I Care If You Listen

In music, as in any art form, we face a conflict between accessibility and artistic integrity. But today music is in an unprecedented state. Audiences would rather listen to something composed 100 to 250 years ago than almost anything written since. (I am only speaking of classical music, or serious music, or art music, or whatever name you prefer for the sort of music that people are expected to sit and listen to attentively.) In recognition of this, concert programs consist of mostly 18th- and 19th-century music.

Is this unprecedented? Well, consider that Enlightenment audiences did not have to be enticed to listen to something new from Mozart or Haydn by sandwiching it between slices of Dowland and Monteverdi. They loved the music of their day. Mozart was a popular favorite, Beethoven a romantic hero. They were idolized, not tolerated, much less despised.

When composers today write about the widespread hostility toward their work, they blame it on the audience. They grumble about short attention spans, the easy availability of recordings, a general laxity in education, or "blue-haired ladies" who just want music to be entertaining instead of challenging. It cannot be because the composers write as if they do not give a damn about the audience (they do not give a damn, by the way, as they will tell you without a second thought).

I do not know why, but starting around 1900 art turned inward. Music, poetry, visual arts, all apparently became willing to disregard their public, at times seemingly determined to alienate it. How many people who are not artists, art students, or art teachers would say they like or understand "modern art"? Just the existence of such a term answers that question. Substitute "poetry" or "music" for "art", and the result is the same.

I have spent much time pondering what art is. The best I can come up with is this: A*rt is the endeavor to describe an emotional or esthetic insight in terms that enable another person to share it*. There are two crucial parts to this definition.

First, art deals with the emotions. Not exclusively with the emotions; any non-trivial artistic effort has an analytical component. But if the insight is purely intellectual, then it is a subject for science or mathematics. (A scientific or mathematical discovery can certainly be an emotional experience, but the tools one uses to explore such an idea are logical, not emotional.) In this view, art based entirely on an intellectual notion, such as a mathematical algorithm, is unlikely to have any artistic value. This is my objection to much of the music of the last 100 years. It starts with a completely abstract concept and attempts

in effect to prove with Euclidean rigor that it is good music through analysis of pitch classes, tone rows, aleatorics, chaos theory, and so on, as if the emotional impact of the resulting sounds were irrelevant and one should ignore the evidence of one's ears. This is as futile as trying to prove logically that a joke is funny, when the fact is that either it makes people laugh or it does not.

Second, an artist's objective is to share his vision with others. If he is working only for his own satisfaction, or catharsis, or indulgence, then it is not art, however much it may meet his own emotional need. So, as you compose, you may tell yourself, "I cannot be bothered with making this less obscure. I only care about my art. I have to write what is meaningful to me. If I consider my listener, I will be selling out." The paradox is that, far from preserving the purity of your art, you have compromised it. If only you and a few colleagues understand it, you have failed as an artist. Art is indeed a sacred pursuit, but that does not mean you should create it only for your fellow priests.

The late composer Milton Babbitt did not agree. He explicitly likened composition to physics, and thought it perfectly natural that just as physicists communicate in a language that only other physics professors can understand, modern composers should not hesitate to express themselves in music that is intelligible only to other composers with an equally thorough grounding in current musical theory. The lay audience is irrelevant.

This perverse outlook is evidently a product of the academic community, which has assimilated almost all study of composition. How many of today's prominent composers are or have been university professors? And how does this relationship influence the way they perceive their most important audience? Is it not inevitable that the approval of their academic colleagues matters at least as much as that of the musically unsophisticated public? Is it a coincidence that music composed before this relationship evolved was and still is more popular? What would literature be like today if the only respected contemporary authors were English professors who wrote exclusively what no one but another English professor could appreciate?

If composers want to write what only other composers can make sense of or would want to try to, they are free to do so. But I think it is a wrongheaded approach to music. If art does not communicate, it is nothing. Its meaning can be clear and direct, or it can immerse you in vague but stimulating images. But if it is just opaque—worst of all, if it is willfully opaque—it is failed art, or not art at all.

I have deep misgivings about another trait I have noticed in too many of today's new composers. They are not interested in filtering or editing their work. I do not mean in the trivial sense that they never review or revise what they write. No, what is missing is a willingness to recognize that what may have seemed at first like a good idea for a composition is not after all. In music and

in all the arts there is a widespread notion that all impulses that enter the creative mind are equally valid, equally important, equally worth preserving.

