

I

The Avant-garde of the Distant Past

IN the autumn of 1976 the all-music radio station that broadcasts on the FM band throughout France made a switchover in programming policy. What had once been a cautious, conservative “classical” station (lots of Chopin and Fauré) suddenly inundated the airwaves with a slew of unfamiliar musical styles and interpreters. Prominent in the new program schedules, alongside contemporary and ethnic music, were large doses of works from the distant past, performed by the likes of Gustav Leonhardt, Nikolaus Harnoncourt, Andrea von Ramm, and other outstanding early music specialists. For the first time, the French could hear quantities of Guillaume de Machaut and Johann Sebastian Bach and Claudio Monteverdi, performed with the true vocal and instrumental colors of earlier centuries.

The brickbats began flying only a few weeks after the new programming policy went into effect. Letters and phone calls poured into the station protesting the changeover from familiar music and familiar performers. Columns of newsprint filled up with indignant editorials defending the sacred traditions of French musical taste against the inroads of foreign corruption (“We don’t need foreigners to teach us about our own music,” barked one music critic; an

American early music ensemble had broadcast a series on Josquin des Prez). Hints of Marxist subversion circulated freely in the ultra-right-wing press.

Unable to contain his anger, Doctor Zwang, a disgruntled psychiatrist, published a pamphlet defending the “legal” pitch for performing Bach (he meant the current, twentieth-century norm), and calling the most eminent standard-bearers of the early music revival by every name under the sun. (“Can you imagine!” violinist Marie Leonhardt was overheard to remark. “Calling Harmoncourt a toad! That’s really an exaggeration.”)

This “war of the airwaves” (as the controversy came to be called) was fought with a fervor recalling the scandals attending the premieres of revolutionary works like *Le sacre du printemps* or *Pierrot Lunaire* three generations earlier. This time the villains were not named Stravinsky and Schoenberg, but Couperin and Kuijken, Vivaldi and Brügger. A new avant-garde, the avant-garde of the distant past, had been officially recognized and had received its baptism in fire.

Unsuspecting, the French public had been dragged into a confrontation. In their characteristically excitable way, they were reacting (a few years later than audiences in northern Europe and America) to one of the oddest, yet most endearing, phenomena of modern times: the rush toward “early” music — not simply the Mozart-to-Debussy sliver of the past that had already been enshrined by our cultural institutions, but the more *distant* past, that part of our heritage which had long since passed out of our ken. The familiar classics of the symphony orchestras and the opera houses and the piano recitals in fact represent only a tiny portion of what Western music has been across the centuries. From the Middle Ages to the late eighteenth century (the point at which our “standard” repertoire begins) the composers of the European continent poured forth untold thousands of musical works. The heritage of music is incomparably larger, and incomparably richer, than the tiny segment that has generally been made available to us. And many forgotten compositions of the Medieval, the Renaissance, and the Baroque periods probe as deeply into the hidden corners of the human soul and offer as much spiritual

consolation and insight (not to mention just plain fun) as the more familiar masterpieces of the Romantic era. Like the bored and indifferent tour guides who herd tourist groups around the châteaux of the Loire valley, the official guardians of our musical patrimony had been showing only a few of the rooms. A lot of the best stuff was being kept under lock and key upstairs, where no one had looked at it for years and years.

Gradually, the travelers to Music Castle have been learning not to trust the official guided tours. They have been walking upstairs on their own and turning the latchkeys of long-sealed-off chambers. The place is full of treasure! Persistent explorers have been rediscovering the world of Medieval vocal polyphony, of Renaissance viol consorts, of early Baroque opera, of French harpsichord music, and of a hundred other far-removed yet vitally engrossing repertoires.

Even the furniture on the ground floor has been cleaned off and given a fresh coat of varnish. The early music of the “official” tradition (the works we already know from the later parts of the eighteenth century) has been reexamined and redefined by a new generation of specialists who perform on instruments of the period (or carefully made copies) and who apply the techniques of sound production, phrasing, and articulation appropriate to the pre-Romantic era.

The controversy surrounding the music of the distant past has not been confined to France alone. The thin, quiet sounds of lutes, recorders, and Baroque violins have not been every modern music lover’s cup of tea. And many a conservatory professor, newspaper journalist, or member of the audience has been heard to cry “Foul!” on being confronted with the unfamiliar ways of the early music world.

