

Arnold Schoenberg, “New Music: My Music” (c. 1930)

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1. IDEAS

Perhaps people as a whole do not sufficiently consider that I am perhaps saying something which cannot be grasped easily or straight away. Consider; if I utter a simple idea, which I base on phenomena that are obvious, then people can easily follow. But if an idea presupposes experiences that cannot have been everyone's, or that are not familiar to everyone, then some people will be quite unable to follow. And, if in expressing such an idea, one uses special resources connected with the subject in question, the difficulties become far worse.

An example, to elucidate this:

Let us assume that I had the chance of talking to someone who lived 100 years ago, saying to him ‘The weather is bad, so we shall need transport to get to the theatre.’ This will be clear, straight away, to anyone of the kind. But if I say: ‘In weather like this we can't go on the bus, because we should be wet through even getting from the bus stop to the theatre’ ...By now, a man who

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knows nothing of buses and bus stops will be out of his depth. And as for my saying: ‘In weather like this we must take a taxi, but we must set out earlier than usual because the driver will have to drive slowly’ ...Then [— + — + +]

All the same, there is nothing particularly profound, nor anything particularly new, about the latter idea, which is sure to be incomprehensible to anyone from before our own time. Just as certainly, uttering it is no achievement. Do we not feel, though, that if a man is anxious to be widely listened to, it is up to him to say something the others *did not know before*, but would be better off for knowing? Something that needs saying, then! Or is a man like that, who believes he knows something of the sort, obliged to keep silent, because he will not be understood? When, for example, a man somehow succeeds in finding out how things look on the moon is such a man to keep it to himself; will he have to keep it to himself, because the only concise and concrete language in which to express it uses scientific terms? Is such a man to keep quiet, then? Or, if he does after all speak, is he to be abused, because no one can understand him? Is one to be free to abuse such a man, as one pleases? [—+—+—+]

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If I now put it as follows: consonances are easier to understand than dissonances; and though dissonances are harder to understand, they are not incomprehensible (as the history of music indeed proves) so long as they occur in the right surroundings — then nobody will be able to dispute them.

[...] The present-day musician's ear has learned to manage without the smoothness of consonances. It has learned to keep quiet about the frequency with which dissonances occur, and indeed they have lost much of their frequency, or, in some cases, all. One recalls, for instance, that in earlier centuries the minor third counted as a dissonance; it was hard to understand. Nowadays one could state it as follows: dissonance may be put on an equality with consonance so far as comprehensibility is concerned. Moreover: the question whether dissonances or consonances should be used, and to what extent, is not a question of beauty, but only a question of comprehensibility.

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2. MELODY

Here is another difficult thing about my music: its melodic steps. The thing hard to grasp is not each and every step; it is their progression. This is inherent,

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above all, in the harmony — in what I have already said about dissonances. It seems to me self-evident that dissonant combinations of sounds imply a different kind of melodic writing, as against consonant ones. If the harmony is primitive, then the melody must also be so, and vice versa. But accompanying a simple melody with a dissonant harmony, like present-day composers, seems to me as comic as wearing the primitive clothes of a primitive peasant, and rounding it all off with a top-hat and patent-leather shoes.

People must realize that there comes a time when a musician is no longer at ease using the same old interval-progressions. For in matters of melodic novelty and individuality (that is to say, the thing by which the musician establishes his inventiveness, his right to be listened to), interval-progressions are the strongest influence.

But even apart from this:

Do you believe a fencer, a wrestler, a boxer, a tennis-player would remain unbeaten for long if he always employed the same succession of lunges, holds punches or strokes? Do you not think this would soon be noticed and suitably countered? Of course, a musician who for ever repeats familiar things, whose progression one already knows by heart before it happens, can hardly be bettered, or only by losing interest or withdrawing one's attention; that is to say, one becomes bored.

To lay claim to one's interest, a thing must be worth saying, and must not yet have been said.

3. REPETITION

Here is the greatest difficulty for any listener, even if he is musically educated: the way I construct my melodies, themes, and whole movements offers the present-day perceptive faculty a challenge that cannot yet be met at a first hearing.

