

A.S.U.C. KEYNOTE ADDRESS*

BEN JOHNSTON

BEING HERE reminds me pointedly of the A.S.U.C. meeting in St. Louis in 1967 when the membership rejected the narrower focus of many of its Founding Members and set itself to represent the actual state of American music as reflected in colleges and universities. I remember in particular the aggressive stand of Peter Yates, who very strongly pushed for a broad and representative society. It was especially memorable for me because Peter was chairing a panel on Microtonality which was the first time I had publicly spoken about the then recent change in my work which set me upon the path I have followed ever since. I suppose what I have in mind is to reassert something of that moment for us here. But all any of us can do is to state where he individually is, at any given moment. I cannot presume to sound a keynote for American music in general, or even for this society in particular. What I must do is to make my own position as clear as I can, and hope that this will resonate in other minds.

My principal compositional technique, extended just intonation, has its roots in the radical departures of Claude Debussy, whose harmonic language approximates as well as can be in equal temperament a movement from overtone series to overtone series, with an emphasis upon higher partials. There is some mixing of series polychordally and some evidence of the use of a principle of inversion, which generates a system of otonality/utonality analogous to Harry Partch's. In contrast, Arnold Schoenberg, both in his atonality and in his serial pitch usage, seemed to be intent upon exploiting the unused portions of a closed system of pitches. His work is, as I have pointed out elsewhere, the first example of a compositional technique which takes the twelve-tone tempered scale for exactly what it is. In all earlier music it represents an acoustical compromise to facilitate instrumental design while still making possible extensive modulatory flexibility. Schoenberg is an example of a radical thinker motivated strongly by a claustrophobic sense of nearly exhausted resources. Debussy, in sharp contrast, seems motivated by an expansion of harmonic resources and a greatly widened horizon. But for Debussy's revolution to have been achieved fully, the tempered scale would have had to go, in favor of extended just intonation, so that the overtone structures would have been unambiguously recognizable as such. The sense of brilliant colors provocatively mixed which

*Revised version of the Keynote Address delivered at the 1986 Annual Meeting of the American Society of University Composers, Evanston, Illinois.

generated the comparison to impressionist painting would have been enormously heightened.

It is well known that Debussy himself did not welcome the designation “impressionist” but would rather have preferred “symbolist” in recognition of his great debt to Stephane Mallarmé. In *Un Coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard*, Mallarmé pushes toward a new syntax and format: almost a new language, like that other famous symbolist James Joyce, who goes substantially further than Mallarmé, particularly in *Finnegan’s Wake*. The profound influence of Mallarmé upon Pierre Boulez has been acknowledged; that of Joyce upon Luciano Berio less explicitly. In his twentieth century history Geoffrey Barraclough has described symbolism as the last great European literary movement to achieve worldwide dominance. After it, third world and Marxist influences displace western European ones on the world stage. Symbolism, as the word implies, has an almost mystical dimension. Mallarmé and even Marcel Proust have been described as secular mystics, and Joyce, while scarcely a mystic, devoted enormous effort to replacing Christian myth with a much wider cross-cultural mythology. Evelyn Underhill, in her study *Mysticism*, observes that mystics surface almost always in the final cultural plases of civilizations, when the breakup of one culture begins to be accelerated by the birth of a new one. It is obvious that the early twentieth century was such a time, and on a worldwide scale. Barraclough’s observation about symbolism gains focus and intensity from such a context. It is interesting that Partch, the first exponent of extended just intonation, was aggressively anti-European and anti-Christian, acknowledging many more Asian and African influences than European ones.

Before a new culture can fully replace an old one there must be actively disintegrative forces to clear away the old ways. It seems to me that the indeterminate movement in American music of the sixties was such a force. It is epitomized by the work of John Cage, whose very philosophy and theory of composition undermine traditional attitudes and procedures. Cage’s philosophical basis is primarily Asian in origin, blended with Dada, itself also a consciously disintegrative movement. Marcel Duchamp, in fact, has been called a destroyer, an antiartist. It is interesting to note Cage’s preoccupation with *Finnegan’s Wake* beginning in the late sixties.

There remains only one ingredient in the transition: an adaptation of traditions of the outgoing culture to become useful to the new one. It is important to connect Debussy and Partch, to complete the revolution and connect it with a redefinition of older values. In my article *Beyond Harry Partch* I have delineated this need.¹

It has been unclear just what the direction of American composition in the seventies and eighties has been, if one consults the critics. One prediction seems to have been accurate: Leonard Meyer’s pluralism, which

reflects a great deal about our culture both good and bad. There is no doubt it has been a conservative period, in contrast with the sixties, but while some critics have been trying out new labels like neoromanticism, none of them seems particularly apt. Two relations to the sixties can be discerned: a reaction away from their experimentation, and a gradual consolidation of many of the experimental innovations of that period. Another major change has been the failure of Europe to come up with anything paralleling the ferment of the fifties and sixties there. The use of computers in music has come into its own, and much technological change is taking place. However, this has not generated a genuinely new style or movement in composition.

