

CH 3 — A COMPOSER'S VIEWPOINT*

When I was asked to give a talk to your Society about my reactions to CH 3, my response covered a sizeable part of the emotional spectrum in seconds. Firstly, I was honoured that you should ask me, but euphoria quickly evaporated, and I confess my knees played a little xylophonic cadenza at the immediate and horrifying thought that such a talk might entail coming to grips with all 695 numbers in that imposing volume. But momentary panic gave way to the more sober reflection that it would be nonsensical, indeed chaotic, to tackle the subject in that way. As my pulse returned to normal, it became obvious that the most viable approach was to use CH 3 as a broad focus against which I could elaborate some of my ideas on the nature and purpose of music in general, and church music in particular. What I have to say will therefore be an exposition, albeit only partial, of my musical credo.

Following the age-old maxim that it is always best to define one's terms before embarking on a project of this kind, I will begin by offering a few thoughts about the nature of music as I see it. The first thing that quickly becomes apparent is that such an investigation reveals a mass of paradox beside which the well-known 'mess of potage' appears the clearest of consommés. For example, music is clearly subjective in so far as our judgments of it depend upon our individual reactions to it. But, at another level, music is objective, not simply because succeeding generations of opinion have endorsed its quality, but because the piece under consideration (whatever it might be), is a fine work-in-itself irrespective of what you or I as individuals may think of it. At another level, music is highly technical in character – it could be compared with engineering in sound – yet it undeniably possesses strongly spiritual and even mystical qualities. As a vehicle of communication it is both precise and imprecise. No one is able to define with any exactitude the 'meaning' of music. Yet, at the same time, our response to a work of quality is such, that as we listen, we are strongly aware of the fact that the composer is communicating something, and we are responding to something, which is highly precise, indeed needle-sharp both in meaning and in structure. Music's meaning expresses itself in purely musical terms, and is therefore shrouded in mystery. Yet we are intuitively and certainly aware that if we were able to find the key to music's door, what lies behind that door would be absolutely clear and unambiguous.

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It has been said of music that it begins where other languages leave off. Great philosophers down the ages (for example, Plato) have attached great importance to it, but none more than Schopenhauer, who goes so far as to say that all other arts aspire to the condition of music. For myself, I would not suggest that music is greater or more profound than the other arts, but it clearly differs from them in many important respects. To give but one example, it is the most formal art that man has yet devised – that is to say, it is more purely ‘rational’ than its sister arts, in the sense that its construction is more fruitfully available to examination and detailed analysis. Every note of a Bach fugue can be accounted for in analytical terms, and this approach is an essential aid to understanding, whereas I submit that it would be relatively meaningless, for reasons which derive from the expressive essence of the other arts concerned, to apply similar techniques to a Rembrandt painting or a Shakespeare play. In both of these cases scrutiny of detail, carried to excess, would tend to obscure rather than reveal the artist’s intentions. In music, the reverse is true. It goes without saying, of course, that any work of art is far more than the sum of its exposed parts is able to suggest. But such analysis, in laying bare the skills and the craft of music, plays a necessary role in the assessment of its quality, and provides the lens through which we can more clearly perceive the ‘magic’ element which is an indispensable part of any artistic equation.

It may be that the central role which music plays in most religious observance is itself a reflection or consequence of these mysterious ambiguities. For example, music is more abstract than the other arts in the sense that it is more self-contained, and has no real dependance on things outside of itself. (I suspect that it is probably this aspect of music which prompted Schopenhauer to raise it above the other arts.) This self-sufficiency, and the qualities of formality and abstraction which music possesses to such a marked degree, have obvious counterparts in the field of religious belief. God Himself, is, after all, pure form, pure spirit, self-contained, self-sufficient, unique. In a real sense music also participates in all of these qualities. It is therefore no surprise that the religions of the world tend to sing about their most profound and mystical convictions, because they recognise, consciously or unconsciously, that music possesses to a greater degree than any other medium that has so far been devised, the capacity to approach the Almighty in something like His own terms.

