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A MUSICIAN UNDER THE INFLUENCE

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Whose Music? A Sociology of Musical Languages, Graham Vulliamy, Trevor Wishart, John Shepherd, Phil Virden. Foreword by Howard Becker. London: Latimer Press, 1977; Washington: Harvester Press, 1980. pp. 296.

The introduction to this book, and the tone throughout, inform the reader that this is a ground-breaking study meant to stimulate "re-examination of traditional assumptions about music." It does so although it helps if the reader is unfamiliar with the development of sociological music theory since Weber, and if, further, one is relatively unhampered by details of music history or comparative musicology, and has no philosophical predispositions towards a theory of culture which can account for the effectivity of artistic production in terms empirically sound and analytically dialectical.

The book is composed of a series of essays by the various authors singly or in collaboration. Shepherd's work is the most theoretically ambitious and comprises the first half of the book, with some assistance from Wishart, a British composer. Regarding this section it is misleading to talk about musical "languages," since the subject is western European art music of the classical period, and the approach lacks a comparative study of other musical languages. This limitation creates problems in interpretation apparent to any ethnomusicologist and to which I will return. The remaining essays discuss musical social stratification, mass culture, the sociology of musical education, and "radical culture". Finally the authors provide a glossary of musical terms, offering a clarity in technical musical matters not attained by the "terms" of reference in social theory which they have chosen to employ.

The book begins by attacking current musicological theory for its failure to place musical meaning in a sociological context. The criticism is just, and the argument for a sociological orientation in the study of "meaning" in music is convincing. But the absence of clear reference to any existing writing on the sociology of musical form[1] offers an early indication of the theoretical limitations of the work, the authors of which appear far more pioneering in their analysis than is in fact the case. Shepherd argues that western classical music reflects, in its harmonic structure, the social structure of capitalist industrialist society, and the major focus of his work is towards a defense of this argument. Shepherd's critique of the attempts of musicologists to explain musical "meaning" places them epistemologically in the context of social and philosophical developments in "advanced industrial civilization." He argues that until their assumptions are revealed and criticized, musicology will be

unable to provide a cogent analysis of the "meaning" of music. The musicologists he discusses[2] disregard music's role as a social symbol in a specific historic context, and thus mystify the meaning of music by reinforcing the split between form and content, thought and feeling, material and idea, art and society. To challenge this dualistic epistemology "ultimately brings under scrutiny the entire centralized social-intellectual structure of industrial society". Shepherd insists that "Music has meaning only insomuch as the inner-outer, mental-physical dichotomy of verbally referential meaning is transcended by the immanence 'in' music of what we may conceive of as an *abstracted* social structure . . ." Thus the familiar discomfort of trying to "represent" music verbally is here both reinforced and apparently solved by the "objectivity" of structural analogy. The "immanent" meaning is discovered by recognizing that "music is . . . an open mode that, through its essentially structural nature, is singularly suited to reveal the dynamic structuring of social life, a structuring of which the 'material' forms only one aspect." Thus culture and society are "immanent 'in' the potentially creative articulation of specific symbols." We are not told what makes the articulation of symbols "creative" in this context. This discussion of contemporary musicology grants legitimacy to its analysis only to the extent that it acknowledges "*structural* conformity between music and mind." (Shepherd's emphasis)

Shepherd is disappointed also with music sociology for discussing its situation but not its form. Weber and Adorno receive passing mention, but their theoretical positions are not dealt with substantively. Adorno is criticized for aesthetic elitism, while his contribution to political cultural theory or to historical analysis of musical language is passed over. Weber's theme of rationalization is visible in the approach of the authors, but his work is not discussed. Other music critics and historians make no appearance, presumably because their analytic assumptions are not based on a sufficiently broad theoretical model. But these rejections are premature, and Shepherd's response to the epistemological challenge is more heroic than progressive. His ideas derive from new mentors: McLuhan, Ong and other structural anthropologists (though the approach lacks an ethnomusicological dimension), and Basil Bernstein, who at least seems willing to consider the interaction between society, media, and consciousness as the source for a theoretical analysis.

Shepherd proposes that the epistemological barrier separating musicologists from consciousness of social meaning also prevents modern society from self-consciousness. This division demands a critical and reflective self-consciousness for the critic wanting to analyze cultural forms within his own society. Shepherd's strategy, however, is to revert to a time-machine jaunt to "pre-literate" society as a source for comparative analysis. Both "pre-literate"

and "industrial" societies are described in the abstract, as total and holistic entities. Shepherd describes the experience before the development of literacy and ensuing technology, centralization, and division of labour. Here he discovers the fatal "oral-visual" split contaminating modern consciousness. If we are to believe Shepherd [and Wishart], the phonetic alphabet and the subsequent spread of literacy through the movable type press have been chiefly responsible for an enormous and mainly unfortunate transformation of thought and experience since the pre-literate age. Writing has irrevocably severed thought from experience, under the guidance of the ruling classes; as a fundamentally destructive force, it is held responsible for modern technology, Newtonian physics, idealist philosophy (commencing with Plato), materialism, alienation, elitism, the hegemony of the centre, nationalism and the power of the modern state, class stratification, aesthetic dualism, the monopolization of the music industry, and the harmonic evolution of European music since the middle ages.

