

TOWARDS A ZEN MUSIC

This text began life as a much shorter paper which I read to a postgraduate seminar in the Theology Department at Kings College London in the spring of 1983, well illustrated with music. In the weeks that followed I gave two other versions to music students at Oxford and the Royal Northern College of Music. The paper betrays its origin not so much in the tone of voice but in the quality of the silences with which it is liberally spattered, and the tunes you have to imagine. There is a sort of argument that dances its way through some twining parentheses: about the relationship between Zen and music; what Zen may mean in our own culture; music as a model of transcendence, the social functions of music; a glimpse of ourselves and our music trapped by the definitions we inherit from our society; a vision of ourselves and our music set free—

The argument is only a game. I can enjoy arguing but I don't imagine that it is possible to win (or lose). Rather more to the point are the gaps between the words where a breeze may enter and—for a moment at least—set the words dancing. It will be rather difficult for me to hear what you have to say, but I will listen very carefully.

The Zen of the title is not Zen as an aspect of Eastern culture, as a religion, as an historical or anthropological phenomenon in some other part of the world; but Zen as a pointer to a way of life, a mode of seeing, hearing, and feeling, which exists only now as I/you write/read these words. Zen is just another word that I have stolen to help me understand from a fresh perspective the tradition I inherited; to show me the unsignposted paths that skirt the bogs and crevasses of habit and complacency. Yet they are not secret paths; they are obvious enough in Western culture. The ways may remain unfrequented, but they're well worn.

Zen first spoke to me through its body of art—its poetry, painting, music and then through its fund of anecdotes of the Zen way of life. Art in action, Zen in action. Zen resides in action, in my/your action. Zen may be found in words as actions. Poetry is an action now, not something spoken yesterday or tomorrow, before or after. Zen art may be found in a special gallery of the museum. It may also be found in any corner of the museum, in any concert, in the Ash tree in the garden next door.

Zen no sooner spoke to me but it was clear it wasn't something over *there* saying something to somebody over *here*. It was a dawning consciousness of a quality of perception, of communication, which, as a composer, I'd known all my life—but also, as a composer, kept in one corner of my life.

The moment the word Zen starts to mean something, it wants to disappear. The Zen which may be spoken of or argued about or theorized upon is—another thing.

When the first Japanese student of Zen returned from China, the emperor invited him to give a discourse on what he had learned. Before the assembled court the monk drew a bamboo flute from his robe. He played one note on it, bowed, and departed.

One note.

Now

If it is impossible to say anything about Zen, what can I say about music?

After all I'm a composer and a teacher of composers. Throughout my life my field of action has been music; that is, playing with sounds, playing with people through sounds—

—Moving through a world of rehearsals, buses going the wrong way, student workshops, committee meetings, airports, tutorials, letters from the income tax inspector, cars breaking down, late trains, gossip in a smoky pub with friends, political indignation, fury, waiting to be arrested in a muddy field, gazing at a winter tree in the first light of dawn, planning new and exciting ventures with colleagues, indulging in fierce criticisms of modishness or reaction, tirades against administrative incompetence, losing my tube ticket and my credit cards, moving from all this into a world of silence.

In solitude and silence, listening. Listening for what arises of its own accord. Listening for *this* sound, discrete and particular; letting it grow in its own way— Transcribing the sound, following its shape with a pencil. Composition is the act of listening.

Listening.

Not before.

Not after.

Now.

No separate thought of an audience, nor of players; nor of a composer. The listener is composer, player, and audience. (Usually I know fairly well the players who will eventually bring a work to light; they become a part of me.)

What I am describing is the act of composition. The vision I am listening to could have become a poem. The sound I see could have become a painting. While composing I see and feel the sounds around me. Everything is tangible; everything is fluid, dynamic. Yet everything is itself; and everything is myself.

* * *

"Einstein, above his work and writing, held a long-term vision: There is nothing in the world except curved empty space. Geometry bent one way here describes gravitation. Rippled another way somewhere else it manifests all the qualities of an electromagnetic wave. Excited at still another place, the magic material that is space shows itself as a particle. There is nothing that is foreign and 'physical' immersed in space."¹

Nor can anything arise in our imagination which is foreign to or outside this world.

From Einstein to Wittgenstein:

1 The world is all that is the case.

¹ Quoted in John A. Wheeler, "Geometrodynamics" in Cecile M. DeWitt and John A. Wheeler, editors, Lectures in Mathematics and Physics, Battelle Rencontres (New York: W.A.Benjamin, Inc., 1968)

- 5.6 The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.
- 5.61 ...We cannot say in logic, "The world has this in it, and this, but not that. "We cannot think what we cannot think; so what we cannot think we cannot say either.
- 6.36 If there were a law of causality, it might be put in the following way: There are laws of nature. But of course that cannot be said: it makes itself manifest.
- 6.361 One might say... that only connexions that are subject to law are thinkable.²

So when I apprehend a new idea—it doesn't matter whether it's labelled as somebody else's or not, I still have to experience it—that new thought is an extension to *my* world; my world is larger. And yet the new thought is immediately familiar. We are not usually taken aback so much by the shock of discovery as by the shock of recognition.

