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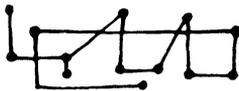
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CONTEMPORARY MUSIC AND THE PUBLIC



MICHEL FOUCAULT AND PIERRE BOULEZ

MICHEL FOUCAULT. It is often said that contemporary music has drifted off track; that it has had a strange fate; that it has attained a degree of complexity which makes it inaccessible; that its techniques have set it on paths which are leading it further and further away. But on the contrary, what is striking to me is the multiplicity of links and relations between music and all the other elements of culture. There are several ways in which this is apparent. On the one hand, music has been much more sensitive to technological changes, much more closely bound to them than most of the other arts (with the exception perhaps of cinema). On the other hand, the evolution of these musics after Debussy or Stravinsky presents remarkable correlations with the evolution of painting. What is more, the theoretical problems which music has posed for itself, the way in which it has reflected on its language, its structures, and its material, depend on a

question which has, I believe, spanned the entire twentieth century: the question of “form” which was that of Cézanne or the cubists, which was that of Schönberg, which was also that of the Russian formalists or the School of Prague.

I do not believe we should ask: with music at such a distance, how can we recapture it or repatriate it? But rather: this music which is so close, so consubstantial with all our culture, how does it happen that we feel it, as it were, projected afar and placed at an almost insurmountable distance?

PIERRE BOULEZ. Is the contemporary music “circuit” so different from the various “circuits” employed by symphonic music, chamber music, opera, Baroque music, all circuits so partitioned, so specialized that it’s possible to ask if there really is a general culture? Acquaintance through recordings should, in principle, bring down those walls whose economic necessity is understandable, but one notices, on the contrary, that recordings reinforce specialization of the public as well as the performers. In the very organization of concerts or other productions, the forces which different types of music rely on more or less exclude a common organisation, even a polyvalence. Classical or romantic repertory implies a standardized format tending to include exceptions to this rule only if the economy of the whole is not disturbed by them. Baroque music necessarily implies not only a limited group, but instruments in keeping with the music played, musicians who have acquired a specialized knowledge of interpretation, based on studies of texts and theoretical works of the past. Contemporary music implies an approach involving new instrumental techniques, new notations, an aptitude for adapting to new performance situations. One could continue this enumeration and thus show the difficulties to be surmounted in passing from one domain to another: difficulties of organization, of placing oneself in a different context, not to mention the difficulties of adapting places for such or such a kind of performance. Thus, there exists a tendency to form a larger or smaller society corresponding to each category of music, to establish a dangerously closed circuit among this society, its music, and its performers. Contemporary music does not escape this development; even if its attendance figures are proportionately weak, it does not escape the faults of musical society in general: it has its places, its rendezvous, its stars, its snobberies, its rivalries, its exclusivities; just like the other society, it has its market values, its quotes, its statistics. The different circles of music, if they are not Dante’s, none the less reveal a prison system in which most feel at ease but whose constraints, on the contrary, painfully chafe others.

MICHEL FOUCAULT. One must take into consideration the fact that for a very long time music has been tied to social rites and unified by them: religious music, chamber music; in the nineteenth century, the link between music and theatrical production in opera (not to mention the political or cultural meanings which the latter had in Germany or in Italy) was also an integrative factor.

I believe that one cannot talk of the “cultural isolation” of contemporary music without soon correcting what one says of it by thinking about other circuits of music.

With rock, for example, one has a completely inverse phenomenon. Not only is rock music (much more than jazz used to be) an integral part of the life of many people, but it is a cultural initiator: to like rock, to like a certain kind of rock rather than another, is also a way of life, a manner of reacting; it is a whole set of tastes and attitudes.

Rock offers the possibility of a relation which is intense, strong, alive, “dramatic” (in that rock presents itself as a spectacle, that listening to it is an event and that it produces itself on stage), with a music that is itself impoverished, but through which the listener affirms himself; and with the other music, one has a frail, faraway, hothouse, problematical relation with an erudite music from which the cultivated public feels excluded.

One cannot speak of a single relation of contemporary culture to music in general, but of a tolerance, more or less benevolent, with respect to a plurality of musics. Each is granted the “right” to existence, and this right is perceived as an equality of worth. Each is worth as much as the group which practices it or recognizes it.

PIERRE BOULEZ. Will talking about musics in the plural and flaunting an eclectic ecumenicism solve the problem? It seems, on the contrary, that this will merely conjure it away—as do certain devotees of an advanced liberal society. All those musics are good, all those musics are nice. Ah! Pluralism! There’s nothing like it for curing incomprehension. Love, each one of you in your corner, and each will love the others. Be liberal, be generous toward the tastes of others, and they will be generous to yours. Everything is good, nothing is bad; there aren’t any values, but everyone is happy. This discourse, as liberating as it may wish to be, reinforces, on the contrary, the ghettos, comforts one’s clear conscience for being in a ghetto, especially if from time to time one tours the ghettos of others. The economy is there to remind us, in case we get lost in this bland utopia: there are musics which bring in money and exist for commercial profit; there are musics that cost something, whose very concept has nothing to do with profit. No liberalism will erase this distinction.

