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Middle Eight

Television's problem with (classical) music

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I

The idea I have in mind is to compare the situation on television today and thirty years ago of what persists in being known as classical music. I write as an academic, but this will not be a normal academic paper. For one thing, I shall not do any special research but base myself instead on memory and autobiographical experience, because thirty years ago, before becoming an academic, I began by writing music criticism and making documentaries on music for television. My intention is to say something as a participant observer about the alteration of the cultural context in which this thing called classical music operates, and about the part that television has played in this.

Perhaps I should first lay my cards on the table: as a music critic I covered everything from Monteverdi to Messiaen and beyond, with a strong bent towards the 'and beyond' (I also listened to modern jazz, especially the progressive variety, but didn't write about it). I made two films on music for BBC2: the first, called *Watching Music* (1970, 20 min), was a film essay which explored the social interaction of musicians rehearsing and performing, including the contrast between the Allegri String Quartet playing Schubert and a group called Gentle Fire playing Stockhausen. The second, called *The Politics of Music* (1972, 30 min), was a portrait of Pierre Boulez, who at that moment was conductor of the BBC Symphony Orchestra; it explained why he wanted to take the orchestra out of conventional concert halls into places like London's Roundhouse, in order to develop a new kind of relationship with the audience.

This involvement of thirty years ago indicates a certain orientation which remains with me: an attachment to what people nowadays refer to as the post-war avant garde. Such an attachment cannot be isolated, however, from the other currents which attended the musical world of, as George Orwell might put it, the middle middle-class child growing up in North-West London after the Second World War. As a constant and inescapable background, there was the popular music of the generation of the 1960s, and the orientations within it as expressions of clashing subcultural ideologies. By chance I already understood something about this in my early teens – an elder brother had featured with friends of his in a story in the Evening Standard in 1958, 'Are you a trad or a mod?', about rival factions among jazz fans. There was also the music of one's domestic and religious cultural background, which is in fact in many ways primary: at any rate, over recent years psychologists have uncovered a good deal of evidence for the formative influence which music may have upon the baby, and even the foetus in the womb.[1]

In my own case, the domestic musical environment included the gramophone

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and the radio, a grand piano, and singing at table on Sabbaths and Festival days. Later I learnt to understand this mixture in terms of a politics of identity, in which the individual is no longer to be seen as the repository of some kind of cultural unity but as a hybrid, because in fact we are all made up of different cultural currents of which we each make what we will to make us what we become.

Since the moment I made those films for television, there has been an enormous change in the musical culture which has moved precisely in this direction, and in which television has participated partly through its own powers of popularisation and partly because of its selective kleptomania. By the end of the 1960s, twenty-five years after the relaunch of television at the end of World War II, this kleptomania extended to the post-war avant-garde – this is when Boulez and Stockhausen first became famous – and a young critic could get to make films about new music and new attitudes. Today, more than half a century into the age of television, the whole Darmstadt School has been relegated to an esoteric niche which the small screen more or less ignores, and its radical subversions have been replaced by a return to the broad-based idiom which it is accused of having tried to expel. The reality is more complex than this charge suggests, and the Darmstadt idiom has not been overthrown but incorporated into the highly eclectic stylistic breadth of contemporary 'classical' music *circa* 2001. At the same time, the range of classical music included within their remit by broadcasters like the BBC and organisations like the Arts Council has expanded in different directions beyond what used to be included in the category. The repertoire on Radio 3 now includes a good deal of jazz as well as the songs of Stephen Sondheim, while commercial stations like Classic FM, undreamt of thirty years ago, play a wide selection of pre-digested chunks from Hildegard of Bingen to Philip Glass – minus the serialists, plus the composers of film music.[2]

