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History, Tradition and Responsibility

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Leon Schidlowsky's essay "The Crisis in Music" (Inter-American Music Bulletin No. 32) neatly summarizes the realities of today's creative music scene. Colleagues from other continents most likely agree with Mr. Schidlowsky's appraisal of the situation. Assertions, however, are merely points of view until put to the test of doubt. These following 'comments-in-reply' are not meant to be argumentative; their purpose is simply to provide a buffer, a varying perspective, and, hopefully, further elucidation.

To make the observation that the arts today live in age of words seems commonplace. Many examples of vociferous verbiage can be cited even in past cultural history. That today's music world is embroiled in word battles not only dissecting linguistics but pleading for a point of view which asks to be equated with a philosophy of life justifying creative acts, seems however, to do past artistic disputes one better. Yet from one standpoint, verbal defense should not be necessary today. Our century's search for a common musical practice

has at last, many believe, codified into a cosmopolitan, or at least international, musical style. Technical practices certainly have been leveled at similar notches. In comparing musical developments of various centuries, one can no longer seriously speak of neo-classic, nationalistic, or any other "istic" trends. Though one may lament the obliteration of what were once considered highly prized individual earmarks, even nationalism, disarmingly flaunted through musical style, has taught world history a lesson.

Many have observed that within the past decade, composers the world over are facing and dealing with the same musical problems. Also, according to many respected sources, music has been granted a new lease on life not only through technical procedures, but by virtue of a new historical dispensation. One might infer from all this (which no one seems to have done) that music may well be entering a new common-practice period. Anyone acquainted with newer music knows however that, paradoxically, matters are not quite so simple.

"The concept of tradition is dialectical and ambivalent as any concept that demands and allows of interpretation..."^{1/} Studied historical fact (or dialectical reconstruction, Mr. Krenek?) and a rolling of dice a la Cage, to give chance a greater chance in choosing the proper note (or avoiding the improper note if you will), are not necessarily musically reconcilable.

To describe a situation in terms of crisis suggests upheaval and disruption; actually, 'crisis' denotes an advanced state of affairs which have reached a decisive moment, a turning point. While it has been asked if the crisis be musical or social, no answer has been given and no succinct answer is possible. That a crisis exists in the materials of music should not bother us. Technical crisis have plagued music since the third was considered a codential dissonance. Yet, the major triad emerged. Similarly, after Gluck abandoned the zink, the orchestra was deprived of a soprano brass instrument able to play a diatonic scale. Yet we have the 'Tromba ventile' of Otello. The Gluck-Puccini squabbles of eighteenth century French versus Italian opera are forgotten -- except for eighteenth century French and Italian opera. Examples are not hard to come by. If an answer to the crisis of new music is not to be found in the quest for technique and procedure, what is the real nature of today's crisis? Mr. Schidlowsky has given us clues, but it is possible to be more specific.

Many critics and theorists consider the difficulties acutely circumscribed by the problems of twelve-tone harmony or Webern's linear development; they overlook the fact that Webern's polyphony is already one answer to the harmonic problem. If the Webern solution is available to all who would so choose, the vertical harmonic problem can be side-stepped by a horizontal approach. This seems implicit in Mr. Schidlowsky's explanation of twelve-tone origin. Again, one sees that no crisis need exist.

In reviewing recent analytical articles and essays on new music, one may suspect that many musicians possibly, though unintentionally, are obscuring basic issues. It is always difficult to verbalize about music and the following may illustrate the pitfalls and dissection of language referred to earlier.

A claim, for example, couched in technical jargon, that the Vienna School's major pre-occupation were with frequency, intensity and

timbre, might seem to provide a truth on which to build. At best it is a not fully interpreted clinical observation, as misleading as a claim implying Shakespeare's prime dramatic concerns were with rhyme, alliteration and syntax. In this light it is a strange notion to assert that Webern's Music does not arrive at a point of 'absolute organization'. Criticism of this sort falls short of the mark. Perhaps we 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 under-developed historical sensitivity? Ernst Krenek would have us believe so: "It is true that Schoenberg's historical consciousness was under-developed..."^{2/} 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.^{3/} 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

¹ Ernst Krenek - *Tradition in Perspective: Perspectives of New Music, Fall 1962.*

² *Ibid.*, p. 37

³ Krenek's view that "tradition as the secured continuity of know-how" need not detain us; his view accommodates itself to our questions of technical crisis, practical considerations, in the last analysis, absorbing or denying procedure. *Ibid.*, p. 37

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".^{1/} 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 Mr. Schidlowsky should share: 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 judgement either confirming or challenging 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. Schidlowsky 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. Words from Camus' essay "The Artist and His Time" come to mind: "It is likewise idealism, and of the worse kind, to end up by hanging all action and all truth on a meaning of history that is not implicit in events and that, in any case, implies a mythical aim."

