George Crumb

"Music: Does it Have a Future?"

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The question "What will the music of the future be like?" frequently arises in discussions with composers and with audiences. I suspect that some ulterior meaning is usually implied—either a sense of doubt that music will ever again be as vigorous and impressive as it was in some past "golden age," or conversely, the hope that the undeniably frenetic activity of the present presages some future "golden age," as glorious and as rich in achievement as any of the past! Even the most timid attempt at prophecy must be based on a close appraisal of earlier developments and present trends. The future will be the child of the past and the present, even if a rebellious child.

The retrospective glance is a relatively easy gesture for us to make. If we look at music history closely, it is not difficult to isolate certain elements of great potency which were to nourish the art of music for decades, if not centuries. The dynamic concept of sonata-structure is a striking example of an idea that bewitched composers for two centuries, at least through Béla Bartók. Sonata-structure was, of course, intimately connected with the evolution of functional tonality, and tonality itself, independently, represents another germinal concept of great potency.

What, then, are the significant and characteristic tendencies and impulses in contemporary music which might conceivably project into the future? I am certain that most composers today would consider today's music to be rich, not to say confusing, in its enormous diversity of styles, technical procedures, and systems of esthetics. Perhaps an attempt to isolate the unique aspects of our music will give us some perspective on our future prospects.

One very important aspect of our contemporary musical culture—some might say the supremely important aspect—is its extension in the historical and geographical senses to a degree unknown in the past. To consider firstly the extension through time: in a real sense, virtually all music history and literature is now at our fingertips through both live performances and excellent recordings, whereas earlier composers knew the musics of only one or two generations before their own time. The consequences of this enlarged awareness of our own heritage are readily evident in many of our recent composers. For example, the influence of medieval music on the British composer Peter Maxwell Davies comes to mind. For many such composers, the sound of medieval music—at times harsh and raw, at times fragile and hauntingly sweet—would more closely approximate the contemporary ideal than would, say, the sound of a Brahms or of a Richard Strauss. I have observed, too, that the people of the many countries that I have visited are showing an ever increasing interest in the classical and traditional music of their own cultures. Perhaps we have come to think of ourselves as philosophically contemporaneous with all earlier cultures. And it is probable that today there are more people who see culture evolving spirally rather than linearly. Within the concentric circles of the spiral, the points of contact and the points of departure in music can be more readily found.

The geographical extension means, of course, that the total musical culture of Planet Earth is "coming together," as it were. An American or European composer, for example, now has access to the music of various Asian, African, and South American cultures.
Numerous recordings of non-Western music are readily available, and live performances by touring groups can be heard even in our smaller cities. Such influences would, of course, be felt on different levels: only a few Western composers would have a sophisticated technical knowledge of the Indian Raga, for example; but, in general, the sounds, textures, and gestures of this music would be well known. This awareness of music in its largest sense—as a world-wide phenomenon—will inevitably have enormous consequences for the music of the future.

Unquestionably, our contemporary world of music is far richer, in a sense, than earlier periods, due to the historical and geographical extensions of culture to which I have referred. As a standard for comparison, it is revealing to take a representative European composer of the nineteenth century and define his “cultural horizons.” I think a good choice is the French composer Hector Berlioz, since his music was regarded as avant-garde by his contemporaries. If we first consider the historical dimension, I think we should have to agree that Berlioz’s contact with any music written before the Viennese Classical period was minimal, although Beethoven was avowedly a very powerful influence on his development. I doubt that Berlioz had any real understanding of Baroque style or technique, judging from the curiously inept handling of the fugato style in several of his works. Berlioz spoke of Palestrina in disparaging terms. In regard to his contact with non-Western music, we know that he visited London in 1851 in connection with the Great Exhibition held there. While in London, Berlioz heard some Chinese and Indian music in authentic performance, and this most progressive and modernistic composer of the time could make no sense at all of what he heard. His description of Chinese music:

I shall not attempt to describe these wildcat howls, these death-rattles, these turkey chuckings, in the midst of which, despite my closest attention, I was able to make out only four distinct notes.¹

His description of Indian music is even less flattering!

Perhaps the true cross-fertilization process between musical cultures did not begin until after World War II, although one can trace the first premonitions in Mussorgsky and especially in Debussy toward the end of the nineteenth century. This represented a relatively high degree of sophistication, indeed, when compared with Mozart and Beethoven, for whom exotic music meant the cymbal and bass drum borrowed from the Turkish Janissary music!

Apart from these broader cultural influences which contribute to the shaping of our contemporary musical psyche, we also have to take into account the rather bewildering legacy of the earlier twentieth-century composers in the matter of compositional technique and procedure. Although we must be impressed by the enormous accretion of new elements of vocabulary in the areas of pitch, rhythm, timbre, and so forth, I sense at the same time the loss of a majestic unifying principle in much of our recent music. Not only is the question of tonality still unresolved but we have not yet evolved anything comparable to the sure instinct for form which occurs routinely in the best traditional music. Instead, each new work seems to require a special solution, valid only in terms of itself.

