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The Performer's Point of View¹

Looking through a random batch of recently published scores for possible review is an interesting and thought-focusing experience, especially for someone who, unlike the more usual 'academic' reviewer, has actually played in public performances of some of the pieces involved. It has proved sufficiently thought-focusing for me to decide to write not a straightforward review of them, but a rather more general article of a quite different kind.

Performers are generally not the most objective judges of new works when, particularly with the limited rehearsal time one has in Britain, they are concerned primarily with the problems of their own part. With the inevitable single performance, players seldom have the luxury of progressing beyond simply putting the right notes in the right place with the right dynamics. When quintets, and even quartets, are conducted to speed up the learning/accuracy process, the most interesting musical problems are left to a conductor (who is not always right!), and performer-listening diminishes, resulting in a lack of real ensemble feeling. Players naturally prefer pieces which they understand in terms of their own experience and familiarity with a particular style, and which are more or less conventionally notated, though not necessarily technically easy. Players want to enjoy playing a part which offers expressive and stimulating possibilities, so the extremes of recent music – minimalism and the New Complexity – are not high on the list, whereas almost anything by, for example, a composer of the Second Viennese School is.

Over the last 20 years, standards of performance in new music have risen dramatically. In this country, apart from the few 'specialist' soloists (and specialisation is very bad for a performer), this is due largely to the work and influence of Pierre Boulez at the BBC and to the London Sinfonietta. The days of the terrible diletantism of fringe new music and the worst excesses of the early music boom of the 1960s and 70s (when players who couldn't play 'properly' hid behind strange noises and 'wrong' notes or bad intonation on authentic instruments) are now happily over: shown the way in the early music field by people like Nicholas Harnoncourt and by Thomas Binkley's Studio for Early Music. Nevertheless, the excellent performances which we do hear show up the under-rehearsed, run-through type of performances that are an unfortunate part of the impoverished London scene.

Today, composers, musicologists and performers are still very separate, carefully pigeon-holed beings. Performers, perhaps, do not give enough thought to what they play – the notation, the style itself – and therefore do not command the respect they deserve from composers. Composers, on the other hand, seeing the increasing technical expertise of players, write things which are often impracticable, and they consequently appear to be arrogant and defensive in rehearsal. The musicologists, writers and commentators (with excep-

tions) view all this, if at all, with on-the-fence, non-committal coolness. It is refreshing to read opinions as strongly felt as those in the following review by Gregory Sandow, from the *New York Village Voice*:

Academics consider Carter the greatest living American composer, and discuss him with so much more respect than enthusiasm that I wonder what they'd think if they heard these two pieces (*A Symphony of Three Orchestras* and *A Mirror on Which to Dwell*) without knowing who wrote them. In the *Symphony* I was not impressed by the 12 much discussed, independent, overlapping movements, and rather put off instead by the colorless melodic material and stolid orchestration; the song cycle seemed more valuable for its deft instrumental writing than for its vocal line, which treats not just the meaning but the sounds and rhythms of Elizabeth Bishop's poetry with the same plodding determination not to miss a single obvious detail that a Carter admirer overimpressed by those 12 overlapping movements would bring to the *Symphony*. I challenge anyone who thinks I'm wrong to compare the piece to atonal works more idiomatically written for voice and chamber ensemble – Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*, Webern's Op.14 songs, the Boulez *Marteau sans Maître* or *Improvisation sur Mallarmé no.1* – and tell me that its vocal line isn't too stiff, divorced from the best musical ideas in its accompaniment.²

Well, certainly no beating about the bush there, and one need only look at Carter's early neo-classical songs like *Voyage* (1942-3), written in a very familiar idiom, to see that he has problems with lyrical vocal writing. *A Mirror on Which to Dwell* of 1976 was the first music for voice he had written since the choral piece *The Harmony of Morning* of 1944.

The performer does have a great deal to offer the composer, not least in such practicalities as notation and what used to be called 'idiomatic' writing, and he is in the best position to have a finger in all three pies: performance, composition and musicology. The performer is potentially the most powerful of the three, since composition and musicology cannot exist without performance; and analysis, the most important and 'active' part of musicology, is what the performer does every day. In Leonard B. Meyer's words

The performance of a piece of music is . . . the actualization of an analytic act – even though such analysis may have been intuitive and unsystematic. For what a performer does is to make the relationships and patterns potential in the composer's score clear to the mind and ear of the experienced listener. Conversely, as Edward Cone has pointed out 'Active listening is, after all, a kind of vicarious performance . . .'³

The composer can learn about modern notation from the best solutions in works of the last 20 years or so, and there is little excuse nowadays for obscurity in even the trickiest of moments. Idiomatic writing and the performer's job of making those 'relationships and patterns . . . clear to the mind and ear' are more serious problems, and among performers are verging on causes for concern.

