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MUSICAL CREATION

A LECTURE DELIVERED BY

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Honorary President of the Société Française de Musicologie

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LOUIS CHARLES ELSON was born on April 17, 1848, and died on February 14, 1920. He was educated in Boston, his native city, and in Germany. As a teacher at the New England Conservatory of Music and as music editor for Boston newspapers, he exerted a great influence for music in this country over a period of many years. He also served as musical correspondent for several European and South American papers, and he enjoyed distinction as a lecturer to the public as well as in the classroom. As author, composer and editor, he had a career of great significance in America's musical development.

In 1945 the Library of Congress received a bequest from the late Mrs. Bertha L. Elson, widow of Louis Charles Elson, to provide lectures on music and musical literature in memory of her husband. M. Pincherle's lecture was one of the series made possible by Mrs. Elson's generous bequest, which also supplied funds for this publication.

MUSICAL CREATION

THE WAY MUSIC has evolved since the beginning of the present century, at more and more accelerated pace during the past twenty years, brings to mind many problems that one might think had already been resolved. At the same time, this rapid evolution seems still to postpone the solution of other problems obviously unsolved until now. One of these is the problem of musical creation, but I want to declare immediately that I do not propose to offer a solution. My ambition is, at best, to present the problem as it stands today in view of the recent orientations to which I have just referred.

This will not be a scholarly dissertation. I have based my survey chiefly on the utterances of composers or of their biographers; many of them are widely known, but they are important and far from negligible.

I have, moreover, made a very limited use of philosophical theories, those of Plato, the wise men of ancient China, also of Dr. Julius Bahle's *Der musikalische Schaffensprozess* and of *Esthétique et création musicale* by my distinguished compatriot Gisèle Brelet. Actually, in such matters, the most high-flown aesthetic or metaphysical systems are often more likely to bring additional complications rather than fuller enlightenment. For example, when Nietzsche, following numerous predecessors, considers music as "the immediate idea of eternal life," when Schopenhauer writes "the composer discloses to us the inward essence of the world, he expresses the deepest wisdom in a language that his reason does not understand," one cannot help asking: what music, what composer do they mean?

Let us put aside the differences of appreciation (arising from remoteness in place or time) which make traditional Chinese music

sound like noise to the non-initiated occidental listener, which explain why a great fifteenth-century musician was, in the opinion of a great sixteenth-century musician, as barbarous as the latter was in the opinion of a great musician of the seventeenth century. Today, because of the rapid changes sweeping us along, a great musician of the year 1930 is definitely outmoded in 1960.

These are puzzles that can be ignored. Let us consider today's music only, the music of 1960. To which category of musical works shall we turn to find the revelation of "the inward essence of the world" promised by Schopenhauer? Is this a privilege reserved to so-called "pure" music—the symphony, the sonata, the quartet? Is opera to be admitted? Are we to go so far as to include operetta?—even the popular song, the street song, or rock-and-roll?

On the assumption that every type of music is accepted, what is the minimum degree of formal perfection, of originality, of achievement that must be attained in order to be in accord with Nietzsche and Schopenhauer?

This question of limits, which I have carried to the absurd, is closely concerned with the problem of creation, but it goes much further. It involves, indeed, the whole of musical aesthetics. You will understand, of course, that I deem it rather risky even to have alluded to it, and I now descend from these heights to more down-to-earth considerations, to what Anglo-American musicology very cleverly calls *the composer's workshop*: the question of learning how the musical work springs into existence or, to use another phrase, how it is fabricated.

But remember, to enter this composer's workshop with full freedom of spirit, it would be necessary first to have answered another very delicate question, that of musical heredity or non-heredity. In contrast to the impressive dynasties of the Bachs and the Couperins, to the many composers whose parents were good musicians in their own right, there stands the enigma of Berlioz, Debussy, Fauré, and so many others born of non-musical parents who were sometimes totally unresponsive to music.

Perhaps an opinion could be formed by means of statistics, but I shall not attempt it. I should like to recall, however, for the sake of curiosity, the information that some people thought could be drawn from musicians' physical constitutions—by means of chiromancy, phrenology, and other sciences more or less dependent on intuition.

On August 22, 1834, a Doctor Fossati, vice president of the Phrenological Society of Paris, addressed to his colleagues a voluminous communication concerning composers.[1] I have extracted a few passages, the first of which is about Weber.

"Here is the mask of Weber. A strong musical organization and educability or perfectibility, revealed by the development of the middle inferior part of the forehead, are the most remarkable of his features. It is this organization that most predisposes a composer to work and makes it possible for him to teach himself, also to learn from work previously done by others. Thus Weber's music shows the influence of science; we recognize, in addition to his native genius, how much he attained by study."

Concerning Bellini: "Bellini, who joins to the organ of music the organ of over-developed kindness, will always make expressive, pathetic, dramatic music whenever he wishes to express in sound the sensations passing through his mind . . .

"The plaintive, passionate tones already will have resounded in his soul before he is able to think of the effect that they will produce on others. Because of his personal constitution, I am inclined to believe that his compositions will always convey song and melody rather than instrumentation and harmony."

