

20th Century Music: 2

Linguistic attributes of functional tonality versus African music.

In order to understand my claims that African/American Music is the natural language for the 20th and 21st Centuries, and that it demonstrably has the potential within its vocabulary/grammar for serious composition, I must first give an analysis of its precursors Functional Tonality and The Blues.

The values that underlie these two languages are diametrically opposed.

BUT FIRST:

ALBERT'S LITTLE HISTORY LESSON (3)

Because of The Greeks, Western Music took a different path from the music of other cultures.

The mathematically based system of pitch which was developed/invented by The Greeks meant that for the next 2000 years there would be two kinds of music : natural and unnatural/artificial.

This value (artificiality) and the values thus derived, governed the course that Western Music took from Greek times to the start of the 20th Century and beyond.

VALUES OF WESTERN MUSIC v NON WESTERN MUSIC

WESTERN MUSIC NON WESTERN MUSIC

Artificial,idealised Sound Natural Sound

Need for originality and innovation in the light of scientific and social advances. Natural Evolution

Composed music of finite length. Not composed

A written/taught tradition An aural tradition

In time this came to mean as a consequence of the leading note:*Contrary motion

Parallelism

Structural interdependence between melody, harmony and rhythm Independence of melody, harmony and rhythm.

Rhythm implicit . Rhythm explicit.

Music as an abstract form of expression - socially elitist. Music as an integral part of social life - communal.

Standardisation of pitch, fixed. Random pitch, not fixed.

Invention of instruments (technologically driven input) Traditional instruments.

Musicians seen to be innovators and intellectual/philosophical pacemakers Musicians seen as either spiritual leaders or "outside the pale" - depending on individual cultural traditions.

As a consequence of the leading note.*

Progression in the time/space continuum.

Static, non progressive.

Tension achieved through thematic/rhythmic

development

Tension achieved through accumulation and rep

Dynamic forms. Passive forms.

Eventually :

Interpretative performance tradition.

Non-interpretative.

FUNCTIONAL TONALITY

In the interests of brevity, I will not attempt to trace the evolution of Functional Tonality from The Greeks to the time of Bach. There are many excellent books and articles on the subject, written by people who are far more learned than I. My purpose here is to analyse it, and show its effect on European Music from Bach's time onward.

I will only say that during the period of time between of The Ancient Greeks and Bach, the European Ear became gradually conditioned into accepting Function Tonality as "natural".

*THE CONCEPT OF THE LEADING NOTE

The concept, idea, of the leading note lies at the root of Functional Tonality. Indeed it is the root of Functional Tonality. Everything springs from its effect.

Put simply, the fact that the leading note draws the ear inevitably towards the tonic, means that a sense of gravity, home,

is created. This in turn leads to motion, thus generating regular rhythms, and a sense of direction when the pitches are drawn from a particular scale (the major in particular). In turn these pitches beget harmony and harmonic progression. Inevitably this harmonic progression is obliged to be synchronious with a regular, arithmetically simple, rhythmic pulse.

Out of sync = syncopation = instability = Gravity Defied!

THE MAJOR SCALE

The major scale is the stable scale. Its internal organisation is consistent, regular. Its primary triads are all major - all the same. The primary triads I V and V becoming I of the next key along, in the circle of 5ths.

THE MINOR SCALE

The minor scale is inherently less stable. Its internal organisation is more confused. Its primary triad V is not the tonic triad of its dominant minor. This leads to feelings of insecurity and therefore tension.

MAJOR v MINOR

The consequences of having these two structures living side by side, are felt by all of us who are conditioned to listen to Classical Music. Secure Major allows us to be happy, positive, optimistic, relaxed. Insecure Minor makes us tense, sad, worried.

The up-front world of the Majors' Circle of 5ths, is shadowed a minor third lower by the emotionally anxious Circle of the Minors.

This arrangement of functionally organised pitch is possibly mankind's greatest achievement. A structure that mirrors our perfectly regular, yet somehow puzzlingly irregular, Universe. Matter and Anti-Matter: Each note orbiting its own tonic, within the larger orbit of the key system; two scales types moving in parallel. A glorious abstraction yet absolutely human. No wonder it was able to provide the means for, almost certainly, the greatest body of creative work that mankind has ever achieved :- Classical Music.

Within this system, however, lay the seed for its destruction - Chromaticism.

In the space of 250 or so years, chromaticism had destroyed the system of Functional Tonality. Gravity was defied, and with it the certainty and security of the old order was no more.

The very system that enabled individual composers to express their individualism so precisely, that encouraged so many uniquely personal utterances, was destroyed by the very individuality it allowed and encouraged.

How quickly it all happened. Classical Music was one glorious adventure after another:-

The work of J.S.Bach, in which he exploited every loophole, examined every possibility, testing the system to the very limits that his contrapuntal style would allow. The brilliant naughtiness of Scarlatti and the formal inventiveness of Handel, soon gave way to the elegant, melodic, classicism of the Mozart, who did all in his power to detach his sinuous, devious melodies from their harmonic moorings. Beethoven, in a creative fervour that lasted only 30 years, overwhelmed classicism in his desperate need to have his music encompass all that life meant. The traditional classical forms, the sonata and the symphony, could hardly contain the visions of Brahms and Schubert. So when Chopin and then, that true revolutionary, Liszt got to work, the end was in sight. It took a few short years for the other great Romantics like Wagner and Tchaikovsky to finish the job. A few "tail enders" found something new to say, but essentially Functional Tonality was dead. R.I.P.