

# WHAT IS THE COMPOSER *trying* TO SAY?

**T**HE ancient old sage Confucius once said, "He who listens carefully, apt to understand; he who cares not to listen, understands nothing." In terms of music, we might re-write this wise old saying in this way: "He who listens to music carefully and intelligently is likely to receive message from composer; he who refuses to exhaust his imagination as he listens, likely to hear nothing!"

What is the contemporary composer really trying to say? To understand this question it is necessary to have an understanding of that which came before the contemporary composer in terms of style and harmonic vocabulary, and to allow one's self to search for the message which is undoubtedly contained in the given approach to contemporary music. At times the message may be that there is in fact little message at all, and this in itself comprises the ultimate message which the composer intended for the listener to get. In other words, a composer's music is the extension of his own personal feelings, his vocabulary, and introspective of his own personality.

This is by no means a statement limited solely to the contemporary composer. One can find, for example, in the music of J. S. Bach unlimited indications of the composer's intricate thinking from so perfect an architectural standpoint. The great seventeenth-century theorist, Marpurg, has stated that Bach was at least two-hundred years ahead of his time. In one sense, Marpurg was saying that it was impossible for the people of his

own day to receive a message from music of Bach; consequently, many listeners of that day did not know what he was trying to say. The irony of it all, at least in the case of Bach, was that he did not particularly intend for everyone to understand what he was trying to say. He himself understood, and to use his own words, his music was written "to the glory of God." He occasionally indulged in exercises to explore the limitless possibilities of a given simple theme. His "Art of the Fugue," for example, was surely not intended to be understood by the average listener. This was "eye music" — music to be looked at in an attempt to find the many contrapuntal intricacies and devices employed throughout the composition which the ear does not always hear but which the eye can detect. We of the present time understand Bach's purpose in writing such an enormous work — primarily to demonstrate and exhaust the total possibilities of a given fugal subject — but the true message of this composition, even to the intended medium of performance, remains a mystery to the untrained ear.

We, as contemporary musicians, living in a world of so-called contemporary music, should first of all assume that the composer *is* trying to say something, regardless of how atonal or dissonant the music may be. All too frequently we tend to negate and rationalize contemporary music by simply telling ourselves that we do not understand it, and therefore will make no attempt to do so. Much of

need to ask, how organized is organization? Can we have a more truthful truth?

A far more subtle danger confronting music today is to draw historical parallels in the belief that answers or substantiations will be provided to questions of musical style. We must not forget that such parallels remain inferred assumptions. A typically fallacious, though widely held view, is that Renaissance forms were 'tyrannized by harmonic aspects,' and late nineteenth-century composers might easily have thought so. Renaissance music is characterized by harmonic aspects. Yet within this available intervallic framework, the sixteenth-century composer had as much freedom at his disposal as any composer at any other age. Let us not forget, therefore, that serialism is essentially still a technique of limitations. Likewise, that Wagner was able practically to utilize any harmonic aggregate, seems an equally questionable belief. We all know that Wagner did not practically utilize any harmonic aggregate, or are we to attribute Wagner's failure to use Schoenbergian aggregates to underdeveloped historical sensitivity? Ernst Krenek would have us believe so: "It is true that Schoenberg's historical consciousness was underdeveloped . . ." In criticizing Schoenberg's failure to realize the full implications of twelve-tone thinking, it is, *pari-passu*, possible to reprimand Schoenberg for not having given us a "Gesang der Juenglinge." Accepting this line of reasoning, it becomes fair to admonish a cat for its biological shortsightedness in failing to become a lion. As philosophy is not a purely linguistic enterprise, neither is music a matter of historical dialectic.