Quite unintendedly, television has played a part in bringing us to a realisation of cultural diversity – and to accompany it, a much debated relativisation and dilution of cultural values. Television, and the music it carries, is porous. While trying to keep the potentially divergent cultural currents of contemporary society under some kind of control, in some kind of order, partly by relegating everything to the schedulers' slots, it inevitably ends up exposing its audiences to increasing cultural diversity, a diversity which it delivers, however, with neither social context nor instruction, neither rhyme nor reason. A paradigm of this process is found in television's big brother, the cinema. Here, for example, the work of an avant-garde composer of the 1960s like Ligeti can enter popular consciousness on the soundtrack of a now 'classic' science fiction movie; and Elizabeth Lutyens spoke of how she had less trouble writing avant garde scores for horror movies than getting her concert works performed. Then there's advertising, as a result of which, everyone knows what Elgar and Vaughan Williams and Mahler sound like, even if they don't know that they know. In short, music which untutored listeners would find mystifying or dull if they were asked to sit down and listen to it quietly provides no-one with any problems of comprehension when it turns up on the soundtracks of everyday life.

These factors contribute to the problematic nature of the term 'classical music'. Traditionally, the strict use of the term in musicology referred to a particular repertoire belonging to the period between the Baroque and the Romantic, whereas in common usage it meant something much wider and looser, being roughly equivalent to music performed by people wearing evening dress in concerts where they

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do not speak to the audience, an image deriving from the ascendancy of the bourgeoisie in the nineteenth century.[3] Both notions are inexact and liable to fraying at the edges – the boundaries of the repertoire are very ill-defined, whichever way you approach it. Moreover, the term is also commonly used to grant canonic status to artistic works in the hindsight of history. I remember a wonderful episode of *Dr Who* in which the Tardis visits a future time where the Doctor offers to entertain a group of youngsters by showing them any scene from history that they want to see on his monitor. They ask to see The Beatles at Shea Stadium. They watch and listen for a few moments with huge fascination and then one of them says, 'But we didn't know they played *classical* music'.

At all events the repertoire in question is no longer played by silent men in penguin suits (since the players are nowadays of both genders and wear a wide range of dress) and television itself has a lot to do with producing the stylish and informal manner of presentation which is also roundly encouraged by record-sleeve designers and public relations folk. Yet this adaptation to contemporary social mores has not been any great help. The truth is that classical music programming on television has been largely eclipsed. A page of data about television conveniently published in *The Guardian* (19 November 2001) has a graph of the output of BBC TV by genre, in hours, at decade intervals, from 1970 to 2000. Most areas have gone up very considerably, doubtless much of it on account of greatly increased broadcasting hours. The largest growth appears to be 'News and Weather', followed by 'Films and drama', and a third group labelled 'Features, documentaries and current affairs'. Right down at the bottom of the list with the fewest number of hours are two groups, 'Music and arts' and 'Religion', which have experienced almost no growth at all, or even contracted. In another table, 'All broadcaster output by genre', the category of music and arts does not even exist.

On the other hand, since 'classical music' is constantly found on the soundtracks of films, television and advertisements, this does not mean that it is less present in the acousmatic world. Acousmatic is a term which Pierre Schaeffer, pioneer of *musique concrète*, borrowed from ancient Greek to describe sounds heard without seeing their source, in other words, what we hear through loudspeakers and earpieces – which probably now account for ninety percent of the music heard by ninety percent of us – or more. The first effect which all the media of mechanical reproduction have upon musical culture is that of a multiplier. First records and then radio hugely extended the reach of musics of every kind, and in some versions of this history, they enter into the creation of new musical genres. Certainly jazz and blues would not have become what they did, and never so rapidly, if not for records and radio. Their reach went beyond the market of buyers in the simple sense, since the mode of musical audition is traditionally collective and this also applied to the loudspeaker. Not everyone welcomed the phenomenon. Schoenberg once answered a questionnaire about radio with the comment that like the gramophone and the sound film, it only made for a 'boundless surfeit' of music. However, other composers, like Kurt Weill, quickly understood how the new conditions of musical dissemination were rapidly altering prospects. Sceptical theorists – here comes the figure of Adorno – warned of ill-effects like the industrialisation of musical production; or the phenomenon of musical fetishism, the perceptual distortion of musical features isolated by disembodied reproduction from their point of origin. Nevertheless, television was welcomed by the whole musical world as an extension of opportunity, even in the USA where the tradition of European classical music

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was much more socially elitist than it was in Europe. What radio and records had done for Toscanini, television now did for Leonard Bernstein (or in Canada, for Glenn Gould).

