

The Poetics of Music in the Form of Six Lessons

2. THE PHENOMENON OF MUSIC

More complex and really fundamental is the specific problem of musical time, of the *chronos* of music. This problem has recently been made the object of a particularly interesting study by Mr. Pierre Souvtchinsky, a Russian philosopher-friend of mine. His thinking is so closely akin to mine that I can do no better than to summarize his thesis here.

Musical creation appears to him an innate complex of intuitions and possibilities based primarily upon an exclusively musical experiencing of time—*chronos*, of which the musical work merely gives us the functional realization.

Everyone knows that time passes at a rate which varies according to the inner dispositions of the subject and to the events that come to affect his consciousness. Expectation, boredom, anguish, pleasure and pain, contemplation—all of these thus come to appear as different categories in the midst of which our life unfolds, and each of these determines a special psychological process, a particular tempo. These variations in psychological time are perceptible only as they are related to the primary sensation—whether conscious or unconscious—of real time, ontological time.

What gives the concept of musical time its special stamp is that this concept is born and develops just as well outside of the categories of psychological time as it does simultaneously with them. All music, whether it submits to the normal flow of time or whether it disassociates itself therefrom, establishes a particular relationship, a sort of counterpoint between the passing of time, the music's own duration, and the material and technical means through which the music is made manifest.

Mr. Souvtchinsky thus presents us with two kinds of music: one which evolves parallel to the process of ontological time, embracing and penetrating it; inducing in the mind of the listener a feeling of euphoria and, so to speak, of "dynamic calm." The other kind runs ahead of, or counter to, this process. It is not self-contained in each momentary tonal unit. It dislocates the centers of attraction and gravity and sets itself up in the unstable; and this fact makes it particularly adaptable to the translation of the composer's emotive impulses. All music in which the will to expression is dominant belongs to the second type.

This problem of time in the art of music is of capital importance. I have thought it wise to dwell on the problem because the considerations that it involves may help us to understand the different creative types which will concern us in our fourth lesson.

Music that is based on ontological time is generally dominated by the principle of similarity. The music that adheres to psychological time likes to proceed by contrast. To these two principles which dominate the creative process correspond the fundamental concepts of variety and unity.

All the arts have recourse to this principle. The methods of polychromatics and monochromatics in the plastic arts correspond respectively to variety and unity. For myself, I have always considered that in general it is more satisfactory to proceed by similarity than by contrast. Music thus gains strength in the measure that it does not succumb to the seductions of variety. What it loses in questionable riches it gains in true solidity.

Contrast produces an immediate effect. Similarity satisfies us only in the long run. Contrast is an element of variety, but it divides our attention. Similarity is born of a striving for unity. The need to seek variety is perfectly legitimate, but we should not forget that the One precedes the Many. Moreover, the coexistence of the two is constantly necessary, and all the problems of art, like all possible problems for that matter, including the problem of knowledge and of Being, revolve ineluctably about this question, with Parmenides on one side denying the possibility of the Many, and Heraclitus on the other denying the existence of the One. Mere common sense, as well as supreme wisdom, invites us to affirm both the one and the other. All the same, the best attitude for a composer in this case will be the attitude of a man who is conscious of the hierarchy of values and who must make a choice. Variety is valid only as a means of attaining similarity. Variety surrounds me on every hand. So I need not fear that I shall be lacking in it, for I am constantly confronted by it. Contrast is everywhere. One has only to take note of it. Similarity is hidden; it must be sought out, and it is found only after the most exhaustive efforts. When variety tempts me, I am uneasy about the facile solutions it offers me. Similarity, on the other hand, poses more difficult problems, but also offers results that are more solid and hence more valuable to me.

Needless to say, we have not exhausted this eternal subject here, and we shall want to return to it.

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