The Pleasures of Music

By AARON COPLAND

That music gives pleasure is axiomatic. Because this is so, the pleasures of music may seem a rather elementary subject for discussion. Yet the source of that pleasure, our musical instinct, is not at all elementary—it is, in fact, one of the prime puzzles of consciousness. Why is it that sound waves, when they strike the ear, cause, as a British critic describes it, “volleys of nerve impulses to flow up into the brain,” resulting in a pleasurable sensation? More than that, why is it that we are able to make sense out of these nerve signals so that we emerge from engulfment in the orderly presentation of sound stimuli as if we had lived through a simulacrum of life? And why, when safely seated and merely listening, should our hearts beat faster, our toes start tapping, our minds start racing after the music, hoping it will go one way and watching it go another, deceived and disgruntled when we are unconvinced; elated and grateful when we acquiesce?

We have a part answer, I suppose, in that the physical nature of sound has been thoroughly explored; but the phenomenon of music as an expressive, communicative agency remains as inexplicable as ever. We musicians don’t ask for much. All we want is to have one investigator tell us why this young fellow seated in row A is firmly held by the musical sounds he hears, while his girl friend gets little or nothing out of them, or vice versa. Think how many millions of useless practice hours might have been saved if some alert professor of genetics had developed a test for musical sensibility.

The fascination of music for some human beings was curiously illustrated for me once during a visit I made to the showrooms of a manufacturer of electronic organs. As part of my tour I was taken to see the practice room. There, to my surprise, I found not one but eight aspiring organists, all busily practicing simultaneously on eight organs. More surprising still was the fact that not a sound was audible, for all eight performers were listening through earphones to their individual instrument. It was an uncanny sight, even for a fellow musician, to watch these grown men mesmerized, as it were, by a silent and invisible genie.  

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About the Author

Aaron Copland has been acclaimed the “Dean of American Composers.” Born in Brooklyn fifty-eight years ago, he was the first American to study composition with Nadia Boulanger, who later taught so many of his musically gifted compatriots. Some of his best-known compositions draw their inspiration from folk sources, notably the ballets Rodeo, Billy the Kid, and Appalachian Spring. The latter score won a Pulitzer Prize in 1945. He is also a compelling lecturer and writer on music. This article was originally presented as a lecture last April at the University of New Hampshire. Photograph by Arnold Newman.
On that day I fully realized how mesmerized we ear-minded creatures seem to our less musically inclined friends.

If music has impact for the mere listener, it follows that it will have much greater impact for those who sing it or play it themselves with some degree of proficiency. Any educated person in Elizabethan times was expected to be able to read musical notation and take his or her part in a madrigal sing. Passive listeners, numbered in the millions, are a comparatively recent innovation. Even in my own youth, loving music meant that you either made it yourself or were forced out of the house to go hear it in my own youth, loving music has impacted for those who sing it or hear it, it will have been achieved on its arriving there.

Musical flow is largely the result of musical rhythm, and the rhythmic factor in music is certainly a key element that has simultaneous attraction on more than one level. To some African tribes rhythm is music; they have little more. But what rhythm it is? Listening to it casually, one might never get beyond the ear-splitting pounding, but actually a trained musician’s ear is needed to decode its polyrhythmic intricacies. Mind that conceives such rhythms have their own sophistication; it seems inept and even unfair to call them primitive. By comparison our own instinct for rhythmic play seems only mild in interest—needling reinvigoration from time to time.

It is part of my thesis that music, unlike the other arts, with the possible exception of film, is not something to be consumed simultaneously on the lowest and highest levels of apprehension. All of us, for example, can understand and feel the joy of being carried forward by the flow of music. Our love of music is bound up with its forward motion; nonetheless it is precisely the creation of such flow, its interrelation with and resultant effect upon formal structure, that calls forth high intellectual capacities of a composer, and offers keen pleasures for listening minds. Music’s incessant movement forward exerts a double and contradictory fascination: On the one hand it appears to be immobilizing time itself by filling out a specific temporal space, while generating at the same moment the sensation of flowing past us with all the pressure and sparkle of a great river. To stop the flow of music would be like the stopping of time itself, incredible and inconceivable.

