

MUSIC OF THE HEMISPHERES

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“WITH all proper deference to the illustrious culture of the Occident, to the arts of your great nations, I seek enlightenment about something you prize highly. Since my arrival in your country I have attended many concerts; I am still waiting, however, for someone to explain the music of the Western world. To my ears, alas, it is devoid of any meaning.”

Politely but firmly, a Chinese friend thus addressed me in San Francisco some time ago. He was a distinguished scholar, a native of Peking, who, after a long study of traditional music with the Imperial Chinese Orchestra, had become a musician by profession. His two-year visit here (he has since returned to his own city) had for its purpose a research into our music. Some of his inquiries he pursued with me, by means of a series of conversations held in his very luxurious home in the Chinese quarter of San Francisco. A man of great means and distinction, influential in the Chinese community, he was also much respected in American university circles. In his own exotic setting he was a peculiarly impressive figure, wearing brilliant Oriental robes, his round, serene, scholarly face bearing its racial impress of calm and impassivity. As I quote him here without permission, I will cloak him in the anonymity of “Mr. Ch.”

“You may not understand our music,” I said in reply to this question, which arose at our first meeting, “that can hardly be expected in so short a time, but surely you can take pleasure in it.”

Mr. Ch’s deprecation was civil but not uncertain. “Unfortunately it leaves me cold. I cannot penetrate its confusion. To me it is formless, an indistinguishable mass. The many instrumental voices melt together like a bag of chocolates on a hot day.”

His calm frankness gave my Western complacency a jolt. It was not surprising that the structure of our music which I, like all Occidentals, accept as normal, should escape his comprehension. But was there not here an unmistakable reference to other standards; the implication of a system contrary in fundamentals to what we conceive as music? I accepted the challenge.

"Do you then," I asked, "expect to follow every instrument in the orchestra? It is essential for some merely to combine their effects for harmony, to create a background to the melody or melodies."

"Ah, yes," he replied imperturbably. "Why do you use so many instruments if all of them cannot be followed, as you seem to admit? Of what use is one more instrument if you cannot hear the melody it plays? Do your musicians and your auditors hear so acutely then that they really listen to each part in the orchestra? Or perhaps, if I may suggest anything so invidious, you add all these instruments for pomp and show!"

"But is there for you no such thing as richness of tone, as harmony?"

Mr. Ch: "It is just this idea of harmony that I fail to understand. I have heard that it is a concept of tones considered vertically. Does this mean that when you hear several notes sounded together you follow them from the lowest up and thus hear a melody as if the notes were played one after the other?"

"The concept of harmony," I replied firmly, "is of several tones heard as one sound and forming a real unity."

Mr. Ch: "This idea is very difficult for me. Is not our way of considering melodies better? Each instrument plays an independent melody and can be followed separately. We do not play more melodies at once than can be followed readily, so that with the exception of percussion, there are seldom more than from five to fifteen instruments playing together."

"Fifteen melodies simultaneously! Whose ears can catch them separately?"

Mr. Ch: "Practice over long years enables our musicians to reach that point of erudition where they can hear several melodies. Laymen, of course, are hardly expected to follow more than one at a time. But the road to auditory pleasure is made

simple indeed. Each man chooses the melody he likes best and follows it. Thus everyone is satisfied."

"But how does a layman pick one melody from fifteen played simultaneously? What prevents his getting off the track at the very outset?"

Mr. Ch: "I am glad that you have mentioned this. The answer lies in the rules of classical Chinese music which are constructed explicitly to aid him here.

"Most of your rules have to do with the combination of tones to achieve what you call harmony. Your Occidental counterpoint, presumably a study of how to combine melodies, is mainly concerned with relating them by such smooth intervals that they run together and confuse the ear as to their individual existence.

"Our rules, on the contrary, are devised to keep these melodies as distinct as possible so that the ear does not lose their individual progress but is enabled to follow any one singly to its destination. Thus it is strictly forbidden to allow two melodies to run into the same tone. For then even the best ear could not determine which to follow after the unison."

"Are there other rules of a similar character?" I asked.

"Yes, indeed," said Mr. Ch, almost visibly warming to his enthusiasm. "For the same reason each melody is played by a different kind of instrument so that the individual tone-quality may help in the distinguishing process. Moreover, the rhythm is so arranged that no two notes may be started at just the same moment even though all the parts are played together (some notes of course being sustained when others are begun). Nor are notes allowed to sound simultaneously which, although not identical, might melt together and confuse the parts."

Slowly this alien system began to take form in my mind, "All that we in our music call harmony," I cried, "is outlawed by the rules of your art!"

Mr. Ch: "When I first heard the music of composers like Beethoven and Schubert, I had the impression that they took deliberate pleasure, by melting the melodies together, in breaking the rules of their art. Your books on harmony revealed to me that these effects were considered legitimate. The very intervals

which are employed to separate our melodies for clarity, to my surprise appeared as discords in your system, beyond the pale."



Armed with the works of Bach, Schönberg and Chopin, I appeared at my next meeting with Mr. Ch, prepared to play and explain their mysteries. To make the first steps easy, I began with a simple waltz by Johann Strauss.