Concerning Rossini: "I have only a word to say about Rossini. His enormous head will show you that assembled within him are all the organs, all the qualities sufficient to make an extraordinary genius. The lateral-anterior development of his head explains the great extension that he has given to instrumental music in musical drama. . . ."

I shall stop here with these quotations. As you see, these texts, dating from 1834, reveal no more than a certain cleverness in explaining the past. They leave untouched the phenomenon of the

[1] *Journal de la Société Phrénologique,* Paris, 1835, p. 95

birth of the musical work. This phenomenon has almost always been accounted for, at least up to very recent times, by the intervention of a *deus ex machina* called *inspiration.* Nowadays we tend to minimize the importance of this mysterious power, or even to deny that it exists. Let us take a closer look.

No one has proclaimed more clearly than Goethe, in his *Talks with Eckermann,*[2] the omnipotence of inspiration in musical creation. "Composition!" he says, "a repugnant word, which we owe to the French, and which we must strive to liquidate as soon as possible. How can one say that Mozart 'composed' *Don Giovanni* . . . as if it were a question of a piece of cake produced by kneading together eggs, flour, and sugar! It is a spiritual creation in which the details, as well as the whole, are the product of a single spirit, animated by the breath of a single life. Because of this the creator had no need to experiment, to sew pieces together, to follow his fantasy; he was entirely in the hands of his *inner daemon,* acting according to its orders."

To what extent this *inner daemon* controls the composer—absolutely, or leaving to him a larger or smaller part of initiative—may be open to discussion. But, until quite recent times, those most directly concerned (I mean the composers) have almost unanimously admitted its existence. If they concede some importance to technique, to free will, to the desire to build something, in their judgment it is *inspiration* that has by far the leading part. Such is the meaning of Rameau's well-known words, uttered in his old age: "Every day I acquire taste, but I have no more genius." [3]

Young Georges Bizet asserts the same idea when, just twenty years old, he compares his present way of composing to that of his student days when he was content to apply the rules he had learned. Thus he writes to his mother: "I feel that all my musical skill and application are of no further use to me; I can write nothing without an inspiring idea. . . ." [4]

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[2] June 20, 1831.

[3] Quoted by Chabanon, *Eloge de M. Rameau,* Paris, 1764, p. 54.

[4] Translated by Edward Lockspeiser, *The Literary Clef, London,* 1958, p. 40.

If, down to our days, there has been almost unanimous agreement concerning the reality of inspiration, this agreement disappears when we approach the mechanics of creation, the way in which this inspiration manifests itself, and the way in which the work takes form in the composer's mind and on his music paper.

For some it is a sudden illumination, for others a long and laborious task. I need not dwell on the example of Beethoven, who sometimes struggled through ten, fifteen, or twenty successive sketches to his final theme, the ultimate realization of which for a long time he had only vaguely foreseen. Both "rhythms" of creation may alternate in the same composer. Berlioz spends three weeks in writing the *Scène aux champs* of the *Symphonie fantastique,* yet completes the *Marche au supplice* in one night.

Nearly always, once the first idea is expressed, the materialization of the work on paper continues at a slower tempo. For certain gifted musicians, however, endowed with a strong power of concentration, the composition is practically completed in the mind before anything is written down. This seems to be the case with J. S. Bach and his masterworks. Certain of our contemporaries who compose in cold blood, as if laying out a plan, pretend to find in him a precedent and a model. Nothing could be more inaccurate. According to Spitta, who thoroughly studied the process of Bach's inspiration, his music in its best moments springs forth with great spontaneity. Usually when he begins to write, his general plan is already settled. His manuscripts eloquently reveal the excitement of his inspiration. Likewise they show when inspiration is weakening, as in those sequential developments which Constant Lambert disrespectfully speaks of as the Bach "sewing machine."

Wagner, among others, conceives large portions of his works before writing the poem and score. He tells Carl Gallard, in a letter of January 30, 1844: "Before I sit down to write in verse, even before trying to draft a scene, I am already bewitched by the musical perfume of my creation. I have all the melodies in my head, all the characteristic themes, so that once the verse is concluded and the scenes elaborated, the opera is, practically, finished. The detailed

working out only depends thenceforth on patience and reflection; these follow after creation itself."

With Mozart this faculty of mentally conceiving a total work becomes prodigious. Everyone knows about the overture to *Don Giovanni,* written in a half-doze as if under dictation. And we know of similar illustrations. At four and a half years of age little Camille Saint-Saëns wants to compose a song, and he is given a poem by Marceline Desbordes-Valmore. He composes his music mentally, then plays it on the piano, and finally writes it down on paper. The same process operates with Benjamin Britten: "Usually, I have the music complete in my head before putting pen to paper.[5]

The case remains where music comes to the composer spontaneously, but he dares not accept such a gift of inspiration. He examines it critically, then reworks it in a state of concern bordering on distress. George Sand (*History of My Life*) describes Chopin's workshop as follows: "His creation was miraculous. He found without looking for it, without foreseeing it. Music came out of his piano, complete, sublime, or it sang in his head during a walk, and he was in a hurry to hear it himself by playing it on his instrument. But then began the most heart-rending labour that I have ever seen . . ." and she describes the torments, the indecisions, sometimes prolonged for weeks, concerning a single page which he would finally re-establish in the exact form it had come to him at first.

