

THE HECKLERS ARE RIGHT ABOUT THE MUSICAL AVANT GARDE



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The musical avant garde is now some eighty years old, and for the last forty years or so these composers have been well-funded and promoted, excellently performed, extolled, analysed and proselytised by a global avant garde music establishment of a small, but controlling, cadre of elitist mandarins within the arts establishment: the Arts Council, publishers, critics, universities and colleges, education authorities, opera and orchestral managers, and the BBC. Yet this movement has still not produced anything of worth for the public, or for musicians, who avoid it like the plague that it is; and they are right!

Contrary to what their apologists say, there is nothing you need to know in order to understand a piece of music: WYS-IWYG; only in this case What You Get Is What You Hear. If a piece sounds like a dissonant cacophony — that's what it is, just as a pile of bricks (even at the Tate) is nothing more than a pile of bricks.

ANTI-PEOPLE MUSIC

But although the avant garde isn't new anymore, it is still as damaging. It gobbles up limited funding and precious performance space, so that 'alternative' composers are prevented from competing. It actually professes a total disdain for the public (as Sir Harrison Birtwistle only recently stated on Desert Island Discs); and which are the "masterpieces" produced by a Birtwistle. A recent *Times* leader (2/4/95) called Birtwistle "the finest modern British composer — some would say of all time" but this not the public's, or the vast majority of musicians', view. If Birtwistle is so brilliant, why are his little clarinet pieces *Linoi*, for

example, not in every clarinetist's repertoire, or the *Five Little Pieces* for piano by Sir Peter Maxwell Davies (a studied composer in the music education curriculum) not on every serious pianist's music stand?

Never before has such 'anti-people' music been produced. What has come out of Pierre Boulez' multi-million pound, state-of-the-art electro-acoustic IRCAM in Paris, or from the many other heavily-funded studios in universities around the world? If these were actual real scientific R&D establishments they would have been closed down years ago, as failures.

THE AVANT GARDE IS A CLOSED SYSTEM

In the seventies, when I was actively involved with the avant garde, as a composer, conductor, performer and promoter, I corresponded with, and subsequently met, Sir Karl Popper, to discuss, even then, my serious criticism of the avant garde's tenets in relation to my, and his own, philosophy. He told me that in 1919/20 he became a member of Schoenberg's circle, and a pupil of Erwin Stein, the result of which was that he left, after three years, a convinced reactionary.

Significantly, an opponent of Popper's, Theodor Adorno, was an advocate of Schoenberg's methods. Popper's "Open Society" is the antithesis of the totalitarian 'Closed Society'. The avant garde is such a closed system: state-funded, yet exclusive and elitist. It excludes in its language just about everything that music lovers value. Indeed, it could crudely but accurately be stated, as a working tenet, that a work must, to be 'avant garde', be an affront to normal artistic/

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

audience sensibilities; and especially, that it must not be 'popular' or liked by the public! The avant garde equate 'standing out' with 'outstanding'. (They have a great problem with past masterpieces, which are both profound and popular.) Hence, the seeming diversity of styles within the avant garde are merely different facets of the same ideology: what total-serial Stockhausen and aleatoric Cage (and their mutations that have since been spawned) have in common, is this audience effrontery — a spit in the eye — and the avant garde's colluding critics call this "challenging" or "controversial", terms which were never considered to be aesthetic-judgemental criteria before the twentieth century. We have certainly moved a long way from 'Art imitating Life'; it is now 'Art intimidating Life'! Today, they can incorporate even popular art forms such as jazz into their idioms, provided that the material is deconstructed and processed (used to be called 'composition') so that it deeply offends normal jazz lovers. They can now do this with anything: fox trots, medieval motets, the classics, nothing is safe; clever, aren't they?

HECKLERS

It takes courage, and probably a great deal of almost heroic anger, to dare to speak out, as Frederick Stocken and his colleague Keith Burstein have done, against these long-standing iniquities. These two composers will be, indeed already have been, vilified by the powerful avant garde establishment for their temerity. As virtually all serious composers these days are beholden to the musical establishment for their living (not usually as composers, but as teachers), they are thereby effectively stifled from speaking out in public, for fear of losing their jobs and opportunities — but they do vent their anger in private.

