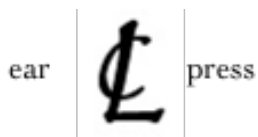


Notes
Toward a Contextual Ars Musicae

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*Originally published in the Graduate Student Journal,
Number 4, Spring, 1965
Berkeley*



2018

Notes
toward a contextual
Ars Musicae

DEFINITIONS: the intelligent pursuit of a subject must involve thought within varying areas of discussion, such areas including those of criticism, analysis, and definition: it is therefore to the point to examine what definition is possible concerning music before attempting an examination of the nature and significance of the art. One occasionally hears the pronouncement: "That's not music; that's noise." Although usually intended as the expression of a critical judgment, such a statement is in fact definitional. There can be no question that the elements of music are aural events, and music may be defined, simply, as an aural event occupying a significant temporal duration: indeed, a narrower definition may only serve to abrogate the universality which should characterize any definition, for some hear music in birdcalls, and some in random noises from mechanical sources.

We are, however, dealing with music as an art; and it is in the nature of art to transfigure its materials. That this is a statement of function, and not of essence, need in no way inhibit our subsuming it under a section devoted to the definition of our terms. A musical work, then, is *an aural event composed of elements which are to some degree related*, whether by plan (as by a composer) or by occasion (as occurs within the "eye of the beholder").

**Music
defined as an
Art Form**

The two broad categories within which we may treat musical phenomena are composition and performance. *Composition* is the art of conceiving music and communicating that concept toward a possible performance. *Performance* is the act of realizing such a concept in terms of physical sounds.

**Composition
and
Performance**

The *materials* of music, roughly in the order of their historical prominence within musical contexts, are: *rhythm*, the pattern of the repetition of a sound; *volume*, or the degree of loudness of a sound; *pitch*, the position of a sound in a scale of sounds arranged from 'low' to 'high' (such position expressed physically in terms of the vibration causing the sound); and *timbre*, the 'tone-color' associated with the source of a sound (this being an expression of the reinforcing or subsidiary sounds produced by a source directed to the production of a given pitch). To be added to these materials are *duration*, the length of a sound; *attack* and *vibrato*, modifications of volume and pitch; *noise*, sounds of such complexity as to resist the assign of a pitch. and, of course, *silence*, the lack of any sound.

**The
materials of
music**

COMPOSITION: we have defined composition as the art of conceiving music and the communication of such a concept

**Compositional
procedures**

toward a possible performance. The expression of relationships within a musical context implies the manipulation of musical materials toward a formulation of such relationships. Such manipulations, together with choices made among materials to be used within a work, constitute compositional procedures. The function of such manipulations would seem to be the formulation of units within the compositional network we have been referring to as a musical context. At this point it may be advantageous to digress a little to examine a little more closely the ramifications of a contextual consideration of art in general.

**Digression:
contextualism
in discussions
of art**

Aquianistic esthetics, discussed by James Joyce in his novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, considers a work of art in three aspects: *integritas*, the work as an entity; *consonantias*, the internal relationships generated by the constituent parts of this entity; and *claritas*, the final significance generated by the work of art. The *claritas* is a function of the other two terms, and is determined by that aspect (of an entity) which reflects its generation by the parts of the entity.¹)

Form

In discussing a work of art in these terms, then, we are dealing largely with a kind of formal analysis, in which the contents of such a work are created as elements within a kind of network or context; the work itself is the expression of that context. (This is pertinent not only in a discussion of music, where, with rare exceptions, representation of extra-musical phenomena is virtually inoperable; but also in the discussion of any art work where, for the purposes of evaluation of strictly technical procedures, any 'meaning' or commentary (residing without, though resulting from, the procedures of the art in question) is left aside.)

This kind of formal analysis is generally preoccupied with considerations of *formal hierarchies*. A complex form expresses itself in terms of the relationships of its constituent elements; these elements in turn may be expressions of subsidiary relationships. It is the effect of a work of art, then to state a relationship of a more or

¹This latter may be paraphrased by the character of the work (to which Stephen Dedalus referred as its *quiddity* in the Joyce novel); or its 'meaning'; but 'meaning' here is a misleading word, used so nearly in its common usage that misapprehension inevitably attends its incorporation in discussions of art.

less complex nature. Warning: by plan or occasion; implicit or accessory.