Honegger, too, knew such agonies, though he flattered himself for not being a *romantique*: "When I am full of the joy of discovery, my guardian angel whispers in my ear, 'it is not possible, it is a reminiscence or an empty dream; all is going to collapse.' Imagine the gold miner—from early morning on he digs with his pick, he perspires, he is exhausted, he will never find anything, and suddenly there is the nugget; he cannot believe his eyes . . . In such a situation great courage is necessary to keep from changing what one has just written." [6]

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[5] In the *Observer,* London, Oct. 27, 1946.

[6] Honegger, *Je suis compositeur,* Paris, 1951, p. 120.

Sometimes it happens that, without the composer's knowledge and in a completely painless manner, a long process of maturation takes place. Richard Strauss describes this with great accuracy: "It usually takes two years before a composition begins to assume form with me. At first there comes to me an idea—a theme. This rests with me for months; I think of other things and busy myself with everything but it; but the idea is fermenting of its own accord. Sometimes I bring it to mind, or play the theme on the piano, just to see how far it has progressed—and finally it is ready for use. You see, therein lies the real art of creation—to know exactly when an idea is ripe, when one can use, must use it. More and more I cling to the belief that we conscious people have no control over our creative power. For instance, I slave over a melody and encounter an obstacle which I cannot surmount however I try. This during the course of an evening; but the next morning the difficulty has surrendered itself, just as though my creative forces had toiled at it overnight." [7]

The phenomenon of inspiration, of course, does not leave all composers as calm as Strauss. Without going back to a mythical age, when the musician-magician was literally "possessed" by his art, we find in more recent times certain creators whose inspiration is accompanied by characteristic emotional symptoms, occasionally sufficiently pronounced to suggest some kind of "twilight state." We can discover many such examples in the Renaissance. Adrien Petit Coclico, transmitting the doctrine of Josquin des Prés, declares (in 1552): "The composer must be compelled to write by an imperative inner impulse, to the point of forgetting thirst and hunger as long as the piece is not completed. Under such conditions one does more in an hour than otherwise in an entire month." [8]

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[7] Quoted by J. G. Huneker, *Overtones,* London, 1904, pp. 33–34.

[8] *Compendium musices,* Nuremberg, 1552—"[Compositor] . . . ad componendum magno ducatur desiderio, ac impetu quodam naturali ad compositionem pellatur, adeo ut nec cibus nec potus ei sapiat, ante absolutam cantilenam, nam una hora plus conficitur, cum impetus ille naturalis sic urget, quam alias in integro mense."

This resembles Ronsard's attitude when, in his *Preface au Mellange de Chansons tant des vieux Autheurs que des modernes* (1572), he writes: ". . . The divine furies of Music, Poetry and Painting do not come by degrees of perfection, like the other sciences, but by impulses, like flashes of lightning which appear here and there in various countries—then suddenly disappear."

Händel often composed in a state of extreme exaltation. His biographer Victor Schoelcher recalls different traits: "When he was composing, his excitement would rise to such a pitch that he would burst into tears:—'It is said, that a friend calling upon the great musician when in the act of setting these pathetic words, "He was despised, and rejected of men," found him absolutely *sobbing.*' 'I have heard it related,' says Shield, 'that when Händel's servant used to bring him his chocolate in the morning, he often stood with silent astonishment to see his master's tears mixing with the ink, as he penned his divine notes.' " [9] Even Grétry, whose music today seems so reassuringly placid, told his young colleague Désaugiers that "in order for him to work, he had to warm his imagination for eight days; consequently it caused pimples to appear on his face, his chest was aching with sharp pains, unexpectedly fever came, and then he could compose." [10] Grétry's own *Mémoires* confirm this: "I read, I re-read twenty times the words that I want to express in sounds; I need several days to warm my head. At last I lose my appetite, my eyes take fire, my imagination rises; then I make an opera in three weeks or a month." [11]

Beethoven, more justifiably, becomes exalted, and he describes this exaltation to Bettina von Arnim, who relates to Goethe, among the "beautiful things" the composer told her, his utterances about musical inspiration: "Not only because of their contents, but also because of their rhythm, Goethe's poems have great power over me, I am tuned up and stimulated to composition by this language which

[9] Victor Schoelcher, *The Life of Händel,* London, 1857, p. 378.
[10] Letter from M. A. Désaugiers, Oct. 18, 1774, in M. Pincherle, *Musiciens peints par eux-mêmes,* Paris, 1939, p. 10.
[11] Grétry, *Mémoires; ou, Essai sur la musique,* Paris, 1789, pp. 28–29.

builds itself into higher orders as if through the work of spirits and already bears in itself the mystery of the harmonies.

