The 'Beautiful' in Music Today

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In 1948, Pierre Boulez ended one of his articles thus: 'I have a horror of dealing in words with what is so prettily called the aesthetic problem. Besides, I don't want to make this article any longer; I prefer to turn back to my MS paper.'

That attitude was to become characteristic of young avant-garde composers in the 1950's. A new world of sonic and temporal experience had been sighted from the standpoint of Webern's serial technique—a world centred on the organization of sound-material. Amid the bustle of striking camp and heading for the new Promised Land, the question of Beauty was not merely out of place; it was downright suspect. For it involved those criteria and taboos, value judgements and ideals, on whose ruins everyone was then standing. And yet—as Boulez's pronouncement show—a belief in the possibility of proceeding (yet again!) from neutral 'sound-values' involved a secret dialectic with the aesthetic considerations that had ostensibly been excluded from the discussion.

The avant-garde was at that time encountering resistance on every side, and not least from proponents of a demand for Beauty that had seemingly been betrayed. This particular form of resistance was so embedded in the complex alliance of (for the most part), conservative ideologies that it was not singled out for attention by the avant-garde composers, who were wrapped up in their own problems and discoveries. Others, upon whom the responsibility should have fallen, were still coming to terms with the Second Viennese School, and evaluating it aesthetically. Having been delayed by the Nazi period, such evaluation was urgently needed in order to clarify the distinction between humanity's legitimate and profoundly rooted demand for art as the experience of Beauty, and its false satisfaction and alienation in the form of art 'fodder' manufactured by the bourgeoisie and preserved in a society of repressed contradictions.*

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* 'Contradictions' (Widersprüche) refers to, but is not restricted to, the Marxist theory of the contradictions of capitalism; see Christopher Caudwell's Further Studies in a Dying Culture (1941) and especially his essay 'Beauty and Bourgeois Aesthetics'. In 1977 Lachenmann composed Salut für Caudwell, a major work for two guitars (Eds.)
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While there was on the one hand a clear recognition of the new need to defend, in connection with the Viennese School, the betrayed concept of Beauty—and here of course I am thinking of Adorno and his pupils—on the other there was a hesitancy about investigating what was happening in the framework of new developments. Wherever such investigation was attempted, the short-circuiting was widespread, and misunderstandings and misjudgements proliferated. Adorno’s article ‘On the Aging of New Music’ proves true and prophetic today, though it obviously was unjust to those in the line of fire at the time.

So the concept of Beauty, dismissed as suspect by the avant-garde, was kept alive by society. Or kept society alive? Anyway, it lived on, not only as a general criterion for identification, but also in its customary and socially accepted form as reified categories. These facilitated the process of identification by offering a shield against the reality that could no longer be mastered. The shield was an apparently intact language: tonality and its expressive means.

Blind to all that, the avant-garde failed society and reality. The opening-up of new dimensions of sound ('parameters' was the magic word), with its implicit denial of the Beautiful reified as the Comfortable and Familiar, was wholly compatible with aesthetic considerations. But in time it led to complacent mannerism—to musical thinking that was blindly technical and empiricist. As a manifestation of the power of musical invention in the free-and-easy realm of well-nourished bourgeois fantasy, the material, in all its richness and fascination, afforded immediate contact with initiates and with open-minded bystanders. The old temptation was irresistible: expectations of the Beautiful—as something theoretically neglected and unconquered yet socially as intact and effective as ever provided well-worn tonal habits are tricked out with elements that are more exotically attractive—began to influence avant-garde musical thinking, which had once been so strict. This was noted not with vigilance or even suspicion, but rather with amusement and sympathy.

Meanwhile the works of Ligeti, Penderecki and also Kagel were being understood and welcomed as an expression of a new-found freedom in the avant-garde’s thinking and self-awareness. The new tolerance of tonal elements that had once been so strictly excluded seemed to be a useful corrective to the compositional frustration which had led to progressive withdrawal from the serial utopias. While glorifying this ‘tolerance’ as a product of ‘avant-gardistic’ boldness, the composer reached a point where he was exploiting those very aspects of culture which had originally been shunned.

The veiled regression of the 60’s was followed by the open regression of the 70’s. The freedom to be tonal turned out to be the freedom to live in leaky places; the tonal ‘corrective’ was revealed as a corruptive. So the journey into the kingdom of unheard-of perception was over. Except for Luigi Nono, leading composers of yesterday have exhausted their resources. Failing to sense the truth about their material-fixated thought, they now decorate the cultural scene as petrified monuments to their old achievements. Meanwhile the sly champions of veiled or open regression take up the discarded banner of the avant-garde and boldly parade it in circles. They are celebrating the come-back of the bourgeois concept of beauty in the same reactionary form it had at the end of World War II if not before: a form sickening to anyone who sees in art—or in beauty—more than just a masquerade. Today the avant-garde is brought low by that selfsame bourgeois domesticated concept of beauty that it so arrogantly assumed it could ignore on the grounds that it preferred ‘to turn back to the MS paper’. For the
concept had not been countered by a demand for beauty purged by reality, and 
thought-through in theoretical and practical terms.