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 the terms 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 unexplainable. 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 anti-septic 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 judgement. 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.

¹ Leon Schidlowsky -- *The Crisis in Music*; *Inter-American Music Bulletin*, November 1962, No. 32, Pan American Union, Washington, D.C.

II

Thus far this essay has attempted to sketch the dangers of historicist thinking when applied to musical evaluation. Historically conditioned art, with its Hegelian overtones, advances on the naive premise that there is nothing of a higher standard existing than the most recent progression of reasoning and ideas. All that results from 'historical necessity' is to be valued. One need only believe in an up-to-date doctrine and its results become automatically true. Two questions arise: Is it possible to act or to compose in such and such a manner because it is in accord with the plans of universal history? Is a historical absolute even conceivable in human terms?

All history, the result of specific acts, is also the result of specific choices. As this is true in political, economic, and social history, so is it true of artistic histories. The importance of individual choice has always been felt by practitioners of art and more or less noted by its chroniclers. Aestheticians have emphasized an essential quality of art in the concept of selectivity. Art, for them, consists of making meaningful choices revealing significant form. Of course, 'meaningful form' evades definition. Unfortunately, literature dealing with the problems of choice, selectivity and its operational fields of chance and probability is scant. This is no doubt due to the tenuous nature of the chance-choice problem. It is, however, possible to say something about the *attitudes involved* in decision making though this must necessarily imply ethical or moral notions. While music has often been assigned ethical qualities (its morality or immorality being usually evaluated on symbolical or didactic grounds, i.e. compound meter = the Trinity, exotic modes = licentiousness) the problem of meaningful choice did not exist until tonal resources expanded to the extent of *permitting* chance to act as a governing agent. Limitations within older, *natural* concepts of diatonic combination made each choice either right or wrong; quite clearly, a different state of affairs exists today.

With this realization, serialists have not minced words of explanation. Herbert Eimert's essay *The Composer's Freedom of Choice*¹ is perhaps the most basic attempt to deal with the problem of compositional freedom today. As the authoritative spokesman for the European serialist cause, Herr Eimert has never been questioned by his allies, so one may safely assume his writings have enjoyed considerable influence; his essay, then, demands careful attention before resuming our main considerations.

The essay begins in a most noteworthy way, readily admitting difficulties inherent in such an investigation as there is no musico-theoretic information available of a composer's strategy "when he plays with notes." The approach will furthermore be free of notorious historical perspective. Readers are brashly warned against twelve-tone music's "sticky emotionalising" and expressionism's false support from the past. Evidently new ground is about to be broken. Nebulous romantic philosophizing is also to be excluded; instead, concrete examples from Webern and Messiaen are cited as illustrative of *proper* approaches to compositional freedom. Any valid discussion of the problem can only proceed from a sound theoretical basis which will form the core of today's 'craftsmanship.' Eimert nevertheless proves awareness of the chance-choice problem by stating "in the process of choice one should allow for the unknown." Here one begins to suspect a subtle dodging of the issue. Does not the conception of chance enter into the very first steps of all scientific -- or artistic -- activity? Webern's functional system of note and motive connections is hailed as a "right" constructive resolution to chance. However, the "rightness of Webern's twelve-tone mathematics is subsidiary to the rightness of the note-motif connections." Messiaen's *Modes de Valeurs* (also cited by Schidlowky) is even more significant because it is the result of an a priori organizational method which treats each note in its "natural" parameters of pitch, duration, and intensity. This, for Eimert, is the "scientifically exact way to define a note -- the negation of all idealistic thinking." Notes do not function, they only exist. The composer assembles his material and then works accordingly, "guided by his own strategy."

At this point we begin to be clearly cheated of our intriguing title. Several objections become immediately urgent. Are not Webern's 'constructive rightness' and his twelve-tone mathematics identical? How can they be separated? Are the tonal materials of a Bach fugue separable from their *personal* usage? Certainly tones have their a priori existence, yet we do not compose with them as they exist; though their existence precedes their essence, it is the composer's will which supplies their essence. To emphasize musical facts which are scientifically observable and then to equally stress the importance of an empirical compositional approach presents irreconcilable points of departure. The a priori and the empirical are categorically mutually exclusive: they cannot mix. If we choose to simplify matters

¹ Herbert Eimert, *The Composer's Freedom of Choice*, *Die Reihe*, Vol. 3, 1957, pp. 1-10

by recognizing that various epochs had different objective musical materials at their disposal which became subjectively shaped by its composers, then our present state of affairs is not so different from a status quo method of composing. Perhaps noting such a prosaic possibility, Eimert's objective inquiry evaporates. Polemics appear and finally an unconditional surrender is issued. "Either music exists as it does in the vanguard, or it does not exist at all. This is not a totalitarian alternative; it is the simple truth." Despite contrary objections, we are, nevertheless, once more left with either a historical perspective or, worse still, a 'totalitarian alternative.'