"Then from the focus of enthusiasm I must discharge melody in all directions; I pursue it, capture it again passionately; I see it flying away and disappearing in the mass of varied agitations; now I seize upon it again with renewed passion; I cannot tear myself from it; I am impelled with hurried modulations to multiply it, and, at length I conquer it:—behold, a symphony!" [12]

As for Schubert, his intimates had the impression of a dual personality. "Whoever has seen him just once, in the morning, in the heat of composing, his eyes sparkling, even speaking in a quite different manner, will never forget it . . . I consider unquestionable that the excitement in which he composed his most beautiful *Lieder,* particularly his *Winterreise,* contributed to hastening his death." [13]

Many composers try to arouse this excitement by means of methods more or less peculiarly their own. We have already seen Grétry, Beethoven, and Wagner warming their imagination by reading again and again a poem or by meditating on the subject they mean to set to music. Tartini, too, when planning to compose a sonata or a concerto, usually sought a stimulus in some lines of Metastasio, which he would write down under the staves of his score. From a curious scruple of circumspection, he employed for this purpose a cryptography of his own, the key to which was discovered twenty-five years ago by our Greek colleague, Minos Dounias.[14]

I shall not burden you with a catalog of the many stimuli, sometimes quite unexpected, said to have been used by certain well-known masters. Felice Blangini, in his *Souvenirs,*[15] gives us a copious if not absolutely reliable list. Some find help in generous wines, in good cheer; others need agitation, noise, or the presence of some pet object or animal.

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[12] Bettina von Arnim, letter to Goethe, May 28, 1810, in Thayer-Krehbiel, II, p. 188.

[13] Josef von Spaun's diary (1827).

[14] M. Dounias, *Die Violinkonzerte G. Tartini's,* Wolfenbüttel, 1935, pp. 90–98.

[15] Paris, 1834, pp. 364–67 (plagiarized by Albert Cler, *Physiologie du musicien,* Paris, 1841).

Among these various aids, of course, the piano is the most natural, the one most frequently required. Many composers use it not only to check on their harmonies but also as a source of inspiration. We are told that Wagner, deprived of a piano for one month during his first stay in Paris, was radically stopped in his work for that entire period; and when he succeeded in renting an instrument, he expressed to a friend his joy in discovering that (I quote his own words) "the ability to compose was not dead." It was then, in fact, that he completed *The Flying Dutchman.*

Were it not for fear of lengthening this lecture, the role of the hand in musical invention would deserve close study. How many discoveries in the field of melody, of harmony, rhythm, and tone-color, result from the careless, almost unconscious wandering of the fingers preluding on the keyboard? Three centuries ago the Reverend Father Mersenne wrote, with regard to the lute: "The art, or science, and skill of the hand are so great that some people have called it one of the principal instruments of wisdom and reason . . . Without dwelling on all of its accomplishments, it is sufficient to consider the way it moves on the lute and on all the other instruments; because these movements are so wonderful that reason often must admit that it is unable to understand their lightness and swiftness, which defy the quickest imagination in the world." [16]

Strawinsky echoes Father Mersenne when, speaking of his *Piano-Rag-Music,* he says: "What interested me especially was the fact that the various rhythmic episodes of this piece were dictated to me by the fingers themselves. . . . We must not despise the fingers: they are great inspirers and, being in direct contact with the raw sound itself, they often awaken in you subconscious ideas which otherwise would not, perhaps have been revealed." [17]

We may observe that Weber also recognized this suggestive power of the hands, but he condemned it as an impediment to the free inspiration of the composer: "These hands, these cursed fingers of

[16] *Harmonie universelle,* Paris, 1636; Livre second, Des Instruments, proposition IX.

[17] *Chroniques de ma vie,* I, p. 178.

the pianists, with their endless practice, have developed a certain independence so that, like unconscious tyrants, they influence creative activity."

What is to be thought of the action of great emotional crises on inspiration? There is no denying this with respect to Beethoven, and the whole romantic world considered such crises of prime importance. According to Lacépède, writing in 1785, "pleasure gave rise to the song, but it is only to sorrow and melancholy that we owe true music." [18]

There are exceptions, however. Berlioz, the hyper-romantic, sees a real danger in emotions when they rise to a paroxysm. When feeling too deeply the sentiments he wants his heroes to express, he becomes paralyzed; he writes: "Passionate subjects must be dealt with in cold blood." [19] Likewise Debussy: "I have never been able to compose anything at the very moment that something happened in my life; this, I believe, makes for the superiority of recollection [as a source of inspiration]: from it one is able to draw valuable emotions. But people who cry when writing masterpieces are insolent jokers." [20]

In a correspondence to which I shall refer again, Tchaikovsky is still more explicit: "When he is creating, the artist must have calm . . . those are mistaken who believe the artist can use his talent to relieve himself of specific feelings of the moment. The sad or happy emotions which he expresses are always and invariably retrospective. With no especial reason for rejoicing, I can experience a happy creative mood, and conversely among the happiest surroundings I may write music suffused with darkness and despair. In brief, the artist lives a double life, an everyday human one and an artistic one, and these two lives do not always coincide." [21]

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[18] *La Poëtique de la musique,* Paris, 1785.

