

THE MUSICAL MIND

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THE musical mind is concerned predominantly with the mechanism of tonal memory. Before it has absorbed a considerable variety of tonal experiences it cannot begin to function in a creative way complex enough to be considered as art. Though the tonal experiences offered to it at any given period of musical history are subject to change—for example, Bach could not hear the timbre of the saxophone, or the pan-diatonic chordal arrangements of Stravinsky; nor could a modern musician hear the sonorities of the baroque trumpets, or the exact nature of the improvised accompaniments derived from the thorough-bass—the mnemonic methods by which these experiences are retained and later exploited creatively remain the same.

The musical memory, where its physiological functions are intact, functions indiscriminately: a great percentage of what is heard becomes submerged in the unconscious, and is subject to literal recall. The creative portion of the musical mind, however, operates selectively, and the tonal material which it offers up has been metamorphosed, and has become unidentifiable from the material which was originally absorbed. In the metamorphosis which has taken place the original tonal material has become compounded with remembered emotional experiences, and it is this action of the creative unconscious which renders music more than an acoustical series of tones, which gives to music its humanistic aspect.

In our time the musical mind is confronted with a great variety of tonal experiences: an immense historical literature has been accumulated and is constantly performed. It is, then, more difficult than ever before for the creative musician to absorb, select and integrate the materials which will make up his art. How then can he make his task easier? If he re-examines the fundamental nature of musical syntax, which actually involves the effort of understanding in the most profound way the manner in which the creative mind works, he cannot fail to gain a true insight into his artistic powers. There is prevalent the superstition that if the composer devotes too much attention to the analysis of the creative process, a

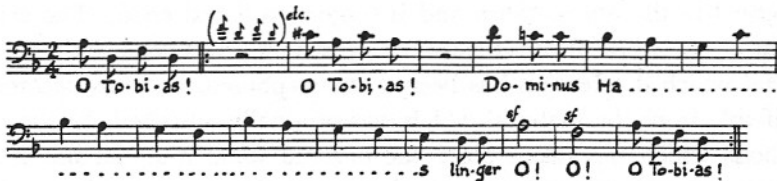
catastrophe results in which his inspiration is destroyed and his art rendered meaningless, and that this meddling with a natural function is a result of over-rationalistic thinking stemming from the modern emphasis on scientific method. It is supposed that in earlier periods artists less preoccupied with this problem of understanding found it easier to produce satisfactory works of art. But there is evidence that the earlier composers were concerned to a greater extent with the mechanisms of the creative mind than are the composers of today. The well-known letter of Mozart in which he describes the methods by which a composition takes shape in his mind demonstrates clearly the degree of his interest in the matter. It is known that one of the few books which he owned was Hume's *Treatise on Human Understanding*, and that Mesmer, the discoverer of hypnosis, was one of his close friends. The following letter by Beethoven shows that he as well possessed a remarkable insight into the structure of his creative mind:

Baden, Sept. 10, 1821

To Tobias von Haslinger

My very dear friend,

On my way to Vienna yesterday, sleep overtook me in my carriage. . . . While thus slumbering I dreamt that I had gone on a far journey, to no less a place than Syria, on to Judea and back, and then all the way to Arabia, when at length I actually arrived at Jerusalem. The Holy City gave rise to thoughts of the Holy Books. No wonder then if the man Tobias occurred to me, which led me to think of our own little Tobias and our great Tobias. Now during my dream-journey, the following canon came into my head:



But scarcely did I awake when away flew the canon, and I could not recall any part of it. On returning here however, next day, in the same carriage. . . . I resumed my dream-journey, being on this occasion wide awake, when lo and behold! in accordance with the laws of association of ideas [*The use of this phrase is indeed striking.—H.S.*], the same canon flashed across me; so being now awake I held it as fast as Menelaus did Proteus, only permitting it to be changed into three parts. . . .

If the modern composer, in the effort to understand better his creative mind, attempts to re-examine the elements of musical syntax, he must immediately find himself occupied with the nature of melody, for it is the melodic phrase, exactly equivalent to the sentence in the syntax of language, which serves as the primary element in almost any musical structure. By investigating the possibilities of phrase construction and discovering for himself what can be done within a small formal frame the composer not only disciplines his creative unconscious so that the melodic fragments

which it offers up possess increased sharpness of contour, but develops at the same time the architectural faculty which will enable him to calculate correctly the time-spaces involved in the manipulation of larger musical forms. Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven possessed the greatest mastery of musical phraseology, and it was at that historical period that such a mastery was stylistically most welcome, for the composers who followed soon became interested in subjectifying the tonal material, with the result that continuity established by means of small connected phrase groups broke down and was replaced by the concept of organic form.

