

VIII

Metaphysics of Musical Polyphony

The possibility of creating music made up of several melodious parts moving concurrently in close but ever-shifting relation to one another was a unique discovery of the European artistic genius; one may add, of the Western Christian genius, whose spirit this form of music characteristically reflects. Harmonic modulation, which is the other face of polyphony, has put at the disposal of composers over the centuries a means of great emotive potency which, when harnessed to liturgical uses, enabled them to match the moods of Christian piety, as suggested by the scriptural and other texts they set, in a most telling way; joy or penitent sorrow, triumph or resignation, prayerful expectancy or the profound insights of mystical recollectedness all found their means of stirring the hearts of the faithful in the tonal medium provided by the polyphonic style. One can speak here, without exaggeration, of a sonorous theology whereby the truths of the Christian religion may be conveyed directly to the intelligence of those who know how to listen, be they simple believers or more instructed persons. This is a dimension of knowledge where set learning, or else its absence, makes little difference.

All this fits in with Western theological and devotional trends; it was the function of a consecrated polyphony in its heyday to complement the Gregorian monody while drawing from it much of its thematic material. In this way the primacy attaching to plainchant as the traditional song-form of the Church was duly maintained and this remained the normal

relationship between the two musical forms over many centuries. This was still true when the Tridentine fathers set about their task of overhauling the existing arrangements for Catholic worship; it still held good in principle, though much less so in practice, when Pope St Pius X issued his decree concerning church music at the beginning of our century.

Given the initial acceptance by the medieval Church of polyphony as a suitable ingredient of the Christian liturgical art, its eventual predominance followed in due course; every branch of music, whether classifiable as sacred or secular, vocal or instrumental, came into line, thus leading by and by to a situation where unharmonized music felt like an anomaly to the average European ear. Whatever may be one's value-judgments concerning the ultimate results of that first big innovation, it is still reasonable to put the question as to what might lie behind a development on this scale having a character so obviously alien to the common practice of the rest of mankind; if the Western European peoples of a thousand-odd years ago were led into adopting such a novel manner of making music, what made them do it? Such a departure from generally accepted norms which, everywhere else, remained wedded to monody with or without improvised variations of a more or less elaborate kind and the spectacular results that have flowed from that departure cannot merely be explained in terms of a historical accident; they must stem from some deep-seated metaphysical insights of which polyphony became the natural mode of expression. It is on these insights that the present essay is meant to focus attention.

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If music consisting of several parts meant to be heard simultaneously has long since become a built-in feature of the Western sonorous art, our own lifetime has witnessed a vast recrudescence of interest in those periods when contrapuntal

composition, the special science of polyphonic interplay, was carried to its highest perfection, namely the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Wherever such music is presented, in concert halls or churches, young people flock to swell the audience; better still, groups are arising on all sides whose delight it is to meet in each others' homes in order to carry on a musical dialogue taking this form. This urge to revive an ancient art for which our parents and grandparents, whose musical taste ran in quite different channels, had no particular use has been accompanied by a zeal for authenticity; whatever information could be gathered through painstaking and imaginative research has been eagerly collated—the idea of trying to perform this old music in quasi-modern style, while using modernized instruments, has become taboo for the present generation of musical enthusiasts, with few exceptions. This battle, in which the great protagonist was my own master Arnold Dolmetsch, has virtually been won, though detailed investigation of all possible sources of evidence continues unabated as more and more examples of lost music are brought to light, many of them dating from the time when the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris was still under construction. Opinions which Arnold Dolmetsch had expressed with extreme vehemence in the face of contemporary prejudice are now commonly to be heard from the mouths of young professionals as well as amateurs, voiced in matter-of-fact tones that go to show how far the struggles of the pioneering age have been left behind.

It is opportune to point out that the now generally accepted principle according to which each kind of music requires its own characteristic technique, and for this same reason may exclude technical procedures belonging to other kinds of music, itself marks an instinctive awakening to a truth of universal pertinence, one to which Mahayana Buddhism has given concrete expression with its teaching about the indissoluble partnership of Wisdom and Method as applying to the art of music as well as in other spheres. Its style, as well as

the content of all such compositions as belong to that style, represent the wisdom aspect of a given kind of music; all that comes under the heading of techniques, including the apparatus these call into play, represents method. These two interests are inseparable, they complement and interpenetrate one another at every turn. Arnold Dolmetsch never failed to inculcate this principle when teaching, both by example and by the nature of his criticisms. As his former pupil I can say, with gratitude, that this experience under the tuition of a musical sage opened my eyes to many things I would otherwise have missed; later, when it came to my turn to teach, I continued to base my methods on what that great man had first shown me.

