
LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

From Michael Short

In a recent issue of *Tempo*, you published a letter from Jon C. Mitchell which contained an implication that I, amongst others, had somehow claimed ‘ownership’ of Gustav Holst and his music. I would like to make it clear that I have never made any such claim, and that any such assertions are completely false.

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From Julian Silverman

Reply to Michael Graubart

Did Anybody have to be Schoenberg?

When someone asked Schoenberg if he was indeed Schoenberg, he replied: ‘Someone had to be’.

It is eight decades since they came up with this 12-note thing, and we’re still discussing what they did it for. Michael Graubart (Perennial Questions, *Tempo* 225) refuses to believe Schoenberg’s reason. At the end of his essay ‘Composition with Twelve Tones’, Schoenberg wrote: ‘The main advantage of this method ... is its unifying effect’. He went on finally to compare himself both to Go and to Wagner Himself, declaring:

I believe that when Wagner introduced his Leitmotiv – for the same purpose as that for which I introduced my basic set – he may have said: ‘Let there be Unity!’

Music can be so deep and stirring! Do we really know how? Not even Schoenberg offered any guarantees. He claims not to have insisted that his pupils even used the method. Is it only old grey-beards that talk about this sort of thing nowadays? It is four decades since Michael and I talked through these sort of questions. (He usually won, but I never quite believed him. Later he became my boss. Only now can I risk trying to have the last word.) Things have moved on, of course. OK, Schoenberg was a genius. But only in the early 20th-century could millions of us be bullied into sharing geniuses’ paranoia and delusions of grandeur. Some rapidly overtook Schoenberg by miles, others (or is it the same people?) have not

yet caught up. I am one of those. I wish I could have known how to write Schoenberg’s Piano Concerto, just as I wish I could have written Carter’s. As far as I am concerned, that is the reason why these issues are still worth discussing (a bit).

Michael gives us two explanations:

1 Dodecaphony is a good thing because it might one day be almost as good as what it replaced. ‘The use of twelve-note rows may give back to atonal music a goal-directed force and the possibility of closure’, he says. Note the implication: music has got to be ‘atonal’ now – in the sense that no note intrinsically relates to any other, therefore there can be no sense of direction other than a questionable one imposed by this device. (I don’t deny the stupendous, almost super-human ‘directionality’ of, say, the Piano Concerto, but I don’t understand how Schoenberg does it. Tonal procedures are clearly at work even without a formed or consistent, tonality.)

Besides, Michael says that one would have to mount all sorts of experiments, audience research and suchlike, to see if this were really true. As a matter of fact I was invited to work at IRCAM on projects along these sort of lines: but nothing seemed to me to be so useless or boring than making psychological testing/marketing a substitute for the imagination. If 12-note sets work in this way, they work on an ‘ideal’ audience regardless of whether actual audiences notice or not. Myself, I cannot see it.

2 Dodecaphony is a good thing because composers like giving themselves puzzles – and by some sort of osmosis their pleasure transfers to us: we find ourselves liking the puzzle too. This does not follow. Who was that extraordinarily talented French writer who wrote a complete novel without using the letter ‘e’! And what about the tremendous gifts of the person who translated it into English using the same *Verbot!* Is the highly ‘mathematical’ first 2-part Invention ‘better’ than, say, the first Prelude in the ‘48’? Or the *Art of Fugue* ‘better’ than the *St. Matthew Passion*? Doing extra tasks beyond those required by the music may or may not be fun for the

composer – the question is what does it do for the piece? Actually we are not really talking about mathematics here. On the contrary we are only talking about very basic rigid, static concepts: baby-maths: 1–12 repeated. With or without this ‘extra’, real music of all kinds, from the Troubadours to Xenakis, requires a more dynamic, partially instinctive ‘maths’, involving ‘phase transitions’, emergent forms etc. This applies both to classical/romantic tonal music and, with more deliberate abstraction, to some recent innovations.

