

FORM IS FEELING

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ABSENCE of emotion is quite generally supposed to characterize the music of today. Composers severely attacked on this account sometimes even provide their critics with the ammunition by exploiting the alleged delinquency as a virtue. Stravinsky's terse declaration that "music, in its essence" is "powerless to express anything whatever" is easily converted into "our musicians have nothing to say."

The charge, however, can stand less scrutiny than the curious legend which, formerly more than now, represented Mozart as a composer of essentially happy, carefree music. Because a typically nineteenth century work could so easily be identified by a brief emotional tag, often provided by the composer himself, even Mozart came to be dealt with in this fashion. But since the kaleidoscope of his almost constantly varying sentiments, merging subtly and imperceptibly into one another, stubbornly defies reduction to a single rubric, there was nothing to do but seize upon the characteristically cheerful theme which, in Mozart, is merely the idea heard first in order of time.

How much more room there is for error in dealing with the novel and so often perplexing idioms of today. Misrepresentation here goes beyond over-simplification. The presence of emotion, that is to say, is denied altogether. And how can there be any content of feeling, it is argued, when composers, on their own admission, are concerned only with technical devices?

We are, however, indebted to Freud for our present knowledge of the way in which our unconscious desires, implicit feelings, partly formulated beliefs manifest themselves in the merest action of walking into a room, in the abstract loops and curves of handwriting, in the "apparently awkward" movement of the hand that "fortuitously" shatters the inkstand which, though our displeasure was not in our mind at the moment, has displeased us for some time.

A composer may evoke emotions without knowing what these are, even without being aware that he is doing so. Tones themselves are, to

start with, emotionally colored. A high, loud sound has its aura of excitement, however limited or diluted that may be under certain conditions. A high, piercing laugh does not represent glee by convention only; there is an intrinsic relation between the laugh and our exultation.

A composer's choice of a high sound to complete a formal pattern involves an accompanying, even if unconscious, approval of the feeling that comes in its wake. The arguments for this assumption would carry me rather far afield, and I should only be reiterating what John Dewey and D. W. Prall have so admirably established and what even Jacques Maritain might not wholly deny – Maritain whose Aquinian theory, when not read carefully and in its entirety, may be thought to substantiate Stravinsky's statements.

Now although emotions are not necessarily absent even from contemporary examples of the most uncompromising purism, it is true that self-expression (or, in Dewey's words, a "spewing-forth") is no longer the primary aim of our most significant composers. Nor do they start, as their Romantic precursors did, with an emotion and subsequently look for the tones to express it. They start with the tones, in which emotions, according to the nature of music, are necessarily embodied.

If this contemporary attitude could be shown as less favorable to the attainment of a just emotional balance than the Romantic one, a good deal of current disapproval might be legitimate. Until recent decades music was held to have been on the up-grade precisely because of its emotional expansion. "Beethoven with his pomp and passion", said Cyril Scott, "surpassed the tinkling dulcitude of Mozart . . ." and thus, it would appear, expressed not only more feelings but better ones. With few structural criteria to make one feeling more suitable than another at any given point, the nineteenth century composer was always free to select the loftiest, the most godlike sentiments – *le sérieux à tout prix*, in Milhaud's choice phrase.

"Indeed, all composers," observed Busoni, "have drawn nearest the true nature of music in preparatory and intermediary passages (preludes and transitions) where they felt at liberty to disregard symmetrical proportions, and unconsciously drew free breath." The Romantic artist thus sought at every turn the exciting effect of the chromatic elements and wide melodic skips which Bach, Mozart and Beethoven had relegated to preludes and transitions. But the impact of such passages obviously springs from their particular relief against the background of more nor-

mal contours, just as black seems the blacker next to white. In Romantic music there are, to be sure, violent contrasts of loud and soft, rapid and slow, but emphasis is more or less continuously on feelings notable for the absence of control. (The Aeolian harp was the poet's metaphor for artistic creation, and Wagner saw the composer as one tossed about by the sea.) Pastoral revery, subdued longing, erotic hysteria, all involving lack of decision, are closer to one another than any of them is to the bright, affirmative theme with which a Mozart allegro normally opens.

The Romantics, far from expanding emotional possibilities, restricted themselves to certain moods which had already been present, along with many others, in previous music. (How Wagnerian is the statue scene in *Don Giovanni* or "Er sterbe" in *Fidelio*.) Naturally, the preoccupation with such moods, and the enormous creative gifts concentrated upon them, developed surpassing skill in their expression. But the insistence upon these sentiments weakened their effect.

The Classical sonata form, which was felt to be a restraint upon nineteenth century expression, instead actually stressed the process of moving forward from one feeling to a subsequent and contrasting one, from the "masculine" first theme to the "feminine" second, from the themes to the motory and often poignant transitions, from the contained exposition to the agitated development. Schubert began to sacrifice this contrast when he allowed some of the function of the development to enter the exposition prematurely, or when he lingered affectionately over an admittedly fetching theme. (He dwells on the first subject of the posthumous *Sonata in B♭* as one might in a variation form).

Forms devised by the composer himself serve as well as the sonata or any other conventional pattern so long as they engender like variety. The virtue of a form does not lie in its familiarity or tradition. More important is its potentiality to embody and unify contrasting emotions while the composer follows its technical prescriptions. When the conscious mind is engaged mainly in arranging tones in striking configurations, the feelings that inform them are likely to spring from deep sources whose subtle ramifications are far too elusive for the unaided attention to grasp. Like the portrait painter who relies too much on his model, the composer, in his desire to reproduce emotion faithfully, may remain too close to his conscious self, leaving little room for chance development in the handling of the material and for adventures into hitherto unknown recesses of his being.

