

tantôt libre, tantôt recherché; imagination and research in musical composition

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tantôt libre, tantôt recherché....

I want this evening to try and illumine a composer's world for you. What is the nature of the inner world of a composer? what is it that she or he actually does? A composer makes music: how? and beyond that inner world, what of the composer in the world?

In the traditions of Western Europe, 'composer' has come to have a specific meaning: we think of an individual, making individual musical works. In the words of the Authorised Version of the Bible, composers are 'such as found out musical tunes'; in the words of the ACE, composers 'generate music product - WCCM (which stands for Western contemporary classical music). To you and me, a composer is a particular kind of musician, standing in a particular relation to other musicians and to the world beyond.

Composers have variously been employed by the church, by the court, by the aristocracy, by the twentieth century film studio; and over the last thirty years in Britain, have been employed in growing numbers in universities. In the coda of my talk today I shall focus on why composers have come to be associated with universities and why I believe musical composition should be part, not just of a teaching curriculum, but of the research endeavour which underpins a flourishing university.

So, to begin elaborating my first subject; what is it that actually happens when a composer sits down to a desk, a computer or a piano? That in itself is a conventional picture of an individual at work; Why an individual? a group of musicians improvising or recording their latest tracks will also be creating new pieces of music; is there a qualitative difference? Yes, I think there is, but it may not be as important as the kinship that exists between all working musicians and which transcends cultural and stylistic differences. It is not a kinship of taste but one of working practice; for where the critical theorist will look at music from the outside, as it were, we who are practitioners start inside and move out from there.

A mathematician thinks in mathematical terms. When I start to work, I am not thinking *about* music I am thinking *in* music. Another kinship links the composer to practitioners in other arts: just as the visual artist engages with questions of proportion and symmetry, so does the composer. The novelist may explore a fractured narrative, the film-maker too, may play with our sense of chronology. All this is true of the composer, who also deals with balance, proportion, symmetry; who will certainly play with our sense of time.

What does it mean this thinking in music? let me be precise. I sing you a note (*): this is a poor wavery thing on an untrained voice, but the same note from a trained baritone would have great focus and power; or if that same pitch, which we call middle C is heard on a flute it will be quite different from the same pitch on the double bass; in one case a rather husky sound we describe as a low note because it is almost the lowest a flute can play, whereas the thin sound of a double bass on that same note, we experience as a high sound. These different colours and qualities of the same note can easily be explained by reference to

their frequency spectrum, but neither you nor I need knowledge of physics to experience the difference between middle c on a flute or a double bass. Similarly I did not bring a CD to play you one flute note and one double bass note because, however roughly, you are able to imagine that. Imagining sounds, not roughly but precisely, is what a composer does, and in due course will bring me back to my title.

To stay with a real sound; the middle C that I sang you had no context; what if I bring it into real time. If I just measure time singing regular seconds (* * *) you will soon tire of the repetition - you don't need the information any more. There's a significant change if I sing this: What was undifferentiated is beginning to be defined: a marker has appeared in the succession of events. I had something raw and I have begun to cook it a bit. You may say 'I don't understand music' but you can recognise there was a different experience and thus a different expectation as to what might happen next. For the composer that first tiny act of definition not only opens up a huge realm for what might appropriately happen next, but is also significant in a literal sense, for it is the first indication of the syntax of the music.

What happens if we add other notes to this fragment? I will play rather than sing: **** (middle C decorated by neighbour notes)

that contour reinforces middle C as a central note, it makes it stable, but this **** makes it part of a journey elsewhere, it turns it into an unstable or mobile note, as does this **** or this*** and if I change the rhythmic contour, things change again: let us hear contour that with all the character and colour intended by the composer:

CD track 1 - Stravinsky *Sacre* - opening

The Rite of Spring - the opening of Stravinsky's *Le Sacre de Printemps*, with that 'low' instrument the bassoon playing a note experienced as very high. There are extant sketches for Rite of Spring, but none for this introduction so we have to guess from Stravinsky's accounts of how he liked to work, as to how he came to this opening: how he listened to an idea in his head, made choices, reflected on those choices so as to take the musical idea further.

Choice: reflection; listening: now I think we have keys which will open some of the doors into the mind of a composer. Hearing is one of our senses: to listen is make an attentive and intentional use of that sense. The world of the composer is the world of the inner ear, just as in Calvino's story, *Un Re Ascolta* (A King Listens) the palace is the ear of the king. Calvino, and later Berio in their opera of the same name, debates the difference between hearing and listening. 'You are crouched in the innermost zone of your own ear', he writes, creating a fine metaphor for a composer.

