

# Music and Existentialism

Herbert Brün

Two Fragments [1961]

These two fragments were written in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1961, where Brün was visiting on the occasion of the first performance of his 3rd String Quartet by the LaSalle Quartet. He was asked by a local museum to contribute a talk under the title *Existentialism and the Arts*. This event is referred to in Brün's presentation *For Anticommunication*.

— Arun Chandra.

## Fragment I

Ladies and Gentlemen,

When I was 18 years old and Brahms my favorite composer and mine the firm belief, that the things which constitute this world, are of a definite shape, with which to deal energetically will be my task in due course, I had, of course, a best friend and, of course, a slightly older friend, who, not being the best, yet was, what I learned to call "The Mentor". He told me one day, for reasons which were and have remained his own, that I should watch out carefully all my life, not to confuse the sources of philosophy with the functions of philosophy and not to confuse either with the history of philosophy. In general he was a great one to advise against confusion. It was difficult at the time for me to understand him, because, of course, it never occurred to me to confuse anything. On the contrary, I was quite sure and untiringly determined, to find a place and a function for everything, and also for myself in this neatly organized system of things, circumstances, thoughts and speculations.

But the day came, when I, myself, invented confusion! (I could not get a copyright on it, because somebody else had invented it a few thousand years earlier.) Still I continued to feel responsible for my invention, and certain aspects of it are instrumental to some of my ideas up to this day. It is just the same as it is with other things: If you invent some music, you are more enthusiastic about music, than somebody, who never invented any music. And if you invent some confusion, you are more enthusiastic about confusion, than somebody who never invented any confusion. For, if the particular confusion you claim to have invented even if you are not the

first inventor, concerns the realm of communication, then this confusion may become the subject matter of your attempts at communication. And if you happen to be a composer of music, you might feel compelled, to select for your composition such sounds, and to organize them in such a way, as to manifest the confusion rather than the coherence of musical communication. It should not be difficult to accept the statement, that organized confusion is the result of just the same amount and quality of planning and [realizing?] as the organized avoidance of confusion would have to be. One has to *know* confusion, in order to plan it and to present it in an intended way. The knowledge of confusion and the acceptance of it as a vital part of the view which people take of themselves and the world, is one very important aspect of modern investigation into the directions, in which some truth might be found.

The confusion I am speaking of is, as anybody knows, the very confusion between subject and object. For the composer of music as well as for the listener of music it is an old question, or a venerable problem: Is music an *object*, which the composer creates and which the listener hears? Or is music a *subject*, which makes the composer composer and the listener hear? Now, just as there always was some kind of existentialist philosophical research in the thinking world, there also was always some kind of protest against this way of asking questions in the thinking world. All questions, which by implying the "either/or" denounced themselves as being leading questions, always were suspect to many. But not always were they suspect to those most concerned, namely to composers and music listeners. It is rather [that] an idea is gaining ground, which proposes, that the experience, called music, takes place in some "no man's land", which is situated between a *cause*, which is the composer's creation, and an *effect*, which is the listener's creation.

While composers frequently develop strong inclinations towards philosophical speculations, they almost never feel compelled to delve deeper into their own reflections than is necessary for the work they just are writing or planning. It will therefore take some time, before

composer, and more time, before listeners will become fully aware of the consequence[s], which are lurking behind their own experiments in concept. Instead of saying "it will take some time" I should rather say "it will take some music", because only when a work is new and full of unheard of sounds, the *nomansland*, where the experience takes place, can be observed and explored. It is there for a short time only, and soon will become the well-known territory, the planning ground, where the mutual agreements prepare the invasion of communicative meanings, which cannot but drive experience out into the future. For this goes for music as well as for the other arts: A language found is also a language lost. What once is comprehensible can never become incomprehensible again. That particular moment of language, where it creates the transition from incomprehensibility to comprehensibility is the moment of birth of that language and can never be repeated. From then on the is [?] language is a living tool, by which nothing but the already understood can be prescribed.

Those composers, who propose, that the experience, called music, takes place in some *nomansland* between cause and effect, are thereby leading into a direction, which, whether they are conscious of it or not, frequently corresponds with some concepts of contemporary existentialism. Once one accepts the image of that "*nomansland*", some consequences must be taken into account.

## *Fragment II*

Ladies and Gentlemen,

If I speak here, today, about certain ideas, which may or may not have had some influence on the contemporary scene of musical composition, I wish to make sure beforehand, that I do not speak on behalf of the composers. Some of them might to a considerable extent agree with my opinions, some might indifferently stand aside and just tolerate my speculations as my personal hobby, some might vehemently attack my views.

Furthermore I would like to point out, that I firmly believe, that any investigation of philosophical value into the intentions and functions of an art, would have to start first and for most with a clarification of the reasons, which make a person choose to attempt to create art in general, and his specific branch of art in particular. I'll skip it now, though I cannot help but keep it in mind.

With the exception of the ideal philosopher, everybody embarks on philosophical speculations with a view on some aim, which he personally cherishes, and which he would like to make desirable *and* accessible to others. He draws on the fountain of disinterested philosophy,

when he feels, that the direct sensation of experience either falls flat or through habitual misinterpretation adopts misleading meanings.