Today the call for beauty is more suspect than ever—whether the concept is 
a pluralism embracing all conceivable types of hedonism, or else a reactionary 
hangover after false hopes and promises, or just academicism of whatever sort. 
Its proponents betray themselves over and over again as they cry out for ‘nature’, 
for tonality, for something positive, ‘constructive’, for ‘comprehensibility at 
last’—and respond with loyal quotations from Bruckner, Mahler and Ravel. It is 
high time the concept of beauty be rescued from the speculations of corrupt spirits, 
and the cheap pretensions of avant-garde hedonists, sonority-chefs, exotic-
meditationists and nostalgia-merchants. Once integrated into an overall theory 
of aesthetics and composition, the concept is no longer suitable for the prophets 
of popularity, the apostles of nature and tonality, and the fetishists of academicism 
and tradition. The mission of art lies neither in fleeing from, nor in flirting with, 
the contradictions which mould the consciousness of our society, but in coming 
to grips with them and dialectically mastering them.

Beauty—or, if we prefer, artistic pleasure—remains an arbitrary and 
coincidental private standard if we ignore the full potentiality Man has acquired in 
the course of his development as a species. We still live in the hope that Man is 
capable of doing right, which of course presupposes that he is able and willing to 
know himself and his reality. We still believe in a ‘human potential’. What we 
call beauty is the sense-experience which makes this belief a certainty. It com-
municates such belief not through a metaphysically orientated, irrational, ex-
perience, but through one that is extremely this-worldly, down-to-earth. Man 
succeeds in expressing himself—which Schoenberg, with extraordinary cogency, 
described as the highest thing an artist must demand from himself.

Expressing oneself means entering into relationship with one’s surround-
ings; it means confronting, as who one is and who one would like to be, the 
questions posed by society and the existing categories of communication, and 
coming to grips with the social value-concepts contained therein. It means, 
above all, offering as much resistance to the inherited categories of communica-
tion as is demanded by the contradictions and unfreedoms embodied in them. It 
is this resistance which reminds Man of his capacity, and his duty, to determine 
himself and become conscious of his unfreedom. Expressing oneself therefore 
means eliciting a sense of social contradictions by rendering them transparent—in 
other words by reaffirming the human demand for freedom, the ‘human potential’. 
A demand for beauty which avoids these consequences means only flight, resignation, self-
betrayal.

In practice, the composer who is concerned to express himself is obliged to 
take account of the ‘aesthetic apparatus’—that is, the sum total of categories of 
musical perception as they have evolved throughout history to the present day; 
of the ‘instrumentarium’ which comes with them; of the techniques of playing 
and of notation; and last but not least, of the relevant institutions and markets 
in our society. From the window display of a music shop to the complimentary 
tickets given to the town council’s charlady for the concert of the visiting fisher-
man’s choir, from the Hohner mouth-organ to the pensionable officialdom of the 
Radio Symphony Orchestra with its many fiddles tuned to the same open fifths 
and its solitary bass clarinet, this ‘aesthetic apparatus’ embodies the ruling aesthetic-
ic needs and norms.

It is no accident that they rule in this particular form, for the apparatus has
been created by the nature of the demand for music. To that extent it mirrors social consciousness, with its value-concepts and taboos—and with its contradictions. It embodies Man's need for beauty together with his flight from reality—his longing, and his fear.

In the context of new technology (but not only of that) and also perhaps in response to non-European and even avant-garde influences, the aesthetic apparatus has developed an apparently inexhaustible tolerance, without sacrificing its value-hierarchies. It offers an escape backwards into the illusory security of the past, and forwards into 'avant-gardist' adventures, however understood.