Returning to that initial batch of scores – and I think it better that the composers of them remain nameless: by chance they all belong to that bland, middle-of-the-road English atonalism which is a kind of 'wrong-note' version of Elisabeth Lutyens' 'cow-pat' school, or what the composer Christopher Fox rather cruelly calls '*stilo SPNMo*'.⁴ Attending concerts of new music in London, one can also frequently witness depressing events which show that this style is not just contained in beautifully produced scores growing dusty on the shelf, but is

alive and well. I have heard in the last few years quite a few pieces that are overlong, meandering and cliché-ridden – often with the inevitable crotales, vibraphone, alto flute and florid vocal line: an extension of Brittenesque word-painting at its most banal. In short, no real creative necessity.

Nevertheless, in terms of our three disciplines, I do believe that composing should be central to music education: contemporary composers, techniques and music history ought to be studied through active reinterpretation, reconstruction and original composition itself. As Charles Rosen has written,

Those who wish really to study music should be taught composition in all its contemporary forms: we may then hope and pray that the majority will never become composers.⁵

This does not in any way suggest that conservatories and universities should become composer factories, but simply that music should be taught creatively, with performance seen as a major part of this creation, rather than the current trend of younger and younger players striving for technique above all in 18th- and 19th-century repertoire. The interrelationship of the three disciplines, while still forging ahead into new areas, might also temper that other manifestation of 'high-tech', the New Complexity, in which composers seem ill-at-ease with sound and might be happier in computer design or data analysis.

Now, more than at any other time, there is a great diversity of new art music, all of which is considered 'contemporary'. Music today, apart from the conservative element, falls roughly into two camps: the modernists and the post-modernists. Modernism is the continuing tradition of western music with its chromatic evolution, including such apparent opposites as neo-romanticism (and even, in Robin Holloway's recent music, neo-Malcolm Arnoldism) and the New Complexity. Post-modernism is a very different world. It is Fox, once again, who has attempted a neat distinction between the two in a recent programme note:

It might be argued that Modernism's preoccupations are essentially those of *Tristan and Isolde* – rhythm, harmony and timbre in flux, an endless striving after unattainable goals – while Post-Modernism's preoccupations are those of *Einstein on the Beach* – autonomous, regular structures, an attempt to draw connections between apparently unrelated phenomena.⁶

There are many problems for the performer as well as the listener in both camps. At the very worst, we appear to have on the one hand a music of great complexity and impenetrability which seems to require a privileged intellectual training and, on the other, a music of naivety and banality verging on the mindless. Perhaps most disturbing is that a real understanding of some composers' work presupposes a knowledge of recent musical trends. Some music depends on conditioning and education and requires a context, whereas other music is self-contained in expression, needing much less cultural knowledge, even when the piece is quite complex. With some post-modernist pieces, particularly those of post-Cardew Britain, being forewarned seems essential if one is not to hear them simply as poor tonal pastiche. The post-modernists have rebelled against the intolerance of the elite atonalists (within post-modernism there is a strong political awareness which equates

atonal complexity with capitalist expressionist decadence); but in doing so, they have formed their own initiates who can recognise the wit and charm of something which completely ignores the last 60 years of music. The meaning of such post-modernist music must be construed entirely by the listener, and the music serves to trigger this meaning, thus making it, at least in some cases, something more than simplistic, elongated tonal progressions. Post-modernist music holds no problems for the performer whose conservatory training is steeped in the 18th and 19th centuries; and now, with the growing number of young expert players, the same can almost be said of modernist music, but with the notable exception of the New Complexity.

It was interesting to read the reactions of one of Britain's best newspaper critics to two of the most important performances in the 1985 BBC Promenade Concerts series: the world première of Elliott Carter's *Penthode* for ensemble and the first British performance of Steve Reich's *The Desert Music* for chorus and orchestra.⁷ After a glowing account of Carter's piece, Peter Heyworth concludes:

My ear was enchanted by what it heard, my mind thwarted by its inability to perceive any large-scale pattern.

He was less impressed by Reich's piece:

Take, for instance, an unremarkable melodic phrase, such as might have been served as an accompanying figure in a nineteenth century ballet score. Hardly has it appeared quite early in *The Desert Music* than it is subsumed into a characteristic Reich pattern. Yet, before it has been fully ingested, it fleetingly evokes another world. The damage has been done. Heard in a non-Reichian context, its banality is painfully evident. These reminiscences are fatal. They confront Reich's music with idioms more powerful than his own.

