Against Plausibility

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As I feel myself to be very much involved in precisely the situation which I shall try to describe, I can but show the seemingly disordered variety of points of view which are responsible for, or consequential to, the general climate in which European composers are, at present, living, thinking, and working. My point of view, which I consider to be neither more nor less justified than any of the others, and which will undoubtedly become evident on these pages, should be understood as just one more example for that which I hope to communicate.

A request for information on a certain subject can be met in two distinctly different ways. One may be to come forth with a sequence of statements which contain what one believes to be relevant information. The other may give an account of the questions which at a given time have been provoked by this certain subject, thereby endeavouring to allow a glimpse of what one hopes will become significant information.

Statements, it seems to me, exhale by their very nature a breath of the past tense. Their value consequently consists in a kind of general validity, not pertaining exclusively to any special moment or situation. One can occasionally make them fit, but they then pass at the expense of the content, becoming ever more questionable as they are repeated. There is a lot of honest belief in statements, but almost never any hope. As of course this statement also shows.

I therefore prefer to deal with questions, whenever the subject belongs to the present. And there cannot even be a question of preference, whenever the subject proposes to relate to images of the future. Information on such images and propositions simply cannot contain factual results, but always, at best, a truthful report on speculations in progress.

It was, in this sense, somewhat alarming to notice how a worldwide criticism concerning certain European publications on contemporary music seriously tried to deduce the absence of information from a seemingly improper use of scientific terms and from a prevalence of overly pretentious style in some of the published essays and articles. None of the critics attempted to prove as a necessary premise for this deduction that an incorrect statement could not possibly communicate a correct information. Nor was any assurance given that a proper application of scientific terms would be useful in explaining musical theories. Almost all these critics quite unscientifically jumped to the fallacious conclusion that the reasons for which an information may fail to reach the addressee disqualify the information which thus got lost.

This example, however, gains real significance only when seen in a somewhat broader context. A tendency to neglect, or even to forget, the difference that obviously exists between giving information about something and the teaching of something, can be discovered everywhere, even in the most unexpected quarters, where the knowledge of this difference should certainly be assumed. This tendency has its own history. I believe it to be quite old indeed. But since it seems to appear and disappear periodically, I shall limit my investigation to its provoking influence on musical activities in our century, and especially to the European situation. It is my opinion that therein, one possible explanation, among many, for recent developments on the scene of musical composition and theory can be found.

The vocabulary generally used to characterize and to explain the impact or the lack of impact
which the composer’s work has on its audience, or even on its contemporary society, stems from a well-known and frequently exploited store of more or less metaphorical expressions. It has not changed much through the ages. But its significance for the composer has changed considerably because of a certain turn the meaning of this vocabulary has taken in this age, when unprecedented eloquence appears in print swiftly all over the world. What once was the listener’s individual expression describing the quality of a personal experience, now has, purely by dint of quantity, adopted the quality of a judgment on the work in question. But because of the vocabulary used therein, this judgment always seems to refer to a musical work, which by the “judgers” is understood to propose rather than to represent music. In spite of the indisputable fact that, where music is concerned, the composers are the competent professionals, these “judgers” ask themselves where music is going in relation to their standards, instead of changing their standards in accordance to the music, which after all, notwithstanding anybody’s opinion has come into existence. Since the composer’s professional competence, however, does not teach—that is, according to standards or by referring to usefulness—but rather informs on facts, regardless of standards and oblivious to usefulness, the vocabulary of judgment has taken refuge by expressing doubt in the professional competence of the composer.

The general opinion of the culturally interested public accused Mahler of triviality, banality, and exaggerated use of means for superficial effects. Debussy was rather soon accepted and praised, but almost just as soon accused of being merely a composer of “atmosphere”, of “ambience”, be it exotic or Parisian. Arnold Schoenberg, when after the first World War he came up with his musical innovations, was first accused of presenting deliberate chaos as music, only to be accused a little later, after the people had heard about his system, of limiting the freedom of inspired invention. It also seems to me misleading, to say the least, to construe a coincidence out of the fact that Anton Webern’s work was condemned to silence many a year for political reasons, only then to be considered just as silent when at last it did reach the public.

History reports many such examples. Each is told as a variation on the same old theme, the “romantic” struggle of artists to gain recognition for themselves and for their works in their society. As if every artist’s life were just another repetition of the same old story, with slightly different trimmings in each particular case.