The causes of this difficulty lie in the following characteristic qualities of the way I write:

1. Substantially, I say something only once, i.e. repeat little or nothing.
2. With me, variations almost completely takes the place of repetition (there is hardly a single exception to this); by variation I mean a way of altering something given, so as to develop further its component parts as well as the figures built from them, the outcome always being something new, with an apparently

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low degree of resemblance to its prototype, so that one finds difficulty in identifying the prototypes within the variation.,

3. Not only are new sections, as so further developed, linked one to another or juxtaposed or lined up — all in the greatest variety of ways — but, particularly, almost the only aid to one's perception of all these types of combination is logic and an acute sense of form.

To elucidate these factors I should say the following:

In general, music is always hard (not even relatively hard) to understand — unless it is made easier by repetition of as many minute, small, medium or large sections as possible. The first precondition for understanding is, after all, memory: if I have no remembrance of the table, this is enough to prevent my understanding the sentence, 'The man is large', because I do not know what 'large' means. But the precondition of memory is recognition; if I do not recognize what the word 'man' signifies, then I cannot remember him either. If, then, in music, a figure is so constituted, so lacking in character, for example, or so complicated, that I cannot recognize it and remember it, then correct understanding of all that follows — all that results from it, follows from it — is impossible. This is perhaps the reason why, throughout music, as much as possible is repeated as often as possible, especially in simple music. For example, in Strauss' *Blue Danube Waltz* the first phrase is repeated seven times, and that is why the whole melody is so easy to grasp. Minor variations do indeed occur, but they simply ensure variety, a certain diversity, without making it harder to understand.

So one can make the following formulation:

The more easily graspable a piece of music is to be, the more often all its sections, small or large, will have to be repeated. Conversely, the fewer sections are repeated, and the less often, the harder the piece of music is to understand. If one wishes to be easily understood, one must keep harping on the subject in question, and coming back to it: 'I should help him,

now?’ ‘Surely you won’t let him down?’ ‘Yes, but don’t forget, he is my enemy, and I should stick my neck out for him?’ ‘True, but now he needs you.’ ‘Yes, but how did he behave when I needed him? ...you keep forgetting that.’ Yes, certainly; he keeps forgetting it, although the other man keeps recalling it.

Nothing is any use here; and in music it may also be no use to keep recalling things. But mostly it is some use. The certain thing, though, is the

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harmful effect of non-recall: one does not know what is being talked about. Now, if I recall that I confessed to repeating little or nothing in my music, then you will rightly ask, ‘Why? Why make it so hard for the listener; why not make things easier for him, in the way he needs; why say once only things that are hard to perceive and remember even when heard repeatedly, so that one completely loses the thread and doesn’t begin to comprehend all the things that come later?’ To this I have to say: ‘I can do it no other way, and it does not work any other way. Only, I did not choose to write like that, I do not go out of my way to write like that, and it would be a relief to feel I might do it differently.’

In the army, a superior officer once said to me: ‘So you are this notorious Schoenberg, then.’ ‘Beg to report, sir, yes,’ I replied. ‘Nobody wanted to be, someone had to be, so I let it be me.’

Supposing I now asked myself, why does somebody have to be? The only possible answer is, ‘I don’t know.’ But the reason why there is no other way: were I prepared to be as discursive as one must be, in order to be widely comprehensible, my works would all last 10 to 12 times as long, and a piece which now lasts 10 minutes would play for two hours, while a whole day would not suffice to get through a longer one. Were each figure first elucidated by repetition, and each of the resulting small sections repeated at various points, and so on, then I should certainly be easier to follow; but on grounds of sheer length, people would be less than ever able to follow me through to my destination.

How far would one get, in trying to discuss a house, if one had first to explain what it is, and what it is like? If one had to say: four vertical walls, with windows and doors, and a roof on top — and, eventually, to explain even what walls, windows, doors, roofs, are? When one refers to a house, anyone has a good idea of it and all its important features; if one has more to say on the subject, one can assume of any listener that he has an ever-present image of a house.

That is how music must proceed, if it sets out from complicated figures, to arrive at still more complicated ones. The word ‘house’ shows how we use terms representing the sum total of a great number of qualities; similarly, this kind of music must operate by putting together complexes whose familiarity is taken for granted, so that other complexes of the same kind can follow, in the expectation that with all their reciprocal relationships,

similarities, differences, and so on, they will be so grasped as to be linked in logical succession.

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