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Purloining Style, Faking Creativity

ANYONE who listens to new music these days will be familiar with the experience of déjà entendu evoked by the works of many composers favored by our musical institutions. The name in the program may be that of a contemporary; there may even be a live person sitting in the audience. But the piece turns out to be shamelessly reminiscent of the style of someone long dead, and the individual among us — now perhaps taking a bow onstage — is yet another ghostwriter on behalf of the past.

Most often the style evoked will be one formed in the first third of the century, with Shostakovich and Prokofiev particularly common models, followed by Bartok and Ravel. Why these? The reason is not hard to discern. Such composers still sound modern, but not too modern. They are also not hard to imitate, at least superficially. If today's pasticheurs were to try to copy, say, Schubert, they might find the task more troublesome, and their game would be exposed.

The result could also be a lot more interesting. A creative imagining of what Schubert might have composed had he lived into old age would be a fascinating project. Perhaps someone could be persuaded to write his Symphony No. 25 in E flat minor, an hour-long movement, ending with an adagio based on a sublime viola melody. Or there might be the possibility of his opera on "As You Like It."

Other composers could devote themselves to works that

Does it sound like Shostakovich?

Yes, but as if mouthed by a ventriloquist's dummy.

Once existed but have been lost, as Alexander Goehr did recently with Monteverdi's opera "Arianna." Mozart's melodrama "Semiramide," awaits its reinventor, as does Bach's "St. Luke Passion." There are even whole repertories waiting to be brought back to life, like that of English choral music at the end of the 19th century.

To venture into any of these areas would be to make it clear that one was creating a deliberate fake — not that there need be any opprobrium attached to that activity. Fakes, if made with sufficient skill and a satisfactory blend of seriousness and humor, can be excellent things to have around, as the example of the pseudo-"Arianna" well shows. And if the practice of faking needs to be dignified with a classic example, Berlioz's "Enfance du Christ" exists for that purpose. (Now could be the time, also, to explore historical fakes of a less august nature, like "Mozart's 12th Mass," once widely sung and widely loved.)

The many who fake Shostakovich or Ravel, however, do so covertly. Their aim, they imply, is not to create more Shostakovich symphonies or Ravel songs but to write their own. Moreover, in a sleight-of-hand maneuver that projects faking as genuine fresh creativity, they declare that the language of Shostakovich or Ravel is the only language available to them in which they can express themselves.

Sadly, things do not work that way. Musical languages are not like English and Spanish: languages that many people can use in different, personal ways. In the work of a great composer, a single measure — often a single chord, sometimes even a single note — can be distinctive, as if the very words of the language were being newly created. If other composers try to speak with those words, what results can only be a plagiarism. Shostakovich's language, so poignant when spoken by him, becomes the mouthing of a ventriloquist's dummy.

The intensity of Shostakovich's style must be one reason for its current appeal to composers, but there is also a more ideological issue at stake. The works of Shostakovich and other composers of roughly his generation remind one that tonality didn't abruptly die when Schoenberg, in 1908, began writing atonal music. By another cunning maneuver, Shostakovich and the rest can be presented as continuing a line from which Schoenberg broke away. And we, too, in the 1990's (so the theory goes), can continue the line by taking it up from them.

HISTORY'S web, though, is much more tangled. No composer of the 20th century was more acutely, heavily, painfully aware of his debts and obligations to tradition than Schoenberg. And no composer was more squarely iconoclastic than Shostakovich. Quite apart from anything else, to offer Shostakovich as an example of steady conservatism is to misremember a complex mind and a difficult, complex career.

If, since his death in 1975, Shostakovich's music has come to seem more germane to the needs and thinking of composers, it must be partly because they, too, are having to deal with manifold pressures and uncertainties — in a safer political climate, to be sure — and partly because, in one of the unpredictable and incomprehensible sea changes of history, tonality has again become unavoidable.

In the current music even of such deeply self-aware radicals as Milton Babbitt and Pierre Boulez, the 12 notes are no longer equal (if indeed they ever really were). Neither composer is exactly writing in C major, but insisted-upon notes or groups of notes have taken a greater significance in their music. At the same time, John Adams and Gyorgy Ligeti have begun exploring new scales, as have the great many composers now working with alternative kinds of tuning.

The world is humming with tonality, and there is no stopping it. But equally, there is no going back. At least, there is no going back in the name of musical or expressive truth.