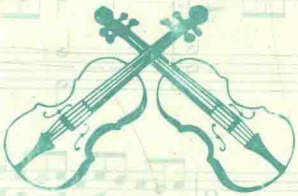
The Musical Imperative

Edition II



by

Simon V. Anderson

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PROLOGUE

There must be forty books on the market for the basic music appreciation course in American undergraduate studies. Why write another one?

First, because the other books fail to treat the full musical environment with equal objectivity. Classical music gets generous coverage, but jazz, rock, Broadway, and country music suffer modest treatment by comparison.

Second, because most music appreciation books attempt too much. My students — 600 or more each quarter term — have heavy schedules in their academic majors, and do not have time for those recommended in-depth analyses of major classical works, not to mention the suggestions for further listening, additional reading sources, and the like. What my students need, and I think they are typical, is a tight, accurate, informative, objective survey of the musical options which lie out there beyond their current personal experiences.

Third, the other books put too much emphasis on "listening skills." We just don't listen to music the way most textbooks would seem to suggest — searching out areas of tension and resolution, identifying the changes of meter, recognizing differences in texture, and all the rest. We "feel" these things, of course, but nobody intellectualizes and verbalizes about them the way we want our college students to. Even veteran concert-goers in classical and jazz circles would have a difficult time doing the things we ask of our students.

It may be interesting to know about cadences, irregular metrical units, and disjunct melodic contours, but it is surely not critical to full musical "appreciation." We can enjoy a fine sirloin steak without any knowledge whatsoever of muscle fibers or the chemical properties of the meat. Nor is our pleasure greatly enhanced by learning the life and times of the cook who prepared the meal.

Fourth, all kinds of the wrong details are given in the other textbooks. Professors don't need a whole bundle of information about music — they're trained experts in the

field. What they need are some new ideas on how to connect what they know to what their students ought to know. Students don't need pictures of trumpets and Renaissance paintings — these things are abundantly available elsewhere. What they need are some ideas on how to connect what they know to what their professor wants them to know.

I have tried to make those connections, to offer many large observations on the musical environment in modern America. I have presented a great variety of sweeping generalizations — many of them controversial, certainly unconventional — to open up new thoughts on the "appreciation" of music. If I have succeeded, class discussions will get very interesting at times.

Fifth, and most important of all, the other music appreciation textbooks seem designed to try to change the musical tastes of the college students. This is a grave error, and nearly always fails. Musical taste — musical preference — is not a matter of knowledge, or generous exposure, or even serious study. It is a matter of family background, socioeconomic level, peer-group influences, self-image (present and future), and many other deeply rooted cultural circumstances. A few short hours of college study will surely not alter those preconditions.

Instruction should not be propaganda. Music appreciation books cannot "improve" or "raise" the musical activities of the land. Nor should they try. At the end of a music appreciation course, a student need not say, "No more rock for me; nothing but classical music from now on." If that happens, the music class has failed. We have just replaced one kind of cultural bias with another.

Instead, at the end of the course, a student should understand some of the basic terminology of the music discipline, should be properly informed about the major styles, schools, forms, and such, and should be able to see the large picture of music as a form of specialized human behavior of a given crowd of people in a given historical time in a given location.

If all goes well, the students will indeed have learned to "appreciate" music — to see what a potent force it is in the life of humankind, how diverse are its forms and styles, yet how consistent are its powers of fulfillment and enrichment.

The basic purpose of a music appreciation course is not, after all, to persuade students that some styles of music are better than others, but, rather, to show how all musical styles derive from and serve similar human needs and desires.

Yehudi Menuhin, conducting the Congress of Strings Orchestra during rehearsal. Each summer, the American Federation of Musicians hires international figures to train college-age orchestras. The program is free for the students, and all salaries are paid from the Music Performance Trust Fund.

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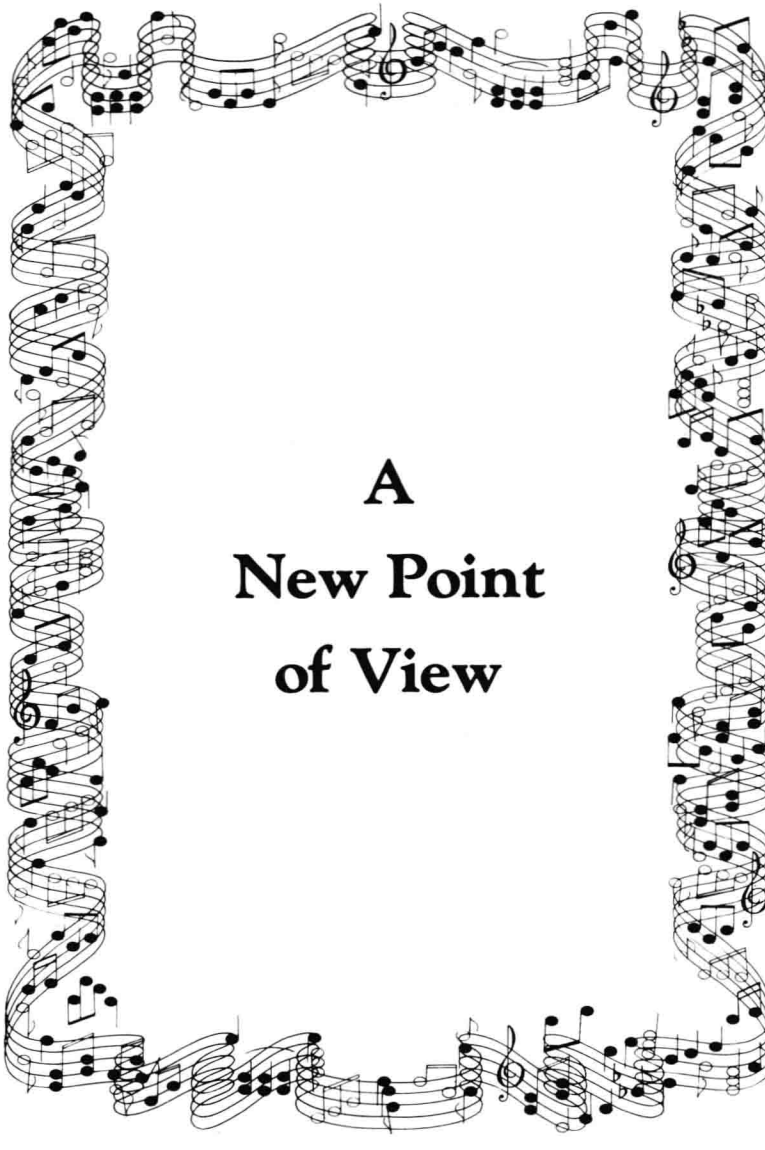

