

PART II

Except in rare instances, we have not imagined music moving us into the future. This is understandable, because we cannot imagine what the ordering of everyday life in the future will be like. And in fact we don't much care. Our experience with everyday life suggests that things are not likely to improve.

But going backward in time has the advantage that the disorder of everyday life is removed. And so going backward is the ballgame. While the "stories" of the past, as in history and anecdote, are simpler than the past was, we still have to keep rehearsing them (the stories) to make them simpler and simpler. But with music this effort of simplifying is not required. Music simplifies the past for us. That we were not there, in place, when the music was invented doesn't matter. The place and the beautiful, unreal order surrounding the place comes with the music.

So, we can go back to Europe or Africa or Asia or wherever things were "easy" when the music was conceived, and for a few minutes be relieved of the present.

Most of us go back to Europe, because that is where most of us came from. So our music is mostly "European" in its nostalgia. The predominance of European music is a given, so even people who presumably came from someplace else are caught up in going back to Europe. Why not? Why fight it? We are not going back to a political possibility. We are not going back to reshape the present. That is science fiction. We are going back to "rest" in the past, to be relieved of the present for a few minutes.

Sorry. I was distracted by the myth of the cowboy, the nostalgia for Wagner and for the triumphs of Italian nationalism and by a definition of "performance art" as melodrama. I used the more common definition of nostalgia. I was distracted from what I proposed was the future of music: a continuous, barely changing commodity always in the air and another kind of music caused by this commodity and made by individuals in refuge from this commodity.

The important question in this discussion is what the music of individuals isolated for a moment-of-variety from the commodity-music will sound like. Among the isolated individuals in retreat from the commodity-music that will be played in every

medium for one day and for one day only there will be, in their music, strangeness. What are the origins of this strangeness?

The origins today are, again, nostalgia, but a different kind of nostalgia. This is a nostalgia for a past when music had a powerful political meaning and when musical change meant a political change of some sort, hopefully for the better. I have changed the meaning or use of the term "nostalgia."

Except that the term, "regret," has an active sense, which I think is not the case now, I could use "regret." We have regret for the time when music had a powerful political meaning and when musical change meant a political change of some sort, hopefully for the better. I would have to say, regret the loss of. So, I will stay with nostalgia.

Let us, for the sake of argument, set the beginning of European modern music with Beethoven. That would make it two-hundred years old. By modern I mean that Beethoven, sensing the power of music in his time, thought that he could change things through his music. He thought that by influencing the attitudes of the ruling classes, who controlled the machinery of everyday life, he could alleviate the suffering of everyday life in some degree in everybody. Whether he thought that listening to his music could for a moment alleviate the actual suffering of everyday life in some degree in some listeners I don't know. Probably. But I don't know.

I think he succeeded. Or maybe it is just coincidence. Maybe it would have changed anyway. (This is the artist-as-idiot-savant point of view.) Who cares? Things started changing and some suffering was alleviated. Not all, but some.

Beethoven's idea about the political power of his music to change things has continued to today in America and in Europe. It is, apparently, originally European and now American, too. I would think that it is spreading to other continents, but that is probably only a guess or a wish. As little as I know, I have not heard of the idea being an important part of any other music. (I was once of the belief that big ideas --- for instance, the political power of music --- happened to everybody on the planet at more or less the same time, the result, maybe, of a sun spot, or some virus, but I have left that idea behind, because the more I learn, the less it seems to work.)

I will not pick on other cultures, because I am too ignorant

to withstand the attacks. But I know that the idea of music to effect a social change is at least European, dating (arbitrarily) from the time of Beethoven, and that we (in America) have inherited that idea.

It must have grown with the growing power of music for two-hundred years, because by the time I got in touch, around, say, 1950, it was very strong. It was still strong after the war --- which was in some ways a "musical" war: that is, (1) the bad guys apparently liked some kinds of music and didn't like other kinds of music and they enforced their beliefs; (2) I think it is fair to guess that our leaders couldn't have cared less; and (3) note that after the war, when we "re-built" European culture, at our tax-payers' expense, we re-built what was there before the war. After the war the idea that music was embedded in the politics of change continued unquestioned, especially in Europe, where every composer was a politician. And it was true in America, where every composer was disenfranchised, but still believed. I believed. Every one of my friends believed.

