MUSIC AND IMAGINATION

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is a mark of the intelligent listener. The classics themselves must be reinterpreted in terms of our own period if we are to hear them anew and "keep their perennial humanity living and capable of assimilation." But in order to do that, we must have a balanced musical diet that permits us to set off our appraisals of the old masters against the varied and different musical manifestations of more recent times. For it is only in the light of the whole musical experience that the classics become most meaningful.

The dream of every musician who loves his art is to involve gifted listeners everywhere as an active force in the musical community. The attitude of each individual listener, especially the gifted listener, is the principal resource we have in bringing to fruition the immense musical potentialities of our own time.

CHAPTER TWO

The Sonorous Image

ONE OF THE PRIME CONCERNS in the making of music, either as creator or as interpreter, is the question how it will sound. On any level, whether the music is abstruse and absolute or whether it is intended for the merest diversion, it has got to "sound." The worst reproach you can make against a composer is to tell him that what he has written is "paper music." On the other hand, one of the quickest ways to recognize talent in the youthful composer is to note the natural effectiveness as sound of even the most casual combination of different tone colors. It is a sure sign of inborn musicality. The way music sounds, or the sonorous image, as I call it, is nothing more than an auditory concept that floats in the mind of the executant or composer; a prethinking of the exact nature of the tones to be produced.

Let me tell you of a little incident that illustrates the importance of "sound" from a musician's standpoint. A few years ago I happened to be in the NBC Radio City studios on business. On my way out I passed by Studio 8H, and hearing a distant music, I realized that a rehearsal of the NBC Symphony was in progress. By peeking through the glass partition of the door I was able to recognize a famous conductor and a famous soloist in the midst of rehearsing a concerto. My curiosity got the better of me, and I decided to stop by for a short time and see how things were going. With the exaggerated care of an uninvited guest I slipped quietly

into an orchestra seat at the center rear of the auditorium. As far as I could tell I was alone; no one had seen me come in. That was lucky, for otherwise I might very well have been unceremoniously ejected. Soloist, conductor, and orchestra were in the thick of it, entirely absorbed with the work in hand. I was there no more than five minutes before the familiar moment arrived; I mean that moment in any concerto when the solo performer reaches a high point and pauses as the orchestral accompaniment sweeps forward in ever-mounting passion. At that instant, without warning, the soloist leaped from the platform and headed straight down the center aisle in my direction. I immediately thought: he doesn't want me here, spying on his rehearsal in this way. But before I could make a move he was upon me. Perspiring and out of breath he fairly shouted at me: "Aaron, how does it sound?" Before I could utter a word in reply he was gone in order to reach the stage in time for his next entrance.

Yes, the sonorous image is a preoccupying concern of all musicians. In that phrase we include beauty and roundness of tone; its warmth, its depth, its "edge," its balanced mixture with other tones, and its acoustical properties in any given environment. The creation of a satisfactory aural image is not merely a matter of musical talent or technical adroitness; imagination plays a large role here. You cannot produce a beautiful sonority or combination of sonorities without first hearing the imagined sound in the inner ear. Once this imagined sonority is heard in reality, it impresses itself unforgettably on the mind. To this day I can remember with extreme vividness the morning in 1925 when I heard sounding for the first time a work of my own orchestration. For some reason I was late to the rehearsal so that my music was in progress when I arrived at the hall. It excited me so that I was afraid I was literally about to fall over. More than once I have gone backstage to speak with the conductor after he has given a first reading to a new orchestral work of mine in order to discuss changes in balance or interpreta-

tion. Often these changes have to do with minute details that depend upon a precise memory of what was heard for only a passing instant at the rehearsal. Neither the conductor nor myself, nor any other composer for that matter, would find this feat unusual. The impact of sheer sound on the musician's psyche is so familiar an idea that we tend to take for granted the force it represents.

