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THE EAST IN THE WEST

John Cage

In Western music at the present time, certain practices are similar to or characteristic of Oriental classical music, specifically, that of Hindustan. I should like to report on them and advance a possible explanation for the tendency they represent towards a fusion of cultures.

Not relevant to my point are the frank transcriptions of Eastern music, like those, for instance, of the Balinese by Colin McPhee. Faithful to the original, they signify a love of the Orient as it is, rather than a desire to bring elements of it together with those of the Occident to create a new music. Nor am I concerned with music unfaithful to the Oriental original (e. g., Mozart's Rondo alla Turca or anyone's Orientele), the motivation of which is a taste for the exotic.

The theory of Schoenbergian music, as distinguished from its sound, does represent an action of the type which concerns us. The use of a different twelve-tone row for each composition is similar to the Hindu use of a special raga, or scale, for particular improvisations. The enormous number of ragas which exist is perhaps equalled by the number of possible variations of the order of the twelve tones in a row. This great variety of available "scales" obviously differs from the conventional Western adherence to only two. Each twelve-tone row differs from a major or minor scale in not proceeding in a straight pitch line (from low to high) but, instead, in what may be called a curve; whether a tone in the row is lower or higher than those which precede and follow is not a matter of theory but of individual choice. By not too great a stretch of the mind, this "curve" characteristic of twelve-tone rows may be likened to the characteristic of the Hindu raga, which often uses two series of tones, one in ascending, and a different one in descending. This duality of the Hindu raga is, of course, more like the same characteristic of the Western minor scale. But another characteristic, that a higher octave may present different intervals than does the lower, suggests an arabesque in pitch-space, which is also implicit in the twelve-tone row.

Certainly the Schoenbergian theory is not a conscious imitation of the Hindu raga, and the parallel between the two cannot be accurately drawn. That there is a closer relationship between them than between the minor scale and the raga might be argued. Interestingly enough, Schoenberg places unusual emphasis on the minor scale in his teaching of counterpoint. He requires that all ascending

NOTE: Quite aside from the validity of its insights, what makes this brief article worthwhile is its timeliness. And what is fascinating about that is its date, for the celebrated Mr. Cage wrote these words not recently but some two dozen years ago. The article appeared originally in the Spring 1946 issue of Modern Music (XXIII, 2, 111-115), the quarterly review then published by The League of Composers under the distinguished editorship of Minna Lederman. It is reprinted with the kind permission of the author.

— Ed.

tones be resolved scale-wise upwards in each voice before the introduction of descending tones, and likewise all descending tones downwards by step in each voice before the introduction of ascending tones. This discipline is made the basis of his teaching of "modulation" (all cross-related tones being so handled). Moreover, Schoenberg's insistence that modulation is not a change of scale but merely an emphasis on a particular degree of the original scale brings to mind the Hindu adherence to a single raga for a single improvisation. His erstwhile avoidance of harmony is neither Eastern nor Western. It suggests the Orient, since the East does not practice harmony; but, at the same time, since avoidance is an admission of presence, it suggests the Occident. Schoenberg's use of the twelve-tone row, being motival and thematic, is definitely Western (an Oriental use would be more freely improvisatory). By the term "motival," I mean that method of composition which employs conscious and consistent repetition and variation of a short motive, a method which Schoenberg, in his analyses, finds practiced by Beethoven, Bach, Brahms and other composers. Likewise, by "thematic," I mean the use of themes, through repetition and development, for structural purposes. The parallel between twelve-tone and Oriental music attempted above, both begins and ends with the similarities of theory pointed out, for there is no likeness in their sound.

Unlike the Schoenbergian, the music of Alan Hovhaness, young composer of Scottish-Armenian descent, is a conscious fusion of Orient and Occident. Hovhaness diverges both from the Orient and the Occident, and he does this at his own discretion. To the degree that he follows his own ideas in matters of theory, he is Occidental. His music sounds Armenian, but this impression is due largely to our general unfamiliarity with Oriental music. For Hovhaness's music is by no means the faithful transcription, for instance, that McPhee's is; it is the evidence purely of its composer's imagination. Freely invented ragas are used which may change in the upper octaves and which may ascend in one way and descend in another. For purposes of expressivity, he allows a change of one or more tones (generally only one) after the raga has been established. Furthermore, he allows a change of raga altogether, with or without a return to the original one, if the expression so demands. He also combines different ragas by letting them appear simultaneously between voices. The use of raga is Oriental; the idea of changing its tones, of letting others appear either at the same time or later is characteristic of Occidental musical thought. The absence of harmony in Hovhaness's music is Eastern. The fact that his compositions are notated and may be played more than once is Western.

Hovhaness's practices with regard to rhythm suggest the Hindu tala, or metrical plan. But he treats his freely invented talas in Occidental fashion, changing them, introducing or combining others, according to his feeling. The Oriental sound of Hovhaness's music is realized with Occidental instruments (basically string orchestra with or without solo instruments), not by preparing the instruments, nor by employing microtones, but solely through the character of the melodies which they play. This character, which is Oriental, is a gliding along the raga without unresolved leaps. Hovhaness's music (and this characteristic likewise is Eastern) is not motival or thematic, but is continuous invention.