To the enlightened listener this time-filling forward drive has fullest meaning only when accompanied by some conception as to where it is heading, that musico-psychological elements are helping to move it to its destination, and that there will be a realization that what has been achieved on its arriving there.

Tone color is another basic element in music that may be enjoyed on various levels of perception from the most naïve to the most cultivated. Even children have a keen sense of the difference between the tonal profile of a flute and a trombone. The color of certain instruments holds an especial attraction, and the fact that composers have often had a weakness for the sound of eight French horns playing in unison. Their rich, golden, legendary sonority is, when heard, an unforgettable experience. Some African composers seem to have being a belated love affair with the vibraphone. An infinity of possible color combinations are available when instruments are mixed. This has led to the wonderful contrapuntal, the orchestra of symphonic proportions. The art of orchestration, needless to say, holds endless fascination for the practioner, being part science and part inspired guesswork.

As a composer I get great pleasure from the color possibilities of the orchestra. Over the years I have noted that no element of the composer’s art mystifies the layman more than this ability to orchestrate. It is a matter of fact that before we mix them we hear them in terms of their component parts. If you examine an orchestral score you would be hard-pressed to find instruments on the page in family groups; reading from top to bottom it is customary to list the woodwinds, the brass, the percussion, and the strings, in that order. A composer can put together a new sound by putting together several families of instruments. Also, the single instrument, whose pure color sonority thereby remains clearly identifiable as such. Orchestral know-how consists in knowing how to orchestrate: how to make one instrument sound different for each other’s way, so spacing them that they avoid repeating what some other instrument is already doing, at least in the same way. The composer can by the fullest extent the specific color value contributed by each separate instrument, or grouped instrumental family.

In modern orchestration clarity and definition of sonorous image are usually the goal. There exists, however, another kind of orchestral magic dependent on a certain ambiguity of effect. Not to be able to identify immediately a particular color combination is arrived at adds to its attractiveness. I like to be intrigued by unusual sounds which force me to examine them. I wonder how the composer does that?

From what I have said about the art of orchestration, you may have gained the notion that it is nothing more than a delightful game, played for the amusement of the composer. That is, of course, not true. Composing in music, as in painting, is meaningful only when it serves the expressive idea; it is the expressive idea that dictates to the composer the choice of his orchestral scheme. Part of the pleasure in being sensitive to the use of color in music is to note in what way a composer’s personality traits are revealed through his tonal color schemes. During the period of French impressionism, for example, the composers Debussy and Ravel were thought to be very similar in personality. An examination of their orchestral scores would have shown that Debussy, at his most characteristic, sought for a spray-like iridescence, a delicate and sensuous sonority such as had never before been heard; while Ravel, using a similar palette, sought a refinement and precision, a gemlike brilliance that reflects the more objective.

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nature of his musical personality: color, or color for composers as their personalities change. A striking example is Igor Stravinsky, who, beginning with the snappier reds and purples of some of his color scores, has in the past decade arrived at an ascetic grayness of tone that positively chills the listener by its austerity.

By contrast, let me point to that perennially popular force among composers, Giuseppe Verdi. Quite apart from his music, I get pleasure merely thinking about the man himself. If honesty and forthrightness ever sparked an artist, then Verdi is a prime example. What a pleasure it is to make contact with him through his letters, to knock against the hard core of his peasant personality. One comes away refreshed, and with renewed confidence in the sturdy, non neuronic character of at least one musical master.