Such a statement has generally, within the tradition of the last few thousand years, been considered the direct goal of the artist's work: that is, a work of art has been taken as the expression of a final statement (or *claritas*) with a well-defined character, determined in advance by its creator and understood generally by its audience; and the measure of the degree to which this statement is *generally* recognized is in some areas still taken as the measure of validity of the work in question. Recently, however, it has become increasingly apparent that the work of art may be an expression of a set of relationships the recognition of which may be left to the individual sensibilities of the audience, and the artist has been emancipated from any obligation to a preconceived reaction on the part of his audience. This has come about gradually: in terms of painting, de Chirico left the interpretation of the representations within his paintings to the individual sensibilities of his audience, this as a natural outgrowth of traditions involving the uses of ambiguity within art, traditions reaching back to the Renaissance; and subsequent painters were thereby enabled to push this tendency one degree further by leaving the interpretations of their forms to the sensibilities of their audiences. This recent reaffirmation of the principle that "beauty lies in the eye of the beholder" operates within the theories underlying much avant-garde art of this century; we might cite, as examples, Dada, Surrealism, 'happenings,' and much of the recent work of the American composer John Cage. Such a revolution within art theory is not without its repercussions in the formulation of statements of criticism; these may best be considered later in a section devoted to such formulations.

We have referred to the choosing and manipulation of musical materials, when directed to the composition of music, as compositional procedure. Such procedure is directed to the organization of materials into formal constituents [by the audience, the performer, or, in the case of such precompositional techniques as tonality or dodecaphony (*v. infra*), by the composer himself]. The manipulation of musical materials includes *scoring*, the choice of the sound-sources to be used; *pitch organization*, the choice of a method by which to relate pitches (including applications of such precompositional techniques as *tonality*, the organization of pitches into 'scales' of seven tones with reference to a basic intervallic structure; or *dodecaphony*, the organization of pitches into 'sets' of

Participation
of the
audience
within the
significance of
a work of art

End of
digression

Compositional
procedure

tonality
dodecaphony

twelve tones in a like manner, but with apparently different psychological connotations within our culture); *tempi*, the speeds at which incidences of change occur with a work; *meter*, the distribution of primary and secondary beats within the rhythmic progression; *voice leading*, the linking of tone to tone within a given strand of the aural texture; *phrasing*, the organization of materials into elements of the formal design; and so forth.

Tradition

The tradition of music arises from the phenomenon that certain attitudes have, at least in the past, always been common, within certain limitations of time and place, to groups of composers. Thus it was common among the Flemish school to organize rhythms according to the principle of isorhythm, whereby the rhythmic organization of a work was generated from that of one rhythmic motive, and it was common among European composers ca. 1680-1930 to organize pitches according to a given plan whereby certain of the pitches (within a tonality) were used with greater prominence than others. Again, certain formal structures attain prominence, flourish, and inevitably decline, as attested by the history of the sonata-allegro form ca. 1770-1900. The tendency today seems to be in a direction away from the imposition of common procedures on individual compositions; instead, each work is increasingly concerned with its own procedure, and the continuation of tradition resides in the assimilation, within individual works, of prior procedure, or adaptations thereof, drawn from the common fund of musical history.

Revolutions of musical style

The history of music is the history of a continuing tradition, surviving revolutionary periods by assimilating the discoveries of these interruptions. A survey of this history will show such periods as represented by monody, homophony, polyphony, Ars Nova, the Italian Renaissance, the high Baroque, the Viennese classical school, and romanticism... Not all of these eras were the outgrowths of revolutionary attitudes: it is clear to us now, for example, that romanticism was the logical result of the continuing ascendancy of attitudes expressed by composers against the romantic school had once seemed to be reacting: Haydn, Mozart, and the sons of Bach come to mind as examples of precursors of romanticism once regarded as classicists against whom the romanticists rebelled. What looks like a barrier to contemporary, often turns out, with the hindsight of a few decades, to have been a bridge. There are, however, certain revolutionary periods of undeniable import: the impingement of secularism in the 12th and 13th centuries; discoveries of polyphonic techniques, given their

final impetus by the Flemish masters; Monteverdi's contributions to the new harmonic and expressive vocabularies. In contrast to these are such movements as 19th century romanticism, really an evolutionary step in music tradition; and dodecaphony, a revision of the extant notion of ordering pitches according to an a priori (or 'precompositional') formula.

