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Edited by

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CONTENTS

TOWARDS A CONCEPTION OF MUSICAL TRADITION (I):

MELODY AND TEXTURE, MEDIAEVAL AND MODERN,

by *W. H. Mellers*

Page 2

FAREWELL AND WELCOME: A SEQUENCE OF POEMS,

by *Ronald Bottrall*

17

A CASE FOR KIPLING? by *Boris Ford*

23

DEMIGODS AND PICKPOCKETS:

THE AUGUSTAN MYTH IN SWIFT AND ROUSSEAU,

by *J. C. Maxwell*

34

'MEASURE FOR MEASURE', by *D. A. Traversi*

40

COMMENTS AND REVIEWS

59

ELIOT'S LATER POETRY, *The Dry Salvages* reviewed by F. R. Leavis (p. 60). AN AMERICAN CRITIC, Edmund Wilson's *The Wound and the Bow* reviewed by F.R.L. (p. 72). GRAMOPHONE RECORDS, *Byrd: Mass for Five Voices* and *Recital of Russian Songs* reviewed by W. H. Mellers (p. 73). JOHNSON, *The Poems of Samuel Johnson* reviewed by F.R.L. (p. 75). *Ruins and Warnings*, Stephen Spender's *Ruins and Visions* and Henry Treece's *Invitation and Warning* reviewed by D. J. Enright (p. 78).

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

2

TOWARDS A CONCEPTION OF
MUSICAL TRADITION (I):MELODY AND TEXTURE,
MEDIÆVAL AND MODERN¹

I.

IT is difficult to know anything about the origins of musical speech because it is difficult to define what precisely we mean by music. A musical sound, we say, is associated with regular periodic vibration; a noise with irregular vibration: yet probably in most organized music-forms noise has a place, and we speak commonly of the 'music' of the wind and of streams, not to mention singing birds. Do we mean that in these instances the noise is somehow ordered and if so ordered by what? Or are we merely using language metaphorically? I think we have to recognize that distinctions between a noise and a musical sound can only be arbitrary, that the boundaries between the tolerable and the intolerable are elastic, shifting with successive ages of the life of man; that music is bound to be conventional to a degree and that only the composer or the social group of which he is a part can decide where the borderline between the naturalistic and the conventional is to come. Probably the only physical laws which are unanswerable and unalterable are those few primary ones on which melodic construction, in the music of all ages and civilizations, is based, and those laws are, roughly speaking, those implicit in the human voice. The melody of the human voice would therefore seem to be the very essence of the art of music: whether metrical rhythm—the beating of toms-toms, etc.—'came first' or not doesn't really effect the issue since rhythm in itself, though it may 'express' emotion of a sort, does so in a manner that is as completely sensory and nervous as, and no more inherently musical than, the effect on the nervous system of, say, a rocking chair or the dentist's drill. (True musical rhythm—Saint Augustine's *ars bene movendi*, as distinct from metrical accent—is of course included within 'melody' since a succession of tones in time becomes melody only when it entails a significant interaction of movement and repose).

Many theorists have held that the human speaking voice is the root of musical expression. That very remarkable Czech composer Leos Janáček believed this, and would wander about the countryside listening not only to the cries of birds and beasts, the ripple of streams and the whining of wind, but above all to the voices of the peasants, the different rhythmic and tonal traits they assumed under

¹*Music in the Middle Ages*, by Gustave Reese (Dent, 26/3).

