

‘New Music’ as historical category

The concept of ‘New Music’, which serves to pinpoint the difference between certain twentieth-century works and the mass of the remainder, seems to be one of those catchphrases which have a precise meaning as long as they are used thoughtlessly, but which turn out to be vague or self-contradictory as soon as one begins to analyse them. Is not newness, one is entitled to ask, a quality which, by its very nature, is tied to a never-recurring moment in time? And does it not seem illogical, therefore, to ascribe it to a whole epoch covering half a century? A concept which is used to characterise an unrepeatable experience is of little use as a historical label. Furthermore, one is forced to make use of the superlative, ‘Newest Music’, in order to distinguish between the avant garde of the past fifteen years and older New Music; and that is a rather dubious verbal construct.

The established use of the expression New Music as a name for an epoch may be paradoxical, but it has not remained without influence on historical terminology. That a term like *ars nova*, which was used in the fourteenth century to describe an *ars nova notandi*, a new notational method, albeit one which had a bearing on compositional technique, should have progressed to become a general term for French music written between 1320 and 1380 probably has less to do with the original meaning of the term than with the unconscious transfer of the later phrase New Music. Even when historians have recourse to the terminology of the past they are dependent on modern linguistic usage. At any rate, declaring newness to be the essence of a whole epoch was a notion foreign to the fourteenth century.

But what in fact is the point of referring to *ars antiqua* and *ars nova* as

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epochs when even the most superficial consideration of the facts shows that *ars antiqua* was new music around 1250, and that *ars nova* turned into old music around 1380? How is one to explain the fact that historians tend to overemphasise unassuming work titles such as *Ars nova* and *Nuove musiche*, almost as if they had been dictated by the spirit of history wanting to place a caesura?

The concept of the 'new', which Ernst Bloch has said is in a bad way, is, taken as a historical category, as unavoidable as it is precarious. It is unavoidable in the trivial sense that the matter of history is that which changes, and not that which is static or that which repeats itself in the same form. It is precarious because the principle which states that history is to be understood as continuity urges the historian to trace the new, if at all possible, back to the old. To be precise, a historical explanation reveals the new only inasmuch as it is not new. The new is not significant in itself, but solely in relation to its antithesis, as the irreducible and unresolved remainder. Thus the new can be seen, paradoxically, as being at one and the same time the actual subject-matter and the blind spot of history.

In psychological terms newness is to be measured not only by its mere information content, but also by the expectations which it arouses. The relevance of the new is dependent upon the character of the old in question: in other words, whether the new continues a series of revolutions or whether it has to assert itself in the face of an authoritarian tradition which reaches back hundreds of years. In a sphere of music and an epoch in which little changes, such as church music at certain periods, the least alteration to the established norm seems like a revolution, whereas in the case of recent post-serial music it has become difficult to perceive changes which would perhaps turn musical thinking upside down if one were able to understand and accept them for the important events they are.

Moreover, newness is not measured by the same standards in the various strata of music. It is a question of fundamental differences, not one of degree. To be of the opinion that something is new has a different significance in popular than in esoteric music. What newness means in the case of popular music depends on how one understands its history; and it is not even certain whether one can talk about historical development in the undiluted sense of the word, or whether it would not be more appropriate to describe the changes as changes in fashion. But the kind of innovation that simply supersedes the previous year's fashion can hardly be compared to an epoch-making historical event, however much the sort of journalism that turns fashions into important events and dismisses important events as fashions might wish to attempt to obscure the difference.

The thicket of difficulties and paradoxes into which one chances even when thinking about the concept of musical innovation in the most superficial way cannot be cleared away in a few sentences. Thus I may be forgiven for attempting nothing more than a rough sketch of the features that distinguish those epochs which are felt to be times of New Music from those which are not. The suspicion that titles such as *Ars nova* or *Nuove musiche* lead to overinterpretation, the mistrust of historians who tend to exaggerate historical breaks to which scholarly labels can be attached, is understandable, but it is not justified. *Musica nova*, the title which Adrian Willaert gave to a collection of motets and madrigals in 1559, was never declared to be the classmark of an epoch of music history, though it would not be difficult to adduce arguments to support the idea that Willaert had created a New Music. It would suffice to recall the tendency to favour homophonic textures and expressive chromaticism, the Renaissance awareness of Willaert's pupils Zarlino and Vicentino, or Monteverdi's claim that Cipriano de Rore, another of Willaert's pupils, was the first composer to make use of the *seconda prattica*. Monteverdi, whom others regarded as the epitome of modernity, felt that new music around 1600 was a continuation of the Willaert tradition.

