music at various times does not at all affect its integrity: what makes an organism of it, what constitutes its formal unity, exists always. *In so far as they have grasped this unity, in so far as they have perceived the work as a complex whole, the auditors, whatever may be their secondary reactions, will understand it in the same way; it will reveal the same thing to them, namely, what it is.* Only the secondary reactions change. It is certain that today, before a *Passion* by Bach, for example, we have other emotions, other thoughts that had the contemporaries of Bach and the composer himself; but there is only one way of understanding it.