

Essay

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Looking Nowhere and the Language of Contemporary Music

Innovation and Experience

In the modern age, art is required to be new and, at the very least, contemporary. »New« is simply an adjective which only has meaning when it is compared with something else – in contrast to adjectives such as »wet«, »sweet« or »grass-green«. To describe music as »new« can only have meaning when it is established which music is »no longer new«. The debate concerning how we can make this distinction and whether it is even constructive to do so is as old as contemporary music itself.

The word »new« needs to be compared with that, which is no longer new, in order to say something. There often also needs to be a second point of reference. When talking about a new house or a new model of mobile phone, it suffices to explain its newness as: this house or this mobile phone which did not previously exist. In other cases, this explanation is no longer helpful, particularly when we say we had a new experience. When it comes to art, this dimension is especially important. The works, it is promised, open the audience's eyes and ears; they transcend the normal perceptions and the traditional categories of evaluation.

In this case, »new« is no longer only differentiated from things or works that already exist. Subjects and their experiences act as the word's point of reference. If something is new, then always »for someone«. Over and above, if it is possible to present people with a new experience, then it is not a coincidence, rather – we assume – the artists' achievement: They will have succeeded in renewing their own view of the world and their own thoughts about how their music should be created having moved off the beaten track.

Everywhere and nowhere – the universal new

This festival looks to the East – to Russia, China and Japan. What kind of experience can this glimpse afford us when considering the question of what is new? What role does the origin of music play for artistic innovation?

This question collides with a concept of the new, the contemporary and the innovative, in which it does »not« matter from which part of the world the music originates when assessing whether it is in tune with the times. This conception assumes that music is then new when it combines familiar sounds in an unfamiliar way or when it opens itself to new material. Both aspects are, in a broad sense, technical: they pertain to the techniques of the composition and the techniques of the sound production – from the style of playing to the integration of unfamiliar instruments to the wide range of electronic sound production.

When we hear music as art, we are – as many experts think – required, above all, to engage with these aspects, and we expect the composer to be equal to the task. In a globalized world, technical aspects are equally accessible everywhere, and they make the same demands everywhere. Art music is thus international, indeed universal. It ignores boundaries of local or national musical languages. And this opinion appears to be justifiable when we consider that the conceptual and technical achievements of contemporary music – from the beginnings of the serial composition to

the process of serialism, expanded playing techniques and recent developments in the area of electronic media – enjoy a recognition that is completely independent of country borders. Similar to how one began to speak of an »international style« of architecture in the 1930's, we could certainly identify characteristics of an international style of contemporary music.

The contrast to this style is music that remains rooted in its cultural and, as a result, seems antiquated or tasteless against the international standard. The experience, in which we encounter the new, should accordingly also be universal. What happens to be new to any one individual is not a decisive factor; what is decisive, however, is the experience of a listener whom we deem universal – in a way that her artistic experience is not limited by any one tradition. The music as well as the audience should be liberated from conventional presuppositions and associations.

The symbolic power of music

An unbiased experience, however, does not only include the structure, movement and form of sound. It also almost always understands music as an aspect which we can call »symbolic« and which only allows itself to be suppressed with great effort. To experience music symbolically means that it reminds us of something that lies beyond its sounds. These memories are often highly individual: a piece of music, a motif, a sound awakens an experience from our own life's story.

Unmistakable, however, are also the numerous symbols in music, which are more or less fixed in a cultural framework. We informally learn their meaning from an early age. The sound of an organ refers to the sacred building of a church, that of a brass band together with a strict meter and catchy melodies to a parade. This does not only apply to Gebrauchsmusik (utility music), which aims to exploit these associations, such as for advertising purposes. It has also pertained to art music for centuries: Haydn and Mozart worked with these symbolic values – that we today conceivably no longer recognize as such and replace with other understandings – no less intensively than Mahler, Puccini or Ravel.

Symbolic values are ever present in our musical experience. However, they pose a problem for the question of what newness in music is. Firstly, symbolic values oppose universalization: they are always attached to a horizon of practices and implications which we have already experienced and understood. That is why, secondly, such symbolic values can »never be completely new«. At the very least, they are associated with something that is already familiar. Moreover, this association is not simply invented or produced. It is often already there, or it is formed without our conscious intervention, just as a link to our memories is formed. As a result, symbolic values are, thirdly, that which the international progressive thinking in music wanted to overcome, namely patterns and habits that arise and are imparted without reflection.

On the other hand, it presumably depends specifically on the symbolic aspect of all music, if we assume that the experience of music is affected by its origin. That also holds true for looking to the east. If contemporary music is per se universal, then it is irrelevant if we look to the East, West, South, North or to ourselves. If looking to the East is relevant, then it is – as it could be considered – because of the symbolic values of the music, which characterize it in a particular way.

Clichés – We and others

The problem of clichés immediately comes into play. With a cliché, we are dealing with a sound or a sound figure when we assign a particular, stereotypical meaning and continue to use it in this sense. The cross-cultural clichés are particularly interesting and particularly critical when taking spatial distances into consideration. If we want to look to the East, it would then suggest that we must look for the characteristics, which indicate music to us that is »eastern« – Japanese, Chinese, Russian. We are all familiar with these characteristics. We learned them at a young age. They are, however, primarily »our« symbols – the symbols with which Germans, or middle or western Europeans denote and recognize the products of a »different culture«.