If this is an anti-totalitarian view and only the 'simple truth,' music again finds itself in a court of last resorts. A prime symptom of historically conditioned art is a belief in its own infallibility -- a decidedly anti-liberal view. These attitudes reveal close kinship with Hegel's ideas of history which maintain that each successive age becomes progressively better. Hegelian historicism sees the world as a necessary eternal unfolding towards Absolute Perfection, regardless of disasters experienced along the way. Embracing such an ideal permits one to understand the 'good' resulting from crop failure

because the resultant starvation corrects the dangers of population explosions. Hegelian history, as Eimert's appraisal of music history, does not admit to the possibility of losing truth. This sense of infallibility, synonymous with moral positivism, without exception leads to political and artistic totalitarianism. (The Third Reich seems sufficient proof.) Though Hegel praises freedom of thought, even demanding its protection by the state, practical examples from any era illustrate obstacles to such an ideal. We know that as each state decides what constitutes objective truth, individual ideas are often dangerous to its welfare.

A Hegelian influence on Herr Eimert's thinking should be apparent by now ^{1/} His 'simple truth' alternative exhibits a typically Hegelian stance. The composer is granted compositional freedom to realize himself through his own strategy, but bureaucratic musical thinking warns him, "join the party -- or else." As in Hegel, the individual composer is allowed to realize himself only with the obligation to acquiesce and become subservient to *The School*. In short, the problem of compositional freedom remains unsolved. Reading Eimert brings to mind Mme. Roland's words while ascending the scaffold: O liberte! que de crimes on commet en ton nom!

III

... it so far surpasses human reason, however, to know the precision of the combination in material things and how exactly the known has to be adapted to the unknown that Socrates thought he knew nothing save his own ignorance, whilst Solomon the Wise affirmed that in all things there are difficulties which beggar explanation in words.

*Of Learned Ignorance
Nicolaus de Cusa*

We must now consider, as far as is possible, chance-probability-choice relations. This is necessary if we are to realize the problems encountered by the strict serialist composer and, to a lesser extent, by the tonal composer as well. One must bear in mind there can be little talk of "natural ordering." We may have a natural major diatonic scale, but the concept ordering of tonal themes is no less artificial than the conception of a twelve note row. In both cases the mind imposes an empirical order. Chance, that property of indeterminateness, functions in Beethoven (as his revisions show) whenever the music has not yet

found its 'natural' or determinate shape. (One might speak of its destined pre-ordained state.) Chance then, as Max Born points out in his *Natural Philosophy of Cause and Chance*, "is a more fundamental conception than causality." The very first steps of scientific investigation or creative activity invoke chance due to the fact that no observation is absolutely correct. In scientific terms, whether a cause-effect relation holds can only be decided by applying the laws of chance to the original observations. Art, of course, involves too many variables; it is steeped in contradictions.

¹ *This musico-political parallel is included because the lengthy final footnote of Mr. Eimert's essay chooses to involve itself in such an excursion. "At present it is the fashion for empty-headed critics to make out that the systematic 'management' of musical material is identical with the terrorist rule of force in totalitarian political systems ..."*

Chance, in resolving itself, travels through operational fields of probability. This is easily illustrated musically whenever a suspension figure has various possibilities for resolution. Probability, then, is that area between ignorance, indecision and full certitude. The subjective and objective foundations of probability should be of keen interest to the composer. These foundations exist formally in the mind and materially in phenomena as they relate to themselves. In musical processes subjective probability plays a great role because psychological states of mind evaluate facts with a fear of possible error. Objective probability functions when reference is made to the quality of facts stated, the mind estimating them and allowing for error. This is the usual approach as mentioned by Eimert. Naturally, as he suggests, rules can be formulated to objectify the subjective aspects of probability. However, this is, in musical terms, destructive, eliminating the personal equation of the composer. The only time objective probability is used by the composer is in revision though, here too, the stamp of revision is subjective.

Interpretations of chance can be studied apart from states of mind by using a priori operations. This was the method employed by Messiaen in *Modes de Valeurs* which considered tonal matter hypothetically, independent of any direct experience; it is a procedure abandoned by Messiaen because of its "too rigid modality." The limitation of chance through empirical probability is quite another matter and cannot be expressed by quantitative mathematical probability. This is not to deny musical empiricism the use of numbers; in such a situation the composer shapes his own subjective mathematics. Strictly speaking, however, a priori and empirical probability cannot combine. Thus probability presents itself in the form of a questionable relationship between premisses and conclusion; though premisses may be true it is also possible for a premiss to be of insufficient weight to prove its conclusion. Reworking of a fugue subject to fit contrapuntal manipulation or a trial and error method of row transposition well illustrate these points. In the compositional process one can only say that even if the results are uncertain, probable inferences must satisfy their own logic.

