WHERE HAVE ALL THE TUNES GONE?

I read with interest John Drummond's observations on tonality in the previous issue of Contact.

I cannot speak with any authority on the condition of twentieth century man in general, though I can understand that the traumatic experiences that composers such as Dallapiccola and Xenakis have undergone might have significantly affected their taste in music to the point of rejection of the emotional posturings of the classical military symphony (whether Haydn 100 or Beethoven 5 or 9).

However as a fellow-composer whose last one-act opera disappeared even before the watchful gaze of the hawk-eyed sentinel, I would like to make a few comments vis a vis the position of tonality in the twentieth century.

I would suggest that Mr. Drummond's band of contemporary tonal composers is not so small as he imagines. Significant tonal references occur in the works of such avant-garde figures as Penderecki, (the close of both the Stabat Mater and the St. Luke Passion) Henze, (second movement of the fifth symphony) and Varese. (the opening of the final tutti of Arcana). Numerous examples could be cited from the less radical composers of this century. Originality is not synonymous with being harmonically adventurous.

In most of these cases (as in the four quoted) the composer has used the vocabulary of tonality without the grammar. The composers of the last century discarded the conventional grammar of tonality in their attempts to expand the expressive possibilities of their language. Though the grammar was abandoned, the language, of tonal sounds, remains available for use.

The major accusation that the tonal composer faces is that when audiences wish to listen to tonal music they are perfectly content with that of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. Composers since have failed to reproduce their perfect balance of form and content. To try and re-establish the outdated structural relationships of tonality produces only a pale shadow of the past.

In this century there has been a great expansion in the vocabulary of musical language available to a composer. I can see no reason why any composer should wish to abandon the technical and expressive opportunities that this increased vocabulary can offer, in favour of a small part of it.

No-one would dispute that the most basic structure of all works having artistic pretentions is to establish a context, depart from it and return to it. In most twentieth century styles this context is created purely by the composer with the minimum reliance on pre-existing technical assistance. The composer then has the

difficult task of extablishing an integrated vocabulary and grammar for each of his works. Not surprisingly there are few completely satisfactory solutions, as the method ruthlessly exposes a composers limitations. The enormity of the challenge and the uncertainty of its outcome can be very stimulating to the creative imagination. There is some virtue in compositional bewilderment.

Though it must often seem so to the elite with perfect pitch, tonality or the use of a pitch area is not the only means of establishing a context. This can be achieved by a harmony (Schoenberg's Five Orchestral Pieces Op. 16 No. 3), a rhythm (Varese's Ionisation), a melodic idea (as in serial technique) or by an awareness of timbre (as in electronic music). The 'weaker brother of the true Impressionist' is not interested only in superficial effects but in achieving a deeper awareness of the quality of sound.

We can, today, write for a more attentive and educated audience who, by means of record or tape, are able to hear a work many times. The twentieth century composer in his more subtle use of more extensive musical vocabulary demands a much greater degree of perception from his listener than did his nineteenth counterpart. This in twentieth century music the return to the original context is usually much more artfully concealed. Many composers feel that they can be more ambitious in their musical language and technique.

To promote a greater understanding of his music the composer is sometimes persuaded to describe his techniques in print. Emphasising 'innovation' and 'originality' enables the composer, or his analyst, to discuss those aspects of his work that an audience unfamiliar with his music would find most difficult. He may also promote a valuable exchange of ideas with other composers. What should really concern composers is Communication.

DAVID H. COX

John Drummond replies:-

Since David Cox and I have argued quite fer ociously on musical matters frequently in the past, he will I am sure eagerly expect me to take up the weak points and misconceptions in the agove article.

The final sentence - "what should really concern composers is communication" - is a sentiment with which I whole-heartedly agree, although I would add the further words "through music" - "what should really concern composers is communication through music." The fact that, as Mr. Cox points out, present-day composers sometimes find it necessary to describe their techniques in print - and, often, their message-content as well, if Tippett is anything to go by - seems to me to be a self-confessed failure on their part to communicate in musical terms. This, curiously, is in spite of the fact audiences today are "more attentive and educated". Why should it be that composers find themselves with this failure in communication?

