

WHAT CAN WE SAY ABOUT MUSIC?

O QUE PODEMOS DIZER SOBRE MÚSICA?

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Nota de Introdução à conferência: O XX Congresso da Associação Nacional de Pesquisa e Pós-Graduação em Música - ANPPOM, ocorrido em agosto de 2010 na cidade de Florianópolis, sediado pelo CEART - UDESC, recebeu o escritor Paul Griffiths, como conferencista convidado. Autor de livros que fizeram parte da formação de grande parte dos estudantes de graduação em Música no Brasil nas décadas de 80 e 90 (alguns publicados em português), o autor faz parte da equipe do *The New Grove* e é também experiente escritor de resenhas especializadas em música. Trabalhou para jornais como *The New York Times* (NY) e *The Times* (Londres), entre outros. Em sua conferência, proferida em 23 ago 2010, Paul Griffiths apresentou um panorama geral da música do século XX e apontou, por fim, possíveis questionamentos a serem abordados sobre em música ao longo do século XXI, atendendo a temática do Congresso. O texto foi apresentado em inglês, com tradução simultânea de Magda Regina Gomes da Silva (SP), e está publicado a seguir na íntegra, com a autorização do conferencista. [N.E.]

Conferência

I want to talk to you about music, to use words with reference to music – something that is often said to be extremely difficult, even impossible. Music, we are sometimes told, expresses what words cannot say. Or else: the only possible response to a musical performance or composition is another performance or composition – an idea with which we might have some sympathy, if we consider that, for example, the arias Mozart wrote for his sister-in-law Aloysia Lange, née Weber, tell us far more about her singing – her range, her brilliance, her command of wide intervals, even her shining dramatic presence – than we could ever hope to gain from reviews or other reports, or that the same composer's fugues are worth volumes of

commentary on those of Bach and Handel, besides being rather more enjoyable than any exegesis in dull prose.

Yet all of us here have decided to place ourselves between these incompatible media, music and words, to listen to the one and convey what we have heard in the other, whether in writing or orally, in lecture hall or classroom – to translate, as it were, from music into words, and we cannot believe that our efforts are hopeless. For one thing, it is not only music that resists verbal description, explanation or analysis. If I wanted to speak to you of the view from my house in Wales, where these words were written, or of the texture and colour of my favourite shirt, I would still find myself stumbling. Our vocabularies are limited. The shirt is cherry-red, but if I were to try to describe the precise colour, which is so important to me, I would have to add further terms and so risk confusing you.

There is, to be sure, a different level of difficulty when we come to use words in connection with music, because our vocabulary for sounds is so poor – at least in the major languages of the world. Imagine for a moment that you had to describe the timbre of a viola to someone who had never heard the instrument. You might be tempted to use the word ‘dark’, but we’re probably drawn to that term, and familiar with it in this instance, only because it comes from comparing the viola with the violin. To someone who didn’t have any basis in experience for that comparison, the word ‘dark’ might not be very helpful. After all, we’re using it in what’s entirely a metaphorical sense. The darkness of a viola is not darkness like the darkness of night or that of a charcoal pencil. It’s a metaphor that can only be understood with reference to its equally metaphorical opposite – brightness – and by someone who’s used to how these terms are customarily applied to sounds. The same goes, of course, for much of our musical vocabulary. Indeed, perhaps the only genuine sound words available to us are ‘loud’ and ‘quiet’, and if we had to limit our discussions to these, then the possibilities of musical scholarship and criticism would be rather circumscribed.

But though our vocabulary for sounds contains so few direct terms and so many that are metaphorical, we have no reason to despair. The very limitation in the number of words at our disposal helps us discover patterns and correspondences. We may feel the darkness of the viola to be like the darkness of the contralto voice, or like the darkness of the clarinet in its low register. Placing these things together may have implications for

musical understanding – even for musical performance, and even for musical composition. We may want to hesitate here. We may want to believe that the nature of sounds is independent of the words we find for them, that there is a reality that our words aspire to touch, but that would exist even were there no words, just as the planet Neptune existed before it was discovered and named, and in a certain sense, of course, that must be so. The spectrum of a viola tone is not changed by whether we call it ‘dark’ or not. However, words are our intermediaries between the raw physical facts and our comprehension, and that comprehension can certainly be affected by the words we choose. We change the perception of reality by the language we bring into play. And if we had a much larger vocabulary for sounds, and for musical sounds in particular, our perception would not be led into the rich networks of comparison I have begun to describe, networks that nourish our musical understanding.