When I was a student it was considered bad form to mention Verdi's name in symphonic company, and quite out of the question to name Verdi in the same sentence with that formidable dragon of the opera house, Richard Wagner. What the musical elite found difficult to forgive in Verdi's case was his triteness, his ordinariness. Yes, Verdi is trite and ordinary at times, just as Wagner is long-winded and boring at times. There is a lesson to be learned here: The way in which we are gradually able to accommodate our minds to the obvious weaknesses in a creative artist's output. Musical history teaches us that at first contact the academicians of Brahms, the longueurs of Schubert, the portentiousness of Mahler were considered insupportable by their early listeners, but in all such cases later generations have managed to put up with the failings of men of genius for the sake of other qualities that outweigh them. Verdi can be commonplace at times, as everyone knows, but his saving grace is a burning sincerity that carries all before it. There is no bluff here, no guile. On whatever level he composed, a no-nonsense quality comes across: all is directly stated, cleanly written with no notes wasted, and marvelously effective. In the end we willingly concede that Verdi's musical materials need not be especially choice in order to be acceptable. And, naturally enough, when the musical materials are choice and inspired they profit doubly from being set off against the homely virtues of his more workaday pages.

If one were to name one musician who came closest to composing without human flaw, I suppose general consensus would choose Johann Sebastian Bach. Only a very few musical giants have earned the universal admiration that surrounds the figure of the eighteenth-centu ry German master. What is it that makes his finest scores so profoundly moving? I have puzzled over that question for a very long time, but have come to doubt whether it is possible for anyone to reach a completely satisfactory answer. One thing is certain: we will never explain Bach's supremacy by the singling out of any one element in his work. Rather it was a combination of perfections, each of which was applied to the common practice of his day; added together they produced the mature perfection of the completed oeuvre.

Bach's genius cannot possibly be deduced from the circumstances of his routine musical existence. For a long time he wrote music for the requirements of the jobs he held. His melodies were often borrowed from old, his orchestral textures limited by the forces at his disposal, and his forms, in the main, were similar to those of other composers of his time. But in his music he had studied. None of these oft-repeated facts explains the universal hold that his music has come to have on later generations.

What strikes me most markedly about Bach's work is its rightness and its beauty. It is the rightness not merely of a single individual but of a whole musical epoch. Each came to the peak point of a long historical development that went into an orchestral page of any complexity, but here again it is not necessary to be able to analyze the color spectrum of a score in order to bask in its effulgence. Thus far I have been dealing with the generalities of musical pleasure. Now I would like to talk about it, not in order to knock a few composers in order to show how musical values are differentiated. The composer's voice, and half the pleasure we get from that fact is that we are listening to a particular voice making an individual statement at a specific moment in history. Unless you take off from there you are certain to miss one of the principal attractions of musical art—namely, contact with a strong and absorbing personality.

It matters greatly, therefore, who it is we are about to listen to in the concert hall or opera house. And yet I get the impression that to the lay music lover music is music, and musical events are attended with little or no concern as to what musical fare is to be offered. Not so with the professional, to whom it matters a great deal whether he is able to listen to the music of Monteverdi or Massenet, to J. S. or to J. C. Bach. Isn't it true that everything we do, as artists or as people, is to a particular composer and his music prepares us in some measure to empathize with his special mentality? To me Chopin is one thing, Scarlatti quite another. Could one ever confound them, could you? Well, whether you could or not, my point remains the same: There are as many ways for music to be enjoyed as there are composers.

One can even get a certain perverse pleasure out of hating the works of a particular composer. I, for instance, happen to be rubbed the wrong way by one of today's composer idols, Sergei Rachmaninoff. The profusion of voices through one of his extended symphonies or piano concertos tends, quite frankly, to depress me. All those notes. think I.

Rachmaninoff's characteristic tone is one of self-pity and self-indulgence tinged with a definite melancholy. As an expected pleasing thing, I can sympathize with an artist whose dis- tenders produced such music, but as a listener my stomach won't take it. I grant you his technical adroitness, but even here the technique adopted by the composer was old-fashioned in his own day. I also grant his ability to write long and singing melodic lines, but when these are embroidered with figuration, the musical substance is watered down, emptied of significance. Well, as André Gide used to say, "I didn't have to tell you this, and I know it will not make you happy to hear it." Actually, it should be of little concern to you whether I find Rachmaninoff digestible or not. All I am trying to say is that music strikes us in so many different ways as there are composers, and anything less than a strong reaction, pro or con, is not worth bothering about.