So much for the credit side. But music also has drawbacks, even dangers. Indeed its very strengths can, if wrongly used, be transformed into weaknesses, even perversions. For example, it is clear to all that the performance of music requires highly developed skills

and technical accomplishments on the part of the players. But what is less clearly understood, is that music also requires of the listener a corresponding talent for response and understanding, and that unless the listener fosters this talent in the same way that the performer practices his instrument, the communication between player and listener which the composer intends will be at best only partial, and may even be wholly falsified. This fact is inadequately understood simply because our culture is widely illiterate in musical terms. Many people, indeed most people, seem to think that the act of listening to music is simply a case of making oneself passively available to it, in the same way that blotting-paper absorbs ink. But in fact the appreciation of music is not passive but active, not simply instinctive but intelligent.

Another danger implicit in music is its very capacity to move us deeply (paradoxically, one of the reasons why we value it so highly). But unless we control this great emotional power and use it wisely, unless we approach music intelligently as well as intuitively, our responses will often be corrupted into self-indulgent sentimentality, which is in my view a perversion of music's powers. Worse still, music is nowadays almost universally used not for itself, but as a palliative, a pain-killer. But music should be an inspiration, an aspiration, not an aspirin. It is not only improper to use it as a drug – in certain respects it is sinister to do so. Consider for a moment the hours and hours of bland 'muzac' which invades our ears in airports, supermarkets and the rest. There is no escape from it, one can only submit to the tyranny of mediocrity. This is an invasion of our civil liberties about which I, for one, feel very indignant. But I at least am sufficiently experienced to recognise inferior music for what it is. However, I am beginning to fear that under continued exposure to such cretinous aural wallpaper, the public's capacity to approach music at its true and noble level will become seriously impaired. Such uses of music are, in my view, a cultural attack, an unwarranted intrusion, and a sinister perversion of public taste. I am *not* a gloomy kill-joy, and I am certainly not advocating that we should spend our lives on some musical mountain top. Good music can take many forms, it can be popular or serious, light-hearted or solemn, gay or tragic, but it must always be *real*. By that I mean that it must always be positive, something which confronts the world honestly instead of something which turns aside, or keeps reality at arm's length. I would like to be able to say that religious music has always been conscious of these dangers and has taken pains to avoid them. But this would not be true. The record of the churches in this respect is good but not stainless. There are examples in every tradition of the Church debasing the currency of music by using it improperly. This would never happen if we took the trouble to recognize clearly

music's strengths and used them to good effect. But let us also take pains to identify and avoid the pitfalls which lie in wait. Go for the best in musical quality. Never be seduced by the meretricious because it is trendy, or the third-rate because it is easy on the ear. If you adopt high standards, you may achieve results which will consistently speak to men's souls. If not you will surely create, whatever its temporary surface attractions or utility value, a religious tradition of toothless, neuter, musical plastic.

Christianity and the splintered fragmentation of belief which has taken place over the centuries have had a profound effect on every aspect of life, including music. There can be no doubt that the Catholic Church occupies a place of great honour and importance in the history of western music because, as its major patron from medieval times to the Renaissance and beyond, it has occasioned the creation of a vast number of great masterpieces, and has helped to bring about the formulation and evolution of music as we know it. Unfortunately, in more recent times Catholic confidence in this attitude to music seems to have declined. Waning influence has brought in its wake more democratic and popular attitudes. There is nothing wrong with that in itself, indeed it is highly commendable. But the unpalatable truth is that good music is neither democratic nor popular. As I mentioned earlier, it requires talent to receive music properly, and unfortunately this talent is not equally distributed. The disconcerting and disturbing consequence is that in periods of popularisation there is a very real danger, because such movements tend to express themselves in terms of the lowest common denominator, and the arts cannot live in that kind of world.