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*MELODY & TEXTURE, MEDIÆVAL & MODERN* 3

the stress of varying emotions. 'The study which I have made,' he writes, 'of the musical aspects of the spoken language has led me to the conviction that all the melodic and rhythmic mysteries of music can be explained by reference to the melody and rhythm of the musical motives of the spoken language'; and of his own music one can certainly say that it is passionately moving because it is a sublimation, though not merely an imitation, of the precise modulations of the human voice when it speaks in anger or love or fear or any other emotion to which human beings are susceptible. I do not myself believe, as Janáček did, that the singing voice is merely the speaking voice sublimated; but I do believe the two are very closely related. And this seems to be borne out, on the whole, by the history of melodic speech. It is instructive in this connection to compare the nature of Byrd's vocal lines when he is setting English words to music (as in the Great Service) with the nature of them when he is setting Latin words (as in the five-part Mass). In both he manifests a superb command of vocal technique, but the lines in the Service are much bolder and more idiosyncratic, abounding in irregular rhythms and intervals. Although one mustn't put too much stress on particular examples, since the services of many English composers seem to have been set indiscriminately to Latin or English words, yet there can, as a general principle, be little doubt that the daringness and ruggedness—the rhythmic complexities, the leaps of seventh and ninth, the preference for accented passing-notes and false relation—which we recognize as typical of the polyphonic composers of 16th century England, relative to the suavity of the contemporary French and Italian schools, is largely due to the nature of the language spoken in 16th century England. (It is probable that English was then spoken with much more inflexion than it is to-day). I think there is a similar relation between the French language and the melodic lines of, say, Gabriel Fauré, and it is a relationship that seems to me fundamental to any great lyrical music. It is of course a text-book commonplace that the mellifluousness of the Italian language conditions the fact that the traditions of Italian music have always been pre-eminently vocal and lyrical.

II.

But in considering the origins of melodic speech we are concerned not with the local and topical differences which language entails, but with the fundamental basis of a few universal acoustical premisses over which these local differences manifest themselves; we are concerned, that is, with the elements which all melodic idioms have in common owing to the fact that the human vocal organs are constructed, the world over, according to the same principles. When we sing a given tone we call it, for convenience, a *single* tone: but in actual fact it is a component of the infinite number of tones embraced within the harmonic series, of which the prime few numbers are in suitable circumstances distinctly audible to the human ear. These prime partials are the intervals defined by vibration ratios of

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[More information](#)

2 to 1, 3 to 2, and 4 to 3 in that order—the octave, the fifth, and the fourth (which is the fifth converted). This means, of course, that no one can sing or give utterance to tones without being sub-consciously aware of these relationships, and the reason for their enormous importance in all primitive musics becomes clear.

A further characteristic of these intervals is that the difference between the fifth and the fourth defines the interval of the 'tone'—the norm of all conjunct motion in European music until the unequivocal acceptance of equal temperament and the Schönbergian semitone. The natural intervallic relations themselves define the natural norm of progression, and that these prime elements of song-speech link up with spoken speech was suggested by Vaughan Williams when he pointed out how a speaker, moved by passion, will tend to allow his voice to fluctuate between two adjacent tones incorporating at points of dramatic climax a sudden leap or fall of fourth or fifth. Such natural figures are among the fundamental formulae, the opening gambits, of folk-song as of plainsong (which began as intoned speech): they are the essentials of melodic idiom, from which song germinates.

Suppose we call our prime tones C, F, G, c, then if one takes the fourths and fifths from the two interior tones (F and G, the original fourth and fifth), one arrives at two new tones and at a more extended, five-note melody-figure (the pentatonic scale) which is the basis of the idioms of almost all primitive musics. The five-tone figure (represented by C, D, F, G, B flat, c) dominates musics as extreme and diverse as those of Africa, China and Japan, India, Egypt, the Australian Bush, the Provencal *trouvères*, Palestine, and English and American folk cultures; while the theory of Yasser that plain-song is fundamentally pentatonic (with two auxiliary tones, used mainly decoratively, to make up the seven-tone modal scale) is increasingly gaining ground. It is remarkable that even when the seven-tone mode was clearly established through the addition of fifths and fourths to the pentatonic additions to the original three-tone figure, and some troubadour songs, for instance, were betraying an unmistakable diatonic tendency to a somewhat surprising use of the not naturally vocal, sub-semitonal leading note, the vocal five-tone figure still maintained its deep anchorage on the evolution of melodic idiom, and pentatonic thought remained fundamental⁹. From the thirteenth to the sixteenth century the seven-tone melody figures owed their tonal and rhythmic fluidity to the fact that they obeyed the dictates of the voice; even the harmony was inseparable from a vocal way of thought. It wasn't till late after the triumph of equal temperament—the surrendering of modal and rhythmic variety for the ability to modulate that the natural vocal conception of melodic

⁹Many troubadour melodies have pentatonic character, apparent less in the use of a pure pentatonic scale than in the frequent employment of minor thirds, with the intervening tone, if present, of such a character that it may fairly be interpreted as a *pièn-tone*. (Reese).

