

Allen Strange

Musical Tradition Is Alive and Well

(and hiding in the avant-garde)

■ New art is automatically put on the defensive because it is new art, because it is looked upon as a break in tradition. It is justified in terms of the past; it is guilty until proven innocent.

Recently, young composers have started to consider the implications of the total situation in earnest. They feel that objections to new music are most strongly advanced by the academically trained musician or persons in academic positions. When a student in an academic institution wishes to present a recital, the usual first step is to get faculty "approval" of the program. This automatically puts the student on the defensive concern-

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ing his choice of music and eventually limits the musical exposure of the concertgoing public. I wonder what our musical heritage would be like today if Mendelssohn had been forced to get approval to rediscover and perform the music of Johann Sebastian Bach.

Musical tradition is presented to composers as a static body of knowledge; anything outside this body is considered anti-tradition. But is this an accurate view of artistic tradition? True, a body of knowledge about music exists, but this musical thought has not been predetermined since the dawn of time. The accumulation of musical thought is the result of tradition, not a definition in itself. Relating to the past should not be the prime concern of the creator. Given a few

years, historians and musicologists will be happy to place today's new music in its proper perspective within the sacrosanct corpus so often mistaken for tradition. The negative critics of new music ask composers to defend their works in terms of the result of the creativity of the past, when they should judge new art in terms of whether it is simply the result of creativity. Judging new art in terms of past art limits it to predetermined aesthetics and destroys the necessity for creative thinking. *The tradition of music is to create and perform music.*

This view of tradition can fit any art form. The tradition of painting is to create and display painting. The tradition of the theater is to create and perform theater. All art forms deal with the same thing—

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artistic creation. The Ancient Greeks had one word for painting, dance, music, and sculpture—music—and they got along with it quite well. A predominant characteristic of mid-twentieth-century culture is the influence of the arts on each other. Total Art, Mixed Media, Theater of the Mixed Means, Environmental Art, Audiovisual Art . . . these terms are an integral part of the vocabulary of the new generation of artists. This fact is documented by organizations such as Electric Circus, Musica Elettronica Viva, E.A.T. (Experiments in Art and Technology), and many others. Striking evidence is found in the variety of disciplines affected by the work of John Cage. Cage's composition classes at the New School in the middle fifties were not limited to musicians. The roster included names such as Allan Kaprow, Al Hanson, Jackson MacLow, Dick Higgins, and many other figures from the various fields of art. In an interview published in *The Theater of the Mixed Means* (Dial Press, 1968) edited by Richard Kostelanetz, Robert Rauschenberg, a painter and artist of the new theater, stated, "It's almost as if art, in painting and music and stuff, is the leftovers of some activity. The activity is the thing that I'm most interested in."

How does the inert view of traditionalism affect new music? In attending a performance of music, the average concertgoer is faced with a hierarchy of elements or parameters arranged to feed his aesthetic appetite. The established menu begins with a stationary performer dressed in black "after six" attire, facing a stationary audience, also dressed in the established concert attire. This aesthetic mirror is enclosed in a strict spatial framework, so that no unexpected factors can interfere with the ritual or the performance. Most of the music composed prior to the middle fifties

was concerned strictly with sonic events, and all distractions to these events had to be controlled by concert ritual. The only tolerated deviation from this ritual was opera. The theatrical aspects of opera obliged the composer to think about sound in a somewhat different setting. Many opera composers gave very specific instructions concerning set design and construction. Again, the composer was determining and controlling the environment in order to draw attention to what he thought should be of concern to the audience.

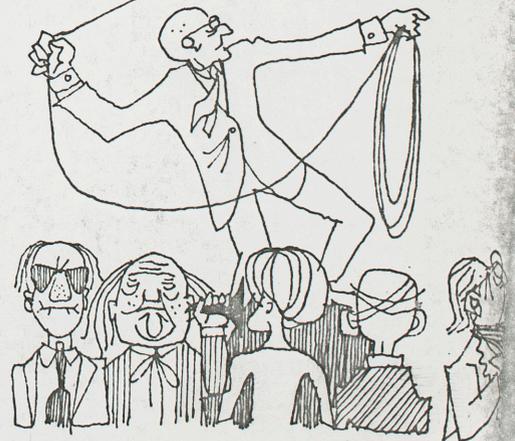
New audiovisual art is basically a development of opera techniques. The ritualism and new ritualism that accompanies much of the new music is an expansion of the concept of environmental control. Ritualism is the basis of every performing art—past, present, and future. The new concert rituals must be evaluated in terms of their relationship to the entire presentation of the new music, not in terms of the rituals of previous presentations.

After the patron has been satisfied by the ritual appetizer, his attention is focused on the main course of the evening's experiences—sound. The viewer becomes a listener and is asked to discover relationships within various sonic events. The parameters that make up these events may be thought of in terms of pitch, rhythm, dynamics, and timbre. The listeners are prepared to experience the composer's music in terms of a stylistic hierarchy of these parameters. In the event that Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* is programmed, almost every listener knows exactly what to expect. If a lesser-known work by the same composer is programmed, the listener still has a specific frame of reference to help him arrange his aesthetic expectancies. Even if a composer's name is unfamiliar to an audience, his birth-

date still gives a clue of what to expect.