Which would mean that whatever we can know or experience has always been a part of us; or to put it another way, we are a part of whatever we may know or experience.

Wittgenstein recognised this in his own way:

- 6.43 If the good or bad exercise of the will does alter the world, it can alter only the limits of the world, not the facts- not what can be expressed by means of language. In short the effect must be that it becomes an altogether different world. It must, so to speak, wax and wane as a whole. The world of the happy man is a different one from that of the unhappy man.²

A fierce warrior once asked the monk Hakuin if there really were a heaven and a hell.

"Who are you?" asked Hakuin.

"I am a samurai."

"You a samurai? What kind of a ruler would have you as his guard? Your face looks like that of a beggar," taunted Hakuin.

The furious samurai put his hand to his sword, but Hakuin went on:

"What if you do have a sword? It's much too blunt to cut my head."

As the samurai raised his sword, Hakuin said, "Here open the gates of hell!"

The samurai froze, sheathed his sword and bowed. Hakuin smiled.

"Here open the gates of paradise."

The samurai asked Hakuin the meaning of words: Hakuin showed him the meaning of himself.

² Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961)

What happened to the world of the samurai in the course of that meeting?

We use our words, concepts, forms to structure our world. The structures define our perception of the world and if we are creatures of habit—and most of us are—they will limit our world. When we grasp, or allow ourselves to be grasped by our emotions or moods, these too affect the limits of our perception of the world.

When Hakuin taught the samurai he wasn't *giving* the samurai a piece of knowledge; he wasn't adding something "foreign, physical" to the space of the samurai's self; he wasn't forming another concept to limit the samurai's experience. Hakuin was directing the samurai *to discover the answer within himself*, to see through his concepts into the nature of his self.

I have never had a Hakuin beside me to teach me Zen; but in listening to the music of Mozart, Stravinsky, or a curlew, I have heard the music of myself.

A dragon singing in a dry wood.

A possum squealing on the roof.

The screech of a car's tyres on the road.

* * *

A monk once enquired of the Zen master Hui Hai: "How are we to interpret correctly all names, form, speech and silence in order to integrate them and realise a state that is neither before nor after?"

Hui Hai replied: "When a thought arises, fundamentally there is neither form nor name; how can you speak of before or after? Failure to understand the essential purity of all that has form and name is the cause of your mistakenly reckoning everything in those terms. People are locked in by these names and forms, and, lacking the key of wisdom are unable to unlock themselves... That which manifests itself right now is the unequalled Dharmakaya (ultimate reality.)"³

Like Wittgenstein, Saussure was concerned to define the limits of language. Having made clear the arbitrary connection between most words and the concepts with which they are connected, he went on to point out the arbitrary connection between a concept in any particular language, and the conceptual field of which it is a part.

"In all cases, we discover not ideas given in advance but values emanating from the system [the system of language, of the society which uses that language system]. When we say that these values correspond to concepts, it is understood that these concepts are purely differential, not positively defined by their content, but negatively defined by their relations with other terms of the system. Their most precise characteristic is that they are what others are not."⁴

Brown is what is not red, black, grey, yellow and so on. Cattle are central to the life of the Dinka people, and almost the whole of their extensive colour vocabulary is one of cattle colours. According to Leinhardt, "The only Western

³ John Blofeld (trans.) *The Zen Teaching of Hui Hai* (London, Rider & Co., 1962) p.115.

⁴ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. by Wade Baskin (New York, Philosophical Library, 1959) (Revised Fontana Edition p.117)

Dinka words for colours, other than terms connected also with colour-configurations in cattle, are *toc*, green... and *thith*, red."⁵

What colours have I not seen because I didn't have a word for them? How many birdsongs have you missed hearing because you couldn't name the bird? And we will continue to miss seeing and hearing "that which manifests itself right now" until we can discover that key which unlocks us from names and forms.

The word "transcendental" has many curious connotations and overtones. If it means anything, it is recognising the limiting concept and at the same time seeing the whole field of which it is a part, undefined by language, society, custom, habit. Seeing Einstein's curved empty space and touching the table.

Zen says: Samsara is Nirvana. The world of form, of illusion, is the world of enlightenment- the void.

Wittgenstein said:

4.33 It is not how things are in the world that is
 mystical but that it exists.²

That quiet in which I compose is not a different part of my world, set apart in stark contrast to the noise and bustle of the rest. The quiet is the focal point in which *everything* stills, becomes transparent; and I can listen not only to what I know, but also to what I don't know I know.

