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*MUSIC AND  
IMAGINATION*

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## *The Creative Mind and the Interpretative Mind*

IN THE ART OF MUSIC, creation and interpretation are indissolubly linked, more so than in any of the other arts, with the possible exception of dancing. Both these activities—creation and interpretation—demand an imaginative mind—that is self-evident. Both bring into play creative energies that are sometimes alike, sometimes dissimilar. By coupling them together it may be possible to illuminate their relationship and their interaction, one upon the other.

Like most creative artists, I have from time to time cogitated on the mysterious nature of creativity. Is there anything new to be said about the creative act—anything really new, I mean? I rather doubt it. The idea of creative man goes back so far in time, so many cogent things have been written and said—acute observations, poetic reflections, and philosophic ponderings, that one despairs of bringing to the subject anything more than a private view of an immense terrain.

Still, the serious composer who thinks about his art will sooner or later have occasion to ask himself: why is it so important to my own psyche that I compose music? What makes it seem so absolutely necessary, so that every other daily activity, by comparison, is of lesser significance? And why is the creative impulse never satisfied;

why must one always begin anew? To the first question—the need to create—the answer is always the same—self-expression; the basic need to make evident one's deepest feelings about life. But why is the job never done? Why must one always begin again? The reason for the compulsion to renewed creativity, it seems to me, is that each added work brings with it an element of self-discovery. I must create in order to know myself, and since self-knowledge is a never-ending search, each new work is only a part-answer to the question "Who am I?" and brings with it the need to go on to other and different part-answers. Because of this, each artist's work is supremely important—at least to himself. But why does the artist presume to think, and why do other men encourage him to think, that the creation of one more work of art is of more than merely private import? That is because each new and significant work of art is a unique formulation of experience; an experience that would be utterly lost if it were not captured and set down by the artist. No other artist will ever make that particular formulation in exactly that way. And just as the individual creator discovers himself through his creation, so the world at large knows itself through its artists, discovers the very nature of its Being through the creations of its artists.

Jacques Maritain has summarized this idea of the necessity and uniqueness of the work of art in these terms: it is the artist's condition, he says, "to seize obscurely his own being with a knowledge that will not come to anything, save in being creative, and which will not be conceptualized save in a work made by his own hands." Thus the creator finds himself in a precarious position because, first, the involuntary nature of creation makes the moment of engendering an art work uncertain, and then, once conceived, there comes the fear that the conception may not be brought to fruition. This gives a dramatic aspect to the composer's situation. On the one hand the need for self-expression is ever-present, but on the other hand, he cannot, by an act of will, produce the work of art. It must either be

entirely spontaneous, or if not spontaneous, then cajoled, induced, gradually perceived — so that each day's work may spell failure or triumph. No wonder many creative artists have been reputed to have had unstable characters.

Up to this point, the situation of the musical interpreter is not so very different from that of the creator. He is simply the intermediary that brings the composer's work to life — a kind of midwife to the composition. He partakes of the same dedication of purpose, the same sense of self-discovery through each performance, the same conviction that something unique is lost, possibly, when his own understanding of a work of art is lost. He even partakes of the involuntary nature of creation, for we know that he cannot at will turn on the wellsprings of his creativity so that each performance may be of equal value. Quite the contrary, each time he steps out upon the concert platform we wish him luck, for he shares something of the creator's uncertain powers of projection. Thus we see that interpretation, even though it may rightfully be thought of as an auxiliary art, does share elements of creativity with the mind that forms the work of art.

But now let us consider the essential way in which creation and interpretation are radically different. The interpretative mind can exercise itself on a given object; it cannot itself supply that object. The making of something out of nothing is the special province of the creative mind. The composer is a kind of magician; out of the recesses of his thought he produces, or finds himself in possession of, the generative idea. Although I say "the recesses of his thought," in actuality the source of the germinal idea is the one phase in creation that resists rational explanation. All we know is that the moment of possession is the moment of inspiration; or to use Coleridge's phrase, the moment when the creator is in "a more than usual state of emotion." Whence it comes, or in what manner it comes, or how long its duration one can never foretell. Inspiration may be a form of superconsciousness, or perhaps of subconsciousness — I wouldn't

know; but I am sure that it is the antithesis of self-consciousness. The inspired moment may sometimes be described as a kind of hallucinatory state of mind: one half of the personality emotes and dictates while the other half listens and notates. The half that listens had better look the other way, had better simulate a half attention only, for the half that dictates is easily disgruntled and avenges itself for too close inspection by fading entirely away.