There is, to be sure, a sense of adventure and challenge in articulating our conceptions, despite the fact that we can take so little for granted; and perhaps we tend to underestimate the struggle-element in the case of the earlier composers. Nonetheless, I sense that it will be the task of the future to somehow synthesize the sheer diversity of our present resources into a more organic and well-ordered procedure.

Perhaps we might now review some of the specific technical accoutrements of our present music and speculate on their potential for future development. The advent of electronically synthesized sound after World War II has unquestionably had enormous influence on music in general. Although I have never been directly involved in electronic music, I am keenly aware that our sense for sound-characteristics, articulation, texture, and dynamics has been radically revised and very much affects the way in which we write for instruments. And since I have always been interested in the extension of the possibilities of instrumental idiom, I can only regard the influence of electronics as beneficial. I recently participated in a discussion with Mario Davidovsky, who, in my opinion, is the most elegant of all the electronic composers whose music I know. Davidovsky’s view is that the early electronic composers had a truly messianic feeling concerning the promise of this new medium. In those euphoric days of intense experimentation, some composers felt that electronic music, because of its seemingly unlimited possibilities, would eventually replace conventional music. Davidovsky now regards the medium simply as a unique and important language at the disposal of any composer who wants to make use of it, and as a valuable teaching tool for the ear. In any case, it is obvious that the electronic medium in itself solves none of the composer’s major problems, which have to do with creating a viable style, inventing distinguished thematic material, and articulating form.

The development of new instrumental and vocal idioms has been one of the remarkable phenomena of recent music. There undoubtedly have been many contributing factors: the influence of folk instrument techniques; the influence of jazz, and, later, rock techniques; the liberation of percussion instruments (a development for which Bartók is especially important); and, finally, the advent of an ever-increasing number of young instrumentalists and singers who specialize in the performance of contemporary music, and who themselves are interested in probing the idiomatic resources of their instruments. The development of idiom, of course, has been an ongoing process over the centuries; in fact, it is incumbent upon each age to “reinvent” instruments as styles and modes of expression change.

An example of this process can be seen in the evolution of the piano idiom. In the hands of Beethoven the expressive range of the instrument was progressively enlarged. The gradual expansion of the piano in terms of range, sustaining power, and brilliance and the introduction of the una corda pedal effect were fully exploited in the enormous body of literature which Beethoven conceived for the instrument. It must have seemed to many of Beethoven’s contemporaries that nothing more remained to be done. And yet, shortly after Beethoven’s death in 1827, Chopin published the Etudes, Opus 10. This astonishing new style, based essentially on the simple device of
allowing widely spaced figuration to continue vibrating by means of the depressed damper pedal, opened up a whole new approach to the instrument. Important new breakthroughs in piano idioms were then achieved by Debussy around the turn of the century and by Bartók a few years later. And in our own day, the concept of piano idioms has been enormously enlarged once again by the technique of producing sound through direct contact with the strings. I think it can truly be said that the potential resources of instruments can never be exhausted: the next generation will always find new ways!

The revolutionary treatment of vocal idioms in the new music has been an interesting development. The traditional bel canto ideal has been much enlarged by the influence of popular styles of singing and also by non-Western types of vocal timbre. In conjunction with this development, the traditional voice-piano medium seems to have given way to a new genre, consisting of voice and a varied instrumental chamber ensemble. A curious phenomenon is that the soprano voice type seems to clearly dominate; the other voice types have been more or less neglected by recent composers, and as a consequence, I suppose, we seem to have very few excellent singers, other than sopranos, who specialize in the new music. Other significant tendencies in the area of vocal composition are the relative neglect of the choral medium and the failure, thus far, to create a new type of large-scale music-theater. In respect to opera, it strikes me that Alban Berg really tied together all the strands of the tradition in his Wozzeck and LuLu, and I feel that nothing of comparable significance has been done since. In any case, the task of finding fresh approaches to opera and to choral music will be inherited by the future.

Perhaps all of the most basic elements of music, rhythm most directly affects our central nervous system. Although in our analysis of music we have inherited a definite bias in favor of pitch, rather than rhythm, as being primary, I suspect that we are simply unable to cope with rhythmic phenomena in verbal terms. It might be argued that the largest aspect of rhythm is pulse, and it is interesting to observe that, whereas the nineteenth century tended to rank composers on the quality of their slow movements—since it was assumed that slow music was more difficult to write—the situation at the present time has been completely reversed. The problem now seems to be the composition of convincing fast music, or more exactly, how to give our music a sense of propulsion without clinging too slavishly to past procedures, for example the Bartókian type of kinetic rhythm. Complexity in itself, of course, will not provide rhythmic thrust; and it is true that harmonic rhythm has to operate in conjunction with actual rhythm in order to effect a sense of propulsion.

