

THE CASE FOR COLLECTIVE MUSICAL CREATION

The cultivated Westerner has such a strict conception of the nature and the ends of artistic creation that even the hypothesis of a collective creative act seems aberrant to him. In a word, our official music is the property of an informed milieu or an elite. It is transmitted by writing; and, if this writing becomes more and more detailed and elaborate as one approaches the present, that is because it has the task of conserving intact (one might say forever) the thought of the creator, whose “personality,” as Schumann has already remarked, is the supreme good.

Personality is that by which a given creator distinguishes himself from all others and acquires the inestimable value of being an exception. It also manifests itself, if not by deliberate opposition, at least by conscious deviation. Artistic creation engenders “works,” things made and finished in detail, which detach themselves from the creator as soon as they have made their appearance, to follow their own destiny.

Devoid of practical utility, the work of art is gratuitous. Those concerned with it seek only beauty and the spiritual enjoyment which it

Translated by Leon Apt.

brings them. Our musical art, then, has no other than the aesthetic objective. Let us add that the creator can achieve the objectives he aims at only through the medium of a third—the interpreter, whose chief virtue is effacement in conformity. Let us also recall that the laws of integral originality and textual reproduction are proper only to Europe, and there only in the last few centuries. The high Asian cultures still ignore them.

For many a priori reasons the lettered West judges as unacceptable the concept of a collective creation, divided among a community. Nevertheless, at other times this concept has had axiomatic value for more than one excellent mind. Those whom we still call “romantics” do not doubt that a melody can spring spontaneously from the depths of the popular soul or that the unanimous concourse of everyone could give it birth. They believe that neither instruction nor legislation plays the least part in this birth. Communal creation, it belongs to all who shelter it, and only the fidelity of this multiple being assures its perenniality.

In 1830 Ampère said:

In primitive ages individuality was practically non-existent. All the members of a social body had the same degree of culture, the same opinions, the same sensations, and lived the same moral life. Imagination was practically a universal gift; poetry was everywhere; the poet was similar to other men . . . he sang what was in all their hearts and spirits. In expressing his thought he expressed general thought. It was the time when the venerable individual was the race, the tribe. The poet was nothing more than the voice of this collective individual.

One hundred years later Bartók did not contradict him. On the contrary, the concept of the “poet,” already so nebulous with Ampère, was to disappear entirely for him. To be just, the romantics have told us nothing regarding the manner in which this is elaborated. Perhaps they refused to reflect on the theme that the melody of a whole people takes on the personality of each participant, bestowing credit on the living or the dead; this might have offended the majesty of the unfathomable mystery. Himself instructed by direct experience, Bartók is not much more loquacious. If he carefully studies peoples’ “instinct of variation” and its effects, he scarcely lingers on the sources of the variations themselves. According to him, there is no reason to search for the origin of borrowed elements, because, in general, they are of little importance. In any case, nothing would indicate that an isolated peasant personality was capable of inventing absolutely new melodies.

But well before this brief appeared, a generation of men of reason

The Case for Collective Musical Creation

had attacked the romantic theory, or vision. Relying on the most ancient of scientific method, they achieved the articulation of a law: "every song [which was and still is the common term] has its author and consequently a place and date of birth." As a subsidiary, for a long time they stipulated that the author could belong only to the nation's lettered elite, who alone possessed the gift of creativity. The ignorant are restricted to imitating them—their share consisting alone in sometimes clumsy, sometimes fascinating, imitation. We can then only gather the "wealth of fallen culture" in cultural wastelands; the scholar has the limited task of identifying this wealth and studying its transformation. If any manner of artistic invention were found among the illiterate, it could only be regarded as the endowment of rare, gifted individuals whose names are lost, and from whom those least endowed with talent have borrowed. If this is the case, it is because it could not have been otherwise.

The major argument which supports and continues to support these affirmations is that a diffuse creative act and a multiple intelligence appear to be unimaginable in the plural. (And to this is referred anyone who bases his thought in all questions on the literal statement of some treatise and who is constantly obsessed by the precepts and interdictions of the schools.) To be truthful, we have never been able to accept fully the illiterate creator, apart from some short improvisation. On the other hand, we have succeeded in tracing back the names of poets and composers of hundreds of songs which are actually sung, especially in Germany. These songs are recent. For the more distant ages we would need to prove a falling-off in resemblance among several popular melodies—French as well as others—and those of the church. And we would need to demonstrate that, before having heard them, the people had no previous knowledge of any sort of music.

