MUSIC AS VIBRATIONS AND AS FLYSPECKS

Observations of a Music Bibliographer on the Unfamiliar Effects and Inherent Perniciousness of His Chosen Objects of Research.

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It is one of the curiosities of our language that “live” music should be that which will not survive. Like fruit, music keeps in cans or when frozen.

Like so many other human achievements, music has been preserved in written records. We know the past not through our memory of events but through documentary evidence, most of it preserved on paper. Axiomatically, that music which predates our written records is pre-historic; so then also is any music which we may hear which has not been notated or recorded. Paper enables the musician to benefit from the past. As we shall see, it also commits him to the past, developing his art into one of understanding, interpreting, learning from, and building on the basis of the past.

This study undertakes to survey the relationship between music and its documents, in terms briefly of (1) basic reasons; (2) history; (3) effects; and (4) future prospects. The subject itself inevitably evokes a wide range of responses, from precarious speculations to the most painful of truisms (“tear up his scores, and where is Beethoven?”). While I shall hope to develop the speculations out of some of the more significant of the truisms, quite clearly my conclusions are contemporary and highly personal rather than the product of any timeless reasoning. The activity of handling musical documents, I believe, could not have found the meaning which I am here proposing without the benefit of rather basic and widespread changes in our general intellectual attitudes during the past few years.

To be sure, we have always had misgivings about our musical heritage being preserved on paper. We concede that, until recordings came along, we were completely dependent on notation for saving our great musical masterworks. But we still feel the need to be both skeptical and demeaning of the paper. The notes we laughingly pass off as fliespekcs, of which there are two varieties: the dead dots which our tiresome scholars study and analyze, and the silly dots which our mad composers trace in order to make the great idiotic compositions of today. The fliespekcs are a mere reflection of the action, the harmonious vibrations in which is em-
bodied music itself. The fact remains that, without notation and its painstaking formulation and study, our music itself would be an achievement far less significant than what we know and enjoy today—considerably less well developed, clearly an anachronism in our age, truly pre-historic.

What has led Western Man to go to the trouble of committing music to paper? First and most obvious is our belief that a musical entity is suitable for and deserves re-performance, which can best be accomplished through preservation—that its sounds, or at least their component relationships, ought to be heard again. This belief may be based on two attitudes. One is a moral, even a religious responsibility (“we must save this”), the other a volition which comes from enjoyment (“we want to save this”). We believe—and quite correctly—that oral tradition is fallible, that the passing of a message by word of mouth is not trustworthy, especially when the message is complicated.

Apart from preservation, we wish or need to accommodate a middle man. Divisions of labor usually result as our civilization becomes more sophisticated; in this instance the creator becomes separated from the re-creator, that is, the composer from the performer. Sound itself is transmitted by performer to audience; the notation enables the composer to communicate with the performer. Behind both, apart from but governing both, as something of a Platonic ideal, is the abstract concept of the work of music itself.

Third, we seek a wider circulation of a work. The music becomes part of the repertoire, not of one performer exclusively, but of many. Thanks to notation, the performer no longer needs to commit the work to memory. We are thus involved in the act of publishing, which requires promotion and publicity.

Implicit is the attitude that music should be shared by performers—an admirable sentiment at any time, and probably the exception in the larger course of music history. Such generosity departs from the practice of the artist’s repertoire being a closely guarded secret. In eras of great virtuosity, to be sure, the notation may become the merest of outlines, in which case the publication is no act of generosity at all. The masterful performer shares the text with his colleagues, and then in comparison to them shows his superiority of skill and taste.

Finally, somewhat opposite to altruistic sharing is sharing for profit. Music becomes a commodity, a means of making money, a basis for commercial gain. Subject to copyright—a “literary” or “intellectual property,” of all things—it provides the musician with a means of survival. He can flout the gods who had prescribed his
lot as one of starvation, and, with exceptional luck, get rich and lose his musical soul entirely.

Out of such considerations, notation on paper—for all intents and purposes a permanent medium—has joined forces with an art form which is essentially fleeting and impermanent, made up of vibrations which are produced, resonate for an instant, and are gone—which live and die in the tragedy of immediacy. (The word “evanescent” was a favorite in describing it in the Romantic era.) In their essence sound waves, and therefore musical compositions, are momentary, and this we should not forget: such is their limitation, also their virtue, and their significance today.