If a composer finds himself sympathetic to the classical quality of expression, he can derive immense benefit from a detailed examination of the melodic procedures of the three great Viennese masters. He will find it logical to begin his studies with the trio forms, such as the minuet and scherzo, for these do not demand the complexities of episodic treatment, and present the clearest examples of the simple musical sentence. As a technical exercise he may copy down the soprano line of one of these sentences and attempt to supply the accompanying parts, comparing his result with that of the master. He will find that with practice he is able to duplicate the original accompaniments or supply alternatives which are equally proficient technically. As a further step he may begin writing accompanying parts to soprano lines which he has himself composed in imitation of his models. Gradually his mind will acquire the ability to direct a phrase which starts in the tonic to the dominant, mediant, sub-mediant, or other destinations, as well as to extend it to any desired length. It is then that he will understand that if he focuses his attention on a definite key and beats mentally in a chosen meter, musical images will be set in motion in his mind, and the entire musical texture generated in this way. It is extremely important to practice these exercises in all keys and all rhythms so that the greatest degree of fluency may be attained. The importance of daily practice also cannot be overemphasized, for without it the bridge established between the conscious and the creative unconscious by technical exercise is soon blocked by non-musical associations. Just as the function of daily ritual and prayer, as related to the intuitive realization of deity, is that of preserving the thread of connected thoughts which lead to the intuition itself, so the function of daily technical practice, as related to musical composition, is that of maintaining free the inroad to that corner of the mind from which the music comes.

As the composer continues to work exercises in imitation of his models he will be surprised to find that along with the thousand subtleties of technique he will absorb from his masters, he will discover the personal materials of his own art. These will often be presented to him in dreams, or in the half-waking state of consciousness, before the inner critical faculty has had

the opportunity to act in selecting and repressing the given material. From these experiences he will gradually accumulate the technical stuffs of a private creative world, possessing capabilities of change and expansion according to his expressive needs.

It is not only in our time that composers have been compelled to build this inner world, though the breakdown of the old tonal system and the great diversity of contemporary styles have created this illusion among us. Bach copied zealously the manuscripts of Buxtehude in which he found a point of departure. Beethoven as a young man spoke of the excitement with which he discovered for himself a certain modulatory sequence (I-V of II - II-V of III - III-V of IV - IV, etc.) especially suited for climaxes. It seems to us, as we survey the music of these earlier composers with the comfortable assurance given us by centuries of musical analysis, that they faced problems which were negligible compared with those facing the composers of today, yet each of them discovered technical devices in advance of the theoretical understanding of his time, musical uses which could not be analyzed by his contemporaries.

We are familiar with the efforts of the great modern composers to create technical systems which will provide them with the tools of expression. Schönberg and Hindemith, not satisfied with pointing out the esthetic inevitability of the paths they have chosen, have taken great pains to establish their systems on a scientific basis. They have encountered so many difficulties in reconciling their systems with those of the past that we may assume that they have come into conflict with the natural functions of the musical mind. Though it is true, as they contend, that the creative mentality can be forced to function within an atonal frame (Hindemith's system is less atonal than Schönberg's in its implications, for though it endeavors to support a free chromatic scheme, it is concerned with the binding qualities of intervals and polar tones), it undergoes a considerable warping in the process. It is as if a man were taught to walk with bent knees because of the inordinate lowness of the ceiling. Many of us feel that it is Stravinsky, in the works of his late period, who has best succeeded in organizing the elements of his musical speech, and that the direction he has indicated offers a most important road for future development. It is interesting that he has not felt it necessary to attempt a scientific justification for his diatonic methods, but has relied on the intelligence of his inner ear.

If the composer is to reject systems such as those of Hindemith and Schönberg on the grounds that they conflict with the natural functions of the musical mind, he must be prepared to stand ground as to what can be considered natural functioning. It is evident that inspiration is a most vital component of art. It is through inspired thematic and structural materials

that the composer most surely communicates to his listeners the force of his creations, through them that his works possess their greatest chance for survival. In this sense it is possible to consider inspiration the creative absolute. It is certain that inspiration occurs only when the artist is compelled to give something of himself, and when his creative imagination is unhampered by technical procedures unsuited to it. Thus a system of musical materials which fails to lead to inspiration can be considered unnatural, and a system which leads to inspiration can be considered one which insures the natural functioning of the creative mind. The composer can be certain that something has gone wrong with his musical thinking when he loses his inspiration. The composer to whom inspiration is granted can be assured that he is drawing on the most significant creative forces which are available to him. He is in a position to perceive the musical mind in its permanent aspects.