Music and Information and Communication and Chaos and . . .

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Ladies and Gentlemen:

The frequently used metaphorical remark “there is music in the air”, while stating a truth, can be interpreted as a promise of treasures easily accessible, and at the same time, as a warning to living composers. The music that now, so to speak, “is in the air” has already been composed, has already had its initial, sometimes also its last, say. All who know of, and believe in, the power of music to sooner or later bring home its intended communication to its attentive listeners, will modestly refrain from presuming to support the powerful by mere repetition, to strengthen the strong by needless duplication. Rather will they direct their searching minds to find those vacancies which lie in the air, waiting to be enlivened by musical sound and musical organization hitherto unheard of.

A composer can not merely cock a sensitive ear, and then inspiredly whistle, hum, play, or worse, write again and again some sequences of tones that one happens to find in the air only because they unfortunately still seem to suit so many people’s purpose like new. Such used musical patterns, having had to stand and sing and march for all sorts of things for so long a time, by now will sound to the composers’s ear like the intonation and inflection of things long since said: they will signal nothing but things all too familiar.

The composer has to construct new sequences of tones, new events of sound. And that is not enough. The composer must see to it that they articulate unfamiliar figures of musical speech with new intonations and fresh inflections, and thus sound the unmistakable signal for the unheard of to be heard. Not that which can already be known about the music, but rather that which must yet be attributed and conceded to it, is the communicated meaning and content of the new music, is the language which composers give to their music so that it may make itself heard.

As an example for what I call music in search of the yet untranslated musical gesture, the yet unusual inflection, I have selected a short piece for string quartet, which, without demonstrative extremism, may help illustrate my terminology. The composer, Giuseppe Englert, lives in Paris and has given this work the title *Les Avoines Folles*, that is, *Wild Oats*. You’ll hear it played by the LaSalle Quartet.

Englert, *Les Avoines Folles*

The Shepherd

One evening, thousands of years ago, a young shepherd experienced a cruel disappointment. After having disposed of his four-legged charges, he had joined his friends and soon asked them to listen to him, as he wanted to relate a lovely event that he had enjoyed repeatedly those past days and weeks, while quietly watching the herd. As they settled and sat down around him, he had taken out some small whistles, merely tied together, of the kind used in those days to call the dogs, to coax, cajole, frighten or lead the cattle, and had begun to play for his friends, thus:

But even as he played on, embellishing and enjoying the phrase, happy to be able to share with his friends what had been till then only a solitary pleasure, he noticed that his audience was leaving. It did not take long for him to find out why. First
of all they had expected a story and had prepared their minds for the appropriate ritual of festive passive attention. This ceremonially trimmed frame of mind was badly shaken when they saw that the treat they had been promised was to be a display of some common everyday tools, speechless and insignificant. But disillusion and boredom turned into anger when the audience perceived that under the pretext of relating a lovely event, the shepherd had offered them something quite different from anything they had ever heard, which was therefore not recognizable, and which therefore could not possibly have any meaning. And even in those early times you had to be and to do what was recognizable for your friends and neighbors if you wanted their recognition for what you were and did.

The shepherd’s listeners thus decided that they had been led, under false pretenses, to witness what seemed to them a desecration of their ritual of festive passive attention, an abuse of their ceremonially trimmed frame of mind, and a personal affront. They suspected a prankster’s joke at their expense and left while the leaving was good.

All this hints at the fact that the shepherd had performed an important, significant, and revolutionary piece of music; but it does not conclusively prove it. To prove that, and to explain why the shepherd’s disappointment was a cruel one, we have to report how the shepherd arrived at his idea and at his expectations.

As I said before: This tune (for today’s ear a somewhat monotonous and rather primitive one) was heard for the first time one evening thousands of years ago, in a community and environment where the only known acoustical device of communicative power was the monotonous and rhythmically flexible drum, and where the shrill sound of roughly whittled whistles served only as an alarm signal and for the driving of cattle. Day in and day out, our shepherd, his whistle in hand, listened to the message-bearing rhythms of the drums, which were heard from all over the countryside. These drums were struck by men skilled in the official code of an acoustical language of signals. Although the shepherd did not understand this language, it still formed part of his life. The frequently repeated acoustical gestures became well known to him, as they accompanied his daily chores. He came to know them, to recognize them in an unskilled sense. Soon the drum sound acquired meaning for him, a meaning independent of that agreed upon for the official signal code.