Moreover, our language of metaphor contributes – perhaps even more than our language of specialized terms: dominant seventh, stretto, sonata exposition, hexachord – to the formation of our musical culture. By learning how sounds, intervals and other musical events may be said to be warm, grainy, explosive, pliable, the student comes to be aware of how music is commonly perceived, and to be led into judgements about how and why it was in the first place conceived. Our language of metaphor, so far from being merely descriptive, links music with other aspects of life and of the world: with what we see and what we feel, what we dream and what we hope. We have no reason, then, to think that words are wholly inadequate and inappropriate when it comes to dealing with music, for in their inadequacy, in their inappropriateness, is their rich usefulness.

Nevertheless, it may help us to remain vigilant, and aware that much of what we say and write about music is at the level of metaphor. I could – though it might take a very long time, and test your patience beyond the limits of politeness – but I could eventually describe to you the view from my house or the feel and colour of that shirt. It would be very much more difficult, however, for me to describe in detail – even given all our special musical terms and all the richness of metaphor at our disposal – a piece of music you did not already know or a performance you had not heard. It is as if music exists on the other side of a membrane. When we are listening to music, we are enabled to travel through the membrane and

experience the music within its own world. Hopefully that is the case also when we are studying music, and surely it is so for the composer. But when we start to use words to describe our experience, or to convey the fruits of our studies, or to explain what we have been doing in composing, we find ourselves on the other side of the membrane, trying to discern things with which we have no direct contact.

Again, though, this separateness of music, which so easily seems to exist in its own world, is by no means complete, which is why I used the image of a membrane and not of an impenetrable wall. There are numerous ways in which music does not withhold itself from words but rather rushes to embrace them, even takes them as part of itself. In the first place, of course, a good deal of music – and in some cultures the majority – is vocal music: music that is sung, and that therefore takes words within itself – though we may not find this a very convincing example of interdependence, since the history of music is full of cases of composers or singers changing the text of a song or other vocal piece, whether translating it or substituting quite different words, as, for instance, Bach and Handel often did, while leaving the music, we would have to say, essentially the same. As librettists have found throughout the history of opera, music has a way of requiring words but then virtually obliterating them.

However, the association of words and music by no means ends there. In the western classical tradition, a tradition differentiated from the rest of the world's music by its elaborate system of notation, the repertory is made up, as we know, of distinct works, compositions, which have titles. And these titles are not just useful labels that allow us to pick out one work from another; they impinge on the musical experience. If Debussy had called *La Mer* 'Symphony No. 3', as he could well have done, then the music might still have reminded us of the sea in its rolling waves and its brilliant splashes, but we would have to listen to it in a different way, as belonging to the tradition of the symphony, and of the French symphony in particular, rather than just alluding to those traditions.

Nor does music's entanglement in words end there. A work of music is indelibly branded not only with its title but also with the name of its composer, a name that will be extremely dense with meaning for anyone with more than a passing interest in music. We might even say that composers' names are among the densest words we have, full of connections that

have to do with what we may have learned of the lives and personalities of those composers, and of their work. *La Mer*, to take that example again, is different because it has the word 'Debussy' attached, and more different the more we know about Debussy through our reading of biographies, letters, studies – and, of course, through listening to this and other works he produced.