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

MELODY & TEXTURE, MEDIÆVAL & MODERN 5

evolution became victimized by the instrumental and harmonic one; (if we arrange the tones of the diatonic scale of C major in some such order as C, G, F, E, A, d, B, c, we can see that the melody shapes implicit in the diatonic idiom depend on each tone bearing harmonic relations to the others): and it wasn't until Schönberg's twelve-tone system (which literally leaves no tone—or technically speaking semitone—unstirred) that the implications of instrumental equal temperament were consummated, and here we can see that the theory of the tone-row—the *artificial* ordering of the *semitone*—bears a very curious and perverse analogy to those pentatonic and modal figures which constituted the *spontaneous* organization of the tone. A natural vocal idiom has its own melody-shapes implicit in its vocal organization; only in an equal tempered chromaticism is the deliberate *manufacture* of melody-shapes necessary. A composer such as Weelkes or Bach or Mozart can magnificently exploit chromaticism as a momentary intensification of a stable, tonally founded idiom: but advanced chromaticism, in and for itself, always seems to coincide with a disintegration of human feeling. Thus, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, in the music of Gesualdo, we can observe a gain in the dramatic poignancy of the brief immediate fragment (accompanied by boldness of harmonic complexion) achieved at the expense of that grand organization of extended lyrical material in accordance with the discipline of the voice which we call the modal system—and which sprang from an order personal, social, and even religious. Similarly the diatonic system decayed into the deliquescence of feeling and tonal instability which marks the Tristanesque music of the late nineteenth century; and the connection between chromaticism and 'romanticism'—the cult of the personal and subjective—is revealed.

It is misleading, then, to think of scales as sequences of ascending or descending tones: as such they are merely abstractions, something *made out of* the things the voice naturally does. Thus 'in the British Isles and America there exists a repertory of distinct melodies, limited in number and set for the most part to texts in English. These airs are perceptible in numerous versions of varying lengths . . . and constitute the life-blood of the folk melodic organism in English-speaking tradition: and the airs included in it (about 40) are universally diffused, and in their various forms they account for by far the greater part of the musical settings to our traditional songs in English, as well as a number in Gaelic, Welsh and Manx'. (S. P. Bayard). Similarly 'I have found that the mode (*echos*) in Byzantine chant is not absolutely connected with a certain *finalis*, but with the occurrence of a group of *maqams* which form the melody of each mode. The scales were gradually evolved by a process of grouping certain formulæ on which all the melodies were built (*enechema*) . . . The composer did not have to compose an entirely new canon: his task was rather that of a modest artisan who wished to add to an admired model something which seemed permissible to him as an intensification, a beautifying, or a small variation' (Egon Wellesz). Similarly in Indian music there is no fixed scale but a fixed group of

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[More information](#)

fundamental intervals, and the precise vibration value of a note depends on its position in a progression and not on its relation to a tonic. 'The quarter-tone or *scruti* is the microtonal interval between notes of the 'scale', but as the theme rarely employs two and never three scale notes in succession the microtonal inflexion is used only in ornament'. (Chromatic notes in the European modal system, though they came to have harmonic significance, were in the first place inflectional). Each Indian song is in a particular *raga* or selection of five, six or seven tones with certain characteristic vocal progressions and a chief note to which the singer constantly returns. 'None of the ragas contains more than seven substantive notes and there is no modulation. The raga is the melody mould and to sing is to improvise, with a wealth of microtonal inflexions or grace notes and in very elaborate rhythms made up of sums (not multiples) or two and three, on the theme thus defined' (after Coomaraswamy). Similarly in ancient Hebraic music 'a mode is composed of a number of motives within a certain scale. The motives have different functions. There are beginning and concluding motives and motives of conjunctive and disjunctive character. The composer operates with the material of these traditional folk-cultures within a certain mode for his creations. His composition is nothing but his arrangement and combination of this limited number of combinations;³ his 'freedom' of creation consists further of embellishments and in modulations from one mode to another' (Idelsohn). Similarly in plainsong 'it is not so much initial tones as initial *figures* that are accredited with modal significance'.