MICHEL FOUCAULT. I have the impression that many of the elements that are supposed to provide access to music actually impoverish our relationship with it. There is a quantitative mechanism working here. A certain rarity of relation to music could preserve an ability to choose what one hears, and thus a flexibility in listening. But the more frequent this relation is (radio, records, cassettes), the more familiarities it creates; habits crystallize; the most frequent becomes the most acceptable, and soon the only thing perceivable. It produces a “tracing,” as the neurologists say.

Clearly, the laws of the marketplace will readily apply to this simple mechanism. What is put at the disposition of the public is what the public hears. And what the public finds itself actually listening to, because it's offered up, reinforces a certain taste, underlines the limits of a well-defined listening capacity, defines more and more exclusively a schema for listening. Music had better satisfy this expectation, etc. So commercial productions, critics, concerts, everything that increases the contact of the public with music, risks making perception of the new more difficult.

Of course the process is not unequivocal. Certainly increasing familiarity with music also enlarges the listening capacity and gives access to possible differentiations, but this phenomenon risks being only marginal; it must in any case remain secondary to the main impact of experience, if there is no real effort to derail familiarities.

It goes without saying that I am not in favor of a rarefaction of the relation to music, but it must be understood that the everydayness of this relation, with all the economic stakes that are riding on it, can have this paradoxical effect of rigidifying tradition. It is not a matter of making access to music more rare, but of making its frequent appearances less devoted to habits and familiarities.

PIERRE BOULEZ. We ought to note that not only is there a focus on the past, but even on the past in the past, as far as the performer is concerned. And this is of course how one attains ecstasy while listening to the interpretation of a certain classical work by a performer who disappeared decades ago; but ecstasy will reach orgasmic heights when one can refer to a performance of 20 July 1947 or of 30 December 1938. One sees a pseudo-culture of documentation taking shape, based on the exquisite hour and fugitive moment, which reminds us at once of the fragility and of the durability of the performer become immortal, rivalling now the immortality of the masterpiece. All the mysteries of the Shroud of Turin, all the powers of modern magic, what more could you want as an alibi for reproduction as opposed to real production? Modernity itself is this technical superiority we possess over former eras in being able to recreate the event. Ah! If we only had the first performance of the Ninth, even—especially—with all its flaws, or if only we could make Mozart's own delicious difference between the Prague and Vienna versions of *Don Giovanni*. . . . This historicising carapace suffocates those who put it on, compresses them in an asphyxiating rigidity; the mephitic air they breathe constantly enfeebles their organism in relation to contemporary adventure. I imagine Fidelio glad to rest in his dungeon, or again I think of Plato's cave: a civilization of shadow and of shades.

MICHEL FOUCAULT. Certainly listening to music becomes more difficult as its composition frees itself from any kind of schemas, signals, perceivable cues for a repetitive structure.

In classical music, there is a certain transparency from the composition to the

hearing. And even if many compositional features in Bach or Beethoven aren't recognizable by most listeners, there are always other features, important ones, which are accessible to them. But contemporary music, by trying to make each of its elements a unique event, makes any grasp or recognition by the listener difficult.

PIERRE BOULEZ. Is there really only lack of attention, indifference on the part of the listener toward contemporary music? Might not the complaints so often articulated be due to laziness, to inertia, to the pleasant sensation of remaining in known territory? Berg wrote, already half a century ago, a text entitled "Why is Schönberg's music hard to understand?" The difficulties he described then are nearly the same as those we hear of now. Would they always have been the same? Probably, all novelty bruises the sensibilities of those unaccustomed to it. But it is believable that nowadays the communication of a work to a public presents some very specific difficulties. In classical and romantic music, which constitutes the principal resource of the familiar repertory, there are schemas which one obeys, which one can follow independently of the work itself, or rather which the work must necessarily exhibit. The movements of a symphony are defined in their form and in their character, even in their rhythmic life; they are distinct from one another, most of the time actually separated by a pause, sometimes tied by a transition that can be spotted. The vocabulary itself is based on "classified" chords, well-named: you don't have to analyze them to know what they are and what function they have. They have the efficacy and security of signals; they recur from one piece to another, always assuming the same appearance and the same functions. Progressively, these reassuring elements have disappeared from "serious" music. Evolution has gone in the direction of an ever more radical renewal, as much in the form of works as in their language. Musical works have tended to become unique events, which do have antecedents, but are not reducible to any guiding schema admitted, a priori, by all; this creates, certainly, a handicap for immediate comprehension. The listener is asked to familiarize himself with the course of the work and for this to listen to it a certain number of times. When the course of the work is familiar, comprehension of the work, perception of what it wants to express, can find a propitious terrain to bloom in. There are fewer and fewer chances for the first encounter to ignite perception and comprehension. There can be a spontaneous connection with it, through the force of the message, the quality of the writing, the beauty of the sound, the readability of the cues, but deep understanding can only come from repeated hearings, from remaking the course of the work, this repetition taking the place of an accepted schema such as was practiced previously.