By elimination it becomes apparent that the real nature of our musical crisis is one of appraising history, tradition, and relating these to compositional freedom of our choice. Of these issues, tradition, paradoxically, may be the more early dispensed with. Why this is so will become clear in our conclusion. Of more immediate concern is the interpretation of history, imparting the sense of historical consciousness which enables advanced composers to set a price tag on musical worth. It may be argued that such a state of affairs is nothing new. Rebellious artistic movements have always claimed themselves reactions to past views, yet what is the ultimate position

of a movement based solely on historical consciousness?

"History's task is not just that of maintaining the discoveries of one epoch as absolute and eternal truth . . . The only comfortable liberty known to composers is that of finding an excellent technique which is secure because of its historical empiricism."<sup>2</sup> One would imagine "empirical" to mean "relying on established technical procedures," but this is not the case. The stress is on denying all established techniques, preferring only those resulting from historical awareness. Technical innovations are to be valued, but are they of greater importance than the work as a whole? Machaut is not remembered exclusively because of the iso-rhythmic motet, nor is Berlioz for his brass writing. To assume composers today are musically secure because they manage a technique conditioned by historical observation is a half-truth. To state it is history's job to do more than merely maintain discoveries of one epoch as eternal truth, admits of knowledge which should be shared: eternal truths are hard to come by. A musical renovation is in progress, but renovation alone does not judge tradition. Inherent in each work of art is an esthetic judgment either confirming or changing tradition. Tradition, as history, then, is perhaps best left to take care of itself. The best historical sense a composer can have is a sense of the timeless which may become tradition. Talk of historical responsibility must be carefully weighed.

No one would deny music the right of exploration, enriching itself with a vocabulary which, today, it badly needs. The composer, however, must realize the risk his explorations run for not all which he discovers may be of value. He must always be aware of what constitutes communicative significance. An important composer like Varese, remarking he is not responsible for conditioning, has not realized his position clearly. Though not responsible for the past, a composer does make commitments for the future and, as Mr. Schidlowky says, "It is to man that art comes and from him that it goes out." And to whom? Ultimately, the composer still must concern himself with communication. Music's abstract properties can be its most intriguing quality and its greatest danger. As in Idealistic philosophy,

the exploring composer must be aware of impracticalities inherent in truth transcending being, lest he be swallowed up by the dictatorial demands of historical responsibility.

It is too easy to simply be a witness; then one need only endorse, refute, either be for or against something because one is a convinced follower. This is partisanship anchored in obduracy, pledged to non-tolerance, only revealing despair over being human. Such a position is not part of the humanist tradition with which it seeks identification.

Any age referring only to "Our Man" can readily become guilty of intolerance. There has never been an age not prizing its own humanism, but let us remind ourselves of this term, origin, and usage. To Romans of 150 B.C., *Humanitas* signified a thoughtful cultivated intelligence, cognizant of man's condition, his responsibilities and fallibilities; its meaning was intended to sharply contrast with *Feritas* or "the way of the wild ones." One could not speak of artistic creation without using the verb *poiesis* which implicitly specified esthetic activity expressing *humanitas*.

The situation is precarious. Historical consciousness has offered "aware composers" two end-game choices. Total serialization naively believes everything explainable, while practitioners of improvisation throw up their hands believing everything inexplicable. Western composers denying this situation, believing in the past, must face the fact that their language admirably lends itself to selling cigarettes and shampoo, and that marches have always served to convince: inspiring opposing sides to slaughter. And, in his antiseptic laboratory, far from any maddening crowd, sits the purified electronic composer, securely splicing bleeps, bloops and plaaps. Perhaps a solution to music's crisis and the composer's responsibility lies between these paths. To the Greeks, 'crisis' meant judgment. Convinced that music will continue in spite of ourselves, we need never despair over being human. The situation is precarious. Let us simply not be afraid of what the individual counts for.

<sup>1</sup>Ernst Krenek, *Tradition in Perspective, Perspectives of New Music, Princeton University Press, Vol. 1, page 37.*

<sup>2</sup>Leon Schidlowky, *The Crisis in Music, Pan-American Union Bulletin, Pan-American Union, Washington, D.C. April, 1952.*