And here I have introduced another level of words, of verbal material, having to do with music, in saying that our understanding of the term 'Debussy', and therefore our understanding of *La Mer*, is affected by our reading. For this is something else that distinguishes western classical music, that not only is it a literate tradition, a tradition based on music that is written down, but that those written-down works have been subjected to a very large amount of commentary that is itself written down, that there are whole libraries devoted to this music, and that there have been such libraries now for several generations. So much is this the case that it might be very hard for us to imagine having a musical experience independently of words, listening to a composition in ignorance of its title or its composer or anything else about it. We might want to hold to the image of such a musical experience as an ideal, as an instance of what we might be tempted to call 'pure' music, unsullied by verbal positioning and explanations, but we also know that we do not live in a world of ideals, and that if we found ourselves in such a situation, listening to something blind, as it were, we might find it impossible to keep our minds focused on this nameless music and not have them racing for words, hurrying to deduce things about it—verbally articulated things, having to do with its instrumentation, its harmonic style, its historical source, its similarities to other music, and so on. We would want to assimilate it to our usual musical experience, in which works come to us from out of an aura of words, an aura comprising the title, the name of the composer, probably a programme note, and also – beyond these immediately present words – all that we have read and been told about the particular piece and other relevant aspects of music. If language represents a fall from the grace of music's essential silence, then we live in a fallen world and cannot imagine ourselves back. But though we clearly know that any such return is impossible, that we cannot possess a music that is isolated from words, we might ask ourselves how it is that we have such a concept, such an ideal – an ideal of music speaking wholly of,

through and for itself, in its own tongue, with no mediation and certainly with nothing we could describe as subject matter other than the musical phenomena of tones, rhythms and colours, meaningless in themselves, made meaningful by how they are put together, composed, but their meaning entirely beyond translation, not requiring translation. For consider, we have no parallel concept of 'pure' painting, except possibly in certain forms of highly abstract art from the special historical situation of around a century ago, and no comparable ideal of 'pure' literature, except again in the work of a few writers from the same period. In almost all cases it seems obvious to us that painting and literature have subjects that can be discussed in terms drawn from the world outside the particular art. A painting shows a cottage in a forest, with smoke curling from the chimney; a novel tells of two young men who, close friends, find themselves on opposite sides in a war. Why do we feel more hesitant about considering music in such terms? Why do we remain hesitant even when there is a text that seems to disclose the subject, as there is in an opera or a song?

I think we feel this hesitation because we are aware that the ostensible subject is not quite the point, not quite central to the composition. We may say that Wilhelm Müller's poetic cycle *Winterreise* is a first-person narrative as delivered by a fugitive from life, one who, crossed in love, goes off into the cold. Of course we are aware that this is not quite the whole story, for people who are tormented and desperate do not easily express themselves in rhymed quatrains, but still we cannot think of the poems, or discuss them intelligibly, without taking into account their narrative content. We may want to be scrupulous here, and examine our preconceptions, but we will have great difficulty ignoring the easy path between life and art that the poems so invitingly open for us, as if their voice really were that of a person suffering the tribulations they invoke. When these same poems are set to music, however, this equivalence is more complex. For one thing, if despondent travellers rarely speak directly in fully fashioned poems, still more rarely do they give voice in song. We may feel – we probably should feel – that Schubert's settings take us closer to the protagonist, that they particularize what in the poems is general, and intensify what is blandly conventional.

At the same time, though, they take us further away – not only because song is less natural a mode of expression than speech, but also be-

cause music, as much as it particularizes and intensifies, has purposes of its own – or we have purposes for it. *Winterreise* will make us think, as I suggested before, of Schubert, and of what we know of his other songs, his other works, his life. On quite another level, the songs are cast in a style – a diatonic tonal style – that involves certain ways of proceeding. Chords and individual notes will have meanings within that style that have very little to do with blighted love and snow, much more with the relation of the flattened submediant to the tonic, with avoiding or moving towards a particular cadence, with creating and disturbing a metre that exists quite independently of the poetic metre, let alone the poetic subject.

We know that Liszt transcribed a number of these songs for piano without voice, and though we might find it hard to listen to his transcriptions without calling to mind the original songs and their texts, or at least the human situation those texts conspire to relate, that of the winter journey, still we do not hear these piano-only versions as ruins or relics. On the contrary, they appear entire in themselves, having suffered no loss, and we could almost imagine them to have been composed as such, around melodies of a vocal type but not as settings of particular verses: songs without words. We could even go further, not just spirit the words away but imagine them replaced by new ones, in keeping with the phrasings and rhyme schemes of the songs as Schubert left them. After all, this would only be to imagine for *Winterreise* a process of textual replacement that was very common in the middle ages and the renaissance – a process for which we have a term: *contrafactum* – and that survived, as I have indicated, into the eighteenth century.