In all these cases, and in many others, the theory of scale is clearly merely a generalization from the facts of song. Reese's account of the five-stage development of plainsong gives a good idea of the process of melodic evolution: first the motive as symbol, then the motive as an independent musical entity, then the analysis of the intervals and progressions involved in the motive, then the development of the theory of scale from this analysis and finally the merging of the theory once more in creation. In the tropes of plainsong we can watch the formulæ of intoned speech flowering into self-subsistent lyricism and song. And I think that the first great lesson which the Middle Ages have to teach us is that of the expressive advantages as well as (or rather than) the limitations of monody or music conceived in terms of a single line: purity of intonation, subtlety and fluidity of movement, modal variety, and fluency based on the natural capabilities of the human voice. Now is a time when it is particularly urgent to remember these things for contemporary music has suffered much from theories maintaining that, after Wagner and the dissolution of tonality, it is necessary to base one's theory on an instrumental conception of the equal tempered semitone, whether neo-diatonic, as in the case of Hindemith, or twelve-tonal as in the case of Schönberg. These theories,

³To this method the technique of Schönberg's tone-row provides a direct (if synthetic) analogy.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*MELODY & TEXTURE, MEDIÆVAL & MODERN* 7

although formulated by men whose greatness and integrity it is impossible not to respect, are, as Hans Gal pointed out in a recent article in *Music and Letters*, fundamentally fallacious because the human ear knows no way of 'understanding' a musical composition other than by memorizing its phrases subconsciously, and the only way to do this is by mental *vocalization*. The great instrumental period in European music arose out of the vocal and never lost contact with it (*e.g.* most of the greater Bach fugue subjects, the Mozart adagio, the Beethoven 'Italian opera' aria, the slow movement in the Lydian mode quartet, the opening fugue of opus 131, and even the Chopin Nocturne). If some twelve-tone music seems to be incomprehensible to all except its creator it is because it has relinquished the natural basis of musical speech which is common to all men, and by obliterating the 'comma' (the acoustic distinction between C sharp and D flat) has betrayed the roots of melodic thought in the human ear. Nothing has done more than the equal-tempered piano and the later work of Wagner (or anyway of his imitators) to foster general musical illiteracy and a dishonest use of the materials of the composer's craft.

To work within the limits of a vocally conceived idiom implies no irksome restriction; on the contrary, it is only within its natural limitations that music attains true freedom. We have only to consider the tropes of the Gregorian chant, or the finest melodies of the troubadours (which derived both from plainchant and folk-song), to appreciate the extraordinary emotional intensity which a vocally conceived monody may attain to: and plainchant and troubadour songs are by no means the isolated phenomena, the divine accidents in musical history, that they are popularly supposed to be. The immense length of line, soaring proudly out of the simplest vocal premisses, and the subtlety of the modal and rhythmic inflexions not only of plainchant and troubadours but also of the Spanish *Cantigas*, the monophonic work of Léonin and Perotin⁴ and the great Notre Dame school, and to a lesser degree of the folk-song-like Italian *Laudi*, certainly place this music among the supreme melodic achievements of history; and the apparently perversely structural 'rules' (conditioned by the poetry) of (for instance) troubadour music allow for so rich a variety of detail that, as Reese puts it, 'far from being primitive, the troubadour melodies anticipate practically all later song forms'. Music may have gained much in a variety of ways since the great monodic ages, but one can hardly claim that, purely from the melodic point of view, music has 'progressed' far even if, indeed, except in the few outstanding instances, it may

⁴The lines of Léonin (whose most important work was done between 1160 and 1180) are the broader and (naturally) the closer to plain-song, moving mainly by conjunct motion and the pentatonic minor third, with occasional ecstatic glissandi that may owe something to Arab influence: Perotin's relatively agile line (his school flourished from about 1180 to 1236) owes more to troubadour technique and becomes more susceptible of polyphonic treatment.