Most people's aural memory is remarkably strong; heard sounds remain in the mind for long periods of time, and with a sharpness that is also remarkable. From the early twenties I still retain an impression of fantastic sonorities after a first contact with Schönberg's *Pierrot Lunaire,* or a little later, the astonishing percussive imaginings of Edgar Varèse, especially in a piece called *Arcanes,* heard once but not again. Also from the early twenties I recall hearing the mysterious sound made by a string ensemble in an adjoining hotel room in Salzburg, a sound which was later identified as an Alois Hába quarter tone *Quartet.* For me the important thing was not the quarter tones, but the sonorous image that was left with me. I can remember too the particular acid sound of a Mexican small-town band playing in the public square on Sunday mornings in Tlaxcala. Were they playing out of tune, do you think? Perhaps, but nevertheless they were creating an aural image authentically their own. So was an English choir of boys and men's voices that I heard in a London cathedral. They had a hollow, an almost cadaverous quality; not pretty, perhaps, but certainly memorable. Most unforgettable sound of all was that of a massed orchestra and band of some one thousand high school performers in an Atlantic City convention hall all simultaneously searching for the note *A.* It is hopeless to attempt to describe that sound. Jericho's walls must have heard some such unearthly musical noise.

I do not mean to suggest that sounds in themselves, taken out of context, are of any use to a composer. Interesting sonorities as such are scarcely more than icing on the musical cake. But a deliberately chosen sound image that pervades an entire piece becomes an in-

tegral part of the expressive meaning of that piece. One thinks immediately of the two different versions that Stravinsky tells us he made of his ballet *Les Noces* before deciding upon a third and final solution: the unusual combination of four pianos and thirteen percussion players. The rarefied timbres of Anton Webern's little string quartet pieces would be meaningless if transcribed for any other medium. In contrast with this are the original effects obtained from the most ordinary means: for example, the juxtaposition of a loud and vigorous body of strings against a soft and undulant pair of harps in Britten's *Spring Symphony* — once heard it cannot successfully be rethought for any other combination.

The ability to imagine sounds in advance of their being heard in actuality is one factor that widely separates the professional from the layman. Professionals themselves are unevenly gifted in this respect. More than one celebrated composer has struggled to produce an adequate orchestral scoring of his own music. Certain performers, on the other hand, seem especially gifted in being able to call forth delicious sonorities from their instrument. The layman's capacity for imagining unheard sound images seems, by and large, to be rather poor. This does not apply on the lowest plane of sound apprehension where, of course, there is no difficulty. Laboratory tests have demonstrated that differences in tone color are the first differences apparent to the untrained ear. Any child is capable of distinguishing the sound of a human voice from the sound of a violin. The contrast between a voice and its echo is apparent to everyone. But it bespeaks a fair degree of musical sophistication to be able to distinguish the sound of an oboe from that of an English horn, and a marked degree to imagine a whole group of wood winds sounding together. If you have ever had occasion, as I have, to perform an orchestral score on the piano to a group of nonprofessionals, you will have soon realized how little sense they have of how this music might be expected to sound in an orchestra.

It is surprising to note how little investigation has been devoted

to this whole sphere of music. There are no textbooks solely designed to examine the sound stuff of music — the history of its past by comparison with its present; or its future; or its potential. Even so-called orchestration texts, written ostensibly to describe the science of combining orchestral instruments, are generally found to steer shy of their subject, concentrating instead on instrumentation, that is, on the examination of the technical and tonal possibilities of the individual instrument. The sonorous image appears to be a kind of aural mirage, not easily immobilized and analyzed. The case of the individual sound is rather different since it is more comparable to that of the primary colors in painting. It is the full spectrum of the musician's "color" palette that seems to lend itself much less well to discussion and consideration than that of the painter.

