

Bad-Carter: Double Concerto
Good-Ligeti: Piano Concerto

J: You used the word competence in reference to certain pieces and I was wondering what you meant by that? I think I remember you're saying to me once that competence has to do with narrowing the gap between the compositional idea and its realization.

S: That's certainly part of it. It's not everything though, since it also has to do with what your intentions are in the first place.

J: So you can have incompetent intentions?

S: Well, yes, I mean, intentions that, even if they were met you wouldn't have a lot there.

J: So what's an example of a bad idea that got realized?

S: One that came to mind would have to be off the record. OK. How about Cage. I mean, I'll grant that the idea is at least "interesting" in terms of philosophical discourse. But as far as the music it generates, its a bad idea from the start.

J: You mean, I take it, the post fifties Cage.

S: Reading from the phone book, that sort of thing. That would be a class of music I would be comfortable in saying that the intention was bad from the start.

J: And one could have predicted that a priori?

S: Well, if not a priori, he should have found out pretty soon from experimentation. But, of course, ultimately the idea is more important to him than the actual sound.

J: Right, but you're claiming that the idea itself is bad.

S: Right because while its an interesting idea to try to find out what something is by learning what its not.-- I think its fine to explore what constitutes music, where the borderlines are-- to use randomness to generate a piece doesn't tend to lead to a very interesting piece in most cases. Of course, I'm not going to say in every case but most of the time its not a good intention to me?

J: To write a piece which explores the boundaries?

S: Well, not per se, but exploring the boundaries it in an aleatoric fashion. You can explore the boundaries of what is music in all sorts of ways other than by making use of chance procedures.

J: But if it weren't aleatoric, it wouldn't be challenge the boundaries.

S: It depends which boundaries you're challenging. I suppose in this case, intentionality, or the amount which the composer controls. But there are other boundaries which he in fact did explore, specifically, what constitutes musical timbre. Well, that's a slightly different category, right?

J: A more interesting category, possibly.

S: That's what I'm saying. That's different from writing a piece for piano which leave to chance what the notes are. Both are exploring boundaries but of different sorts.

J: So then, the fundamental question is why are certain sorts of boundaries more sacrosanct, or more open to exploration than others?

S: I would say that with one you still have personal control over what you do whereas with the other you relinquish it.

J: But this returns us to the question of control. Obviously, when we write a piece we don't have everything under control . At what point does losing control become an aesthetic liability.

S: I think the problem general than what your question gets at: most things, including ideas, which you push to extremes, no longer work. And this is a case in point where the extreme of relinquishing all control, no longer works. Where the opposite case, some sort of hyper-control seems to be equally unsatisfactory.

J: But isn't hyper-control completely succeeding in you intentions as a composer?

S: I suppose you could define it that way, and that would be a good thing.

J: So hypercontrol is a good thing. I don't mean to be argumentative--I'm trying to hit the question of technique from a different angle.

S: Hm, well that's interesting. I suppose I'm contradicting myself.

J: Maybe, but I don't think so.

S: Right. Well I meant hypercontrol and aleatoricism in two ways. I mean, when a choice is intuitive, is it in your control or not? Maybe not, it is ultimately, I suppose, but it's not the same as aleatoricism which insures that you have no control over anything at any level. On the other hand, you can set up systems to make sure that every note can be explained as coming from some source or some procedure that's logical.

J: Now, is that having control?

S: Well, you have control of something. I'm not sure what it is though.

J: Let's get back to this idea about ideas being pushed to extremes. I'm wondering whether you would have the same criticism of the Carter. Does the piece strike you as extreme?

S: In a funny way it doesn't seem extreme to me. It seems rather unextreme. Does it seem extreme to you?

J: Well, it's certainly relentless, but that doesn't necessarily mean extreme.

S: Right, but not even that. There is a certain amount of variation between movements in tempo and density. But I think the problem is in the way we're using the word. Now we're using the word to describe the surface of the music but in the case of Cage we were using the term to apply to the carrying out of musical ideas. So for example it would be extreme to believe that one can replace the function of tonality and pitch in organizing or ordering a piece in terms of rhythm. I think that would be an extreme idea.

J: That's certainly an idea. What makes it extreme compared to other ideas one might have about putting a piece together?

S: Well, it's extreme because it doesn't recognize the possibility of compromise-- of finding a middle ground between the requirements of pitch and of rhythm.

J: So is it that what you find unsatisfying about the Carter?

S: I'm not sure. I'm much more aware of these issues in my own work than I am with other people's

J: You're aware of what? Avoidance of extremes!? It really doesn't seem that way to me. I mean, the music doesn't sound that way.

S: That's right. I'm interested in extremes and I think about the issue. I think that's the reason that the music sounds the way it does. I also think a lot about the concept of the middle. I mean, you can think about the middle in lots of ways, but there is a tendency to think of the middle in terms of middle-of-the-road, and conservatism-but there's also a way of looking at the middle as if it's a tightrope, and you could fall on either side. So in that way the middle is very highly charged, it holds things together. So you say that my music has high contrasts-I assume that's what you meant. But the idea is to have the contrasts and not have the piece fall apart. To keep these opposing forces in a careful balance-that's what composing often seems like.

J: But that's not to say that your music is extreme in every way. For example, I can imagine music—say Schnittke—which is harmonically more extreme, in the sense of having sharp juxtapositions of consonance and dissonance, than yours, but I don't think that your music would cohere in the way in which you expect it do with a level of harmonic contrast.

S: Maybe so.

J: And I sense that is what might lie behind some of your criticisms as well in that you are not criticizing extremes per se but extremes in particular domains.