Of course, any new texts for *Winterreise* would have to conform not only to Wilhelm Müller's poetic forms but also to what we might judge to be the expressive temperatures and contours of Schubert's settings. *Winterreise* could hardly become a sequence of hymns of divine praise or of meditations on flowers, but its narrative could be, say, that of a mother reacting to the death of a young child, or of someone bitterly regretting being exiled from home. We could imagine this and still feel that the integrity of Schubert's music had been preserved, whereas it is impossible to conceive of the image in a great painting being replaced by something else and yet the painting remaining in any sense 'the same', or a novel being rewritten around another story while staying recognizable as what it was.

I am proposing this thought-experiment of changing the text of *Winterreise* in order to argue that one group of words associated with music – the words that are set in that music, and that therefore might seem most intimately bound up with it – may be, on the contrary, superfluous – that the singing voice is not necessarily the best guide, or any guide at all, to what the music is saying. And I am arguing this as part of the larger argument, which I derive from our common usage and assumptions, that music, in comparison with the other arts, has an extra degree of separation from what it purports to be its subject. This belief in music's fundamental otherness has been stated many times, but never more emphatically, or from a position of greater authority, than by Stravinsky in his autobiography, where he writes, or at least allows his ghost-writer to write for him, that music is, 'by its very nature, essentially powerless to express [his own italics] anything at all, whether a feeling, an attitude of mind, a psychological mood, a phenomenon of nature, etc.'

Now, we can seek to explain away this rather austere view by drawing attention to Stravinsky's historical position in steering music away from its late Romantic involvement with exactly those things: feelings, attitudes of mind, psychological moods, phenomena of nature, etc – a Romantic involvement amounting to a full-blown love affair in the music of, say, Richard Strauss. We can also say how Stravinsky was an unusually objective artist, one whose works seem very often to spring from a concern with form or tradition, the motive force in a small musical idea, or a curiosity about how things were done in the past. And we can protest, all too easily, that of course music generally is expressive, even if Stravinsky's isn't so very much. We all recognize the weight of ceremonial sadness in a funeral march.

Three things may be said against this commonsense approach. One is, as I've already suggested, that music's apartness, even abstractness, is just as universally acknowledged as its expressive force. Another is that the kind of expression Stravinsky is talking about – and dismissing, a musical mimicking of emotional and mental states, of natural phenomena and of whatever may be subsumed under his 'etc' – is not to be found in all music, not even in all western classical music, and where it is found, it is not often the primary source of value. Indeed, a response to music's expressive connotations is widely regarded as a first stage, to be gradually joined by, and supported by, an appreciation of the structural functions by whi-

ch expression is brought about. I may go repeatedly to look at a Rembrandt portrait and find my appreciation deepening of the subtlety and acuteness with which a human face is not just shown in image but made to seem really present, by means that remain wholly mysterious. But as I listen again and again to a Beethoven quartet, I understand more and more how much its expressive qualities will depend on the performers, and at the same time how much they depend not only on a certain turn of the melody or harmonic progression but also on the placing of these events within a larger and larger context. I learn nothing of the form of the Rembrandt; I am not even sure what 'form' in this domain would entail, beyond obvious questions of how the figure is placed in the imaginary space of the picture. On the other hand, with the Beethoven, I can hardly avoid being confronted by formal questions of development, cross-reference and satisfactory closure.

This is all to say that our experience of music is not principally – though it may be firstly – a response to its expressive characteristics. There is also music in which so much is going on, as we might like to say, 'purely' musically, so much of incident and connection, that we find ourselves captivated by that and would find it difficult to say what is being expressed: some Bach fugues might fall into this category, or perhaps the first string quartet of Helmut Lachenmann. And here we come to our third reason to doubt the importance of what is commonly called expression in music – the expression of feelings and so on – for it is not only the music of Bach and Lachenmann that causes us difficulties in placing musical expression. Indeed, this has been a conundrum in aesthetics since Plato, and still we have very little understanding of how and why music is deemed expressive.

