

ROGER SESSIONS

THE
MUSICAL
EXPERIENCE
OF
COMPOSER,
PERFORMER,
LISTENER

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I

The Musical Impulse

How shall we explain the power that men and women of all times have recognized in music, or account for the enormous importance they have ascribed to it? Why did primitive peoples endow it with supernatural force and create legends, persisting into times and places far from primitive, in which musicians of surpassing ability were able to tame wild beasts, to move stones, and to soften the hard hearts of gods, demons, and even human tyrants? Why have serious and gifted men—in imaginative force and intellectual mastery the equals of any that ever lived—why have such men at all periods devoted their lives to music and found in it a surpemely satisfying medium of expression?

Music, of all the arts, seems to be the most remote from the ordinary concerns and preoccupations of people; of all things created by man, its utility, as that word is generally understood, is least easy to demonstrate. Yet it is considered among the really important manifestations of our western culture, and possibly the one manifestation in which our western contribution has been unique. Those who have created its lasting values are honored as among the truly great. We defend our convictions concerning it with the utmost intensity; and at least in some parts of the world we bitterly excoriate those whose convictions differ, or seem to differ, from our own. We regard music as important, as vitally connected with our-

selves and our fate as human beings. But what is the nature of our vital connection with it? What has impelled men to create music? What, in other words, are the sources of the musical impulse? I would like to explore here some approaches to an answer to this question.

Our way will be easier, I think, if we ask ourselves first: is music a matter of tones sung or played, or should we consider it rather from the standpoint of the listener? A close examination of this question leads to some rather surprising conclusions. We find that listening to music, as we understand it, is a relatively late, a relatively sophisticated, and even a rather artificial means of access to it, and that even until fairly recent times composers presumably did not think of their music primarily as being listened to, but rather as being played and sung, or at most as being heard incidentally as a part of an occasion, of which the center of attention for those who heard it lay elsewhere than in the qualities of the music as such.

In fact, composer, performer, and listener can, without undue exaggeration, be regarded not only as three types or degrees of relationship to music, but also as three successive stages of specialization. In the beginning, no doubt, the three were one. Music was vocal or instrumental improvisation; and while there were those who did not perform, and who therefore heard music, they were not listeners in our modern sense of the word. They heard the sounds as part of a ritual, a drama, or an epic narrative, and accepted it in its purely incidental or symbolic function, subordinate to the occasion of which it was a part. Music, in and for itself can hardly be said to have existed, and whatever individual character it may have had was essentially irrelevant.

Later, however, as certain patterns became fixed or traditional, the functions of composer and performer

began to be differentiated. The composer existed precisely because he had introduced into the raw material of sound and rhythm patterns that became recognizable and therefore capable of repetition—which is only another way of saying that composers began to exist when music began to take shape. The composer began to emerge as a differentiated type exactly at the moment that a bit of musical material took on a form that its producer felt impelled to repeat.

The same event produced the performer in his separate function; the first performer was, in the strictest sense, the first musician who played or sang something that had been played or sung before. His type became more pronounced in the individual who first played or sang music composed by someone other than himself. At both of these points the performer's problems began to emerge, and whether or not he was aware of the fact, his problems and his characteristic solutions and points of view began to appear at the same time. These will be discussed in detail later on. Here it is important only to envisage clearly that the differentiation of composer and performer represents already a second stage in the development of musical sophistication. The high degree of differentiation reached in the course of the development of music should not obscure the fact that in the last analysis composer and performer are not only collaborators in a common enterprise but participants in an essentially single experience.

I am not, of course, talking in terms of musical history. The developments I have cited are not in any precise sense historical, and I have not presented them as hypothetically so. It would certainly be in accordance with historical fact, however, to think of them as a long, somewhat involved, gradual development, of which I have given a condensed and symbolical account. And this very qualification underlines better

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the point I am making: namely, that the performer, as distinct from the composer, is the product of already advanced musical refinement. While the relationship of the composer to music is a simple, direct, and primary one, that of the performer is already complex and even problematical. To be sure, the composer as an individual may be the most complex of creatures and the performer the simplest—I have personally known examples of both such types! But while the act of composition, of production, is a primary act, that of performance—that is, re-production—is already removed by one step. The music passes through the medium of a second personality, and necessarily undergoes something of what we call interpretation. I am not raising here the much discussed question of what interpretation is, or what it may or should be; whether it should be “personal” or objective,” whether it can be or should be historically accurate, and so forth. I am simply pointing to it as an inevitable aspect of the performer’s activity, of which the other aspect is, of course, projection. The performer, in other words, not only interprets or re-conceives the work, but, so to speak, processes it in terms of a specific occasion: he projects it as part of a recitation or a concert, as the embodiment of a dramatic moment or situation, a part of a ritual, or finally and perhaps most simply as a piece performed solely for his own delectation. Whether or not he is aware of the fact, the nature of his performance is conditioned by the circumstances under which it takes place.