There are plenty enough composers who work in a different way to this. They can talk of creating this effect and that effect, of creating this kind of mood, or that. Many times I have been frustrated because I cannot use my craft at will, not least because commercial composition can be fun as well as financially rewarding. Tant pis. The dullest commercial art is totally predictable, the most brilliant is predictably unpredictable. That art and music which leads me directly from the novel to the familiar, and from the familiar to the ever-new is essentially the unpredictably unpredictable. It unlocks names and forms; it unlocks myself.

* * *

A painter works rhythmically (in time) in 3-dimensional space. His actions focus on a 2-dimensional surface.

We read the 2-dimensional surface rhythmically (in time) and recreate a 3-dimensional space.

The 2-dimensional surface is the medium of the painting.

We see the surface and we apprehend shapes and volumes. That is, we transcend the medium in reading it. *Trompe l'oeil* painting is too easily understood and I tend to find it rather banal because the painter is generally insisting on that aspect of his art which I would wish to take for granted.

As a musician I work in space but the surface of my work is time itself. Music unfolding is time inviting us to transcend itself. (Like a ghost asking another ghost not to be frightened of it.) And maybe there is an analogy between minimal music and *trompe l'oeil* painting, in so far as it is music which insists on being so many little clocks ticking away, unwinding their ostinato springs.

⁵ G. Leinhardt, *Divinity and Experience: The Religion of the Dinka* (London, O. U. P., 1961)

Music begins as movement—of lungs, voice, arms, legs and so on—on the part of the performer. Though nowadays we can and usually do separate sound and movement, performances from other cultures remind us that whether it is intrinsic—in the ritual of a performance—or extrinsic—in the identity of dancer and musician—music, theatre and dance are essentially aspects of a single art.⁶ In the frequently found combination of pitch instrumentalist/drummer/dancer the dancer may well be singer and another drummer as well. There is no question that the dancer may be icing on the cake, a vicarious afterthought.

A drummer dances with hands. A gamelan player sings and dances with hands. A string player sings and dances with hands and fingers. A flute player uses their instrument as an extension of their voice. At least that is one way of looking at it. Western musicians tend to think of musical instruments as tools, i.e. extensions of our bodies. It is exciting to be reminded by musicians of other traditions that we may also understand ourselves as the servants of the instruments.

But in any case, we can say that music begins as physical movement and we apprehend it physically. The old (European) argument as to whether or not music expresses something over and above itself need not divert us here. It is clear that the body of the performer expresses itself through movement and the body of the listener responds, resonates to that movement, perhaps obviously through sympathetic movement of the limbs and trunk or, more subtly, by the movement of the breath.

The medium through, and by which, music is structured **is time**.

Time as an arrow, a narrative, a succession of events.

Time as duration, a period which is defined by the ontogenesis of the particular music or ritual of which it is part.

Time spiralling, (cyclic time) which relates this strophe to the next on the small scale; and on the larger scales, relates this performance to similar performances and rituals. It enables our understanding of transformation to grow as we follow the unfolding of petals and branches.

Time as a temporal grid (pulse) and its proportioning; by which we experience the whole gamut of sound, from the pitch and timbre of a single note to the complex colour of a great harmony, (pitch, timbre, harmony being themselves temporal events which take place at a speed beyond which we cannot physically or psychologically separate them); from the simplest rhythmic shape to the largest symphonic/operatic/ritual forms. What may be called psychological time is the interaction of all these factors, the interplay of their tensions.

It is only the peculiarities of our language which allow us to speak of melody, harmony and rhythm as though they were distinct and separable entities. They are no more than different perspectives from which we may view the same phenomenon and it is my most consistent task as a composition teacher to reiterate this fact.

All these temporal phenomena combine in our experience as a complex network which, in the first place, creates the language structure of the particular

⁶ A perennial problem associated with the public performance of electronic music is how to create an appropriate ritual which will allow the audience to focus their attention. It is a great help if there is some preliminary theatrical performance such as a spoken introduction by the composer and a person sitting at a mixer imperceptibly twiddling knobs and faders is better than nothing in front of the audience. I prefer to listen in more or less total darkness, but this tends to discomfort many people.

musical performance in which we are engaged; and in the (temporary) end, modifies and inflects our experience of that performance and of the body of language structures to which it belongs. (There has to be a more elegant way out of this jargon!)

Time is the essential medium of music; form is the means by which this temporal structure is composed, articulated and perceived. Whether we are concerned with a simple song, the whole of a complex symphonic movement, or coherent segment of it, it is form which enables the composer and/or performer to remember, shape and interpret the temporal structure in the first place. Like speaks to like. Form is not something optional, extraneous, outside the music, nor can it be imposed upon the music. Nor is form outside ourselves. Form is the way our memory works. It is only through our own aptitude—as listeners—to formally apprehend the temporal structure of a performance that we can hear a piece of music as something distinct from a succession of disjunct noises.