Now, it was never considered a very urgent matter to study and perform the music of old—at least not until the nineteenth century. Composers always wrote for the music lovers of their own time and place: neither they nor their public had more than a vague notion of much music older than themselves. Music was by and large an art without a past. In sixteenth-century Italy, for example, a madrigal thirty years old was considered antiquated and a subject for derision.

In seventeenth-century England, the lutenist John Dowland complained bitterly that musical fashion had passed him by; he was not yet fifty at the time. In eighteenth-century Austria, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, like every other composer of his day, turned out new operas and new concerti because his public demanded the stimulation of a constantly renewed, contemporary repertoire.

In fact, the world of art music prior to the Romantic era had many things in common with the popular music industry of our own time.* From the troubadours of twelfth-century Provence to Franz Joseph Haydn in the eighteenth century the patterns of creation, diffusion, and appreciation were very similar: musical works were conceived for a moment, for a given time and place. They had their day in the sun, eventually fell into disuse and neglect, and were replaced by newer and more fashionable products.

Our own peculiarly schizoid age has a much more ambivalent attitude toward the past and its great works of art. On the one hand, the terrifying rate of technological change that characterizes our society makes anything more than fifteen minutes old seem outdated; on the other hand, no age before ours has been so conservative and backward-looking when it comes to questions of taste in art music. The works of living composers of “serious” music usually interest only a handful of people, and the attention of the public at large for art music tends to focus on a small number of established masterpieces from the late eighteenth through the early twentieth centuries.

No longer does the public for “classical” music rush out to buy the latest volume of freshly composed madrigals, hot off the printing presses. No longer do café musicians play hit tunes from the season’s most successful operas, as they did during Mozart’s day. Instead, we treat the concert-hall experience as something not far removed from church attendance: as an opportunity to contemplate eternal, im-

* We are talking about *Western* music: our nervous civilization changes fashions in the arts faster than average for this planet. China and India, too, have their high cultures, but the ways their music and art evolved over the centuries differ significantly from our own, Euro-American, patterns.

movable values (or to doze off, depending on our current relationship to things Eternal).

The tendency to replace Religion with Art began, I think, in the nineteenth century. From Shelley to Ruskin, a current of Romantic thought demanded of the artist that he be a kind of moral prophet, forging new values for all of mankind. No wonder the young rebels of the twentieth century took to Cubism and country dancing—they couldn't stand the pressure to be so unremittingly holy. The Romantic-modern idea of artist-as-priest goes hand in hand with the canonization of certain works as official "masterpieces": every religion needs a Bible.

Such a quasi-religious reverence toward a fossilized musical repertoire (and the whole world of performance values, social codes, and marketing techniques that the repertoire has dragged along with it) is unique to modern times. The whole concept of the public concert is a modern one. And in a society dominated by commercial values, music has become a commodity just like anything else. Although many music lovers would be hard-pressed to admit it, their favorite conductor or violinist has gained fame in part through skillful management and publicity. And our need for a canonized body of musical masterpieces from the past characterizes us just as strongly as our opposite infatuation with speed and technological gadgetry.

Most of us accept the idea of the "standard" repertoire, consisting predominantly of works from the past, as something entirely normal, since we have never experienced anything else in the world of "classical" music. But within the musical community, an important minority has been rebelling against the canons of official music making since the early years of this century. Not all the malcontents were yearning to open the locked rooms of the castle. Quite a few, in fact, were itching to burn the old place down.

Some violent forms of protest against the classical music establishment sprang up in the years just after World War I; the protesters were composers, and they rebelled against the conventional musical wisdom of the day by destroying the accepted protocols of musical composition and by creating new, often jarring, and barely comprehensible forms of musical expression.

The wave of avant-gardism that swept across Europe during those years was (and is) a striking indictment of the malaise in our cultural establishment. Many of the avant-garde modernists in music and the other arts were resolutely futuristic and scornful of the past — a not unsurprising attitude, given the deadening effects of too much standardization and repetition on our creative spirit.

But among the modernists there were some (and those not the least influential) who rebelled against the recent past by turning to a still more distant yesterday for inspiration. Ezra Pound's translations of troubadours' poetry, William Butler Yeats's reworkings of old Celtic myths, Igor Stravinsky's and Paul Hindemith's use of neo-Bachian counterpoint — these, too, were ways of rejecting the aesthetic norms of the day. Turning toward the distant past became another means of escaping from conventionally imposed standards.