To listen, to choose, to reflect; as a composer lives in this inner world of the imagination is he or she at work or at play? composing is an activity undertaken for its own sake and in that it seems to be like play: to make something, be it a sonnet, a soufflé or a song, is its own reward. Yet we speak of a work of music and perhaps this is in recognition that once we begin a process of listening, choosing and reflecting we are making an intentional journey of exploration: not a journey in a straight line, for I have been describing a cyclical process, but nevertheless an intentional one, a mindful exploration not a mindless one. We play with time, and work towards a construction in time.

There is a complementarity between ideas of being at work and at play, but no contradiction. Nor is there a contradiction between the listening and choosing, which we might call active, and the passive act of reflection; we analyse what we have done in order to go forward again. I might describe it as the imagination being informed, or being nourished, by the intelligence. By imagination I mean the power to form mental images in music; and the contemplative, receptive, analytic activities of the mind are what I harness in service of the imaginative ear, not just to keep it alive, but to keep open the possibility of those leaps it can make; leaps which we call intuitive or even inspirational. Here a further kinship is emerging; for many scientists have described how after a period of systematic thought or empirical enquiry, they have made an unprecedented leap forward—an intuitive leap.

Stravinsky said 'I am the vessel through which *Le Sacre* passed'. In his phrase lies an apprehension of mystery; but *Sacre*, however extraordinary and unprecedented, was in a literal sense, preceded by his very considerable previous experience. The creative power of the mind may bear fruit in ways that fill us with awe and admiration, but they are not inexplicable. For though intuition cannot be willed, it can be prepared for by that interaction of intelligence and imagination.

In the mind, the composer can move ideas back and forth at will; so playing with time is not an idle phrase: in the world of the imagination there need be no fixed chronology. I can use my inner ear to play with the relationship between a literal sensation of time passing and the altered perception of time which the music will create. This ability to shape ideas in the inner ear, in the mind, rather than having to do so by literal performance, is where we can see that a composer may have as much in common with other artists, whether poets or painters, as with the improvising musicians I referred to at the beginning. What seems to be peculiarly the composer's own is the ability to grasp the wholeness of a piece as if it could be apprehended simultaneously, like a picture. In the virtual time of a composer's imagination a work which in concert will last for twenty minutes, can be imagined all at once. Let's try and feel what that's like:

CD track 2 - *Beethoven V i cuts* (recorded analysis)

You heard a kind of essence of Beethoven V: the first movement taken out of its real time; all the detail, all the working out, the transitions and leading through are yet to come and instead we heard the bare bones of the piece, its architecture, our way through this skeletal structure being signed by the initial idea. The composer at work holds in the mind this wholeness, this kind of multidimensional overview in which all the detail is immanent, waiting to be realised. As your mind's eye can roam over a mental picture, so the mind's ear is roaming in time. Many composers have spoken of this apprehension of the whole, and the long business of working out the piece that ensues, never losing touch with the whole. When Mozart writes of his quartets as being the fruit of long and laborious study we have a vivid picture of that thinking in music with which I began - the most fertile of musical imaginations fused with acute musical intelligence.

To return to Beethoven, which is to return to my title, for the words '*tantôt libre tantôt recherché*' appear at the head of the first edition of his op. 133 quartet commonly known as the *Grosse Fuge*, the great fugue.

To translate *libre* is comparatively easy: free, freely; but in *recherché* we have a multiple pun, both for Beethoven and ourselves. Today, we use *recherché* to mean something choice, perhaps exotic or even esoteric. To an early nineteenth century musician, the word was the French version of the Italian *ricercar* - a standard term but a complex one. It could simply be a synonym for fugue; or it could mean skilful counterpoint, or it too could mean esoteric, in the sense of a piece of music intended for an elite who would appreciate its particular musical devices.

To explore the word a little further, where do *ricercar* and *recherché* come from? the Latin *requirere* gives us seeking out, and our modern 'require' in the sense of calling something up; and the Latin *circare* that lies behind *chercher*, carries the idea of circling around: you go about, to find an object; whether its a physical object or a mental object, you don't go in a straight line. That the composer is a seeker is nothing new; and is it not particularly apt to connect our English word research to this idea of 'going about'. Moreover I described a process whereby the composer listens, chooses, reflects and so on: a circling, spiralling process if ever there was one. So just as I suggested earlier that there is a kinship between the composer and the scientist as they make those informed leaps which we call intuitive, so I would now suggest that the process of composing is a process of researching. Research is not about accumulating facts: it is about seeking knowledge and eventually embodying it. So also in composition. When I listen to a piece of music, my sum of knowledge is expanded; my understanding of the world is changed. Nelson Goodman has written: 'Art like science provides a grasp of new affinities...cuts across categories to yield new organisations, new visions of the world we live in.'