The Presbyterian tradition as I see it is very different. Initially fundamentalist and radical, it was deeply distrustful of 'high art'. But the Presbyterian church seems to have graduated to a position where it is now doing all in its power to encourage high quality in the music of its liturgy. But, however our various approaches to music in religion may differ or fluctuate, there is one central point which is not without importance. As I said earlier, religion has helped to produce great composers and great church music. There can be no doubt that such music glorifies and heightens the mysteries of religious belief in a very special way. Yet, it is not really 'religious' at all. Music complements religion as an ally – it is a parallel path reaching out for the infinite in its own way, and sharing with religion the same, common destination. There can be no question of the greatness of religious music being dependent on religious criteria or on its adherence to dogmatic or liturgical orthodoxy. For example, Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, Fauré's *Requiem* and Bach's *B Minor Mass* are all great 'religious' works. But the *Missa Solemnis* is more pantheistic than Christian – Fauré's *Requiem* is a deeply felt re-

ligious document composed by a self-confessed atheist, and Bach's B Minor Mass, though it is completely non-liturgical, and written by a Lutheran, is perhaps the greatest 'Catholic' Mass in existence. I have already insisted on the independence of music, and indeed its true value to religion stems from that very quality. For without independence and integrity it cannot be great, and without greatness it will lack the penetrative mysticism which complements so admirably the religious experience. In other words, if in using music, you seek to compromise it, or to qualify its internal criteria, you will fail. The message here is clear, and I repeat it. Go for the best, reject the bogus, be suspicious of fashionable fevers – remember that it is part of music's ambiguity that sterile posturing can all too readily masquerade as passionate commitment. Demand of music not simply that it move us, but that it move us to think. Require it to challenge and disturb us. Acknowledge the fact that listening to music is not an easy matter, but demands of the listener a constructive effort of the imagination and the intelligence.

Unfortunately, this philosophy of music is never likely to be popular. It is too difficult, even painful, and rejects the widespread tendency to regard music as a comfort, a panacea. Too many people have come to regard it as a source of ready euphoria which can be tasted absently and discarded at will, thereby reducing it to a passive act of evasion rather than an affirmation or confrontation.

The only answer to this dilemma is education. It should be our function to raise the level of public understanding of these matters, because this is the only way that the door to music's wonderful rewards can be opened wide. This educative process can be a rather uphill struggle, because, as I have already said, our capacity to understand depends upon our talent for understanding, and this, obviously, is not given to all in equal measure. But let no one say to me that great music is beyond the ordinary man, for it is simply not true. Some of the most perceptive musical intelligences that I have encountered belong, not to musicians, but to ordinary men and women. In my time as a parish choir master I was confronted in the early days by people almost entirely devoid of even basic musical skills. Yet they had the ability, under training, to transcend their limitations, to tackle music of formidable complexity, and produce results of quite astonishing musical quality. So, in dealing with the man in the street, reject half-measures and compromises, because ultimately they are condescensions of which he has no need.

Let me turn now to some more specific remarks on CH 3. I confess that my first impression was one of envy. I am a great admirer of the literature of hymns which the Reformed Churches possess. Your tradition in this field is very rich, and at its best, is remarkable

for precisely those musical qualities which I have been recommending. There can be no doubt that many of the Scottish hymns and German chorales which appear in CH 3 are peerless little masterpieces. They are as impressive now as they ever were, and their grandeur shows no sign of faltering. There are undoubtedly mediocrities also in this collection, but there is nothing to rival the grotesque poverty of some of the hymns which exist in the Roman Catholic tradition. The catalogue of musical disasters which are in current use in the R.C. Church is unhappily all too large, and reveals exactly those defects of which I have sought to warn you. Sentimentality rather than sentiment runs rife. Superficial banalities wear an air of profundity. Of course we have our successes too, but they are not enough to right the balance. There can be no doubt that our hymn tradition is much inferior to yours. Even in the field of performance you are ahead of us. The singing of Presbyterian congregations that I have heard may not have been particularly skilful, but at least it is always committed, and has a positive, virile quality. In the Roman Catholic church, however, this is not so. By and large the standard of singing is appalling, the approach is heavily sentimental, and only one tempo is used – a lugubrious adagio. I have a private fantasy of God, the great musician, having to call on all His reserves of infinite patience to get Him through some of the offerings which reach Him – or perhaps He wears celestial ear plugs.

