

## 20th Century Music: 1

An alternative view of 20th century music.

From as early as I can recall, 20th Century Classical Music has been in a state of crisis.

Composers bemoaning the lack of audiences. Audiences bemoaning the lack of good tuneful music. Musicians complaining that there is little new repertoire to stand alongside the established masterpieces of history. Promoters complaining about falling or low attendances.

Since my student days it has ever been thus. I have attended, and taken part in, innumerable meetings where contemporary music professionals have looked for ever more "imaginative" schemes to help promote New Music- usually theirs, all to no, or very little, avail. Performers "dressing down"; pre-concert talks; educational initiatives and, of course, large amounts of public and private subsidy have all failed to rouse the public at large.

Only the already converted attend New Music concerts regularly and with any degree of enthusiasm. The majority of music lovers remain stubbornly indifferent to New Music

It is my view that these problems may never be resolved. It is New Music itself that is the problem. No amount of education, subsidy or innovative programming will ever provide New Music with a secure, self supporting and artistically viable audience base!

I should say, at this point, that I am no musical Luddite, continually looking back to a "Golden Age" of tuneful harmonious security. Therein lies the road to vacuous banality. Indeed, I have very little sympathy with those who publicly, and sometimes virulently, attack contemporary composers. Preaching from their own parochial soap boxes, their arguments, such as they are, are usually informed by ignorance and bigotry.

It is a fact that much of what has been composed in the last half-century has been artistically and creatively outstanding.

The problem, is that hardly anyone is listening!

### AN ANALYSIS

The first half of the 20th Century was a time of great promise, excitement and extraordinary achievement. The music of Debussy, Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Ives etc. etc., pointed out several ways forward which would continue the great European/Western musical tradition. The later music of Varese, Webern, Messiaen etc., likewise, bristled with innovative techniques and technical rigour. Optimism and confidence were the order of the day. Although the music was often "difficult", the future seemed assured. In time the wider public would come to love and appreciate this modernity in all its glorious variety.

Unfortunately this did not, and has not happened.

Early enthusiasm for, and confidence in, New Music has gradually been dissipated and eroded.

Why?

One of the principal causes, lies in the linguistic diversity that is a hallmark of Twentieth Century Music. The fact that there is no common language is at the root of the problem! There are too many linguistic codes for even the most informed and sympathetic listener to crack!

What can explain this phenomenon, where New Music is so often rejected, "returned to sender", neither loved, understood or appreciated? How did this situation come about? Is there an underlying reason, a flaw in the logic that this centuries' composers have been following? A flaw that lies at the very core of New Music's problems?

I believe that the answer to these questions is emphatically yes!

Until and unless this situation is honestly addressed and recognised, the contemporary composer's twin blights of; injured introspection on the one hand, and intellectual arrogance on the other, will continue, unresolved.

### LOGIC AND WHERE IT GETS YOU!

The assumption that the work of the early 20th Century masters was the next step forward in music's progress was logical and rational. As night followed day, Modernism would replace Romanticism, just as Romanticism had replaced Classicism. This inexorable logic, so brilliantly explained by writer and critic Andre Hodeir\*, contains one fatal flaw : the myopic belief that European/Western Art Music has a guaranteed future in a multi-cultural, modern world.

"It ain't necessarily so."

It certainly is not! No matter what composers and their apologists do and say, the public (even the European public) has increasingly (as this century has progressed) shifted its allegiance to music with a different cultural root. Very little 20th Century Music has entered the standard repertory. Only the, I believe temporary, phenomenon that I call "New Music" can be said to buck this trend.

Outside the narrow introspective confines of the salon and "Academe", New Music is, quite simply, a non-starter, irrelevant!

\*Since Debussy - A View of Contemporary Music by Andre Hodeir

published by Secker & Warburg 1961

## SOME OBSERVATIONS

The World is no longer subject to an exclusively European artistic hegemony. The world has moved on! We are, all of us, on a different journey now!

Contemporary composers have simply been overtaken by events. We now live in "The Global Village", with all its associated implications.

Composers must communicate in the appropriate language if they want to make contact.

We may mourn the passing of time and the loss of old cultural certainties, be they European or Nationalistic, but, in seeking to maintain, promote and develop an European culture (albeit with a leavening of other traditions and processes), we are living in a false world of delusion, bathed in the warm comforting light of "cultural afterglow".

Other art forms and creative disciplines have recognised this, and prosper.

If all of the above is true, ( and I, obviously, am convinced that what I have written is self-evident and that my analysis is correct) why then has this situation not been addressed before?

The answer lies in vested interests!

## VESTED INTERESTS

It is not in the interests of "The Powers That Be" to acknowledge these changed circumstances! They have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo.

Imagine a situation where New Music was both artistically and commercially (sic!) viable :-

What would happen to all of the committees?

What would become of Arts Councils and their staff?

What would happen to all those people who have power in the world of contemporary music?

Imagine a situation where academic institutions no longer held the exclusive rights to our cultural definitions :-

What would become of teachers who were only teaching the irrelevant and the esoteric?

What would become of their powers of patronage?

What would they do for a living?

**RIGHT! IT IS UNIMAGINABLE!**

This culture of a mutually rewarding interdependence precludes the possibility for change.

Therefore, our young composers grow up and train in a protective, but ultimately stifling and creatively proscribed, environment. Each incarnation, increasingly, a paler clone of a previous generation.

Welcome to the new orthodoxy, the ultimate madness :- where success is measured, not by how little subsidy one

needs, but, by how much one gets!

CRAZY !

SOLUTIONS

BUT FIRST :-

ALBERT'S LITTLE HISTORY LESSON (1 )

Once upon a time, around 1900 in fact, functional tonality died!

The stresses and strains of its wonderful contradictions had finally torn it apart. The collective, wondrously sustained, creative assaults by Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Liszt, Wagner and the younger Schoenberg left it exhausted of possibilities. There was nowhere left to go!

The 20th Century masters tried various possible ways forward. Much great music was written. Each had his disciples. Each had many virtues.

Each was a "Dead End"!

ALBERT'S LITTLE HISTORY LESSON (2)

In The West, around 1900 in fact, a new musical language emerged in unison with a new geo-political reality. It resulted from a perfectly natural cultural synthesis, rooted in history, inevitable.

This music was called The Blues.

The new power? The United States of America.

THE BLUES

The emergence, history and background to The Blues is well documented.

That this music forms the root of all the contemporary "popular" styles is likewise, commonly acknowledged and universally recognised.

Why then is it not studied in any serious way in our (U.K.) Academic Institutions?

After all, Early Music, Indian Music, Gamelan, African Drumming, Jazz, Pop, Rock, etc., etc., you name it, are all assiduously, albeit usually on a superficial level, studied.

Could it be that, because the music that gave birth to our popular styles is not European/Western is considered degenerate and is, therefore, not deemed to be a suitable subject for those with artistic sensibilities and serious intentions?

Whether this is evidence of cultural racism, or just ignorance, I do not know.

DEBUSSY AND RAVEL

Both these French masters understood the significance of The Blues, and their music, particularly that of Ravel, reflects this fact. Their individual and separate influence on 20th Century music is usually only understood from a purely European perspective.

The rest of this article (polemic) is concerned with these composers and their unsung contribution to the only viable musical language that we have for this and the 21st Century. A language that, if properly understood, could support and sustain serious art music as well as the more popular forms that are, currently, its predominant legacy.

That their contribution was not a conscious one, in no way invalidates the following thesis.

To follow :- A technical/historical analysis of The Blues, and the "Ravel effect".