It hardly need be pointed out that the relation to music of the listener is even more complex than that of the performer. As I have pointed out, the listener, as we think of him today, came fairly recently on the musical scene. Listening to music, as distinct from reproducing it, is the product of a very late stage in mu-

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sical sophistication, and it might with reason be maintained that the listener has existed as such only for about three hundred and fifty years. The composers of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance composed their music for church services and for secular occasions, where it was accepted as part of the general background, in much the same manner as were the frescoes decorating the church walls or the sculptures adorning the public buildings. Or else they composed it for amateurs, who had received musical training as a part of general education, and whose relationship with it was that of the performer responding to it through active participation in its production. Even well into the nineteenth century the musical public consisted largely of people whose primary contact with music was through playing or singing in the privacy of their own homes. For them concerts were in a certain sense occasional rituals which they attended as adepts, and they were the better equipped as listeners because of their experience in participating, however humbly and however inadequately, in the actual process of musical production. By the “listener,” I do not mean the person who simply hears music—who is present when it is performed and who, in a general way, may either enjoy or dislike it, but who is in no sense a real participant in it. To listen implies rather a real participation, a real response, a real sharing in the work of the composer and of the performer, and a greater or less degree of awareness of the individual and specific sense of the music performed. For the listener, in this sense, music is no longer an incident or an adjunct but an independent and self-sufficient medium of expression. His ideal aim is to apprehend to the fullest and most complete possible extent the musical utterance of the composer as the performer delivers it to him.

And how, through what means, does he do this? Let

us think for a moment of a similar instance of artistic experience, which is however not quite so complex in structure. The reader of a poem does not generally receive the poem through the medium of an interpreter, nor does he, generally, actually "perform," i.e. read aloud, the poem himself. Yet the rhymes and the meters, as well as the sense of the words, are as vivid to him as they would be if the poem were actually read to or by him. What he does in fact is to "perform" it in imagination, imaginatively to re-create and re-experience it. The "listener" to music does fundamentally the same thing. In "following" a performance, he recreates it and makes it his own. He really listens precisely to the degree that he does this, and really hears to precisely the extent that he does it successfully.

I have discussed this question in some detail here not in order either to belittle the listener or to minimize the validity or the intensity of his relationship to music. What I do wish to point out is that if we are to get at the sources of the musical impulse, we must start with the impulse to make music; it is not a question of why music appeals to us, but why men and women in every generation have been impelled to create it. I have tried to show as clearly as possible that composer, performer, and listener each fulfill one of three separate functions in a total creative process, which was originally undifferentiated and which still is essentially indivisible. It is true that there are listeners—as, alas, there are composers and performers!—of every degree of talent and achievement. But the essential is that music is an activity: it is something done, an experience lived through, with varying intensity, by composer, performer, and listener alike.

An understanding of these matters will help us to seek and perhaps to understand the basic facts regarding the musical impulse. We will know better, for in-

stance, than to seek them in the science of acoustics or even primarily with reference to sounds heard.

Let me make this a little clearer. A great deal of musical theory has been formulated by attempting to codify laws governing musical sound and musical rhythm, and from these to deduce musical principles. Sometimes these principles are even deduced from what we know of the physical nature of sound, and as a result are given what seems to me an essentially specious validity. I say "essentially specious" because while the physical facts are clear enough, there are always gaps, incomplete or unconvincing transitions, left between the realm of physics and the realm of musical experience, even if we leave "art" out of account. Many ingenious and even brilliant attempts, it is true, have been made to bridge these gaps. One of the difficulties of trying to do so, however, is apparent, in the way in which the physical fact of the overtone series has been used by various harmonic theorists to support very different and even diametrically contradictory ideas. Because the first six partial tones obviously correspond exactly with the tones composing the major triad, theorists are fond of calling the latter the "chord of nature." On that premise, Heinrich Schenker, for example, a brilliant and at times profound writer, has reconstructed the theory of tonality as basically an elaboration of that chord or its "artificial" counterpart, the minor triad. He bases what he considers the immutable laws of music on these deductions, even though in doing so he virtually excludes the music written before Bach, after Brahms, and outside of a rather narrowly Germanic orbit. Furthermore, what is perhaps even more problematical, he is forced to disregard the evolutionary factors within even those limits, and to regard the musical language of Bach and Mozart and Beethoven and Brahms in exactly the same light; and he remonstrates with even