Here I should like to give you a glimpse of my own music: it is, after all, the only authority I have to speak to you. I have chosen *Columbia Falls*, which is written for a large orchestra. Listening to it is rather like looking at a broad landscape: you are aware both of the overall contour, the balance of forces that shape it, and of the multitude of details. The orchestral 'families' each have their own kind of music, their own area of the landscape. The brass are outgoing, brilliant, virtuosic: the woodwind are also soloistic, but in a much gentler, more intimate style, like chamber soloists. The strings create a harmonic continuum which fills all the musical space; sometimes they are in the foreground but more often they are ambiguous in their perspective.

Listening, you can move between foreground and background, taking bearings from the juxtaposition of contrasting ideas, ideas that are recurring, meeting, parting, changing. The perspective is always shifting, the music always growing about you.

I'm going to play the last part of *Columbia Falls*, which means we shall listen to about seven minutes of music; the whole piece lasts twenty minutes.

Woodwind, solos, very quiet and inward, begin the last section, and because we are coming into the middle of things it may be hard to orient yourself. Stay with it, though, and you will hear how the strings join in, then the low brass, until all the musics gradually draw together until they fuse in a big climax. (Here, it is like the widest view of the landscape, each area perceived in relation to each other and the whole). The work ends with a solo alto flute which creates a final ambiguity of perspective and mass. Is this solo a detail, a shred of melody heard from afar? or is the whole broad landscape the expansion of a single song?

CD track 3 - *LeFanu Columbia Falls* (conclusion)

Many people in an audience listening to a new piece of music are inclined to say 'I didn't understand it' although they may easily admit to having been interested, excited, or bored - and those reactions are already first steps towards their understanding. How important is understanding? Mozart, in a letter to his father writes of a new work which the cognoscenti will appreciate and the rest of the audience will like it without knowing why. For myself, the more I know of the musical thinking in a work, the more intense my reaction and relation to it. Sometimes concert composers are described as serious composers - an unfortunate term if it means unrelieved gravity, but quite useful if we think of it colloquially; serious because the activity is intense, significant, as when we say some one is seriously rich (something few composers will ever be!). Mozart's letter about musical understanding uses the term cognoscenti without apology; similarly Beethoven's *recherché* is a proud advertisement: op 133 is at once free and also something else: skilful, esoteric and intended for a musical elite. This leads us into a very difficult area: for elite has become a pejorative term: we have begun the twenty first century with the notion of a musical elite as a bad thing, unwanted baggage from the past. Just as in the 1930s totalitarian governments in Germany and Russia used the term intelligentsia as a term of abuse, so the consumer-led society of the present and recent past places little value on the activities of an intellectual elite in the arts. Value may be literal: composers don't earn a living through their royalties, and nor does the Poet Laureate. However this aspect of value is not new; a composer like Holst, now so firmly established in the canon with *The Planets* as a best seller, reckoned his annual musical income in shillings and pence, not pounds. The aspect of value that seems curious to me at present is the extent to which such music as is imaginatively and intellectually enquiring has become peripheral. People who engage readily with contemporary art or theatre are not feeling the same need to extend or enrich themselves through musical exploration. In part, this is explained by how people use music. It can entertain, it can soothe it can set our feet dancing - it has always had these functions and I hope it always will. Music can do so much more, though. It can take us into new imaginative territory and it is that musical journey which people today seem to find fearful, or simply an irrelevance. I attribute this partly to a false opposition expressed in the cliché 'head and heart'. It is as if the freedom implied in Beethoven's *tantôt libre* is associated with heart and the *recherché* with head; and further that this 'heart' music is the music that you can enjoy because you can use it to entertain or soothe you, whereas the head music has no obvious function of this kind and so you don't know what to make of it. I have a difficulty in engaging with this problem in that I have never experienced and therefore never understood, this cliché of the head and heart, whether it is meant to be situated in myself or embodied in the music I hear. When I listen to music, it engrosses the whole of me; it takes me into itself. I say 'that Bach fugue moved me' or 'that Bruckner symphony sent me to sleep', describing in each case a feeling, even maybe with its physical symptoms such as tears. These reactions come from my apprehension of the music; the more I know it, the stronger my reaction is likely to be. To separate head and heart in

myself as a musician is as impossible an idea as it was for Shylock to cut out a pound of flesh without shedding blood. The keener my intelligent understanding of the music, the greater my enjoyment .

