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Controversies Incorporated

The following three short articles are responses to material previously published in *Contact*. The first two offer replies to Roger Heaton's 'The Performer's Point of View' (*Contact* 30 (Spring 1987), pp. 30-33). The third is a rejoinder to Richard Barrett's 'The Notation of Time: a Reply' (*Contact* 30, pp. 33-4) from the author of the article which had provoked it (James Ingram, 'The Notation of Time' (*Contact* 29 (Spring 1985), pp. 20-27). Further responses to these debates are invited; contributions must be received by the editors at the Goldsmiths' College address on page 3 by 4 January 1988 if they are to be considered for *Contact* 32.

Andrew Ball

Bridging that Gap

Roger Heaton's article 'The Performer's Point of View' has an importance beyond its actual content. The gap which has opened between composer and performer threatens in many cases to become an unbridgable chasm, and the necessity for those of us involved in the performance of new music to articulate our views clearly and publicly becomes vital. I, for one, am certainly tired of the familiar post-concert scenario. In one corner of the pub the players sit in a morose and defensive huddle, trying to dispel their dissatisfaction with the evening's unfulfilling activity by telling anecdotes varying the well-worn theme called 'Catching the Composer Out': that is, either first-hand or apocryphal examples of composers unable to hear what is going on in performances of their own pieces. In the other corner the composers and their cronies have an equally dispirited air, uncertain whether the unsatisfying effect of the first, and quite possibly last, performance of their work is due to their own or the performance's shortcomings; self-esteem usually demands an answer in favour of the latter. Between the two groups flits a critic or two, ears open for items of gossip which can be transformed overnight into a definitive judgement on the concert, while from any members of the audience present the usual tentative, uncertain adjectives come wafting over the clink of glasses – 'interesting', 'disappointing', etc. And so it goes on, that of which they all speak: an apparently never-ending conveyor belt of human activity, often to a large extent wasted because composers and performers will not communicate at a serious level. Regrettably, these days composer and performer have become quite separate animals (a situation unheard of in earlier centuries), and we must now put all our energies towards making the relationship between the two a more trusting and fruitful one.

Bearing this in mind, it is not only what Heaton's article says which is important: it is also the fact that he

wrote it at all. My main worry is that his often understandably contentious stance may simply provoke alternating barrages of unconstructive hostility from both sides. If anything is to be achieved, performers and composers must share ideas and experiences, not pursue vendettas. It is important that the dialogue does not simply become an attack on certain schools and movements, and it is perhaps unfortunate that Brian Ferneyhough and the New Complexity loom quite so large in Heaton's article. Although in some ways this is an extreme point in the composer/performer schism, much wider issues are at stake; and, ironically, one of the most complex and 'impractical' of British composers, Michael Finnissy, is a virtuoso exponent of his own, and others', music.

I would like to describe two recent experiences of my own – one positive, one negative – to illustrate different facets of the composer/performer relationship. Chris Dench's piano piece *Tilt* was commissioned by the Brighton Festival for a recital I was giving in May 1985. It is a work of extreme difficulty, horrifically complicated and posing immense problems of pianistic athleticism. I am fairly certain that if I had received it through the post as a '*fait accompli*' I would have refused to learn it. However, before any decision was made as to whether the commission would go ahead, Dench arranged a meeting with me, during which he outlined his general musical tastes, his specific compositional preoccupations and his ideas for the new piece. At once I felt a sense of being able to orientate myself within a particular musical personality. As composition of the work proceeded, Dench was meticulous in keeping me abreast of the way the piece was taking shape and even of the problems and vicissitudes he was encountering. Extracts of musical material were sent, advice on questions of keyboard practicability was sought. This was both helpful in terms of gradually communicating the whole aura of the piece and also very sound psychology: if the question 'I don't suppose it would be possible to do this on the keyboard?' was posed, the implied challenge led me suddenly to agree to attempt things which I would have otherwise dismissed as impossible. (In one or two cases they actually *were* impossible.)

The total result of this communicative activity was that when the score arrived, a bare month before the first performance, my reaction on viewing the welter of notes was one of excited anticipation and enthusiasm, rather than of horrified shock. Above all I had a vision of the end-product I was seeking; this is absolutely vital for a performer before he or she starts to sort out the countless details that make up a piece of music. (Of course, if composers have no vision or image of what they are searching for, they will find it very hard to communicate anything useful to the performer.) With this conception of the piece in my mind, and with the

interest and enthusiasm engendered by the abundance of pre-natal reports, I was amazed at how soon even the most intractable passages began to achieve a recognisable feel and shape, in my fingers and in my ears; and the feeling of knowing the spiritual geography of the piece built up a momentum which, I think, carried me through passages which at the first performance were still technically very insecure. I would differentiate this experience very clearly from Heaton's 'improvisational inexactitude'; there is nothing more soul-destroying for a performer than to try to make sense out of nonsense, to attempt to improvise something which bears even passing resemblance to an impossible technical demand.

