

ON QUOTATION

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OUR century is remarkably given to nostalgic composition. In the works of Mahler, Ives, Villa-Lobos, Virgil Thomson, Paul Bowles and others, one particular aspect of reflective discourse is revealed: a new attitude towards quoted material taken from life. The neo-classic orientation is, too, a nostalgic one in that it depends on quoted material, in this case historic art material, and relies for its expressive power on the recognition of this material.

There is no mistaking the vulgar origin of the tunes, rhythms, phrases and even the instrumentation frequently heard in the nine big symphonies of Mahler which open our century. He makes some of his most interesting pages out of common brass band march tunes, hymns and sentimental love songs. These he imbeds in a richly imagined if frequently too sumptuous setting of uncultivated landscapes, heroic Stonehenge architecture and unfinished sunsets. His personal story is told here in nine stupendous sections as an adventure meaningful to the rest of man and with the direct intent of amplifying this import. His use, then, of common material is towards the same end. He woos a transfigured and Beatrice-like woman in the language of Sweeney; marches out over a grim and elevated field of battle to the same tune the grocery boy whistles on the way to school; he is buried with the same concerned (and inexpensive) mortician at hand. In such pathetic and touching images Mahler made clear his entire devotion to the lay audience. It is his wish to represent himself as one of us, and, in order that his token be accepted, he speaks in our own tonal tongue. Nor, indeed, is he speaking down to us; the vivid, streaming resonances of his highly professional orchestra bear witness that his own intensest self is not absent.

What really happens, musically, in Mahler's symphonies and in the higher usage of Ives is that the quoted portion is never "developed" (in the Beethoven sense), it is not concealed or even embroidered much (though embroidery too is sometimes heard). It is simply revealed in the music. Here is a special distinction of our new way with regard to quotation. We

employ the tune or section as a character is employed on the stage; it is not suffused in a total emotional activity, the true subject of which is the author himself; on the contrary, it is made to stand forth, to represent a special, active, and, as much as possible, objective personality in the drama.

In the works of Ives this "imitation of life" grows to fascinating proportions. With his rejection of post-Wagnerian pomp and luxury furnishing, Ives was among the earliest of our true twentieth century composers. During Mahler's life, and years before Stravinsky and Schönberg experienced their celebrated revulsions from Victorian plush, Ives was carefully chiseling out works of sinew, strength and concentration. At the same time, however, he preserved the germ kernel of the nostalgic method and by a mindful personal cultivation produced the texture we now think of as Ivesian.

And his sensitive texture does depend on and derive from the nostalgic method. It is, in the final stages, a many-sided, many-layered, at once serious and facetious, common and cultivated fabric in which the tonal characters stand up, walk forth and have a whole life against a setting (with commentary) of Ives's own invention which is largely made up of oracular puns, rich and ambiguous in meaning.

As opposed to Mahler, Ives no longer purposes to speak for the rest of us at the gates of heaven; rather, in the best gentleman-scholar fashion (did he not abandon the exclusive exercise of his profession for the living of a whole and therefore amateur life?) he assembles the data of his observed surroundings and tells the tale, not without tenderness, of what he and his friends were like and where they lived. His aim is amazingly close to that of the best Chinese poetry (wherein observed fact is more expressive than referred likeness) and of Chinese painting which is concerned with observation of nature, human nature as well as "natural" nature.

So he composes love songs that are fantastically accurate records of the taste in love songs at the turn of the century, church tunes that are just right for the village soprano, and Fourth of July celebrations that couldn't be better. Observation of nature, all of it.

When he quotes, however (and this is more directly what concerns us here), he is quite precise about it; the tunes are stated to the end and are set out like the entrances of important characters. Then, miraculously, the air around is filled with fluent, sometimes mysterious, always fascinating comment: puns, the tunes and harmonies scrambled, related expressions (tonal or associative) from other pieces – in short, the revealed mind of the author as oracle. And the organization is not centered in personal force growing to the messianic act or (as in the *Sacre*) ritual sacrifice. Rather it is a more or less constant classic commentary, a reflective language suitable by pun to aid in reflective penetration of the subject matter.

Now this, as is easily seen, was also what James Joyce was up to. Indeed there are a startling number of similarities between the works of Ives and Joyce, and (even more startling) their work procedures as well. Both artists set off from a very special, very folksy locale. Both take the road through local myth outward and across the borders towards general (personal) culture.