Nevertheless the question arises why a historian who is trying to decide where historical breaks occur and to assess their significance sees Caccini's monodies and not Willaert's madrigals as *nuova musica*. Broadening the question, are the events around 1320, 1430, 1600, 1740 and 1910, of which one thinks automatically when one is speaking of the 'new' in music history, more significant and momentous than what was happening around 1500, 1680, 1780, 1830 and 1950? Is Josquin's 'ars perfecta' or Haydn's 'new, special style' of lesser historical importance than Dufay's 'euphonious counterpoint' or the symphonic style of someone like Johann Stamitz? Or is it not so much the importance as the character of the changes that forces upon the historian the concept of the new? When emphatically ascribing newness to certain epochs and not to others, are we dealing with a qualitative difference, and not one of degree? Are we concerned with the profundity of the break or with its character?

I

When analysing the complex of ideas which comprise the concept of the new, we immediately come across a factor which seems trivial but which is actually rather surprising. Newness is exclusively ascribed to the beginnings of a lengthy period of evolution (a period of evolution, that is, which spans one or two centuries) and not to the middle or later stages.

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Neither a classical style, be it that of the Low Countries around 1500 or of Germany around 1800, nor a mannered style, such as the *ars subtilior* of the fourteenth century or the excessive chromaticism of the sixteenth century, attracts the epithet 'new'. But it would be misguided and untenable to claim that the extent of perceivable newness, the number of unusual expressive features or, to quote Karlheinz Stockhausen, the variety of compositional 'discoveries and inventions' is as a rule greater at an early stage than at a middle or a later one. Of course, when speaking of newness in the emphatic sense, one thinks less of what has already been achieved than of what is just over the horizon, and of that contained as an unexploited possibility in what already exists. Caccini's monodies, the *Nuove musiche* of 1601, differ markedly from what immediately preceded them, such as the madrigals of Luca Marenzio, more on account of their unexpected poverty and thinness than on account of anything strikingly new. Progress, if it could be described as such, consisted in reduction. That the monodies were nevertheless and rightly felt to be the New Music of the seventeenth century was due to the consequences which followed from them. The relapse into primitivism formed the precondition for a long and far-reaching evolution. The New Music around 1600 – and similarly that around 1430 or 1740 – has the character of a programme for the future. The new style, at which the concept of New Music is directed, is to be measured not by what it is but by what it makes possible. Its apparent poverty is, as it were, a promise of future wealth.

II

The new, which asserts itself through its antithesis to the old, has a propensity to reflection and to polemics; and the more insistent the polemics are, the more unjustified they seem. Measured in abstract musical terms, the challenge to the overpowering tradition of counterpoint mounted by Vincenzo Galilei and the Florentine Camerata verged on sectarian absurdity. The fact that this challenge was nevertheless epoch-making was in no small measure a result of the literary presentation of the new by apologists and chroniclers such as Doni. Similarly, around 1740, we should not underestimate the influence of literary publications, which provided a language for the feeling of stylistic change with which that feeling could articulate and establish itself.