S: Right in certain contexts extreme ideas don't work. So take the seeming lack of harmonic variety in Carter. I would call having every vertical structure available at any time an extreme approach to . But the paradox is that the music doesn't sound extreme, you just get this grayness all the time.

J: Does that kind of grayness always tend to be the result of extremism of the sort you're talking about? I'm curious whether you have other examples in mind?

S: Take minimalism. Minimalism in its most extreme forms doesn't produce anything that's musically interesting. But at the same time there's another side of it that makes the music something that's definable and understandable on its own terms. And you want that of course.

J: How about serialism? Would you say the same thing.

S: Sure.

J: But does it lead to music which is. . . .

S: Definable and understandable etc.? Well maybe not to the same extent. Maybe historically it was the same thing, its hard to know. I mean we can associate serialism with expressionism—yeah you have non-serial expressionistic stuff—but basically we can associate one with the other. But the difference is in intention. I mean in the case of minimalism, the intention is achieved. Its very clearly manifested when something is minimalist, whereas with strict serialism, since its often indistinguishable from aleatoricism, you don't have the structure of music audibly reflected in the same way. So in a way you could say that the music doesn't succeed in its intention.

J: We started this conversation with the assumption that music which "succeeds in its intentions" is somehow better than music which doesn't. But I don't think you want to say that minimalism is necessarily better than serialism.

S: Again its a question of which intention you're talking about. On a limited technical level its not a big problem to get a minimalist piece to succeed in sounding minimalist. Of course, I'm not saying that achieving one's intentions is sufficient.

J: So would you say that minimalism is an instance of a school that succeeds in its intentions too well, or never had very interesting intentions to begin with?

S: Right. I mean of course a lot of interesting things have come out of minimalism, I don't want to deny that. But this gives me a chance to refine what I meant about extremes. I mean you have this dialectic that's working itself out now--what with the two poles of the extreme "complexity" total serialism, on the one hand, and the simplicity of minimalism on the other. (Granted that some of the rhythmic things in minimalism are not simple by any means.) But you do have the two poles of something totally non-repetitive versus something totally repetitive. This seems like a simple case--where it seems totally obvious that the truth of creating a musical language lies somewhere in between the two. And it's a matter of using the dichotomy. I mean, repetition versus non-repetition should be an active dynamic that's under your control, that creates moments. It shouldn't be an ideological battle. Same idea with complexity and simplicity, a musical language should be able to express both. You want to be able to have both and not attach negative or positive values to either. I mean, something isn't good or bad because it's simple or complex, but the dynamic of going from one to the other, the playing off between the two--that seems to me to be a positive quality, which again, assumes that there is a middle between the two extremes. Which is why I think good composers tend to be middle of the road.

J: Do you really? My impression is the opposite, at least in terms of how music history tends to be presented to us. The figures which are held up to us as defining different musical epochs are those who have in some way or another, gone out on a limb. The most extreme adherents of a particular camp--even if, say, in the case of Bach they were extreme in being conservative or even reactionary, are the ones whose names get passed down to us. But that doesn't mean that will continue to be the case: you could make the argument, that one of the distinguishing features of our musical climate is that the progressivist reading of music history has outlived its usefulness. The question is how to make a compelling argument for a middle of the road aesthetic.

S: Well, I'm not sure if I really want to do that. It was probably a mistake for me to use the term middle of the road. It's a pejorative term from the beginning. But I think you're right that things are different now in terms of what it means to "go forward." The meaning of the word "progress" has to change when you have explored every nook and cranny of every domain of what you can do in music. Of course, what's meant by musical post-modernism has to do with that realization. Since you don't have this idea of progress in the same way, what do you have? I think what you have instead of progress is assimilation or to put it another way, bring things together instead of bringing them forward. To use another pejorative term, eclecticism can be about this. Take Beethoven's opus 131. You know that the piece originally had a subtitle that the publisher got rid of. It was, I think, "Pilferings from Here and There." There's a piece that has a renaissance ricercar followed by a country dance. Then there's a

recitative before an aria, there's a set of variations that's like an aria. There's a fast scherzo. And he gives them each titles like an opera, not numbered movements. Here's something which is borrowing from different genres and yet its been held up as a great example of unity and single-mindedness of purpose. So what its doing is bringing things together into one thing. I think that's what I'm talking about.

J: Is the same kind of thing possible today given the huge range of musics which we have to draw from which have expanded exponentially since the time of Beethoven?

S: I think the Ligeti is eclectic in the ways I'm talking about. So, for example, you hear elements of Ligeti's early music in the second movement. The Polish school sound masses, the electronic sounding clusters up high in the strings, and so on. But that's combined with this step-wise descending line that has all sorts of other associations with it.

J: But the borrowing in the Ligeti is constrained by the consistency of the musical language which is really a modernist language—certainly harmonically, at least. So I'm not really sure that the eclecticism you're talking about is really that much of a departure.

S: But who's looking for a new language?' I think the point that I'm making is that when assimilation replaces the idea of progress, or is progress, the whole question about the novelty of the language becomes sort of irrelevant, and you begin to judge pieces based on the naturalness of the synthesis. Now of course, you can find pieces that borrow from a lot of the same sources as Ligeti does. I mean, there's also Nancarrow and minimalism in it. But in superimposing all these images the piece somehow manages not to sound "a little bit of this a little bit of that" but to have its own demeanor and integrity. I think that's an indication you can have "the middle" which can hold together all of these centrifugal forces. Its a hard thing to achieve, and we all know pieces which fail in that way. That's the thing about walking on a tightrope. Its easy to fall off.