
LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

from David Johnson

Julian Silverman's article and letter (*Tempo* 223, 224) are excellent, yet hard to accept in their entirety. I would love to agree with everything he says; instead, here I am writing in to tell him where he's wrong.

First, I'd like to say that, though I can't write pastiche Mahler, I do a nice line in reproductions of Thomas Erskine, Earl of Kelly (1732–81). Only a few bars at a time but indistinguishable from the real thing, and several of them have been published and recorded. This isn't composition, of course, but musicology, reconstructing Urtexts from defective 18th-century source material; still, technically it's a similar skill.

From everything Julian has said, it's clear that the heyday for classical composers to be influenced by music outwith their own time (i.e. historical music) and their own social milieu (i.e. ethnic music) was 1770 to 1970. Before 1770, there wasn't enough information available about 'other musics' to allow this to happen. But its point wasn't really information anyway, but a new range of possibilities for *inspiration*.

Julian's example of Beethoven's bogus Lydian Modes in his op.132 quartet has to be a crucial case.

It doesn't seem to have mattered that composers often messed around with their models: that Beethoven didn't check out his medieval modes properly (no internet access in 1820!), that Bruch's *Scottish Fantasy* misunderstood the structures of Scots folk tunes, that Stravinsky's *Dumbarton Oaks* treated Bach's concerto formulas as a target for random darts, spilled Coca-Cola, lost furniture vans and hurled mealy puddings. What mattered was the composers' confidence that, wherever they derived their inspiration, whatever they purloined and treated as their 'heritage', they could assimilate it and make it their own. Their borrowings would become part of up-to-date Western classical music, strengthening it even further as the finest music in the world.

Since 1970, that confidence has gone. Why look for technical reasons when the sociological ones are so obvious?

No one needs contemporary classical music any more. It's no longer 'the best' – the music

which the ruling classes know they want and pay up for on automatic. Instead it has become a sideshow, almost a charity, broadcast at off-peak times, its composers pushed around by committees, told to *submit* this and that, get themselves *adopted* ...¹

What would change this grotesque situation would be the emergence of new masterpieces – whether derived from earlier classical music or made from 100% new material – recognized as such by a large proportion of the population. Readers of *Tempo* – how does one compose a classical masterpiece in 2003?

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Julian Silverman replies:

On David's last point, I am working on it. If I succeed, I'm not going to tell you all how. If I find I can't manage it, I'll go for adoption instead. Beneath the PRS I've always felt like a stray dog – or a member of an endangered species. But the officers of the society do well by their pets. I know: they send me their magazine, and there they all are, grinning expensively from their shiny pages. My own earnings from the PRS all these years, amount to 29p (no exaggeration). So I'd be well motivated to fetch papers for them, or whatever you have to do.

I can now vouch for David Johnson's uncanny feeling for Kelly, and for every intonation and dialect of every sort of Scottish type, which should make his forthcoming opera on *Kidnapped* a very special experience.

Beethoven's use of the Lydian mode is not at all bogus. (Of course, 'Lydian' is the wrong term. That was the mediaeval theoreticians' first misinterpretation of the ancient Greek past. But that is by the way.) Beethoven's is truer to the spirit of the mode than the mediaeval composers were (who always cheated, and flattened the B), because it captures the evanescent, true modal

¹ On being told about the PRS Foundation's 'Adopt a composer' scheme the other day, a friend of mine exclaimed: 'I don't believe it! For only £1.50 a day you can guarantee a composer a square meal ...'.

feeling of indeterminacy, which the old contrapuntists were often trying to square off somehow.

I find his explanation of the 'crisis' in contemporary 'classical' music spot-on, even though he puts it the wrong way round. Firstly, seeing as the ruling class won't pay up, how is 'a large proportion of the population' even going to hear any new masterpiece, let alone recognize it as such?

Masterpieces are not written by individuals alone. This is beyond the conceivable and inconceivable powers of even the greatest single genius. I think David is saying this, too. Where would Beethoven's music be without the dominant 7th? And what would a dominant 7th be if its implications were not already understood by the listeners? Who invented it? What could today's equivalent be? If we can't invent such a thing where could we find one?

The ruling class has, in its perverted way, brought all cultures face to face. There is not a path of ground on earth without the remnants and embryos of a thousand different cultures,

juxtaposed, superimposed or coexisting. The one time I was in Scotland was to play electronic keyboard (in default of a piano, or, preferably, a metronome) for a summer ballet school in the grounds of a semi-deserted 'big house' in Argyll. Round the corner lived a Gaelic-speaking almost nomadic ex-bagpipe player (his pipes had been destroyed in an earlier caravan fire) who, at the slightest prompting, would pour out hours of ecstatic mouth-music, explaining its secret meaning in the battle of Culloden, as though he had been there himself. Behind the next field was an outhouse, where a couple sat who were in a modern Scot-Rock band. In the village you could see shop-window signs from a composer offering, for a fee, strathspeys, reels or airs for your birth, wedding or funeral. Down the road lay the 'European City of Culture'...

If no one needs contemporary classical music any more, why go on flogging a dead donkey? Why not try to find something we *do* need?

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