



From Bach to Rush: Notes on Composition

by Lothar Klein

Mozart, to a boy who asked him how one might learn to compose:

If one has the talent it pushes for utterance and torments one; it will out. There is nothing in this thing of learning out of books. Here, here and here (pointing to his ear, his head and his heart) is your school. If everything is right there, then take your pen and down with it. Afterward ask the opinion of a man who knows his business.

Universities, with government assistance, have installed courses in musical composition and creative writing, a commitment not always fully understood by either politicians or electorate. Were a government to eliminate these courses it would be an admission that the arts, as an expression of the individual mind, do not matter. Our societal development, conditioned by secular humanism, has come too far for such a reversal. Crucial in defining positive attitudes towards the presence of

artistic pursuits within the university is the credo of secular humanism which implies that musical creation is the closest thing to a divine emanation possessed by modern man or, on a more modest plane, that the fruits of musical creativity provide a civilizing pleasure. In some cases of true "divine emanation" composers become national treasures like Poland's Chopin, Italy's Verdi or Finland's Sibelius. Major composers are not the only proof of a country's musical culture, and genius is not based on geography; the Almighty discriminates against neither Timmins nor Tucson. The essential factor in any western country's sense of musical self-respect is that music be part of life, practised, listened to and accepted. One of Fidel Castro's first public acts was to maintain the *Orquesta Nacional* even if the harp lacked strings.

But all is not optimism. Anyone who has responded to an early symphony by the young Mozart or read poetry by the adolescent Rimbaud has wondered if

creativity can be taught. Can a teacher in an egalitarian society pump the life-blood of inspiration into a fee-paying student? Educators and governments seem to think so. Creativity is hallowed and there is much talk about the paths to it.

This belief in mass creativity (and its corollary, art as salvation) is comparatively recent. Ancient cultures lacked a word for art, while in music the romantic view of the past 200 years stressed genius as indispensable to creation, and denied that composition could be taught. Pre-Renaissance opinion submerged genius in favour of an artisan attitude which stressed a total command of craft as the *sine qua non* of creativity. Apprenticeship to a Renaissance composer employed by the Church meant years of setting contrapuntal formulas according to volumes of rules. Free composition was unknown. Even troubadours, less learned than Church composers, were subject to rigid forms and modes in their *extemporized* songs. Bach taught only harmonizations of

BLACKBERRIES

Rona Murray

fat on the tongue
burst purple
under an August sun

my nails
stained black
hour after hour pick
wine and winter jam
but these berries are not so profligate
I cannot catch
their pulpy fruit
before its weight
pulls vines to earth
and spills in inky
waste

Peaches
—little golden suicides—
fall from the west wall
break
gentleness
on tarmac
Apples
lie in grass
until their pith
is eaten out
and empty balls of tissue skin
tease wasps
too full to sting

It is too much
Cockayne is here
and all day long
I try to force some order on
a universe
so absurdly generous
it stuns
the small and dubious
human mind

given melodies and allowed his pupils to extract melodies only from prescribed harmonies; these techniques mastered, the pupil was left free *to compose*.

Hand in hand with present day faith in individual freedom comes a distrust of established, demonstrable technique. The demands of historically derived forms seem to encroach upon individual freedom. To compose a fugue in the style of Bach is deemed academic and deferential to a repressive establishment. "Debussy never wrote a fugue," is the rallying cry of those unable to fathom the constraints of Debussy's freedom. In attempting to achieve personal creative freedom some contemporary composers speak of *inner vision*. Their written music is often graphic, and the sound realized in performance denies the cause and effect relationship of conventional western notation. This music is beyond analysis and the evaluation of craft. What can one say about John Cage's piano piece wherein the player sits motionless, hands on keyboard for four and one half hours without producing a sound. An exercise in Dada obviously. But what of the student who does not know or understand Dada?

A more salient example of new technique eliciting powerful traditional response is found in the string quartet of Polish composer Witold Lutoslawski. This quartet also has roots in Dada. It was first composed as a set of four individual playing parts which existed apart from a complete score. (Traditionally, of course, composers write a full score from which individual playing parts are extracted.) Lutoslawski's music shows creative freedom, flexibility, and cohesion. His music elicits a traditionally communicative response because of his conventional musical training. (John Cage's training is more philosophical than musical.) But again, what of the student writing advanced, personal music yet eschewing conventional training? The situation clearly demands new approaches to teaching composition, requiring of its teachers the insights of philosophers-aesthetian, historian, psychologist and practising musician.