Things have changed somewhat since. Now nobody believes. But that doesn't mean that the idea has gone away. Maybe we are just stunned, as after a big meal the carbo-shock leaves you speechless. The next decade or so will tell.

Back to the question of Roger Reynolds and me. We are getting old. After forty you can't play third base in the major leagues. Merle Haggard says that after sixty you lose your voice. (I think he's right.) We have lost our power. And even if you are under forty, so have you.

The most serious criticism one can make of my music (or the music of Roger Reynolds), which criticism I hear in various forms more and more is: what you are doing is not going to change anything; this piece is "self-indulgent," the term meaning it doesn't mean anything politically. The critic, in my imagination a younger composer, maybe doesn't know where the root of this complaint lies, but it is on his or her lips, because the idea that music can change things is still in force. But unacknowledged. Muted.

Actually, what I have just said is not true. I am rarely any longer criticized by younger composers. Now just newspaper "critics" complain. Times have changed. Twice, about thirty years ago, I had the experience of having a young man come up to me after a concert (these were different young men) to tell me

that he hated my music. In one case the young man had to make a special trip to a party given in my honor. I was flattered, of course, and asked him why he had wasted his time to make the trip --- when he could be home composing music. He said it was important to him that I know. Those were the days. Now I am just ignored in the traffic or treated very politely as an old guy that did it. I will speak more about the current absence of mutual criticism among composers later. For the moment I must stay with the subject of nostalgia.

The problem for the three of us, Reynolds, you and me --- and for all of our contemporaries --- is that we are in nostalgia for the time, only four decades ago, when music had a political meaning. I can remember the time (wow, nostalgia) when almost every piece was more or less earth-shaking. Now, I must admit --- this is like some kind of medical confession --- that few pieces seem earth-shaking to me. They sound like strange sounds never to be heard again. They sound isolated. Not as manic and monomaniacal as early Stockhausen and Boulez. (These are political, not musical, evaluations.) Not as politically confrontational as Cage. Not as eerily unlikely as Feldman or Nono. Just pieces of strange, isolated ideas. That I may never hear again. And I don't mean just among the young composers. I mean everybody.

I would like to insert here a somewhat indefensible theory of mine in order to introduce a long and complicated complaint about a peculiar characteristic of American music. It goes like this. The Europeans who first arrived on the American continent were not, we think, big-time intellectuals or artists or musicians. They were escaping from oppression, real and imagined. They were what we could call, euphemistically, the working class. Their job, immediately, was to cut down trees, build huts, plant crops and in general make what they found as much as possible like what they had left. They didn't bring court music or Gregorian Chant or the beginnings of Bel Canto or anything of the sort. (Probably that's the stuff they wanted to leave behind.) They did bring a kind of unrealized devotional music, which became realized here. But, most important, they brought dance music; that is, music organized around a simple beat, which was expressed in the body. Because everybody has to dance.

Then they brought entrepreneurs, who in turn brought indentured servants (a wonderful term) and slaves, to cut down the trees, clear the swamps, fight the Indians, plant cotton and

tobacco and, hopefully, make money. The devotional music became more and more isolated in the churches. But the dance music --- the African drum beats, the Celtic bar dances, the polka and every other kind of dance rhythm --- was thriving.

Then every successive wave, the Germans, the Irish, the Italians, the Slavs, the Greeks, the Russian Jews brought more. We are inundated --- no, that's not the word --- we are brainwashed with the notion of music as an expression of rhythm to dance to, because that's what the mostly very poor people, who had only that, brought with them. It is so deep in us that we can't find it to cure it.

I am sorry to seem belligerent. I like dance music. I like America. I like our innocent people. I am one of them. But I have come to like, as well, another kind of music, which is in conflict, I discover, with the idea of music as something to dance to. I have come to like a new kind of "devotional" music, which has moved out of the churches into some unlocated, secular place. I say "devotional," because I don't know a better word, but it is music to be listened to, not danced to. In the listening it takes you to someplace you have never been. It is mental. It doesn't require head-nodding. You just sit there and it flows through you and changes you.