The integral use of percussive sound which appears in the music of Edgard Varèse is also a characteristic of Oriental music. The battery in the West is generally only auxiliary to the other instrumental bodies. Even in his combinations of pitched sound (e. g., Octandre), we are reminded more of percussion events than of harmonies. Varèse's frequent use of repeated tones, which bring to his music the image of telegraphic messages, is less melodic than it is percussive. Although he employs generating motives, his use of them is not strict, and his procedure is Orientally non-thematic. His music does not sound Oriental probably because of the absence of anything corresponding to raga or tala.

The microtonality of Alois Hába and others presents an Oriental characteristic not found in any of the music discussed above. Although the Hindu ragas employ generally only seven tones, these seven are chosen from some forty-odd tones in the octave. Hába, as is well known, employs quarter and even one-sixth tones. He uses them, not to make seven-tone scales, but to enrich the possibilities of melodic and harmonic nuance, and to facilitate his non-thematic, non-motival procedure, which he practices in purist fashion. But what I have heard of his music has not sounded Oriental, and, as with Varese, I think this due to the absence of structural rhythm and integral use of scale. Carillo's Cristobal Colón is the only example of Western microtonal music I know of that uses its scale in step-wise manner with all leaps resolved.

In general, then, there may be pointed out certain large musical conditions which are characteristically Oriental. They are: that the music be non-thematic, non-harmonic, non-motival; that it have (a) an integral step-wise use of scale, (b) structural rhythm, (c) an integral use of percussive sound and (d) pitch distances less than a semi-tone.

One other characteristic, not technical, must be added to the above. It is the quality of being static in sentiment rather than progressive. In Hindu esthetic, the emotion of serenity or tranquillity is considered a necessary adjunct to the proper expression of any of the "permanent" emotions, e. g., the erotic, the heroic. In Western music, this point of view is ably expressed in the work of Erik Satie. His Socrate presents a vocal line which is continuous invention, which is like an arabesque, and never seems to move towards or away from a climax. Its accompaniment is in the form of musical situations (rather than themes) which recur unaltered. They apparently take place in relation to a predetermined planning of time-lengths. This is a special instance of structural rhythm, and indicates not so much an imitation of Hindu tala systems as it does a fusion of the principle underlying them with that underlying sophisticated Occidental phraseology.

Orientalisms occur in music where we least expect to find them. The non-thematic procedure of Virgil Thomson produces such impressions, reinforced in much of his music (notably the Stein opera) by his integral use of scale. There is, I believe, a similarity also between Western medieval music and Oriental. In other fields than music, Dr. Amanda K. Coomaraswamy has discussed such a relation. The idea is pertinent because a community of purpose has shown itself between those composers whose work is "Oriental" and those whose work is "neo-Gothic" (dissonant total polyphony, e. g., Carl Ruggles, Lou Harrison, Merton

Brown). This purpose is to express lofty sentiments in the most direct manner possible, rather than to evoke in any way the "classical" tradition of music.

This is also the purpose of Messiaen, whose music, like a changeable silk, shows now aspects of the Orient, now of the medieval world, and now of twentieth-century French impressionism. It is, incidentally, the emphasis on harmony in Messiaen's music which accounts for its occasional bad taste. This element, harmony, is not medieval nor Oriental but baroque. Because of its ability to enlarge sound and thus to impress an audience, it has become in our time the tool of Western commercialism. Messiaen's use of invented scales and rhythmic structures and his non-thematic procedure (the medieval subject or ground, expressed either melodically or rhythmically, being used instead) account for the congruity between his music and its avowedly spiritual program. These devices, to paraphrase Virgil Thomson, are suitable to "opening up the heavens;" his harmony to "bringing down the house."

Hovhaness's subject matter is also openly religious (the Armenian Church and its precedent mythology). Although Harrison has no direct connection with an organized Church (as do both Hovhaness and Messiaen), his Motet for the Day of Ascension is of sacred, rather than secular, intent. Other composers feel more individually along these lines, their music being dedicated, but not destined for liturgical use. Varèse, through the force of his imagination, creates an explosive present between an ancient past and an unknown future. Ruggles, with his Evocations, suggests, less literally but more vividly than Ives, the transcendentalism of New England. Thomson, in his Symphony on a Hymn Tune, by placing the sublime in constant juxtaposition with the ridiculous, allows each to give measurement to the other in an act of faith, a procedure not unlike that of medieval Christianity which covered its churches with gargoyles. Schoenberg analyzes and fragmentizes his music, so that he seems with Freud to be a founding father of today's cult of the neurosis.

The composers who today wish to imbue their music with the ineffable, seem to find it necessary to make use of musical characteristics not purely Western; they go for inspiration to those places, or return to those times, where or when harmony is not of the essence.