

# Composer

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## A British Music Information Centre

The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation's grant of £2,000 to the Composers' Guild for the initial setting-up of a British Music Information Centre is the first practical step achieved along a theoretical road which the Guild has been pacing out for several years.

Recently a memorandum on the *ideal scheme* was brought out by the Guild and the main points are reprinted here.

"Until such a Centre can be established in Britain the resources for the promotion of our native composers' music must remain precarious and haphazard. Except in the case of a few adventurous concert-giving societies, the contemporary British composer is woefully sparsely represented; the BBC, with its arbitrary

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Musicians read strange things these days. For example: "Music exists as it is in the vanguard or it does not exist at all".<sup>1</sup> "The only comfortable liberty known to composers is that of finding an excellent technique which is secure because of its historical empiricism".<sup>2</sup> "It is true Schoenberg's historical consciousness was underdeveloped".<sup>3</sup> Pontifical pronouncements, innocent assurances and scholarly evaluations tell him he must believe these things because history demands it. In the course of this essay, these statements will be carefully weighed. They are obviously not random remarks, but indicative of a view of history, imparting *the* sense of historical consciousness which enables advanced composers to set price tags on musical worth. New artistic movements always claim reaction to past views and it may be argued that today's state of affairs contains nothing new; that historical developments have always influenced style. Yet what is the ultimate position of a movement based solely on historical consciousness?

Of the remarks cited, the first two may merely perturb. Mr. Eimert's well known comment may be dismissed as the musings of an armchair general. An examination of its historical relevancy must be reserved for our conclusion, while the assumption that composers today are musically secure because they practice a technique conditioned by historical observation is a half-truth. Technical innovations are to be valued, but are they of greater importance than musical vision? Machaut is not remembered exclusively for his iso-rhythmic motets, nor is Berlioz for his brass writing. Mr. Krenek's sober evaluation of Schoenberg's historical consciousness, on the other hand, possesses real shock value. Though the comment is accepted as valid in many quarters, it can lead to topsy-turvy historical evaluations. In criticizing Schoenberg's failure to realize the full implications of twelve-tone thinking, it is, *pari passu*, possible to reprimand Wagner for not having given us *Erwartung*. Accepting this line of reasoning, it becomes fair to admonish a cat for its biological short-sightedness in failing to become a lion. I shall here claim that, as philosophy is not a purely linguistic enterprise, neither is music merely a matter of historical dialectic.

Few composers have confessed a greater propensity for historical perspective as a decisive factor in channeling the direction of their musical style than Krenek. His concern for history has not limited itself to philosophical discussion, but has also received musical elaboration in his chamber work *Sestina* inspired by a Provencal text. The text asks: "What lives in history, was it only chance, decline, fading sound, vanished shape?" And answers: "The hour causes change, turns the time. What looks ahead subordinates itself to number . . . Force vanishes, brings forth new chance." Twelfth-century poets were not the first to ponder history, chance, time or change. A philosophy of change was already presented by such pre-Socratic thinkers as Heraclitus; only recently, however, has music sought guidance from the light of history. For the modern musician pursuing style through the dictates of history, an examination of Hegel's philosophy of change naturally invites investigation on several counts. Two

<sup>1</sup> Herbert Eimert, *The Composer's Freedom of Choice*, Die Reihe, 1957, vol.3.

<sup>2</sup> Leon Schidlowky, *The Crisis in Music*, Revista Musical Chilena, April-June, 1962.