Listening may be more or less creative just like any musical act but it can never be entirely passive.

On the smallest and largest scales. repetition within the temporal structure defines its elements; modified repetition and the degree of modification, inflects the elements, creating the interplay of tension between them. But we cannot know what a structure or segment of a structure may be until we have experienced it formally.

Think of the opening of the *Magic Flute*. Think of the first chord of E flat, all by itself. Let's listen to it—

We have already experienced the form of a complex temporal event: it is a chord of this shape, with this timbre, made up of these pitches.

Now, let's listen to the first chord and its two successors which together make up the mighty gate to the opera.

If you know that gate then you have also experienced its form. Modified repetition has created a structural relationship between the three chords. After the pause the chords change their texture, beginning to flow into melodic phrases which have a form of their own and, at the same time, extend the implications of the first three chords at a higher structural level.

Listening to the music, or playing it, we do not think about the music or its form. Indeed we cannot—the music which might be thought about could not be the music we hear. The music breathes; psychically, and probably physically, we breathe with it. We float on the moment; the past is present to us, the future music already lives in the implications of the present. Like our breathing, the forms accumulate this way →→→; they inflect and modify one another as they group this way ↑. Bunches of notes on paper may look as though they repeat—but our experience of them can never be repeated. The end of the overture is a large breath; some hours later the *Magic Flute* stops. Our experience of its segments dissolves in our experience of the music as a whole. We let the forms go and the music resonates timelessly within us.

And we, as we so often say, have been inside the music; and the more completely we have been inside it the more completely we have transcended time. If we hang on to any particular bits of the music, are bored by them, or enjoy them more than others, or perhaps we are distracted by something "outside" the music, then we experience the music unevenly. However much we may enjoy aspects of the music, as aspects they are incidental; we may carry away a pretty tune but we lose that sense of wholeness, of resonance.

"Transcendental" is a very ordinary word. It is possibly the nearest word we have to describe the Zen experience but it won't do if we try to puff it up or expect something in particular from it. I remember the story of one man who practised archery on the edge of the open cliff, back turned to the drop, heels over the edge— How about listening to music in such a way? Some such position is obviously the best for composing!

No thought, no reflection, no analysis,
No cultivation, no intention;
Let it settle itself.⁷

Listen!

* * *

"The way is easy," says the beginning of the Hsin-hsin Ming, "just avoid picking and choosing." Picking and choosing according to the parochial concepts of our particular society, according to the customs of our class, the habits of our upbringing.

I want to make a distinction between a (any) composition and music. We tend to think of music as a score that a composer presents sometime or other to a player, saying to the player, and through the player to generations of players, "Here is my piece of music. Take it (the music) away, learn it (the music) and play it (the music.)" But this piece of paper, though it may *represent* an intense and particular musical action, is not the music.

Lévi-Strauss puts it elegantly in his introduction to "The Raw and the Cooked":

"Music becomes actual, like... myth, through and by the listener. In both instances, the same reversal of the relationship between transmitter and receiver can be observed, since in the last resort the latter discovers its own meaning through the message from the former: music has its being in me, and I listen to myself through it."⁸

We can re-work Lévi-Strauss' statement with equal propriety for everybody taking part in music-making: "Music has its being in me and I perform myself through it." "Music has its being in me and I compose myself through it."

Until very, very recently in the history of our species, most women and men must have combined at least two of these roles: performer/listener, composer/performer, and many might have combined all three: composer/performer/listener. Did the Romantic problem of originality arise? Did the problem of communication?

"This is my song," says the singer of a verse from a Gröte Eylandt song cycle. I hear only a barely perceptible change in his addition to the series of verses which make up the song cycle. The composer has changed one image in the song that was given to him.

⁷ Tilopa, Six Precepts, quoted in Alan Watts *The Way of Zen* (New York, Pantheon Books, 1957) Penguin Edition p.99

⁸ Claude Lévi-Strauss *The Raw and the Cooked*, trans. by John and Doreen Weightman (New York, Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1970) p. 17

What has that scrap of paper, the score, done to, for us?

If I wanted someone to remember a complicated set of directions I would write it down for them rather than rely on them remembering everything I had said. Firstly, it would remain with them for reference. Secondly, even if my correspondent were a secret agent who could not afford to carry a potentially dangerous piece of information with him, it would be easier for him to remember it *having read it* even if he had to eat the piece of paper afterwards. Information which is presented to us visually can be more complex than information which we can only take in through our ears. We can compare the elements of a visual structure at will *and take our own time* in building up a comprehensible and memorable picture of it.

The use of a musical score to assist a player's memory and to aid the co-ordination of a number of performers is one thing. The use of a score to enable a composer to sketch and elaborate time-dependant structures within a visual medium is quite another. It is a move into another dimension to take up charts, graphs, even computers to assist the visual manipulation of sound, and the move was made as long ago as the Renaissance.