[19] Letter to the Princess Carolyn von Sayn Wittgenstein, Aug. 12, 1856 (about the opera *Les Troyens*).

[20] Letter to Pierre Louÿs, March 27, 1898.

[21] Letter to Nadejda von Meck, July 6, 1878, quoted by Catherine Drinker Bowen and Barbara von Meck in *"Beloved Friend,"* New York, 1937, p. 247.

This fragment of self-analysis leads us to a category of statements possibly more substantial than the sporadic quotations I have offered so far. Some composers have attempted to describe quite methodically their creative process. For a long while the model of such descriptions was considered to be a lengthy and indeed fascinating letter in which Mozart minutely explored the mechanism of his creation. This letter, dated October 12, 1790, and addressed to a certain Baron von Aufsess, was first published in 1815 in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*[22] of Leipzig, reprinted in 1904 in the *Leipziger neueste Nachrichten,* and issued again on September 25 of the same year in *Le Guide musical* of Brussels. It was accepted as genuine and widely exploited until about 1920. Unfortunately no trace has ever been found of Mozart's autograph, and today the opinion of the experts, principally Dr. Wilhelm A. Bauer and Dr. Otto Erich Deutsch (preparing the complete edition of Mozart's correspondence), is that the letter is a forgery of the too ingenious Rochlitz, a forgery which seems, however, to be based on rather plausible data.

But more reliable documents are available, such as those I have already quoted by Richard Strauss, Honegger, Tchaikovsky. I shall have recourse again to the last-named, who makes us more conscious of the psychophysiological complexity of the creative process. In his correspondence of February–March 1878 with Nadejda von Meck, to which I alluded above, there is an extensive passage of the utmost importance. I am not the first to appreciate its value, but I feel that it cannot be neglected. Tchaikovsky says: "Usually the seed of a future musical creation germinates instantaneously and most unexpectedly. If the soil is eager, if there is a disposition to work, that seed takes root with amazing power and speed, appears above ground as a little stalk which puts forth leaves and branches and finally, flowers. This simile is as near as I can come to a description of the creative process. If the seed appears at a favorable moment, the main difficulty is past. The rest grows of itself.

[22] XVII, No. 34.

"Words are vain to tell you the boundless joy that comes over me when a new idea is conceived and begins to take definite shape. One forgets everything; one is a madman, trembling and quivering in every organ, with scarcely time to outline the sketches, so rapidly does one idea pursue another. Sometimes in the midst of this magic process an outside shock wakes one from this state of somnambulism. The bell rings, the servant enters, the clock strikes, reminding one that the business of the day must be attended to. These interruptions are inexpressibly trying. Sometimes, inspiration takes flight, one has to seek it again—often in vain. Frequently one must rely here upon a quite cold, deliberate technical process of work. Perhaps such moments are responsible, in the works of the Great Masters, for those places where the organic coherence fails and where one can trace artificial coherence, seams and patches. But this is unavoidable. If that spiritual condition of the artist called inspiration, which I have tried to describe, should continue uninterrupted, the artist could not survive a single day. The strings would snap and the instrument fly to pieces. One thing however is indispensable: the main idea of the piece, together with a general outline of the separate parts, must not be found through searching but must simply appear—a result of that supernatural, incomprehensible and never-analysed power called inspiration." [23]

"Do not believe those who tried to persuade you that musical creation is a cold, purely mental exercise. Only the music that pours from the depths of an artistic soul, moved by inspiration, can touch and take possession of the hearer. There is no doubt that even the greatest musical genius has sometimes worked unwarmed by inspiration. It is a guest that does not come on first invitation. In the meantime one must work, and an honest artist cannot sit with his hands crossed because he is not inclined to compose. . . . One must hold fast and have faith, and inspiration will come.

"This happened to me only today. I wrote you that I had been working regularly, but without enthusiasm. If I had given way to

[23] Bowen-Von Meck, *op. cit.*, p. 206.

a lack of inclination, I would surely not have accomplished anything for a long time. But faith and patience never desert me, and today, ever since morning I have been possessed by the inexplicable, mysterious fire of inspiration." [24]

When the composer is in good disposition "then work proceeds with the strangest ease. One forgets everything, the spirit quivers with sweet excitement, and before one has time to follow the swift flight to its end, time has gone by unperceived. In this state is something somnambulistic, *'on ne s'entend pas vivre.'* " [25]

I shall end this review of composers who believe in that mysterious power which Goethe called the *inner daemon* with a profession of faith of Debussy, in an interview granted to a reporter in 1911, a few weeks before the first performance of *Le Martyre de Saint-Sébastien*: "Who can penetrate the secret of musical composition? The noise of the sea, the curve of the horizon, the wind in the foliage, the chirp of a bird awaken in us many impressions. And suddenly, without the slightest assent from ourselves, one of these remembrances springs out of us and expresses itself in music. It bears its harmony in itself. Whatever you may try to do, you will not be able to find anything more just and sincere. Only thus will a heart predestined to music make its most beautiful discoveries"—and here Debussy merely develops a thought expressed a few years earlier (1907) to his friend Victor Segalen: "Art is occultism. Whence does it come?"