Many composers in Europe today not only doubt the validity of these reports, they even wish to evade the fate of one day becoming the helpless “heroes” of another of these legends. And they want somehow to get around the temporary misunderstanding, which seems to have hit just those masters they most respect. First of all they do not agree that there is an old story which only repeats itself again and again. They conceive of the traditional inertia of society in relation to its contemporary artists as one single but very long story, which must eventually come to an end.

Furthermore they consider it most probable that the swift development of the technical reproduction of music might very soon, maybe in their own lifetime, revolutionize the concept of music’s social function so thoroughly that all the traditional attitudes, mental or habitual, which came to be associated with the listening to and the appreciation of music, would slowly become obsolete. It is obvious that this process could only be commercially initiated, commercially controlled, and commercially understood. The question which presents itself to composers is whether they are to be drowned in this flood, or to be carried by it to unprecedented heights and distances. In other words, composers have to decide whether to express their hostility to the powers that be by tactics of opposition, or by helping them along to a desirable finish.

There are other thoughts which, seemingly less realistically and less rationalistically founded, still show the composer’s preoccupation with the function of music in society. An allergy against the colloquial meaning and usage of the word “new” has become rather violent now, after a prolonged period of merely annoyed and almost condescendingly academic smoldering. Though they admit that nearly every variety of confusion pertaining to the term
“new” seems abominably commonplace, and, apparently, unworthy of serious discussion in professional circles, many composers today have decided that it has become naive, unrealistic, and acutely dangerous, to further believe in the tolerable innocence of these confusions. They claim that these confusions, which at first manifested merely a lack of discrimination under the impact of something new, have now developed into powerful weapons in the hands of those who wish to discriminate against everything new.

One more point, before I set out to show how such considerations have influenced in a tangible way the musical development in Europe. Most contemporary composers agree with the public (though not in the choice of terminology) that our time has produced some trends in music which constitute, to the meaning of the word *music*, a revolution far greater and far more incisive than any of the many historic precedents. It seems that something which basically had not been challenged for hundreds of years, and in consequence was taken for granted, cannot be taken for granted any longer. That which apparently is meant by this something can be described only vaguely as being the potential information value contained in the musical patterns which all musical events have the tendency to form within time. Expressed in a simplified but still rather vague way: the contention of the composers might be called a growing suspicion that no matter which compositional method is employed, the forming of really new patterns is becoming increasingly improbable. It is felt that by now even widely divergent methods of musical element organization generally produce rather similar musical patterns, and that the semantic value common to similar patterns overshadows and overrules, in power of communication, the differences of dissimilar methods of organization. Thus was raised the problem of how then to invent and compose new musical gestures, if this can not be done by relying on a new compositional technique or method or system. The absurdity, which seems to lie in the form in which this problem is presented, is considered to be one of its positive features.

Those who create a climate will then also find themselves influenced by the very climate they helped create. If one wishes to know about rather than evaluate an intellectual climate, i.e., rather to gain than give information, then it is necessary to know about the motives common to all those who represent this climate. The half dozen points of consideration which I have sketched out so far, account, I believe, for the problems and questions which most advanced composers in Europe today believe to be the important and interesting premises for professional discussions. These discussions, the study of compositions and the analysis of the written essays which are now so often requested of composers, or which they feel called upon to write, of course also reveal on what particular problem each composer places the main accent at a given time. It also shows how the problems keep changing their position in the light of each particular attempt at a solution. But at the same time, it should be understood that any one composer’s works, theories, and opinions, while containing authentic information about that composer, represent second hand information only as to the circumstantial climate in which the composer is active. This holds true even if a composer’s temporary influence were held to be part of the general climate.

There is a difference between the new music, called “experimental” and “avant-garde” by music critics and that presented under these terms by the composers themselves. Only a small part of the usual hopelessness which prevails in the relation of alleged representatives and guardians of public opinion with the true problems of either the music or its public is worth mentioning. Europe can show no more than maybe five officially recognized writers whose praise can be taken as a success of the composer’s intentions, and whose disapproval can be understood as being disappointed hopes rather than confirmed prejudice. This goes to show that the reputation for cultural activity, which generally is associated with Europe, should definitely be qualified as a reputation acquired for the merit of preservation rather than initiation of culture. And it yet remains to be proven, before appearances are judged, that what is preserved here more than elsewhere can indeed still be called culture. The development of mu-
sic in Europe during the last fifty years documents a growing opposition against precisely that pretense to culture which has become a commercially supported weapon to inhibit an urgently required and historically justified renaissance of cultural productivity.