That describes, of course, only one kind of inspiration. Another kind involves the personality as a whole, or rather, loses sight of it completely, in a spontaneous expression of emotional release. By that I mean the creative impulse takes possession in a way that blots out in greater or lesser degree consciousness of the familiar sort. Both these types of inspiration — if one can call them types — are generally of brief duration and of exhausting effect. They are the rarer kind, the kind we wait for every day. The less divine afflatus that makes it possible for us to compose each day — to induce inspiration, as it were — is a species of creative intuition in which the critical faculty is much more involved. But I shall come to that in a moment. Long works need intuitiveness of that sort, for it is generally the shorter ones that are entirely the result of spontaneous creativity. Mere length in music is central to the composer's problem. To write a three-minute piece is not difficult; a main section, a contrasting section, and a return to the first part is the usual solution. But anything that lasts beyond three minutes may cause trouble. In treating so amorphous a material as music the composer is confronted with this principal problem: how to extend successfully the seminal ideas and how to shape the whole so that it adds up to a rounded experience. Here, too, inspiration of a kind is needed. No textbook rules can be applied, for the simple reason that these generative ideas are themselves live things and demand their individual treatment. I have sometimes wondered whether this problem of the successful shaping of musical form was not connected in some way with the strange fact that musical history names no women in its

roster of great composers. There have been great women musical interpreters, but thus far—I emphasize, *thus far*—no examples of women composers of the first rank. This is a touchy subject, no doubt, but leaving aside the obscure and various reasons for the historical fact, it appears to indicate that the conception and shaping of abstract ideas in extended forms marks a clear boundary between the creative mind and the interpretative mind.

In all that I have been saying about creative thinking there is implied the strongly imaginative quality of the artist's mentality. I stress this now because there has been a tendency in recent times to put the emphasis rather on the artist as craftsman, with much talk of the composer's technique. The artist-craftsman of the past is held up to us as the model to be emulated. There is a possible source of confusion here: amidst all the talk of the craftsmanlike approach we must always remember that a work of art is not a pair of shoes. It may very well be useful like a pair of shoes, but it takes its source from a quite different sphere of mental activity. Roger Sessions understood this when he wrote recently: "The composer's technique is, on the lowest level, his mastery of the musical language . . . . On a somewhat higher level . . . it becomes identical with his musical thought, and it is problematical in terms of substance rather than merely of execution. On this level it is no longer accurate to speak of craftsmanship. The composer is no longer simply a craftsman; he has become a musical thinker, a creator of values—values which are primarily aesthetic, hence psychological, but hence, as an inevitable consequence, ultimately of the deepest human importance."

It is curious that this concern with craftsmanship should have affected an art that has developed no successful large-scale primitive practitioners, in the sense that there are accepted primitive painters. Music boasts no Henri Rousseau, no Grandma Moses. Naiveté doesn't work in music. To write any sort of a usable piece presumes a minimum kind of professionalism. Mussorgsky and Satie are the

closest we have come in recent times to a primitive composer, and the mere mention of their names makes the idea rather absurd.

No, I suspect that the stress placed upon the composer as craftsman, especially in teacher-pupil relationships, comes from a basic mistrust of making private aesthetic judgments. There is the fear of being wrong, plus the insecurity of not being able to *prove* that one is right, even to oneself. As a result an attitude is encouraged of avoiding the whole messy business of aesthetic evaluation, putting one's attention on workmanship and craft instead, for there we deal in solid values. But that attitude, to my mind, side-steps the whole question of the composer's own need for critical awareness and for making aesthetic judgments at the moment of creation. As I see it, this ability is part of his craft, and the lack of it has weakened, when it hasn't entirely eliminated, many potentially fine works.

The creative mind, in its day-to-day functioning, must be a critical mind. The ideal would be not merely to be aware, but to be "aware of our awareness," as Professor I. A. Richards has put it. In music this self-critical appraisal of the composer's own mind guiding the composition to its inevitable termination is particularly difficult of application, for music is an emotional and comparatively intangible substance. Composers, especially young composers, are not always clear as to the role criticism plays at the instant of creation. They don't seem to be fully aware that each time one note is followed by another note, or one chord by another chord, a decision has been made. They seem even less aware of the psychological and emotional connotations of their music. Instead they appear to be mainly concerned with the purely formal rightness of a general scheme, with a particular care for the note-for-note logic of thematic relationships. In other words, they are partially aware, but not fully aware, and not sufficiently cognizant of those factors which have a controlling influence on the success or failure of the composition as a whole. A full and equal appraisal of every smallest contributing