

EAST/WEST CONFERENCE

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TIN CAN CULTURE

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for the East / West Conference

It appears that the self-evident crossing of the threshold of a new age, characterised by an extraordinarily rapid progress of the technical environment of beings - or should we say, of a species called homo sapiens, should not be marked by the discovery of atomic energy, since we are witnessing the impact of increasingly sophisticated information systems that encroach, as it were, on almost each human being, pushing towards the very limits of imagination; due to their capacity for exploiting the most basic biological functions and orientation, inherent in the development of the species in the course of the millennia. Looking at the state of things from this perspective, we find ourselves to be living in a video-age, with all its good and bad consequences. Here I have in mind the fascinating global outreach of communication as well as the brutal and speculative intrusion of the not always harmless contents into the mind of almost every human being.

We are faced with a peculiar kind of mass brainwashing that keeps spreading its tentacles of unimaginable possibilities of information growth through our fascination with visual information and with exclusively visual perception of such effects into almost every nook and cranny of the substance which makes our existence so distinctly human. Meanwhile, we seem to have merely a vague awareness, or even none at all, of the consequences of such global change in relation to human thinking and with regard to the paramount necessity of social development of the animal species we really are, and which has been, quite justly, already nicknamed a "video-beast". The beast generally, and also in terrifying majority, accepts visual message as a direct, top-priority information that bypasses all control mechanisms in its psycho-physical structure, without the slightest doubt as to the value of the content.

We are faced with such levelling of global relationships which, accompanied with constant emphasis on some kind of democracy or another, can hardly be seen as anything else than a spitting image of fundamental ideologies of totalitarian regimes, albeit of different origin.

Maintaining the privileges of any political nomenclature through the brainwashing of the masses hardly differs at all from the systematic brainwashing of the so-called free world which bestows privileges - not infrequently supported by genuinely criminal undertakings - on nomenclatures of all kinds of merchants and representatives of linked trade.

Everything therefore serves the aspirations to own the largest possible share in controlling the masses, and it appears we have no scruples whatsoever in doing this. The entire information structure which is in its many different ways really advertising in its essence, is geared to controlling the largest imaginable number of potential users, and has been doing so by reaching down after the ever lower spheres, by tuning to perceptions of the most unfathomable or unsophisticated individuals in human society. This can undoubtedly ensure one a considerable share of marketing space.

The problem is so overwhelming that it has begun to raise questions even in the highest administration circles of the Old World where they wonder where will it all end. On the downward spiral of shallowness one can always discover an even lower rung of vulgarity and crudeness that makes the brain rot, and such opportunities are heartily exploited by a multitude of profiteers. It seems that we are giving in to each senseless whim and perversity, and that it is high time to stand up against it; the society, after all, does not just yield in to any desires - do I wish that to be true - to stealing, drug addiction, nor to the abuse of women. We have truly become lost in some all-encompassing entertainment, gathered under the cloak of culture of "the raging wild beasts, jumping tits, and roaring imbeciles", to quote one of the best experts in media developments.

Music, of course, as the most exploited art form at the level of entertainment, is the most exposed. It is presented as "music of the young, and for the young", while in reality it is an outcome of manipulation, of merciless money-making at any price, ultimately abused and professionally degraded, produced in flashy multi-medial packages that successfully target and exploit biological instincts of human beings.

Such marketing strategy can best be described in the words of a certain Croatian pop-singer. He claimed that he first tries out his songs on his four-year-old son. If the boy liked them, the song was almost sure to become a "hit". And since everyone in this world is at least four years old, so to speak, such products bring in immense sums of advertising money which is being invested in the hunt for a host of consumers who want to appear cultured, and who feel they can accomplish this through the shallowest forms of entertainment.

We are thus faced with going around in the circles of some neverending and recurring mental immaturity sustained by corresponding musical expression, and we may safely - and quite certainly without joking - state that the entertainment industry, with billions of annual revenue, and with the largest share in sound products at that - is by far the most successful of ecological enterprises. Its products are undergoing continual and instant recycling, without any change in

the content, and without the least development of any quality whatsoever, as they always relies on the effect of creating habitual response, the same as in the world of drug pushing.