This situation gains in complexity by the fact that even composers of serious music occasionally act as if they believe preservation to be the cause of tradition. The confident conviction that mere continuation of an already established concept will bring about new continuity is very hard to shake. One does not seem to agree that a tradition worthy of preservation only comes about when a new concept of continuity is invented, first to connect that which at the time is considered disconnected, and then to prove just that to be conforming to cultural progress which at the time is being attacked for disturbing a cultural situation.

Looking at the scores which have been written in Europe during the last ten years, and listening to those performances of them that have taken place in the last five years, I have gained the following variety of information. If I am one such composer, then:

1. I may decide that a new method of administering musical materials will naturally generate new musical patterns.
2. I may only hope that such a process will take place.
3. I may decide that a new method of administering musical materials will allow me to organize the musical patterns, which I hold to be new, in such a way as I believe is implied by the term composition.
4. I may hope that by using a new method of administering musical materials, I may find a way of composition, hitherto not implied by that term, which will generate the characteristics of newness in any resulting musical patterns.
5. I may decide on the musical patterns, and then search for a method of administering musical materials which will extend the characteristics of newness to what I believe to be implied by the term composition.

6. I may decide that it depends on what I believe to be administration and composition whether any acoustical event will adopt the quality identified with the term “musical”. I may then hope for the behavior of the performers and the audience to create patterns that are consequently of new musical relevance.

7. I may decide that what I believe to be administration (or lack of it) and composition (or lack of it) will bring about an acoustical event, the quality of which then will define the meaning of the term “musical”; I may decide further that the behavior of the performers and the audience will create new patterns which consequently are of musical relevance.

Whatever I might believe were the ideas and thoughts which moved me to write a piece the way I did—the resulting score (whether read or heard) will inevitably belong to one of these categories. Actually to only one, because even if, theoretically, traces of another category could be spotted, their function would take on the quality of a disturbance or negligent oversight rather than the character of an attempted counterpoint of intentions. The foregoing should be somewhat qualified by the reminder that while looking at or listening to a score, different persons might disagree as to the category with which this score should be associated. On the other hand, I hurry to concede that just at present it is amazing to observe how often some composers succeed, by following only one set of ideas and thought, to produce a series of works of which each belongs to a different one of the above mentioned categories. It is far more difficult, therefore, to ascertain the propositions and intentions which directed the composer’s hopes and decisions than to discover the way in which the composer organized the composition. And it is far more difficult to understand the composer’s propositions and intentions than to ascertain them. These difficulties hamper the relation between the composer’s music and the composer’s audience. All kinds of music lovers are quick in assuming that an apparent similarity between difficulties of understanding allows them to infer a similarity between the communications,
which they believe are meant to be understood.

Thus it happens again and again to composers as well as to listeners, to analysts as well as to critics, that they undiscerningly confuse, or identify, the complexity of means with the complexity of purpose. If people have difficulties in understanding something, it is their privilege to decide whether that “Something” is very complex, or whether they are simpletons. Hopeful vanity, even with the usually modest, tends to one direction. I dwell on this point and indulge in rambling on about it, because it implies an almost informative description of the chaotic picture which public discussion of new music presents today. And because it may help to explain why, as I wish to contend, a short period of helplessness towards “language” and “words” on the part of lecturing and speculating composers does not necessarily point to their suffering under a spell of inferiority complexes, or from a neurosis expressed by a fascinated belief in pseudo-scientific and would-be mathematical pomp. But rather that it points to a helplessness of language itself, when confronted with a supercilious usurpation of authority by the incompetent, who are supported and encouraged by a well-educated but corrupt commercialism. To bring order into this picture, which attempts to show a crisis of communication of ideas, is almost impossible, as the picture itself cannot but bear evidence of that crisis. The best one can do is try to evaluate the significance, which lies in the repetitious occurrence much more than in the content, of the following sequences of request and response. If I am such a composer,

1. I might be asked to explain my composition. I do. I am then attacked for having tried to explain music.
2. I might be asked to explain what my music is supposed to mean, or to say, or to express, or to describe, etc.
   a. I refuse, and am accused of inhabiting a vacuum or an ivory tower.
   b. I comply. In which case my music is accused of having needed an explanation.
3. I might be asked to explain how I composed one of my works, and what it means to me.
4. I might be asked to state my views as to the general problems of contemporary music. I come forth with an analysis of my own works.
5. I might be asked to contribute program notes for a work of mine, which is to be performed in a concert or a festival.
   a. I comply by commenting on what, in my opinion, distinguishes my music from other music. These program notes are not accepted for reasons which make it evident that what is wittingly or unwittingly being demanded of me is that I show how there is nothing which really distinguishes my music from other music.
   or
   b. I comply by asserting my respect for what, in my opinion, is common to all music anyway, and therefore, of course, is also inherent in my music. The program notes are accepted.