A teacher of composition confronted with avant-garde student works must bring all these insights into focus while arming the student with a capacity for self-criticism. As a philosopher he must relate creative vision to accomplishment, promoting the grand tradition and history of music, and at the same time, judging how criticism may emasculate ideas and the creative psyche. For example, if a student submits a score the pitches of which are determined by imperfections in the music paper (it *has* been done,) the teacher might react in three ways: engage in dialogue (an endless task), refuse to discuss it (making a reactionary of himself), or point out that music is an aural, not a visual art. The day

of the dogmatic teacher-stylist has passed.

If these examples seem far-fetched, remember that the radical empiricism of the avant-garde has its roots in the ambiguity of life itself. After all, music is simply a phenomenon of sound occurring in time. Music's abstract qualities are at once its greatest charm and greatest danger.

What makes a composer? Talent and conditioning seem safe answers. About talent we know little and investigations of conditioning never end. We can only speak knowledgeably about training, examining the educational program of pre-twentieth century composers to gain insight into the predicament of young composers today. The formal schooling of Bach, Beethoven and Verdi was finished by the time these composers were fourteen years old. If they received any formal schooling it provided them with little more than the ability to do basic sums, read, write and conjugate Latin verbs. On the other hand, they were given intensive training in counterpoint, singing and instrumental proficiency. By the age of fifteen, they possessed a formidable grasp of musical craft but were lacking academic skills. Today young musicians the world over begin musical studies in first-year university at an age when composers of the past stood on the threshold of professionalism.

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I have already mentioned his self-taught and secret exploration of the keyboard, the chord, the compass of tonality, the cycle of fifths . . . all sorts of modulations. When I discovered all this, he was fifteen years old. (Thomas Mann, on the education of a composer, in Doctor Faustus.)

Modern media unites young musicians from Medicine Hat to New York — broadcasting has contributed massively to subliminal music education. The loud-speaker, as Constant Lambert predicted in the 30s, has become "the street-walker of music," luring us with many musics of different qualities and intents. One moment we are uplifted by a Beethoven symphony, later the same music tempts us to drink beer. Distinctions between serious and popular music all but disappear in this promiscuous cross-fertilization. Radio, not television, is the chief source of this phenomenon. The young have come to distrust their eyes and to rely on their ears.

Radio educates the ear indiscriminately. A fast tempi madrigal and an upbeat pop vocal are both accepted as contemporary sound. Disco and rock groups, notably *Emerson, Lake and Palmer*, raid the classics, fusing styles. Lesser rockers and punkers present other styles and attract their own followers. Mistaken iden-

tities of style are not crucial in all this, (musical pigeon-holing is of little concern to the young) nor does rockdom corrupt the lifestyle it represents. What is insidious is rock's limited harmonic vocabulary, its narrow harmonic moves which affect the integrity of the music. It is this stricture which limits the aural imagination of the young — first-year composition students *not* excepted. Unless a young ear has absorbed Bach and Mozart, its future aural, emotional and intellectual growth will be stunted.

These limitations do not imply an age of musical barbarism or an impasse in musical education. Many composition students admit to wearing harmonic earmuffs. Their aural *potentiality* offers a clean slate to the composition teacher and makes it possible to teach a variety of styles. Although learning methods, techniques, and devices is valuable to a novice, stylistic brainwashing is precarious. The composition teacher is in a position of ethical-aesthetic responsibility. He and the student are flanked by the opposing forces of mystical illuminism and scientific objectification of artistic material; mystical illuminism will *let all hang out*, while rational, scientific objectivizing becomes a game that favours method, tables and diagrams over substance. The retreat of the creative intelligence into either threatens musical art.

The student must discover the moral imperatives for himself. Tonality, atonality, serialism, aleatorics, graphs, electronics and computer music may seem to be paths to creative salvation. Young composers should consider Joseph Conrad's reflections on the novelist in search of self through technique: "All these gods must, after a short period of fellowship, abandon him — even on the threshold of the temple — to the stammerings of his conscience and to the outspoken consciousness of the difficulties of his work." Today these difficulties are aggravated by a narrowness of historical perception. Myopia underlies the fashionably existential attitude which justifies much of today's chance-determined art.