The recycling of contemporary concert activities is not, by that standard, any less “successful”, and fatal. The most striking example are of course those orchestras which, following the line of least resistance, irresponsibly take advantage of people’s lack of knowledge, of natural human fear and reluctance to what might be perceived as somewhat different or even new, and who therefore resort like mad - and here, too, the only criterium is the colour of money - to the endless repetition of some small fragment from an otherwise varied opus of top musical works from the past, not to mention the contemporary music compositions at all. The principle of pop-mentality is at work here, too, and it is absolutely ridiculous to see such self-sufficient attitude sell itself, with no further effort, as great art.

Placed on the pedestal of their own conceit they feed themselves and their naive audiences with well-worn iron repertoires that can only satisfy self-sufficient snobs, lacking the indispensable conscience of a craftsman who of necessity aspires to continual growth and development of values for his own good, as well as for the benefit of listeners. Clinging to the excuse that they must sell as many tickets as they can, these people destroy any possibility of cultural progress based on the development of expression or on the growth of artistic sensibility, and consequently, the development of culture as a whole.

In the field of the so-called “serious music” (which is quite a silly term, since one can only talk of aspiring towards highest quality, in musical composition and reproduction), the decay of standards (which are the logical outcome of historical development in musical expression and consequently a direct cause of extraordinary musical and technological activity) is best seen in the example of the enterprising and profit-oriented association of three singers, the “3 Tenors”. With their albeit justly earned, yet almost setting glory which the mass marketing propaganda machinery always exploits to the utmost, they have turned a concert event into a veritable orgy of betrayal of all criteria of moral or quality standards regarding the culture of singing at its height. Let us leave aside the proverbial character traits of tenors which gave rise to endless jokes and anecdotes, and are also reflected in their monstrous performances. We should, however, point out how they force the best that opera has to offer into a circus-like shape, in acoustically ill-suited environment of football stadiums. One should also point out their unmistakably peacock-like attitude that was so once characteristic of the period of opera castrates, which all serious opera composers who introduced a balance of musical and theatrical elements into their works and

thus contributed to the development of opera as an independent top art form, opposed.

Girlie-violinist Vanessa Mae is another such example, commented by a well-known German concert musician as “nur eine Masche” - which is to say that she is the outcome of some kind of fraud. To call her merely a violinist would be an understatement: by turning on the electronic percussions machine to perform Bach’s music written for violin solo, this attractive - and through pop-advertising made even more so - teenager reveals a truly regrettable lack of reproductive musical sensibility. Agreeing to such musical combination she has apparently - personal deficiencies can be hidden in different ways - rejected any demands for dynamic analysis and rhythmic nuancing. Her performing literally dumps the elements of top musical development in the field of musical reproduction straight into the garbage can.

In this regard, Vanessa Mae does not force music - although this is Bach - any differently than those woodcutters who produce the so-called “techno” music to make their listeners even more stupid, as pop-singer Neneh Cherry says. Yet this is not the whole truth. On the one hand, these products are just a step away from pop-singing (which supposedly does not - yet - make people stupider), while on the other these products with pre-arranged electronic sound material are a result of the activity of those people - and also made for such - who are already musically ignorant, and who regret putting any energy into thinking about music because this would be too much to ask, as well as because in today’s world of instant mass multiplying of quasi-artists, who feel no responsibility whatsoever, that is unnecessary anyway.

At the time of extraordinary technical progress, coupled with mass-mindedness of the football field, we tend to forget what the basic meaning of “culture” is - and this is true the world over, not just in relation to some imaginary East or West. This, of course, is mostly the consequence - although not strictly speaking - of the information rush linked to the rapid expansion of profit-oriented business activities which shamelessly misuse this word in a wide variety of contexts. The term itself may thus be used as a cover for many a thing that, in addition to social prestige also brings in state subsidies, regardless of the fact that it is applied to endeavours that have nothing in common with the genuine meaning and standards of culture. The forces at work are people who talk of music with their mind on the box-office, says pianist Keith Jarrett.

Culture is not a concert, nor a radio or tv show; neither is it a fine art exhibition, a performance of an amateur choir or a publication of a novel, and most certainly not something that can be waved as a flag, or a token of membership. Culture is a realisation of an intimate process through which we

develop and refine our natural qualities as spiritual beings, it is a higher, intellectual level of receiving and giving information, combined with a set of values, and is always socially conditioned, as the fabric of our civilisation so directly reflects. Let me quote a prominent German politician: Culture is not a luxury one can, or cannot afford. It is the spiritual foundation that ensures the survival of our inner self.