So what about head and heart in music, a subject on which there has been exhaustive speculation. First, let's be clear that the reaction I described above is in me, not in the music. Music expresses itself; it is a poor vehicle for messages beyond itself. Even an avowedly programmatic piece speaks only within a small cultural context: the afternoon of a faun can be the morning of a reindeer to the uninitiated.

How can one separate head and heart in a Bach fugue? Is it useful or even possible, to separate the concepts of intelligence and imagination? are they not so interdependent as to be inseparable? Bach holds in his mind, a mental, multidimensional modelling of time and space which is expressed through the skilfulness of counterpoint. We, as performers or listeners, experience his music with the feelings of pleasure and satisfaction that can come as surely from the exercise of the intellect as from the exercise of the dance floor.

In my title this evening, I made an opposition between imagination and research only to emphasise the better that intellectual enquiry and musical imagination are mutually dependent aspects of each other. Lacking in one or other, music is impoverished to the point of mediocrity.

CD track 4 – Bach Ein Feste Burg (opening chorus)

In composing, the extent to which conscious, reflective activity is uppermost varies enormously. Sometimes skill and free fancy are so completely fused that a complete song or a whole movement can be heard in the head and captured on the page without a second thought, without that looking back that on other occasions is essential. A different work may need weeks of sketching and rewriting before it seems to have fulfilled itself, to have borne out its own terms of reference. Yet another kind of reflective working out comes into play when a composer adopts a pre-existent musical form such as a Variation form. Each succeeding musical passage must stand in a particular relation to the original idea on which the whole is premised. Yet here too the composer's mind may be capricious - one variation takes a lot of attempts to get right; the next seems to flow effortlessly onto the page. There is no difference of quality in the result - the listener cannot tell which section cost the composer hours of sleep and which came so easily. Nor are those passages of music which are consciously adopting a skilful formal technique intrinsically richer or poorer than others; in Bach's Goldberg variations every third one is a canon, but that does not make them more or less expressive, or more or less memorable.

The most satisfying musical experiences for me are those where the music works on a number of levels: aspects of it can be enjoyed straightaway, but it yields many of its rewards only gradually. With repeated hearings and the growing understanding brought about by familiarity, comes the added savour of recognising the ambiguities in the piece, of joining the composer in a delight at the play of possibilities. Now you are hearing the piece in its own terms.

Very little new music achieves the popularity that leads to repeated performances. I think this is due to a fear, or misunderstanding, of musical thought as it has developed over the last hundred years.

One of the misapprehensions concerning music loosely described as modernist is the idea that twentieth century composers were more reliant on arcane

techniques than their forebears; yet in my experience this is far from the truth. By their own account, radicals such as Stravinsky and Webern worked out their ideas in a way that is remarkably similar to all European composers from at least the renaissance on. It is worth pausing for a moment to consider Webern, since he is often held up as an example of what is called a difficult composer. Webern's music does not adopt the fixed hierarchies of harmony that the ear expects if it's accustomed to the norms of the nineteenth century; but then renaissance polyphony doesn't either. Nor does Webern's music adopt a familiar grammar of metre and phrase; but to expect him to do so is to expect twentieth century poets to continue using the metres and rhymes of Tennyson or Browning. Webern's music creates a rich network of relationships that invites us to think again about the nature of musical hierarchies; that is to listen again to the infinite possibilities of musical expression. I might say that it is a post relativity music. I cannot understand the work of contemporary physicists, but I can still feel awe and admiration and excitement in so far as I can follow their discourse.

My view, that music is capable of infinite possibilities of expression is the view by which I live, but it is not one that can be taken for granted. In the conclusion of his 1996 book *Life's Grandeur*, Stephen Jay Gould voices his pessimism about the future of the creative arts and of classical music in particular. He suggests that its history may be at an end, as it reaches a boundary of the possible — an evolutionary right wall beyond which there is no passing. That such a distinguished thinker should feel this, merits our serious consideration. He writes 'perhaps the range of accessible styles can become exhausted, given the limits of human neurology and the consequent limits of understanding'; and he attributes the dilemma to a perpetual striving for novelty.

Yet I would question whether the serious artist is striving for novelty; it is true that music is marketed in this way, and so it may be true of the music that Gould comes across; but in this case his remarks are not so much a response to music's problems as a reflection of its place in US society, where the values of the market place are even more ubiquitous than here. Two hundred years ago, Mary Wollstonecraft warned of the danger of continual novelty serving as a substitute for the imagination, and went on to quote Solomon's 'there is nothing new under the sun'. Solomon's remark is apposite when taken with the famous concluding words of Darwin with which Gould, too, ends his book: 'Whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity....endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been and are being evolved'.