Heyworth has, I think, put his finger on the major problems of the two opposing camps. Reich's move away from what he himself might see as the limitations of his initial and highly original rhythmic/phasing processes towards a concern with more melodic and harmonic elements reveals a less original voice in the face of tradition. One may argue that originality is not important, but a composer must communicate something individual through whatever language he may choose, or there is simply no reason for saying anything at all. Perhaps the well-worn example of Stravinsky's *Pulcinella* is apt here: the composition not of pastiche but of reinterpretation. Heyworth's comment on Carter's piece, on the other hand, questions our whole ability to respond to complex music. To be 'enchanted' by the sound of a piece but unable to follow its argument or structure is probably very common. How many concert-goers really hear the differences in the recapitulation of a classical sonata movement, or follow the thematic/harmonic direction of a development section?

Complexity may be a problem for audiences, but at least with repeated hearings one can begin to get inside a piece, as with all music. For performers, the 'complex' music of Carter is actually not as problematic as it may appear. His pieces do contain some very tricky rhythmic passages with fragments passing from instrument to instrument. Yet, despite the involved compositional systems, Carter is concerned with sound, and the orchestration does allow space for detail and the combining of lines to be heard. This cannot be said, however,

of the composers who are lumped together, rather uncomfortably, under the New Complexity label to which I have already referred several times, with Brian Ferneyhough not as leader, but as the most prominent and influential member of the group, not least through his rôle as teacher.

For the performer, even for the few circus-freak soloists who hawk their 'most-difficult-piece-in-the-world' shows from festival to festival, there is no doubt that much of the music of this 'school' exists only as intricate and ingenious systems on the page, and not in sound. To take one of the performer's biggest bugbears: why is it necessary for the basic metre of a piece to be a quaver, and then to have a metronome mark of, say, quaver = 40? This means that the piece looks black, fast and more complicated than it really is, when in fact it is quite slow; in other words, it does not look like it sounds. Since notation is only a set of signs to be translated into sound, and not an end in itself, one can only assume that in such cases the look of the score, its calligraphy, is all-important.

In an interview which appeared in *Contact*, Ferneyhough seems to be interested in a score which has a life of its own: '... a visual representation of a possible sound - that's just one aspect of what a score is.'⁸ Ferneyhough also expects performances to be approximations, which is inevitable when successions of rhythmically detailed groups of notes, which also have many different superimposed treatments (flutter-tongue, multiphonic, etc.), are then directed to be played in a very short space of time. This is unlike the sort of techniques that Vinko Globokar would use, where he superimposes different events - singing, growling, trombone embouchure playing (on a bass clarinet), key movements/notes - to achieve a reasonably specific sound quality and the theatrical energy of the performer attempting the impossible. Ferneyhough's scores are, of course, very different from those of Globokar or even Xenakis: composers who take the performer clearly, almost graphically, to the heart of the sound. When asked what are the criteria for a good performance of his music, Ferneyhough offers '... the establishment of audible criteria of meaningful inexactitude'.⁹ The interviewer, Richard Toop, then counters with: 'So interpretation consists, to some extent, of different intelligent failures to reproduce a central text?', and Ferneyhough agrees. He also agrees with the assertion of the next question:

Obviously, in the sheer technical difficulty of the pieces there is a certain in-built defence mechanism against uncommitted performers. Is even the notation itself, and its *mis-en-page*, a sort of "protective commentary" (in Debussy's sense) against the dilettantish approach?

The notation and the whole meaning of the style cut two ways with this point. Ferneyhough, by very nature of the conventional notation, places the performer's approach to his music within the western classical tradition. Because the pieces are impossible, the performer has to fake and to improvise certain sections; players familiar with the style, and probably well practised through free improvisation, can get away with it. This leads to the possibility of imaginative, but technically less competent, players performing these pieces, whereas a player with a sound traditional technique (the only one to have!) would not attempt something which has no regard for the instrument while still, by the notation, setting out its terms of reference within the tradition from which that

instrument comes. This approach of improvisational inexactitude is backed by two further points: the first important, the second less so. Some New Complexity composers have begun notating arrows showing approximately where the main metronomic pulses occur, ignoring the bar-divisions, which are often irrationals. This means that one plays as though reading spatial notation, which makes a nonsense of the original rhythmic detail but is, of course, already one of the techniques of faking. Secondly, many of the scores, even original manuscripts, contain rhythmic mistakes of bars which don't add up: not enough beams or wrong groupings.