Furthermore, past controversies are taken remarkably seriously by historians, who like to illustrate the differences between epochs by means of symbolic events, with the result that the more emphatically the new appears in the shape of polemical documents, the greater its chances of

being deemed epoch-making become. To claim that Mozart's modifications to opera buffa were not of lesser significance than Gluck's reform of opera seria and of the tragédie lyrique, and may even have been of greater significance, would be in no way absurd. Yet it is impossible to deny that the publicity which was accorded to Gluck, and which was denied to Mozart, helped the reform operas to acquire a prestige which was as important historically as the works themselves. The proclamation of an epoch sometimes resembles a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Thus literature about music, hardly different in this respect from literature about literature, forms an integral part of music as a historical event, and even as a perceived object. What one emphasises when listening to music is in part dependent on what one has read about it. Musical perception, even of the most impartial kind, which in reality does not exist, is permeated with reminiscences of what one has read, with traces of literary memory. Even the endeavour to arrive at a 'purely musical' form of listening is conveyed by literature, either as the work of aesthetic awareness or as the fulfilment of a postulate which is hardly more than 150 years old. The literary element is an aspect of music, particularly of new music, which is not directly comprehensible on its own terms.

III

That the concept of the new attaches to a whole era, instead of to an unrepeatable moment, seems to presuppose that an old style, a *prima prattica*, exists side by side with the new one, either in the shape of a peripheral tradition, as in the seventeenth century, or in that of a predominant one, as in the twentieth. A new music whose antithesis disappears within a few years, as happened around 1740, hardly needs to be declared as such.

Yet the real antithesis to the new is not music which is seen and felt to be old, but either the 'moderately modern', which Robert Schumann disparagingly referred to as the 'juste milieu', or else a dogmatism which claims that it is rooted in the nature of the thing itself, that is to say, abstracted from history, a claim which Hindemith's *Unterweisung im Tonsatz* shares with Fux's *Gradus ad Parnassum*.

Jacques de Liège's polemics against the *ars nova* of the fourteenth century were permeated with feelings of resignation. The new was bewailed as excessive, yet without calling into question its right to exist. Jacques, even if rather reluctantly, was aware that the *ars antiqua* whose passing he mourned was a thing of the past.

It was different around 1600 in the controversy between Artusi and

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Monteverdi. The antithesis to the New Music of the seventeenth century, to the *seconda prattica*, the beginnings of which, according to Monteverdi, reached far back into the sixteenth century, was not an *ars antiqua*, but rather, as its apologists saw it, a timeless dogmatism which had been codified by Zarlino in 1558 as if it had been a natural law of music. It is no accident that the concept of the 'pure style', which admittedly was coined only in the eighteenth century, reminds us of the 'pure doctrine'. It seems as if Monteverdi also understood the stylistic difference between the old and the new as the contrast between a natural and a historical justification of musical techniques. Whereas the *prima prattica*, which, characteristically, was formulated as a theory, tried to give itself the appearance of having been derived from nature – Fux saw in the change of taste nothing but the ephemeral exterior of a counterpoint which remained essentially the same – the contemporaries of the *seconda prattica* already sensed, albeit in an unarticulated manner, that it was a historical phenomenon whose evolutionary stages – madrigal, monody and the concertante style – were clearly distinct. It was quite possible for Monteverdi to subsume diverging styles, the polyphony of the madrigal and the monody of early opera, under the concept of *seconda prattica* so long as they were understood historically.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, aesthetics and historical theory primarily contrast the new with the 'juste milieu', the reasonable middle way, and not with the old, which is far rather understood as something that was once new, as something to which one can relate instead of having to combat it. Historical awareness, inasmuch as it is not pleasure in antiquarianism but awareness of what is perpetually new in history, becomes a vehicle of progress; and there arises the paradoxical concept of a revolutionary tradition which extends from Beethoven to Schoenberg via Berlioz, Liszt and Wagner. The opponent is moderation; the middle path is, according to Schoenberg, the only one that does not lead to Rome.

IV

Tradition is that which is self-evident, which takes itself for granted as long as it retains its predominance. It only becomes self-conscious when cracks appear in its edifice and when it begins to be assailed by doubt. A tradition that is maintained in a strenuously self-conscious manner is exposed for what it is precisely because it is on the defensive.