<sup>3</sup> Ernst Krenek, *Tradition in Perspective, Perspectives in New Music*, Princeton University Press, vol. 1, p.37.

basic tenets of Hegelian historicism are the dynamic, progressive reconciliation of contradictions and identification of the process of Reason with the sequence of events. For Hegel, history is not cyclical; every historical period follows sequentially as a necessary consequent, simultaneously exhibiting totally new characteristics. Apparent contradictions found resolution in the well known Hegelian dialectical triad of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. This dialectical process is self motivating and exhibited simultaneously in logic and history. Out of an analysis of the concepts in any thesis is generated an opposite antithesis. Thesis and an antithesis are resolved into a new synthesis or, one might say, a unity of opposites. The rapprochement between Hegel's views and compositional trends stressing historical consciousness is, then, not difficult to find.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF NOVELTY

Composers who identify novelty with value are presupposing Hegel's contention that each successive historical stage is better than that preceding it. The position taken by Krenek and the exaggerated attitudes of the en-Caged school are Hegelian. Though they have never explicitly claimed that music determined by historical consciousness is better than other contemporary music, this is evidently their opinion—or else why such extreme demands on 'newness'? (Perhaps their reluctance is similar to that of the musicologist who, never admitting it to be the case, nevertheless has unshakeable faith that older music is superior because it is old.) Applied to music of the past, the criterion of historical consciousness can obviously become embarrassing, particularly when dealing with such 'non-historical' composers as Bach and Brahms. This alone should cause us to question the notion of historical consciousness.

If musical validity today is solely determined by its relationship to an appraisal of history, what perspective then does new music force on itself? Krenek seemingly shares a belief with Hegel in something being automatically better (at least more desirable) because it is the result of a progression of time. For Hegel, this belief in progressive betterment was grounded in nineteenth century scientific idealism coupling the inevitability of progress with an older theological belief in providential fulfilment. If real history would tend to undermine Hegel, his defense would invoke the dialectic to prove the reconcilability of contradictions. Dialectical manoeuvres can prove the necessity of wars, the latent 'goodness' of earthquakes, and allow the equation of esthetic criteria with dogmas of historical perspective. Our century, predominantly and without malaise, has extended nineteenth century beliefs, assured that change at any price provides an even functioning guide, eventually resulting in the good.

#### JOHN CAGE AS PHILOSOPHER

Esthetic consciousness of style is similarly influenced. Does the avant avant-garde, in true Hegelian fashion, find it necessary to invoke a similar dialectic to bring off their music? (One avant-garde critic explains: "I believe we may start by thinking of John Cage as a philosopher, who uses instead of arguments esthetic instances. He is a thinker who will not be confined within esthetics . . . he is concerned with the event not with its meaning, with the digits and their arrangement, not with the total number or sum."<sup>4</sup> Surely a lucid commentary. Though not "confined within esthetics", Mr Cage nevertheless uses esthetic instances. He is "philosopher" blithely formulating propositions without concern for conclusions.) They may have the rug pulled out from under by a gentle reminder that where no basis for synthesis exists, contradictions cannot be dialectically resolved.

Analytical methodology does not dispute the usefulness of the dialectical concept.

Music history can be read as illustrating the reconciliation of such 'contraries' as harmonic counterpoint and tonal twelve-tone music; in certain respects, Krenek's dialectical analysis of music history can be accepted, just as economists can accept with reservations some of Marx's dialectical analysis of economic history. When, however, music completely denies and contradicts the past, no synthesis is possible and esthetic validity cannot be substantiated logically by dialectics.

Of course, we know the artist is always free to side-step the bickerings of academic logic in favour of his creation as Hegel reserved the right of contradiction to justify his great reality the Absolute. (At the risk of sounding old-fashioned, 'artist' is the only word which will do. Whereas formerly one could speak of the composer being responsible for concepts and their ordering, this description is today inaccurate. In an improvisatory work, for example, it is the performer who accepts the responsibility of conceptual ordering, the composer becoming a kind of manipulating Pontius Pilate who simply assembles alternatives. The following observations may equally apply more to Cage but, since he has flirted with the Absolute, Krenek also is vulnerable. He may be partially vindicated because of his concern for tradition and the technical procedures he uses; essentially, he remains middle-of-the-road. Evidence of this can be seen in the following remark by Cage which counters Krenek's statement on chaotic and traceable causality: "What is maintained here is the concept of pairs of opposites; having black and white, as it were, and then composing with the play of these opposites. One can then engage in all the games that academic composition has led us to know how to play."<sup>5</sup>) Most likely, believers in all powerful historical consciousness would claim the object of their labors is much more modest. Is that the case?