It has been for me a period of humanizing my music and of reaching out to wider audiences. It has been the time in which I extended my just intonation to include all that Partch did and more. It has been a time in which I have seen the risk I took in 1960, when I began to use just intonation, begin to bear fruit.

In the early sixties when Elliott Carter was a guest professor of composition at the University of Illinois he spoke of his earlier decision to abandon his neoclassic style in favor of a much more complex style involving in particular a high degree of rhythmic complexity. As he saw it, the gamble was that it would either establish him as a unique and important composer or it would result in a massive neglect of his works. It is clear for a long time now that he won the gamble. It is not always fatal to challenge performers and audiences vigorously.

I feel now much as John Cage said he did in 1968 when he was readying *HPSCHD* for performance. He said he thought the compositions he was writing after his current one were works that really should be written by others. It was almost as if he was expressing a degree of guilt for moving in on others' territory. That was actually not the case but it is the feeling which is significant. I think what was actually happening was a realization that his time of radical innovation was ending. His works since *HPSCHD* do not break new ground but rather build upon his earlier work in a most solid and impressive way. They have a maturity and a clarity which give them great strength and meaning. It is in this period that his fascination with *Finnegan's Wake* came to fruition. I am now three years older than he was then, and I have a similar feeling. It does not take the form of feeling that I am treading on ground which should belong to others, but I do have a sense of having achieved what I set out to do.

What remains is to carry extended just intonation into other performing areas and to recommend as strongly as possible that it opens the way to further musical growth as no other alternative does. That cannot be done by me alone, and I have quite intentionally not encouraged my students to become disciples. A few have undertaken in their own ways the kind of

intonation I am using but not because I urged them to. I have taught extended just intonation when asked to do so, but not in exclusion of other ways of composition. I have simply been providing a reconnaissance. My method as a teacher has always been to try to understand just where a student is as an artist, and to enable him or her to see that more clearly and if possible to achieve that individuality more effectively. I have relied upon example and nonverbal personal influence to effect any directional changes in artistic activity in others. I think it is proper for me to continue to function in this way as I approach you here. It is difficult to do this in a speech.

Perhaps the best way is to imagine that I am addressing the culture as a whole. As a preliminary observation I would like to say what I think art does in human life and why I think it is important. In his multivolume work *The Masks of God*, Joseph Campbell sets out first to explain that in an animal with a conscious, verbal intelligence, the instincts which rule the interior and exterior lives of other animals do not disappear but take the form of archetypes (in Carl Jung's sense of the word). These thought forms exist more as potentialities which can be activated by us or simply by life circumstances to become dreams or ritual or art. In the view of Jungian psychologists, dreams have a compensatory function in the psyche, suggesting what aspects of one's life need attention and change. The activation of archetypes by art and religion is like this, calling into play themes of existence which, when relevant, stimulate action. Tribal ceremonies are intended to activate these atavistic memories, or, more accurately, built-in possibilities of psychic and physical action, and in most societies of the past, religion has served this function. But religion in modern societies has undergone a drastic change, which renders it both less effective and less available for most people. In contemporary society the arts perform this function more effectively than anything else. This is the real reason why governments subsidize the arts, and why the arts, however unsuccessful they may be commercially, do not simply fade away.

In the United States only sports receive the kind of public and community support which it would be healthy for the arts to have. Contrast the support that professional sports get in a large community with the support given its symphony orchestra, its opera company, or its chamber music organizations. If this kind and degree of support could be instantly and permanently provided, it would still not solve the problem because these musical organizations are busy with art which stimulates archetypes appropriate to another time and place, which may or may not have any important relevance to life as it is lived here and now. The sports section of most journalistic publications is immeasurably better developed and more widely read than the arts section. And most of the critical writing in these arts sections shows very little real awareness of the meaning of this kind of relevancy.

I believe it is for this reason that there is in our culture a split between "serious" and "popular" music. Every member of ASCAP or BMI knows that popular music supports itself commercially and serious music does not. It does this partly by placing itself in near bondage to business interests but not by any means wholly so. It still exerts enormous power over its devotees, and the lion's share of that power is artistic. It is part of the entertainment industry, but its importance by no means stops there. It has been pointed out many times that the basic difference between entertainment and amusement is that the latter is an escapist activity, while entertainment at least may not be. To recognize popular music as art entails taking a look at what archetypes it activates. Much of the ongoing controversy about sex and violence in movies and on TV is an incomplete raising of this issue. In their separate and extremely contrasting cultures both Plato and Confucius pointed out that art is not merely a symptom of culture but a contributing cause. What, then, are we doing to ourselves by our artistic habits? How many people have recognized that it is not mainly the lyrics of rock music which raise questions about the kind of influence it has upon the emotional lives of fans but *the music itself*?