I have brought up this point of the difference between dance music (music to be danced to) and "devotional" music (for want of a better word), because Americans keep trying to arrive at some sort of "compromise." Check out the term, "accessible." It almost invariably means the music has a "beat." I don't think there is any reason music has to have a beat, unless you are going to dance to it. It can have a beat. That is a pleasant aspect of some music. I do it myself. But unfamiliar music that doesn't have a beat is discriminated against. The composer knows this. And so the composer is always trying to compromise. This is expressed as "give 'em what they want." This is the musical version of "I can't think, unless I am being interrogated." Which is, in the case of thinking, why we don't have very many free-standing thoughts. We have answers. I catch myself doing this. I wake up in the middle of the night in the middle of a complicated argument, and I realize that I am answering to something that hasn't even been asked. It's as though I am interrogating myself. There is no kidding myself that this is a meditation. I am on trial. Or arguing for something. And so I have begun to notice this in a lot of writing. We don't have meditations, thoughts. We have answers.

We have, in the same way, few examples of music that is a meditation, free of external consequences. I don't mean "meditational" music. I mean music free of external consequences; that is, the consequences of who and whether anyone will like it. I think this compromise has damaged us. It is peculiarly American, because, as I said earlier, when our ancestors (all of our ancestors) came to America, they brought only what the "common" people had, because they came under adverse circumstances --- almost all of them. They brought what they could carry. And so we don't have the tradition of European "thinking" music, we don't have the tradition of African or Asian "thinking" music. We have a lop-sided culture that we have been trying to fix for a few hundred years.

There was a brief few decades, early in the century, when the better-off went to Europe (Germany, in particular) to catch up with non-dance music. Charles Ives didn't go. But everybody else went. They brought back imitation German music. It was good in Germany, but here it was imitation.

Then, in this "serious" music there was a brief flirtation with jazz, which mostly came to nothing, because the black people were better at jazz. And black people could not make "serious" music, because they were oppressed.

Then (this is a chronology) there came American-Serious-Music. It was taught in the conservatories. Every music school had a Resident String Quartet (the cheapest form of ensemble), a Graduate Student String Quartet, and numberless Undergraduate String Quartets. They played American-Serious-Music. The string quartet was the university computer-music-studio of the 1940's and 1950's. The string quartet was the sampler that ate hamburgers.

It is a characteristic of the string quartet to emphasize moving the bow back and forth. The more the better.

Insert: Mr. Arditti, of string quartet fame, complained to Alvin Lucier, in the presence of a large number of people, that he didn't like to play Alvin's String Quartet, because there was very little bow movement, which lack of bow movement made his arm tired. To which Alvin replied, "Why don't you play it with the other arm?"

American-Serious-Music became a matter of moving the bow

back and forth as much as possible, with accents here and there. You might call it sawing. One of its foremost practitioners called the style, "motor-rhythmic." It is characterized by a continuous sawing of sixteenth-notes or eighth-notes (depending on the time signature and the tempo.) Up-bow, down-bow, Up-bow, down-bow, endlessly. You know what I mean.

This is where I came in. I went to music school. I hated "motor rhythms." Gradually I came to hate string quartets, when they got into that sawing, because that relentless sawing was simply a senseless update of the circle-dances that those innocent people had brought with them to America. Lawrence Welk get back. I am sensitive to poverty. Everything about "motor rhythms" was just another version of the polka, the hora and whatever else the dances were called wherever they came from. A circle of mostly poor people holding hands and jumping up and down.

A long way from Morton Feldman. And I didn't even know Morton Feldman existed.

Then there was a period, very brief, no more than two decades, when the "motor rhythms" went away. I think they were replaced in the music schools by something else, but I'm not sure what that was. Whatever it was, it wasn't very important, because it couldn't hold up to the changes happening in Europe and America. The European composers became irrational (and contagious) with Serialism. A lot of American composers got into --- if you will pardon the expression --- "sound." (The pejorative term was "drone.") Both sides were fascinated. What could be more different and more beautiful: serialism and the drone?

Things were looking up.

Then something political happened. If I were into conspiracy theory, I would blame it on the government, because it happened exactly when the NEA happened. But that's impossible. Maybe. "Motor rhythms" came back in a blitz of journalistic attacks on the "drone," in composers attacking one another, in string quartets sawing away, in five-finger exercises at the synthesizer and elsewhere. This time it was called something else. Another label. Same deal. Different name. Personally, I think the reason for the reaction was that the drone had just got too far out. It wasn't satisfying our need to nod our heads in memory of the polka and the jig and the hora.