To its opponents, tradition seems to be the old that has been historically condemned. Conversely, the old, for those who represent it, is tradition: not something that is past and in the process of dying, but something self-

evident which will survive. Thus the concept of the old, as a counter-concept to that of the new, is not at all a neutral category. Whatever is dismissed as old in the eyes of the new, be it the regulated counterpoint of around 1600, the idea of the bass as the foundation of music around 1740, or tonal harmony around 1910, seems self-evident to those who cling to it, and appears to be old only because it has always been natural and obvious. The organism model, the idea that no aspect of music is immune to becoming old and dying out, serves as a historical scheme with which to justify the new – though the concept of growth, as an antithesis to that of creation, is a conservative category.

V

It seems that both detractors and eulogists are of the opinion, though in a diametrically opposed sense, that the more abrupt the new is, the deeper the break in historical continuity it signifies. Around 1600 the contrast to received tradition was doubtless felt to be sharp. Yet nothing would be further from the truth than to exaggerate the effect that polemics against the old can have. Confronted with the tenacious power of what exists and is deeply rooted, even a successful revolution is curiously powerless. And it is precisely when the new ventures far into the unknown that it permits the old to exist alongside it unchallenged. It is no accident that in the seventeenth century, just as in the twentieth, the *seconda prattica*, new music, tolerated the existence of a *prima prattica*, old music, as a complementary contrast. And if around 1740 it seemed as though the old style was about to be eradicated, then the abrupt displacement of the 'learned' by the 'galant' (to use the language of the eighteenth century) was corrected a generation later in Haydn's quartets from Op. 20 onwards and in Mozart's return to Bach. The radical nature of the sudden change around 1740 can hardly be understood in abstract music-historical terms, in an isolated problem history [*Problemgeschichte*] of composition; it forces one to fall back on socio-historical attempts at explanation. On the other hand, the resumption of the interrupted tradition of counterpoint a few decades later represented a kind of triumph of an immanent music-historical logic independent of socio-historical factors.

VI

The new which opposes a dominant tradition not infrequently stems from an oppressed one, resembling a usurper in this respect. What had been accorded scant attention or considered to be of little value because it was

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regionally or socially on the fringe moves into the centre and determines the dominant style.

The New Music of around 1430, which Johannes Tinctoris acclaimed as the dawn of a new age, is based, to put it crudely, on the assimilation by French music, whose hegemony had obtained for centuries, of provincial English and Italian techniques and stylistic traits. If Heinrich Bessler is right in contending that Dufay's adaptation and artificial* redefinition of fauxbourdon was the crucial factor, then the New Music of the fifteenth century would have to be seen as the result of the ennobling of what had hitherto been peripheral and trivial.

The hypothesis which states that a hitherto secondary tradition comes to the fore whenever there is a change in style complements Hans Naumann's assertion that art on a low level is 'decayed cultural property'. It acquires added weight in that seventeenth-century *nuova musica*, Caccini's monody, is also, at least in part, the artificial formulation of a procedure which, as a peripheral musical practice – vocal improvisation over a ground bass – reaches far back into the sixteenth century. Seen in this way, monody did not arise abruptly around 1600 as a reversal of polyphony, but was merely raised from being an unpretentious occasional art form to being the dominant style.

That the New Music of the eighteenth century is characterised by traits which its adherents praised as being popular and which its opponents dismissed as being trivial is too well known for it to be necessary to cite details, such as the criticisms levelled against Haydn by the North Germans. However, it is less obvious, or at least less frequently commented upon, that in the early nineteenth century the new style also takes its starting-point from peripheral aspects of the old. Before being ennobled around 1820, the characteristic genres of Romanticism, the song, the lyric piano piece and programme music, were all of them overshadowed, secondary genres, however widely they may have been disseminated. At the same time, it is impossible to deny that the attempt to explain innovation in music as the upgrading of a peripheral or trivial tradition fails to explain the changes around 1910. The New Objectivity [*Neue Sachlichkeit*] of the 1920s would fit into this scheme much better. But however gratifying it may be that a historical–theoretical hypothesis has proved convincing, it is not sufficient compensation for abandoning the conviction that Schoenberg's transition to atonality was the decisive

* *Artifiziell*. Dahlhaus's many references to 'artificial' music should be taken in the literal sense: music made up of artifices, or 'art music' as opposed to popular music. See J. B. Robinson's preface to Dahlhaus's *Foundations of Music History* (Cambridge, 1983), p. x. [Trans.]

event in the music of the first half of this century – and probably of the second half as well.