How far the characters of H. C. Earwicker's purgatorial dream in *Finnegan's Wake* are found from home! How far is the singer suggested by *In the Night* from any special Danbury night; rather isn't he heard singing in every night, almost everywhere, of deserted homes, and despite the charming words (only to be thought, not sung or heard!) appended to the tune?

Ives composes by several processes. It is often evident that he has started from a very simple basis. The final result is achieved sometimes by direct addition, more often by splitting and stretching a bit the original phrase to include pertinent matter.

Joyce begins composition often with very simple, banal narrative sentences. By associative accumulation, pun, scrambling, and rational as well as emotional suggestion he engages the mind in a progressive penetration of the subject, leading from the common locale, through myth and paradox, to the total (and personal) world, where meaning is provoked in many layers and the mind's eye sees both close and distant. In a certain sense Ives and Joyce decompose, rather than compose their subjects.

The surprising thing is that we are still dealing with "observed surroundings" and "observation of nature," for the myths, tune-shapes and associations that effect the resonance of the whole style are quite objective matters. Only if the personal dynamic pattern through this path leads to catharsis and resolution (Mahler's whole meaning is just that) is the style made impure and the clarity of design obscured, for the private choices involved in crises upset the punning and observing faculties and shift meaning back into a dynamic frame from which there is only a private issue.

The oracular language of our century refers to an enormously broad general culture of inter-meaningful facts and symbols and does not properly aim at private catharsis. (Is there really a climax in *Finnegan*? Does it even begin or end? Are the four "answers" of Ives's *Fourth Symphony* towards any progressive shape?)

I dwell on Ives and Joyce at some length because the full reality of our modern sense in this matter is most sharply to be seen in them. The position of most others is in varying ways less sure than theirs. Villa-Lobos, for instance, is a brilliantly haphazard practitioner of the style who usually cuts short of the borders of his own land. Virgil Thomson, again (probably because of his dual and split esthetic impulse), rather too timidly restricts

the play of his punning faculties so that his productions in the style resemble newsreels more than fluid montages. He is, however, since Ives's major period, the most considerable American to have employed the style.

Stravinsky's ragtimes and *The Soldier's Tale* are the enchanting results of his thinking along this line. Here the paste-up job tells us more about the subject than the author's own commentary, which is slight. The material is disjointed and reassembled with high imagination and much cross-meaning (within itself) so that one fragment of common stuff will serve in a number of different ways. Touches from the marches turn up in the *Petit Concert* movement, the *Ragtime* steals from the *Tango*.

Stravinsky's next step was, of course, the so called neo-classic style, which everyone agrees is rather ill-named, for neither the Hellenic nor Biblical is evoked thereby. The eighteenth century is its fundamental reference ground, though the process, once having been thought up, may be with equal ease applied to any time, or, let us add, culture. It is evoked either by the direct quotation of masters, as in Stravinsky's *Pulcinella*, with commentary added through distorting devices, or by the reverse procedure, that is by choosing a special set of stylistic devices from the older masters with which to erect a modern work. Falla's beautiful *Harpsichord Concerto* is perhaps the clearest example of this, and also one of the most nearly perfect pieces in the neo-classic style.

The limit is here set on the punning faculties, one age at a time, preferably one composer at a time. Thus in Stravinsky's *Piano Sonata* it is C. P. E. Bach, in *Pulcinella*, Pergolesi, and in *The Fairy's Kiss*, the late nineteenth century of Tchaikovsky. Indeed the passionate application of these voluntary limitations and their detailed working out account for the special pleasure to be had from the style.

It is, like other styles which depend on a limited reference scheme, a restricted one. The special distinction of neo-classicism, its use of privately composed and highly cultivated music instead of popular or folk music as a spring-board, almost automatically reserves it to the educated musician. However its less far-flung associations, together with the elegance and prestige of the social world to which it constantly refers, invites the listener more easily than the kind of thing Ives does which requires rather more work and a good deal more attention in a broader reference scheme.

Space forbids a full discussion of this enormous subject of quotation. Its importance in our time can scarcely be overestimated. No age before our own has had so vast a musical past suddenly laid open to it. The nineteenth century mania for library research, the present explorative attitude is unprecedented. At the same time, no age has been so thwarted and unstable as ours. The sensitive mind seeks among cross-references for a key to meaning no longer given in music's place among us.