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Today a directly opposite conception is gaining more and more adherents in musical circles. This conception puts the emphasis on intelligence and industry and regards musical composition as an objective activity in which the leading role is played by technique.

It was Jacques Ibert, I believe, who transferred to musical composition the definition Thomas Edison gave of genius: one percent

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[24] Letter of March 17, *ibid.*, p. 217.
[25] Letter of July 6, *ibid.*, p. 247.

inspiration, ninety-nine percent perspiration. This was semifacetious. But Strawinsky is perfectly serious in declaring: "The phenomenon of music is given to us for the sole purpose of establishing order in things, and chiefly between *man* and *time*. Such purpose requires necessarily and exclusively a construction. This construction being achieved, order being attained, everything is said. It would be useless to search or wait for something else. It is precisely this construction, this order, which produces in us an emotion of a quite special character, thoroughly different from our customary sensations and reactions springing from impressions of everyday life. One cannot define more clearly the sensation generated by music than by identifying it with that which we feel at the sight of architectural forms." [26]

This is the same idea, in fact, that Mersenne attempted to carry to its ultimate consequences in a *proposition* of his *Harmonie universelle,* entitled "To determine if it is possible to compose the best of all songs that can be invented." [27] To form this perfect structure he tried countless combinations and permutations of notes—until he was obliged to give up and renounce this visionary goal.

It so happens—and this is a mere parenthesis—that nowadays some people are, indeed, working in a way not so different from that which Mersenne proposed. But they base their work on mathematical probability, the laws of Fischer, Laplace-Gauss, Maxwell-Boltzmann, and so on. Two and even three centuries ago composers already were attempting to exploit the laws of chance, but in a much more naïve or even frivolous way. Some of them devised musical games in which dice, dominoes, or lottos were thrown haphazardly. Whatever number came up represented a phrase of music, and the result, accidental as it might be, was always a perfectly acceptable, logical composition which conformed to the rules. Thus, anyone

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[26] Igor Strawinsky, *Chroniques de ma vie,* I, pp. 117–18.
[27] *Harmonie universelle,* Livre second, Des Chants, Proposition VII.

could "compose without knowing a single note of music." [28] Even the very learned Abbé Stadler amused himself with such fancies. His *Tabelle, aus welcher man Menueten und Trio herauswürfeln kann,* published in Vienna in 1781, has often been reprinted—under Mozart's name!

To return to Strawinsky, however: some other texts of his seem to admit the existence of inspiration, but how restricted in its attributions! "The layman," he writes, "imagines that it is necessary, in order to create, to wait for inspiration. On the contrary, it is a propulsive force found in any human activity, and is not at all the monopoly of artists. But this power is only disclosed when put into action by an effort, and this effort is termed *work.* Just as appetite comes in eating, so it is equally true that working summons inspiration if it did not show itself at the beginning. But it is not only the inspiration that matters: it is the result, in other words, the product." [29]

It seems advisable to point out here that the *Chronicles of My Life* dates from 1935, quite some time after the extraordinary creative period in which Strawinsky composed, at a stretch, the *Firebird, Petrushka, Le Sacre du printemps, Noces,* and *L'Histoire du soldat.* More recently, less and less dependent on the *inner*

[28] For the sake of curiosity I shall mention the *Secret pour composer en musique par un art nouveau, si facile que ceux-mêmes qui ne sçavent pas chanter pourront en moins d'un jour composer à quatre parties sur toute sorte de basses* by Du Reneau, Paris 1658 (actually only a method to realize, by means of tables of letters and numbers, counterpoints of the first species on a given bass); the *Ludus melothedicus; ou, Le jeu de dez harmonique,* sold at La Chevardière, 1757; the *Domino musical; ou, L'Art du musicien mis en jeu* by Avocat [N. Bigant], 1779; a *Tabular system whereby any person, without the least knowledge of Musick, may compose ten thousand different minuets,* by Welcker, a London music publisher *ca.* 1775; the *Musikalisches Charten-Spiel . . . wobey man allezeit ein musikalisches Stück gewinnet* of Michael J. F. Wiedeburg, Aurich, 1788; the *Gioco pitagorico-musicale* of Calegari, Venice, 1801; the *Quadrille Melodist* of J. Clinton, London, *ca.* 1850 (a set of 62 cards supposedly able to produce 214,000,000 quadrilles and melodies)—but all these inventions were by far transcended by the surprising *Componium* built by Winkel in 1821, an instrument really able to give out variations *ad infinitum* upon a given theme (a specimen, perhaps the only one extant, belongs to the Museum of the Brussels Conservatoire).

[29] Strawinsky, *op. cit.,* II, pp. 186–87.

daemon, he has increasingly staked almost everything on research, experimentation; each new score has been the solution of a new problem in writing, in form, in orchestration, dramaturgy, or aesthetics.