The single innovation of our century, which time probably will eventually show to be only a dislocation of the tradition, not a revolution, is the emphasis on the possibility of a composer's contenting himself with devising procedures for performances which leave the final work of synthesizing formal constituents up to the audience; John Cage has been instrumental in establishing this tendency, which accounts for the prominence today of such techniques as aleatoric (or 'chance') composition and the allowing for improvisation within a compositional procedure.

The product of the composer is his *score*, the directions by which the performer is instructed to realize the composer's concept. The score may be more or less detailed; it may leave one area unspecified, as does *Art of Fugue* with regard to scoring and dynamics, while clearly specifying within other areas, as does this same work with regard to pitch. (The 19th century tried to specify performance details the more as its compositional procedure became increasingly ambiguous: Mahler and the Schoenberg of *Gurrelieder* are cases in point.) The language of written directions to the performer, like any language, is subject to change; and, historically at least, should probably be examined with a critical eye with regard to its clarity; for any language is no better than it communicates. In this area too, the tradition has proved to accept valid changes, and to resist only temporarily those innovations which contain valuable possibilities. Further, generations of composers have reflected their preoccupations in their scores, and devised methods of notating procedures which are important to their attitudes; to the extent that the significance of such procedures wane, notation becomes less complex and gives way to an increase in detailed notation of the more significant procedures and following epochs. As our contemporary musical attitude has lessened the operation of common procedure on individual works, so has it seen the proliferation of individual techniques of notation; and as symbols for the notation of (for example) rhythms wane within certain schools, along with the waning of interest in rhythmic procedures, we find increasing symbols for the notation of procedures which become increasingly significant within those

**20th century
innovation**

**Composition:
the score**

**Revisions of
notational
systems**

schools, such as auxiliary sounds produced by standard instruments (percussive noise on violins, plucked sounds on the piano, etc.) or microtones operating within the fabric of pitch organization.

**The obligation
of the performer
to the
composition**

PERFORMANCE: We have defined performance as the realization of a composition in terms of physical sounds. Performance procedures necessarily involve the performer's judgment in determining the character of the composition in question, and in directing their materials, and their technical skill at the manipulation of these materials, toward an accurate accounting of the effects deriving from procedures implicit in the composition. (The corollary of this is the composer's obligation not to transcend reasonable limitations of performance technique, or, alternatively, to accept the aural results of his directions to the performer.) While directing his attention to a true reading of the score, however, the performer necessarily comes between the composer and the listener; and although the performance should not subvert the composition, it may easily 'transform details of the composition in such a way as to introduce a character of its own; this is what is referred to as a personal reading.

**Musical
analysis in
performance**

An accurate performance of a score can only result from close study of the procedures implicit in its composition, as they are reflected in the notation. This implies a knowledge, on the part of the performers, of compositional procedures and attitudes; and while there are no doubt cases of intuition or mimicry producing good performances, these cases are rare, and serve to illustrate the strides to be made by the studious refinement of musical intuition: or adoption of the procedure, as well as the results, of the performance technique which is being imitated. To sound the slightest detail of a composition with authority requires an understanding of the function of that detail, and this implies some degree of analysis, either prefatory to or concurrent with the performance.

**Tradition
within
performance**

Such analysis can result only from sympathy with the work in its historical context, for, since a good performance (of a work expresses its place within musical tradition while determining its contributions to that tradition (and always incorporating these discoveries in, and deriving them from, a realization of the purely individual effects of the procedures within the score in question), such a performance must result from a balance between internal forces within the score and the derivation of these forces from musical tradition. In Aquinistic terms, a good performance

delineates both the *integritas* and the *consonantias* while expressing, through its examination of the formal forces operative during the progress of the work, its *claritas*. The effect of a failure to observe this principle is observed in many performances of contemporary music, which may err either on the side of awestruck, sanctimonious homage to the master in fashion at the moment, or in the direction of cerebral, dry recitations of compositional procedures, without expressing whatever *claritas* may result from these procedures.

Performance, then, far from occupying a position subservient to composition, is the means by which compositional procedures are realized; but a high degree of responsibility rests on the performer, who is thus obligated to the demands both of his instruments and of the concepts he is called upon to realize.

CRITICISM: The first obligation of critical thought is to determine the areas within which it may operate. At the beginning of these remarks it was observed that confusion can arise between critical and definitional statements.