I may now venture to speak about my picture, as it emerges from this accumulation of observations, and which could not be greatly changed by any additional observations, although these might challenge, modify, or even confirm and develop the analytic description of the situation.

The attacks once launched on Mahler’s music were phrased in a vocabulary so different from that used for the later attacks on Schoenberg that almost everybody was misled into the belief that Mahler’s and Schoenberg’s works were misunderstood for different reasons. Almost all the literature written on behalf of either seems to corroborate this. Not only weatherbeaten apologists but even convinced apostles, young and old, can be found trying hard to expound that what does not seem plausible to the stubborn public and to the conservative colleague should, in fact, be found very plausible indeed. By doing this they defy their own purpose. In Mahler’s case, because it was just his seeming plausibility against which the attacks were launched. The peo-
ple resented the length, the pathos, the apparatus, because it seemed to tell them with superfluous insistence what they believed they already knew. They did not understand that Mahler used the plausible only as a means to achieve such ambiguity in his musical language as would render it implausible to the society he had to live in. Whether he reasoned that a lack of plausibility would constitute a new experience, or whether he hoped to draw attention to what he considered new by stretching plausibility to implausible dimensions, is a question that was not discussed for a long time, but is being discussed a great deal now among European composers. Especially among those whom the critics call “ultra-moderns” and “radicals”.

But in the early twenties when Schoenberg became known, Mahler, as a problem at least, was forgotten. Schoenberg, with all his anticipating caution, and others with their more didactic methods, had begun to show how not everything is incoherent that seems incoherent. With Schoenberg’s innovations it became possible, not only for apologists and apostles but even for opponents, to cover for years and pages a field where the differences between plausibility and logical structure were disregarded. A campaign was started, which is still going on, to inform the listener that whatever a composer does is done according to some rules which either are inherent in or imposed on the material used. This campaign, which was started around 1925, had a surprising success. It inadvertently confirmed two diametrically opposed beliefs at the same time. It supported the contention of Schoenberg’s and Webern’s opponents that a logically conceived method of composition still does not present the listeners with a work which is plausible to them, and so encouraged the now raging defamation of the allegedly “intellectual” composer. Simultaneously, it supported the contention of the followers and admirers of the “Viennese School” that the plausibility of a logically conceived method of composition communicates itself to the resultant work, which thus becomes musically understandable. For some time now, however, the composers of “new” music have been developing a gnawing suspicion concerning the aptness of an assumption according to which plausibility is conducive to understanding. They try to connect the evidence in the cases of Mahler and Debussy, where understanding was defied by too much apparent plausibility, with more recent evidence which proves that plausibility simply does not seem to generate understanding. Thus emerges the desire to banish, in the interest of understandability, all attempts at plausibility.

But first one must find out what it is that has to be avoided. It appears that composers and listeners alike, when confronted with a musical experience, tend to find their bearing, in order to evaluate meaning and quality of the music, by measuring that which seems new to them with that which seems familiar. Each listener’s particular selection of familiar experience, which then is used as a kind of measuring rod, usually is suggested to that listener by some important features of the work heard. Now, it has been observed that at times experiencing familiarity becomes an end in itself, instead of being instrumental in providing the means for the yet unfamiliar to become that end. The new and unfamiliar thus will be accepted only insofar as it can be made to embellish this measuring rod, and only insofar as it can be expressed in terms familiar to the listener. Under these circumstances the term “new” naturally loses its original meaning, and the performance of new music its intended impact, even on a friendly audience. What has to be suppressed, therefore, seems to be everything that allows for this self-indulgent use of the measuring rod in the pursuit of a plausibility that can not but substitute for understandability. This banishment has to take place within and through music itself. The search goes for a way to compose which will lead to a musical event that, neither in part nor in the whole, suggests to the listener, especially not to the well-educated listener, the “familiar” musical experiences of which it might seem to be a variation, a rudiment, a caricature or any kind of derived consequence. For this it would be necessary that the very concepts of development or evolution, together with the adherence to the principle of cause and effect, neither be used nor hinted at nor propagated in any of the hitherto obvious or hidden manners.