There are many diverse and interesting questions concerning the role of tone color, or sound image, in musical thinking. My contention that tonal image and expressive meaning are inter-connected in the composer's mind is more true today than it was in the past, if I read my history books correctly. In the eighteenth century music was meant to be played — that was the first consideration. What instruments it was played by seems often to have been dictated by the requirements of a particular occasion. Bach's arrangements of other men's works, and Mozart's alterations in a Handel score are paralleled, in the following century, by Liszt's piano versions of Schubert's songs. Nowadays we tend to look upon transcriptions with suspicion because we consider the composer's expressive idea to be reflected in a precise way by its tonal investiture. We go even further: we assume that the choice of the sound medium itself will almost certainly influence the nature of the composer's thought, as witness some of the examples I have already mentioned.

Thought and sound can interact one upon the other only insofar as the composer or executant is sensitive to the medium adopted. The remarkable affinity of certain composers for certain sound media has been pointed out many times, but not the corresponding

limitation that sometimes accompanies this affinity. The most famous example, is, of course, Chopin's extraordinary felicity in writing for the piano. Suppose he had been born into a world before the invention of the piano, what would have happened to his composing talent in that case? I frankly don't know. I do know that his friends tried over and over again to persuade him to broaden his tonal range, without success. His reply, as we have it in a letter, was as follows: "I know my limitations, and I know I'd make a fool of myself if I tried to climb too high without having the ability to do it. They plague me to death urging me to write symphonies and operas, and they want me to be everything in one, a Polish Rossini and a Mozart and a Beethoven. But I just laugh under my breath and think to myself that one must start from small things. I'm only a pianist, and if I'm worth anything this is good too . . . I think it's better to do only a little but to do that as well as possible, rather than try to do all things and do them poorly."

We think of the younger Scarlatti as an analogous case because of his genius for the harpsichord; and history shows many other examples of the sympathy of certain composers for specific media: Hugo Wolf for the solo voice, Ravel for the harp, and Brahms for the small chamber music ensemble. And what of the masters of the nineteenth century orchestra — Berlioz, Wagner, and Richard Strauss — is it mere chance that they have no piano music to speak of? Or that Debussy composed but seldom for unaccompanied chorus and Fauré seldom for the orchestra? From these few examples it would appear that expressive purpose is closely allied to specific sound media, quite different in the case of different composers.

To a considerable degree, of course, sound images are imposed upon us from without. We are born to certain inherited sounds and tend to take them for granted. Other peoples, however, have an absorbing interest in quite different kinds of auditory materials. The Orient, for instance, leaves us far behind in sensitivity to the

subtle variety of percussive sounds. Dr. Curt Sachs, in writing on oriental music, mentions the "dizzying mass of wooden, bamboo, stone, glass, porcelain, and metal implements, to be pounded, shaken, rubbed or struck." Our own poverty-stricken percussive imaginings are put to shame by comparison with the richness and diversity and delicacy of the oriental mind in this connection. One wonders what the comparatively undifferentiated sonority of a string quartet might communicate to a Balinese musician, brought up on the clangorously varied sonorities of a gamelan. On the other hand the complex harmonic textures obtainable from our keyboard instruments are a closed book to the Eastern musician. Dr. Sachs tells us that an Arab, given a piano, plays in "empty octaves" and the Hindus, "in single, sustained notes on the harmonium."

It is clear, then, that musicians of the East and the West are both restricted by birth to a comparatively limited gamut of inherited sound materials. Perhaps this is just as well; otherwise we might be overwhelmed by the too numerous attractions of tonal color possibilities. Western musical history is characterized, moreover, by the identification of specific sound media with certain periods, to the practical exclusion of other possible sound media, and it was because of this exclusive interest that the medium chosen could be developed so highly. The cultivation of music for voices, especially choral music, up to about the year 1600 is a prime example. Virgil Thomson once told me ruefully that he thought composers of that time were so wonderfully adept at exploiting the possibilities of the human voice in choral combination that they had left practically nothing really new for us to do in that medium as far as exceptional effects are concerned. The exhaustion of any medium forces composers in other directions; this undoubtedly was partly the reason for the development of interest in purely instrumental writing during the period that followed the choral age. A further enrichment in the way of tonal combinations came with the joining of the large choral mass with orchestra, as in the oratorios of Handel. The nineteenth cen-