There are even prominent and learned philosophers who go the whole way with Stravinsky and deny that music is expressive in the ways commonly understood, asserting that what we take to be expression is all personal association, different for each listener and unintelligible in general terms, so that there can be no theory of musical expression. I don't think we have to go quite that far. I think we can identify some of the features that would make most people feel Rachmaninov's music to be more expressive than Satie's. But we have gained so little comprehension of how musical expression is brought about, whether by performers or by composers, that the outlook for further understanding is not good. I spoke earlier of the language of metaphor through which we say so much about music:

‘dark’, ‘bright’, and so on. Perhaps expression is another language of metaphor through which we try to give some sense, not least to ourselves, of musical experience. We have listened to a performance, and through such terms as ‘melancholy’ and ‘gaiety’ we try to name what we have experienced, while probably being aware as we do so that the names are insufficient, perhaps even mistaken. Like the words of Winterreise, those names the music has absorbed close to itself, our expressive associations seem to be beside the point – present, no doubt, but not at the centre. We do not listen to music in order to be caused to feel sad, or to witness sadness in others: the singer of a song or the articulating voice or voices that a piece of instrumental music will so often seem to bring before us.

Yet nor is music’s hold on us that of a wholly abstract play of sound events. To begin with, sound events are never wholly abstract. We listen to music with the organs of perception and discrimination that evolved, through the tens of thousands of years of human and protohuman history, to listen to sounds from long before there was such a thing as music. Music may remind us of those other sounds, sometimes very deliberately, as with the birdsong impressions of Olivier Messiaen, sometimes perhaps by accident, as when a sudden closing forte may sound like the fall of a tree. But the sounds of which music reminds us constantly and continuously are those to which our ears are most closely attuned: the sounds of human voices. We may say – I have used the term already – that music speaks to us, and indeed it does, in ways that are not just metaphorical. The central pitch range of our instruments is the central pitch range of our voices. A musical phrase will ordinarily be of roughly the same sort of length, a few seconds, as a phrase in speech. The end of a statement will be signalled by a fall, unless an abrupt effect is desired for rhetorical purposes. This congruence of music and speech was recognized in the eighteenth century, when the theory developed of planning a composition like an oration or an argument, putting forward principles, working them up, bringing all to a conclusion.

If music speaks, however, it does so in no language, for language, like expression, is one of those cherished properties of music we have to recognize as metaphorical. One of the essences of a language is that it can identify things without pointing to them. I can say ‘Panama Canal’ to you even though it is nowhere to be seen, and we all know what we mean. I can even say ‘Father Christmas’ or ‘Sugar Plum Fairy’. And because I can

do so, it is possible to translate from one language into another, to identify the same things with other words defined within that second language, as is happening right now. But music cannot identify things except by imitation, as in the case of Messiaen's birds. Such examples are rare, and they do not have the other property of language I mentioned, that of being translatable. If I translate a passage in Messiaen as 'Garden Warbler, Blackbird, Robin' I cannot feel I have reproduced the effect of the music in any degree whatever. Music speaks, then, but not in a language. In a way it returns us to a very early stage in our existence, when we heard voices but had no notion of what they were saying, and perhaps no notion that they were saying anything at all. However, there is this difference, that young babies pay attention to voices because they are primed to do so, and gradually they do acquire the skills to understand what is being said to them, or sung, and to respond appropriately. We who listen to music, on the other hand, will never understand what it is saying, because it is not saying anything in the manner of a language, and certainly we will never gain the faculty of being able to reply to it. If we did, what would we say?

To view music only as non-verbal communication does not, however, seem quite enough. We have devoted a large part of our lives to this discipline; we do not want to believe it is no more than a superior system of grunts. To go further we may need to recognize that music is made not only of sounds but also of something I have not yet mentioned: time. We can regard music as sounds placed in time or as time delineated by sounds. A sound takes some period of time in order to be played and to be perceived, and though we may be aware of the passage of time in total silence – or under other conditions, when we are hurrying for an appointment or, indeed, listening to a lecture – sound allows an interval of time to be shaped, to have a beginning, a middle and an end, and, most importantly, to have relationships with other intervals of time, leading from one to another, causing a momentary surprise, or doing any of the other things that sounds in time, time in sounds, can achieve in music.