The reason for these disparities is that the hymn is more central to your form of worship than it is to mine. Consequently you attach great importance to it, whereas we see it as something more peripheral. This difference of attitude is reflected in our respective hymnals. Catholic hymnals, though they have improved in recent years, are relatively unambitious and vary widely in quality and planning. CH 3, on the other hand, strikes me as being admirably well thought out. It is alive to modern thought, yet fully aware of tradition. It draws readily on international sources, yet takes care to foster native talent. The list of contents makes most interesting reading. It includes, for example, extracts from the *Liber Usualis*, the Psalms of Gelineau, and works by such great composers as Tallis, Tye, Orlando Gibbons, Farrant, Praetorius, Purcell, Bach, Handel and many others. In addition there are some intriguing curiosities, like the arrangements made by John Milton and Julius Rontgen. Add to that, copious fine contributions by anonymous masters, adaptations of traditional folk songs, and from our own century, pieces by such distinguished composers as Sibelius, Gustav Holst, Vaughan Williams, Lennox Berkeley and many more. Altogether 85 twentieth-century composers have been included, among them 16 living Scottish composers. CH 3 is a monumental

volume. While the quality of the individual items is variable (as one would expect in such an undertaking), the general standard of achievement seems to me to be high.

I am also impressed by the obvious policy of periodic renewal and re-edition to which the Church of Scotland is committed, because this signifies an awareness of the contemporary world, and shows a willingness to respond to its changing needs. For example, the inclusion of works by contemporary composers, is most important. Great music of the past survives from its own day because it has those qualities of objectivity and universality which I spoke of earlier. But that element in the music of the past which arises from the social conditions of the period, no longer has the same relevance for us as it did for people of that time. Quite simply, we need contemporary music because we need to comment upon the present state of human affairs, and musicians like myself (albeit much lesser composers) can express contemporary truths and attitudes in a way which the great men of the past cannot. But while I admire the thorough and imaginative way in which CH 3 has been compiled, I might perhaps offer some observations upon aspects of it which could be developed in the future. (I should say at the outset that I do not wish to intrude upon the area which could be defined as theological content. I have no doubt that the texts of some hymns require to be looked at from time to time, and brought into accord with modern thought on such matters. But that I leave to the theologians. My observations will be confined to the musical field.)

It appears to me that all such collections of music should include a proportion of what one might call 'old favourites' (provided always that they have a real function to perform and are not included simply as sops, or as a form of self-indulgence). For example, which one among us has not become deeply attached to an old pair of trousers, or slippers, or a pipe. It would be a hard world indeed which refused to allow us such delights. But any sensible person will recognize when the trousers will no longer fit, or the slippers start to trip you up, or the pipe tastes sour, that the day has come when it is necessary, however reluctantly, to dispose of them. As far as CH 3 is concerned, a sympathetic but sensible policy of review in the field of the 'old favourites' should be maintained, and when time has passed them by, and they no longer have any real life left in them, they should be quietly excluded. But as with the trousers, the slippers, and the pipe, defer the evil day, because strong emotions and affections are involved. Do not use a new broom – it sweeps too clean. Set aside what no longer serves any useful purpose, but do it gently.

Another factor which interests me is one which I will have to pose in the form of a question, simply because I have no idea of the

answer. It seems to me that hymns have not changed much over the last 400 years. Most of them conform to a basic type. But is it beyond our ingenuity to devise a new approach to the hymn – not one which will exclude the ‘traditional’ hymn, but one which will open up new possibilities, musically and liturgically? The reason for this question is that I suspect that the present form of the hymn, while it is by no means exhausted, should be showing more signs of evolution. I do not seek to encourage radical innovations for their own sake, but rather to ensure that the door remains open to the possibility of new developments. At the moment, the theological content may be periodically revitalized, but the musical formula remains the same.

In my days as a choir master, due to my low opinion of so many Catholic hymns I frequently borrowed from the Reformed tradition (Bach chorales, and pieces of that kind), and incorporated them into our services. This had to be done rather surreptitiously because at that time the ecumenical climate was less advanced than it is now. To my knowledge, some Presbyterian churches have been doing something similar for years, in that they take whatever opportunities present themselves to include suitable works from the Renaissance and post-Renaissance polyphonic periods. I am delighted to see this happen, and I hope that this wonderful music will be found by your church to deserve a continued and expanding role in your liturgy. In some cases this situation is already well developed. I remember, with delight, being told by the chaplain of my university that the university chapel choir frequently performed a little *a capella* Ave Maria of mine. Twenty years ago this would not have been possible. It is a sign of our growing maturity, and developing sense of brotherly unity, that this practice of borrowing one another’s good things no longer causes an indignant outcry. Indeed, I doubt whether most people nowadays would even raise a questioning eyebrow. For me, this new climate is one of the great hopes for the future, and I have no doubt that a lease-lend system applied to our musical traditions can only help to foster mutual understanding.