The commitment of music to paper thus results in an alliance between two media, one visual and the other aural, one directed to the ear and the other to the eye. When the occasional and inevitable family conflicts arise between the two, the notation always loses. This is as it should be, since music was originally, and is essentially, sound and not paper.

We can see the way notation loses out as we follow the current fashion of pondering our everyday idioms. We adapt an old military expression and speak of a performer “facing the music,” meaning that he has chosen to do his own thing which is not J. S. Bach’s own thing. The printed page then brings him rudely back to orthodoxy. (Thus, in current colloquialism, have our fliespecks functioned as the fall guys in the Great Creative Cop-out of Western civilization.)

We also use the German term Augenmusik—music of the eyes—in speaking of a composition which is more rewarding in study than in listening. The term is not precisely appropriate: a better term might be Kopfmusik—“head” music, or at least “heady” music. If the fact be known, there has been very little true Augenmusik in the sense of music pleasing to the eye. As a graphic art, musical notation through history has fared very badly indeed. There have been very few great masterpieces of music book production. The thrilling prints of Petrucci, the first great music printer, and the handsome early engraving of Domenico Scarlatti’s sonatas come to mind; but beyond this even the most experienced music bibliographer will have trouble finding examples of which he can be proud. The early twentieth century saw several attempts to make music beautiful on the page through specially prepared music type faces, fine paper, elegant design, and tasteful decoration. The results were hardly successful. Music which is visually attractive almost inevitably, and most unfortunately, becomes affected in its appearance. The performer wants his instructions stated in as clear and unornamented a version as possible—and in view of the
speed and exactitude with which he must grasp his instructions, his needs are indeed critical. In printing, better an ugly legible statement than a beautiful illegible one. Similarly in publication: better an ugly edition of good music than a handsome edition of bad music.

Through the course of Western history, at least up to the twentieth century, music has found permanence by imitating the printed book. Music has enjoyed a free ride in the vehicle of literary texts; and as a result music has had to go where the literary vehicle was willing and able to go. This influence has yet to be extensively studied or appreciated. At this point, then, a survey of the main events in this history is in order.

We find the earliest notation of Western music, as it is traced back to the Middle Ages, already involving either numbers or words. Pitch levels are based on mathematical relationships. The names of these levels are assigned with word syllables, as in solmisation, or later with the letters of the alphabet themselves. Musical rhythm is derived either from the natural rhythm of spoken words, or later from mathematical subdivisions of time duration.

With the invention of printing in the mid-fifteenth century, the development of music printing a few decades later, and the emergence of music publishing soon after 1500, music becomes all the more strongly committed to words. One admires and is fascinated by the achievement of the early craftsmen who conceived the first music type faces; one also respects their output, which provided the permanence for most music written during a span of two centuries. Musical notation by 1500 had already come to resemble what we know today, to the extent that it consisted of symbols arranged in a line, like the letters of a word. To be sure, the staff lines themselves caused the printer some difficulties which he never solved completely; but it is hard to doubt that movable type, as soon as it was invented in the days of Gutenberg, was destined to be applied to music. Early type could not directly designate instructions for musical color or harmony. These two elements, we might observe, are in themselves less significant in Renaissance and early Baroque music than they were to be later.

Someone someday will perhaps defend the hypothesis that printing contributed to the transition from polyphonic music to that of the continuo period. Would figured bass have been adopted if performers could have had printed chords to read (and, by having had more of them to read, would have learned to sight-read them)? Was there also in the late Renaissance, as part of some larger subconscious arch of civilization, a need and desire for “line,” for simple linear construction in music? For the first time, man dealt
extensively with books, where one thing happens at a time; and at this time his imagination and interests were first being stimulated by a knowledge of exploration and travel, involving a person going to only one place at a time: perhaps such factors helped to discourage polyphony, in which several lines are presented at one time.

