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The Concept of Time in Contemporary Music

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It seems to me that the venerable idea of the eternal - that which stands outside time - has, in the course of the 20th century, gradually faded from view. Might it be possible to apprehend the entire Modernist epoch as both a rejection of an all too linear - as it were, Cartesian/scientific - approach to measuring time and as the paradoxical celebration of a species of aestheticised temporalisation of our powers of comprehension? If that were indeed the case, then music - as the temporal art form par excellence - would be advantageously positioned to offer essential service as a societal mediatory instance. To the extent that Modernism seeks to disencumber itself of the all too wearying load of the past, it has been New Music which has begun to focus on the many-faceted question of temporal perception and the formal potential of temporal architecture.

Musical experience articulates not one, but many 'times'. So many, in fact, that their discernment and contextual absorption would necessitate a practically infinite time-space of their own. Since around 1910 there has scarcely been an influential composer who has failed to come to terms with and exploit this perspectival multiplicity. As a consequence, the exploration of the entire complex of issues has become one of the most pressing tasks of our time. For the first time, silence - pure duration - became an integral component of musical facture. In the decade following the Second World War this tendency towards the integration of abstract temporal proportion was encouraged by the development of integral serialism. By reason of the innovatively totalising constructive and aesthetic principles adopted at that juncture the temporal dimension found itself remainderlessly enfolded into the ensemble of conceptual and practical characteristics defining a work's physiognomy, indissolubly linked both by generative operation and proportional relation to the unique constellation of qualities embodying that work's unmistakable sonic presence.

If immediately preceding epochs had understood the experience of time primarily in a discursively linear i.e. metrically defined fashion, so now time came to stand, one might say, outside time itself. In other words, it came to be understood as a specific, qualitatively and quantitatively concrete dimension amenable to speaking in the same voice as a number of other essential ingredients of sound. Moreover it came to be capable of being expressed by means of the characteristics common to all of them. It is perhaps this mutual permeability - this sense of time having become, in composers' parlance, 'material' - that heralded most profoundly and comprehensively the uneasy contemporary insight that, in the same degree as musical time was rendered more immediately available for structural integration and manipulation, it began to slip away from us, to somehow

elude our rational grasp. The more specifically bound up into a work's discursive fabric, in other words, the less temporal experience could be objectively separable from the unique weave of values that the individual composition represents.

Time has become frustratingly fickle, no longer the reliable and obedient pathfinder of times gone by. The anticipatorily experiential time of the self-aware and sovereign subject had arrived at absolute ground zero.

The half century that has in the meantime elapsed has witnessed many and varied attempts to restore a certain autonomy to the temporal domain; to make it available. Some of these endeavors have centred on the restoration of clearly-audible metre as a measure of temporal perspective, while others have set as their goal the re-evocation of stylistic traits drawn from prior historical periods of development, thereby aspiring to recapture the auratic temporal spaces initially associated with these latter. Still others have sought to radicalise perceived discrepancies between objectively measurable clock time, subjective experiential time and what might be termed event time (that is, the adequacy of the space occupied by a musical event with respect to the optimisation of the information it embodies). One composer who has made particularly effective use of this latter prospect was Morton Feldman. In a significant number of his later works, he combined vastly extended overall duration with extensive series of subtly fluctuating and non-directional local motivic variants, thus ensuring the emergence of a certain eeriness, of experiential deracination in the face of such calmly subversive demolition of monolithic, unidirectional and totalising temporal architectures.

Music is surely the art form which most unapologetically tends towards productive confrontation with the residua of its own past. This perspectival approach nourishes itself on the unending - and endlessly obsessive - conversation carried on by present-day composers with their forebears. Far from being an incidental byproduct of recent postmodernist stances, this productive dialogue-as-monologue can be found beating often unexpected paths through the thicket of occidental music history.

It has often been argued that creativity is a peculiarly powerful form of appropriation through misunderstanding. It is misunderstanding by means of the continual palimpsestic re-writing of a certain sort of fictive history through which we feverishly seek to re-inscribe ourselves on the already chaotically teeming page of the present. The implication is that music represents the purest, most unadulterated manifestation of this omnipresent urge, in that the sheer transparent immateriality of the temporal medium permits the representation of a form of truth (as Hegel argues in his Aesthetics) which can be achieved in music's a-temporal cousin, painting, only by resort to dissimulation and self-abnegation of the medium itself. All composers, I believe, maintain overt or covert conversations of this type across the ages, even if the object of discussion is not immediately obvious to the listening ear. As a result, even the most radical manifestations of contemporary music are unavoidably saturated with a peculiarly impalpable temporality available to other art forms only in the guise of ironic distance or specific stylistic pastiche.

