

# music educators journal

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# Stravinsky's Poetics: Dialogue of Music and Lifestyle

Lothar Klein

Composers seldom trust books on aesthetics. Aesthetics, they rightfully sense, can claim no victories apart from the example of art itself. In the eternal debate between creative action and theoretical creativity, the only permissible exception is Stravinsky's *The Poetics of Music*.<sup>1</sup> This book adds an aesthetic theory to the revolutionary composer's legacy of masterworks, thus fusing theory with practice.

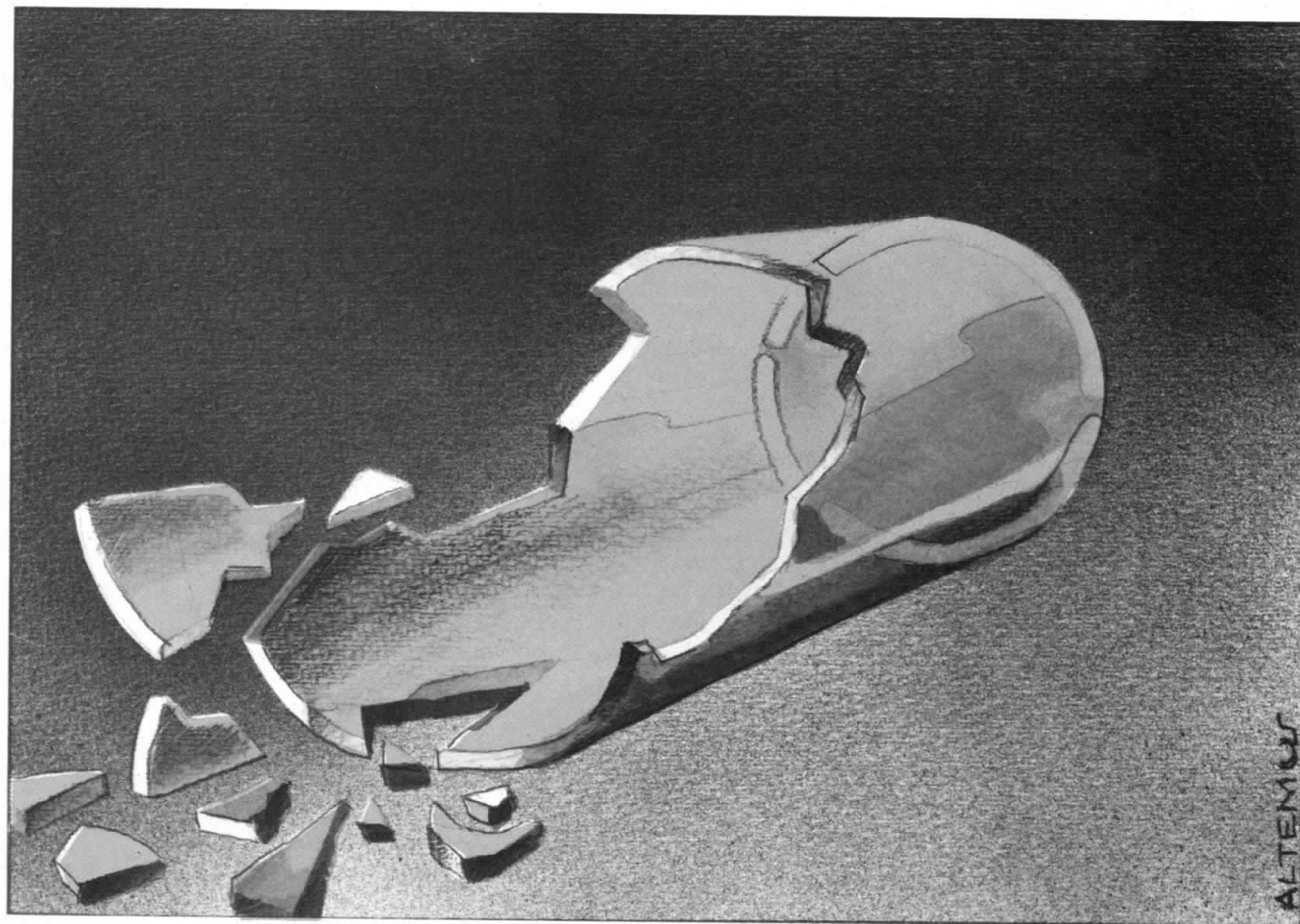
Stravinsky's slim volume contains the precisely tangible insights into music that we would expect of this century's greatest composer. Like any great book, the *Poetics* can be read on several levels, and for various purposes. One can, for example, compare the aesthetic concepts espoused by Stravinsky some thirty years ago with recent developments in music. Similarly, an ethical reading of the *Poetics* can provide revelation into the mysterious dialogue between art and life. Although other arts disciplines—classics, English, philosophy—study themselves to illuminate life, music lacks a distinctive literature that seeks links between itself and life. However, to ignore the possi-