Usually, the composer is *listening* to these visual aids—but small wonder that from time to time some composers have lost their ears in following through their pre-compositional preoccupations. But, by and large, the score is a marvellous extension of our aural memory and a spur to our invention. A Dufay Mass or the *ricercar* from the Musical Offering should serve as reminders that the richest music has evolved because composers can take their own time in developing this time-dependant, time-transcending craft. Our ears have grown as a result of experiencing these multidimensional sound worlds. Music composed with a score is essentially a new development within the field of music, almost like a new species of music, and—in itself—not necessarily better, nor worse.

When taxed about the difficulty of his music, Strawinsky once replied that anybody who had followed the development of music up to his time should be able to understand his music.⁹

Any composer nowadays might, could, should be able to make a similar reply to the same question. After all, it seems a reasonable request to make of any self-styled music lover.

But if the request is fair, it might also be making too many assumptions about our freedom to understand, to enter into "that which manifests itself right now." At least some of the music lovers who dismissed Bach's later music as old-fashioned, or those who rubbished the later music of Beethoven as cacophonous and incomprehensible, had a fair notion of the state of the art in their own time. They were familiar enough with the immediate cultural and historical context in which the music grew. This didn't help them to follow the adventures inside the composers' minds. It was—literally—beyond them. Yet for many of us, the music they dismissed is comprehensible enough; and much of the music of our own time, from which our contemporaries turn away, baffled and bored, is also comprehensible and enjoyable to us.

For the moment, let's put aside the half-baked music, the pretentious music, the over-cerebral music, the modish music; above all, let's forget the romantic composers—whether of the 19th or 20th centuries—obsessed with the establishment of their personal originality. The general point remains: set music free to evolve and it cannot but accelerate its evolution.

⁹ I should offer a modest prize to anyone who can tell where this comes from. Strawinsky left behind too many memorable quotes for a mere composer!

The new ideas are there; and like the knowledge of nuclear technology, cannot be unthought. Wherever they may lead they are a part of my world. They are not only part of a musician's world; they are also an essential part of the culture from which they grew. Yet new ideas also challenge those established cultural values to grow and assimilate them.

If we remain locked within the local concepts with which we grew up, any ideas from outside, and in particular, any obvious evolution of ideas, can only be understood as an aggressive challenge to our security and sense of identity. Either we must reject the ideas outright, or—as hurriedly as possible—build up a new but just as rigid conceptual boundary somewhere the other side; like running up new defences in an advance (or is it a retreat?) The one reaction may be characterised as that of the flat earthist; the other is the Pentagon syndrome.

Naturally enough we rarely see these reactions in ourselves or our friends and allies, it's usually "them"—and even if we really are free of such obvious reactions we still have our *musical tastes*—

How shall we enjoy ourselves tonight?

Shall we go to the opera? To an interesting new group at The Place, or how about Riverside? There's also Brahms and Rachmaninov at the Festival Hall? Of course we could go to a disco, or some Vintage Jazz in Oxford Street? Of course, that's closed now— Shall we go home for some music by the fireside on our new compact disc player? Just imagine, some Country and Western, some Schönberg blues, Northumbrian pipes, a run through Elijah, or perhaps the latest lump of Jesus Rock? How about Ockeghem, or Op.132? Or the Trout or hymning HUMNEN? Or Reggae, or Soul or—?

What a truly extraordinary choice of music we have in our culture. It's pretty well impossible for me to begin to pinpoint the processes by which my individual taste has been formed, let alone specify the actual criteria which might satisfy it from day to day. I don't mistrust my taste on the grounds of this mystery alone—and I certainly wouldn't want to dissuade anyone from using their 'taste'! I have a deep disinterest in "good" and "bad" taste, but my musical tongue is my first and last critical guide.

Yet without a recognition of this mystery— this ambiguity— surrounding the origin of our tastes, taste itself becomes a trap. How many of us are prepared to categorise the music about us (particularly what we don't know) according to pretty rigid concepts?

One of the commonest questions asked of a composer by well-meaning people who are not themselves professional musicians is, "What kind of music do you write?" An unintentionally impertinent question risks an impertinent answer.

It is quite impossible for many of us to make an honest answer within the narrow terms the questioner has been led to expect as proper. The questioner does not intend to be impertinent; they are merely following the lead of their formal education as well as the informal education provided by the media. The answer usually expected is one which places the composer firmly within the spectrum: classical ↔ popular (or serious ↔ light). All too often it is considered a faintly rude evasion on my part when I answer the question in terms of the media for which I've composed. Perhaps you also consider it evasion, and believe that if a composer has composed mostly chamber and orchestral pieces, this is sufficient to place them squarely within a "classical" category? My reluctance to accept this is not just that I don't really know what you and I mean by words such as "classical", but—much more importantly for me—I do not know what kind of music I have

composed and most certainly I do not know what kind of music—if any—I may compose tomorrow.