As one of the temporal arts, one of the arts that take time rather than space in which to unfold, music is often linked with drama and film, but of course there is the basic difference on which we've already touched, that music has no narrative connotation. Music does not use notes to tell a story in the way that drama and film use words, actions and images; the

notes themselves are the story. But now we have an indication of how this does not make music a thoroughly abstract art. On the contrary, we might even say that music deals most concretely with its subject matter, if we can understand that subject matter as time. Where a painter will use shape and pigment in order to refer directly or indirectly to things visible, a composer makes a statement about time with the substance of time itself, with flecks of time that are given colour, form and intensity by sound, and that are worked together to constitute the composition. And here we might return to Stravinsky's autobiography, where, having insisted that expression is not music's rationale, he goes on: 'The phenomenon of music is given to us with the sole purpose of establishing an order in things, including, and particularly, the coordination between man and time.'

It is curious how difficult it is to think about time. Indeed, we can easily sympathize with St Augustine, and feel we have not advanced much in our understanding through the sixteen centuries that separate us from him. 'And I confess to Thee, O Lord', he writes in his Confessions, 'that I yet know not what time is; and again I confess unto Thee, O Lord, that I know that I speak this in time.' He knows that his words are following one upon the other in due order, but he knows this – as I know the same now of what I am saying – either because he has prepared them that way – that is, he has, beforehand, looked forward into the future – or else because he remembers what he has said – that is, he has, afterwards, looked back into the past. He cannot observe them going by, as one might observe cars passing along a street – or, if one were St Augustine, sheep passing along a path. We can see what is here in front of us, because we have time in which to do so. But the corollary of this statement makes no sense. Space offers us no assistance at all in experiencing the temporal equivalent of here, which is now. Now is much more elusive; we can hardly speak the word – as St Augustine seems to be saying – before it is already not now. How long is now? As long as one word? Now? Or could it be five? Or could we feel that now might persist for as many as fourteen words? Or did that sentence already occupy more than one now? And if so, how many? 'Woe is me,' concludes St Augustine, 'that do not know even what I do not know.'

We have no sense organs for time, as we have our eyes and our ears to help us orient ourselves in space. And we have no such sense organs because, in a way, we don't need them, since we cannot move in time

as we can move in space. Or at least, we can move, but only at the universal pace of one second per second. Our reach into the future is only by way of imagination, and into the past by way of memory and study. And if we have difficulty in taking the measure of now, that difficulty is compounded when we try to examine how and why time flows. Just as we have no sense organs for this, so we have no tools, and precious little in the way of theory. Some have argued that the passing of time is a construct of human consciousness, that we alone in the world know ourselves – and therefore feel ourselves – to be moving through this fourth dimension. But then it's hard to see what could provide us with this awareness, which for all of us is precisely the same.

I said just now that we have no sense organs and no tools with which to examine time, but we do have sense organs for images of time, and tools with which to create those images: our ears and our musical instruments, voices included. For I think we could take more seriously Stravinsky's assertion, shared by many others through history, that music is most essentially about time – that music is made of time, which it makes perceptible to us through sound, and that a musical composition is a kind of sculpture in time, or, perhaps better, a building in time, into which we enter and in which we sense, with an immediacy we find nowhere else, the passing of time. If we are drawn to music by its ancestral voice, we are held, too, by this experience it offers of time.

We are all familiar with this. We know, for instance, how a very fast tempo easily produces an effect of breathless energy, so that we might feel we are running at top speed, even though we are in fact sitting still in the concert hall, or how a very slow tempo can almost convince us that time has stopped and we have slipped into eternity. But music's resources for creating images in time by no means end at the level of tempo, metre and pulse. As I suggested earlier, every note in a composition, every shading of every note, is a fleck of time contributing to the building in time that is the complete work. This image of time, this image of time in time, depends not only on those components of music that have to do with duration and speed but also with those that are concerned with pitch and timbre, and surely also with loudness and dynamic shape. Everything contributes, and we judge the success of a composition or of a performance by how thoroughly and richly everything is integrated to the same purpose.