The excavation of archives, or a simple name, or an allusion to some society often has permitted the designation of the historical event to which a song had reference when reality had faded into legend. At the same time such corroboration also dated and designated the author: a soldier serving in such a regiment in Holland during such a campaign of the eighteenth century, for example. From there it followed inescapably that at the outset there was a "work," as we understand it, whose original form must be in principle capable of reconstruction. Celebrated works are tested with similar reconstructions for poetry, and we also attempt this technique, with less courage, for music. This

argument breaks down when considered in the light of information acquired even in the last half-century alone. To begin with, there is no proof that the misunderstood is irrevocably incomprehensible or that the unimaginable is inevitably impossible. The number of natural phenomena that we have finally understood has, on the contrary, increased with dizzy speed. Could the collective creation be, perhaps, precisely one of these natural phenomena?

The hypothesis that productions of art are confined to "high" society runs into still more severe objections. Even Europe recognized that ethnic groups, or "peoples," subsist in which a lettered elite has been lacking for a long time or has failed to appear as an artistic model. That the plainsong appeared in the West in the milieu of peoples ignorant of any music is formally contradicted by all our knowledge; such peoples have never been encountered in any other part of the world. At most, not only does it appear (and the analysis confirms this) that the church, as self-styled master of the song of the multitudes, has reabsorbed (either by deliberate purpose or in self-defense) a good number of melodies from those whom she evangelized but also there is proof that the first written European compositions, which derive from liturgical melodies, imitate the earlier procedures. Historians of the nineteenth century, when they discovered these compositions, took them for monastic speculations, so extravagant that they shocked the taste of their time. Since then, however, similar compositions have been discovered on other continents, quite far from Rheims or Saint-Denis. This time the current flows from low to high. But the question, "Who were the inventors of the religious airs that the common man adopted?" is still with us. If the inventors have undertaken the task of reforming a heritage, as they seem in fact to have done, the question arises logically, "From whom did they receive the heritage?" and the argument is only transposed in time.

On the other hand, several attempts at restoration which at first sight were as convincing as they were brilliant ended in resounding failures. Thus one may consider the example of a scholar who gave as theme of a sung narration a historic account written in the late Middle Ages and about the country, Piedmont, to which the only variant readings then accessible and the inaccurate proper names conducted him. But as new readings were found, particularly in eastern Europe, all trace of history was eradicated, as well as all possibility of localizing the story. All that remained were the skeleton of an impersonal anecdote and the adventi-

The Case for Collective Musical Creation

tious details superimposed on it. The inquiry, now better founded, ended by fixing on—anyone, any time, any place.

The statement of this German historian, to whom we are indebted for the rediscovery of the signatures of the authors of many songs registered in the village, have not advanced us further. They demonstrate only that the countryfolk absorbed a great many urban side products, but these statements clarify the problem of creation only on two conditions: first, that the supremacy of the printed word among the rustics questioned by our inquirer can be traced very far back into the past (and nothing that he cites or that Goethe and others cited before him carries us back beyond the end of the eighteenth century); second, that the villages which he visited had never possessed anything peculiar to themselves (which he does not pretend they did). Quite to the contrary, even in Germany, from which is derived the thesis of the uncultivated man who is receptive but sterile and of the “values of a debased culture,” the most resolute defenders of these theses are faced by acceptable artistic manifestations on every level, which cannot be incorporated in them. They have thought that they could escape this impasse by declaring these manifestations too rudimentary to merit examination. Unable to define them and to account for their origin, they nevertheless expressly conceded that these were the products of an ancient “communal culture” whose reality they recognized, while depreciating it. The fact is that, despite arguments in the abstract, “something subsists—an irreducible ground,” and André Schaeffner asks himself properly whether it would not “have been more rational to apply first an analytical effort, which scholars have preferred (vainly, it should be added), to a repertory which deviates from it and varies according to the taste of the collector.”

According to all evidence, a misunderstanding of some sort continues. The “residue” in question, whatever it may be, evaluated according to existing norms, that is, aesthetic quality, is then the spiritual property of a particular society—one which the theoreticians have made the subject of their contempt since the distant origins of our scholarly art. If they do not call it, as we do, “primitive,” they consider it completely vulgar, ignorant, and deprived of the instruction in which they glory. It is illiterate.

But the absence of writings overturns to such an extent the conditions of creation that we are forced to reform the very notion we have of it. Without the aid of a writing, the created object would endure only

through the universal consent of those who preserve it—itsself a consequence of the uniformity of their tastes. The oral “work” exists only in the memory of him who adopts it, and it arises in the concrete only by his will: their lives merge. No written document stabilizing an edition of it once and for all, this work is not a “made thing” but a thing that “one makes” and remakes perpetually. This is to say that all the individual realizations of a melodic patron are equally true and have the same weight in the balance of judgment. It indicates also that “the instinct of variation” is not a simple rage to vary but a necessary sequence in the absence of an unimpeachable model.