This search is directed at a goal which most prob-
ably will forever remain beyond reach. But at least it should serve as an imagined point of reference to which present endeavors could be related. What it in fact would amount to is an individual standard by which a composer can consciously estimate the probable degree of “familiarity” that the composer’s musical language is going to suggest to the listener. This puts composers in the desirable position of being able to plan according to their own intentions and ideas when and where they may accept, for their language, the risk of being recognized, and when and where they needs must strive to avoid it.

The long and protracted attempt of enlightened composers to convince their opponents of the plausibility of their professional actions is slowly coming to an end. The plausibility of language itself has rendered the plausible explanation uninformative. Too great a familiarity with the communicating medium allows the unheard of to pass practically unheard and unnoticed.

This line of thought has influenced some composers’ attitude towards problems of contemporary music. The familiarity with music as a communicating medium has grown so fast during the last century that everybody is easily able to recognize the seemingly familiar means of communication, without understanding, yes even without hearing, the music. This ability, to recognize easily just that which is not meant to be communicated in a musical context, and thus to overlook the real significance of its existence, is the result of a process by which the mental association of the term “music” with a certain limited and well defined set of means of communication, has become taken for granted. It is this set, this system, to which the so-called popular music appeals today, just as it did sixty years ago. And now, it finally is dawning on the composers that even their new music is taken to be merely an experimental research project, which investigates new ways of referring and appealing to the same old system. They have come to understand, at last, that all their new music is applauded and turned down for one and the same reason, namely, for using and speaking an old language in a new way. All audiences love the old language and some the new way.

If the purpose of music is to endow acoustical events with a sense which the acoustical material in itself would not possess, and which can be perceived by an audience as a communication of contemporary relevance and significance about usually abstract visions and movements in the human mind, then the purpose seems to have gotten lost in our time, because the audience endows the music with a sense which was perceived long ago, at an entirely different occasion, and which now will not communicate anything of contemporary relevance and significance anymore. A new musical language, therefore, will unfortunately remain unheard, even unnoticed, until the newness of ways has become commonplace enough to stand back behind the newly reinstated purpose. However, this reinstatement of the purpose of music will not become discernable until it can be expressed by a language of music that can neither be understood nor even misunderstood in terms of the old set of communicative means.

This problem of an apparently vicious circle urgently requires solving. Nobody knows at present whether a solution should be looked for or whether it should be invented, or whether it is already hidden in some recent compositions, soon to become clearly and unmistakably evident. The fact, however, that speculations on the reinstatement of the lost purpose of music have become a subject of serious interest and vivid controversy for many composers today, seems to me to present important evidence that indicates how radical a change in the social function of music is being anticipated by these composers.

Out of the immense quantity and variety of factors which combine to enliven the general intellectual climate in Europe, the teachings of information theory and of modern sociology, more than anything else, have influenced composers’ attitudes in dealing with their problems. By getting acquainted with these disciplines of thought, composers have learned that there isn’t any such thing as a “purely musical” material or a “purely musical” idea, and that their problem of “how to compose music of contemporary relevance and significance” must be considered as being involved and entangled with a great quantity of problems, which, in themselves, and without the composers’ initiative, would have
no connection with music at all. It will take some time until these connections will be established. The slowness of progress in this direction corresponds to the sudden increase of knowledge needed for composing music which is to have contemporary relevance and significance. Since young composers usually do not wait until they know all there is to know, and because young people are occasionally inspired by impressions of a latent knowledge which in fact they do not yet possess, I contend that their mistakes, their exaggerations, their uncouth stylistics, and especially their compositions more often than not contain a rare feature, namely the yet unevaluated information on the degree of urgency with which a directional drive gains influence, even on those who neither know its origin nor its destination. What I call “unevaluated information”, probably is the extreme contrary to what usually is understood to be given through “teaching”. It is meant in this sense, when I claim that the term “masterwork” was introduced in order to sell musical merchandise by the dozen to an audience which desired to be taught without obligation, while an audience which desired information could not be found. As paradoxical and absurd as it may sound, I contend that composers of new music today attempt to view life realistically, while their audience is trying to withdraw further into the ivory tower which it once had erected for the composers.