Also, for some wonderful reason during the two decades of relief from motor-rhythms, many composers got into using words. The words were largely political, the Vietnam War and various other complaints, but the important point is that music stopped being resolutely "structural" and started being "narrative," as though there was some kind of primitive "opera" being born in America. (Note that at the same time the European composers were advocating "burn down the opera houses.")

This turning to "narrative" was maybe as important as the evolution of the "drone." And it was, apparently, in the minds of composers, audience and middle-management, as dangerous as the drone. So, something political happened.

We went backwards.

Thirty years and I was back to where I came in: head nodding while the string quartet played. I stopped composing for a while. My dream had come to an end.

Curiously, at the same time many Europeans went nuts. I'm telling you: sun spots or a virus. "Free improvisation." Wow. I don't want to vilify "free improvisation," because so many musicians like it now and practice it. Obviously, I don't. Maybe I am too old, or maybe there is another reason. I have noticed only, in my own defense, that much of free improvisation does not seem so free. It is a powerful method for finding new sounds without having to wait for the neighborhood orchestra to invite you to make new sounds, but it does seem to me to lack, in some way, a freedom of variety. I mean a variety among styles.

A few months ago I heard a glorious concert by the Art Ensemble of Chicago. I can't remember that they described their music as free improvisation, though improvisation was certainly there in force.

Just last night (March, 2000) I heard a concert of free improvisation by nine professional musicians, some of whom according to the program notes have reputations based in part on free improvisation. One characteristic of the music was indisputable: it came from jazz improvisation. In fact, it reminded me during many moments of a concert I heard in 1970 played by Anthony Braxton, Chick Corea, Dave Holland and Barry Altschul (the era when many Europeans went nuts). It also reminded me of many concerts I heard in 1960 played by the Bob

James Trio. It reminded me of concerts I've lost track of played in the 1950's. In other words, it seems not to have changed much and so it seems unlikely to lead us out of this situation of political powerlessness. It seems unlikely to change things for the better, if nobody is paying attention. The concert wasn't a statement. I don't know why I should have wanted it to be, but I did.

One aspect of free improvisation that seems important to someone from the "outside" is that so much of it sounds like it is a form of jazz.

I don't see why free improvisation has to sound like jazz. There are so many other things to be free of musically. But, I have heard few concerts of free improvisation that reminded me of anything except jazz, except from British musicians. Maybe only the British, after 1970, survived free improvisation free of jazz influences. Why? Because they had a rigid caste system, a Royal Family that spoke German at home, and, thus, a sense of humor. I have enjoyed British free improvisation, because it was like Monty Python does modern music.

That was a mistake. I heard a concert in Berkeley in about 1972 by George Lewis, Douglas Ewert, Rae Imamura and Jacques Bekaert that I think was totally improvised and that did not remind me of jazz. A spectacular concert.

Anyway, I have spoken so much about free improvisation, because it seems so important now. Almost as if there is a contest, in teaching music, between free improvisation and some other form that I haven't heard much about but that I take to be a kind of retrenchment to the incorporation of known ideas --- rhythmically, melodically, harmonically and orchestrally known ideas. I know I am guilty of this, I mean the retrenchment. It is one of those ideas that spread. A sun spot or a virus. But I don't do motor-rhythms.

And I have spoken so much about free improvisation, because I am not much impressed. There is so little variety of style. I wish those musicians who improvise "freely" would come up with a new "idea," a new form of behavior to signal the world that we are not satisfied with the way things are.

I wish free improvisation would make the audience say, "Those people are crazy." Like audiences said about Ornette Coleman and John Cage and Juan Hidalgo and a few of my friends.

I wish free improvisation would divide the audience into the care's and the care-not's. I think divisiveness is necessary to accomplish certain things.

The good thing about free improvisation is that it is generally free of "motor-rhythms" --- not always, but enough. In that respect it is importantly free. The retrenchment has certainly given us "motor-rhythms" of a sort. They seem new, but they are not. I am waiting for another change.

I think, to put my intuition in the simplest possible statement, the future of music --- I mean both instrumental and vocal music (about which I will say more in a minute) --- will include the important change that music will get much faster and much slower. We will move dramatically away from what we think of now as the limitations of what the body can do. I think that, within reason, limitations are self-imposed by habit. This is illustrated in the radical changes we have seen in the last thirty years in sports. The slam-dunk, never imagined, is now a without-which. The triple Lutz, never imagined, is now a without-which (and they are going for four.) The four-minute mile. The sixty home runs. The seventy-yard pass. Etcetera.