Typically, when we label something as cliché, it is meant to be deprecating. That does not do justice, however, to the complexity of the problem. If it is true that we unintentionally hear symbolic values in music, then we cannot avoid clichés. Clichés and the associations they inspire are distinctive. They give the listener a reference point. At this point of reference, much can happen.

In the worst case, it does not go further than the association and mere recognition. This circumstance is overshadowed by an illusion of newness: When we hear that banalities, which remind us of something »foreign« or exotic, have been worked into the framework of a musical language with which we are familiar, then this connection can seem as if it has allowed our eyes to be opened to experience something new. New, in this case however, is at best the combination of symbols, which are well known in and of themselves. If this juxtaposition goes no further than surprising stimuli, which reduce to stereotypical associations, then the apparently new experience can scarcely be separated from exoticism. Such exoticism, however, is only appealing because it assumes a limited and static cultural horizon against whose background the clichés emerge as decorative effects.

It is different when a formula that appears exotic is examined and addressed according to its melodic structure, its sound qualities, its rhythmic form, so that it enriches »our« musical language. The cliché dissolves, and the lines between that which is one's own and that which is foreign are blurred. No clichés are needed here, just careful listening. It may appear as if the innovation, which can arise out of this, is purely technical. Would it, however, be correct to assume that addressing it technically erases and overwrites all traces of symbolic values? Or does it not belong to the value/quality of an international musical language that the root of a sound figure in a particular cultural context remains audible?

The »international style« – bearing symbols in spite of itself

The value of symbolic references creates a counterbalance to the idea that we can measure the newness of music on a universal scale. And when we take this value seriously, the universally applicable perspective changes. Helmut Plessner formidably presented this change in his great essay "Macht und menschliche Natur" (Power and Human Nature) in 1931 – it was, however, not in relation to music, rather to the universally intended term for human beings. It may well be a step forward that this term for human beings, no longer tied to a certain way of life and culture, appears on the stage of history. In this context, we can also understand the ideas of contemporary art which transcend all national or cultural boundaries.

At the same time, however, Plessner emphasizes: Such a term appears on the stage of »history« – in a certain historic situation and in a certain part of the world. It sees itself as universal, yet stems from its own tradition and cultural association. For music, it signifies that the means of the »international style« can be experienced entirely from the outside – hence from a perspective which conceives of itself in such a way that it is still not part of this internationality. From this point of view, the international style appears to be a »exceptional« style, which moreover – symbolically – refers to a certain context, namely to Europe, to »the West«, to aspects of its culture. Its rational, intellectually characterized features are presumably of particular importance here. An art-form, wishing to free itself of every association with particular traditions, now becomes – in spite of its own self-evidence – the bearer of symbolic content attaching it to one sphere of universal history.

It will be difficult for music, musicians and composers to resist these symbolic conceptions. They can insist that they are misunderstood if the music is linked to memories and stereotypes. They can proclaim that the substance of their music lies in a different area. But is there not a potential for the new and contemporary in that the hearing has such unconscious features which constantly push past music – that the symbolic aspects grow wild, impose themselves and, in doing so, challenge rational, constructive thinking and hearing?

Answers to this question are given by looking East (looking to the global South could achieve something similar) as soon as we see that the east is looking back at us at the same time. This, too, can happen in different ways. In the worst case, this view is a mirror image of exoticism: a cliché is pleasantly reproduced that the European should recognize. We encounter more interesting cases, however, in music, which, in its range of means – its melodies, rhythms or instrumentation – has absorbed and processed techniques of international contemporary music.

With different ears we then hear musical means with which we identify ourselves: they were taken out of a context that was self-explanatory to us. They sound both familiar and foreign – as though we were hearing in another language words from our own, assimilated in the form of citations and appropriations. In this role, they gain a new, perhaps strange sound and meaning. This can go as

far as being parodistic: the international style is worn by music, which has sprung up from other traditions, like a disguise.

What kind of experience is it to hear music which carries the symbolic in its sounds without surrendering to it? To hear something which we feel to be universal, and with which we identify ourselves, mirrored in this way, can be disconcerting. What we traditionally hear as stylistic devices of contemporary music appears, on the one hand, alienated. Could it not also be that our experience of the new and contemporary itself is based on clichés, in that it conceives a series of sound figures precisely as symbols of the modern? At the same time, the expectations, even the clichés whose un-mirrored fulfillment we anticipate, appear alienated when we look eastwards. The alienating and the irony, which ensue when symbolic values clash, incite a special kind of experience.

It would not be an exaggeration to describe this experience as new and surprising. It is, however, just that, because its newness is not alone tonal or technical in nature. Nor is it the result of a combination of techniques or symbols, in which the individual puzzle pieces remain unchanged. The new, surprising experience arises much more from the friction of musical aspects, which we habitually hear in such a way that they include the memory of something outside of the music. This newness does not leave the old behind; rather it preserves it and lets it shine.

The music of this festival is therefore a double invitation: to listen to the richness of those figures of sound which are due to a certain cultural, possibly traditional context and thus laden with symbolism – and, at the same time, to question our own perception of those sound figures, through which we are in danger of slipping back onto the beaten path of clichés.