A New Point of View

Introduction

The Meaning Of Music

Generally speaking, there are two great schools of opinion on the meaning of music: (1) the Absolutists believe that music has no intrinsic meaning whatsoever, that what is understood or felt as meaning is nothing more than an emotional response to the stimulating pleasure of the sounds and a kind of satisfying joy in the organizational order of the total experience; and (2) the Referentialists believe that music represents, or refers to, in some vague way, certain extra-musical states of being — like happiness, sadness, love, rage, comfort, or whatever. A good number of subschools exist (Abstract Formalism, Abstract Expressionism, Social Realism, Symbolism, and others), each armed with loaded philosophical and scholarly weapons to gun down the others, and establish, once and for all, full and secure control of the territory of aesthetic meaning.[1] The literature of the music profession is flooded with learned treatises which analyze, describe, and finally define musical meaning as this or that or the other thing.

ILLUSTRATION: Russian composer, Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky, 1840-1893, who wrote many referential (programmatic) compositions.

PHILOSOPHY

All the major poets and philosophers have discussed music.[2] Plato believed that music could refine the character and preserve good health, but that too much music could cause a man's character to be "melted and softened beyond what is good." Aristotle believed that the aim of art was purification. Music was especially good at drawing off unsocial and destructive impulses into harmless excitement. But Aristotle, too, cautioned that too much music was a dangerous thing. Augustine confessed, among other things, "to have sinned criminally... being more moved by the singing than by what is sung." He thought music had its place, though, because "by the delights of the ear, the weaker minds may be stimulated to a devotional frame."

Schopenhaur believed that music was the most powerful of all the arts, because it could most immediately and powerfully elevate man above the strife of Will. Goethe is supposed to have said that architecture was "frozen music." Henri Bergson considered musical works to be "records of intuitions." Freud believed that music was a sublimation process in which the composer converts his repressions and unfulfilled wishes into primal fantasies expressing his desires. Charles Darwin believed that music preceded the existence of articulate speech, and was used originally as a factor in attracting and selecting a mate.

All this scholarly and philosophical footwork is interesting and entertaining to be sure. The blunt truth is, however, that music is simply a form of social behavior through which a given crowd of people exchange and reaffirm attitudes they hold in common. No more; no less. But that's enough. Enough to be a critical activity in the life of all non-industrial societies, and enough to be a major business in every industrial society.

Music is a highly specialized social behavior, as is every language of communication, of course. Edward Sapir and his student, Benjamin Whorf, hypothesized 50 years ago that different languages reveal distinctly different worlds, not just different terms for the same world. Leonard Bernstein drew heavily on this philosophy in his *Unanswered Question.*

Such is the power of language — spoken, musical, or body — that gross misinterpretation often occurs by someone outside the culture. A raised eyebrow means one thing in one culture, but something quite different in another. Body odors are welcome in some cultures, and marriage matchmakers smell the prospective bride and groom to determine if they will be compatible. Such is just not the case in Western Civilization.

Likewise with music. A throbbing tenor saxophone is much in demand in jazz, but somehow totally out of place in a Mozart symphony. And the reverse. An operatic voice is glorious in opera, but ludicrous in jazz. On a less obvious level, a rich E-flat augmented eleventh chord is absolutely right for a certain moment in a jazz tune, but the same chord would destroy a country song. In fact the superimposition of one musical gesture on another musical culture is so shocking and humorous that Peter Schickele, the promoter of the works of "P. D. Q. Bach," has made a successful career in comedy by doing just that.

Every musical style has its own inner laws which make it what it is. Even mixing periods within a major style category does not work. To put a Romantic crescendo and cymbal crash in a Bach cantata would be criminal. But what a glorious effect that gesture is in Tchaikovsky. To throw a Dixieland phrase into a be-bop setting never works at all, but what a happy event was that same Dixieland tail-gate trombone phrase when Jack Teagarden did it in the 1920s.

CANTOMETRICS

The real "meaning" of music defies verbalization, of course, as much as the real meaning of love, friendship, joy, or sorrow. Yet music conveys something very specific and accurate from the performers to the listeners. The study of just what it is that music conveys between and among its performers and audiences has consumed the intellectual and scholarly energies of Alan Lomax, now, for over 40 years.