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NARCISSUS AND TONALITY

Narcissus is my first major work since my one-act opera "The Hawkeyed Sentinel", first performed in November, 1969. The more alert listener may, in fact, detect a similarity in shape between one of the themes in Narcissus

and one in its predecessor

This does not mean that the works are programmatically linked in any way; rather, it is part of a compositional problem that has occupied me for some time.

The problem is by no means exclusively my own; indeed it is central to a great deal of modern music, particularly opera, as I discover increasingly in research into 20th century opera. Stated quite simply, the problem is that of how to structure music that portrays a developing dramatic situation. All of us, whether composers or analysts or both, cannot help but be aware of the amazing variety of structural methods that sixty years of experimentation has brought forth. The conventional explanation for such compositional bewilderment is contained in the phrase "the downfall of tonality".

Tonality "fell down" because of the immense expansion in its language that took place during the latter part of the 19th century. The effect was devastating because tonality was, and is, not merely a structural convenience, but a complete language in itself; i.e. not merely a grammar, but a vocabulary. This means that it could/can be used to express often quite specific emotional areas by dint of the associations and traditions that surrounded it. Its aim was/is "comprehensibility", to paraphrase Schoenberg on serialism; the tragedy of post-tonal developments is that there has, as yet, been no substitute found which completely integrates vocabulary and grammar to the same degree of comprehensibility.

My own compositional style therefore, favours tonal methods for two reasons. Firstly, like most other young musicians, my musical experiences have been largely experiences derived from hearing and performing tonal music. However much avant-garde composers may assure me that contemporary man is best addressed in contemporary (i.e. avant-garde) terms, my own experience tells me that the music of long-dead composers can still speak powerfully to my own condition, and to the condition of twentieth century men in general. Is it too naive to say that human beings haven't



changed all that much in the last two hundred and fifty years? My second reason is more intellectual, in the sense that my analytical awareness of form leads me to tonality as being the most perfectly developed method yet devised for musicians to organise sound in a way that can both detail developments in dramatic situations and at the same time be immediately understandable to a listener.

Two features of tonality may be cited to make the point. The first is that conventionally used tonality establishes a context; this creates the possibility of movement away from that initial position (i.e. modulation), or of variation of that initial position (e.g. distortion of a tonal theme) which creates instantly recognisable effects. Because the context is so firm, the scope of the freedom in tonality is almost infinite in its expressive possibilities. The second feature is the moment of return to the tonal context in a particular piece of music; such moments of return are almost inevitably recognisable, usually on the upper rather than the lower levels of consciousness, and therefore allow, despite the avant-garde, a listener to be aware of both context and departure from context.

In this matter, tonality to my point of view offers such scope to the composer that until the same features can be provided by some other linguistic device, integrating vocabulary and grammar in an equal manner, I can personally see no reason for abandoning the tonal system. Indeed, at times of great prejudice, I can see no reason why any composer should wish to abandon the technical and expressive opportunities that tonality can offer. Perhaps only the true Impressionist, or his weaker brother, the composer interested only in superficial effects, would choose to write non-tonally.

This brings me back to my first point - the similarity in material between one theme in Narcissus and one in Sentinel. Freely acknowledging that the simplest explanation is the paucity of my inspiration, I would nevertheless maintain that such a similarity has its predecessors in the most tonal of tonal music. The three most simple methods for announcing a tonal thematic context are (a) by diatonic scale movement (b) by triadic movement, (c) by a combination of the two. That much is obvious from the most superficial examination of works by Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. The similarity in my own works is in category (b).

In using such a method in my own tonal music, I see no reason for apology, although our musical environment is such that the tonal composer quite properly is often forced to defend his style. The major accusation he faces is that he lacks "originality" - that much misused word whose stable-mate "innovation" was discussed in the last issue of Contact and will surely be discussed ad absurdum in future ones.

With the editor's permission I will take up the issue of "originality" on behalf of we small band of contemporary tonal composers in the next issue.

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