<sup>1</sup>The *Poetics* were prepared, in the form of six lessons, for Harvard University's 1939 Charles Eliot Norton lectures. Paul Valéry, the distinguished French poet, is often credited with being their literary godfather.

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bility of an ethical reading of the *Poetics* is to evade the book's total perspective.

Like Aristotle's *Poetics*, Stravinsky's book summarizes a total, nearly inexhaustible aesthetic. It would not be an exaggeration to claim for Stravinsky's *Poetics* a position in the musical arts equivalent to that of Aristotle's fragments in the dramatic arts. Stravinsky did not attempt a dictionary definition of music as some have sought to do. (Stockhausen's music, for example, consists of order-relationships in time, and the nineteenth-century opinion was that "music is the deepest, holiest expression of mankind.") Instead, Stravinsky discussed the "phenomenon of music" and extracted for discussion those elements of music that serve in themselves to define music. There is no talk of specific techniques, and unlike the writings of other twentieth-century composers, there is no polemical endorsement of any particular style. The focus is on big issues, and the basic concept is that "the phenomenon of music is nothing other than a phenomenon of speculation." While the simplicity of this remark grants composers of any period their basic right to exercise musical imagination, speculation carries with it that equally basic requirement of art—choice. Speculation is subject to selection, and art requires selection. Scientists fondly



point out that science emanates from art, proceeding first by speculation (experimentation) and then formulating selected conclusions.

It becomes tempting to say (and comforting to believe) that if science uses the artistic method, then musicians can adopt the experimental method and produce art. Stravinsky denied this notion, claiming that "experimental music" is an impossibility—science experiments, art concludes. A new piece either succeeds or fails, and any composer who calls his work "experimental" is only seeking the listener's sympathy. These distinctions may seem subtle, but the differences between pseudoscientific art and the real thing are not; the former clamors for our attention, while the genuine article seizes us with love.

Two elements, sound and time, are indispensable for speculation about music. Stravinsky's definition of sound and his ideas about how music functions or organizes itself in time distinguish his thought and separate it from new perceptions of music. Although many composers think of Stravinsky as having been prejudiced in favor of tonality, Stravinsky was quick to point out that "the traditional diatonic system possesses no absolute value." He also said that "dissonance is no more an agent of disorder

than consonance is a guarantee of security." These two claims could easily come from a defense of radical music. However, when Stravinsky spoke of "poles of attraction" and said that "all music is nothing more than a succession of impulses that converge toward a definite point of repose," he isolated the fundamental schism between old and new music. For Stravinsky, the art of sound in music had to be directed toward a goal—full of movement and intention. Radical music simply wishes sound to be directionless—accepted and savored for itself. Like found art objects, sounds must be permitted to have their own uniqueness, with no demands being made as to how they should behave.

Stravinsky's view and the claims of new music may well boil down to endless arguments about experience and conditioning. New music often offers psychological explanations to defend its validity; Stravinsky used the pure concepts of music to explain his view, and thus offered, to my mind, a more convincing aesthetic for new music. By insisting exclusively on musical defenses, Stravinsky, strangely enough, established stronger arguments for the autonomy of sound than have the radicalists. Yet, new music allows sounds that Stravinsky rejected (the "liberation of noise"), and it is at this point that the division between Stravinsky's

*Poetics* and new music becomes irreparable.