There will be more notes played in a shorter period of time, because we will learn from what computers can teach us that we can actually play more notes (and understand them) in a shorter period of time.

There will be more notes sustained over a longer period of time, because we will learn from what electricity can teach us that we can actually sustain our attention to notes over a longer period of time.

The important stylistic novelties that I have noticed and admired while so-called "serious" music in America reinvented "motor rhythms" are two (both in popular music): one is what I believe is called, "New Age Music," which certainly is different and which certainly changed something (and which has remained, curiously, anonymous; someone should look into this). The other is: African-American "talking music." (I won't use labels here, because I can't keep up with the label changes.) This style has become the commodity, and has remained short; that is, modeled on the commodity form of popular music. I don't see why it has to be almost always short (except that African-Americans usually need the money that a good commodity provides). Short can be powerful. But there must be longer stories to tell from the

African-American community. There must be some way that the composer claiming the African-American experience, and who can afford to, can make an "epic" statement, something that lasts longer than three minutes and still has the power of "talking music." (Correct me, if this music exists.)

As you can see, I like African-American "talking music" and I like its "political-ness," though sometimes not all of its politics. I like it because it is not nostalgic. But I think it will come to nothing except "style," and then be supplanted by another "style," unless it gets into the musical population at large. Its dangers --- lots of words --- must be taken up by the musical population at large (especially older folks), must be "assimilated" (oh, God) to do us any good. It must be assimilated, like we assimilated serialism, like we assimilated the drone.

You will answer that composers "assimilated" rock and roll and that that is what I am complaining about. But that's not right. Composers did not assimilate rock and roll until it had lost its power. Composers assimilated "motor-rhythms," the academic music of the 1940's. And lost it.

One more time. We are in nostalgia for the moment, not long ago, when a musical idea could have political consequences. I don't mean elect a new president or change the rules about telling the consumer about what's in the toothpaste, but political in the sense that having heard the music the world is not the same for you anymore.

There are exceptions. There are pieces that definitely are not likely to be a commodity. I play them whenever I have the feeling that I have lost the vision. I will play a few examples later.

I will say it again. We are in nostalgia for the time when music meant something. That is what I mean by nostalgia. We are hobbled by our inability to change our habits about what music might sound like and might accomplish, if it were changed, if it could shock us into paying attention.

The future of music, for us, has to include, logically, the possibility that there may not be any music at all, except for the commodity-music playing in the background. In spite of what I have said about the isolated individual doing it just for variety, just for fun, which is the most likely scenario, there

is the possibility that the variety could disappear. Books and learning disappeared from Europe for a few hundred years during the so-called Dark Ages. (See: "How the Irish Saved Civilization," Thomas Cahill, Anchor Books/Doubleday, New York, 1995.) Music in all of its variety could simply disappear for a while.

I say that this is an unlikely scenario, because certain psychologists (see: "The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind," Julian Jaynes, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1976) have suggested that the brain makes some form of music for some functional purpose, whether we want it to or not, and that, if we don't admit that message as music, we think the gods are talking to us (and we get put away.) In other words, the idea that there won't be any "new" music is preposterous, not only from a common-sense point of view ("she could sing before she could talk"), but in the opinion of speculative science.

But, of course, that depends on what you mean by "music." There could be mad-men and mad-women, safely locked up and singing away, but no music schools. What would the world sound like then?

John Cage famously suggested that we could direct our attention to the "outside" world of sounds, where every sound has a specific meaning (the traffic, the bird, et cetera) and be just as happy. No matter that it didn't work for him (he went back to or never stopped composing) and that his idea followed suspiciously on "1984" and "Brave New World," it is a big idea. The idea that every sound (from the outside world) has a specific meaning (is a "sign," as they say) and that the pattern of those sounds could satisfy us as much as any pattern of sounds we could invent, is a big idea. It suggests that we can stop "thinking" musically. All of those musical thoughts could be replaced by something else, I don't know what. But, for example, I do know people, wonderfully smart people, whose calculating thoughts have been replaced by the pocket calculator. (She said to me as I did the budget in my head: How do you do that? I said, the multiplication tables, of course. She said, the multiplication tables? My heart stopped. Talk about a generation gap. I explained the multiplication tables and that they were simply memorized. She said, Why would I want to know that?)