The great sixteenth-century commercial empire of music publishing, based on movable type, finally collapsed and was replaced around 1700. As early as 1620, new music type faces were seldom being designed. This is only a detail in the story of this period, to be sure—the Thirty Years War and the various forms of puritanism had ravaged Europe, and in fact new type faces of any kind were rarely to be seen. In music, the old type was used in religious service books, in treatises—again reflecting a tie to the printed word—and in popular song anthologies. Progressive instrumental music suffered in particular. No notes were available for rapid passage-work, and chords could be constructed only by carefully chipping two or more pieces of type and fitting them together.

We can thus add the upheaval of 1700 to our list of those musical revolutions which have obligingly happened every century, on the century. In this instance, liberation was not from a tired and corrupt artistic tradition, but from a book trade best suited to doing other things. Music from this time forward was on its own course in the publishing world, using engraved plates rather than movable type. With independence came also the loss of the usual channels of distribution and registration control: the librarian today can seldom rely on the standard historical bibliographies for evidence on published music. The circulation of some music even went underground, although partly for reasons of control over performance: Italian opera, for instance, conquered Europe not through transmission in typeset editions or even engravings, but through a highly developed manuscript copying network.

We can also plot a two-hundred-year historical cycle: music printing around 1500, music engraving around 1700, and sound recording around 1900. The implications of the last development are perhaps the most staggering of all. The marvelous Siamese-twin conveniences—permanent storage of the sound itself, and mass-media distribution of sound—are obviously very great technological "breakthroughs." Typically, they have eliminated production workers (i.e., musicians) and require more service workers (i.e., managers and electronics repairmen). At the same time, the surviving production workers are infinitely more effective: they reach a wider audience, and incidentally get paid slightly better. But typically the inventions have also led to many of the ills which beset music today: the virtual elimination of regional non-conformity; audience apathy; the decline of "live performances," at
least of the institution of formal concerts; and in time perhaps the elimination of the performer, the composer in the de-specialized world of tomorrow communicating directly with his audience by creating his own sounds. Even now, the craft of music engraving is dying. Nobody is really sure what music publishers themselves are up to, and while they claim to be happy, neither the composers nor Wall Street seems to care much for them. The era of music on paper may thus now be regarded as the proper domain of the historian. It has become part of the past from which we are expected to learn something. What then is our heritage of music on paper?

What characteristics of our music are the result of paper? We have considered what we want when we commit music to paper: more important is what we actually get. In what ways—pace McLuhan and the ambiguous verb which he has taught us to say together—“is” the medium the message? We speculate and surmise, but with no real certainty: there is of course no parallel civilization with music not committed to paper with which we could make a clinical comparison. Even so, we can develop several lines of reasoning which tell us what the marriage has done to one of the partners. From this we can anticipate the freedom and to a lesser degree the loneliness which will characterize the newly found single life.

Let us begin with McLuhan’s concept of the linear—the idea of progression from one point to another, such as we experience in countless ways: reading a text from one word to the next, traveling from one place to another, reasoning logically step by step, growing from childhood to adulthood. Before printing we communicated in “auditory” rather than “physical” space. Our communication, being mostly oral, took place in time rather than through the two-dimensional visual surface of paper or other documents.

It is wrong to say that auditory space is not linear, as I sometimes think (but am really not quite sure) McLuhan would have us believe. In its various forms—primitive, pre-Renaissance, and that since the invention of printing—music is always committed to a temporal “line.” Line as perhaps been emphasized, or more systematically conceived, since the invention of printing. The devices for notating the elements of music were fixed long before the Renaissance, and then accommodated in movable type. Rameau’s formulation of the harmonic progressions in the eighteenth century, the monumental Western codification of its practices, is a complex system of rhetoric and logic rather than a grammar or spelling guide, the appropriate counterpart to the succession of words on a
printed page. When confused by new music even today we say “I don’t follow,” as if we were lost in an argument or discussion.