You see, while the shepherd tried to deduce nature’s meaning from nature’s noises in order to know ahead of time nature’s attacks on his safety and well-being, he tried to induce into the sign language of the drums some meaning that would help him to understand himself and his own daily order of existence. The shepherd was not fascinated by the conventions of acoustical signals. Otherwise he would have changed professions and joined the ranks of message-transmitting drum operators. As it was, he was fascinated by the acoustical pattern itself. That was what seemed to him worth remembering and worth relating to others. Worth remembering, in that it had gained significance for him by association with certain events, say, a lovely shepherdess. Worth relating, in that it would allow him to share his happiness with his friends without having to betray either the cause nor the detailed story of his delight.

His was a musical idea.

It was musical because, by considering an acoustical pattern of which he ignored the signal content worth relating, our shepherd accorded to such acoustical patterns a new communicative potential, a socially enriching function.

And it was a creative idea, just because of its independence of existing conventions, just because it had been conceived in the hope that it may become instrumental in bringing forth a new convention, whereby his report on his daily life may be received as fresh information, as a novelty, even though the report would communicate nothing but the purely acoustically perceptible image of an acoustically perceived image.

Thus went the drums:
Whether they carried the message “The rains are coming” or “50 sheep stolen by northern neighbors” or “Foreigners around, beware!” — the shepherd did not know the language, it wasn’t his business, and the content of the message could not at that moment influence his life. But the form of the message associated itself in his mind with all that simultaneously happened to him.

**Drummage**

In order to later reproduce the acoustical phenomenon, he could have procured a drum. But he soon decided that this would never do. He knew, and so did everybody, that drums were used for the transmission of messages. Only a few popular rhythms had been set aside for ritual dances and ceremonies. If he now would play the drum, nobody could understand what he meant. Those who knew the message-code would get a message which he did not intend to transmit. Those ignorant, like him, in communicative drumming, would assume that a message-code was being used and would therefore believe themselves unable to understand a message which he did not intend to transmit. It obviously was imperative to avoid the drum sound altogether, as it was already far too burdened with non-acoustical significance and meaning, semantically far too occupied a sign.

What about a different sound? The shepherd tried to reproduce on his wooden whistle what the drums had sounded.

Unsatisfactory. It seemed to the shepherd that everybody could easily recognize the model for such direct imitation and thus would be misled by the rhythmical component again, either to decipher the sequence in terms of the drum signal language, or to consider themselves as not addressed. But the young man wanted to be understood. At least, he did not want to be misunderstood. So he began, first theoretically then practically, to translate and to transform the characteristics of the drum into the characteristics of the woodwind. The monotone of the drum became the multitone of the syrinx, a technical combination of several whistles. The equally short impulses of the drumbeats converted into the different durations of sustained tones. The surface rhythm of the message code turned into the dynamic profile of formed phrases of a yet unlearned language. And finally: The far reaching sound of the purposeful drum reduced to the intimate range of the flute sound, which was not to bridge distances in space, but instead to address a present audience, and to draw it into the circle of implied events in time. This was the drum signal:

It disappeared but, at the same time, lived on in this flute sequence:

The flute sequence communicates the fact that a drum signal had been heard and what it was like. But neither the message carried by the drum signal nor its original purpose are mentioned. While originating in an acoustical order which in a certain conventional system had its meaning, the transferred information now refers to a new system wherein that acoustical order acquires a new meaning. No longer a language sign or symbol, the acoustical order itself becomes the subject and content of communication, and thus liberated from inaudible purposes, it becomes music. And, for that matter, important, significant music, or as I like to call it, new music. For a new store of sound had been opened in order to give new meaning to an already existing store of sound, and, knowingly or unknowingly, the reference system for the meaning of acoustical orders had been augmented.

This extension of the system of referencing is the important achievement. Let us compare: On that very evening, thousands of years ago, when, in my freely invented example, the flute sequence was new music and heard for the first time, it also represented a new store of sound inevitably for the last time. From that moment on this new store began to grow old, older with every tone sequence representing it. After that, no shepherd or composer could have been asked or even commissioned to
make a flute tone sequence represent a new store of sound. It is still possible, on the other hand, even today, though rather difficult, to conceive of a musical score in which a new system of reference manifests itself powerfully enough as to compel even an ancient panpipe’s sequence, if integrated into the composition with good judgement, to give up its time-honored accumulated meanings to a perfectly new meaning. We find numerous instances of this kind, especially in so-called masterworks.