A work of art may ultimately prove to be interesting, absorbing, or a bore; but its critical evaluation can proceed only from an investigation and evaluation of its procedures; we are left with only the definitional statement of a subjective response. An efficient criticism might therefore best begin with an investigation of these procedures. According to various schools, various evaluative standards are imposed on these investigations: stylistic purity within the work, economy of means, smoothness of the progression of compositional procedures, etc.; but care must be taken in the application of these lest they obtrude to the extent of concealing elements within the work in question, or distort elements to which they inapplicable.

Thus the materials of a piece of music may be appraised for the extent to which they are integrated within the structure growing out of their manipulation: the materials may then be either legitimate, or invalid 'gimmicks' inserted in the work either for their own sake or in order to conceal compositional weaknesses. The danger here, of course, is that because of unfamiliarity, a source may be rejected which might otherwise be used with compositional validity; this was at work in the famous rejection of Cesar Franck's Symphony in D Minor on the grounds that no symphony was scored for an orchestra including an English horn. Again, stylistic purity may be suspended as a compositional standard in favor of

**Viable areas
of criticism**

**Critical
standards and
dangers of
their false
application**

another, incompatible standard: this is exemplified in many of Berg's works, notably the incorporation of tonal implications within the Violin Concerto.

**Historicity
as a critical
operation**

Then too, just as an evaluation of the traditions within the period reflected in the work is a function in its performance, so does it operate within critical assessment of the work. The continuity of progression within a composition must be evaluated differently when dealing with Bach on the one hand, or Tchaikovsky on the other; for the traditions operative in their respective periods regarded musical progression differently. Bach's music, however intricate its form, is often characterized by a sort of 'organic growth'; Tchaikovsky's is marked by a procedure based on the contrast of subsidiary sections.

**Compositional
intent as a
critical
consideration**

Again, it is hardly to the point to attack a work for failing to achieve a purpose unintended by its creator. We have alluded to the critical implications of the heightened value placed in the early years of this century by the artist on the uses of ambiguity; such a radical change of attitude can serve as a pitfall to the critic careless enough to judge a work by standards which don't apply to it. There have always been critics who lived in history because of their errors in judging their contemporaries; these must inevitably include those who ignore work on pretext that it is beneath consideration; for while the neglect into which a work may fall, or the lack of influence it may leave behind, may reaffirm the notion of blind alleys branching out of the main stream, the very existence of such anomalies exposes the possibility of their generation from forces within a tradition: and the attack on them as demonstrations of the applicability of the fable of the emperor's new clothes, based as it is on the transfer of critical standards to a tradition in which such standards have no relevance, results logically in putting the critic in the position he had intended as the artist's. Especially in the case of certain contemporary works, care must be taken not to evaluate as a composition a precompositional set of directives given the performer as rules by which to improvise, for the result can only be meaningless criticism at best; in view of increased tendencies in this direction (as mentioned earlier in discussing 20th century innovations within the musical tradition) this will become a field for careful revision of present critical procedure.

**Materials of
criticism**

The materials brought to an evaluation, though with the most objective of procedures, must at bottom be of a personal nature: for taste itself is the product of cumulative experience of the field under survey. This taste must, however, be tempered by

curiosity, a desire to add to the accumulation of such experience, and it must be supplemented by that reflection which derives from an awareness of the impersonality of the historical procedure: for such momentary aberrations as the neglect of Machaut or Bach, or the eclipse of Beethoven by Meyerbeer, or the adulation of Brahms or Stravinsky, must inevitably be corrected in the long run.

Any work of art will inevitably be subsumed within the tradition: and while it may, and probably should, be evaluated first on its own merits, its greater import is determined by an examination with respect to that tradition from which experience has brought our standards. So we are brought to the purposes of criticism: to assess the current state of the tradition, examining a work both as to its derivations and its contributions; to discover and correct anomalous attitudes on the part of the public and musicians alike, that reason may prevail in the continuing development of that tradition; and to assist in furthering or formulating systems of esthetics (by which it is meant fields of procedures within which to operate for further delineation of relationships), that no possibilities may be overlooked in the process of that tradition.

**Purposes of
criticism**

—Charles REMOLIF
1964

AFTERWORD: Since context is all, the reader may want to know that this was written in the wake of a college education in English literature as taught in the 1950s, when The New Criticism was still in vogue. A certain amount of parody was intended: consider the nature of the periodical for which it was intended. Not yet thirty, I was trying to apply the principles of literary criticism to the discussion of music, which was just then becoming my main preoccupation. As to my *nom de plume*, there were several reasons for it.

—Charles Shere
November 2018