A rather more serious example of the inappropriate way in which we can be misled by these fundamentally inappropriate categorisations is provided by the way many musicians inhibit or even exclude a large part of their musical heritage because—it seems to them—it comes from the wrong box. Quite a few of my composition students began their active musical lives within rock groups, and a couple of them from the brass band tradition. One or two have actually thought that they had moved on to "higher" musical affairs; more have been well aware of what that earlier experience still meant to them; but all have found it extremely difficult—some have found it impossible—to integrate their musical lives. But without that integration, they are speaking—singing—with half a voice.

On the one hand, our tastes lead us to explore, map, categorise, and perhaps (probably?) limit our world. On the other hand we also find our place within the social fabric by initiation into both obvious and subtle alliances, by our recognising and identifying with others of similar tastes and interests. Surely we can all of us remember a period when these tastes, immature and second-hand, were the whole image we were trying to project to the world.

Our tastes are not only enjoyed, they are also shared.

Our tastes are not only the expression of our most personal development; they are also our meeting point with the people about us.

And most particularly is this true of our musical tastes, since music is at once the most useless and therefore the most personal and most social of all the arts.

Konrad Lorenz gives excellent accounts of what he calls the triumph ceremony of geese in his books *ON AGGRESSION* and *KING SOLOMON'S RING*. The spectacle of a noisy cackling flock is familiar to most of us but Lorenz gives us an insight into the function of the Geese's antics. A bald summary would be something like this:

When a real, suspected, or imaginary intruder approaches a flock of geese, they merge into a solid phalanx, stretching out their necks towards the intruder and make a raucous trumpeting fanfare. If the intruder is repelled, the victorious geese turn inwards, towards one another. Continuing to stretch out their necks, but now low along the ground with the head tilted upwards, they come to the climax of their ceremony. Their music changes to a low passionate chatter or cackling as they greet one another. With only slight modifications, this ceremony may be enacted by a clan, a family, or a pair of geese. One of its most powerful functions is to identify and bond the members of the clan, the family, and, above all, the pair.

A goose which for some reason of social deprivation is unable to share in a triumph ceremony is a very unhappy, unfulfilled goose. It would appear to have lost not only its social, but also its individual identity.

Lorenz demonstrates the elegance and power of this evolutionary transformation of the aggressive instinct into a social and pairing bond. He goes on to point out the proliferation of similar evolutionary adaptations throughout the animal world. It requires only a modicum of imagination and a sense of humour to realise the similarities between the goose ceremony and many of the varied and elaborate ceremonies and rituals of humankind. And for geese and people alike, the most essential ingredient for most ceremonies—apart from participants—is music.

Music was the songs around the peace camp fires at Greenham Common and the "Rule Britannia" sung by Margaret Thatcher as she rallied her natives to the final sacrifice. Music is the lover's lament, the lullaby, the hymn of praise, the war dance and the exorcism. The intimate bonds created by our sharing musical experiences are generally obvious, but for most of us it requires a leap of the imagination in order to see music as an agent of large-scale social cohesion and, inevitably, its complement- social divisiveness.

The composers of Henry Tudor's reformed church had to set to and create a new music for it. The Council of Trent was ostensibly concerned with music best suited to devotional rituals, but the real issue was to censor musical styles which would threaten the unity of the orthodox.

It's easy to see—and hear—what *God Save the Queen*, *Deutschland über Alles*, *The Stars and Stripes* and *The Internationale* have in common; it's less easy, but just as important, to understand the connection between *styles* of music—like verse anthems, reggae, and punk.

Having lived the greater part of my life within that minuscule fragment of society which is concerned with the composition and performance of (here it comes, the real, the genuine, official categorisation) SERIOUS CONTEMPORARY MUSIC, I have so often been involved with, bogged down in, bored to tears by discussions on the theme: "The Gap In Communication Between The Contemporary Composer And Audience." For all the myriad variations on this theme and its practical implications (like how should/could David Lumsdaine and his friends earn their crusts or buy their houses) few discussions manage to drag the subject beyond its purely local boundaries, and those that do are usually part of some dogmatic political approach which only succeeds in shifting the boundaries, not escaping them.

But the political approach is at least correct as a starting-point, for the "communication gap problem" (if/how/why/must it exist(s)etc.) is not an isolated phenomenon. It is deeply rooted within our social structures.