Yet what television produced over those first 25 years, from 1945 to 1970, turns out to have been an ever-widening gap between factions, with this thing called classical music pigeon-holed as a matter of educated minority taste. Musicians were sanguine. In *The Politics of Music* I ask a leading member of the BBC Symphony Orchestra if he felt satisfied with the low viewer rating that they got for a broadcast of a prom concert. No, he replies, 'but what are you comparing it with? Compared to the ratings of 'Softly Softly' it might not be very big, but compared to the number who can hear the performance live in the concert hall, it's huge'. However, it turns out that this wider audience has an invisible ceiling, and the classical music share of the record market got stuck at around 10%. Nowadays, discs must compete with other formats, including MP3 and video. Television, it seems, is bowing out of this market.

II

Thirty years ago, the cultural mandarins of television music reluctantly allowed for a constituency of interest in avant-garde music but had fixed ideas about proper presentation. In the cutting room next door to me when I was editing my first BBC music documentary was one of the then doyens of the department, Barrie Gavin, who had filmed performances of string quartets for the Beethoven bicentenary in an innovatory style, focusing the camera on the bodies of the instruments, excluding the players' faces from the frame, and cutting with the musical structure. Believe it or not, one of the department's senior administrators opined that this divergent style constituted a maltreatment of the classics which he judged to be in poor taste, and that while it might be necessary to adopt 'that kind of style' for new music, Beethoven did not need it. Among the misconceptions in this comment is the notion that the conventional style is respectful to the music and there is no need for the director to insert themself between the music and the audience. Or to put it the other way round, 'respect the classics, they should not be messed around with, attempts to interpret are out of order'. Experimentation in the styles and methods of presentation was thereby discouraged, in spite of the fact that creativity has always progressed by means of the reinterpretation and reappraisal of the classics.

There are two misconceptions here. The first is the supposition that the director of the television presentation is categorically not an artist; even if artistry is involved, the creative prerogatives of the artist are out of order. The job is to be a transmitter of other people's creativity. Here the mistake is to continue thinking in outmoded terms, to conceive the artist as an oracle, a being apart, gifted with special expressive powers, etc., when the modern culture industry has produced a different configuration by drawing on an ever-growing pool of aesthetic labour, cultural workers who are called upon to exercise their own aesthetic judgement, although preferably within the genres required by the commissioners. The truth is that a political economy of production which gives the cultural producer a belief in their own creative freedom, at the same time limits that freedom and the scope of its application by granting said producer the status of the freelance. The commission will be denied to those who cannot or will not deliver the kind of programme required by the schedulers; everyone working in or around television documentary over the

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last ten or fifteen years knows this to be true. The term 'freelance' is a cover: what we are really talking about here is a system of subcontracted labour. This means that the programme producers are in the same relationship to the television market as the musicians who are the subjects of their programmes. They are the originators of the value of the commodity, but they are forced to rent their services and cede the largest part of its value to others. (Definition of an agent: someone who resents the fact that someone else gets ninety per cent of their earnings.)

The consequences of this system include an increasing concentration on star performers, and the musical repertoire that goes with them. Here it turns out that television, despite its immense cultural power, is thoroughly parasitic. Every documentarist has stories about the ones that got away. One of mine concerns a project for a social history of the piano.[4] Needing a young virtuoso, we discovered that our chosen victim was under exclusive contract to his record company, but if he agreed, they would allow us to film him for a nominal fee of £100 – a form of inducement which they reckoned would be amply repaid in record sales. Of course the music he played was exclusively by long-dead composers. No sharing the royalties.