A composer seriously concerned with 'expressing himself' is at once fascinated, by, and highly suspicious of, this aesthetic apparatus. In no circumstances will he simply make use of it; rather must he master it, technically and spiritually. Whether he recognizes it or not, he cannot wrestle with the rules of the games implicit in the aesthetic apparatus without being dragged into the conflict that determines the consciousness of our society. This conflict—fear of freedom and simultaneous longing for it—is his own as well, and consequently he cannot evade the crucial decision. Either he must face up to the conflict and bring it to a head, or he must close his eyes and trust in his 'naive artistry'. If he chooses the latter course he must try to salve his conscience by pretending that the current rules of the aesthetic apparatus are harmless 'laws of nature', which can be ingeniously exploited, once one has adapted oneself to them. But he should recognize that the material he uses, however arcane or however familiar, is always and from the outset in direct connexion with the aesthetic apparatus, and under its sway. The fate of serialism should have shown this. This connection has to be recognized, and the compositional thought-process has to proceed from that. Only in coming to grips with the aesthetic apparatus and the categories that determine it, can self-knowledge and musical expression come about. Only then can the experience of freedom be artistically communicated as reality (with its distinguishing contradictions) and become conscious. The experience of the Beautiful is indissolubly connected with making perceptible the social contradictions in our reality; because to make them perceptible is to make them surmountable.

Such a determination of the Beautiful is the only realistic and rational means of discriminating the Beautiful in traditional art (and indeed especially). There is a need today for investigations into the music of Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, Schubert, aimed at showing that the degree of individualization, of intensity and of truthfulness, achieved was inseparable from the process of grappling with the aesthetic apparatus at each stage in its historical and social development. From the harmonic consistency of Bach's chorale settings, which so offended his contemporaries, through Mozart's subversive use of the elements of Empfindsamkeit, which had once been so gracious, and Beethoven's liberated concept of form as the display of thematic work, to Schubert, Schumann, Wagner, and Mahler, the elements of compositional individualization are directly apprehensible as rejections of the usual; as latent or open cause of scandal, as expressive redefinition of the means of composition.

Whether the negation of inherited norms is potential or actual, it always obeys rational laws of thought and structure. For the sake of his beloved irrational pleasure the listener may repress his understanding of the rationale, or make a mystery of its esotericism. Aversion to the idea that art could be an expressive and structural imprint of a realistic, this-worldly, reason is characteristic of the false connoisseurship of a society that fears for its survival.
Nothing challenges the self-confidence of a society so mercilessly, nothing is more revolutionary, than the appeal to realism and commonsense. A clear relationship between compositional practice and social consciousness may have been rare, and sometimes the two may have even been in contradiction. The means whereby society has at each stage evaded that critical aspect of the work of art range from uncomprehending hero-worship to isolation and existential destruction. The sentence of Marx which Lukács quoted at the front of his big *Aesthetics* is relevant: ‘They don’t know it, but they do it’. Today the postulates of the Beautiful subserve the unremitting responsibility to insist on knowing what is being done. Beauty no longer ‘blindly’ fulfills. It knows its function in relation to what is habitual and reified, and in relation to the task of making bourgeois contradiction manifest. For the sake of truth, and with the perspective of the ‘human potential’, it offers resistance.

The ‘naïve artist’ is today a contradiction in terms; he is the embodiment of social mendacity and stupidity. To resist effectively, the creative instinct must harness all rational and intuitive forces, otherwise it will give way to the ever-present pressure to adapt and accommodate. The will to create must draw its strength from levels deeper, and more realistic, than those of the ‘creative appetite’ that Stravinsky talks about in his musical Poetics. Merely immanent aesthetic consistency must be replaced by historically and socially stringent action. This is determined by clarifying the objective relationship between one’s own expressive will and the aesthetic apparatus, and doing so before composition begins. Only through this study can the composer’s individual métier be sharpened. From then on, permanent vigilance towards alien compositional means, and towards one’s own, should become easy and natural in proportion to the readiness of the composer to question his own projects theoretically from the very beginning. The constant theoretical self-discipline responds to an experience of reality no longer repressed, but receptive to a demand for art and beauty made credible in terms of releasing that ‘human potential’ which gets blocked up afresh in us, and by us, every day of the week.

The striving precisely for a theoretical self-knowledge in the light of an overlapping responsibility will proceed differently for every composer, and certainly it will do so empirically to a large extent. It won’t happen without experiment. There are certainly no recipes, such as the serial principle became. There are simply ever-different situations, and different tasks and possibilities. It is a matter of maintaining one’s creative vigilance in relation to these. Whatever one does or decides as a composer, it will have to justify itself as a means of illuminating what is reified. The concept of the Beautiful has to pass through this purging of itself via the real contradictions of social expectations.

Beauty. It is the pillow, or the pin-cusion, of our species, which has never been able to desist from hating in the name of love, lying in the name of truth, earning money in the name of serving, exploiting in the name of solicitude, killing in the name of life, spoiling in the name of saving, suppressing in the name of freedom, and acting foolishly in the name of responsibility. The path to the ‘happy’ experience of the Beautiful leads through a conflict-ridden experience of it, whether repressed or accepted. In other words, it asks of Man whether and to what extent he is prepared to live eye to eye with his contradiction, and—conscious of this contradiction—remain vigilant about what he is up to.