Of course, personal contact with a composer is not a pre-requisite, or even a guarantee, of a committed performance. But composers must remember that today's performers are being confronted by scores of a bewilderingly demanding diversity, both technical and stylistic, and a breakdown in the lines of communication between composer and performer can have disastrous effects, as demonstrated in the second experience I want to describe. The work concerned was a very early piece of chamber music by a now established composer, Kurt Schwertsik. The piano part, mainly inside the instrument, was extraordinarily difficult and impracticable: and, indeed, as I worked on it, I became gradually convinced that it was quite impossible. It was the opposite situation to that of Dench's *Tilt*. There, a feeling of collaboration and insight into the conception of the piece had, as it were, carried one over the difficulties. Here, the impossibility of contact with the composer until just before the performance led to a mounting sense of frustration and to alienation from the piece. When it was finally played to Schwertsik, the situation became unconstructively confrontational, and eventually it was agreed to abandon the performance.

Not an earth-shattering tale, perhaps, but what stuck in my mind was something the composer said in a rather heated moment of discussion. As I went through my catalogue of complaints about the impracticability of the piano writing, he shrugged his shoulders and said, 'So why play it, if you dislike it so much?' There are of course dozens of reasons, not all of them economic, why one sometimes plays music one dislikes or with which one has no affinity or sympathy. But the performer of new music must beware, because the experience, if it happens regularly, is a demoralising and ultimately a spiritually deadening one. I believe it affects much of the performance of contemporary music in this country. For myself, this second experience, though rather traumatic at the time, has proved in retrospect unexpectedly productive and thought-provoking. It is salutary to be reminded that one is not simply a 'note-processing machine'. Performances in which the performer is not caught up in the imaginative world of the composer ultimately do no-one any good.

Therefore, my final plea is: to performers, do all you can to resist performing vast quantities of new music – we must make every concert an act of commitment; and to composers, resist the feeling that any performance is better than none – you have somehow to infect the interpreter with some of the driving force and creative energy that led you to write the piece, otherwise it is better left unperformed. Above all, let us try to bridge the gap that has grown between composer and performer by establishing more honest and fruitful lines of communication – 'only connect' . . .

Ivan Moody

The Mystic's Point of View (or a Byway of Post-Modernism)

Roger Heaton's stimulating article provokes me to endorse his observations on the stylistic (as well as the technical and notational) polarities of the great wealth of new 'art-music' and its relation to the performer. I also wish to add a few words concerning a particular sort of post-modernism that does not come within the scope of what he discusses, but which sheds an interesting sidelight on composer-performer-musicologist relationships and upon the aesthetic attitudes of the western 'art-music' tradition.

This other 'post-modernism' is practised by three composers in particular: Henryk Mikołaj Górecki, Arvo Pärt and John Tavener.¹ All three have in common with the minimalist composers an economy of means and a directness of effect; what distinguishes them is purpose – they are motivated by deep religious conviction, manifesting itself as a conscious asceticism and spareness. It is an extra-musical dimension determining the function of the artistic product as a means to an end, in exactly the same way as ecclesiastical statuary or an ikon.

From the performer's point of view, there is usually little enough on the page. (In this respect there is a connection with overtly 'experimental' composers such as Howard Skempton.) Pärt's scores often consist of page after page of 'white notes': minims and semibreves in even rhythm. This is particularly the case with his recent vocal pieces such as *De profundis* or the *Two Slavonic Psalms*. Like both Górecki and Tavener, he has been increasingly drawn to the human voice as the best and obvious means of projecting a religious text. Such writing, equipped with the bare minimum of 'interpretative' markings (dynamics, etc.), leaves a good deal up to the performer, more than is the case with a composer who writes with more consciousness of stylistic concerns and questions of musical vocabulary. The performer is, after all, required to experience and convey at least a part of the spiritual import of the music. This is something neither necessary nor desirable in music of another kind. (This is not to say that with other kinds of music the performer should not be conscious of the composer's philosophical or spiritual intent, and should not attempt to project it, if that is what the composer requires.)