The second misconception is the idea of neutrality of style: there is no such thing. Whatever form of interpretation or presentation is adopted implies some attitude towards the material in question. Adorno has some pertinent comments about this in his essay 'Bach defended against his devotees'. The favourite argument of the purists, he says, is that everything should be left to the score, which only needs to be allowed to speak for itself. This argument completely misses the point. As long as music requires any kind of interpretation whatsoever, it is defined through the tension between its form and its sensuous appearance. Devotion to the score ought to mean constant effort to grasp what it hides (as Mahler once said, the music is not in the notes). Without this dialectic, says Adorno, devotion becomes betrayal, and interpretation which assumes the meaning will reveal itself of its own accord will be false interpretation, since it fails to see that the meaning is always constituting itself anew.[5]

After finishing my second BBC music film, I discovered that this was not a restriction under which television music producers in the rest of Europe laboured so much. I went to Salzburg, not for the famous music festival, but for an international conference of television music people (guest of honour, Marshall McLuhan) which was running concurrently. To the upholders of such devotional attitudes some of the most interesting programmes to be screened at the conference would have been anathema. For example, *Hallelujah*, by Mauricio Kagel, in which composer and film-maker are the same person. Kagel is a true latter-day surrealist, and the visual conception of the work is an extension of his specific way of musical thinking. *Hallelujah* could not be called 'opera' in the narrow sense, and the film is hardly transposable to the stage. In a more conventional vein I remember a duo-piano recital made by Saar Television, which used sustained black-and-white silhouette effects augmented by electronic feedback mechanisms to enhance the image. Fairly crude by today's standards, the effect was a constant pattern of movement within the picture which counterpointed the movement of the music itself, sometimes moving with the music, sometimes away from it, sometimes against it, sometimes towards it. It made the usual way of presenting piano recitals look very staid and static. On the other hand, some of the worst programmes suffered from uncontrolled use of similar effects like colour feedback, phase shift, and so on, apparently executed under the impression that it is sufficient to produce garish colours and

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haphazard patterns to reflect the psychedelic age. This was true of the piece which won the opera prize, a production from Denmark Radio which was supposed to portray some kind of drug-induced trip.

In fact, however, it must be said that opera, both traditional and experimental, has been pretty well served by television over a number of years. Who would have believed it? Television contributed considerably to popularising what was conventionally regarded as the most sumptuary, elitist, ridiculous and illogical of all high art forms. Visually speaking, opera is an unlikely candidate for television, since one would suppose that operatic singing would only look all the more ridiculous – and ugly – in the close-ups which the TV screen demands. Here, however, the small screen showed an advantage over the big screen, since television close-ups overcome the distance of the spectator from the stage without over-magnifying. Some of the best examples were broadcasts of productions at the old Glyndebourne, a small theatre which allowed the cameras close enough to render the intimacy of Mozart, for example, without appearing at all forced. I remember lots of two-shots and three-shots which caught the mesh of the social relations which these operas map so accurately. The effect by which the television screen brought opera into a closer and more familiar relation to a wider audience was reinforced by the adoption of subtitles, which would become such an essential adjunct to the experience of opera that they have now gone into the opera houses as well. People say subtitles make opera more democratic. Now you do not have to do all that homework beforehand in order to be able to follow the plot.

For a period there was also an experimental trend which elicited original works in both modern dance and television opera, a small but thriving area of creative dialogue and synthesis between choreographers and composers and television producers. I think of the *Not Mozart* series. Although this work has gone almost unnoticed except for aficionados and cognoscenti, it has probably been the most imaginative television over the last ten or fifteen years. But it easily gets pushed to the margins, and usually needs some special event to elicit the funds it requires. Unfortunately, a Mozart bicentenary does not happen every year. Or perhaps fortunately, given all the rest of the hullabaloo.

III

Technically speaking, the presentation of music on television is possibly affected more by the sound than the image, although the image is certainly problematic. The well-known predilection of the television screen for close-ups is more kindly to instrumentalists in small groups or individually, but not to full orchestras or singers. However, thirty years ago, arguments were adduced which have now been largely forgotten, that classical music was hampered by the poor quality of reproduction provided by manufacturers in domestic sets. It was said that they would introduce hi-fi reproduction on television sets if and when sales begin to fall off, in order to stimulate renewed consumption, and this would help to promote the classical repertoire on television. If this is not what happened, it is not because television sound did not improve – nowadays we have plenty of models with good enough sound reproduction. The trouble is that a mismatch remains. The art of sound reproduction proposes to bring a full orchestra into our living room. You are supposed to be able to close your eyes and imagine sitting in the stalls. Put this on television and you are constantly reminded of the fragility of the illusion. (Opera

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and especially dance are better placed to survive this anomaly because of their qualities of spectacle, because their aesthetic is not a naturalistic one.)