That little advert for "Hecklers" placed in the *Spectator* by Frederick Stocken (and then acted upon!) may well become, through up-front debate (the affair has already generated an enormous amount of media interest — even globally), a symbol, signifying an end to the hegemony of this destructive avant garde, thereby allowing the new more-humanised art to surface, evolve and be created in the future.

WHERE ARE THE MASTERWORKS?

The avant garde has also failed to fulfil the rightful and legitimate expectations of the many first class professional performers who have performed the music. Their outstanding musicianship, nigh-on-perfect performances (of some of the most complex music ever created), and genuine dedication, should have resulted in commensurate rewards and status for their trust. I have been privileged to have worked with some these musicians, who are of absolutely first rank, but who are now, in middle age, still virtually unknown and struggling to make a living. If musicians have mastered a repertoire of the supposed 'masterworks' of the avant garde canon, and received critical acclaim and awards for their performances, they should be able to reap the benefits. This has not happened. If a pianist, for example, presented a concert of these 'masterworks' by Stockhausen, Boulez, Maxwell Davies, Birtwistle *et al*, would there be an audience, a paying public? No. And yet acknowledged masterpieces are the very bread and butter of concert promoters' and musicians' livelihood, because paying audiences want to hear them — again and again. Young pianists — such as Ian Pace, a vociferous opponent of The Hecklers — should stop to ponder seriously on how will they feel in, say, twenty years time, when the avant garde works they are now enthusiastically proselytising (and justifying by the same sort

arguments that were also used twenty years ago) are not new anymore, and still not earning them rewards?

The London Sinfonietta has commissioned and premiered numerous works over the past decades (heavily subsidised, of course), most of which received critical acclaim at their premiere; where are these works now? In the repertoire? We are not talking about poor, under-rehearsed performances (Schoenberg's complaint) in obscure venues, but outstanding performances at auspicious venues with all the sophisticated promotional techniques of the modern PR industry.

PERSONAL PLEASURE

Sir William Glock, father figure and patron (with public funds) of the British avant garde, is also an excellent pianist. What does he play for his own pleasure and in public: Haydn and other classics! Why haven't his friends — Maxwell Davies, Birtwistle or Boulez — written works specially for him for his intimate, personal pleasure? No Goldberg Variations here to ease the troubled mind — this is equivalent to a modern architect living in a Georgian house! Can you imagine Beethoven's patron, the Archduke Rudolph, playing nothing but the 'Old Masters' like Handel for his pleasure? Now that patronage is corporate, the sponsors don't have put their own personal funds (and trust, and prestige) where their mouths are. In fact the idea of actually playing avant garde music for pleasure is laughable.

The avant garde movement likes to describe itself as being on a par with Space Exploration ("Boldly going ..."), but all it has actually produced, in some eighty years, is the equivalent, in real compositional terms, of the non-stick frying pan. It has primarily been a technical and ideological movement; but it is arguable that even these (admittedly tremendous) technical developments of advance composition and performance techniques would have been developed anyway through the burgeoning advances in the 'other' modern musical culture: film and popular music. (Commercial studios, computer and recording technology has now outstripped that of the experimental avant garde).

FROM NAIVETY TO NIHILISM

In avant garde jazz, the story is the same. By the sixties the 'chords had run out'. Then into atonality, free form, anarchy ... it's dead easy to improvise when you don't have to worry about harmony, melody or form: a whirl of notes, and manic performance expression (always a dominant feature of jazz and popular music) will get you a long way!

Even pop music is going down the same road — from exuberant naivety, through a more refined and expansive maturity, to a brutal confrontational nihilism based on easily-acquired, computer-based technology, sheer brute wattage and hyper- (not to say hyped) expressionism. (See the recent American publication by Martha Bayles, *Hole in Our Soul: The Loss of Meaning and Beauty in American Popular Music*, Free Press, New York 1994.)

THE DIALECTIC OF NOTES

All in all, the avant garde has been a negative, destructive movement in the twentieth century. When the time-tested basic elements of Western music — the harmonic (vertical) and melodic (horizontal) dialectic of pitched (Pythagorean) notes are jettisoned, you are left only with the expressionism of colour, orchestration, dynamics, instrumentation, etc. which, although ever present, and an integral part of Western music, never has, nor ever can be, a substitute for music's unique language: the 'dialectic of notes'.