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*The scientific basis for aleatoric, chance-derived art is perhaps the famous, and famously misunderstood, principle of indeterminacy; and it also springs from a totally mistaken notion that the absence of an intervening, in our everyday sense of intervening, God means that existence is meaningless. Such art is, though apparently self-effacing, absurdly arrogant. (John Fowles, *The Aristos*.)*

The history of creative music since the seventeenth century runs parallel to the

emergence of secular humanism — that light at the end of the Christian era's tunnel concocted of common sense and a dash of science and history. Whatever stylistic progressions are exemplified in music history from the Baroque period to the Modern, the common denominator is emancipation of the individual musician from the dictates of past styles; each individual, regardless of excellence, becomes a conqueror of the past. This romantic view of the omnipotent artist defying history is announced in the Renaissance poet Pico della Mirandola's proclamation that man is "the fashioner of his own being." Herein man becomes God in a reversal of the Incarnation. The idea of man's divinity is expressed in the lyrics of rock groups like Yes and Rush. Songs in Rush's *Hemispheres* album trace the emergence of a New Man born to an Apollonian-Dionysian struggle. This struggle will eventually create a humanistic world.

*Let the truth of Love be lighted
Let the love of Truth shine clear
Sensibility
Armed with sense and liberty
With the heart and Mind united
In a single perfect sphere.*

Neil Peart

These lyrics echo Ionesco's remark that "all history is a mistake."

*Facades are tarnished now
The principles have been betrayed
The dreams gone stale
But still let hope prevail
Hope that history's debt won't be repaid.*

("Beneath, Between and Behind")

This music, so foreign to the middle-aged ear, projects a future world and, like secular humanism, tries to engulf and supplant the values of Christian humanism. (An Elton John song asks "If there's a God in Heaven, what's He waiting for?") However, musical humanism does not face both the future and the past: its future projections repudiate the achievements of the past.

This repudiation is reflected in the changing curricula musical academies prescribe for composition students. As the disciplines of seventeenth century Fuxian counterpoint, a system of rigid musical acrostics, were abandoned by mid-nineteenth century in favour of Bachian counterpoint, so today's musical curricula give only passing acknowledgement to the Bach style. The most notorious disregard for this contrapuntal heritage is found in those music departments which fail to offer any training at all in contrapuntal skills. This omission is justified on the grounds that counterpoint is irrelevant to

today's music. (A more satisfactory explanation is most likely the inability to find competent instructors.) An analogy might be drawn with the Church abandoning the Latin Mass. Both moves are justified by the claims of a new order.

Today's musical styles are generated when the emancipated individual composer in pursuit of a new aesthetic denies tradition. Similarly humanism, projecting a new ideal, severs traditional religious ties, distrusts and neglects historical values. The sin of both is ingratitude. Deprived of a total aesthetic birthright, our notion of human character is simplified as the distinction between sacred and secular blurs.

Despite the inanities of rock's commercialization we cannot abandon or ignore it; to abandon rock and youth is to forsake a potential future good. Mozart's first encounter with the music of Bach resulted in his C major fugue for piano (K.394) which, outwardly, maintains the general structure of a Baroque fugue. However, an informed hearing will reveal a stylistic transformation as much the result of a classical perspective on Baroque forms as of Mozart's genius. A music teacher seeks neither the genius of Mozart nor a safe return to Neo-Classicism. He/she must identify aesthetic principles and relate them to twentieth century idioms. Such an approach offers no textbook guidelines. The student must extract his own conclusions and apply them. Correlations between past and present are elusive and false interpretations are possible; but the student's exposure to masterworks is, in itself, healthy.

The didactic and ethical aim of this method is to make an artisan of the student, a worker of informed, superior craftsmanship. When this is accomplished the artisan may emerge a genuine artist. Yet even at this more mature stage, the student would do well to recall Conrad's words warning of the precariousness of the search. "The artist descends within himself and in that lonely region of stress and strife, if he be deserving and fortunate, he finds the terms of his appeal." Temperament, then, whether individual or collective, is not amenable to persuasion. The young composer must seek an enduring truth which craft only imperfectly reveals. This, once found, will become a lasting possession. □

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