So let’s go back to Schoenberg’s own explanation. I don’t find this convincing either. So what, if everything is the same? Actually, opposites meet. Does the first Prelude betray ‘motivic unity’ or not? Does the ‘motivic unity’ of *God Save the Queen* or *Twinkle twinkle little star* make them better tunes than the thousands upon thousands of examples of mediaeval or renaissance monophony and polyphony or the traditional songs and dances from all continents and cultures whose richness, vitality, spontaneity and depth derive precisely from their freedom from the shackles of motivic unity. Bricks and

modules are not the only way to build dwellings, and motifs are not the only building blocks of music, but Schoenberg’s art was so rooted in the music of half a dozen mutual acquaintances over perhaps one and a half centuries, within a radius of a few hundred kilometres of Vienna, that he was scarcely able to recognize anything else as music at all.

There is nothing so amazing about the discovery that composers sometimes carried over certain patterns of notes, intervals, contours etc. from one part of a piece to another. This is a natural effect of the concentration involved. Sometimes it is just a habit, like scratching one’s head or picking one’s nose. For example, in Rimsky-Korsakov, César Franck and Wagner – not to mention his Hollywood imitators – this unity can be stifling, monotonous, tiresome and eventually mind-destroying – even when the individual ideas are thrilling: a failure of the imagination to cope with complex wholes. And as for the Minimalists ...

In the examples Michael gives (and he and I know we could quote thousands more) and in the few examples Schoenberg himself gives, these *Grundgestalte* are far more meaningful, of course. But they do not prove Schoenberg’s case. They

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work only in so far as they defy the rigidities of the idea of a basic set. They consistently rearrange intervals and contours, extend potential patterns and sequences at certain moments, foreshorten and telescope them at others – in fact there are amazingly dynamic processes at work by which each moment in a piece can telescope and sum up what has gone on before. There are places where pressures have built up so strongly that they can only be released by a completely new perspective opening up ... All these things are what musical composition is all about. Beneath the surface of a real piece of music is a hidden network of relationships – sometimes going beyond the predictable, sometimes only half-realized – the continuation to be taken up by the listener's imagination.

A piece like Schoenberg's Piano Concerto is full of these things. It is also astoundingly unified: every cell seems to contain the genetic code for the whole work. Obviously this has something to do with the compositional technique employed. But this is not why the piece works. It works primarily because of the extraordinarily strong differentiation between melody + accompaniment, motif, phrase, theme and 'section', and between transitions, bridges, returns, strettos, codas, developments etc. – all the paraphernalia of classical tonality and functional harmony, without its actual 'inner meaning'. (Although, on a different plane, it is full of strong if equivocal 'tonal' implications. Malcolm MacDonald and others have pointed out that it ends in a clear C Major!)

Perhaps Schoenberg was like Einstein, whose searing radicalism was the result of an obsessive quest for the immutable. He eventually accepted that the universe was expanding. A unified field theory still escapes us. So does whatever might be its musical equivalent.

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From Stewart R. Craggs

May I, in the wake of Mark Doran's excellent and searching review of Jan Swynnoe's book on British Film Music (*Tempo* no. 226: October 2003), make one or two observations of my own?:

The author claims, in the conversation with Roy Douglas which appears as one of the book's appendices, that I have indicated that Sir William Walton's score for the film *Battle of Britain* (1969) was 'lost'. This is quite untrue: neither in my two Walton catalogues (1977 and 1990), nor in my *Walton Source Book* (1993) have I ever said that such was the case. In reality, the score was retained by United Artists for almost three years until Sir Edward Heath (then Prime Minister) successfully negotiated its release in March 1972 in time for the Walton 70th birthday celebrations. I regret that this misinformation concerning the manuscript score continues to thrive up to the present day – even being rehearsed one more time in the very recent BBC feature on Radio 3 about the film's planned re-released with Walton's music restored.

In addition, I might point out that any real investigation into the best British film music from the given period must mention the pioneering scores of Walter Leigh, e.g. his score for Basil Wright's documentary *Song of Ceylon* which was one of the most advanced sound tracks of the early 1930s. A look through the index of Swynnoe's book also reveals other important omissions, e.g. Lennox Berkeley, Bretton Byrd, Eric Coates (there is no mention of his name or any score apart from *The Dam Busters*), Gideon Fagan, Peter Fricker, Philip Green, Constant Lambert, Percival Mackay, Clifton Parker, John Reynders, Humphrey Searle, Eric Spear and Lambert Williamson – to name but a few.

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