Aesthetic indigestion occurs when any of the following circumstances arise: (a) the listener is not aware of the composer's arrangement of parameters and is judging the work on an invalid conception of its nature; (b) the composer is concerned with a parameter not previously dealt with in musical thought (in this case the audience will either disregard the results as an unrelated event or be completely unaware of an event that is an integral part of the performance); or (c) the composer is concerned with only one or two parameters (instead of focusing on the music, the unaware listener impatiently waits for events that are of no immediate concern to the particular work).

When an aggressive listener is faced with one or more of these situations, he immediately denounces the composition and the composer for being unmusical and untraditional. What he means is that the composer has violated his current understanding of the art. *The Tortoise, His Dreams and Journeys* by LaMonte Young consists of an amplified open chord of incredible duration. In this work the composer is not concerned with melodic relationships. The listener prepared to be aesthetically moved by melodic patterns will be greatly disappointed. The music of Henry Brant involves the spatial relationships of the instruments. In listening to his music, one must be aware that these spatial relationships are



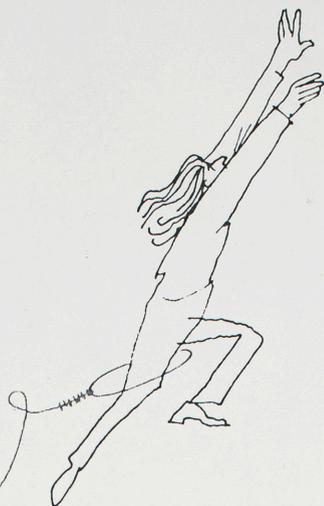
composed and must be considered with the same importance that is given to pitch and rhythm. *Come Out* by Steve Reich is constructed from a thirteen-minute repetition of a boy saying, "Come out to show them." The artistic concept is a very gradual development of the rhythmic relationships and how they eventually affect timbre.

None of these works is untraditional. Each of the composers has been trained in the established musical concepts. Each has continued the artistic tradition of adding to and expanding previous concepts. This is not to say that every new work of art must involve a completely new approach. On the contrary, each composer owes it to his art to develop his ideas, style, or whatever, and to make it part of the "establishment." In turn, the next generation can be schooled in the established musical concepts, including those of Young, Brant, and Reich.

Eras arise in music history because many original ways of thinking about music require the realization of more than one composer. But once a concept has been firmly established and developed by one or many, composers start thinking about new approaches to their art. That is the tradition of music.

Often, certain people are not content with judging the results of a performance. Many listeners, usually other composers, criticize the music on the basis of its notation. During the intermission of a concert of new music, one of my colleagues approached me with a score of a work to be performed later in the program. He scanned several pages of swirls, lines, and dots, then exclaimed, "This junk isn't music!" Of course, he was absolutely right. Neither are staves, clefs, and figures used in standard notation. A score and parts are vehicles of communication that serve to create music. One can sit all day and stare at a score, but that won't produce a bit of music. Music occurs in the physical and acoustical interpretation of figures in the score.

The current standard notation has evolved from early neumatic symbols as a product of necessity. The composer had to decide upon representations that adequately informed the performer of what he



should do with the relevant parameters. Renaissance composers were not interested in communicating to the performer that he should execute various dynamic changes. The composer controlled dynamics by terraced orchestration, and a special notation was unnecessary for his music. As composers became more interested in dynamics, a notation for them was developed. Very traditional thinking, indeed!

Today a composer is criticized for notating something like the score in Figure 1. This notation is completely justified if it conveys all of the necessary information in the least confusing manner. Perhaps that same music could be notated as shown in Figure 2. If the exact pitch was a concern of the composer, then the second method would be best. If exact pitch is of

no concern to the composer, as in the music of many of the new Polish composers, the first method is superior because of its simplicity.

The standard method for notating glissando, shown below, is adequate for most music before 1950, but it does not convey all the information connected with the effect.



How long should the performer sustain the E before the glissando begins? Is every frequency between the E and the A to be covered by the glissando? String techniques usually result in the penultimate pitch being a major second above the final pitch. The composer using this notation is usually not concerned with these aspects of the sound. Therefore, the notation is adequate in communicating the information in which he is interested. New systems of notation are justified in the same manner. It is not a question of tradition at all.

The person who criticizes new art—music, sculpture, dance, painting, or theater—as being nontraditional must decide what tradition involves. If he is convinced that tradition is a historical concept, then the adjective "new" makes traditional comparisons irrelevant and unnecessary. If tradition is conceived as the nature of the art, in terms of creation and purpose, many of the adversaries of new art will be forced to find another premise from which to operate.

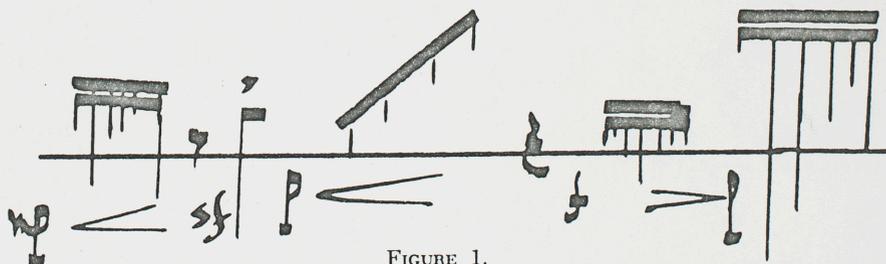


FIGURE 1.



FIGURE 2.