
LETTER TO THE EDITOR

From Julian Silverman

Return of the Perennial Question

Readers of the January issue of *Tempo* may have come across an article of mine: the first of a series of articles by various writers on some general themes of interest to contemporary musicians. But the version you will have seen represents an early stage in the formative process of the piece. This unique snapshot of the author at work represents a first hurried response to a letter from David Johnson in the October 2002 *Tempo* before (somewhat provisional) emendations/ extensions were made in order to create a (short) article.

Calum MacDonald and I are each claiming responsibility for this cock-up, in a very *noblesse oblige* type of gentlemanly dispute. To avoid falling out over the matter, and to avoid either sending you functionless body parts or the whole thing all over again surrounded by yet more

verbiage, I will set out the argument which, I thought, got somewhat underplayed the first time round.

I was claiming that composers' use of the past almost always misses the vital point. A glass case is not conducive to life. Living bodies move and react to their environment, and they are subject to the laws of evolution. Likewise pieces of music. There is an interplay of forces both within a piece and between pieces across time. It is not, for example, as paradoxical as it might seem that it is precisely those who wish to return to 'tonality' who understand its dynamic even less than those who try to avoid it. Hence my remark that the logical consequence of the consistent use of tonality is atonality. If you want to stop the clock, I said, it is not enough to set it back, you'd have to smash it.

To illustrate this point, I took the two examples given by David Johnson: why not write the extra six cello suites that Bach didn't get around



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to writing? Why not take the formal explorations Beethoven was making in his last years further? My remarks about Bach were printed, but what I went on to say was that Beethoven's forms were, in a way, extensions of the same procedures Bach had applied: the concern with allowing the particular figures and motifs to create their own form had by now overstepped the boundaries set by the formal mould.

The discoveries that composers make are as real as those of biology or physics, even though one is listening more for the process of discovery than for the 'results'. And these various processes of discovery obey the same principles of development, which give rise, within a piece and historically, to the same 'phase-transitions', emergent properties etc. as other developments in nature and in thought.

Musical systems, styles, 'periods' and languages can be seen as nothing more than aggregate-generalizations from particular pieces: or more precisely from the basic units which underlie each piece. On the other hand, one can also look at the relationship exactly the other way round: systems create the piece (just as with speech, a word cannot exist without a language). The relationship between the two is analogous to the relationship between individual and species or phenotype and genotype. The interplay between the two, the dynamic principles which underlie the origin, construction and development of a piece and of systems etc, the principles of growth and transformation at work, cannot be rediscovered / recreated without discovering the fundamental units: the equivalents of 'phonemes', genes, sub-atomic particles or whatever of which various musical systems are made. We lack a universal musicology. The start of such a discipline would be a study of the properties and potential of the quasi-Piagetian practical operations which form the elementary constituents of the various systems, etc. These operations are at root, very simple – easy to imitate, improvise and memorize. Only when they have been mastered is it possible to manipulate them and harness their power and hence to further the creation of

viable new systems, etc. (instead of the artificial ones created by ill-thought-out and sterile schemata in recent decades). In other words, the music of the future needs a past. One needs 'real' music to create a 'new music' which can become real. But this is a subject which would require much more than a short article in a journal like this.

Suffice it to say that the very act of composition nowadays is a historical statement, regardless of the will of the composer. Every composer is obliged to invent the virtual cultural world which each piece inhabits – and s/he has to do this anew for every piece. Composers are actually doing this whether or not they chose to be aware of the fact. The results are likely to be more interesting with composers who know what they are doing! The struggle, so to speak, to learn how to talk in a language which doesn't quite exist yet, has to be one of the major responsibilities, pleasures and meanings of composition.

Actually this process, whereby music history itself becomes increasingly an intrinsic property – the subject of an individual piece – started centuries ago. Monteverdi's *Vespers* of 1610 plays off the modal system against the tonal in the same way as Schumann's *Kreisleriana* plays off baroque against 'romantic' (as though there had been no intervening 'classical' period).¹ And Beethoven (in the op. 132 quartet) created out of a bogus ancient Lydian mode an extraordinary extended or fragile and ethereal tonality which hovers between existence and non-existence, an evocation of Beethoven's own experience of recovery from illness. It is an amazing masterpiece of creative misunderstanding of the past – a much better model than the ill-digested regurgitations or artificial manipulations of earlier material current today. Perhaps this is what David Johnson was suggesting when he seemed almost to be boasting that he couldn't write pastiche...

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'Perennial Questions' resumes in the July issue with Michael Graubart on 'What are 12-note rows really for?'

¹ Who says there was, anyway? If the Baroque represents music whose time-scale was determined by the nature of the occasion, and Romantic where there was no occasion, and/or the composer had to create or imagine one, then perhaps the classical period was simply a romantic or transitional phase of the baroque...