Music

For a considerable time now some ideas keep poking through fields of speculative scientific research, ideas which, if tenable, would lead us to assume that sooner or later all events will become repetitions, recurrences of former events; that only the continuous extension and augmentation of reference systems may lend to those used events the new meaning always urgently needed for the significant presentation of new thought; that even to the extension of reference systems there exist finite limits, which once reached would signal the impossibility for anything further to be or to become meaningful and significant.

According to those ideas—and we witness daily how true they probably are—according to such ideas the history of music, among other things, would appear to be a documentary report, first on the continuous rehabilitation of the past by means of new meaning always urgently needed for the significant presentation of new thought; that even to the extension of reference systems there exist finite limits, which once reached would signal the impossibility for anything further to be or to become meaningful and significant.

All this, of course, was either long ago or still lies far ahead. Both the composing shepherd and the future of music are at a hypothetical beginning. One can see, however, why the shepherd, seeing his audience leave, became sad. “Well, they did not understand it, poor friends,” he said to himself at first. But a little later it began to dawn on him that actually they must have understood. How else was it to be explained that they reproached him for exactly that which he had, after long consideration, found worthwhile doing? They had noticed very well that he did not use a well-known language. They had neither recognized the drum signal code nor believed to hear a shepherd whistle for his dog. Some even had told him that they had heard a bunch of tones they had never heard before and that it had therefore meant nothing to them. So they had heard (hadn’t they?) that which he wanted them to hear, and they also had understood exactly that which he had put into the tune. Had they not only understood the music, but also accepted as music what they had understood, maybe they might have discovered questions to ask themselves, questions as to what this new unused language could say for them, for realms hitherto silent which, rendered audible, would promise pleasure and expression.

It wasn’t, the shepherd concluded, the lack of understanding, but a matter of disagreement and lack of desire. A cruel disappointment; he had no friends, not even neighbors. He died young and remained young. His audience didn’t.

I have dedicated a piece, hopefully called *Futility 1964*, to the memory of this shepherd.

*Brun:* *Futility 1964*

**Futility**

Nothing is sooner lost than new ways and new languages, and the privilege to walk the new path and to utter the new tongue is given to us but for a moment. In no time the gift of a present turns into the possession of a property. Thus every moment of creation implies a moment of futility. However, without the stubbornness with which the artist of all times has clung to just this flimsy pair of moments, nobody (and none of us) could hope to ever reach beyond the limits—imposed on understanding—by narrow-minded considerations of temporary expediency. Time and again composers, writers, and progressive educators attempt to convince an allegedly conservative audience that the listeners should overcome their reluctance and accept contemporary music as the appropriate musical language of their day by reflecting that, after all, it only represents new ways of treating the same old material, and that, af-
ter all, what seems extremely strange today, will appear meaningful and familiar tomorrow.

Such benevolent and friendly advice unfortunately is misleading because these advisors are no friends of new music. First they assume that musical listeners would believe themselves to be hearing new music, if it were merely “new ways of treating the same old material”. Then these advisors suggest that there is some neutral objective “material” which remains in some way the same, no matter how it is treated. Furthermore they wish to tell us that a problem today need not be solved because it will disappear by itself tomorrow. And, unknowingly, they line themselves up with the most conservative listener by implying that the term “extremely strange” denotes a state of affairs which is to be overcome so that the blossom of familiarity may bloom.

In fact the composers of new music do not try to communicate with their listeners on the basis of an agreement on ways and language. Just because they know all the already established agreements just as well, or even better, than the listener, just because they are aware of all the meanings which have been conveyed to all kinds of constellations of sound and have thus been understood in the sense a language might be understood, just therefore, the composers of new music hope to address their audience today with constellations of sound upon which no agreement has as yet been established, where new meanings are proposed for which the appropriate language has not yet been gained by anybody but the composer. It is a mistake to request the listener to understand a contemporary work of art as can outlive its birthday, this gradual accumulation of attached meanings, will no longer convey the music, but only the story of its successful function in society, of its contemporary relevance and significance. Many a person with a talent for thinking and dreaming has occasionally tried to imagine what one would have felt if one could have been present at the first performance of a classical masterpiece which today enhances that person’s life with the deepest emotions and the most stimulating inspirations. In vain. Even the loveliest and most celebrated burdens of acquired meaning are yokes that can not be shaken off, and the step into the living past remains untaken.