This proved the most difficult of all.

"The top of this piece is all that I can follow," he cried, "the other parts run together inextricably."

Arriving at a spot in the Chopin work where the main melodic interest shifts from one part to the other, I carefully explained just when and where to skip. This change of attention he himself, after some practice, was able to control but still found taxing because, as he said, "such a shift of interest is never demanded by our music."

"Bach and Schönberg," he added later, "are very much alike. I follow the various melodies in each but they are clearer in Schönberg."

"This," I commented dryly, "is hardly the opinion held by our musicians. On the whole they find Schönberg confusing and certainly not like Bach."

"What troubles your musicians," Mr. Ch replied, "is probably the unfamiliar harmony in Schönberg. To me, untrained to hear harmony, the differences between the two are not baffling for they are non-existent. In the music of both I generally find a melody for each part."

The cross-rhythms in a piece by Chopin left him far from bewildered, on the contrary, quite pleased, for this independence of rhythm helped to clarify the melody and was, again, in this sense, reminiscent of his native art.

"Most of your music," said he, "has little rhythmic development. The notes are apt to be played at the same time and the pulse generally remains the same." To answer his criticism I showed him a copy of Stravinsky's *Sacre*, but he remarked: "This is so minute an improvement as to be hardly noticeable. The

metre changes, but for all the parts at the same time. Were the melodies truly independent, each would have a different metre that would change at separate times.

"In our musical system, the whole rhythmical conception is radically different. A rhythmical unit consists of an *accelerando* up to a certain point, followed by a similarly graduated *ritardando*. This is immediately succeeded by other rhythmical units varying in speed yet bound, even in their variety, by some controlling relation.



Comment on our scales came at the third meeting.

"They are both too simple and too complex. We use a foundation of five tones, like your pentatonic scale; but in addition we divide the octave into forty-eight equal steps. These finer shades are either resolved to one of the five main tones or are approached by a slide away from one of them. Such slides or portamentos, regarded as out of taste in your music, are fundamental in ours. They appear in our speech, we find them in the sounds of nature, the wind and the sea, and we consider them great assets to our music."

"But with forty-eight tones to the octave, how can you regard our paltry twelve as too many?"

Mr. Ch: "Because where all twelve tones are used independently, as in the music of Schönberg, the number of *important* ones is too large. Even seven tones, as in your older scales, are almost excessive."

"What do you think of the proposal to use a quarter-tone scale embracing twenty-four tones to the octave?"

Mr. Ch: "Would not a vast confusion be the result? Unless some of them were to be recognized as more important than the others, and the lesser resolved to the important ones."

"What is the source of the melodies used in Chinese music?" I asked on another occasion, the object of inquiry having shifted from West to East.

Mr. Ch: "Following the classical tradition we do not use melodies by modern composers, except for popular music. The

melodies, and there are a great many, are all centuries old. Each may last an hour or more. The convention of playing several at once and thus hearing a number simultaneously at a concert is the simple outcome of an effort to save time. Musical composition in China today consists of bringing traditional melodies together in conformity with known rules for combination."

"Then is any single combination of such melodies written down and used again?"

Mr. Ch: "Yes indeed, but only by the conductor of a particular orchestra for whose special combination of instruments he has written the arrangement. Our music, by the way, is inscribed in special Chinese characters."

"Who are these composer-conductors?"

Mr. Ch: "Invariably the players of the woodblock, regarded by us as an instrument of the first importance. When the woodblock player raises his hands to play, the orchestra can follow his beat. The woodblock is in constant use while the other percussion instruments, though also important, often merely mark the entrance of a new section in the musical form or, in the case of opera, the arrival of an important character."



When I was taken by Mr. Ch (dressed for this occasion in a sober American business suit) to the Mandarin Opera Company in Chinatown, the management, at his request, substituted for the usual hybrid, popular repertoire, an ancient classical work to delight our ears. The heroine having been murdered in the opening scene, operatic complications immediately developed; they lasted six hours. For three of these, to my great bewilderment, I was unable to relate the music to the dramatic developments.

"That," explained Mr. Ch, "is because you do not comprehend the anticipatory nature of the music. When there is peace on the stage, the orchestra prepares for the war which is to follow. When war comes, the orchestra heralds the peace which will

ensue. Thus jolts to the emotions are minimized and all changes are announced in advance."

And by accustoming myself to this reversal of the usual routine, I eventually learned how not to be surprised, in the Chinese manner, and even to recognize by the standardized love, joy, hate and war melodies to what action I should adjust my expectations.



These are the scant records of several encounters with the erudite, cultivated and skeptical scholar from Peking. Ostensibly they were conducted for the purpose of his enlightenment as to the mysteries of Occidental music. Whether other Chinese musicians would have been in agreement with Mr. Ch, I cannot say. My general impression is that he returned to the City of the Mandarins mentally aware of our art, but as cold and remote as when he came to San Francisco. For myself I realized that it would be folly to attempt a judgment on Chinese music, our own laws being no guide thereto. But the visit of this fixed academician of the Orient served to provide me with a refreshing if distant glimpse of other planetary orbits of music than our own.