those composers whenever he catches them punching holes in the system he has thus established. Or again, Paul Hindemith, also a brilliant and certainly a more creative writer, has carefully examined the overtone series and made very interesting deductions regarding it, but he gives it an even more outspoken status than has Schenker, as a kind of musical court of last appeal, with the triad as final arbiter, on the basis not of musical experience, but of physical science. Other writers, however, noting that the overtone series extends well beyond the first six partials, have found in this fact justification for harmonic daring of a much more far-reaching type, and have in some cases sought to discover new harmonic principles based on the systematic use of these upper partials.

Such speculations have been in many cases the product of brilliant minds, of indisputable musical authority, and I do not wish in any way to minimize this fact. Yet it would be easy to point out that each author, in a manner quite consistent with his musical stature, found in the overtone series a tool he could adapt to his individual and peculiar purpose. Above all it seems to me clear that physics and music are different spheres, and that, though they certainly touch at moments, the connection between them is an occasional and circumstantial, not an essential, one. For the musician at any level of sophistication, it is his experience, his relationship with sound, not the physical properties of sound as such, which constitute his materials. Experience, and only experience, has always been his point of departure, and while it has often led him to results which find apparent confirmation in the non-human world, this is by no means always the case. Even when it is the case, it can be regarded as no more than an interesting coincidence until a clear connection with musical experience can be demonstrated.

What I wish to stress is the fact that since music is created by human beings, we must regard the sources, or raw materials, first of all as human facts. For it is not rhythm and sound as such but their nature as human facts which concerns us. And if we look at them closely we perceive that they are actually human facts of the most intimate kind. We see that these basic facts—the raw materials, the primitive sources, of music—are facts of musical experience and not the physical facts of sound and rhythm.

Let us look at rhythm first, since it is perhaps the primary fact. It is quite customary to refer our feeling for rhythm to the many rhythmical impressions constantly received from experience—the non-human as well as the human, the subconscious as well as those of which we are aware, and the sophisticated and complex as well as the naïve and simple. Reference is made not only to the act of breathing and walking, but to the alternation of day and night, the precession of the equinoxes, and the movement of the tides; to the beating of the heart, to the dance, and to many another instance of rhythmic recurrence in nature and man, even the mechanical rhythms which everywhere impose themselves on our consciousness. Such illustrations certainly have their place and their relevance; anything so fundamental as our rhythmic sense certainly is nourished and no doubt refined by impressions of every kind, and I believe we may truly say that it remains impervious actually to none. It seems to me also, however, that such generalizations miss a fundamental point. For our rhythmic sense is based ultimately on something far more potent than mere observation.

It seems to me clear indeed that the basic rhythmic fact is not the fact simply of alternation, but of a specific type of alternation with which we are familiar from the first movement of our existence as separate

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beings. We celebrate that event by drawing a breath, which is required of us if existence is to be realized. The drawing of the breath is an act of cumulation, of tension which is then released by the alternative act of exhalation.

Is it, then, in any way far-fetched to say that our first effective experience of rhythm, and the one that remains most deeply and constantly with us, is characterized not only by alternation as such, but by the alternation of cumulative tension with its release in a complementary movement? This is, actually, the primary fact of musical rhythm too. We recognize it in the technical terms "up-beat" and "down-beat," *arsis* and *thesis*; and we apply it, consciously as well as instinctively, to our conception of larger musical structure, as well as to the more familiar matters of detail to which these terms are generally applied.

What, for instance, is a so-called "musical phrase" if not the portion of music that must be performed, so to speak, without letting go, or, figuratively, in a single breath? The phrase is a constant movement toward a goal—the cadence; and the rhythmic nature of the latter is admirably characterized in the term itself, derived from the Italian verb *cadere*, to fall: that is, the "falling" or down-beat, the movement of release.