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[More information](#)

properly be said to have come within measurable distance of catching up.

III.

The centrality of vocal monody is the first great lesson that mediæval music has to teach us: the other is implicit in one of the most fascinating phenomena in the whole history of art—the birth of polyphony. The desire to create music in more than one voice would seem to have first manifested itself in two closely connected ways which may have been, to begin with, accidental. When a group of untrained people imagines itself to be singing in unison (or at the octave) it will sometimes be found that several members of the party adapt the music conveniently to the pitch of their voices by singing a fifth or fourth apart from the main body of singers without realizing (so deep is the hold of the perfect consonances) that they are not singing in unison. When this happens we have an unconscious example of organum—the first type of art-music to employ simultaneously voices at different pitches. Of course strict organum was not polyphony, for polyphony implies some degree of contrary motion; but we may call it ‘symphonious’ music according to the definition of Hucbald: ‘Consonance is the judicious and harmonious mixture of two tones which exists if only two tones, produced from different sources, meet in one joint sound, as happens when a boy’s voice and a man’s sing the same thing, or in that which they commonly call Organum’.

Another accident that may happen in choral singing among primitive cultures is that two singers may unintentionally give different versions of the same line. At first the intervals which result will be fortuitous and their intonation vague: but in more sophisticated cultures it will not be long before the intervals become clearly defined, with one line taking the theme while the others play round it and vary it without departing so far from it that one may say they have melodic independence. This type of music is known as heterophony, and the nature of the intervals involved in it will depend, of course, on the structure of the melodies peculiar to the culture, though in most cases they will be those implicit in the pentatonic scale.

Polyphony in Europe seems to have begun as the interaction of these two prime principles of organum and heterophony:⁵ parallel and free organum (diaphony) are seen as two aspects of the same thing, and we find John Cotton not only admitting all the recognized consonances into organum but explicitly encouraging contrary motion and the crossing of parts. At first the two notes of the organum, which were two slightly different ways of saying the same thing, moved (naturally enough) note for note; but soon composers became attracted by the possibility of creating counter-melodies

⁵The existence of instruments, particularly the organ with key-board, must have aided the process of the birth of polyphony; but was not, I think, the fundamental motive. (See section V).

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*MELODY & TEXTURE, MEDIÆVAL & MODERN* 9

more complex and elaborately rhythmic than the original liturgical melodies and, as Reese puts it, 'a very important result of this was that the borrowed melodies became more and more long drawn out as the counter-melodies became increasingly elaborate until every note of the *tenor* [the name significantly derives from the Latin meaning] would, like a sort of pedal-point, support above it a complex group of notes in the duplum or triplum . . . We may perhaps see here the transference of the drone of folk music'. The model for the 'free' part of diaphony was of course the melismatic tropes of plainchant, and like the trope, polyphony was regarded in its early days merely as an embellishment of the Gregorian repertoire. But the fact that there was now more than one part implied, as Franco of Cologne early perceived, a revolution: for if the singers were to keep together, mensuration now became inevitable. The change from monody to polyphony was thus fundamentally a rhythmic one; during the great period, at least, of the Middle Ages polyphony does not entail any harmonic concept that is not implicit in vocal monody, that is to say in our sense it does not entail harmony at all. But the problem of mensural accent in part-writing was the real revolution, and it was one with the most far-reaching consequences.