In our experience of music we understand this. We cannot fail to. But it is dismaying how often, in our study of music, we fall into the trap of considering a work or a performance not as something in constant change and movement, something we can grasp only as it changes and moves, but as a static object, all of whose parts are simultaneously available to us. Western classical music being, as I said, a literate tradition, it provides us with scores, which we can leaf through, and compare one passage with another, virtually ignoring how it might take half an hour to get between the two, ignoring what happens during that process, and what effect the process will have on the meaning of what comes at the end of it. We can print a music example in an article or book as if it were a detail from a painting, whose components could be examined in any order, again ignoring how it is in movement through time. Similarly we're used to treating performances, through recordings, not as proceeding from beginning to end in constant flow but rather as fixed objects we can sample at any point.

It seems to me that new areas of musical study and enlightenment could be opened up if music were to be considered more in its mobility, as a play of forces that are dynamic in themselves – for any particle of sound will constantly be changing – and dynamic in the implications they hold for and the effects they have on other musical forces. Some understanding of this mobile nature of music has come from Heinrich Schenker's work in showing how harmonic processes, at ever deeper levels of simplicity are the engines of movement in great works of the century and a half between Bach and Brahms. But we understand much less about how music from outside this period – or from wholly other musical traditions and cultures – comports itself through time, or, even in the central tradition that has been most closely studied, how matters of rhythm, tempo, colour and volume interlace with those of harmony and melody. We need, perhaps, to come away from the score and the recording, reflect on music's nature as constant movement, and then go back, with new questions.

Among those questions may be some concerned with the effect on us of music's flow, for it may be that the power of western classical music has to do in the first place with its command of time. As we know, this music has spread from a small part of the world to almost everywhere in the last three centuries; it could not have done so if it did not impart something deeply important to us.

We may observe – it can hardly be ignored, certainly in Europe and North America, and no doubt in South America, too – that the music that has been most widely and enthusiastically embraced is that of what I just now called the central tradition, the music of, in the main, German and Austrian composers from around 1700 to around 1900, with some Russians towards the end of the period. This is what fills our concert halls and our radio schedules. It is not necessarily the most expressive music. We could say that Italian opera – Verdi, Puccini – is more expressive. We might want to argue rather that music in which expression goes so far as to rip through cultural norms and artistic proprieties – the early atonal works of Schoenberg and Webern, or, in our time, the fragmentary songs and instrumental pieces of György Kurtág – that such music is more expressive. But where the music of Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Brahms stands unrivalled is in its creation of a dynamic continuity that is consistently progressive, so that we have the sensation of being carried, even through gaps between movements, ever forward, towards a destination that has been declared near the outset: the tonic chord. The music may go through loops and diversions, but it will in due course arrive, and it leaves us in no doubt about that. Evolving in Europe at a time of great change and uncertainty, this music offered reassuring images that the story of the world, as represented on a small scale in the extent of a piece of music, is a story of progress, that at any point a clear end is in sight, and that this end will be reached, no matter what.

We may recall that this music dates from a period, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when progress could be observed in many areas of human activity, enough for individuals to be aware of change – betterment and advance, we would have to say, in most cases – during their lifetimes. In the sciences, people learned of the number and nature of the chemical elements, of the rules of genetics, of the vast age of the earth and of the evolution of species. We may feel this drive to know in the music of Beethoven. There were also great social changes brought about by industrialization and the move to cities – changes whose reflection we can witness in music in the increasing size and complexity of the orchestra or the standardization of instruments and tuning. But we can sense in that time, too, a view of the human life as a progress, as if the clock driving scientific discovery and economic increase were operating also within the hu-

man body, directing each human life towards fulfilment. Music – which, alone of all inanimate things we can witness in the world, shares with us an existence in time, from a definite beginning to an inevitable end – became an image of that steady progress we all would probably still wish to see – within the world we inhabit and within ourselves – despite the dismal lessons of the twentieth century, to which the twentyfirst seems to be adding its own disappointments. Music in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries took on the pattern of optimism, and in that degree became a reassuring companion. Small wonder we find it reassuring still.