But there is another, more practical aspect which you might consider. Your present use of music is almost exclusively geared to the hymn. But hymns are, musically speaking, miniatures – and the miniature, being of limited scale, is also limited in its range of expressive possibilities. I would suggest that the judicious incorporation of some bigger scale works (motets, anthems, and so on) would allow you to increase and diversify the rewards which you derive from music, without in any way eroding the pre-eminent and central role of the hymn.

I have already commended the policy of commissioning new hymns from contemporary composers, but I would like to pursue

here one of the difficulties which is implicit in this policy – a difficulty which confronts the composer with a dilemma which can be very serious. As you will all be aware, music in our time has advanced very fast, and in doing so has tended to outstrip public taste. Idiomatically it has become very complex, and technically very demanding. But when a composer is asked to provide hymns for a collection like CH 3, it would clearly be absurd for him to provide pieces which were beyond the technical capacity of ordinary people. It might be said that this is a purely practical musical problem. But it carries with it a graver question involving artistic ethics. On the one hand, the composer's common sense tells him that he cannot use his fully developed contemporary style, because it is beyond the performing ability of ordinary congregations. Yet, on the other hand, any question of 'watering down' his style to make the music more approachable raises a very delicate problem of artistic integrity. I think some composers would find this problem insoluble, and I cannot imagine some of them accepting such a commission. For myself, I will not deny that the problem is a very real one. Indeed, in the pieces I wrote for CH 3, it was the greatest single difficulty that I had to face. But I believe that I managed to solve it (to my own satisfaction at any rate). I accepted the fact of the public's limitations of musical skill, and I was realistic enough to recognize that without communication between myself and the ordinary churchgoer there was little point in writing the pieces and, indeed, little hope for the future. The contemporary composer must say things which are relevant to the present, using the language of the present. But in doing so, he need not be bewilderingly experimental or progressive. In my little pieces I retracted some of my claws, but hopefully I have still produced music which is clearly twentieth century in character, and which will, I hope, appear relevant to those who use it, though they may well find that it taxes their skills and understanding to an unaccustomed degree. So the dilemma for me does not arise as long as I never feel that the practical limitations of the situation begin to inhibit or compromise the artistic honesty of what I want to say. But it should be noted that if music continues to advance rapidly in the future, and if the distance between the composer and the public increases further, then this problem may become more and more acute. Even so, I do not believe that there are grounds for serious alarm, because while this situation is present in contemporary music in a fairly severe form, the problem has always existed. It is endemic to every age. Ways of solving it have always been found and will, in my view, continue to be found, because culturally and artistically they *must* be found.

If some of my remarks appear controversial, or if they challenge cherished assumptions, so much the better. In presenting my ideas

I am very conscious of many inadequacies. Limited time has prevented me from developing fully the various issues which I raised. I am aware that I have not attempted to substantiate or justify my convictions. My purpose has simply been to state them as clearly as possible. As I said at the beginning, this is an exposition not a defence. It may well be that I have asked more questions than I have answered, but that is a good thing. If you leave here feeling that these floating questions are important enough to require you to find some answers, I will be well satisfied.

I assure you that I am not a purist in any sterile sense. My insistence that we should recognize, and hold fast to the integrity of music at all times, does not spring from an attitude which is narrowly doctrinaire. Nor is it an assertion of artistic values in some kind of vacuum. On the contrary the point at issue is highly practical, even pragmatic. For if we seek to impose qualifications or limitations upon music, if we seek in any way to force it into a position of compromise, if in our solicitude for the human we neglect its 'divine' qualities, we will produce a stunted and withered growth which will be devoid of those spiritual, intellectual and emotional powers which music can give so richly. In the last analysis my attitude is simple, possibly even naive. Among His other attributes, God is the Great Musician – only the best we can offer Him is good enough.

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