It is interesting to compare Strawinsky's point of view with that of another composer, Maurice Ravel, to whom for a long time (and quite erroneously) critics ascribed an attitude similar to the Russian's. The precision of Ravel's writing deceived the commentators, persuading them to see him as nothing more than a patient adjuster of micrometric mechanisms. But what did he himself say? In 1910, in an article on Chopin, we read: *"Architecture! What an inane comparison!* There exist rules which tell us how to make a building stand up, but there is nothing of the sort to show us how to link up a chain of modulations. Or rather, yes, one thing—inspiration." [30]

On another occasion, attacking the formula of Buffon that *genius is no more than steadfast patience,* Ravel said: "That *steadfast patience,* or will-power which unfortunately Buffon thought constituted the very essence of genius, is in reality no more than an accessory to it. The principle of *genius,* that is to say, of artistic invention, can only be established by instinct or sensitivity. What was intended by Buffon as nothing more than a witty remark has given rise to a fatal, and relatively modern, error, an error that leads people to think that the artistic instinct is directed by the will. . . . In art, craftsmanship [métier] in the absolute sense of the word cannot exist. In the harmonious proportions of a work, in the elegance of its unfolding, inspiration plays an almost unlimited role. The *will* to develop can only be sterile." [31]

This point of view is not entirely extinct today, even among masters considered innocent of conservatism. Witness Messiaen: "I believe in musical inspiration—not in the sense of an abrupt invasion by some Dionysian ecstasy, but rather as a slow, imper-

[30] "Impressions" in *Le Courrier musical,* Paris, Jan. 1, 1910, p. 32.
[31] *Revue S. I. M.,* Paris, March 15, 1912, p. 50.

ceptible process which goes on despite ourselves. We can control it to a certain extent, but we have no absolute power over it." [32]

Nor can I forget that, in this very hall, in the course of a lecture in this same series in which it is an honor to appear, my eminent colleague Egon Wellesz spoke on Schoenberg and concluded: "The great composer can never be subservient to any existing theory, but follows his inner ear." [33]

We cannot deny, however, that in recent times a lively opposition has arisen—and not only in the realm of music—against the dogma of inspiration as a spontaneous manifestation more or less subject to the subconscious. For these new theorists the primary conditions of creation are: a) the composer's becoming aware of his own position in the evolution of music, and b) his wish to introduce something new. In an article leveled against Strawinsky (before musicians of the younger generation decided once again that he had some genius) René Leibowitz wrote: "I do not believe in musical genius in itself, or rather, I do not believe that there exists in man an inspired nature which permits him to achieve at certain times and, so to speak, despite himself works of genius. The musician of genius is he who becomes conscious of the totality of the problems resulting from the evolution of polyphony in the period in which he lives, problems which he poses to himself of his own accord and which he proceeds to resolve with prodigious gifts and with an irresistible force of character. In this sense there is no more an element of chance in the act of creation than in the evolution of an artist. In the final analysis one must choose his path and commit himself to it entirely." [34]

In a less belligerent manner these same ideas are developed in Gisèle Brelet's *Esthétique et création musicale,* which derives in part

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[32] "L'Inspiration musicale" in *Opéra,* Dec. 19, 1945.

[33] *The Origins of Schönberg's Twelve-Tone System,* Washington, Library of Congress, 1958.

[34] "Igor Strawinsky, ou Le choix de la misère musicale" in *Les Temps Modernes,* Paris, April 1, 1946, p. 1336.

from the theories of Dr. Julius Bahle.[35] I should like to quote a few passages that are particularly explicit: "The artistic will of the musician can only arise in the first place from the consciousness of his historical destiny. We have already said that the history of musical thought seems to develop according to some internal logic beyond the psychological personalities of the various composers. Now, to become aware of this internal logic, to know how to introduce one's own creative personality into the historical curve to which the art of music is committed—these seem to be the primary conditions for a fruitful creativity. . . . The creator can only achieve a fertile creation if he becomes conscious of the historical moment when his personality is called upon to manifest itself. . . . The profound will of the artist is dominated by a struggle to conquer new forms and sensations of sound, which are linked to one another. . . .

"In the depths of himself the musician expresses the wish to be *original,* to raise and to solve new problems in the realm of musical thought." [36]

If I devoted to these ideas the attention they deserve, it would be necessary here to go beyond the particular problem of the "composer's workshop" and to attack the even vaster and thornier problem of contemporary musical evolution. But that would require another lecture, or two or ten, and at that there would be faint hope of exhausting the subject. In these new doctrines I must limit myself to the appearance of two elements which, throughout many centuries, have scarcely been considered by composers: first, the desire to become conscious of their place in the evolution of music; and second, the deliberate wish to present something new.

In the past, as you know, things were far simpler. With very rare exceptions the creator followed the teachings of one composer or another whom he specially admired. He considered himself a success when he resembled his master as closely as possible. When his own genius stirred him to innovation, it was because of an inner

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[35] *Der musikalische Schaffensprozess,* Leipzig, 1936.
[36] Gisèle Brelet, *op. cit.,* pp. 15–17.

impulse to which he did not always willingly abandon himself—since those around him were hardly likely to applaud such heresy. To surpass others in technic (everyone's aim today) was considered rather a handicap. Most people thought that genius does not go together necessarily with daring, that, instead, it is to be found (as believed by most of the composers I have mentioned) in those regions which elude our conscious control. If further proof were needed, it would suffice to think of Mozart. Certainly there are innovations in many of his works, but far more numerous and equally, or even more, admired are those pieces written in a style no more advanced than that of Wranitzky, Dittersdorf, or Wanhal. Should not this make those who believe the most important thing is to pose new problems stop and reconsider?