The extremes of the New Complexity lead one back to the larger issues of originality. The modernist composer is now bound by the concept of the masterpiece. The business of new music - with its commissions, publishers, reviewers, radio, the one performance with its professional audience - pressurises the young composer into producing a constant stream of serious and intense 'masterpieces'. Increasing numbers of composers present increasingly eclectically-inspired pieces: rummaging among the obscure and esoteric for their inspiration, or at the very least to give the work a 'serious' identity. It is here, with the constant search for the new and the different, that the post-integral-serialist phenomenon of the New Complexity has come about. While one would never seriously condemn an 'advanced' composer simply because his early works show the unmusicality and banality of, say, Carter's early songs or Ferneyhough's *Sonatina* for three clarinets and bassoon (or bass clarinet) of 1963, these things do fuel the niggling doubt that the complexity is perhaps there to cover a lack of ideas. The techniques serve merely to make the musical material more 'interesting'.

At the other end of the spectrum, one of the good things about the post-modernists is a healthy attitude to the 'finished' work of art. If the newly written and performed piece doesn't work, then 'better luck next time'. There is little paranoid defensiveness here, and the down-to-earth approach of these composers is concerned as much with craftsmanship as with aesthetics. One of the major influences on this attitude is that the majority of post-modernist composers are, or have been, performers of their own music. This can only be a good thing: composers' active involvement, apart from stimulating new ideas, teaches a good deal about the technique of performance. Set against this are the problems of writing only to the limits of one's own instrumental technique, and perhaps compromising in more serious artistic ways for the sake of performance. It also breeds the idea and questionable merits of the 'professional' composer who can turn his hand to anything. There is the story (I'm not sure if it's true, but it is, nonetheless, a good one) that someone stood up at a composers' conference at which Harrison Birtwistle was present and said that it was vital for a composer to have a technique and to be able to write in any idiom before trying to write in a more 'advanced' style, to which Birtwistle replied: 'I have enough trouble writing my own music, never mind anyone else's'.

Finally, while there are no problems for the performer in post-modernism, he who tackles recent works from the modernists' Complex school begins to realise the absurdity of this culmination of tradition as we reach the end of the

century. Musicians might be encouraged if they were to explore the work of someone like Horatiu Radulescu,¹⁰ who suggests one successful path for both performer and composer to music of the next century. The absurdity of the excesses of the New Complexity lies not merely in the precise notation of 'expression', but in the subjugation and manipulation of the performer, who can only conclude that his efforts are ultimately of secondary importance. The player confronted by these impossible works, is defeated before even beginning, and ultimately discouraged and depressed by the approximations which occur, challenging his integrity. In performance, the listener may be impressed by a great flurry of things and a show of techniques. But, finally, how much of this has anything to do with the composer? When the act of writing, the systems and the very notation itself, take on more importance than the music it is there to serve, I am reminded of an aphorism of Albert Camus which I read recently:

It is from the moment when I shall no longer be more than a writer that I shall cease to write.¹¹

- ¹ I have taken my title from that of an article by Leonard Stein, which originally appeared in *Perspectives of New Music* in 1963 and is reprinted in *Perspectives on Notation and Performance*, ed. Benjamin Boretz and Edward T. Cone (New York: Norton, 1976), pp.41-50. This deals with problems similar to some of those discussed here; in Stein's case, they are posed by the total serial music of that period.
- ² Gregory Sandow, 'Fed Up', *The Village Voice* (2-8 December 1981), p.94. This reviews the recording of the two works by Carter that are mentioned, on CBS M 35171.
- ³ Leonard B. Meyer, *Explaining Music* (Berkeley, etc.: University of California Press, 1973), p.29. (The Cone quotation is taken from the author's *Musical Form and Performance* (New York: Norton, 1968), p.21.)
- ⁴ Christopher Fox, 'A Darmstadt Diary', *Contact 29* (Spring 1985), p.46.
- ⁵ Charles Rosen, 'The Proper Study of Music', *Perspectives of New Music*, vol.1, no.1 (1962), p.88.
- ⁶ Christopher Fox, programme note for a recital in the Purcell Room, London on 13 December 1984.
- ⁷ Peter Heyworth, reviews in *The Observer* (28 July and 4 August 1985).
- ⁸ Richard Toop, 'Brian Ferneyhough in Interview', *Contact 29* (Spring 1985), p.12.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p.10. Toop's two following questions appear on p.11.
- ¹⁰ See my article, 'Horatiu Radulescu, "Sound Plasma"', *Contact 26* (Spring 1983), pp.23-4.
- ¹¹ Quoted in Nadine Gordimer, 'The Essential Gesture: Writers and Responsibility', *Granta*, no.15 (Spring 1985), p.140.