The schemas—of vocabulary, of form— which had been evacuated from what is called serious music (sometimes called learned music) have taken refuge in certain popular forms, in the objects of musical consumption. There, one still creates according to the genres, the accepted typologies. Conservatism is not

necessarily found where it is expected: it is undeniable that a certain conservatism of form and language is at the base of all the commercial productions adopted with great enthusiasm by generations who want to be anything but conservative. It is a paradox of our times that played or sung protest transmits itself by means of an eminently subornable vocabulary, which does not fail to make itself known: commercial success evacuates protest.

MICHEL FOUCAULT. And on this point there is perhaps a divergent evolution of music and painting in the twentieth century. Painting, since Cézanne, has tended to make itself transparent to the very act of painting; the act is made visible, insistent, definitively present in the picture, whether it be by the use of elementary signs, or by traces of its own dynamic. Contemporary music on the contrary offers to its hearing only the outer surface of its composition.

Hence there is something difficult and imperious in listening to this music. Hence the fact that each hearing presents itself as an event which the listener attends, and which he must accept. There are no cues which permit him to expect it and recognize it. He listens to it happen. This is a very difficult mode of attention, one which is in contradiction to the familiarities woven by repeated hearing of classical music.

The cultural insularity of music today is not simply the consequence of deficient pedagogy or propagation. It would be too facile to groan over the conservatories or complain about the record companies. Things are more serious. Contemporary music owes this unique situation to its very composition. In this sense, it is willed. It is not a music that tries to be familiar; it is fashioned to preserve its cutting edge. One may repeat it, but it does not repeat itself. In this sense, one cannot come back to it as to an object. It always pops up on frontiers.

PIERRE BOULEZ. Since it wants to be in such a perpetual situation of discovery—new domains of sensibility, experimentation with new material—is contemporary music condemned to remain a Kamchatka (Baudelaire, Sainte-Beuve, remember?) reserved for the intrepid curiosity of infrequent explorers? It is remarkable that the most reticent listeners should be those who have acquired their musical culture exclusively in the stores of the past, indeed of a particular past; and the most open—only because they are the most ignorant?—are the listeners with a sustained interest in other means of expression, especially the plastic arts. The “foreigners” the most receptive? A dangerous connection which would tend to prove that current music would detach itself from the “true” musical culture in order to belong to a domain both vaster and more vague, where amateurism would preponderate, in critical judgment as in creation. Don’t call that “music”—then we are willing to leave you your plaything; that is in the jurisdiction of a different appreciation, having nothing to do with the appreciation we reserve for true music, the music of the masters. When this argument has been made, even in its arrogant naïveté, it approaches an irrefutable truth. Judgment and taste are prisoners of categories, of pre-established schemas

which are referred to at all costs. Not, as they would have us believe, that the distinction is between an aristocracy of sentiments, a nobility of expression, and a chancy craft based on experimentation: thought versus tools. It is, rather, a matter of a listening that could not be modulated or adapted to different ways of inventing music. I certainly am not going to preach in favor of an ecumenicism of musics, which seems to me nothing but a supermarket aesthetic, a demagoguery that dare not speak its name and decks itself with good intentions the better to camouflage the wretchedness of its compromise. Moreover, I do not reject the demands of quality in the sound as well as in the composition: aggression and provocation, *bricolage* and bluff are but insignificant and harmless palliatives. I am fully aware—thanks to many experiences, which could not have been more direct—that beyond a certain complexity perception finds itself disoriented in a hopelessly entangled chaos, that it gets bored and hangs up. This amounts to saying that I can keep my critical reactions and that my adherence is not automatically derived from the fact of “contemporaneity” itself. Certain modulations of hearing are already occurring, rather badly as a matter of fact, beyond particular historical limits. One doesn’t listen to Baroque music—especially lesser works—as one listens to Wagner or Strauss; one doesn’t listen to the polyphony of the *Ars Nova* as one listens to Debussy or Ravel. But in this latter case, how many listeners are ready to vary their “mode of being,” musically speaking? And yet in order for musical culture, all musical culture, to be assimilable, there need only be this adaptation to criteria, and to conventions, which invention complies with according to the historical moment it occupies. This expansive respiration of the ages is at the opposite extreme from the asthmatic wheezings the fanatics make us hear from spectral reflections of the past in a tarnished mirror. A culture forges, sustains, and transmits itself in an adventure with a double face: sometimes brutality, struggle, turmoil; sometimes meditation, nonviolence, silence. Whatever form the adventure may take—the most surprising is not always the noisiest, but the noisiest is not irremediably the most superficial—it is useless to ignore it, and still more useless to sequester it. One might go so far as to say there are probably uncomfortable periods when the coincidence of invention and convention is more difficult, when some aspect of invention seems absolutely to go beyond what we can tolerate or “reasonably” absorb; and that there are other periods when things relapse to a more immediately accessible order. The relations among all these phenomena—individual and collective—are so complex that applying rigorous parallelisms or groupings to them is impossible. One would rather be tempted to say: gentlemen, place your bets, and for the rest, trust in the *air du temps*. But, please, play! Play! Otherwise, what infinite secretions of boredom!

—translated by John Rahn

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