VII

The observation that a new musical style not infrequently takes its cue from peripheral traditions suggests making use of the idea advanced by the sociologist of literature Levin Schücking, that stylistic change in general terms is bound up with a change in the 'type of the upholder of taste'. According to this theory a change in taste is the taste of a different social stratum or of a new public. But the attempt to transfer Schücking's interpretative scheme to music history, which seems plausible at first sight, proves unsuccessful; the caesuras in the history of music do not coincide with those of social history.

The *ars nova* of the fourteenth century was doubtless destined for the same 'literati' who, according to Johannes de Grocheo, formed the audience for the motet around 1300, inasmuch as one may term retiring scholarly circles an audience. However great the musical differences between them may seem, *ars antiqua* and *ars nova* are impossible to tell apart in sociological terms. And again, a century later, at the historical break around 1430, nothing points to a change in the 'type of the upholder of taste'. The social structure of the Burgundian court at Dijon was in essence the same as that of the Papal court at Avignon, the centre of the *ars subtilior*, the musical mannerism of around 1400.

Early seventeenth-century monody was esoteric music, an art for aristocratic humanistic circles. Yet these had already sustained and encouraged the *musica reservata* of the sixteenth century, the expressive polyphonic art of the madrigal. What was new in terms of the history of music was based sociologically on tradition.

That stylistic change around 1740 is linked to the rise of bourgeois musical culture, as described by Eberhard Preussner, has become a scholarly commonplace. But although the hypothesis seems plausible because of its simplicity, it is questionable. In the first place, sixteenth-century bourgeois musical culture was hardly inferior to that of the eighteenth century. Secondly, England, the bourgeois nation par excellence, did not play an important role in the history of music after the death of Handel. Thirdly, the eighteenth century saw the parallel rise of Metastasian opera seria and of its bourgeois counterpart, opera buffa. That the Enlightenment was a bourgeois epoch in literature does not mean that it was also one in music. Finally, it seems as if the proposed connection between stylistic change and a change in the 'type of the upholder

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of taste' is of no avail even in the twentieth century. For it would be rather difficult, using tangible sociological criteria, to prove the truth of the assertion that the New Music audience, though it is doubtless a special one, differs from that of older music. But then the attempt has not as yet been made.

On the other hand, a distinction has to be made within the category 'type of the upholder of taste', inasmuch as the group that is crucial in music-historical terms does not have to coincide with the representative audience in music-sociological terms. Yet the concept of what is representative in terms of music sociology is ambiguous. It does not signify the mass of listeners, which tends to prefer the trivial and make no bones about it, but the group whose taste ranks highest in public opinion. An empirical study, which remains to be carried out (though it would not be difficult), would probably show that the listeners at chamber music and symphony concerts represent the ruling 'type of the upholder of taste', both in their own estimation and in that of most other people. In contrast New Music is tolerated without being socially accepted. In everyday parlance 'modern music' is considered to be jazz. Yet a single group, which according to the criteria of music sociology would be considered a sect, such as the audience of the 'Society for Private Performances of Music', which its detractors referred to as the 'Schoenberg clique', can in retrospect turn out to be of crucial importance in music history. There is a discrepancy between historical and sociological relevance. But if the group that supports a new music lacks social prestige, then the concept of the 'type of the upholder of taste' becomes vague and difficult to pin down.

VIII

The epoch-making new music of around 1600 or around the middle of the eighteenth century was poorer than the old which it replaced. Compared with the tradition which it destroyed it seems a relapse into poverty, which should not however be misunderstood as naivety. A penchant for the calculated, even for the aggressively constructive, is unmistakably present in both Caccini's and Monteverdi's monodies and, a century and a half later, in the symphonies of Stamitz and the sonatas and fantasias of C. P. E. Bach. The new – though based on reduction and on the polemical reaction against the move towards increasingly complex polyphony which preceded it – was more mannered than innocently primitive, a fact which went unnoticed as long as there was a tendency to regard begin-