

FAVOURITE COMPOSERS

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When I am asked who my favourite composers are, I do have some difficulty in giving a satisfactory answer. There are two reasons.

The first reason is that if I declare that I prefer Handel to Bach, Mozart to Haydn, Wagner to Brahms, Berg to Schoenberg, and Jonathan Harvey to Peter Maxwell Davies, I am perhaps saying something meaningful about myself, but I am saying very little that is meaningful about the composers in question.

The second reason is that I have never heard any music that does not seem to me to have some interest. It may well be said, perhaps, that my early years of playing at seaside bandstands, pubs, and nightclubs have coarsened my sensibilities, but I prefer to believe that it is my fascination with the structure of music, the division of sound into definite and indefinite pitches, the division of definite pitches into modes, scales, chords, or as analysts of “atonal” music say, successions and simultaneities, articulated through time, rhythm, timbre, and register that enables me to experience a meaningful coherence in all music.

There are two final observations. While at Southampton University, I heard Hans Keller give a fascinating lecture on his view of what constitutes “good” and “bad” music. “Good” music, in his view, is music that continually challenges one's expectations of what is about to happen, and “bad” music is when such expectations are fulfilled.

There are two basic problems with this.

The first is that it seems to imply that, after repeated hearings, the piece in question becomes more familiar, the “surprise” factor becomes less potent, and the perceived quality of the music deteriorates. Keith Swanwick, former Professor of Music Education at the University of London Institute of Education counters this view by observing that the initial “surprise” will be replaced by an appreciative memory of the experience. It seems to me that what is really important is the aspect of the musical structure that can be subjectively felt as a “surprise”, which could range from a simple interrupted cadence to a distant modulation that disrupts the clearly established tonality. The word “felt” is significant; we hear music subjectively; is there really an absolute definition of what challenges expectations, and what fulfils them?

This, of course, leads to the second problem. There are people who prefer pieces of music because they feel that their expectations are fulfilled. At different times, I have heard people say that they like Palestrina and Mendelssohn because they felt that the music of these composers is “predictable” Are their views on what constitutes “good” music any less valuable than anybody else's?

Keith Swanwick once carried out a rather mean, but useful experiment. He played two recordings of a Brahms symphony to a group of recently graduated music students. He told them that recording 1 was by conductor X, and recording 2 was by conductor Y. The students found all kinds of differences between the two recordings, I believe that recording 1 was found to be much worse than recording 2. They appear to have based this judgement upon a generally accepted view that conductor X's recording had been judged to be “inferior”. In fact, it was exactly the same recording played twice!

This was an almost frightening demonstration of how easily our views can be affected by subconscious prejudices. There is one example that can be cited from musical history of how even great minds can be affected by such prejudices. At one time, I always seemed to be reading books which told me that the orchestration of Schumann's symphonies was “excruciatingly bad”, and that both Tchaikovsky and Mahler had “attempted to re-orchestrate them.” In fact, when they were all performed as Schumann wrote them recently, as far as I know, nobody found anything “wrong” with the orchestration.

Admittedly, there is not the variety of timbre that is to be found, in, say, Tchaikovsky, but the same could be said of Brahms's orchestral writing, and, as far as I know, nobody has ever complained about him.

I was, for a short time, a music critic for a newspaper, and although I did not think as seriously about these matters as I do now, I avoided making pejorative comments about composers. Music critics generally seem to have no inhibitions about communicating their prejudices, and reinforcing those of other writers. The most notorious example that comes to mind is Hanslick's appalling attack upon the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto. The attacks on Schumann's orchestration seem to have originated almost as soon as he wrote his symphonies; can they be traced back to the opinion of a critic or perhaps, an unsuccessful first performance?

For the reasons listed, I have to say that although I may prefer Mozart to Haydn etc., I will listen analytically to any of the composers on the list, whether or not I "like" them. This applies to any other composer, of any other type of music. I would even be prepared to go to a rock concert if somebody would give me a free ticket!

How do we assess music? Take a symphony in which the first movement is excellent, 10 out of 10, but the remaining four movements are poor, each of them earning 2 out of 10 namely 16 out of forty, 40 per cent. That is unfair on the brilliant first movement.

Does it matter? Should it bother us?

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