

Gustav Mahler and the Virtue of Ambiguity

Two Fragments

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[early 1960s?]

Fragment I

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In order to understand some aspects of a contemporary problem it occasionally proves to be helpful, if one directs one's attention to a somewhat similar problem of the immediate past. Especially if one suspects, that the past problem has remained unsolved, in that it pleased a progressive audience to get used to it and thereafter to enjoy it exactly as an unsolved problems.

Mahler's famous remark: *Meine Zeit wird noch kommen!* (My time is yet to come), would in this sense, so it seems to me today, bear some investigation. Seeing how frequently and widely his music is performed now, one might easily say that, at last, Mahler's time has come. But what would that mean? Certainly not more than what every master of musical composition could have said, when reflecting on the time it takes until society is willing to absorb what is new to its concepts. To be precise, I even should say that it take some time until society is willing to absorb what *was* new to its concepts, but is not new anymore.

Maybe Mahler, counting the number of performances of his works, would be satisfied today that his time has come. Not only because he might believe that being popular means to be understood, but also because he might know that when his works are played, they function in society and thereby gain influence on society, even if society may not always be conscious as to the extent of this influence.

The more one gets used to something, the less chance is there, that an effort is being made to understand the full implications of the impact it created before one got used to it. My opinion is: that Mahler's music has made its way largely, because society found several ways to enjoy it without understanding it; that even those who like his music only tolerate in loyalty, that which is *intolerable* to those who *dislike* his music.

It has become a tradition to either attack or defend triviality, banality, sentimentality, unjustifiable length, orchestral pomp and the like in Mahler's music. It reminds me of present times and the hopeless discussions about indeterminate music, in which the partners try to determine the point at which what is called freedom by one turns into what is called arbitrariness by the other. In fact there cannot be any real discussion. For every musician who is free to choose the moment when to play a certain tone, manifests his freedom if it makes a difference to him which moment he chooses. If it makes no difference to him and he still plays the tone, then he manifests arbitrariness. It frequently happens that a musician carefully chooses a moment for his tone, but that at the same time to a listener it does not make any difference whatsoever when this tone is played. In this case of course the musicians manifestation of freedom will be perceived

by that listener as a manifestation of arbitrariness. There is no way out of this plausible course of mutual misunderstanding, unless one slowly starts to assume that musicians, poets, dancers and painters more often than not are people to whom, for maybe unfathomable reasons, it makes a lot of a difference how and when and where a tone is played, a word is said, a movement is made, a shape, a design, a color is placed. The quality of the results, however, depends lastly on the width of choice at the disposal of the onlooker or listener. The more possibilities a man sees, the fuller of meaning between his final selective act. The function between width of choice and precision of selection represents the quality of a person's freedom. People, who disliked the music of Schoenberg, called it, at first, arbitrary. After having been taught, that "arbitrariness" was completely lacking in Schoenberg's work, these people were very disappointed, and from then on despised Schoenberg's music as "contrived". They meant and still mean the same with both terms: namely, that the composer has chosen to organize his material, which he knows very well, in a way which the dissatisfied people neither could nor would have chosen.

Fragment II

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Everybody knows how very difficult it is to exactly understand the true reasons for even the simplest human actions. The general attitude towards this problem can be described as follows: If I see a person do something, and if I find in myself one or two reasons for which *I* might do the same, then I assume to understand *his* actions as consequences of *my* one or two reasons. If I find *my* reasons for *his* actions, I shall consider his actions as understandable and as reasonable actions. This general attitude helps to get along, but does not lead to an exact understanding of what may be called "his reasons", which may be different from mine. All of us have at some time or other defended a movie or a play which we did not like at all, just because somebody disliked it for what we considered the wrong reasons. Speaking for myself, I should like to defend Bach, Mozart, Beethoven and even some of our contemporary masters against the abominable attacks launched against them by their adoring lovers. I do think that many an agreement on quality, beauty and power of communication was reached just because *one* did not investigate *the other's* reasons for agreeing. My reasons, your reasons, his reasons: Three different sets of thought, three different ways in which to go, three different wishes to appear.

Whenever I speak of Electronic Music, the question most frequently asked is: Will synthetic sound eventually replace and make obsolete the sound of musical instruments? — This question has a background of respectable implications. Man likes to understand a thing. Otherwise he might get afraid of it. But he craves not only for the knowledge as to what the thing *is* and *means*, but he is also very keen on establishing, what the thing *is not*, and *does not mean*. There we have a tendency which implies that a thing is not only what it is, but is also the only exception in a world which it is not. (If there is to be electronic music, how is there to be instrumental music too?) Most definitions contain some element which has an excluding character. I'm not attacking this principle. But I do doubt its validity when the definition by exclusion becomes uppermost in the minds of people who do not master the definition of the thing that is. Many people, who would prove unable to explain to me what music *is*, would without rehearsal sing a perfect unisono chant if asked what is *not* music.

The usual and ubiquitous attitude towards new music consists of two sentences: A) If I were a composer, I should never have created *this*. B) *It* is not music. And then they go on from there. All of these [attitudes? (illegible)] forget, at least, two things. They forget to forget their own reasons and to find "his" reasons, and they forget to define music, or the "it" in the sentence which says that "it" is not music.

This process of forgetting is the mainstay of tradition and, on a far lower level, of conventionality. It is an indisputable fact that the evaluating quality of tradition can function only where the functions which brought traditional quality about are completely forgotten. It is in this sense when I say: To remember sometimes definitely means to forget.

And here we have a key to some efforts which have been made recently by composers of music. Now I do not claim to know all *their* reasons for acting the way they do. But I do claim to have found reasons for which *I* might do what they did. All I can do is to propose to you some ways of reasoning which may lead you to assume that you understand what they, the composers, meant to do. And since all arts happen in an assumed world of apparent reality, I do think it fair if all reasoning about it take place in a world of assumed understanding. If this world should be administrated a little better than the real one, we may be satisfied for a moment.

One way to prevent listeners from forgetting something is to give them nothing to remember. Now this is a very crude way. No creative artist is really able to contemplate such extreme procedure. But he might feel compelled to construct walls and filters between his communication and the intended recipient, so that nothing arrives where nothing is asked for, and that all arrives where all is asked for. It is thus that an abyss is denounced by many a music critic, where in all actuality a bridge is built. A conditional bridge, of course.