The proud inhabitants of "free societies" are well aware of how totalitarian societies attempt to shape and manipulate the contemporary arts- music and poetry among them- in an attempt to contain them. Ironically, this attitude only seems to build up an appetite for the arts. Where in Europe or the United States would a solo "serious" poet fill a sports stadium for a poetry reading? Or a festival of contemporary music have to turn away people from packed concert halls night after night? By contrast, the bureaucracies which are our establishments and the market forces which finally call their tune, take the line of ignoring the radicalism inherent in the contemporary arts, and, where and when they can't ignore it, trivialise it.¹⁰

Where shall we 'escape the herds of arts administrators which arise whenever there is a new budget made available for the arts? Are they really a new breed?—or an ancient lineage taking up a new territory and gracing it with a wholly new name? People under the age of thirty-five find it difficult to believe that a particular London-based concert-giving organisation which nowadays requires two full-time administrators once ran equally—at times more—effectively on a minuscule budget with a series of energetic committees and some part-time secretarial help. A lot of administrators are excellently motivated, but many more are entrepreneurial empire-builders who lack better scope and talents.

I would assure any arts administrators who—on account of these words—may doubt if they remain my friends, that I am attempting only to describe a general

¹⁰ 1991: During the last couple of years much of this may have disappeared into the maw of history, but the questions remain.

phenomenon. That administrators gather so quickly around a budget may indicate nothing more or less than that they are the antibodies called up by the social body to ensure that this other new-ish breed—the contemporary artist—does no lasting or effective damage. *I, myself, may be the plague!*

But of course I'm not really speaking seriously. If administrators do not help to close the "communication gap", neither do they seriously exacerbate the situation. When British or Australian governments—to speak of ones I know—talk of giving money to "The Arts," what they really mean is Covent Garden or The Australian Opera. These are the real money-eaters, and, with the exception of the tiniest peripheral enterprises, they effectively divert money and creative effort wholly back to the purposes of the establishment.

But let's say that all this is irrelevant to the vitality and spontaneity of true creative endeavour which cannot fail but cut through establishments in the end—Well, then we move from examining the frying pan and take a larger view of the fire. There, to thoroughly mix my metaphors, stretches the ocean of cassettes, muzak and transistor radios from Balham to Bali to the Baring Straits. Marx might be surprised to know that television and microchip music, between them, would appear to have taken over the task of religion as the opiate of the people.

When the airliner taxis down the runway to take off, or when it makes its approach to descend, we don't have prayers, we have canned music.

I don't imagine that this is a state of affairs which can be "put right" by elections or revolutions any more than the latter could achieve international disarmament, or put an end to underprivileged minorities, famine or any other of our perennial plagues—though I believe I should always act as though they might! If an enormous and valiant uprising of the spirit like the Russian Revolution had to end up in the hands of a Stalin why should the arts be surprised at finding themselves lost in little bogs of mediocrity?

Politicians are by definition people who seek power. Politicians, of whatever persuasion, would appear to have more in common with one another than with the people they seek to govern. How can one disagree with Lao Tse and Chuang Tzu¹¹ that the people who seek to rule are the people least suited to rule. We can hardly blame the politicians for this so much as the craving of most people in our society *to be led*.

And the more quickly a society appears to evolve, the more nervous, defensive and unstable it appears to become. "Society"—the word conjures up an awful abstraction, but in the end it is you and me, a collection of music-lovers with slightly different tastes.

* * *

The proliferation of styles of music in our society is less a flowering of liberal humanitarianism than the reflection of the splintering of this unintegrated and unwieldy mass into more or less closely-hedged, more or less defensive and/or aggressive, more or less indifferent groups. Very rare indeed is the appearance of music which is capable of cutting across barriers of class, education, race, economic strata, age— What did the Beatles have that Stockhausen and the Pink Floyd lacked? Was it simply a matter of cleverer marketing?

Even within the relatively narrow band of people represented in a university or college, or the neighbours in your street, how many would go to a

¹¹ Lao Tse, Tao Te Ching and Chuang Tzu, Chuang Tzu.

concert to enjoy the classical music of their own century, such as Strawinsky or Varèse? How many—or how few—would find active enjoyment in listening to the music of the composers living in their midst?

Musical styles and idioms seem to appear on the scene quite innocent and free of associations beyond the moment. But as soon as we can *speak* of a new style (as distinct from *playing* it), its name is already identified with those categories, classifications and concepts which are embedded in our social structures, and enable us to interpret our various activities in social terms. The names we give to musical styles and gestures, as well as the interpretations we put upon them, belong to the language of social structures. They are essentially extraneous to our understanding of the musical language to they became attached. *The style which we can speak of is not the music.*

A great misunderstanding looms; let's dodge it swiftly. There is a musical language which builds up the structure and form of any particular piece of music no matter whether it is a lullaby or a war song or one of the 48. This is the language of which I speak. It is a musical language—metalanguage is possibly a better word—which is irrespective of style, and, to a large extent, culture as distinct from those infra-cultural languages which are firmly based on musical style. This musical metalanguage is not the same thing as musical style.

