

# Strauss and the Electronic Future

By GLENN GOULD

ONE of the certain effects of the electronic age is that it will forever change the values that we attach to art. In fact, the vocabulary of esthetic criteria that has been developed since the Renaissance is mostly concerned with terms that are proving to have little validity for the examination of electronic culture. I refer to such terms as "imitation," "invention," and above all "originality," which in recent times have implicitly conveyed varying degrees of approval or censure, in accordance with the peculiarly distorted sense of historical progression that our age has accepted, but which are no longer capable of conveying the precise analytical concepts that they once represented.

Electronic transmission has already inspired a new concept of multiple-authorship responsibility in which the specific functions of the composer, the performer, and indeed the consumer, overlap. We need only think for a moment of the manner in which the formerly separate roles of composer and performer are now automatically combined in electronic tape construction or, to give an example more topical than potential, the way in which the home listener is now able to exercise limited technical and, for that matter, critical judgments, courtesy of the modestly resourceful controls of his hifi. It will not, it seems to me, be very much longer before a more self-assertive streak is detected in the listener's participation, before, to give but one example, a "do-it-yourself" tape editing is the prerogative of every reasonably conscientious consumer of recorded music (the *Hausmusik* activity of the future perhaps!). And I would be most surprised if the consumer involvement were to terminate at that level. In fact, implicit in electronic culture is an acceptance of the idea of multi-level participation in the creative process.

If we think for a moment about the way in which our concept of history has influenced our use of such words as "originality," some conventional judg-

ments about artistic figures are placed in a very curious light indeed. For instance, we are forever being told that although Bach was a great man he was decidedly retrogressive in his own musical tastes—the implication being that had he been a little less of a genius, his remoteness from contemporary fashion would have quite done in his inspiration. Mendelssohn, after some violent fluctuations of the approval meter, is pretty much out of favor once again, not due to any lack of musical ability but largely for the reason that he was less innovation-prone than some of his colleagues, that his music is therefore less "original" and, one somehow is left to assume, less valuable. As a matter of fact, Mendelssohn provides a rather interesting case because the question of identification in our historical concept is quite often left to the observation of what you might call the quirk-quotient, the discovery at reasonably frequent intervals of some tell-tale response to a particular constructive problem for which a certain composer becomes noted. For instance, César Franck becomes noted for verbatim sequential transpositions: he thereby becomes easier to identify and the satisfaction of confirming the identification holds, for the uniquely illogical processes of the Western mind, the implication of unity within the particular work. But Mendelssohn, on the other hand, is inclined to spurn positive identity-factors of this kind and to draw instead upon what one could call negative factors. His work is more notable for those situations that he prefers to avoid than for the stylistic gestures that he attempts to indulge, and this is what infects his music with such a moving, puritanical quality. Since, however, the negative considerations of unity are out of fashion at the moment, so, unfortunately, is he.

Most of these ideas about the validity or lack of validity in a particular artistic procedure stem from an idea of history that has encouraged us to conceive of historical action in terms of a series of climaxes and to determine the virtues of artists according to the manner in which they participated in, or better still anticipated, the nearest climax. We tend to visualize a greatly exaggerated concept of historical transformation and, for reasons that seem expedient in helping us make history approachable and teachable (in order to make history captive is perhaps closer to the point), we tend to prefer antithet-

ical descriptions of historical point and denial, and to these we assign descriptions, terms that are consequently infected with all sorts of extraneous notions about progress and retrogression.

The absurdity of these assumptions about progressivism could perhaps be illustrated if I were to suggest the various judgments that might be applied to the same artistic experiment if it happened to be labeled in a variety of ways. Let's assume that someone were to improvise at the piano a sonata in the style of Haydn and to pass it off, at first, as a genuine work of that composer. The value that the unsuspecting listener would assign to this opus (let's assume it was brilliantly done and most admirably Haydnesque) would very much depend upon the degree of chicanery of which the improviser was capable. So long as he was able to convince the audience that this work was indeed that of Haydn it would be accorded a value commensurate with Haydn's reputation.