All these things together have evidently marked a big change in musical sensibility; it is not only one's taste but, what is more important, one's whole manner of listening that has been affected. Where a previous generation had chiefly admired works of long duration in which the component material was spread comparatively thin, the present generation has again learned how to listen in depth; a contrapuntal masterpiece lasting no longer than five minutes holds their attention in such a way as to leave them feeling that they have participated in an ample musical experience, they ask for nothing more. Both for performers and listeners their scale of musical values has altered radically.

One point which hitherto has eluded all but a few observers is the fact that there is no known historical precedent for such a far-reaching attempt at resuscitation of the musical past as we are witnessing at present all over Europe and even as far as America and Australia; it has been reserved for the twentieth century to think and feel in this way. Other ages had been content with what the music of their own time, supplemented by some residual material of relatively recent date, was able to offer; whatever had come before was simply allowed to lapse at its own pace, including its greatest masterpieces. Shockingly wasteful, as one feels minded to say, yet

such was the way the authors of those masterpieces expected their own work to be treated when it came to the turn of their successors to take over. It must be admitted that there is a certain air of selflessness about this attitude. Here one is speaking chiefly of European music, where the idea of individual creation has played an increasingly prominent part in people's aesthetic appreciation ever since the rise of polyphony. In countries whose arts had remained on a strictly traditional basis such considerations were unlikely to count except in a very limited sense. The conscious cult of originality, with the man of genius as its accredited agent, became enormously accentuated in the European mentality from the Renaissance onwards; in other traditions genius could win recognition on occasion, but this concept did not become obsessive as eventually happened in the West.

The vast undertaking involved in the present revival of earlier types of music therefore appears in history as something of a paradox; one may well ask what has caused people in an age nourished (or rather starved) on the ideology of 'progress' to wish to repossess all this bygone music at the cost of so much effort and with every appearance of wishing to satisfy an urgent need. What do they sense in this music which they cannot obtain by other means? More important, what actually is to be found there? This is the essential question.

By all the signs around us we can safely guess that behind this whole story lies an unavowed attempt to fill the spiritual vacuum left by the flight from Christianity in the West; the fact that this music, as was pointed out at the beginning of the present essay, was a characteristically Christian creation—it is shared with no other tradition—makes it all the more likely that those who feel so strongly drawn in this direction are, did they but know it, responding to a homing instinct. We are thus brought back to what essentially is a metaphysical question; what is the message woven into the very substance of this music? More particularly, what is it that musical polyphony,

that unique creation of the Christian West, is able to communicate to human minds and human hearts?

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Like every genuine art, music provides an image of the Universe, at the level of 'the Lesser Mysteries'; when practiced with this truth in mind, it will serve as a support of contemplation and the joy it incidentally evokes will be seen as a reflection of the Divine Bliss.

The suchness of God, inexpressible and unmanifestable in Itself, corresponds, in our human experience, to voidness or *silence*. When silence is affirmed, sound then takes birth: 'In the beginning was the Word.' Music comes out of silence, and into silence it retreats in the moment of fulfillment. The primary affirmation of this truth is recognizable in the keynote, whether actually heard or implied in what is first heard; the keynote remains, throughout any piece of music, as a reminder of the *Unity* from which all that is manifested or developed derives its existence; the keynote, as it were, represents the germ of creation, it is never absent in fact, as efficient cause, from all the effects it will subsequently give rise to. Those effects are all contained in the primary cause, just as that same cause is communicated across its every effect, cause and effects being in fact inseparable; the prototype of this relationship is the Divine Intellect, wherein all that God 'has created' or 'will create' remains in a state of permanently present actuality which things and beings, in the course of their successive becoming, at once veil and reveal.