Three composers—two traditional and one contemporary—especially interest me with regard to their imaginative handling of rhythm and might possibly have some bearing on our current approach to rhythmic structure. The first is Beethoven, whose sense of rhythmic control was absolutely uncanny. Of all composers, he was the master of the widest possible range of tempos, from prestissimo to molto adagio. The Beethoven adagio, particularly of the third style period, offers a format which might be further explored in contemporary terms: within the context of an extremely slow pulse, a sense of much faster movement is achieved by tiny subdivisions of the beat. Such a device offers contrast and yet gives a sense of organic unity. Another composer whose rhythmic sensitivity impresses me is Chopin. I am thinking primarily of certain of the nocturnes, in which he achieves a sense of “suspended time” (as in much new music), but also provides a feeling of growth and progression through time. And lastly, I would mention Messiaen with regard to his use of the “additive rhythmic principle,” which, in his Technique of My Musical Language, he associates with Hindu music. I feel that this principle could become increasingly important in the further development of our rhythmic language.

When we come to a discussion of the role of pitch in new music, we enter an arena of widely conflicting opinions. In general, I feel that the more rationalistic approaches to pitch-organization, including specifically serial technique, have given way, largely, to a more intuitive approach. There seems to be a growing feeling that we must somehow evolve a new kind of tonality. Probably the ideal solution, anticipated, it seems to me, by Bartók, is to combine the possibilities of our chromatic language—which is so rich and expressive in its own right—with a sense of strong tonal focus.

An interesting practice in music since the atonal period of the Viennese composers has been the widespread use of a few tiny pitch cells. One such cell, which pervades the music of Anton Webern and Bartók, is the combined major-minor third: C–E–E-flat; another such universally used cell is the perfect fourth flanked by tritones: C–F-sharp–B–F; another is the chromatic cluster: C–C-sharp–D. These three cells, in various permutations, together with a few other basic types, are astonishingly prevalent in contemporary music of whatever style.

There has been considerable experimentation in the field of microtones in recent years, but to Western ears at least, a structural use of microtones is frustratingly difficult to hear. Microtones seem to be most frequently used in a coloristic manner, for example in “bending” pitches. It would be very difficult to predict what role any microtonal system might play in a work composed in the twentieth century, but since music must somehow relate to our central nervous system, which has evolved over countless eons, a widespread use would seem problematical.

I have already alluded to the problem of form in new music, arising primarily from the erosion of so many traditional forms which depended on functional tonality. Of course the simpler, more primitive forms remain to us, and the variation principle is always available. Two basic types of form, both of which were known to earlier music, seem to have a peculiar attraction for recent composers. These two types are diametric opposites. One is the “non-repetitive” principle, which implies a progression along a straight line without ever referring back to itself. The other could be called the “minimal” type, which usually consists of a repetition ad infinitum of one idea, whether it be a rhythmic motif, a chord, or a melodic succession of pitches. Curiously, both types are represented in Arnold Schoenberg’s music: the “non-repetitive” in several works, and the “minimal” in the “Sommernacht an einem See (Farben)” from the Five Pieces for Orchestra. Of course, both types could more correctly be termed formal procedures rather than convention-
ally articulated formal structures like the sonata-structure or the rondò-structure. In any case, these aforementioned two types do not easily lend themselves to large-scale structure; their overextension would most likely produce fatigue and monotony. And so, perhaps we must again reevaluate the more traditional principle of repetition-with-contrast, which served the earlier composers so well.

Perhaps many of the perplexing problems of the new music could be put into a new light if we were to reintroduce the ancient idea of music being a reflection of nature. Although technical discussions are interesting to composers, I suspect that the truly magical and spiritual powers of music arise from deeper levels of our psyche. I am certain that every composer, from his formative years as a child, has acquired a “natural acoustic” which remains in his ear for life. The fact that I was born and grew up in an Appalachian river valley meant that my ear was attuned to a peculiar echoing acoustic; I feel that this acoustic was “structured into” my hearing, so to speak, and thus became the basic acoustic of my music. I should imagine that the ocean shore or endless plains would produce an altogether different “inherited” acoustic. In a broader sense, the rhythms of nature, large and small—the sounds of wind and water, the sounds of birds and insects—must inevitably find their analogues in music. After all, the singing of the humpback whale is already a highly developed “artistic” product: one hears phrase-structure, climax and anticlimax, and even a sense of large-scale musical form!

I am optimistic about the future of music. I frequently hear our present period described as uncertain, confused, chaotic. The two decades from 1950 to 1970 have been described as “the rise and fall of the musical avant-garde,” the implication being that nothing at all worthwhile was accomplished during those years. I have even heard the extremely pessimistic idea expressed by some composers that “Comedia finita est”—all possible combinations have by now been exhausted and music has finally reached a dead end. My own feeling is that music can never cease evolving; it will continually reinvent the world in its own terms. Perhaps two million years ago the creatures of a planet in some remote galaxy faced a musical crisis similar to that which we earthly composers face today. Is it possible that those creatures have existed for two million years without new music? I doubt it.


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