Line, the term we use for the sequence of sounds in time, is an essential dimension to all music, the other dimension being the variety of the sounds occurring in a single moment—color, and in a static sense, harmony. Line has certainly been conspicuous in the art music which we most highly esteem. We admire and are moved by music which brings out the “long line,” be it an Urlinie in Schenker’s musical analysis or the delicate spinto affectations of a great lyric soprano. Italian and German music, one might speculate, are generally more linear than French. The frequent abandonment of line is regarded as a hallmark of the new music, foreshadowed by the Romantic color made possible by the technology which produced the modern symphony orchestra. Composers are supposed to delight now in bright bursts of sonority—perhaps for purposes of being non-linear, unconsciously or self-consciously, possibly also to wake us up and keep us awake, and perhaps because the two are one in the same. In many of the non-Western musics, I am told, the linear element is also less conspicuous. Even in the most advanced music of the future, line is inevitable, since time—like physical space—has dimensions. Music always has a line, although it is possible that because of printing the line is more conspicuous.

Second, the printed page of music offers escape—a refuge from the bright glare of musical sound. The metaphor of a “bright glare” of course, is logically inappropriate, and in the same way as musical “color” is. Coming from the world of light rather than sound, it is useful only by way of suggesting the peculiar way in which sound engulfs us. Sound varies in loudness, and usually the hearer can locate the source of the sound. But we can not avoid sound by turning our head as we can avoid looking at a visual object.

It is important for a listener to be able to get away from music. This was felt as early as the Renaissance, when the audience came to be placed further away from the performers, especially the large groups of performers. Thanks to opera, the proscenium arch tended to be used for music as soon as it was devised for the theatre. In more recent eras the classic escape at a concert has of course been sleep. Today earphones offer a further element of privacy. Having the music we want when we want it is an unprecedented and staggering blessing, the only limitation being our ability to absorb very much of it at one time. We will still want and need to get away from it at times. It may prove to be one of the typical ironies of history that, at the very moment when we
have the totality of the musical repertoire available, we will least
care about it or need it.

Third, paper makes possible analysis: the printed page helps us
comprehend music by allowing us a limited and a different access
to it, enabling one set of senses to be reinforced by another. Music
on paper lends itself to a varied manner of comprehension, the lay-
ing out flat on a two-dimensional surface making possible an im-
pression of the totality at a glance. The score becomes a map of
the terrain; and while there is admittedly no way to know the
countryside better than through a good walk, we can correct many
of our errors if we take along the map.

Fourth, and most important in many ways, is the prospect of
betterment made possible largely through analysis. The composer
can study the past and learn from it. He learns to hear his music
"in his mind’s ear" as interpreted through his eyes; and from this
he can discover his own errors and correct them, his weaknesses
and strengthen them. In an abstract way, his work can evolve in
its perfection. He can work as a Beethoven, re-examining his
achievements and thereby building an organically conceived type
of music—keeping in mind all the time, of course, that there are
also Mozarts who are no less great for having comprehended
intuitively so many of the relationships which are to him so
thoroughly a rational process.

Fifth, paper offers tangibility. Sound, being impermanent, is also
undependable. We ask the man we deal with to "put it in writing";
and we argue endlessly after a concert, always about what the per-
former accomplished, often even about what sounds actually were
heard. Control becomes possible with the printed page—the per-
former’s job becomes one of making music in terms of conditions
spelled out, the degree of freedom depending on the music. Stravin-
sky would have the conductor of Le Sacre acting largely as a cuing
metronome; the composer of Neapolitan opera, of a concerto arriv-
ing at a cadenza, or of a pop tune intended for a jazz combo, draws
in only the rough sketch, asking the improvising performer to take
off like a liberated bird, making sure only that the flight follows
the suggested course or lands at the right airport. In all such situ-
rations, the written notes, being fixed, are the means of control.
Through our copyright laws, they take on the characteristics of
real estate and personal property. They get bought and sold, and
have resulted in music industries as concerned with self-perpetua-
tion as our great corporations. The notes engender their own laws
and rules; and they get hauled into court because of those
regulations.

Finally, they also get us into heaven, if they’re good enough.
Permanence, and the prospect for improvement, together lead to
immortality—to timeless musical monuments, the concept of the
heroic Romantic musical genius leaving footprints on the sands of
time. Through paper, music, long assailed by puritanism as sinful
and ungodly, achieves revenge, offering its favored practitioners
its own brand of salvation apart from the rules and regulations of
the church: in effect, “instead of getting to heaven by being good,
live it up, write a great symphony, and you’ll make it.”