Behind this technical hitch there is an aesthetic antinomy, an antipathy between television and 'classical music', because they present radically different kinds of representational space. For there is, after all, another quality in music which we have not yet mentioned – its interiority. A space within which it offers a special kind of solace – which is not at all exclusive to classical music of the Western variety since it also belongs, for example, to the classical Indian tradition, and even certain anti-classical traditions, like flamenco and various strands of jazz. Television seems to me inimical to this inner sense, which is defeated by the ephemerality of the televisual flow. What television does best with music is allow us an observer's insight into the everyday world of the musician – a documentary revealing how an opera house is run, for example, but also masterclasses, and films of rehearsals. These were all once part of the regular diet, along with the biographical documentary. The space for this type of programming has all but disappeared, along with the squeeze on individual documentary in general. What we now see is a television inimical to these more thoughtful kinds of programming, because it has fallen for what Brian Winston once called the law of the ice-cream sellers – when the ice-cream sellers first arrive on a beach, they start at opposite ends selling different brands, but they always end up side by side selling the same thing. And it is not classical music.

If this is not just a good joke, it can serve to remind us that television's problem with classical music is also an expression of wider troubles. These include a serious matter of public health. What has happened to music on television, of every kind, cannot be separated from the question of what has happened to our hearing, the noise pollution of everyday life in actually existing capitalism, the transformation of the everyday environment into a battle-zone of noise that is capable of making people ill and even driving them insane. Television contributes to this aural pollution by reducing every kind of music to the same level of a passing moment in the televisual flow. I am pondering how to explain what I mean when it is time to break off and go to a small conference on music in Russian cinema. One of the papers, illustrated by a fine selection of clips, is by Evgeny Dobrenko, a Russian scholar at Nottingham, who looks at the evolution of 'popular music' in the musical comedies of the Stalin period, and here I discover a mirror image of what I am trying to get at. Dobrenko offers a reading of the uses of popular music in socialist realism in which it represents what authority wishes that the masses would be like (happy and cheerful, etc.). Because the Soviet Union comprised a huge diversity of cultures and ethnicities which were officially supposed to coexist, this involved a levelling of the diversity of musical cultures which included the incorporation of the classical tradition, which was also applied to the irresistible incursion from outside of jazz. The result was a neutralisation of difference, which it must also be said, Dobrenko added, responded in certain measure to a need from below.

And I think: but this is not something which has only happened under Stalinism. It also happens under different systems of authority – and I am not thinking of fascism, where cultural diversity is unwelcome, but of the hegemony of the cultural marketplace in the West. Here too we have reached a condition where music represents a world which on the one hand is deeply divided against itself, and on the other, idealises social and cultural diversity by dissolving both tradition and differ-

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ence into a continuous flow in which the old hierarchies break down, and all values, so it seems, become relative.

As for television's problem with this thing called classical music, everything points to a pessimistic conclusion, except for one thing: fortunately the fate of music is never determined by authority of any kind. The only thing the situation proves is that there is still life outside television.

Endnotes

1. This is because the ears, unlike the eyes, are already working well before birth. When the mother speaks, the growing foetus hears, and learns to recognise her voice; and musical mothers report activity in the womb in response to musical stimuli. (I am thinking of a friend with three musical daughters, who regularly sang in a choir during all three pregnancies.) This is surely why so many musicians and composers come from musical families – because of early and long apprenticeship.
2. This afternoon, Classic FM played a taster from the score of a film which at the time was not yet released, *The Lord of the Rings*. This evening, Radio 3 has Ladysmith Black Mambazo playing the opening gig of the London Jazz Festival at the Queen Elizabeth Hall – another example of boundaries becoming blurred, since the same group on another station might be billed as World Music, or even the same station at a different hour.
3. See chapters five and six of my book *Musica Practica, The Social Practice of Western Music from Gregorian Chant to Postmodernism* (London, 1994).
4. I ended up writing it instead: see *Musica Practica*, chapter eight.
5. 'Bach defended against his devotees', in T.W. Adorno, *Prisms* (London, 1967).

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