One participates in such music in the same way that one would participate in a religious ritual. Indeed, some of these pieces are religious rituals. Both Pärt's *St John Passion* and Tavener's *Vigil Service* come into this category. If one performs these works (or sections of them in the case of the Tavener) outside the liturgical context, then one is inevitably by-passing the chief aspect of their *raison d'être*. This does not, of course, invalidate performance in a context other than the liturgical unless the composer expressly forbids it, but it does mean that performers have a responsibility to be aware of the music's proper function over and above that of a concert piece.²

Even instructions in scores designed to assist performers can imply the necessity of further research. Some of Tavener's directions particularly are far from conventional: at one point in his *Ikon of Light* he requires the music to be 'transfigured with the Light of Tabor', which is hardly an excessive demand in a work

that is in essence an invocation of the Holy Spirit, but which is strange and potentially mystifying to a concert artist in a way that *'nobilmente'*, say, or *'con malizia'* (to choose two rather idiosyncratic directions from other music of this century) are not. One could argue that this kind of written direction fills in gaps left by the notational simplicity of this music: that it becomes part of the music itself. This is again true of other music; it is simply that in the instances under consideration there is a larger leap of faith for the musician to undertake.

Górecki uses less esoteric performing directions, but his music can still require enormous spiritual empathy on the part of singers and instrumentalists. It is not immediately evident, for instance, why a composer should choose to set the single word 'Amen' to form an entire piece for unaccompanied choir (Tavener has also written a one-word piece, *Dhoxa*, setting the Greek word for 'glory'). Indeed, I do not claim that there is a single explanation of this that would make it 'easier' for a choir to understand or sing, but it must certainly help if one knows something of Górecki's religious, political or aesthetic concerns as they affect the performance of spiritual music in a secular ambience. Oddly enough, this then means that we have the same situation as with the 'music of great complexity and impenetrability which seems to require a privileged intellectual training' to which Heaton draws attention as being at the opposite pole from 'a music of naivety and banality verging on the mindless'. These three composers, however, do not write for an élite, nor even for a specifically religious audience. After all, if one were so concerned that non-believers would be misinterpreting one's spiritual intentions, one would give up composing and live in a monastery. A prayer can affect an agnostic or an atheist just as much as a Christian, even sometimes more. Nevertheless, it is a paradox that music of such enormous simplicity can make such demands on its exponents in their search for something 'beyond the notes'. Then, too, this music is 'mindless', in that it is selfless, concerned with the Creator rather than the created.

There is also a connection with Ferneyhough's view of the function of a score as 'a visual representation of a possible sound' (quoted by Heaton) and of the performance as an approximation. Though Ferneyhough obviously holds the view that the score may be many other things besides, Tavener and Pärt (and even Górecki) would probably join him in saying that it is a visual representation both of a possible sound and of something apart from that sound. In other words, it is an ikon. (Tavener has frequently compared his music to an ikon, and Pärt, who is also Orthodox, has spoken of music as a poor relation to prayer.) This could alarm performers who do not wish to become monks!

Some other composers have also become committed to an aesthetic or spiritual simplicity that does not necessarily relate directly to an adherence to Christianity. David Bedford and Giles Swayne have both written works in recent years that demand a simplicity of spirit from the performer. In Swayne's case, it derives from the refreshment of his work with the study of indigenous African music. In some respects, too, Horatiu Radulescu (to whom Heaton refers as having found a successful path through the jungles of complexity and banal naivety) and Giacinto Scelsi exploit a degree of simplicity, but their work is less theologically transparent, more orientated towards the western 'art-music' tradition than Pärt's, Tavener's or Górecki's. The same is true of the post-modernists in Christopher Fox's definition as quoted by Heaton (i.e. their concern

with 'autonomous, regular structures' as in Glass's *Einstein on the Beach*), though I believe certain examples of this kind of writing have come very close to the overtly ritualistic aspects of Tavener or Pärt. Glass's *Akhmaten* in particular is an intensely ritualistic work, even though it is actually far more successful as an opera than his other stage works have been. There are also para-liturgical works from the overtly religious composers approaching the secular by way of the sacred, the inverse of attaining the ritual via the minimal. (In this category I would place Górecki's Third Symphony and Tavener's *Akhmatova: Rekvien.*) Stockhausen has been interested in cosmic meditation for years: the jump from *Stimmung* or *Atmen gibt das Leben . . .* to Pärt is but small.