But now let us imagine that the improviser decided to inform the listener that this was not in fact a work of Haydn, though it very much resembled Haydn, but was in fact a work by Mendelssohn. The reaction to this bit of news would run something along the lines of—"Well, a pleasant trifle—obviously old-fashioned but certainly shows a good command of an earlier style"—in other words, bottom-drawer Mendelssohn.

But one last examination of this hypothetical piece: let us assume that instead of attributing it to Haydn or to any later composer, the improviser were to insist that it was a long-forgotten and newly discovered work of none other than Antonio Vivaldi, a composer who was by seventy-five years Haydn's senior. I venture to say that, with that condition in mind, this work would be greeted as one of the true revelations of musical history—a work that would be accepted as proof of the farsightedness of this great master, who managed in this one incredible leap to bridge the years that separate the Italian baroque from the Austrian rococo, and our poor piece would be deemed worthy of the most august programs. In other words, the determination of most of our esthetic criteria, despite all our proud claims about the integrity of artistic judgment, derives from nothing remotely like an "art-for-art's-sake" approach. What they really derive from is what we could only call an "art-for-what-its-society-was-once-like" sake.

When you begin to examine terms like "originality" with reference to those constructive situations to which they do in fact analytically apply, the nature of the description that they provide tends to reduce the imitation-

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Recently, the brilliant Canadian musician, Glenn Gould has devoted less time to concertizing, more to writing, composing, and recording. Devotion to Strauss has been manifest in many ways, with a first performance of his variations on a motive from *Metamorphosen* scheduled for mid-summer.

invention ratio in a work of art quite properly to a simple matter of statistic. Within this statistic no work of art is ever genuinely "original"—if it were, it would in fact be unrecognizable. All art is really variation upon some other art, and the more we divorce the application of terms like "originality" from those analytical observations to which they can profitably apply, the more uncertain is the ground upon which we erect our evaluations of art.

NO artist of recent times has suffered more from the strange presumptions of this artistic-chronological parallel than has Richard Strauss. Very few of his critics are honestly able to deny that he was one of the consummate masters of the musical craft, but nevertheless he has become a thoroughly unfashionable and greatly misunderstood artist. The case against Strauss rests usually on the argument that:

- a) He drew no artistic sustenance from the inspiration of twentieth century life;
- b) His later works were in a somewhat less chromatic and hence "advanced" style than in fact were his early works; and
- c) He simply lived too long and, as a composer, "dried up."

It is not uncommon to find analyses of his work that even attempt to identify the specific instant beyond which he is supposed to have run counter to the times. In recent years we have often been told that the great and truly inspired works of Strauss were all written prior to the first World War, and that thereafter the pressures of his own eminence, the unchallenged facility with which he wrote, the immediate access to the means of production that were at his disposal, that all of these took their toll, and that the post-World War I works are but a pallid reflection of his earlier achievements. One of the most startling verdicts of this kind comes not from a present-day writer aiming to put this doddering reactionary in his place, but from a 1920 essay by the American critic Paul Rosenfeld, who published a profile of the composer that states:

"Strauss was never the fine, the perfect artist. Even in the first flair of youth, even at the time when he was the meteoric, dazzling figure flaunting over all the bald pates of the universe the standard of the musical future, it was apparent that there were serious flaws in his spirit . . . in those days Strauss was unmistakably the genius, the original and biting expressive musician and one forgave his shortcomings because of the radiance of his figure, or remained only half conscious of them . . . today it is difficult to realize that

Richard Strauss ever inspired such high hopes, that there was a time when he made Nietzsche's 'mad dream of a modern music,' appear realizable and that for a while the nimbus of Dionysius burned around his figure."

Rosenfeld goes on to pinpoint the moment at which Strauss, in his view, deserts the Nietzschean orbit. It happened, he seems to feel, with *Rosenkavalier* and *Ariadne*, of which he says, "he [Strauss] has become increasingly facile and unoriginal, has taken to quoting unblushingly Mendelssohn, Tchaikovsky, Wagner, himself even . . . . Something in him has bent and been fouled."

