

Reflections on the Renewal of Music

A Polemic

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Pluralism has been accepted as the best broad working definition of the current cultural and artistic situation in the West for some time now. In New Zealand, the debate over 'biculturalism' versus 'multiculturalism' drones on. Commercially this is reflected in both 'market segmentation' and its opposite—attempts at 'cross-over'. Artistically, it has made 'bicultural' works fashionable, as creative attempts are made to fuse various traditions together, especially the Maori and Western, and nowhere more so than in music. The key to making successful 'fusion' pieces seems to lie in first grasping the essential differences between the musics, then trying to resolve the clashes or accommodate friendly juxtapositions.

While this fairly public process of 'multiculturalism' is carried on, a different and rather subterranean process of evolution is continuing within the mainstream Classical music composing camp in New Zealand, because there are other musically specific, and highly important, issues to be faced by composers in addition to the broader cultural ones. These other issues can be traced back to two fundamental questions: time and politics.

Critics like Ian Dando (see his article and reviews in *Canzona* 1997, for example) now routinely use terms such as postmodern and postminimalist to describe some of the approaches contemporary composers are taking. Such words are helpful to a certain extent, even if they define movements by what they follow on from rather than what they actually are.

But some residual archaisms from the old post-war avant-garde are still hanging around to muddy the aesthetic waters even further. Postwar modernists such as Stockhausen and Boulez had a few central fixations, pre-eminent amongst which was a dealing with time. Stockhausen's supposedly radical 'moment form' reflected this fixation with redefining time in musical space at a macro-level. One might see the pointillist, splintered textures of scores like *Le Marteau sans Maître* as resulting from the same process applied at a micro-level (derived out of serialist theory). On the artistic-political level, Boulez's famous demand that composers sever links with the musical past and 'start from scratch' all over again arise from the same belief.

Avant-garde ideology became the most powerful musical dogma for Western Classical composers for about 40 years, and composition teaching in New Zealand over the postwar decades seems to have been very much based on a largely undeclared but powerfully imposed aesthetic of generalised avant-

gardism. Large areas of composition were proscribed by implication, particularly tonal writing and lyrical melody. Generations of younger composers, including myself, were trained in the ways of the avant-garde while at university.

Even though avant-garde music itself usually failed to really speak to us or to a general audience musically, the intellectual apparatus supporting it, formulated by powerful minds like those of Schoenberg, Adorno and Boulez, was irresistible.

Wrestling with the idea of time and a profound mistrust of history (a library of closed books, according to Boulez) lead avant-gardists to become overwhelmed with the idea of originality and novelty. Everything, created from scratch, had to be 'new'. Every piece composed was supposed to be new in both content and form. Of course this is a nonsensical proposition: human communication is based on repetition, on recurring patterns. The unknown and the familiar must be balanced against each other for a new creative work to succeed. Postwar avant-gardism was a musical sunset, not the sunrise, to borrow Debussy's assessment of Wagner. Obsession with novelty, a self-consciously cultivated extremism and disregard for the wider musical community, especially for non-specialist audiences, are all legacies of nineteenth-century Romanticism.

The proposition that innovation and progress are the key artistic qualities is good old cultural Darwinism, whereby art is viewed as evolving along an inevitable historical-chronological line. The past is irretrievable and belongs to different historical circumstances, runs the theory. In Marxist terms, a different set of historical necessities generates the genuine cultural currency of any age. This means we have to keep trying to make new things up because time moves continually onward—actually not just onward, but forward! So innovation is more important than any other artistic quality. What's more, it becomes important to be able to demonstrate intellectually that whatever 'new' work is created really *is* new and demonstrably advanced from past works. All this accords nicely with the twentieth-century love of destruction (the A bomb, eco-vandalism) and erection of artificial things on the newly-raised sites.

But time is not like this. History is not linear. The past does not disappear or become irrelevant. Memory has always meant that the past is also the present, and now recording and broadcast technology have physically removed nearly all limitations of time and space, as far as reception of the arts is concerned.

