
LETTER TO THE EDITOR

From Michael Graubart

Benjamin Skipp's propositionally-challenged but very interesting article on Arvo Pärt in the July *Tempo* ('Out of Place in the 20th Century: Thoughts on Arvo Pärt's Tintinnabuli Style') makes, explicitly or implicitly, some generalized claims which also call out for challenge. Here are a few of them.

Unity as a criterion of value has been tacitly assumed, has been questioned, is worthy of continuing discussion. But Benjamin Skipp continually slides in and out of a conflation of unity *within* and unity *between* works. In fact (and here comes a rival generalization that, too, invites challenge) it was just in the period in which uniqueness, individuality, difference between one work and the next, and difference between one composer and the one before, became more and more valued – late Romanticism and early Modernity – that the need for unity within each work became more and more strongly felt. Indeed, it is only when a work is internally unified that it can possess a character all of its own; and only then does it become possible to talk about its difference from other, equally strongly characterized, works.

Mr. Skipp regards Pärt's eschewing of technology in composition and performance as related to his search for spirituality and the numinous and, interestingly, sees his acceptance of sound recordings and videos for the propagation of his music as ironically opposed to this. Mr. Skipp refers particularly to Steve Reich and other minimalists as using technological means for the creation of their music, but also implies that this is a general tendency amongst postmodern composers as a whole. In fact, the use of technology is in no way widespread amongst postmodern 'classical' composers, or modernist ones for that matter, and for most of them its avoidance has more to do with humanism, spontaneity and expressive contact with listeners than with anything transcendental. A contrast between Pärt and, say, Reich in terms of the use of technology only makes sense if Pärt is viewed as in other respects a fellow-minimalist. But it is precisely Pärt's avoidance of the strict repetitiveness and mechanically-systematic processes of gradual transformation for which technology is so useful that distances him from Reich. His avoidance of technology in compo-

sition and initial performance has more to do, I suspect, with the non-Reichian way in which he wants his musical ideas to transform themselves during the progress of a piece – and, doubtless, with his faith in the spirituality of human beings – than with an equation of technology with Enlightenment secularism.

For Mr. Skipp, the 'purely formal ingenuity' of Bach's counterpoint (whatever 'purely formal' may mean here) relates him to Enlightenment's trust in human reason. Is there anything, in Bach or elsewhere, more ingenious – and less dedicated to Enlightenment humanism – than some of Ockeghem's or Obrecht's pre-Enlightenment canonic structures? Or *less* ingenious in that 'formal' sense than the first prelude from the '48' which Pärt uses in *Credo*? Or, to use better examples, since *Credo* is not yet a tintinnabuli piece (and, moreover, to use examples of the profoundest spirituality), 'Erbarme Dich' or 'Wahrlich, wahrlich' from the *St. Matthew Passion*? As for equal temperament (for which the C major prelude from the first book of the '48' is supposed to be iconic), so far from representing mathematical perfection as an ideal of the Enlightenment, it is a pragmatic way of coping with the unfortunate aporia in Nature (seen by some as evidence for the Fall) between the harmonic series and the cycle of fifths, the former of which by itself does, as was recognized by the Greeks, represent a kind of mathematical perfection.

For Bach's contemporaries, his old-fashioned counterpoint was *opposed* to the spirit of the Enlightenment. For me, it is Bach's end-directed, teleological sense of harmony, allied to his rhythmic drive, that differentiates him from his contemporaries much more than his contrapuntal ingenuity; and Christianity is nothing if not teleological.

Mr. Skipp pertinently quotes Paul Hillier on the importance to society of myth. But to be thus important, myth must not be a museum exhibit, a quaint object of curiosity or sentiment, but must be connected to the present by continuity of tradition. Schoenberg was in that sense a traditionalist, carrying on, even through his brief period of radical modernism in the years immediately before the First World War, the procedures of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Wagner and Brahms. Webern's case was already more problematic. His chromaticism

and his motivic work, like Schoenberg's, were part of an ongoing tradition; but his adoption of the canonic structures and even, in one case, the long-note notation of 16th-century polyphony in his late works is more a reversion than a continuation. Listening to Pärt's tintinnabuli music, it is hard to distinguish in one's subjective reactions between spirituality and nostalgia.

Mr. Skipp writes that '(t)he shaping of plain-song was less an individual activity and more a communal response to repeated recitations of religious texts'. That ubiquitous *incipit*, 'Credo in unum Deum', that we hear intoned during performances of Classical mass settings? Maybe. But all those wonderfully-shaped, extended, melismatic melodies? Edith Gershon-Kiwi and Egon Wellesz between them showed more than half a century ago that some Gregorian chants at least derived from melodies still sung at the time of their research in remote Jewish communities encapsulated within Arab countries – melodies, therefore, associated with very different words in a very different language with quite different habits of declamation. And the practice of cantors

in today's synagogues continues to illustrate the power of individual creativity in singing traditional texts. It is important not to confuse the diversity of creative origins with the selective adoption and transformation of music when it is used by societies. And it is here – and perhaps through a sociological and a Marxist analysis such as is hinted at by Mr. Skipp's reference to Capitalism – that it would be interesting and valuable to examine topics such as Pärt's 'palatability', the social esteem to be gained by an interest in contemporary music whilst achieving it without tears, nostalgia for a diatonic innocence and the desire for transcendence and mysticism. And it is in this socio-economic context rather than in terms of a contradictory attitude to technology that Pärt's embracing of recordings and videos of his music, once it has been performed without technological means, becomes relevant and important.

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