This vision of continual evolution and variation is for me a rich metaphor. Just as it can be free from notions of progress, so I think in Gould's musings on music there has been some confusion between individuality and originality, between what he calls 'the ethic of perennial originality' and the ethic by which an artist tries to make something which is not second-hand. If we take Mahler's 'tradition is laziness' and Wollstonecraft's 'continual novelty serving as a substitute for imagination', we capture something of the challenge for the artist.

Passing fashions may bring us simplistic music, pretentiously complex music, music that self consciously desires to please. But this kind of Narcissism can be found in all the arts. There is a wealth of rewarding music being composed today that is little known, and a rich heritage of music from the twentieth century of which music lovers remain fearful. Fear arises from ignorance. What I think we need to value, and to sustain in the face of commercialism, is musical

intelligence. We need to nurture and develop the quality of musical thought and ask ourselves, what kind of musical culture do we want to see in this country? Do we want our music making, whether popular, classical, or of any other genre, to be market-led, with commercial values overriding artistic ones? Surely we need music that speaks to the whole of a person; music that can be both searching and entertaining, relaxing as well as challenging. 'Art music', to use an old-fashioned term, offers us an experience like no other. The capacity of serious music to enlarge our view of the world, to enrich us, is infinite. We may describe it as spiritual or transcendental or more simply in a word such as beautiful; and also as witty or ironic, since (as we know from JS Bach) 'serious' music is also good humoured music.

In the last few years it seems that this kind of music has entered the endangered species list. There have been many contributory factors, but it is an irony that the undervaluing of serious art has in part come about through general cultural policies that were designed originally to increase diversity, not to narrow it.

Composers and society at large, need each other. I do not believe that 'society owes the composer a living'. As composer and teacher I have devoted my life to music and to working with children, students and audiences. I believe an artist has a social duty (an old-fashioned term!) to help people broaden their horizons, to keep alive a breadth of experience, so that we have art music flourishing alongside popular music, and all the musics in between. This has been a British tradition - Vaughan Williams, Holst, Britten and Tippett all exemplify it.

You can tell from my lecture tonight that I am a practitioner not a theorist, and that my approach to music will always be that of one who makes music, working from the inside outwards. I have felt, over the years that any insights that may arise from this are more valuable to my students than any other aspects of the training I might give them. For this reason it has meant a lot to me to give time to helping shape the direction of the new Arts and Humanities Research Board, a body which with luck will become a fully fledged Research Council. Lord Dearing, who set the stage for the AHRB, said that if there was one aspect of education he wanted to emphasise, it was the need to nourish imagination, the key to creativity. The formation of the AHRB is an acknowledgement that creativity is a *sine qua non* in university research, not just a brand name for an activity in the primary school.

Those who speak of the need to develop creativity in the young, to make a place for the creative arts in the curriculum, usually argue this as a means to an end: creative thinkers are more useful thinkers. I would go much further, and not least in relation to universities. Developing the imagination and the intelligence so that they can work together seems to me essential in any university discipline. To do so in music is to do so for music's intrinsic value as a non-referential, non-verbal art of extraordinary potency. You cannot quantify it, which is no doubt why politicians and bureaucrats are afraid of it; but you can say, if you believe that universities have an active role in the evolving cultural life of their country, and a responsibility to stand by artistic and intellectual excellence, that universities will be impoverished without it; particularly if you believe that research is not just seeking, but finding. Not for nothing were mediaeval minstrels called troubadours or trouvères. I am reminded of Holst's story of a needle in a dark room. While the philosopher speculates if it is there, while the

mystic speaks of an unverifiable faith that it is there, the artist goes into the dark room and comes out with the needle.

Do we need composers? do we need serious music? The last music example shall answer that. I am going to play the briefest of extracts from Michael Tippett's *Ritual Dances*. It is music of affirmation, joy and energy, music that can be called accessible if we remember that it could not have been written if Tippett had not known and loved the modernist music that is often blamed for inaccessibility—Stravinsky and Berg, in this case.

CD track 5 *Tippett Ritual Dances*
OHP – Tippett

There is no question in our day of the artist receiving a mandate from society to create. The mandate of society is to entertain. But the mandate of the artist's own nature is to reach down into the depths of the human psyche and bring forth the tremendous images of things to come. For this the artist can receive no reward but the joy of doing it.

The artist creates because without art, in this deep and serious sense, the nation dies.

I will let Tippett's own words provide the cadence to mine.

'The artist creates because without art, in this deep and serious sense, the nation dies.'

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