It is thus much in order here to recall a lovely old German canon
with the following text:

Himmel und Erde mussen vergeh’n,
Aber die Musici, bleiben besteh’n.

Literally translated, “Heaven and earth must pass away, but the
musicians will always remain.” Really quite outrageous. Today the
words would probably read instead,

Soon the Establishment ceases to swing,
Leaving musicians a-doing their thing.

Or, as our feelings may become more specific, “When our institu-
tions collapse of their own cumbersomeness, our cultural centers
go bankrupt, our paper turns to pulp—then we’ll be left with
music.” The innocuous Sängervereine who perpetuated this ditty
certainly never thought of doing any such thing, but they have
indeed brought us face to face with the doom of the flyspecks, the
fall of the gods, the movement of the tide which will smooth the
sand, erasing the footprints of the 3 B’s.

The Armageddon we are talking about is not in itself the great
battle going on today for social change, the eradication of poverty,
or the rise of the non-white races—although the two are con-
ected: music is part of society, and there are obvious parallels
between our social and our musical establishments. By way of a
brief digression, we might observe that even if the parallels did
not exist, music would almost surely play a conspicuous role in
social conflict. Its well-known emotional appeal is only half of the
picture. Existing as it does in time, music is the very essence of
change, of creating beauty in a context of impermanence. In days
of uncertainty, it is symptomatic that we should so often hear the
expression, “Play it by ear.” To the musician the phrase means
memorizing the notes and then executing them. The world of com-
cerse flatters him by defining it even more broadly, as going into
a difficult situation with no fixed course of action at all in mind.

Music’s message is less obvious than that of words and pictures;
thus it becomes the medium for reflecting those pulses and
rhythms, those subconscious feelings and sensations which other forms are unable or unwilling to express or reflect. Music may be harmless and lovely in its purity as an autonomous art form; but as a means to an end, it can much too easily also be highly potent, intellectually stultifying as only an emotional appeal can be. If musicians are less “involved” today than their music is, perhaps this is because they can see the whole process of reform as merely one more mind-blowing operation, at least at the stage where music gets into the act. They can be sympathetic with the cause of social justice; but they also have strong impressions of how democracy in America has preferred mayhem and inanities on television to live artistry—how popular education has produced technicians rather than humanists, and how the more abundant life resulting from the battle against poverty is conceived largely in terms of Gross National Product.

Musicians perhaps have a better pipeline than we give them credit for. Their music has frequently revealed some important things about ourselves which we were not ready to accept. But they have also been all too quickly ridiculed for the attitude “My kingdom is not of this world” or “after all the blue meanies get bumped off, we meek little rascals will inherit the earth—the Bible tells us so.” Thus it is well to return to the little German canon to note that the word is “Musici,” and not “Musica”: what will remain is not the music itself, but the musicians. We really must be allowed to stretch the point here and say that music-making is what will remain. The musicians’ bodies and talents, like their compositions, must be regarded as part of the Himmel und Erde which will pass away. The musical experience is fixed in the human condition, and beyond this in the vibrations of the stars.

Music on paper has obviously played a large role in the process by which music has become increasingly committed to the past. Fifty to a hundred years ago, concerts came to favor the “tried and true” at the expense of the present. Within the past fifty years, our musicologists have sought to fill in the gaps in the panorama of Western musical development. Today the musical experience is largely an archival experience, our values those of the historian. What we make of our musical past may bother our sense of honesty, and quite appropriately. Hitler loved and used his Wagner; and the modern administrator loves and uses his Machiavelli. But to deny that our most cherished musical experiences are important to us and in some way bettering is dangerously close to a denial of that vague but important link between the humanities and humanity.

We all piously insist on a need for musical vitality. The price may be expensive indeed. Probably we would need to abandon the institutions which encumber our music, not only the flyspecks and
recordings in our libraries but also the stultifying etiquette of our concert life. Also vulnerable are the concert halls themselves—indeed they are probably the very proof of Parkinson’s “law” about institutions deteriorating when they move into an edifice properly suited to their image of themselves. Along with all of these monuments, alas, must go the Art of Fugue and Messiah, the Mozart concertos and the Beethoven quartets, Otello and even Wozzeck. We will never excel them—such is one of the obvious assumptions today, and whether inherently true or false, it will be true as long as we believe it.