As a fellow human being I find one thing, Scarlatti quite another. J. S. Bach prepared us in some measure to empathize with his life and work of Ludwig van Beethoven.

The English critic, Wilfrid Mellers, had this to say about Beethoven recently: "It is the essence of the personality of Beethoven, both as man and as artist, that he should invite discussion in other than musical terms." Mellers meant that such a discussion would involve us, with no trouble at all, in a consideration of the rights and wrongs of, say, the French Revolution, and other allied subjects.

We shall never know in exactly what way the ferment of historical events affected Beethoven's thinking, but it is certain that music such as his would have been inconceivable, most original achievement of the revolutionary temperament of his time and the ability to translate that concern into the original and unprecedented musical thought of his own work.

Beethoven brought three startling innovations into music: first, he altered our very conception of the musical, emphasizing the psychological element implicit in the language of sounds. Because of him, music lost a certain superficial quality and instead a new dimension in psychological depth. Second, his own stormy and ex- plosive temperament was, in part, responsible for a "dramatic" quality in his whole art of music." The rumbling bass tremolos, the sudden accents in un- expected places, the unexpected unheard-of rhythmic insistence and sharp dynamic contrasts, all these were externalizations of an inner drama that gave his music its theatrical impact.

Both these elements, the psychological orientation and the instinct for drama, are inextricable in my mind with his third and possibly most original achievement—the creation of musical forms dynamically conceived on a scale never before attempted and...
of today upset infection and the simple experience and tends to suffocate match, but the fact is that we tire of everything, past. This narrows the range of our distance.

The first oven's delicious contemplation of the tragic sum of nature; in purely musical terms, Beethoven has one quality compelling. A remarkable degree—he is enormously successful. No discussion of musical pleasures can be less and less restrained when we have to broaden our conception of what is to be included under the heading of produced music. No performers, no musical instruments, no microphones are needed. But one must be able to record on tape and conduct into it electro-magnetic vibrations. Listening to the results, one feels that in this case we shall have to broaden our conception of what is to be included under the heading of musical pleasure. We shall have to take into account areas of sound hitherto excluded from the musical scheme of things. And why not? With so many other man's assumptions subject to review, how could one expect music to remain the same? Whatever we may think of their efforts, these young experimenters objectively and unselfishly attempt experiments as far from the realities of existence, but a kind of cross-fertilization of our two worlds is developing that promises an unusual synthesis for the future. Thus the variety of musical pleasure that awaits the attentive listener is broadly inclusive. The art of music, without specific subject matter and little specific meaning, is the response of the human spirit; not a refuge or escape from the realities of noise, but a haven in which one can make contact with the essence of human experience. It is a unique font from which all of us can be replenished.

For readers who may wish to pursue the subject further, the following books are recommended:

Copland, Aaron WHAT TO LISTEN FOR IN MUSIC McGraw-Hill $3.95

Copland, Aaron OUR NEW MUSIC McGraw-Hill $4.50

Copland, Aaron MUSIC AND IMAGINATION Harvard University Press $2.75

Sullivan, J. W. N. BEETHOVEN New American Library $3.50

Tovey, Donald Francis THE FORMS OF MUSIC Mercier Books $1.35

Hodges, André JAZZ: ITS BEAUTY AND ESSENCE Evergreen Books $1.45

Turner, W. J. MOZART: THE MAN AND HIS WORKS Anchor Books $0.95

Einstein, Alfred A SHORT HISTORY OF MUSIC Vintage Books $0.95

Dent, Edward J. OPERA Penguin Books $5.00