Composers of music frequently develop strong inclinations towards philosophical speculations. but they almost never feel compelled to delve deeper into their own reflections than seems necessary to them for the work, which they just are writing or planning. They are, what one might call interested philosophers with certain attributes of a consumer, in that they never know quite exactly, whether they use their own head or somebody else's. Any attempt therefore to relate contemporary problems of composition to contemporary problems of philosophy must show a distinctively fragmentary character and will necessarily result in at least disputable statements.

The most significant trend in our day's *serious* attempts to create *new music* seems to me to be the renewed assault on some established concepts regarding the relation between music and listener and regarding the function of music as a communicative language. The significance of this assault, which is mobilized by the composers, lies in the fact, that it implies some proposition, which in my opinion resemble a number of propositions implied in modern existentialist thinking methods.

Let me briefly mention one or two of the established concepts. A composer, as subject, creates an object, called music, to which the listener, as a subject, listens. As soon as the composer and the listener agree on the appearance and the function of the object, this, as a comprehensible language, carries some intended communication from the composer to the listener. In order to prove that understanding has taken place, they use another language, to compare the meanings, which each of these has attached to the communication. If complete agreement has been proved, then one can say, that the music was heard and the meaning understood.

The contemporary attack on this concept could be briefly, and somewhat facetiously expressed by the slogan: "Let the meaning be heard and the music be understood." The facetiousness of this demand lies in the fact, that there is no way of proving, that it can be fulfilled. There is no language, by which a listener could possibly explain to a composer, how he heard the meaning and how he understood the music, without reverting to the old syllogism, where hearing the music precedes the understanding of the meaning.

In fact, of course, those composers, of which I speak here, do not demand or expect any proof for something, which they believe to have no sense at all. They do not agree that music is an acoustical vehicle for anything but itself. The content, that the processes of musical com-

position today, do not allude in any way to the patterns and syllogisms used for the presentation and communication of processes of thought, but rather to the process of thought itself. Music, in their concept, does not communicate musical thought, but *is* musical thought. The relation between music and the listener would then appear to function along the following lines:

There is the music that is played and there is the music that is heard. The first is the projection of the composer's thought into an almost unlimited field of acoustical possibilities. The second is the projection of the listener's thought into an already limited field of acoustical possibilities. These two projects meet once and never again, in some nomansland, where repetition and recognition have never been heard of, and therefore direct experience reigns. For a short time only, because the organized forces of mutual agreements on the terms of comprehensible communication almost immediately try to invade this nomansland, to drive direct experience out and to establish the reign of some language common to all, which is to guarantee with a minimum of ambiguity one understanding. A deep skepticism regarding the value of a language common to all for the achievement of mutual understanding could always be observed in the realms of art. But never before, to my knowledge, have composers of music attempted to prolong the period of direct experience in nomansland as consciously and as ardently as today. Not only by dint of organization but even by the very choice of the acoustical material, which they set out to organize, they try to ward off the fatal moment, which which the direct experience of musical thought will become obliterated by its interpretation in terms of indirect comprehensibility; when, what they wished to do and say, can be said and done no more, because it then has become doings and sayings, a vocabulary of meanings and actions in a preconceived system, which by sheer habit and longevity has become unaware of its own existence.

I should like you to witness one minute of such music. Incidentally, this excerpt is taken from a composition for orchestra by a young American composer, Earl Brown. He aptly called the piece *Available Forms*. Both, the music and the title seem to me to indicate a strongly

expressed doubt in the determinability of objects and an obvious call to the listener, to take on the responsibility for what he hears.

[*One minute Brown*]

The composition, and many others, which I have heard in the last few years, are notated in a way, which leaves varied degrees of freedom to the musicians as to the execution of their parts. In consequence no two live performance of such a work are exactly alike. While some elements of the composed scheme of things may recur, others may be omitted. The constellation of the musical events in the dimension of time changes considerably from one performance to the other, thereby defeating any attempt to coordinate the events to any pattern derived from logical systems.

Such music presents itself almost in the following manner. For reasons, of which it does not speak, organized according to some intentions, of which it does not speak, it is once audible, because it is played and heard, and never again. The listener, projecting his capacities to meet the sound, hears what he can hear of it and is fully responsible for the part he take in the existence of the music. Whatever he remembers of it, will help him to know later, that it did not happen again. And what he does not remember will, remain for him pre-existent, still in nomansland, some other time perhaps to be experienced or lost forever. The listener exists only in what he hears, and becomes aware of his own existence through the amount of experiences which he succeeds in proving for himself out of the meeting with the organized nameless unknown. Thus can be attained a state of understanding, which does not need the understood object. In this frame of mind, a language gained is a language lost and all communication simultaneously a way and a wall. The aim of philosophy, said Jaspers somewhere, is to get a fresh grip on objectivity and so make it the means of causing existence to appear. Some contemporary music sounds very much like examples strewn along the way, which eventually may lead to this aim.