Now, we are the unrepeatable living past of those who tomorrow will envy us for what we could witness at the instant of creation, and what they will have to understand in order to justify their second-hand experience. Thus it is all right for every listener to be moved, shocked, irritated, surprised, or even pleased by the impact of events of sound, even if at the time nothing of it seems to appeal to the listener’s standards, nothing of it seems to mobilize those associations of thoughts and ideas which one has been taught to consider the infallible signs of legitimate cultural experiences.

After the first performance of György Ligeti’s orchestra piece Apparitions in Munich, Germany, half of the audience applauded enthusiastically and the other half booed and hissed enthusiastically. The atmosphere was full of crackling controversy, and almost everybody was having a good time, when a very elegant lady in the next row suddenly turned around and addressed us in a voice trembling with aristocratic fury: “I assume you’re getting well paid for applauding such nonsensical outrage!” She was, in her ruined haughtiness, so funny that it was not
possible to take offence. But she had meant to offend. And I wonder whether such behavior represents culture defending itself against barbarism, or whether it isn’t rather the outcry of barbarians who feel threatened by culture.

The composer of the piece that provoked such expressive demonstration, György Ligeti, is a Hungarian who lives in Vienna and who has composed such music as should enable you to observe what I have called, the signs of a language in the process of being born. The title of this composition by György Ligeti, is *Apparitions*. An apt title in this particular case. The orchestra of the Bavarian Radio is conducted by Bruno Maderna.

*Ligeti: Apparitions*

When one is speaking about nature and natural laws, then the word *chaos* denotes the end of everything. In talking about the human mind and its efforts, the same word *chaos* denotes the beginning of the world.

In nature, so the sciences teach us, the basic premises of order and organization, perceived as forms, shapes, properties and functions, etc., are actually all manifestations of differences which through continuous energy exchange will finally disappear in a state of complete uniformity, where everything is one.

The human mind, however, moves under directly opposite concepts. It conceives of an initial state where one is everything, and proceeds through differentiation to create the basic ideas of order and organization, whereby the number of possible situations is enlarged, and the significance of choice and selection becomes richer.

But while, with the help of this human mind, scientific proof has been attempted and found for the law of nature, where the end is *chaos*, no such proof exists for the idea that our present state has indeed been preceded by chaos. In fact, the idea that out of nothing may come something, presents, from the scientific view, one of the most irresponsible attacks against nature. This idea has never derived its strength from provable truth, but alone from its audacity and from its magnificent consequences. Of course, the human mind, even while creating and naming the forms of progressive order, is in itself also a part of disorganizing nature. But it opposes the totality to which it belongs; it represents nature’s subversive actions against nature’s own law which leads toward uniformity, death, nothing; it is truth which without us cannot exist, protesting against reality which does not need us.

Many a musical work begins with what might be called an analogy in gesture to initial chaos. A kind of exposed potential in a state of suspended force. There is Beethoven’s *9th Symphony*, Gustav Mahler’s *1st Symphony*, Mahler’s *9th Symphony*, Alban Berg’s *Orchestra Pieces*. More recently then, without the exposed potential, only suspended motion, as in the examples we heard before, Ligeti’s *Apparitions*, Englert’s *Wild Oats*, and my own *Futility 1964*.

[The beginnings of the above-mentioned pieces, in sequence.]

But nowhere, not even in our contemporary music, can we find an example where the end of a work would suggest an analogy to final chaos. It seems that human creations lack those absolute values which nature possesses. The end of a musical piece, however chaotic its behavior may be, always appears conditioned by the formal growth to which it belongs. Unlike the beginning, where nothing is supposed to have yet happened, the end will be simultaneously embraced and pervaded by the organizing inertia of its artificial past. And so will its listeners, because, if they have listened well, their memories, similar to the memory of a computer, will have followed the program from one strictly specified address: the beginning. While nature has no memory, we do. For us, *chaos* is a potential and not an end.