The sonata form, allowing for a variety of feelings without too much specification as to what they should be, and affording free moments in preludes, transitions and developments, is no intellectual straight-jacket. But even where structural restrictions are most rigid, feeling is not necessarily inhibited. Mozart's observance of key limitation, for example, often resulted in a struggle, in his opening allegro, to resist the pull towards the subdominant key, which finally enters as the tonality of the second movement with the emotional impact of something long desired. The struggle for a key may seem a prosaic matter, yet the overtones of all past struggles in our experience may crowd into this presumably abstract material. "Just as all neurotic symptoms," according to Freud, "like dreams themselves, are capable of hyper-interpretation . . . so every poetic creation proceeds from more than one motive, more than one impulse in the mind of the poet, and must admit of more than one interpretation."

Wagner sacrificed the emotional range of such large key structure, because he observed so little key limitation. The harmonic complexity of each detail eliminated the possibility of the more significant complex of broader relations. For him the *Leit-motif* was the chief repository of feelings. Our time has experienced a gratifying return to pre-Wagnerian tonal principles. Stravinsky, though he uses modal and chromatic details inherited from his Romantic forebears, also gives us, in his broader structure, something comparable to the Mozartian scheme, though it is very different in character. In the first movement of *La Symphonie de Psaumes*, E phrygian alternates abruptly with tones centering about the dominant harmony of C minor, repeatedly interrupting this dominant's tendency toward its tonic. Later, a bridge is established between the two tonal centers and the movement ends on the dominant of C minor; and this finally resolves in its long awaited tonic at the opening of the second movement. Reflected in the struggling tonal centers is of course the urgent sentiment of the sung text: "Hear my prayer, O Lord, and give ear unto my cry." And whether Stravinsky deliberately willed it or not, the resolution in the second movement is related to the repose of "I waited patiently for the Lord; and he inclined unto me, and heard my cry."

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What often leads to the conclusion that emotions are absent where music most ideally fulfills its structural essence, is the difficulty of localiz-

ing them with respect to our normal connotative methods of thought. Yet the emotions are none the less specific. If there can be so much ambiguity in poetry, where the verbal symbols so closely represent their objects, music, in turn, must allow for a still broader interpretation. Where one or two obvious emotions serve as a focal point, as in Romantic or Impressionist music, there may be little room for disagreement in analysis. But in the more abstract works the whole unconscious is given free play. With as much time, skill and effort as a psychoanalyst devotes to his patient, we might arrive at a relatively convincing approximation of the content of the most "absolute" music. Since we are so dependent on verbal characterization, we incline to the error that where emotions are least definable, they are absent altogether. This is unfortunate, for if what a composer has to say could be easily duplicated in words, there would be little point in trying to express it in tones.

Emotion seems most evasive of definition when form and feeling, are, as they should be, most thoroughly identified. Once we accept this identification we no longer fall into the common error of insisting that intellectual factors are important only as a bridge to the feelings. Form, in this dangerous dichotomy, is the composer's original sin. Busoni at one time came to the absurd conclusion that the musical *rest* or *fermata* "most nearly approaches the essential nature of art." Thus the apex is achieved in formless music, and formless music is not of this world, is not music, is silence. The Romantic concept of feeling becomes a negation of music.

It may be objected that Wagner's structure was highly complex. The complexity, I believe, is more specious than real. The *Leit-motif* is a formula rather than a form. Motive-development had earlier been one of many elements. Its over-evaluation was a simplification and because harmony is often taught separately from so-called "form and analysis," we tend to forget that key structure is fundamental to a form. Wagner's perpetual modulation destroys the possibility of unifying contrasting keys. But just proportion, almost unknown to him, is practically synonymous with good form, for it involves a sense of when to stop one thing and go on to the next.

Composers today who, unlike Shostakovich, are not perpetuating Romantic dogma, try desperately to return to this saner concept of form. They do not unnaturally project themselves into the past for want of anything to say. But since the eighteenth century reached an understand-

ing of the lasting, intrinsic potencies of tones, the principles being *reinstated* (a more accurate verb than *revived*) are as valid now as they ever were. This reinstatement springs from a profound conviction that the preoccupation with feeling is contrary to the nature of art.

Granting the reinstatement of Classical principles as natural and inevitable, one may still argue that to borrow themes and melodic turns from older composers represents an arbitrary retrogression, an effort to make up for aridity. But I believe instead, that in analyzing the creative process, emphasis should be placed upon the reciprocity of the materials being combined within the work of art. It matters little that some of the parts, taken by themselves, do not express the composer's own sentiments. His personal attitude will be reflected in the juxtaposition of elements. "The business of the poet," as Eliot has explained, "is not to find new emotions, but to use the ordinary ones. And emotions he has never experienced will serve his turn as well as those familiar to him." A segment of a work is not its own fulfillment, but something incorporated because its feeling is apposite to the form as a whole.

Is form alone, then, important, and not feeling? Hardly. "Art for art's sake", whatever that slogan may mean, is not the only path open to those who disavow "self-expression." There is the more challenging alternative of the just balance of form and feeling. It was this goal that inspired classical method; it is certainly one of the most noble objectives that composers today may set for themselves. Paradoxically, it may best be achieved by absorption in the form. Even if Stravinsky's statements make dubious philosophy, his aim as a creative artist is sound.