

PART III

The idea that every sound in music has a particular meaning is of interest for me, because of my obsession with opera. Words, if they are real words, have a particular meaning and are the essence of opera.

That is, if they are real words, with a real meaning in the real world, like "hello," "love" and "goodbye," the words can be used in opera.

I have veered off into opera, my obsession. Sorry.

"Hermeneutics," for instance, apart from how weird it sounds, cannot be used in opera, because it is not a real word. It is a label. In fact, it is not even a label from the real world, like "chair." It is a label for an intellectual preoccupation, like "categorization," "racialization" and, for example, "preoccupation."

Footnote: A distinguished professor of physics at Princeton, who had won a Nobel prize, was asked, upon his retirement, what he looked forward to in retirement. I suppose the interviewer expected an answer like: Buy a house in Mexico and pursue my interest in desert gardening. The professor said, "In my retirement I will never again have to go to the dictionary and look up the meaning of hermeneutics." I myself have looked it up three times. Since then I have given up. The Webster's definition is: "the study of the methodological principles of interpretations and explanations." "Hermeneutics: the study of the methodological principles of interpretations and explanations."

"Hermeneutics" is apparently a kind of intellectual model-railroading.

Culling through all of the words to find real ones, I can't get rid of all labels. For instance, "chair." But I get rid of as many as I can. Otherwise, how can you tell a story?

Our nostalgia for the time when a musical composition, in its resolute abstractness, in its defiant "differentness," could change the world for the listener, has left us with a tool that doesn't work any longer. This is the nostalgia that cripples Reynolds and me --- and you. And there is nothing we can do about it without resorting to drastic measures. (Little pun.)

Don't misunderstand, please. I like Roger Reynolds' music, as I always have. Forty years. I listen to it. I mean, within reason. There are just twenty-four hours in a day, some of which has to be given over to making a living. And, of course, there is everybody else. Like Reynolds, I have a small reputation for liking other people's music and trying to help it be heard. I haven't done this as much recently as in the past, when I could do it, but in my home town, among my friends, there is a sort of standing joke along the lines of: why is an old guy like you still going to hear concerts? What's the payoff?

In preparation for this visit to UCSD I spent a special amount of time listening to Reynolds' recent works. "The Paris Pieces," "Kokoro," "Ariadne's Thread" and "Focus."

The music is curiously similar throughout (throughout the three CD's) in its ability to intimidate me with its skill in conveying the music to the page. I can't do that. I don't have access to the scores, but I am dazzled by the very number of notes and by the knowledge that these notes have been written for a functionally anonymous group of players and that, as I know to be the case with Reynolds, the composer has had to make up a new kind of graphic language, a new set of symbols, to tell the players what to do. This is the most brilliant music in its style and "medium" --- that is, written --- that I have heard in a long, long time. I could not do anything of the sort.

My music has become complicated over the past thirty-five years by its involvement with verbal ideas. Probably nobody else can do anything of the sort.

Roger and I and a lot of composers I know share two things. We have extraordinary skills. We have lost our power.

My complaint about the nostalgia is that we have lost our power. It was there and now it's gone. We have lost our power to make music important. Now it's up to the kids. Good luck, kids.

Insert: As I am working on this essay (March, 2000) I have just received a wonderful book from Granary Books, "Arcana: Musicians on Music," edited by John Zorn. It is made up of essays, remarks, technical hints, whatever, from thirty composers. In his Preface, Zorn complains that, though these musicians have been at it for some time --- they are all entering into or thriving in middle age --- they have had no

recognition (at all!) in the critical press. In other words, nobody cares that they exist, except for their fans. That is what I mean by loss of power.

I know almost every one of the thirty composers from at least a concert or two. Some are extraordinary musicians, as good as or better on their instruments than anybody in the world. Their ideas in composition could not be more varied. But the composers are not commodities. Their music is, in most cases, not a commodity. And I think they do not want to be commodities or to make commodities. But, as Zorn points out, nobody cares. They are powerless. Music has stopped meaning anything politically.

I could not have invented a more perfect example of the point I am trying to make. This is a plug for the book (<http://www.granarybooks.com>). Zorn says it right out: "...after more than twenty years of music-making on the New York scene, except for the occasional review in trade magazines/periodicals (which because of the context in which they appear and the speed with which they are written don't really count anyway), not one single writer has ever come forward to champion or even to intelligently analyze what it is that we have been doing. Indeed, they hardly seem able even to describe it." Welcome to the club, John.

What I remark about the book --- and this is not a criticism of the music --- is how isolated each of the composers seems. In their ideas. There is great regard for improvisation; the notion occurs in many of the essays. Maybe I can learn something. But even though I know these musicians play together in various combinations --- because I have seen and heard it --- I would not know from the book that any one of them knows any one of the others. I think this is fair. Each of them is a private universe. Encapsulated, as it were. Traveling throughout the world to world-wide fan clubs, but quarantined from the world. It seems almost worse than when I was a kid. I think it is not their fault. I think they are trapped in the bubble of politically meaningless music. Have mercy on their souls.

Now I will stop picking on Reynolds and everybody else --- including now the Europeans and the younger composers --- and just pick on myself.

For the rest of this speech, with the exception of one remark, I will speak about opera, which is something I know

little about and care a lot about. It certainly figures into the future for me.

The exceptional one remark is that I think "counterpoint," that is, the musical technique of many instruments playing together, each trying to make sense and each trying to stay away from collisions with other instruments, is on its way to being dead as a door nail. Maybe a couple of generations. Roger Reynolds, Brian Ferneyhough, George Lewis, Anthony Davis --- to name a few of the local celebrities --- and I compose in counterpoint, because that is what we were taught; that dogs are too old to learn new tricks, and the time is not ripe anyway. But computer programming suggests that there is the possibility of a "whole" music (in the sense that the liver is a "whole" human organ: that is, without "parts") in which the causes and effects are too complicated to be understood for a long time (i.e. requiring eventually a new music theory), in which there are no "lines" (as in counterpoint) and in which (unlike in counterpoint) no element can be removed without bringing down the whole house of cards. I am sorry I won't be around to hear this music.

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