Somewhat later in his portrait of Strauss, Rosenfeld drops the rather significant comment that he finds Strauss at his best when at his most brutal and that he notes a disturbing tendency in all his works (*Elektra* included!) to a certain "lascivious prettiness." It is here I think that, right or wrong, he reveals the bias of his particular argument against Strauss, because this comment is quite representative of that large body of opinion that holds that the early works, *Macbeth* through *Elektra*, let us say, hold quality in direct proportion to their motific muscularity, to the growth of that intense and angularly declamatory music which particularly marks the transition from the tone-poems to the earlier operas. To put it another way, the definitions of history are satisfied by the degree to which Strauss's earlier works progress in complexity, dissonance ratio, and rhythmic sophistication. But when the musical embodiment of that "lascivious prettiness" becomes dominant and the post-*Rosenkavalier* works reveal an increasing preoccupation with the retention of tonal formulae, supplemental as opposed to organic dissonance and rhythmic sobriety, Strauss is accused of deserting the historical movement in which it was assumed he had long coveted a niche.

The deficiencies of this argument arise from the fact that its proponents simply cannot tolerate the idea that the participation in a certain historical movement does not necessarily impose upon

the participant the duty to accept the logical consequences of that movement. One of the irresistibly lovable facts about most human beings is that they are very seldom willing to accept the consequences of their own thinking. The fact that Strauss deserts the general movement of German expressionism (presumably in Rosenfeld's terms the embodiment of "Nietzsche's modernism") should not be more disturbing than the fact that that unquestioned innovator Arnold Schönberg found it extremely difficult in his later years to fulfill the rhythmic extenuations of his own motific theories. The fact is that above and beyond the questions of age and endurance, art is not created by rational animals and in the long run is better for not being so created.

Through all of Strauss's works there runs one prevalent ambition, the desire to find new ways in which the vocabulary of key-signature tonality can be augmented without at the same time being allowed to deteriorate into a state of chromatic immobility. When you examine the condition of the tonal language at the time when Strauss was a young man, and then summon the image of that tonality as it existed in his middle period (*Bourgeois Gentleman*), let us say, or in his late years (*Capriccio*) the contrast is striking. He inherited, after all, the diffuse improvisatory chromaticism of Wagner, the fascinating but never quite workable sequential-variation technique of Bruckner, and yet Strauss's work, while being involved with just as high a ratio of non-diatonic harmonic material as was that of Bruckner or Wagner, does not begin to approach that condition of satiety through which their structures more than occasionally became top-heavy. What Strauss did was to provide a method by which the chromatic language of late-Romantic tonality could be erected upon a more stable keel than that which Bruckner or Wagner laid.

The harmonic sense that enabled Strauss to do this was absolutely unique within the annals of tonality. From his earliest works, teenage amusements like the Violin Sonata or the Wind Serenade, it is immediately apparent that whatever else this composer lacks or possesses, no surer ear for the centrifugal implications of the tonal cadence ever existed. The achievement of Strauss's harmonic development becomes really significant when you consider that he assimilated the vocabulary of Wagnerian chromaticism, put it to work within the extraordinary vertical organization that he developed, and made it supplement the particular expressive purposes that belonged to Strauss alone. In doing this, he developed an infallible instinct for the har-

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# Kahn, Morgan, and "Salome"



—Pach Bros.

Otto H. Kahn in 1910.

GIVEN sufficient patience, almost any historical sepculation may, by documentary evidence, eventually be proven true or untrue. In the case of the banishment of Strauss's *Salome* from the Metropolitan Opera more than fifty years ago (after a single public performance on January 22, 1907), it was as much as daring permitted for the press of the time to trace the objection to "the family of one of the most influential and powerful of the box-holders." In the speculative, off-the-record, word of mouth, this could be translated as J. P. Morgan.