All the music which is recorded (and that's a lot) is equally available for listeners. With compact disc, the music of Bach is not less immediately available than something composed this year and also on disc. Chronology no longer determines what we hear or when. That choice has been removed from the clutches of time and become a political matter (involving the market economy, education backgrounds, socio-economic factors, etc). Certainly the idea that history is linear with living people at the forefront of it is defunct. No-one can live at any time except the present, and memory cannot be entirely suppressed. As the late Alfred Schnittke once said, 'For me there is no music which exists today or music which existed 300 years ago. For me, music is the whole. So, the connection between the different elements just goes on.'

If the realities of an eternal cultural present are accepted, some political implications follow. The remnants of avant-garde aesthetics need to be scrapped, or at least seen in context. The old totalitarian view of 'new music' and what it may or may not include is equivalent to the right-wing economic orthodoxies we endure at the moment. The old avant-gardism held that there was *no alternative* to scrabbling after endless novelty as a priority: novel timbres, equivalent to increasingly silly twists on a daily TV soap opera; ceaseless permutations of forms, paralleling the pathological organisational 'restructurings' we've seen. The ideologues determined this approach was not only right but the *only way* possible. Sound familiar?

There *are* alternatives, of course. A restoration of classicism, with its ability to encompass polarities within perceptible structural frameworks presents a reasonable course. Here the emphasis is on communication, with novelty as an element used to achieve that goal. Renewal is more important than the ephemeral glamour of originality (and ironically, when most avant-gardists strove for originality and novelty they quickly ended up recycling stylistic clichés of early post-War Modernism anyway. Some still do).

Importantly, a restoration of classicism does not mean adherence to any particular neoclassical style. It is a philosophical approach, an outlook, not a technique. Genuinely classical music aims for expression beyond the merely personal. That is, it aims to deal musically with the commonality of human experience rather than being circumscribed by individual neuroses. It is music as communication rather than music as experiment.

We have had three broad waves of musical activity in this country to date. First came the transplanted Polynesian tradition which evolved into distinctively Maori music. Then came the folk, popular and classical music of Europe from the eighteenth century onwards. A third wave crested in the mid- to late-twentieth century with the development of indigenous art music composition using the

Modernist trends of the times. Now it's time for the fourth wave.

To restore a classical approach to composition is to find ourselves liberated, because it is inclusive, not exclusive. It permits composers to incorporate the most powerful devices from the historical arsenal into new works, including, even . . . wait for it . . . tonality. The aim of a classical composer is to achieve communication through a balance of polarised musical tensions within a structure which is perceptive to the ear of the listener, either consciously or intuitively. In doing this we can help return serious music to the mainstream of civilised life. This music will be alive, vitally and happily linked to the past, innovative and open to our surroundings (nature, other arts, popular culture, science). Classicism is robust and includes vulgarity and cliché as easily as novelty and technical sophistication. It may encompass extremes but will not get distorted by any one extreme element.

Over 25 years ago, the American composer George Rochberg speculated on the function of the musical art at the beginning of the postmodern era. His conclusion was: 'Art is neither a mirror nor a substitute for the world. It is an addition to that universal reality which contains man and shows the infinite varieties of ways that man can be . . . What cannot be remembered cannot be preserved. The true intent of art is to preserve human consciousness'. From that premise Rochberg drew the conclusion that revisiting the tonal tradition of western music was going to be a mainstay in creating the new music. He has, I believe, been proved largely correct. Why is the rehabilitation of tonality important? Nearly all music in the world is tonal in some significant way. Virtually all folk and popular music traditions rely on tonality for achieving some sort of structure which is creatively useful and perceptible to the listener. More technically, recent musical philosophers, such as Roger Scruton, have noted the crucial functional difference between music structures which use the 'elaborational' grammar of tonality of some sort and the synthetic 'permutational' grammars of serialism and its descendants.

The need for a renewed and fertile contact with the musical vernacular of our time is self-evident and already well-advanced in some composers' work. It can revitalise 'serious' music while winning back links with lyrical melody, dance and comprehensibility.

Near the end of his life, John Cage said: 'people who are reasserting tradition are involved in speaking, communicating . . .' Such activity did not appeal to him, being one of the pillars of the ancient musical order. But in the present age of individual isolation rather than community, of competition rather than co-operation and of the Thatcherite 'death of society' with its replacement by 'the market', the role of art as an essential communicative, binding element for humanity is stronger than ever.