But Sturgeon's Law suggests otherwise. Sturgeon's Law states that 94% of everything is shit (there are variations that use milder terminology or a different percentage, but the point is the same). This may sound like a glib dismissal of everything good in the world, or a dejected admission that we are surrounded by the worthless. But for me it is simply a reminder that no one can casually produce anything worthwhile. To the composer, Sturgeon's Law means that it just is not easy to write music worth listening to. Most of the ideas that enter your head should be immediately escorted out again. True composition is a matter of more than instant inspiration; it requires the composer to think—hard—about what will be meaningful to a listener (not just to himself), and to be prepared to scrap an idea when it begins to sound like self-indulgent nonsense. If you want to beat Sturgeon's Law, you need the discipline to recognize the 94%, discard it, and put your time into the more fruitful 6%.

I think a successful work of art succeeds on two levels. Something about it immediately appeals to you: color relationships in a painting, a phrase in a piece of music, a rhetorical flourish in a poem. Your initial reaction should be, "Hmmm. There is something interesting going on here, but I am not sure yet what it is all about. I want to look closer." So you re-examine the painting, you replay the music, you reread the poem. And when you do, you in fact discover things that you did not catch at first, things that you have never thought about in just that way, and you are glad you persevered.

If your first thought is, "Well, yes, that is nice, but it is all so obvious", then the work is too shallow (if it is not simply junk). And if your first thought is, "What the hell is this?", and you walk away irritated, then the work is too obscure (if it is not simply junk). It may contain jewels, but the artist has buried them so deep that only a trained geologist would ever look for them.

Is the trend toward obscurity in music, and all art, driven by a search for innovation? I would definitely say that in music the answer is Yes. My one great frustration in my music studies was professors' insistence that students explore only contemporary forms, or preferably devise new forms. The prevailing view is that the less your music shares with anything that came before, the more worthwhile it must be. The worldwide academic musical community shares this view—new is good, old is bad; strange is good, familiar is bad. I am still astonished that in my course on orchestration we studied four scores in detail, by Holst, Debussy, Stravinsky, and Schoenberg. Evidently there is no longer anything of value to be learned from Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Berlioz, Tchaikovsky, or Brahms. Stravinsky wrote that he admired Beethoven's orchestration above all because you never notice it; it never intrudes between you and the music. I will never understand why we would not have done better

to study one of his symphonies with the same zeal as Schoenberg's *Five Orchestral Pieces*.

I think the academicians are deluded into believing that there is such a thing as progress in the arts, in the same sense that the sciences progress. This, of course, is not true. Art does expand to include new ideas, in a manner that may superficially resemble scientific discovery. But science and art differ in two crucial aspects.

First, science reveals truths that exist independent of mankind, while artistic truth is purely a human creation. There is an inevitability to the train of scientific progress: if Newton had not written his laws of mechanics, someone else would have. That truth existed before we did, and someone was bound to find it in time. But if Beethoven had not composed his fifth symphony, it would not exist, and that truth would be hidden forever. We mourn a promising composer who dies too young differently than we mourn a promising chemist, because in the composer we have lost a unique voice.

Second, as science adds to our store of knowledge about the world, it purges obsolete ideas. As experimental data accumulates it disproves previously accepted theories, and these must be abandoned in favor of explanations consistent with what we now know. 21st-century science is thus superior to 17th-century science, but 21st-century music is not superior to 17th-century music, and it is a mistake to think of any art as replacing or superseding what came before. A valid composition is not valid only in its own time; it does not have an expiration date, when it must be pulled from the shelves to make room for something fresh. I wince when I hear, over and over, that old musical forms are of purely historical interest, and can no longer be explored creatively.

What would happen if a fabulous new Schubert symphony were discovered tomorrow? Would it be of purely historical interest, and never find a place in the concert repertoire? Would the academic reaction be "That is nice for the musicologists, but we already have plenty of common practice music to perform"?

Some poets speak of "the new formalism". This seems to be academic camouflage for a return to traditional rhyme and meter. I think this is a healthy trend, though I wish these poets did not feel the need to justify it with such scholarly jargon, as if they needed permission from the professors of literature. But I hope this will not mean that free verse is now passé, that it is to be dismissed in favor of sonnets and villanelles. In poetry, in music, in any art, the artist should feel free to use the form that fits, whether it is centuries old or completely new.