Reassurance, however, has to be repeatedly tested and rediscovered if it is to remain alive, and it is in this spirit that we need to go back to the classics, those of us who are scholars as much as those of us who are performers. A classic is not a stable monument but rather something that is, like music itself, constantly in motion, mutating in time. It has an element of stability in its notated form – or at least of relative stability, since, as those of us who are textual scholars well know, there will very often be the possibility of variant readings, where different sources disagree and cannot be reconciled. However, the greater mutability of the classics comes from how they are forever being altered by performers and by critics and analysts. We have all had the experience, probably many times, of listening to a recording or a concert performance of a piece we knew very well, only to find we didn't know it at all, to find an unexpected importance in details we'd overlooked, and perhaps even a new atmosphere and meaning in the whole work. We have had the experience, too, of reading an essay that offers a new and compelling interpretation of a familiar masterpiece. The music of Beethoven, we may say, was written only for the first time by Beethoven; it goes on being rewritten by those who perform it and by those who write about it, going back to, and most certainly including, E.T.A. Hoffmann while the composer was still alive. That is what a tradition is, a river whose waters are continuously being refreshed by new influxes.

Reinterpreting the classics is part of our task, not wilfully but mindfully, cognisant of the tradition – the living, changing tradition – within which we stand and to which we must aspire to contribute. The classics still mean something to us not only because we have the same physical constitution as the people of two or three centuries ago but also because we have the same determination to improve the world, no matter through

how many failures along the way. The classics mean something different to us because time has passed, bringing us into a world that is radically different in many ways.

As musicians we have a measure of that difference in the work of composers who are our contemporaries, and we miss opportunities, perhaps even shirk responsibilities, if we fail to pay attention to new music, for Beethoven is being changed now not only by performers and scholars but also by composers who take on – in new terms, in our own terms – the Beethovenian challenge of large, all-embracing form that springs from the past but is also open to the future. It would be disappointing if our work on the music of the past were to be safely enclosed within that past, screened off from what we might learn from the present, from the musical present.

Equally, as scholars, we have the opportunity and the responsibility to bring our awareness of the past to bear on new and recent music, for this is, as far as most scholarship goes, terra incognita, far more remote than the *ars subtilior* of six centuries ago or the work of minor masters of the Baroque. There has been a failure of musical criticism, at all levels, to deal with the music of the last three or four decades; as far as most courses go, and most musical studies, the history of music ended somewhere in the early nineteen-seventies, with the institution of minimalism, of spectralism, of extreme sonorities and of computer sound synthesis and transformation. It may be – it does indeed seem to be – that there has been no great innovation since that time, even a retrenchment in terms of technique. But if so, what are the reasons for that retrenchment, aesthetic and economic? Where is it being countered? Can there be a newness in music without technical innovation or advance, and if so how, and where is that newness to be found? What new paradigms in the creation of music are evolving, through partnerships between composers and performers, or between composers and computer technicians? How is composition being altered by the internet, not only as a means of dissemination but as a creative medium?

These are all very general questions, and perhaps unanswerable except through the close study of particular works that seem to us to demand our attention. I think it is possible that our neglect of contemporary music, as investigators, critics, analysts, is having an adverse effect

on composition. If we do not provide student composers with information about the musical achievements of recent decades, then we leave them several steps back on what should be their path. This is particularly crucial when students are not going to get this information anywhere else – not from the radio, not from concerts, and almost certainly not from the internet, where the bewildering abundance of information, all immediately available, defeats anyone's efforts to discover what is significant.

But of course it is not only young composers who need to be informed about contemporary music. We need to educate also those who will become performing musicians, musical administrators and teachers. Otherwise, as we have seen, new music will be almost ignored by the general cultural life, except where the audience can be granted the rather shallow thrill of a première.

And then we need to educate the audience, i.e. everyone. The progress that scholarship made in the twentieth century was extraordinary – not just in the sphere of music, of course, but in all the humanities and sciences. We are the beneficiaries of that progress; we live in a far richer – in many respects a far more wondrous – world than did our forebears of a century or so ago. But we know also that the twentieth century was an age of colossal failures, and one of its failures was in transmitting the knowledge and experience it was acquiring. Let us strive to enlarge understanding, eliminate error and extend awareness, but let us strive also to propagate our discoveries and our innovations to the widest possible public, to share the wonder.

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