If there is a creation, half of it is ephemeral. Furthermore, it is two-headed, divided between a hypothetical creator and its translators, without which it would return to nothingness. Having made these preliminary observations, it is self-evident that illiteracy, oral transmission, and identity of preferences are only the signs or corollaries of a certain type of civilization, essentially characterized by a uniformity of occupation and submission to an inherited state of affairs. From Lisbon to the Caucasus such a civilization is still encountered in more or less advanced degrees of dissolution (to talk only of Europe, which is often wrongly dissociated from other continents). It is to be understood that this civilization is always turned toward the past and that the rules that it respects come to it from the ancients. They remain present to the spirit of each one, without it being useful to consign them to the past, and each holds them at once as good and as sacred. Faith and law retain their force as long as the soul of the community which they govern conserves its integrity.

That is why the desire to innovate, the moving capital of a cultivated creator, does not in reality have any place in the preoccupations of the “primitive.” In relation to what would he innovate? He is concerned with preserving his property, not with replacing it. Better still, this psychic behavior sets modern man before a fact which he has not yet comprehended: it is the intemporality of so-called primitive creations. A house or cabin, built last night according to a traditional plan, is new only in its material reality; but the moment of its completion is of no importance: it is a thousand years old in its spiritual reality. It varies an architectural type in the same manner that a singer varies a melodic type. The less the milieu of the constructor and of the singer have submitted to foreign influences and reabsorbed infiltrations, the more both of them defy history. In addition, in opposition to the “composer,” who

The Case for Collective Musical Creation

is conscious of the significance of every stroke of his pen, the uncultivated is conscious of no "method" (the word is Rameau's) and cannot account for any technical process or for any theoretical concept. His domain is integral empiricism.

The meaning of the term "creation" having been thus roughly readjusted, we should find it easier to approach the creator himself. To be honest, no one has ever succeeded in apprehending this elusive being. His individual terrestrial existence still remains an assumption. Those who believe say that it matters little whether we can or cannot recognize him or name him: sound reason suffices to certify that he has been; his creations attest to it. Others elude questioning by denying these creations. In practice, however, our investigations have regularly failed, even when restricted to as well-defined an object as a song correctly described, inspired by a recent event. Not long since I reported several, all equally deceiving. The surprising thing was not the absence of authors but rather their excessive proliferation in the course of the inquiry. Limited at the start to as few inventors as possible, the research extended into an ever widening circle in which each individual either lied or told the truth in rapid succession. It was as if the work had hastened to hide itself in anonymity and to recede into the atemporal as quickly as it had appeared. New, as it was, it was reduced by one or the other of these properties to the impersonal and to the "already seen."

As long as the analysis has been applied only to the assembled materials within the limits of a region, a race, or a country, the confrontations have brought to light such a profusion of dissimilarities and oppositions that hope for perceiving anything other than a mass of irreconcilable oddities appeared vain. Still, it is worth noting in passing that even in western Europe, Germany included, where public instruction has been going on for some time, the first collection of popular music to appear contains passages which our scholar has not accounted for in any measure. We needed to look at the thousands of documents compiled from all parts of the world in order that, by examining the contrasts which astonished us, we could begin to glimpse some analogies or likenesses. And these surprised us even more. As our information increased, we saw that identical phenomena, which we first presumed to be local or "national," had reappeared in Africa, in Asia, or in the South Sea Islands.

If these agreements strike us immediately, the reasons for them are difficult to find; and they are penetrated only occasionally by meticulous

analysis in which our legislation can serve merely as a term of comparison. Is it indeed a question of “works”—such as the illiterate people of Europe would have demanded from those better instructed than they—works obviously constructed, of some magnitude, and resembling those which we commonly call a “song.” To be sure, more than one society has evolved in this way. Nevertheless, what daily examination discloses is less the ordering of elements put into the work than the elements themselves and their immutability—less the constancy of the arrangements than that of the pieces which compose them. Examined closely, these building stones reveal that they deal with scales, rhythms, or structures; they also reveal that they are determined by an intelligible principle which adheres to a more or less extensive ensemble or process, or, if you prefer, a system. We recognize the systems by the “natural” character of their principle, by their usage, and by the methodical exploitation of their resources. Origin, by means of a suite of fifths, is sufficient explanation for such scales—a simple arithmetical agreement of duration for such a rhythmical category; articulation by some variety of syntactic cells rather than by equal series, for such forms.