I am tempted to call this the most important musical fact, and am sure I have done so on occasion. More than any other fact, it seems to me, it bears on the nature of what I shall call "musical movement"; on it depends the appropriateness to their context of harmonies, of melodic intervals, and details of rhythmic elaboration. From it are derived the principles on which satisfactory musical articulation is based; and many an otherwise excellent performance is ruined through inadequate attention to what it implies. How often, unfortunately, in the performance

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of music, do we hear so much emphasis put on the first part of the phrase that its conclusion is left dangling in the air! The phrase does not, if I may put it that way, sit: the effect is one of breathlessness because the tension is not quite released, or to put it a little differently, the goal of the phrase is not clearly felt. It is not a question of what is generally called accent, but rather of solidity and firmness.

For instance, I have sometimes been distressed to hear the following passages from Beethoven's Quartets played thus:



and



instead of thus:



and



Or, still more distressingly, I have heard the opening of the Scherzo of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony played thus:



(a)

instead of, correctly, thus:



(b)

In the first case (a) the "poco rit." for which Beethoven asks in the last two measures makes no sense whatever, and the effect is one of complete indecisiveness—the sense of the *ritenuto* cannot be communicated because it comes *after* the accent, and it therefore, as it were, trails off into space. In case (b) the *ritenuto* falls into place: it prolongs the tension before the final accent, and since it falls perfectly into place, its execution presents no problems whatever.

I am not implying that our rhythmic sense is derived from the act of breathing alone, or even from the alternation between tension and release which contributes such a tremendous part of our physiological and therefore of our psychological existence. Actually our sense of rhythm is a fundamental organic fact, the product of many forces within us working together toward a common end. Nor have I forgotten that the term "rhythm" is often used in an inclusive sense, embracing not only the facts I have described, but what we define more strictly as tempo and meter as well.

Once more I should like to emphasize that it is through our perception of these elements, our awareness of them, that they have meaning for us, and that we gain this perception through the experiences of our psycho-physical organism. Here it is not a question of the alternation of tension and relaxation but of our experience of time itself. We gain our experience, our sensation of time, through movement, and it is movement, primarily, which gives it content for us. It is unnecessary to seek scientific proof of this. We need only a clear analysis of ordinary experience, and it is the latter, in any case, which is relevant to the nature of music. We judge tempo first of all by the relation of basic metrical pulsations to the speed with which we accomplish the ordinary actions of our existence, such as walking and speaking; but, in a more extended sense, we judge it by the amount of effort required to reproduce or respond to it. Heavy accents call forth more energy because we subconsciously assume more energy in producing them; they suggest, and therefore actually call forth in our imagination, greater effort, of which the physiology can be demonstrated many times and in many contexts. Similarly, music rich in detail or elaboration, whether melodic, rhythmic, harmonic, or polyphonic, requires greater effort on the part of the hearer than when the changes are less constant or the detail less elaborate. Consequently music of the former type performed at a fast tempo will seem energetic and strained, while music of simple texture may move along, however rapidly, with the utmost ease and grace.

Nietzsche, always a profound writer on music though not himself a musician, laments in his *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* ("Beyond Good and Evil") the passing of what he calls the "good old time" of Mozart and Haydn, when, to paraphrase his words, a true Presto movement was possible in music.

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He cites Mendelssohn as the last composer who could write a real Presto. To be sure, he did not know Verdi's "Falstaff"; and needless to say, he was speaking of the music of genuine composers and not of imitators of past styles. Everything, he said, had become ponderous, heavy in spirit, and weighted down with preoccupation; a vital ease had disappeared from the life and hence the culture of Europe. Leaving aside his psychological judgment, which does not concern us at this point, and translating his statements into analytic terms, is he not drawing true conclusions from the indisputable fact that the music of the nineteenth century was, actually, far richer in texture and in coloring than that which had preceded it, and that this fact in itself precluded the type of movement which Haydn embodied so often in his Finales, or Mozart in such a work as the Overture to "The Marriage of Figaro," in which detail is reduced to a minimum of elaboration, and contrasts are of the subtlest kind?

These few observations lay no claim to exhaustiveness. The subject of rhythm is a vast one, and indeed an adequate definition of rhythm comes close to defining music itself. It is a subject, too, that lends itself all too easily to oversimplification, a clear case of this being the abstraction of the rhythmic element in music from that of musical sound.