#### HEGEL'S CONCEPT OF THE ABSOLUTE

Had Mr Krenek told us only that life and the processes of serial music are "related in the paradox of the chaotic appearance of totally and systematically traceable causality," one might have wondered why he specifically mentioned serial music. Instead, he gravely informs us that "it (serial music) may mean as much or little as life itself."<sup>6</sup> There is no doubt what is meant; the search for the Absolute is on.

For Hegel, the Absolute was at once the ultimate and unconditioned reality beyond time, change and history, the very historic process itself. All progressions, stages and striving merge into history, seek and are encompassed by the Absolute. Particular ideas of freedom and spirit are absorbed into the concreteness of history. In his introduction to *The Philosophy of History*, Hegel speaks of the synonymous "Idea of freedom as the nature of the spirit and the absolute goal of History." The Absolute embraces all.

For all its beauties, Hegel's historicism nevertheless leaves us with a peculiar situation. By acknowledging one another, both History and Absolute, now identical, have little left to do except play solitaire using a deck both know to be marked.

Krenek's historical perspective looks up a similar blind-alley. He seems to admit as much in his essay *Tradition in Perspective*; "My persistent interest in the context of history has not prevented me from now attaching less importance to the awareness of continuity of tradition than I had earlier . . . whatever happens in history seems to happen by necessity simply because we shall never know what might have happened instead."<sup>7</sup> This seems a condition with which it is difficult to argue. If we regard history as a series of abstracted, isolated, particular events, it is indeed impossible to discern any necessity whatever in the flow of history. Krenek cautiously modifies his

<sup>4</sup> Peter Yates; *John Cage: Reviews and Critical Articles*, Henmar Press Inc., New York, 1962.

<sup>5</sup> John Cage, Henmar Press Inc. 1962.

<sup>6</sup> Ernst Krenek, "Extents and Limits of Serial Technique," *Problems of Modern Music*, W. W. Norton & Co., New York.

<sup>7</sup> *Perspectives in New Music*, Fall 1962.

stand, aware of possible dangers which may result from mechanistically separating historical consciousness from continuity of tradition. The best historical sense a composer can have is that sense of the timeless which may become tradition. Tradition, as history, then is perhaps best left to take care of itself.

What is the ultimate position of such historical determinism when applied to music?

A view demanding that all creation must be the result of a newly illuminated historical consciousness is logically vacuous. In practice, every work is dated, losing the very validity which gives it meaning, the moment another work appears exhibiting greater 'historical awareness' – no matter how small this awareness may be. The perspective certain New Music forces on itself is expressed in Heidegger's conclusion made a century after Hegel, that "History is not synonymous with the past; for the past is precisely what is no longer happening. And much less is history the merely contemporary, which never happens but merely 'passes', comes and goes by. History as happening is in acting and being acted upon which pass through the present, which are determined from out of the future and which take over the past. It is precisely the present that vanishes in happening."<sup>8</sup>

#### PHILOSOPHY OF IDENTITY

If musical historicism of a Hegelian tinge proves false, its parallel philosophy of identity merely leads to superficialities. Historically conditioned art proceeds on the naive premise that there is nothing of a higher standard existing than the most recent 'progression' of ideas and reasoning. As ideas originate in the mind, they are the result of reason; as ideas become realities, these realities become the results of reason. Such sophisms allow one to conclude that all which is reasonable must be real and all which is real is obviously reasonable. Consequently, all that exists because of this 'progression' of ideas becomes a reasonable historical necessity greatly to be valued. More simply: one need only believe in an up-to-date doctrine and its results become conveniently true.