Without proper refinement of sensibilities and the perception of our environment it is impossible to maintain or even develop intellectual abilities, and develop them meaningfully - which, ultimately, is the development of civilisation in all its elements. This is the true objective of any cultural undertaking, and within this context music plays an especially important role.

Artistic and scientific activity, marked by creativity and exploration, is the basic requirement for the evolutionary development of man's mental attitude towards the world; it steers his conduct and properly ordered assists him in conquering it. The tasks of cultural work in the higher spheres of human existence are therefore many, and are conditioned by man's capacity to think. Any music-related activity necessarily requires intellectual effort, since the structure of the ongoing sound composition is the very simulation of thought process itself. On the one hand, it is this essential necessity of awareness in perceiving the sound elements as they are patterned in time, which makes music the most demanding of art forms; on the other hand, we continue to discover its extraordinary importance for the development of abstract thinking: musical education is becoming increasingly appreciated in the developed countries as part of the general education.

Upbringing and learning must be actively supported by cultural institutions as well as by the media, setting quality as our highest sight - as becomes the original meaning of the word "art", which is skill and understanding. Institutions of higher education must accept their share in this undertaking, yet if they choose to remain in their ivory towers instead of responding to initiatives from their environment, and changing it in return, the work cannot be done. This interaction between higher musical schools and professional environment is of the utmost importance for the development of musically educated minds in any culture.

Intense, deliberate, dedicated musical activity, be it the playing of an instrument or just the reception of music, can, in specific circumstances, improve the quality of our thinking as well as deepen our understanding and intellectual values. Music is known to influence our perception, cognition, feeling, imagination, concentration, performance, bring our feeling, thinking and action to a unity of expression, and enhances our memory. Culture cannot and must not, therefore,

be equalled with entertainment whose goals and aspirations are what they are - if there are any at all - and of quite different nature, spiralling downwards to satisfy the biological needs of daily life. Going to a concert can be considered a cultural event only in the presence of active participation, in bringing alive the structure of sound composition.

Suitable conditions need to be created to present those uncomfortable alternative art forms (and I do not mean that sort of endeavours which, in Slovenia, serve as a mask for different forms of indescribably slapdash would-be entertainment) that look to the future, especially in creative art. Experience has proved such approach to be quite successful, if the projects are carried out with proper professional skills.

In one of the shows broadcast by Austrian television the call was sounded for an urgent inclusion, maintenance and encouragement of elitist cultural activities. The term itself still carries something negative with it, as it wholeheartedly denies the importance of mass culture. Yet this is the exact opposite of brainwashing to which totalitarian thinking that is still alive and doing well, aspires along with all the profiteering hyenas - although, in fact, it does not mean any other thing but the maintenance of the highest standards and continuous critical reflection.

Above all, we need to free ourselves of the football field syndrome, and the syndrome of the fully occupied seats of the "grand" hall. We can do this easily, if we can only do away with the mental attitude related to sick striving for populist crowdedness. According to a well-known German theatre figure, each manager is happy when the hall is packed, but it is no less true that an empty hall may also be a proof of good theatre. This, of course, means that all serious endeavours to develop a genuine musical culture at its highest professional level must be focused to the elite in the best and not in the least the inflated sense of the word. This paramount necessity must become a reality, or else we shall find we have lost music as art, leaving a blank spot in the very civilisation we are so very proud of.

"And where, pray, is it written that jazz should be widely accepted," wrote the concerned columnist in our daily paper. "If the aim of the festival is to make jazz more popular, commercialised programme is too high a price to pay." And is it perhaps a rule that concert programmes with their wide selection of best compositions, including contemporary music compositions, ought to be widely popular as well? They never have been.

Commercialisation of programmes in the field of concert music likewise transforms the art of music into a used tin can, or into a museum at best, and cannot reflect the pulsation of our culture, our age, the time we have, the time

we can improve and refine only by investing a conscious effort, our own thinking. This responsibility must be shouldered by any musical undertaking, it is a part and parcel of that specific “self-sustaining” development which is now being promoted as part of the global environmental efforts.

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