As an arts council committee member I come to grips with the question of subsidies for musical performing organizations. It is frustrating not to be able to raise these issues powerfully. As a composer I tend to be more at the mercy of performing groups than influential upon them. As a teacher I come into contact mostly with other composers. I have tried to design my music so that even its technical construction raises archetypal issues, so that even its performance practice brings these into play. As a "serious" composer I am concerned to raise issues I feel as vital and important, but as a professional I am definitely not content to address an academic audience only. Any artist who is able to let his work speak from his depths and to eschew merely saying whatever gains him a wide audience or whatever his or someone's else ideology dictates is a serious artist. It is the serious artist who can help to reshape and even to help heal the society.

When President Reagan attempted to make cultural contact with Ayatollah Khomeini by sending him an autographed Bible he acted upon an incomplete perception. It is true that Iran, like the rest of Islam, is a society in which religion exerts powerful influence by activating archetypes in its devotees; but the United States is not such a society, and is perceived as not being so by Iranians. Thus such a gesture fails in its symbolic message, and at worst suggests a hypocritical motivation. Similarly when America exports primarily its artistically irresponsible popular music and other entertainment products to the rest of the world, it projects an image of seductive shallowness. This is not perceived as hypocritical; rather it is seen as exploitative, an accurate perception. The real issue: that Iran and other

radical Islamic forces are stimulating warlike and fanatical archetypal contents in their peoples, is obscured by the undeniable evidence that American business interests are stimulating self-indulgent and anarchic contents in their promotion of, for instance, rock music. Choose your poison.

Recently I listened to a TV discussion about Soviet Premier Gorbachev's *glasnost* policy. One of the American commentators said that it was much easier and less important to unleash the arts than to alter the bureaucracy. Nothing could be less accurate. Yes, it is probably easier, because Russian artists have long been champing at the bit, but it is probably even more fundamental than democratizing part of the governmental structure, because it is from the artistic sector that not only most of the dissent but also most of the positive, forward-looking criticism has come and will continue to come. It has always been more difficult for ideologues to make propagandistic use of music than of the other arts, but bureaucratic meddling in the name of ideology has long been a feature of Russian musical life. It will be most interesting to see what musical changes will follow upon *glasnost*. This kind of loosening up is unavoidable if much of Soviet society is to become computerized, because the tight rein upon information which has always characterized Soviet leadership will be impossible in the face of high-tech computerized information systems.

It is most interesting to see a parallel and even more sweeping current of change in China. That this is economic in nature can be seen as a function of the need to raise substantially the standard of living in this extremely populous country. But the opening up of the culture to the rest of the world is also transcending economic issues inevitably, and it is hard to imagine how attitudes like those of the Cultural Revolution could find any welcome in this context. It is still too soon to say what artistic ramifications will follow, but clearly the door is open to change now.

And what is our equivalent need to change? Given the closedness and ideological rigidity of these two communist societies, change moves them in a direction of freeing up. Our problem is the opposite. It is no happenstance that the drug abuse problem is one of our most serious weaknesses. And this is directly related to the self-indulgent permissiveness stimulated by our popular arts. Some kind of increase of seriousness and self-control is the only answer, and this must be given more than lip service by the arts. For rock musicians to speak out against drug abuse or even to clean up their own behavior is not sufficient, though it will certainly help. Only a change in the archetypal content of the art will really help. For us to move in a religious fundamentalist direction would produce symptoms no better than those of Islamic Revolutionism. In any case that is too far from where most of the culture is to be at all likely on a large scale. It has been said that Russian communism abuses equality, while American capitalism abuses freedom. The archetypes we need to achieve balance are different.

The indeterminacy movement of the sixties is in this respect quintessentially American. But we have moved as far from that as from hippies. What we seek is a kind of discipline to replace the excess of freedom. What we need is a kind of discipline that leads to greater harmoniousness. The first step toward that lies in a clarification of relationships between individuals and an increased awareness and precision in our adjustments. The informational complexity of postindustrial America needs powerful organizational skills and tools to avoid anarchic dissipation of our energies. The methods of simpler societies are not adequate to the task. Thus our art needs to awaken this discipline, this awareness, this organization. It is toward this end that I have been trying to direct my art.

NOTES

1. See the author's "Beyond Harry Partch," *Perspectives of New Music* 22 (1983-84):223-32. At this point the ASUC talk incorporated Ben Johnston's article "Extended Just Intonation: A Position Paper," *Perspectives of New Music* 25 (1987):517-19.