It is a fact that our sense of musical time is fundamentally and irreversibly multiple. Just as in a painting a multitude of fleeting shadows and highlights conspires to evoke the contours of a landscape, so in music each panorama is decomposable into a multitude of short-lived experiences and perceptions, some of them associated with particular figures or prominent events, others gradually accreting and decaying in step with perhaps only vaguely sensed processual transformations. For composers, it is this challengingly protean fluidity with which time continually recasts itself which provides one of music's enduring fascinations, and it is into attempts to harness this dimension that much pre-compositional planning is directed. In particular, a musical discourse is frequently imagined as being built up in layers, each of which is distinguished by the individual relationship between material, mutability and metric periodicity. Over and beyond the simultaneous evolution of these various musical layerings and narratives, the composer must ensure that larger-scale macro-temporal volumes are enunciated by the planned coincidence of prominent temporal markers - points of

culmination, particular harmonic patterns and so forth - in multiple concurrent layers. In this manner music begins to respire, to live, becomes capable of being heard as more than the mere sum of its component parts.

The overall perspective - as it were, the implicit distance from which the discourse is observed - of a work is often a function of the rate of unfolding implied in its very opening measures. Apart from its attention-getting role, the first few seconds of a composition's discourse set up expectations as to the intensity of aural involvement with detail which it is the composer's task to mobilize, reflect or even contradict in the course of what follows. This Ur-space is the measure of all subsequent acts. The opening of the first of Schönberg's Op.19 Klavierstücke projects a very different sense of temporal compaction, almost claustrophobia, than does the vastly oceanic pulsation of the opening of Das Rheingold. Both engage, educate and absorb the observing mind in landscapes uniquely appropriate to their further unfolding.

Time creates time(s).

By the same token, denial of the satisfaction of ultimate closure - or even the deferred prospect thereof - in a work retrospectively throws intermediate, provisional quasi-closure situations in question, as "false friends". Linear progress through time gives way to varying degrees of intensity of presence in time. In such musical ideolects, the concrete fulfilled moment comes to stand in for that utopian, unattainable time of unrequited desire which exists only in the imperfect and ravaged interstices of memory. Time flees into material, becomes material and, in so doing, delivers up its essence to the immaterial instant, the non-existent membrane separating past and future.

Time-flow is often marked by the beginnings and ends of discrete events, but less obvious changes of state in one or more dimensions (dynamic / harmony / colour) can also readily serve the same purpose. It follows that multiple time-flow perceptions may be evoked by such changes in one and the same linear event continuum. In such situations, the primary time line is modified, tinted or filtered by accompanying secondary nuancing. Our sense of time becomes more fluid or glutinous in proportion to the perceived density of "grammaticity" which these modifications connote.

And then there is memory. The spiral, nautilus-shell-like structure of memory sometimes demands that we move backwards (in internalised, "faulted" time), traversing de-temporalised phenomenal space in an infinite succession of anomalous ellipses. The instantaneous elisions and annulments which accumulate serve further to void our sense of time passing, instead re-rendering it as a form of organic fossil or trace held fast in some geological stratum of isolated, elapsed present. This ineffably poignant future pastness of the musical instant is something, I think, which composers - consciously or unconsciously - treasure: it is also one reason why speaking of temporal aspects of musical experiences remains at best poetic, at worst depressingly absurd.

Further complicating the issue is the consideration that the times of composing, of learning and of listening are all, in principle, independent variables. This has been brought home to me through my experience as a composition teacher, when I have assigned a pupil two parallel tasks: one, to compose an hour-long composition in one minute; the other, to write a minute-long piece in one hour. In the first instance, the student will probably have little opportunity to define more than a few simple events accompanied by basic verbal instructions, with the result that the importance of codified detail as compared to overall duration will be minimized and the temporal perspective will very likely be defined from the standpoint of the latter. A work lasting one minute composed in an hour, on the other hand, will be much more likely to evince a higher definition and density of constituent detailed articulation in proportion to its brief duration. In both instances the time relationships involved in the work's creation will play a major role in those defining its subsequent apperception. Similarly, the amount of time involved in learning a new composition will, in some way, be reflected in the intensity or richness of execution, providing an almost archaeological experience of sedimented

interpretational layers, a feeling for the vertical stacking of time as opposed to its linear unfolding. It is open to the composer to calculate-in this dimension when choosing appropriate notational form for the fixing of his invention.

Music cannot invent new forms of time; all that it can legitimately aspire to (perhaps) is the sensual underlining of the extent to which our comprehension of the world around us is actively framed by a multitude of conflicting measures of temporal experience - modes of apprehension according to which the conventionally received concepts of "before" and "after" are less important than an appreciation of "depth" effect. Time as simultaneity? Time as mnemonic ballet of potentiality? The search continues.

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