If two parties are communicating on the level of exchange of ideas, a communications failure is likely to occur when the two parties either do not use the same language, or when the speaker does not speak clearly, or when there is no common ground of ideas. For rational communication from mind to mind, the most basic criterion is a common language. It is argued by most authorities that human language developed precisely for the purpose of the communication of information and ideas. Language is composed of two things: vocabulary - i.e. words which are sound-equivalents to the information or idea, sound-equivalents with certain associations; and grammar - i.e. a method of linking words together so that information which is a complex of constituent parts can be readily understood. Grammar is a method of presenting relationships between words so that their meanings become clear. For a meaningful communication of ideas, vocabulary and grammar are inseparable - grammar is hardly conceivable as an abstract divorced from words, while words disconnected from grammar are inappropriate for the communication of ideas. Tonality is, to my way of thinking, a complete language, and neither merely a vocabulary nor merely a grammar. To suggest, as Mr Cox does, that in the nineteenth century composers "discarded the conventional grammar of tonality" and then to say that "the grammar was abandoned" is not merely logically suspect, but gives the grossly misleading impression that such composers were able to convey developing ideas without the use of grammar.

Tristan und Isolde, which might be taken as an example of Mr Cox's viewpoint, is in fact based upon conventional (and analysable) tonal grammatical procedures, even if those procedures are not immediately perceptible to the ear. (They are more perceptible to a present-day ear than to the ear of 1865.) It is undeniable that Tristan greatly expanded the expressive possibilities of the tonal language, but it is important to emphasise that this was not done at the expense of grammar. Expressiveness has never meant abandoning grammar and concentrating on inventing new words (with, as Mr Cox points out, a few old words thrown in for good measure). The freedom to express something excitingly new is not best served by abandoning all controls, no matter what the anarchists say. Scoenberg invented a new language, we are told - so did the inventor of Esperanto. But unless Esperanto can communicate ideas which cannot be expressed in English, which has the benefit of a long tradition of developing expressive sophistication, it would seem rather pointless to address English people in Esperanto. And, let us make no mistake about it, tonality is the language with which we are most familiar - the musical language we learn from childhood to graduation.

To extend the analogy one step further, I would firmly propose that it is still possible to communicate new ideas through English vocabulary and grammar. Perhaps these new ideas will require additions to the vocabulary (words from foreign languages, like 'sputnik', or words that realign and compress existing words and roots - 'launderette', 'mini') and modifications to the grammar ("Sensational escape bid from Chinese cookie factory!") but languages, whether verbal or musical, are organic, developmental phenomena.

Mr Cox suggests that some composers are "interested ... in achieving a deeper awareness of the quality of sound", and quite rightly rebukes me for flippantly suggesting that Impressionist composers are

interested only in superficial effects. My argument above, about tonality as a grammar-plus-vocabulary, relates to the field of rational communication. If purely sensory communication is the aim of the composer, then the means of rational communication may not be applicable. "The cat sat on the mat" communicates an idea; "cat-mat" is a word-complex that has purely sensory effect, the ideal relationship between a particular cat and a particular mat being unimportant. (Erudite readers: forgive the trivial example.) "Cat-mat" is not something to be understood, it is something to be experienced. Since sensory effect is never absent from aural communication (whether verbal or musical), and, indeed, may be part of the means of attracting attention to the ideas, it is easy to see how the two may become confused.

Furthermore, sensory communication may become a part of idea-communication itself: the emphasis a speaker gives to different words in "the cat sat on the mat" may convey reams of information about the animal world, the manufacture of carpets, and the moral benefits of repose. Purely sensory communication, however, divorced from idea-communication, has always seemed to me a rather introverted approach to music. For composers to occupy their time merely communicating a deeper awareness of sound is as irrelevant to what music is about as discussing the attributes of God is to a religious faith. Musicology is already in danger of becoming a theology of music; if the creative artists of today also indulge in such introspective, exclusive pursui then I see every justification in asking "where have all the tunes gone?."

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