Naturally, monophonically trained composers did not take kindly to mensuration and in their organa over a tenor cantus firmus for a long time allowed one part to remain more or less free and unmeasured. Conductus style (the origin of the name is dubious, unless it had something to do with liturgical processions) was their closest approach to a step-by-step organization, but even this, though it took over the ternary rhythmic 'modes' of the troubadours as the measure-basis for the discant of its duplum, triplum and even quadruplum, employed incidental melismata, overlapping, ellipsis and crossing of parts so elaborately that any effect of rigidity was dissipated: by the time of Pierre de la Croix (c. 1250) the ternary measure had been, even theoretically, superseded. In the motetus style which increasingly dominated the 13th century an ever completer differentiation between the parts was aimed at. The conception was never really harmonic: the absolute and perfect consonances, the harmonies implicit in a pentatonic way of melodic thought, remained the props of the tonal structure; but the continual revolutions around a single consonance bore more relation to folk heterophony than to specifically harmonic thought, and the effect of the added seconds and sixths of the intertwining upper parts was usually more pentatonic than triadic. Furthermore, what happened *in between* the points of concord was dictated entirely by melodic, not harmonic, considerations, and parallel seconds and dissonant clashes in the melismatic parts were no more taboo than parallel fifths. The art of thinking simultaneously on several melodic planes has never reached a more logical consummation than in the thirteenth century motet in which each part was not only in a different rhythm, but set to a different text, indiscriminately bawdy or secular, very often in different languages. The sixteenth century, while preserving fluidity and self-subsistence of line, aimed at the richest and most

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sonorous homogeneity of material, the reconciliation of the horizontal with the vertical: such a notion is completely remote from the thirteenth century when composers, according to Franco of Cologne, would first compose their *tenor* line complete (the plainsong basis being now dispensed with) and would then add the *motetus* and the *triplum* each as elaborate, independent linear compositions; each of them perfectly satisfying if sung solo while at the same time attaining, in conjunction with the other melodies, to an altogether subtler and more complex experience.

Round about 1330 Philip de Vitri coined the term *Ars Nova* for the school of polyphonic writing that was beginning to supplant the (by now designated) *Ars Antiqua* of Léonin and Perotin; and throughout the fourteenth century we can observe a gradual, if slight, tendency towards the sixteenth century homogeneity—the synchronization of part-writing accompanied tentatively by the domination of the triad—the harmonic norm implicit in seven-tone melody shapes rather than in pentatonic ones. The most mediæval means of achieving homogeneity was the device, explored in Machaut's remarkable *Hoquetus David*⁶ and in the motets of Philip de Vitri, of isochronous rhythm—variations upon a rhythmic framework (completely emancipated from the restrictions of the old rhythmic 'modes') that remained constant throughout. The form would appear to be one of the most rigid in musical history: yet so subtle were the variations of tone value and texture, so elaborate the shifts of (what we would call) harmonic context, that the music attained, in the relentless logic of its development, to an extraordinary steely power and monumental grandeur.

More important from the point of view of historical evolution, is the much greater use, during the fourteenth century, of canon; for the tendency to make the parts homogeneous rather than heterogeneous can hardly be carried further than by giving all the parts the same melodic material to play with. The use of a single generating cell in the 'gigantic motet' which is Machaut's *Mass* is also significant, while this composer's elaborate *cantrizans* begin a tradition that survived until the end of the fifteenth century. (Canonic device had been little more than latent in the 13th century *rondeau* style). The trend towards homogeneity manifested in Machaut's work, his relative fondness (in his secular compositions) for thirds and the major scale, his subtle use of chromaticism starting from the inflectional anti-tritonal B flat and F sharp, were further explored by the brilliant Italian *trecento* school (of which the chief composers were Jacopo da Bologna, Giovanni da Cascia, Vincenzo da Rimini, Francesco Landini, Nicolo da Perugia, Andrea da Firenze and Matteo da Perugia), since these musicians renounced polytextuality,

⁶Walter Odington defined the hoquet (hiccup) as 'a truncation made over the tenor in such a way that one voice is always silent while another sings'. There were various degrees of complexity in the style which is not of much evolutionary significance. Hoqueting is found in some primitive musical cultures also.