What actually happens in the created universe we see around us and in which we are involved? This universe is characterized by the triple fatality of change, competition and impermanence; to speak of a world (any kind of world) is to speak of contrast or opposition, for distinction of one being from another inevitably imposes this condition; 'a world' is always a play of black and white, with all the inter-

mediate shades of grey or, shall we say, all the changeful play of the spectrum. What then exactly happens when two or more beings are developing in the same world? These beings may either converge or diverge or, for a brief space, move parallel with one another (or almost so, since an absolutely parallel course is not a possibility) and this will from time to time bring the beings in question into contact or even collision. What happens then? In proportion as one being is carried along with greater force as compared with another, the latter will get pushed and deflected from its course till it is free to move again in its own direction; this fresh direction it will pursue until it again runs into opposition of some kind—perhaps this time its own impetus will prove the stronger and it will be the *other* being which will be deflected in its turn and so on indefinitely.

What does this picture suggest but a *counterpoint* which, by its continual interplay of tensions and releases, expresses that unity out of which all its constituent elements have arisen and which they are all forever seeking to regain consciously or unconsciously? The musical parallel is self-evident and it is this, in fact, which confers on contrapuntal music its strange power to move the soul. The rigor of the contrapuntal principle governing the music of the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Western Europe easily accounts for the tremendous effect which this kind of music makes on the performers and, to a slightly lesser degree, on outside listeners.

For instance in a fantasy for viols, or in the Church music of the period, what is it that typically happens? Silence is affirmed (therefore also broken) by the primary enunciation of a theme which evokes, from another player, either *agreement* (i.e. repetition of the theme in the original key or else in a related key) or *contrast* (i.e. reply in the form of another subject); but this very relationship, inasmuch as it introduces a duality, leads to collision at some point or other; the stronger part pushes the weaker off course until the sense of opposition (which is what a 'discord' amounts to) has ceased,

only to give rise to another such opposition as the parts in question encounter fresh points of resistance in trying to cross the path of some other part or parts. The search for freedom goes on as long as this process continues; each relation of concord represents a relative and provisional freedom with its corresponding degree of comfort, but so long as there is a process of *change* no situation can remain comfortable for long; oppositions will continue to arise, with a consequent urge to resolve them: only by a return to the original unity, of which the lurking memory constitutes one's incentive to achieve that very return, can peace at last be found.

Just as in the world one finds uphill and downhill, the one imposing extra effort and the other allowing of relaxed movement, so in our contrapuntal scheme we find that the interplay of parts is such as to impose, from time to time, an increase of effort perceptible by the ear as a *crescendo* and vice versa: this impulse to increase will always start in a *particular* part, it is never due to an arbitrary ('heretical') wish to play louder. In contrapuntal music, *crescendi* and *diminuendi* are always expressions of musical logic, not of some individualistic or sentimental motive in the players. It is always possible to determine exactly in which part, and why, an increase or decrease in sound is needed, evoking in its turn a corresponding response from the other parts, until a collective climax results for such time as musical logic does not begin to reverse the tendency in the direction of more or less sound. The *discipline* of contrapuntal music is to heed the signs telling one what to alter at a given moment; otherwise one goes on as one is. This kind of music—it is the secret of its quality—is half-way between a science and an art: *ars sine scientia nihil*. In teaching this music one should from the start accustom one's pupils to see and feel things in this way; one induces the right way of seeing through concrete example—theory and application keep step at every turn, but it takes some time before one is in a position, as now, to sum up one's experience in terms of a coherent synthesis.

Similarly, that counterpoint we call 'life' is a search for a unity which, across all the vicissitudes of existence, is sensed as ever-*present*: only in a return to our existential keynote will peace be found. Temporary resting-points or closes there may be; each passing cadence in fact provides in its own way a micro-image of the whole process of resolving dualistic opposition into unity. Each note included in a cadence calls for a different kind of emphasis; certain notes have to be joined smoothly, others separated, while some have to be swelled and others diminished. For a group of players or singers, to shape a cadence just right is already a collective exercise in unity, a distant foretaste of a lost bliss.

In terms of the more static arts, God has often been described as 'the great Architect of the Universe'; in terms of the essentially dynamic art of music, He could with equal appropriateness be called 'the great Contrapuntist of the Universe,' since 'creation,' the expression of 'being' through 'becoming,' also implies its corresponding Divine Name, as above.

A more succinct version of the same idea might read thus: Counterpoint, whether musical or existential, affirms and illustrates the unchanging presence of unity across all the vicissitudes of multiplicity, as also the reduction of the oppositions consequent upon the process of change to that same unity in which the process itself is for ever taking fresh birth. This is the mystery of existence (or creation) which counterpoint, in terms of sound, serves to reveal. Hence also the manifold profit to be derived from its intelligent performance, for those 'who have ears to hear'.