Perhaps we, too, we critics, musicologists, aestheticians are partly responsible for this. I should like to recall—and this will be my last quotation—the diatribe of a great French composer who was, at the same time, probably our greatest music critic, Paul Dukas. Early in this century he lashed out against those commentators on Wagner who thought that they had explained everything when they had taken apart, bit by bit, all of his *Leitmotivs*. They create, he said, "an illusion which profits most those who like to 'take stock'—the statisticians of sixteenth-notes, the accountants of reminiscences, those who are enchanted that music becomes, in some way, an art about which one can reason as if it were a thing without mystery, with precise examples, footnotes and numbers. By leaving nothing unexplained, by giving a translation of almost every bar, these inveterate commentators have made of Wagner's music a purely analytic art from which we shall only painfully be able to free ourselves. At the same time, and this is the delicate and serious point of the matter, they have at last offered unbelievable facilities to mediocre composers. A reading of their anatomical dissections must have convinced many musicians . . . that a powerful art was within their grasp, since skill counted for more than imagination,

patience more than emotion, and since, too, it was only necessary to labor sufficiently in order to win a spotless glory.

"Thus it is that the misunderstanding found throughout the history of our art has assumed a new guise, and not the least curious one. Thus it is that we have embarked upon a particularly interesting phase of the struggle which has been going on ever since the Middle Ages, between the notes themselves and the music. This has resulted from the confusion of the writing and the thought, the letter and the spirit, the means and the end." [37]

Dukas really seems to condemn, by anticipation (in 1901) those tendencies which have gained common currency in our times. What he could not foresee was the extraordinary development they would undergo, a development which has forced us to embrace, under the same term *music,* two fundamentally different arts, despite all the verbal acrobatics that certain people indulge in as they attempt to harmonize them. On the one hand there is a music which goes back to remotest times and which, despite many trials, despite so many abrupt changes that might be dignified as revolutions, has permanently preserved two essential characteristics: a) it was related to the composer's desire, to an instinct if you wish, which impelled him to express in the language of sounds what we call (for lack of a less equivocal term) musical ideas, those concepts which in reality are sensations and which, moreover, obey other laws or follow a logic differing from that of spoken language; b) this music fulfilled its task with the utmost regard for the ear, for the affinities and repulsions existing between sonorities, for the evolution of our aural keenness or tolerance, which constantly enlarges our conception of dissonance, or rhythmic symmetry, and of association of instrumental timbres.

Opposed to this music, to which Schoenberg and his first disciples once subscribed, another music arose, or rather many others, diversified in their aims and in their means of expression but having in

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[37] P. Dukas, "Les Notes et la musique" in *La Revue hebdomadaire,* October 1901, pp. 255–256.

common the same absolute confidence in intelligence, in reasoning, in will-power, aided and abetted in certain cases by pure chance (as in the case of Mr. Janis Xénakis). Here the process of musical creation nonchalantly ignores the *inner daemon* invoked by Goethe, and there are no mysteries behind its façade.

There are—at least one may fear so—two distinct universes. Is it possible to reconcile them, as attempted sometimes by certain daring young composers, troubled by their own boldness and seeking reassurance by placing themselves under the retrospective sponsorship of Johann Sebastian Bach, who is no longer present to straighten things out?

In an article recently published in the magazine *Théâtre* I find this utterance: "Discovering in 1948 the resources offered by manipulations of sounds after recording, Pierre Schaeffer completely upset [the French *bascule complètement* is coarser] the traditional procedure of musical creation." [38] I am not convinced of its accuracy. Quite different is musical creation, quite different that creation which consists of calmly, objectively fabricating assemblages of sounds. One system cannot be discarded in favor of the other. One is the privilege of genius (in varying degrees of power); stemming from the profoundest depths of human thought and feeling it can act upon mankind with a force the untold examples of which I need not recall. The other is an activity, academically as well as financially burdensome, the future of which is not yet easy to foresee, but for which the best hope is that it will become a devoted auxiliary of the first. Is this possible?

I shall do no more than pose the question, having, as I admitted to you earlier, only very modest ambitions and not at all the gift of prophecy.

This may seem a slight harvest after such a long talk, and I am embarrassed that, in order to reach this point, I had to shield myself behind such a profusion of quotations. It was through neither

[38] Sophie Brunet, in *Théâtre,* Paris, July 1960, p. 16.

laziness nor cowardice, but simply because it would be improper to neglect what greater authorities than I have contributed to a subject that engrosses me. And it was also the means of presenting to you, thanks to their assistance, a sufficient number of judgments of tested value to be sure of not vainly having seduced you away from either your work or your leisure.

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