With this in mind, I must take exception to a well-intentioned but wrong-minded defense of the arts in our society today on the basis of their excellence. We do indeed need excellence; and the level of excellence in the arts is indeed high enough to be a model for other activities today. The experience of music, like that of her sister arts, is one of stimulation, accomplishment and pleasure; and such being the case, the already high level of excellence will be further heightened by competition in an inevitably overcrowded profession. In practical terms, the results are likely to be less happy. For economic reasons—supply and demand, together with the technological “breakthrough” in sound recording mentioned earlier—the Gradus ad Parnassum is missing some steps near the top. The boy who practices seldom gets to Carnegie Hall. The excellence toward which the vast army of our educators must work must be fitted into a context in which amateurism, rightly and understandably, equals amateurishness, in which local pride is often an emotionally charged but valid excuse for quality. The ascent from the great plains, vast if less arid than we imagine, to the Olympian heights, is sudden, steep, and with frightening odds against survival. “It’s warm in here—yes, perhaps for violinists”; and therefore, “If you can’t stand the heat, get out of the cotton patch.” And as a result, the Global Village Philharmonic will soon be impeccably performing the opera omnia of Western music, giving us with pushbutton convenience all the listening pleasure we want. Rather than justify music on the practical grounds of its excellence, one should perhaps accept its total uselessness as its greatest virtue—it does less harm than politicians or scientists. Far better one should hope and work for the impractical, unpredictable, but now highly possible: an aesthetic right-headedness of some sort, comparable to the recent moral righteousness over Viet Nam in this country, serving to remind us that the musical experience is more rewarding in achievement than in gratification, being in essence a creative art rather than a consumer commodity.

Rather than justifying music in terms of an administrative value in our society today, it would be nice to think that we might seek
to apply one of the administrator's favorite laws of positive thinking: when faced with two alternatives, come up with a third which, with instinct and effort going for it, will prove to be brilliantly appropriate. Can we keep the past without being its slave? The mind boggles at what the answer might involve: but experience leads to the hunch that somebody will be singing about it before the mind stops boggling.

A dispassionate and analytical glance at the popular music of today will perhaps help to renew our faith. Its texts usually tend to strengthen our respect for the social values of adolescents; and similarly, its musical content leads to a sanguine hope that a new creative era is at hand. In comparison with most of the popular (and much of the classical) music of the past, its content is indeed richly varied, imaginative, and frequently quite skillful in its construction.

As for the future of music on paper, this is altogether more predictable: the dictator is alive and well and living in central Siberia, available for academic appointment. As long as performers and scholars continue to work with the past, the examination of a composer’s documents will be a necessary experience, not to mention a moving one. As for the composer today, the notion that he learns from the past appears to be temporarily out of fashion. The Romantic genius saw the past as irrelevant in the light of a divine blessing, and so the composer of today sees it as subverting his originality, no longer relevant. The fact of the matter of course is that composers of any age develop their craft, a skill in the handling of their materials. In the learning experience, musical documents will maintain their importance. They are the giants, in the medieval metaphor of Bernard of Chartres, from whose shoulders the dwarfs of succeeding generations will be able to see more, and more distant things.

It is more than a cunning trick of a parsimonious librarian to suggest that our repertoire be shifted, quietly and en bloc, to his watchful custody. The care and feeding, and to a degree even the protection of the giants (sensitive as they are, and susceptible to disease, despite their great strength) should belong to specialists, and not the general public. Rather than become infatuated with the giants, or throw stones at them, our society will be far happier helping our midget composers climb onto the giants’ shoulders—perhaps watching a few of them become giants in their own right.

Musicians learn first to read music, then to recognize the danger of playing the notes and missing the musical experience. As historians we examine our notation and come to appreciate what it has enabled us to have in our music; we should then look to its larger function, as both a preserver of and a stimulants to music itself.