

FORM IS LINE

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IT IS a common experience for creative artists to be led by instinct rather than by reason. This does not mean that the two faculties are opposed to one another. Rather they are in the relationship of pursuer and pursued. Reason follows instinct as the greyhound runs after the electric rabbit. If the greyhound does not *try* to catch the rabbit there is something wrong with the greyhound; but if it succeeds, there is something wrong with the rabbit. In other words, while creative instinct appears always as something true and desirable to the reason, it never yields itself so wholly that the reason fully possesses it.

An illustration of this may be found in the way certain composers seem nowadays to be groping toward a new kind of tonal orientation on a quasi-diatonic and *linear* (rather than harmonic) basis. I doubt if any one of them knows just what he is driving at. Some speak of "polarity," Schenkerites of an *Urlinie*. The trend has not as yet been reduced to any kind of system, which is perhaps the secret of its attraction for so many creative minds. Yet one could say that if the trend does not represent precisely a return to the Gregorian modes, it is at least the revival of a similar principle. As it applied to the modes the principle meant (1) that the diatonic scale, instead of containing only two "finals" or tonics, had four; and (2) that the interval between these finals and their respective dominants or "tenors," instead of being always a fifth, varied in size anywhere from a third to a sixth according to the mode. In short, the degrees of the scale had at that time a *flexibility of function* which was greatly curtailed by the harmonic major-minor system that developed later. Harmony proved to be such a vast field that it could doubtless be explored only one corner at a time. In the meantime, however, the linear or melodic side of music ended by becoming largely subservient to certain established harmonic progressions. These, indeed, became the basis of musical structure. The earlier concept of form as *line* yielded to that of form as *architecture*. Harmony was the bone structure or framework,

and melody, as Donald Tovey defined it, merely "the surface of music." Finally, the chromaticism of the last century all but destroyed everything except the vertical or harmonic functions of tones. The popular reproach against composers of this school was always that they lacked melody, and in this instance the popular instinct was quite sound.

At all events, melody, from the point of view of the creative musician, seemed pretty well played out. Weakened by chromaticism, its position came more and more to resemble that of a reigning queen who had let herself get so tied up in the protocol of her court that she had ended by losing all autonomy of movement and with it the integrity of her personality and the *raison d'être* for her position. Lip service she still enjoyed. She was still "the surface of music." But she had little say in the control of affairs. Within the last forty years she has sat by and watched this control pass from harmony to rhythm. It would be hard to say under whose domination she fared the worst. Now that she seems on the point of again asserting herself as the naturally dominant factor in music, it will take all her wisdom to separate the wheat of sound reform from the chaff of reckless experiment and useless spending.

All music derives from the fact that one note differs from another; and it is chiefly in melody that these ineffable differences shine out in their full power and singularity and splendor, like fixed stars . . . Hard-headed, practical musicians will perhaps think it a bit nonsensical to make so much of *single notes*. They take them too much for granted. They do not stop to consider what strange, potent little entities they are — entities that so baffle definition in terms of experience that we call them by letters or arbitrary syllables. We have not even a good name for the species as a whole. I referred to them just now as "notes;" but the word of course refers not to them but to their written symbols. Then we speak of one being "higher" or "lower" than another, by an analogy drawn from spatial experience. We might just as well speak of them as "lighter" or "darker," "thinner" or "thicker." The fact is, they can be distinguished in experience only by a *quality of being*, so pure in form that it appeals solely to intuition and not at all to discursive reason. St. Thomas Aquinas held, however, that the principal function of the mind is to apprehend *being* rather than *meaning*; and he was surely right. How otherwise account for the fact that so many of the very greatest minds have expressed themselves in a language made up exclusively of words without meaning, words that refer only to themselves, that merely *are*?