A composer can break with tradition relatively easily; he can write some new works that contain standards and ideas of their own. A performer is more limited. In Europe and America, a "classical" musician is usually someone who transmits the musical thought of another — a regrettable state of affairs, perhaps, but it is simply so. And so a performer may have a harder time than a composer in expressing his own personal values, his own artistic center through his work — especially if he feels himself to be out of step with the prevailing ethos that surrounds him.

One way for a performer to break out of the mold (if that is what he wants to do) is to specialize in the interpretation of contemporary music; that has been a solution for many fine musicians of our time. The most normal and plausible of musical destinies, in fact, has always been to perform the music of one's own day. Only in the twentieth century has playing "modern" music come to signify something rather marginal and off the track.

For many reasons, however, contemporary performers have generally tended to avoid prolonged contact with the music of their own time. Like the listening public at large, the performers' world has been slow to accept the thorny, hermetic products of the contemporary avant-garde into its bosom. One can feel alienated from the

dominant values of the concert world without being simultaneously drawn toward the modernist avant-garde and *its* values.

Here is at least a partial explanation of the movement toward the performance of early music. Like the audiences who flock to early music concerts, the performers have been charmed by the intrinsic beauty and power of these repertoires; like the public, the players have fallen in love with the tranquil eloquence of old instruments and playing styles.

For the players, however, there are even deeper motivations for hitching one's career wagon to the early music star. The most important reason, I believe, for deciding to specialize in such an odd thing as the music of the distant past is to define one's own self in the here and now. Like those in the modernist camp, the early music performers often find themselves in opposition to the prevailing values of the day. (This opposition, by the way, has no necessary connection with political engagement; gambists and shawm players range all the way up and down the political spectrum, just like everyone else.) The finest performers in this field have had to stake out their own territory, have had to create their own values and standards. They needed to do so to make their music come out the right way; and they needed to make the music come out the right way because the things they had earlier been trained to hear and do did not rest well in their souls.* The decision to make early music one's life has to do above all

* "How the hell are *they* so sure they're doing it the right way!" snorted Mr. Grampus, as he threw this book to the floor. Then he got up and put on his favorite recording: Heifetz playing Bach's "Air on the G string."

You can't argue with pleasure.

Some musicians, though, felt irreducibly alienated from the prevailing ways of the modern concert hall. You can't argue that feeling away, either. The old treatises, the careful reproductions of historical instruments, the scholarly studies — these things gave many early music performers an objective confirmation of that which they had been intuiting already. Most important, scholarly knowledge and research have created a psychic space for self-affirmation. A performer can say, "I'm me, not you, and so I'll play the music this way and not that."

Still, Mr. Grampus does have a point; we aren't as sure as all that about absolute historical veracity. Early music performance is like any other skilled craft; you can follow the rules only so far, and then you are on your own.

with finding one's place in the confused and tumultuous modern age. We pay the strongest and most intensely detailed attention imaginable to the music of the distant past in order to define ourselves with greater truth and clarity in the here and now. Quoth Nikolaus Harnoncourt: "We make music in the present, totally, and as living, breathing people of our own time."

The word "authenticity" is much bandied about these days in early music circles. It is an unfortunate buzzword, since its current meaning in musical circles — see Chapter XIV — is too narrow. The word has far deeper resonances than current usage tends to permit. You will not, therefore, find it popping up very often in the pages of this book, despite its regrettable and current popularity. But there is a way in which "authenticity" in the deepest sense does apply to this musical context. In the human situations that this book's photographs depict, the struggle to do well, the boredom of waiting, the fun of success — in these images of a performing generation, you can see the authenticity of creative enterprise.

As the twentieth century lurches and heaves toward its final decade, uncertain whether life or death is its goal, every sign of hope and renewal has more than ordinary importance. Opening the locked rooms in the castle of music may seem to some a trivial activity as our planet prepares for war. Perhaps, though, the loving respect and careful nurturing that are nearly everywhere in the early music movement can find their place, and have their influence, in the world outside. May the energies released by the avant-garde of the distant past help us point the way toward a more humane and peaceful future!