

On form and content in music

14 July 1998

To the WSWs Editor

In recent WSWs postings on jazz history, IR quotes John Andrews as writing 'Music is by its nature the most abstract of all art forms, yet its allure lies in its ability to concretize the most fundamental human emotions', and goes on to ask 'But how does music concretize the most fundamental human emotions? I never thought of music in this way'.

Some of the most fundamental and perplexing issues in the aesthetics of music are raised here.

I think that to describe music as 'the most abstract art form' is to presume a continuum of concrete/abstract which is questionable, and certainly undialectical. The problem with music arises because in its most significant cases (say, the string quartets of Bartok or the improvisations of Charlie Parker)--which it is certainly not wrong to describe as abstract in a sense--the most striking element is the absence of content in the way that there is content, for example, in a novel: roughly, its narrative; or in a painting: its image. Music of this kind lacks narrative and image, and in this sense lacks content comparable to the ways in which such sister arts can be said to have--and be discussed as having--contents. Music has no semantic reference, no vocabulary, no tense, no perspective, no person--except in the most metaphorical ways of attributing such things, and so to attempt to discuss it in these terms would really be to miss what is most essential to it.

Hegel wrote somewhere in his Lectures on Fine Art (I can't find the place just now) that every form is the form of some content, and every content is the content of some form. That is a most helpful piece of dialectics, whose application to the case of music could guide much original and creative theoretical work.

What is most striking about 'classical' music (I use the term in its broadest sense) is its tremendous emphasis on form over content. I listened yesterday to Mendelssohn's Symphony No. 3. The chorale-like

opening, answered by arabesques of violins alone, to describe only the first minute of the introduction, says absolutely nothing about anyone's biography, or physiognomy, or any ensemble of social relations which novels might narrate or paintings image. Yet these musical sentences (another metaphor) most emphatically provide the motivated listener with a sense of their exquisite formal arrangement, of inevitability, of a measured and august tread, of some--yes, abstract--elements from human life and imagination. Only music can do this in this way. Fine music addresses itself to deep levels of human integrity, intelligence, wit and sensitivity, and embodies and focuses these things. Perhaps that is what John Andrews is getting at in saying that it concretizes the most fundamental human emotions.

So the first thing which I feel must be said in relation to the citation from Hegel above is that the case of music forces us to reconsider what we mean by form and content. If we can only define each of these in terms of the other (which I think is true) then the existence of an overwhelmingly formal art form requires us to expand, correspondingly, our conception of what counts as content in art. And that might well force us to reconsider what counts as art in life, or, put differently again, what culture is. The profit system is incapable even of beginning to address this; on the contrary it has brought genuine culture to the verge of extinction.

I would like to propose to WSWs correspondents a discussion of some of the primary texts of musical aesthetics. I could post a brief annotated bibliography if anyone requests it. Out of such a discussion (which has obviously already begun) the forces ranging themselves around this web site could begin to create a new kind of music analysis, theory and criticism which articulates the essentially humanizing nature of musical experience; something which professional musicology under the sway of postmodernism is not inclined

towards, but which could contribute significantly towards the renewal of socialist culture.

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See Also:

What bebop meant to jazz history

[22 May 1998]

A letter to John Andrews: Two questions about jazz history

[28 May 1998]

The Aesthetic Component of Socialism - A lecture by David Walsh

[9 January 1998]



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