We can't translate a piece of Shakuhachi music, an Indian rag or a piece of gamelan, not because the feat of translation is somehow beyond us, but because it is totally irrelevant. (I once heard an instrumental transcription of the Balinese ketchack made by a Japanese composer. It was a feat wherein ingenuity and fatuity just about balanced one another.)

It is common enough for music to carry a discrete supramusical symbolism: for example, the highly evolved language of rasas, i.e. tastes, associated with colours and emotions which is identified with the intervals of the ragas.¹² Western music has become less subtle in the use of this kind of language, but we still read meanings into certain musical styles. It is doubtful that somebody unfamiliar with our culture would pick up the precise meaning we associate with—for instance—one of the stock funeral marches, or *Pomp & Circumstance*. Yet I'm sure the foreigner could still hear their very different musical characters. For that matter I can imagine that without the hindrance of any supramusical responses, my foreigner might well hear the music itself more clearly and directly than I do. *Pp & Cstnce* might not be all bullshit. (Rather more subtle, but much less precise in its interpretability is rhetorical music like the first movement of Shostakovitch's 5th Symphony.)

It is the metalanguage of music which enables us to "understand" music in a simpler way, yet at a deeper level to that which can be conveyed by "symbolic" music or music which is meant to express emotion (a weird tautology here since emotion is essentially a means of communication). This is the language which in Strawinsky's words, "expresses itself".

* * *

I remember the story of Hakuin and the samurai— When I was a child of ten years old, I would have had very different associations with the words "heaven" and "hell" to a Japanese samurai of the eighteenth century. I have very different

¹² Phillip Rawson drew my attention to a very full discussion of this subject by R Gnoli in "The Aesthetic Experience according to Abhinavagupta", Serie Orientale Roma, Istituto Italiano per il medio ed estremo orientale, 1956.

associations with the words today; and though our associations might overlap, your associations and mine are unlikely to coincide. Yet I would be surprised if you were not able to appreciate—in the same way as myself—Hakuin's pointing beyond the samurai's concepts into the heart of his being. In so far as you apprehended this story your experience was complete and self-sufficient—as with an image from a poem, as with:

"Music has its being in me, and I listen to myself through it."

I am pointing to our ability to hear ourselves in music, and to the magic of the exercise. When I listen to a piece of Indian Classical music my comprehension of it must be radically different from that of an educated Indian, but I can comprehend it (and transcend it, too). Likewise, I can't listen to the *Magic Flute* like an inhabitant of Vienna in the late eighteenth century. And that's just not the point of the exercise of listening to music.

Our understanding, our comprehension of music can only be our own. It cannot be that of some mythical person from a mythical past and culture (who never heard it on CD anyway) or of some mythical critic or teacher. No matter what music you and I listen to right at this moment, it will only ever be heard as it's played in this place and by these ears.

I cannot choose but bring to music the whole of my experience—my knowledge of and feeling for history, anthropology, musicology, chess, astrophysics, ornithology, my bugs about Zen, my sense of taste, my passing mood.

I can choose whether this results in a conditioning which limits my experience; or an experience which leads me out and beyond those limits.

On the one hand the self-indulgent delights of nostalgia and *liebstod*, the frissons of interesting novelties, the abysses of boredom, bewilderment and disgust; but always the reinforcement of my ego and my identification with a class, a clan, my allies, my status within my profession, my place within the social hierarchy.

On the other hand, I can drop all ideas of who I am, of what I know and what I should like to be and simply follow the path of the music as it leads me beyond the limits of my world into?—my world, that which manifests itself right now.

Those limitations, those categorisations, those prejudices may be my defences, but defences against what? It is not just that "hell is other people." Hell is otherness. Otherness is the alienation within ourselves between one moment and another. There is no alienation right now.

Music, the model of the transcendental, invites us to transcend ourselves.

"The way is easy, just avoid picking and choosing."

And what if the particular piece of music we are listening to is less than perfect, or the performance mediocre? I'm reminded of being told in an uncle-ish way, many years ago that "a good cheese invites butter, a poor cheese demands it." Well, good music invites transcendence, poor music—Wittgenstein will say it again for me for the last time:

66.54 My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way:.. anyone who understands me eventually recognises them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.) He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright.

7 What we cannot speak about we must pass
 over in silence.

Listen—

"Towards a Zen music?"

In the best Zen tradition, let's drop the word "Zen"; like these notions of "towards" or "from"; "before" or "after" it's just painting legs on a snake. Music, our music, is all around us.

A monk asked Ts'ao-shan: "Master, what is the way?"

"A dragon singing in a dry wood."

"I wonder whether there is anyone who is able to hear this song?"

"There is no-one in the entire world who does not hear it."

"I can't imagine what kind of music the dragon's song might be."

"I don't know either; but all who hear it lose themselves."¹³

No thought, no reflection, no analysis,
No cultivation, no intention;
Let it settle itself.

Listen.

¹³ The Transmission of the Lamp.