There are many different interpretations of probability for many different purposes. Only two need be considered for our purposes: probability as a measure of belief and probability as an operational concept. Probability as a measure of belief deals with the degree of rational credence which can be assigned to

certain facts. In this realm probability is largely subjective, equiprobability also being difficult to determine. Is one segment of a twelve-tone row as good as any other? Probability as an operational concept was once used by Cage. This operative concept assembles relevant or supposedly relevant data and procedures which are determined by frequency of repetition. The results can be correlated with numerical correspondences which in turn produce a guide to probability from which to choose. Naturally, the very fact a composer decides he must use such manipulations proves he wishes to be "on the right side" at any price. It also reveals the serialist as afraid to take a chance and it is at this point that the split occurs between serialists and Cageites. Though one might credit Cage for a certain audacity usually missing in the work of cautious serialists, he eliminates himself as a musician because of the type of probability with which he chooses to deal.

Probability deals with two basic types of inferences: inductive (or probable) and presumptive. Inductive inferences have intrinsic reasonableness, while the presumptive inferences show extrinsic reasonableness. Inductive inference, the basic operating concept of tonal and serial music, deals with limited determinisms, but presumptive (extrinsic) inferences deal with unlimited, extraneous determinisms. Consequently, as Cage's work deals with factors outside of music, one cannot properly consider it in musical terms. He is, by his own admission, more interested in failure than musical success, an illuminating remark since it seemingly entails metaphysical shenanigans.^{1/}

Composers invoking chance as a governing principle are usually accused of being afraid to make decisions or to choose. The observation may seem pedantic but it should be pointed out that purposeful purposelessness also indicates choice. There is no getting around it. Evasiveness will not work. It is, however, more important to realize all activity to some degree involves chance. Efforts to eliminate it in artistic endeavors are useless. In art, one admits contradictions to be not only unavoidable, but desirable. Supposed artistic activities, basing their techniques on pseudo scientific basis, become nonsensical in that contradictions in science are not permitted and if they occur, must be eliminated. Consequently, the composer and his unprojected ideas, continually operate in a field of chance, only discovering their identities through willful choice.

¹ Because Cage and company have often emphasized that they give nothing to and expect nothing from their audience, their work seems rather pointless. If it has metaphysical value, its give nothing, expect nothing attitude merely seems selfish.

A creator draws his work from the palette of uncertainty. Each decision is a risk. There are no a priori aesthetic values. Choices are made. Are they arbitrary? Each decision is evaluated on its own merit and relation to the whole. One choice-value outweighs others because it has been chosen. The how of the decision, a purely technical matter, does not rationalize its goal; the *why* becomes evermore important. Freedom cannot deny possibilities, it must affirm them. Freedom arises out of realizing possibilities and choosing, exercising the control of freedom.

Despite the absence of a priori artistic values and such misleading statements as "free will has no place in creativity," coherent values do appear after the art activity is completed.^{1/} One cannot beforehand explicitly state what art ought to be. We can only ask that art activity not be arbitrary and here we come to a notion of ethical-aesthetic choice in which man defines himself and his art through his will. The making of a work of art may be compared to an exercise of moral choice; ethics and aesthetics become one, there is no longer any difference between the man and his art.

All this may sound too abstract and abstract ideals do risk running aground. Yet, even in abstract activity, there is no such thing as a non-human situation. All situations are the result of human involvements

for they symbolize, belong to, and are representative of man.^{2/} This is particularly so with art activity.

As an individual each composer is a composite of his past, and present life and, to various degrees, he projects himself into the future. This he does, as an individual, in stylistic terms. Thus the composer as a being is continually interested in individual stylistic possibilities. This composite past, present and future is self contained and functions within itself; it is delimited by death, a cessation of possibilities. However, this temporal subjectivity occurs within the flux of here-and-now time, usually described as an objective historical epoch. Thus pure possibilities must contend with specific historical developments not chosen by the individual. With this in mind one must again ask to what extent music is the result of historical or personal developments. Are statesmen, painters, politicians, or composers the result of history? Matters are really rather simple. As an individual in his allotment of infinity, the composer has a right to a little nonsense. He may make music by swinging a creaky door, composing in C major, or by proceeding serially. One method may be more historically "in," another more pretentious, but there seems little point in attempting to out absurd one another. And yet ...

¹ Alan Walker, *Study in Musical Analysis*, Barrie and Rockliff, London, 1962, p. 138. Though widely discussed, this supposedly influential and unique book seems a compendium of misinformation.

² Consequently, musical theater or "happenings" suggested by one person and indefinitely carried out by another, no longer belongs to the originator nor do they represent the original involvement.