If the origin of systems is to be sought in elementary material data, we should not be surprised to learn that even the most rudimentary have continued alive to our time in the jingles of children. One would be even less astonished that, in the bosom of primitive societies which practice them, each member of the society possesses the mechanism of the system and knows how to make its springs operate, whereas the musician educated in the Western manner has great difficulty deciphering them. This amounts to saying that the systems do not have an author and cannot have one. They furnish only the materials of a creation. Among the most indigent—supposedly the most ancient—these materials seem to us insufficient for the constitution of any sort of music, when certainly even a “scale” of two sounds associated with a rhythm, using only two beats and a strictly symmetrical form, presents, arithmetically speaking, a good number of possibilities. But the more that these possibilities multiply, the more they crystallize into commonplace repertoires with flowing expressions and formulas in which we might detect the lure of creation, although they were derived almost entirely from the system itself.

It follows that one of these first vocalizations nourishes by itself the whole of a song. Usually we join several, whose combination results in the construction of a melodic disposition. Without any compulsion dic-

The Case for Collective Musical Creation

tating its choice, a creative work has at this time taken place. Theoretically, the selection of components and their placement in an order could very well be done in the imagination of one alone, who, in transmitting the fruit to others, charges that it be utilized thereafter in a suitable manner. And he then sinks immediately into oblivion—by the effect of an inexorable law which, however, is still unexplained. To this conjecture the strongest objection is that the initiator, if he exists, should of necessity manifest himself by the “originality” of his invention or, in other words, by some melodic passage whereby his individual quality would be sensed to be distinct from the undifferentiated mass which surrounds him. Consequently, it would be necessary that the repertoire of “primitive” societies (or, better still, of a state to which this qualification would reasonably apply) was composed—taking into account the restriction imposed by the ruling systems—of a great variety of melodic types.

Our research, however, has established precisely the opposite. Perhaps we have stressed too lightly the fact that, of certain populations which had for a long time no contact with Europe, some recognize only one type of music while others recognize only another. The reality is always less simple than we would wish. Nevertheless, Bartók, without going as far as Polynesia or the Cape, remarked that in a coherent and essentially unchanged group we do not recognize a vast, motley sampling but rather its opposite—a style, an expression of a general manner of sensation and action. These concrete manifestations are so closely matched that we take them at first for simple variations of a unique melody. The dilemma is thus perfectly clear: either the individuals who are thought to be creators do not stake all on a single and same creation, in which case they dissolve into the multitude and remain forever mythical, or we must agree that our problem has been a second time poorly posed and that it is a question, in fact, of something else.

This “something else,” in that case, we must necessarily consider, is the collection creation. We should not make the mistake of understanding by that the power of extracting from nothing a *res facta* without like. This has long been said. The question is one of knowing if the collective predilections carry a human plurality toward such of the artifices permitted by a system, rather than toward others, and if, assuming the plurality is able even to make artifices, that the material of more or less stable structures is capable of passing for a distinct object to our eyes.

There are no grounds for doubting this. In truth, the reason for these

propensities remains and will remain a mystery. But the perpetual elaboration of these same substances is easily observed in the mass as well as in each particle of the "social body." This has often been studied, although imperfectly. The *Variationstrieb* is just that. If it were really collective, it would then be equivalent to creation. But could that be? Assuredly, since it *is* so.

Nevertheless, that it could have given life throughout the world to so much apparently incompatible music inclines one toward doubt and raises an important question. But mathematics answers this. If one remembers that we are still very far from knowing all the original systems that govern melody, rhythm, and form, not to forget polyphony; that we ignore the relationships between thousands of languages of the earth and music; and, finally, that each new unity, when added to a number of combinations, multiplies them dizzily, then the fog is slowly dissipated, and little by little the irrational becomes logical.

And, yet, all this is only of value for peoples or tribes—henceforth theoretic—in which the generative systems retain their rigor. These systems, however, are hard to kill, even when submerged under secular deposits. And when, in the seventeenth or eighteenth century, and in France, some urban rhymester once more takes from one of them, in order to give wings to a song, its most common turns, but also the most typical of them, his song resembles in this respect the hut, at one and the same time new in construction as well as immemorial from the primitive. To conclude, then, the poets have seen—taking everything into account—more justly than the scholars, and the dreamers more justly than the men of good sense.

As we go to press, we learn of the death, at Geneva, of Constantin Brailoiu, whose loss will be cruelly felt in the various circles concerned with musicology.