In this previously unpublished letter to Strauss from the late Otto H. Kahn (written after the latter had taken over larger responsibilities in the running of the company at the Metropolitan in 1908), the speculation is proven unmistakably sound. As well as rejecting Morgan's offer to pay the composer the royalties for which they were liable over a period of years, the Kahn-led group did everything possible to secure the premiere of *Elektra* for the Metropolitan. The records show, however, that it was first performed at the rival Manhattan Opera (Hammerstein's theater) on February 1, 1910. It was not until December 9, 1913, that another Strauss opera was done at the Metropolitan, when *Der Rosenkavalier* had its American premiere. *Salome* had to wait until January, 1933.

*William and Pine Streets,*

KUHN, LOEB & CO.

*New York, Den 29. Mai, 1908*

Persönlich.

Sehr geehrter Herr Doctor:-

Many thanks for your friendly lines of the 16th, from which I am most happy to learn that you have regained your health completely.

Your frank comments are most appreciated. I can understand completely your "lust for revenge" against those responsible for the unfortunate *Salome* episode in New York. It is also quite understandable that you should regard "Orestes" Hammerstein as a ready tool for atonement; but permit me to point out that you are looking for Clytemnestra and her paramour in the wrong place.

The responsibility for the *Salome* veto must be shared by the clumsiness of Conried and the honestly-felt, but, in this case, totally inappropriate religiosity of Morgan. Conried tactlessly called the dress rehearsal for Sunday at eleven—the hour for church services—and invited "tout New York," thus attracting the attention and anger of churchmen, who stirred Morgan into action. Neither Morgan nor Conried have the slightest thing to do with the present Metropolitan Opera Company. As you know, Conried is no longer in our service. As for Morgan, I should like to explain that there are two Metropolitan Opera companies: the Metropolitan *Real Estate Company*, which owns the house, and the Metropolitan *Opera Company*, which as of the first of May, has rented it for a number of years and maintains independent rights. Mr. Morgan is connected only with the first-named company, and does not have the slightest interest in management or the results of managerial activities. The Metropolitan Opera Company, that is, the producing company, of which I am the chairman, is solely and totally responsible for the administration and its artistic and financial results. Whether these are good or bad can be neither beneficial nor detrimental to Mr. Morgan and his company. However, our own company, the Metropolitan Opera, is made up predominantly of "rare birds" [white crows], who, together with myself, have campaigned most energetically for *Salome*. The only black—or at least gray—crow among us was James Speyer, who is no longer connected with the company.

You ask who is in charge here. Gatti-Casazza, an excellent man who admires you very much, is General Manager. Dippel is Administrative Director. I am Chairman of the Board of Directors.

Whether or not we produce *Salome*, against which the Metropolitan Real Estate Company protested to our predecessor, the Conried-Metropolitan Opera Company (whose legal responsibilities have been taken over by our new organization), whether or not we produce *Elektra*, is of absolutely no concern to the wallet or emotions of Mr. Morgan and his company. Their protest, however, remains effective until, sooner or later, your hoped-for and inevitable retraction is forthcoming. Ergo, since you aim your just wrath at us, you affect Mr. Morgan not at all; instead you harm *us* first of all, and second, yourself, financially at least (for if you make punitive conditions for us but not for Hammerstein, the unavoidable result will be that your works will be done only by Hammerstein and not in both houses—not to mention the fact that our troupe tours a great portion of the country, while Hammerstein plays only in New York and Philadelphia). The only one who can profit is "Orestes" Hammerstein, the "tertius gaudens duobus litigantibus."

So, you see the guilty ones are not in our house. You are on the wrong track, and I hope most sincerely that you will call a halt so that the "horrible being of the night" will no longer haunt our guiltless steps.

I was very happy to hear of the tremendous success of the Berlin Philharmonic under your direction. I should very much like to have the opportunity sometime to admire you as a concert conductor; perhaps that pleasure awaits me when I visit Europe next year. It is a shame that you are not coming here, but it is not surprising that you have no desire to do so.

Mit besten Grüssen,

Ihr aufrichtig ergebener,

*Viel Glück im neuen Hause  
und meine ergebensten Empfehlungen  
an Ihre Frau Gemalin*