Certainly the most shattering aspect of such reasoning is the inevitable accompanying attitude of moral positivism, a positivism obliged only to itself, immune from any other considerations. (In contemporary Marxism-Leninism, we see the theoretical dilemma in practice.)

These words may easily be construed as outrageously conservative. They are not; they seek only to stare acute historical problems in the eye, problems previously spared composers. The Brahms-Wagner 'schism' is trivial compared to the involvements of serialism. Nor is there here denied any sort of *Zeitgeist*, implying that everything is relative, or that basically there is no difference between a 'revolutionary' *Sacre* and a 'conservative' *St Matthew Passion*. If one grants that New Music faces problems, not least of which is the historical one, then some attempt must be made to seize a little more truth, even if a few comforting contemporary (or fashionable) beliefs must be abandoned. A cynical or relativistic retort may claim there are no general criteria for truth. It is precisely this realization which may constitute a truth, and if this is so, it does not follow that all choices (i.e. the choice between serialism or another music) are arbitrary, or that there is only one way. Thus, the historicism playing so great a role in today's musical developments remains little more than historicism, the result of our interpretation of history which is not necessarily infallible. Even Croce, a part-time Hegelian who has sloughed off the absolute, exhorts praise for the productivity of all epochs and reminds us that none are to be condemned in the light of history. Repugnant facts are insufficient for historical propositions. This poses a basic question.

Are we sincerely interested in allowing music to continue as a form of knowledge

<sup>8</sup> Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, Yale University Press, Inc., 1959.

*continued on p. 22*

After an unusually scored passage for clarinets, basset-horns, bass-clarinets and percussion, and an orchestral episode, the bass pronounces "*Dignare Domine die isto*". The last assault by brass and eighteen kettledrums in superimposed rhythms is a savage, enigmatic confrontation between Man and his Maker. *A capella* choirs, *Lento e molto patetico*, murmur "*non confundar in aeternum*", the final statement in this blinding moment of mystic terror.

By any standards Brian's achievement is unique, and it presents a totally new aspect of British music in the 1920s. The *Gothic* symphony is the subjective testament of a visionary, and deals with the primal verities. In addition, in Part I with its references to Goethe, and the sacred subject of Part II, Brian has exploited a literary-musical vein which earlier produced Liszt's *Faust* Symphony, and Mahler's 8th. Yet these were composers closely influenced and moulded by Teutonic ideals, i.e. the Goethe element. Brian, steeped in English tradition, treated this alien theme with a greatness equal to that of Liszt or Mahler, and with the universality of genius.

October 30, when the *Gothic* is to receive its first professional performance sponsored by the BBC at the Royal Albert Hall under Sir Adrian Boult, should prove a memorable night in British music.<sup>8</sup>

In the preparation of this article I should like to thank the composer for his unfailing assistance; Dr. Robert Simpson, for kindly allowing me to study his copy of the symphony; Mr. Deryck Cooke; the BBC Central Music Library; Mr. Richard Valery of Cranz & Co. Ltd., London. The music illustrations are reproduced by kind permission of Cranz & Co. Ltd., London.

8. See *The Listener*, September 1, 1966, p.317 for some comments on this matter.

continuing History in perspective

communicating personal truth? If so, we must recognize that the accumulated resources making serialism possible, personal (imagination, reason) and sociological (tradition) may have definite validity, but have no sovereignty over past, present or future styles. (No more is meant by 'personal truth' than personal musical expression free from the dictates of historically conditioned schools. Were there such a thing as 'truthful music' in a linguistic sense, there would also have to be untruthful music. Nevertheless, we have all heard music which lies.) It is this denial which may lead to other resources and greater knowledge. Excesses of historicism cannot be used to sanctify musical authoritarianism. To do so will lead to the very stagnation which serialism must oppose. It also risks the humanistic premises which must remain basic to music.



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