Now, if we consider musical sound from the standpoint of the impulse to produce it, we find that in a very real sense and to a very real degree this impulse, too, is rooted in our earliest, most constantly present and most intimate experiences. From almost the first moments of our existence the impulse to produce vocal sound is a familiar one, almost as familiar as the impulse to breathe, though not so indispensable. The sound, to be sure, is at first presumably a by-product. But is it not clear that much of our melodic feeling

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derives from this source; that is, from a vocal impulse which first of all is connected with the vital act of breathing and is subject to its nuances? In the second place melodic feeling undergoes vast refinement during the growth of even the most unmusical individuals. From the vocal impulse we acquire, for instance, our sensitive response to differences in pitch. I mean here powers not of discrimination, but of response, the kind of response that is instinctive and that precedes discrimination and possibly even precedes consciousness. In simple terms, when we raise our voices we increase the intensity of our vocal effort, a rise in pitch implies an increase in tension, and therefore an intensity of energy, or, in other terms, of expressiveness in one direction. When we lower our voices we make a different kind of effort, and gain an intensity of a different and more complex kind. Similarly, an increase in volume denotes, not only in terms of the physical effort of production, but in the sympathetic effort of response, also an increase in tension and hence of intensity. I have spoken of intensity of expression, which of course is synonymous or commensurable with the degree of contrast involved. If we like, we may speculate on the combinations possible between two directions of movement of pitch, and two directions of movement in volume. We may try to formulate, for instance, the effect of high or rising notes sung or played very softly, or of a descending passage sung or played crescendo. What I believe will be indisputable is the fact that with only slight qualifications we carry over these primitive responses from music produced vocally to our more complex response to that heard instrumentally, independently of the particular character of the instrument involved. Though subject to definition, qualification, and refinement, it is a very basic musical response of which I am speaking, and possibly more

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than any single factor it governs our response to melody in its largest features. I shall discuss actual discrimination, the refined sense of pitch, later; here I am referring to the purely instinctive bases of musical expression, as nearly as I can define them, quite apart from the coordinative function of the musical ear. It is true that the line of demarcation is an arbitrary one. But the discrimination of delicate shades of difference in pitch, such as all civilized musical systems demand, only refines these basic responses. It makes possible, through the fact of notes of fixed and definite pitch, greater precision in rhythmic and melodic contour.

Nevertheless, a melodic motif or phrase is in essence and origin a vocal gesture; it is a vocal movement with a clearly defined and therefore clearly expressed profile. And, one final point, it too is sensitive to infinitely delicate nuances of tension and relaxation, as these are embodied in the breathing which animates the vocal gesture and shapes its contours. Thus, agitated breathing will be reflected in agitated melodic and rhythmic movement; or conversely, sharp, irregular accents, or successive violent contrasts in pitch will call forth subconscious associations suggesting the kind of agitation which produces violent or irregular breathing, just as quieter melodic movement will evoke a more serene response.

I am oversimplifying, of course. These are not the only elements in musical expression, but I am deliberately restricting the discussion here to primitive, direct, and simple responses to music. Even at this level, may we not say that the basic ingredient of music is not so much sound as movement, conceived in the terms I have indicated? I would even go a step farther, and say that music is significant for us as human beings principally because it embodies movement of a specifically human type that goes to the roots of

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our being and takes shape in the inner gestures which embody our deepest and most intimate responses. This is of itself not yet art; it is not yet even language. But it is the material of which musical art is made, and to which musical art gives significance.

If we appreciate these facts, we can understand the more readily why music is the art of sound. For of all the five senses, the sense of hearing is the only one inexorably associated with our sense of time. The gestures which music embodies are, after all, invisible movement in the abstract, movement which exists in time but not in space, movement, in fact, which gives time its meaning and its significance for us. If this is true, then sound is its predestined vehicle. For what we apprehend through the eye is for us static, monumental. Even movement seen is bounded by our range of vision; we never can closely follow it off into space unless we ourselves move. Sound, at least in our experience, is never static, but invariably impermanent; it either ceases or changes. By its very nature it embodies for us movement in time, and as such imposes no inherent limits.

To sum up: the experience of music is essentially indivisible, whether it is embodied in the impulse to produce, or in the response, through re-production, actual as by the performer or imaginary as by the listener, of the musical experience embodied in music already produced. Secondly, what we may call the raw, formal materials of music are also the expressive elements, and these, again, have their basis in certain of the most elementary, intimate, and vital experience through which we live as human beings. Let us consider now the means through which these raw materials are coordinated, become coherent, and are rendered significant; through which, in other words, they begin to be music.