Like McLuhan, Shepherd introduces an impressive number of considerations into his analysis. The patently linear and simplistic historic scheme, in other words, disguises itself through its enthusiastic multiplicity of factors. This approach to social communication arrives at an almost unqualified condemnation of post-feudal society and names literacy as the driving force behind its catastrophic development. Given the political orientation of the current literacy debate in Britain and elsewhere, this position is most peculiar. Following McLuhan, it projects a frenetic paranoia against print the only comfort of which lies in the "revolutionary" technology of television, an absurdly de-historicized optimism as mythological as the rejected musical epistemology. While Shepherd does dutifully assert the potentially dialectical quality of literacy in the growth of consciousness, the dialectic is lost in the analysis of music history. Clearly, he believes, with Marx, that the ideology of the ruling class is the ruling ideology; unlike Marx he fails to indicate any dynamic activity which might challenge this hegemony.

With the aid of structural diagrams (they look rather like the "building blocks" of chemistry texts), Shepherd traces the development of pentatonic music in medieval society and charts its erosion by tonality as the feudal system gave way to modern industrialism. He argues that pentatonicism, the harmonic form of medieval plainchant and polyphony, encodes an "unequal" but not "hierarchical" relation between tones, since there is no central or dominating note.[3] Any note in the pentatonic scale can function as a "fundamental", reflecting the uncentralized and unalienated social relations of feudal society. The three-dimensional extension into bourgeois tonality is the result of a new consciousness created by literacy whereby explicit tonal relations signify a spatialized, unified world-sense characterized by homogeneity and centralization. The "magnetic pull" of tonality towards the

dominant key expresses a quintessential belief in progress as part of industrial man's "increased control of the environment" which leads him to "conceive of manipulating and 'improving' the environment." Shepherd's doubt that any "improvement" has occurred is made clear by his compression of time-consciousness, centralization and hierarchy, nationalism, explicit codes and conceptual distance from experience, and alienation into one "ideology" of "industrial man".

Musicologists might doubt that tonal centres are unique to European music.[4] Further, they would challenge Shepherd methodologically for his preoccupation with harmonic structure. As Dalhaus argues the concentration on harmonic phenomena "as opposed to differentiated presentations of thematic and motific relationships almost always serve the verification or refutation of a theory and not the interpretation of a work . . .". Thus "analysts are conscious of not being able to determine sufficiently the functional connection of harmony with the other dimensions or components of form."[5] This concentration on harmony limits social correlation to a laboratory proof rather than a history of western music. Such a history requires more complex *musical* analysis — whether of the relationship of harmonic modulation to the dominant key signature, or of other features such as the derivation of melody or rhythm from folk music or other cultures, or various psychological attitudes towards the "spirit of progress", or the apparent relationship of the composer to the dominating musical ideology of his own time.[6] Such a history must consider changes in melody, motif, rhythm, mood, texture, and in the *social function* of the music. Perhaps Shepherd would argue that his focus on the harmonic structure stems from the imperative of connecting musical form with social structure. But an overly schematized view of musical evolution cannot guarantee an adequate social or historical analysis, and is more likely to impede it. Such obstruction is certainly the case here, where structural determinism prevents the consideration of a multitude of musical qualities expressing precisely those individual and social tensions, ruptures or negations, dreams, questions, enchantments and disenchantments, isolations and solidarities, criticisms and transformations, that Shepherd's history forgets.[7]

While Shepherd shows clearly that bourgeois music did not evolve through autonomous internal development as an art form, he fails to describe any expression in music of the often contradictory relationship of artists and their work with dominant ideology. Harmonic enrichment is not understood here as part of the early bourgeois critique of feudal authority, or as the musical expression of a new and progressive ideology of freedom propelling music towards new form and new functions.[8] Rather tonality is depicted as fated individualism in the web of authoritarian industrialism, leading to the abstract alienation of atonalism and the serial technique. Not only are the