From an educational point of view, it might seem that we all need to go to seminaries to penetrate such clearly religious music. (This would bring a fourth element into the eternal triangle of composer, performer and listener (or musicologist!).) But then this is probably no more necessary than studying with René Char in order to understand Boulez. Performers and listeners must each decide for themselves how far they wish to enter into a work, how long they need to meditate. Perhaps if the composer writes *less* on the page he implies that there is actually more work for the performer and listener to do: because composers like Górecki, Pärt and Tavener write less, they are 'more than composers'. Like Camus, if they were to become no more than writers, then they would cease to write. Probably the monasteries would gain three former musicians, and the concert-halls would lose three monks.

¹ For recent articles devoted to these composers see Adrian Thomas, 'The Music of Henryk Mikołaj Górecki: the First Decade', *Contact* 27 (Autumn 1983), pp. 10-20 and 'A Pole Apart: the Music of Górecki since 1965', *Contact* 28 (Autumn 1984), pp. 20-33; Susan Bradshaw, 'Arvo Pärt', *Contact* 26 (Spring 1983), pp. 25-8; Peter Phillips, 'The Ritual Music of John Tavener', *Contact* 26 (Spring 1983), pp. 29-30.

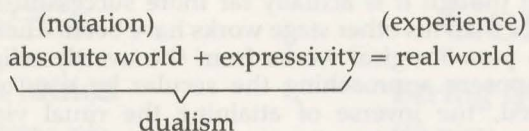
² Tavener's *Vigil Service* has in fact been issued on disc (Ikon Records IKO 16/17).

James Ingram

The Notation of Time: a Reaction to Richard Barrett's Reply

Apart from being pleasantly surprised to discover that my article on the notation of time had not after all sunk without trace, my immediate reaction to Richard Barrett's reply was that he was simply perpetuating several widely held misconceptions which I thought I had effectively demolished. His main problem is that

he does not understand my central thesis, which was an attack on the following dualism:



Barrett's précis of this is simply wrong.

One of the problems with using this scheme for ordering one's thoughts on notation is that it is very easy to feel that one is being logical while one is in fact losing touch with reality. This is precisely Barrett's problem when he advocates '... a hypothetically accurate realisation...' and the use of more and more distant tempo relations. As I have pointed out, experiential tempo relations are limited by human short-term memory. Barrett's absolute world, on the other hand, is that in which tempos are directly related to the physical configuration of machines. If he wants to hear his pieces accurately performed, then he should realise them mechanically. Should this be the case, he would be better off not using the standard notation at all, since it contains restrictions deriving from its having to be read in 'real-time'.

Another area of misunderstanding is that of 'tempo'. My position is not that I deny its existence, but that I don't think it is a *necessary* part of music. I also believe that the single tempo of reference, which co-ordinates music written in the standard notation, should not be confused with the complex feedback mechanisms which co-ordinate the parallel processing in biological systems. I have nothing against reintroducing symbols for tempo relationships ('subdivisions' or 'irrationals') or criteria such as that bars should add up, providing that the relationships are simple enough to be experiential.

Barrett tries to defuse my criticism of the standard notation by pretending that the notation which results from that criticism is only the product of my own stylistic requirements. However, in contrast to composers of the 1950s and 60s, I was not designing a notation *separate* from the standard notation, but removing those parts of the latter which are related to tempo in order to isolate a core of notation which can be used in situations where (simple) tempo relations do not exist. The 'Ingram notation' is not an *alternative* to the (supposedly untouchable) standard notation in the way that, for example, Christian Wolff's notation, from the late fifties and early sixties, is.¹

The world of experience is far more subtle than any absolute world we might like to devise, and Barrett's preoccupation with accuracy (with respect to some absolute standard) is therefore misplaced. In a 'real-time' notation at least, style is not notatable, and the lack of absolute meanings for symbols means that composers are increasingly having to work closely with particular performers, or to be content with giving them a larger share of responsibility for the result. (The former case requires a certain humility on the part of the players, the latter that the players accept the responsibility!) I am myself quite happy to write pieces designed for players who have developed a strong style of their own.

The era (which began in the 18th century) in which composers could take performance practice more or less for granted is rapidly coming to an end. (Electronic music studios have always resembled the monasteries of the Middle Ages in that local performance practice has to be learned before a composer can think of starting work.) It seems to me, however, that the increasing importance of 'local style' is a not unwelcome development. Apart from anything else, the currently raging information and media revolution makes criteria, other than those simply based on quality, boringly totalitarian. The structure of music publishing and management, the meaningful curricula for practical music courses and the nature of international superstardom are all changing...

¹ See, for example, Christopher Fox's excellent article 'Music as Social Process: Some Aspects of the Work of Christian Wolff', *Contact* 30 (Spring 1987), pp. 6-14.

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