achievements and ideologies of the bourgeois revolution frozen into schematic diagrams, but in this chapter, entitled "The Musical Coding of Ideologies", the concept of ideology itself is named and dismissed in the same moment. Who could maintain that Mahler is the same bourgeois as Verdi or Bartok, or that Beethoven's "ideology" is the same as Wagner's? What is presented is not ideology but structure. Nor is it music. Nor are there composers. We can discover no developing contradictions between art and the civilization he describes, surely one of the major features of modern western culture. Musical creation loses, along with its autonomy, any constitutive role in the development of consciousness, a role it would (and does) require more than *structure* to fulfill. By engaging the language of harmonic tonality, all music becomes affirmative of dominant culture. In Shepherd's analysis art becomes a victim, or even an accomplice, in this "civilizing process" which is painted in the darkest colours, and about which he offers only momentary remarks of consolation. Since western music is undeniably "coded" in tonality, his analytic method precludes the discovery of creative contradiction. As with the satanic achievements of Mann's fictionalized Schoenberg, "there is not a free note."[9] Technological rationalization becomes the implacable face of the universe. In his impressive historic panorama, nothing *happens*.

A new determinism, wherein "encode" replaces "reflect" as the unclear signifier of causality is involved. The concept of human agency is blurred by the assumption that experience is unconscious, and that its categories cannot be creatively transformed. This assumption creates some embarrassing problems for the second, more "concrete" section of the book, as the authors turn their attention to the critical mistreatment of popular culture. In an essay on social stratification in twentieth century music, Virden and Wishart demonstrate their uneasiness in introducing their own analytic assumptions.

> We do not deny that tonality remains the dominant musical language within the "European" tradition. As with any cultural field there will be a tendency for the dominant "language" to invade others that might try to coexist. So, in music, we should expect that the conventions of the forms favoured by the ruling elements would exert a great deal of influence upon the music of the general population. We should equally expect almost a complete lack of "pollution" of elite music by any music generated by the peoples . . . What we might expect, however, assuming that the great differences in musical preferences and productions between the classes are not differences between good and bad musics, is that there are

> different rules for generating (both good and bad) music for the ruling and working classes because what the musics have to say is quite different.

In response to the bewildering issue of the musical "discourse" of social classes in contemporary society, we turn aside from how we "should expect" social hegemony to assert itself in music — *not* to contest the assumptions either theoretically or historically, but to prefer a democratic aesthetics of co-existence. Their "separate but equal" model for music evaluation attacks some prejudices in socially conditioned aesthetic values, and proves something can be "going on" in popular culture, but the question of what that something is remains abstract as long as it is separated from the social and individual processes which materialize the form, or which the "form" in turn activates. To defend popular music from the orthodoxy of Adorno and traditional music scholarship, they approach music as "stratification of symbols" in relation to a "continuum, the poles of which embody at one extreme high mediation, explicitness and lineal structure and at the other more immediacy, implicitness and circularity." The authors' application of Bernstein's linguistic model to a study of blues pentatonicism is stimulating (but what about its inevitable return to the dominant key signature?) and avoids much of his implicit value orientation, but it also avoids problems of understanding "symbols" in relation to cultural tensions. Hence the role of constitutive creative production in relation to social conflict is unresolved. Though the authors recognize the need to analyze active contradictions within contemporary popular culture, their analytic resources are not adequate to their intentions. How Afro-American music articulates a developing consciousness as it changes from its "intentional" pentatonic origins remains unclear. The dilemma finds its most poignant expression in the quotation concluding Wishart's eclectic concluding essay "On Radical Culture": in response to a query about "post-Capitalist" society's power to integrate subversive innovation, a British film-maker responds that the problem is not one artists can solve and that the working class should never trust left wing intellectuals.

In its focus on immanent structure, the analysis adds little to Adorno's work on the structure of musical language;[10] and calls into question the author's ostensible dislike of his work. Their own scheme is too linear to provide further insights where they are really needed, especially into such matters as the analysis of musical form as language active within the complex and dynamic relations of musical material, compositional procedure, listener reception, and the musical and social context mediated through the foregoing. The work shows evidence of some discomfort with critical social theory, writing about music, writing in general. It evokes as much uneasiness as it

displays, although perhaps of a different sort. The authors offer little evidence of pleasure in music, little discussion of the experience of listening or of how musical experience varies with style, intention, or context. Shepherd especially seems to understand both musical creation and listening as unconscious experience determined by structural form, which is itself unconsciously determined. As a result there is an underlying pessimism about critical creativity, and about music's ability to affect either subjective or social change. This perspective seems, on the surface at least, paradoxical for a book attacking "bourgeois" epistemology and the impact of social inequality on musical experience. The paradox is attributable to the theoretical impetus of the work as a whole, which becomes problematic as soon as the authors begin to construct their own historical "model"; their approach ultimately challenges the very intentions which make their contribution to the sociology of music important.

The authors would agree that any concrete work in cultural studies must "make a strategic theoretical choice as to which definitions are most effective," such choices are "bound to have theoretical consequences."[11] Without examining the role of creative activity in social and artistic production, the authors cannot explain either the dialectics of music history nor the social or theoretical implications of their own activity. Musicology may benefit from their demand that the study of music must consider the social forces within which music functions, and which it articulates; but the critic must also demand a more comprehensive understanding of how music itself as a mode of cultural creation participates in the changing consciousness and experience of living human beings and of social classes. The consistent intention in *Whose Music?* is to counteract the idealist view of music as an autonomous expressive realm, to show that it is shaped by social forces — the McLuhanesque version of these social forces is part of their problem. While the authors succeed in showing where music is determined, they do not succeed in showing where it is *not*. Shepherd's determinism may be an advance from the biological determinism of his mentors among the anthropologists, or even from the schematic determinism of orthodox Marxism, but it is not yet great progress. His desire to attack the dualistic contradictions of western thought by presenting it with its own history breaks down, not because he avoids history, but because, under the fire of the attack, the historical concept is appropriated by technological thought.

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Notes

1. Extensive recent bibliographies are available in K. Peter Etzkorn, editor, *Music and Society: The Later Writings of Paul Honigsheim*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1973; and in the *International Review of Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, Vol. VII No. 2, 1976; Vol. VIII No. 1, 1977; and Vol. VIII No. 2, 1977.

2. Suzanne Langer and Leonard Meyer.

3. To clarify this "technical" confusion about musical syntax, it should be pointed out that in pre-tonal music it is *precisely* a central note which provides "consonant" resolution, ie. defines other notes in a melody as "dissonant" in relation to itself. In tonal music the "hierarchy" involves not single notes, however, but triads, which define other chords as "dissonant", i.e., requiring resolution. Thus the entire classical "system" is structured on a complex pattern of thematic and harmonic language which "makes expression for the first time an element of the total structure." For this reason "Tonality is more than a harmonic system (although it is sometimes convenient to speak as if it were only that). It carries with it a complex set of presuppositions about melody, rhythm, and form, none of which can exist independently of the others." Charles Rosen, *Arnold Schoenberg*, New York: Viking Press, 1975, pp. 27-28. The critical "discovery" of the hierarchical functioning of harmonic modulation as the basis of the classical form is attributable to the whole history of 19th and 20th century composition, whose progressive loosening of the "hierarchy" of musical language, i.e., of the stability of the syntax of structure, received its radical culmination with the work of Schoenberg some seventy years before the publication of this book.

4. This objection was in fact raised, in response to a paper by Shepherd, by members of the Society for Ethnomusicology during a panel at the 1980 SEM conference.

5. Carl Dahlhaus, "Some Models of Unity in Musical Form", *Journal of Music Theory*, 19 (1), Spring 1975, p. 7.

6. For a relevant discussion of "visual ideology" in painting as simultaneously socially determined, autonomous, and internally constitutive and changing, see Nicos Hadjinicolaou, *Art History and Class Struggle*, London 1978.

7. For instance "Polyphony, tonal harmony, the predominance of instrumental over vocal music, the prevalence of the dance rhythms now taken for metrical norms, the ascendance of major and minor, in short all of the fundamental structural and also socially functional characteristics of recent western music, are historically the outcome of periodic breakthroughs and consolidations resulting from just this continual infiltration over the centuries of secular traditions into the preserves of high art, and the reverse influence as well, in violation of all the precepts of the church theorists and against the sometimes deadly resistance of the authorities." Norman Cazden, "A Simplified Mode Classification for Traditional Anglo-American Song Tunes", 1971 *Yearbook of the International Folk Music Council*, p. 55.

8. "The great musical struggles under feudalism started under the banner of the 'struggle for true music', reflecting the fierce struggle of the bourgeoisie against feudalism. At the beginning of this struggle the bourgeoisie is in direct opposition to the church and thus also to the feudal function of music. The feudal function of music made possible the social purpose of evoking and intensifying in the congregation a state of repentance, but the new function in bourgeois society is that of allowing a harmonious development of the individual personality and is directly opposed to the feudal function." Hanns Eisler, *A Rebel in Music*, 1978, p. 44.

9. Thomas Mann, *Dr. Faustus: The Life of the German Composer Adrian Leverkuhn as Told by a Friend*, 1948.

10. See Theodor Adorno, *The Philosophy of Modern Music*, New York: Seabury Press, 1973; *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, New York: Seabury Press, 1976, and other writings; also W.V. Blomster, "Sociology of Music: Adorno and Beyond", *Telos* Number 28, Summer 1976.

11. Stuart Hall, "Some Paradigms in Cultural Studies", Estratto da Annali-Anglistica (1978, 3), Instituto Orientale di Napoli.