Twenty years ago, French composers of *musique concrète* taped ordinary everyday sounds—bird songs, dripping water, glass breaking—and used tape recorders to mutate them. Some composers today would not hesitate to use the undisguised whirling of an eggbeater as a source of sound for their music. Advocates of new music believe that daily sounds (a sort of musical slice of life) should be emancipated for use in music. Stravinsky, however, rejected the notion that everyday sounds—machine noise tumultuous, water rippling, or glass broken con *delicatezza*—are capable of assuming musical significance.

Remote as it may seem, traditional and radical perceptions of music balance on this question: Can noise or sounds produced by nonmusical instruments assume musical meaning? The question is academic, because the answer defines two different views of the world. If we believe that noise has an expressive value beyond itself, art and life become one, and there is no need to compose music since the soundscape of any city then becomes music. (This neatly disposes of sound pollution.) A negative answer to the question preserves the separateness of noise and music, divides life and art, and maintains a rationally conforming view of the world. But this is the very way of looking at things that many people today have come to distrust. Stravinsky (one infers) always wished to maintain categorical distinctions, not for ethical reasons as some philosophers claim or because it is easier as some composers erroneously believe, but because

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**For something to be objectively true, intention must be realized in existence. If a piece of chance music always changes intention in performance, can it claim to exist as an artistic unity?**

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separating art and life is a richer way of experiencing the world. When art and life become one, everything supposedly becomes beautiful. The corollary—that when all is beautiful, nothing is beautiful—is perhaps more truthful. As joy is defined by sorrow, as love is distinct from indifference, so the meaningful experience of art only becomes possible by acknowledging the mundane.

But how do we experience the art of music? Psycho- and physiological explanations are insufficient, and the question fortunately remains unanswerable. To quote St. John Chrysostom, "A known God is no God." We know only that music is a temporal art, yet music does more than just take place in time. A Japanese scroll painting that is six feet long and that may be unfurled slowly or rapidly at the viewer's pleasure also takes time to reveal itself. Stravinsky points out that "music is the best way we have of digesting time"—that is, music operating in time makes itself felt, and rhythm, the chief trajectory of form, enables the listener to digest time through music. For Stravinsky and a great many other composers, rhythm must be a dynamically felt response that propels music. In new music, pulse is generally denied, and there is instead a concentration on a free interaction of line and color in which textural density is valued above all. While these calibrations of density are often fascinating, the beat disappears and surrenders itself to the realm of color. Thus rhythm, music's most crucial element, becomes a subordinate feature, and we hear music as a perfume of sound. All-enveloping sound may mesmerize our ears, but it also paralyzes our pulse. When this occurs, music undergoes a radical transformation in time. The music may, like a Japanese scroll painting, take time to unravel, but it does not actively engage time to define itself.

To insist that music set up patterns against a beat may seem academically narrow and creatively stifling, but a study of Stravinsky's divisions of time should offer persuasive evidence of the importance of these observations. The *Poetics* describes two types of time—the ontological and the psychological. Ontological time is measurable Greenwich mean time by which we set our watches. Music form makes use of it in sensing proportions. Psychological time is the way we measure our emotional reactions to the time involved in events. Music based on real ontological time slices time into equal units—Baroque motor music and Beethoven scherzos are obvious examples. Music that includes expressive *rubato*—in which shifts of tempos seem to reflect changing emotional impulses—makes use of psychological time, as Schuman, Wagner, and Debussy well knew.



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Stravinsky conceded that all music establishes time relationships, but he went a step further and discussed the basic aesthetic principles of unity and variety that are inherent in these two types of time. The steady music of ontological time proceeds by similarity, and similarity achieves unity; the music of psychological time, with its floating pulse, is full of contrast and variety. By equating similarity and contrast with unity and variety, Stravinsky brilliantly postulated a value system. Because contrast and variety are everywhere, Stravinsky declared that the artist must seek similarity and unity. Psychological music, he felt, has been seduced and weakened by variety; conversely, real-time music is stronger through similarity and unity. The power of music is thus determined directly by the way rhythm deals with time.

Music without pulse cannot proceed in itself by either ontological or psychological time. The state of mind a listener brings to a piece of music is totally different from the psychological life the piece reveals through time. Some improvised pieces of new music are endowed with variable time spans that may last three minutes or three hours. Obviously, if everything is rubato, no shift or psychological time is possible. Music with variable time spans may undergo changes—in timbre, texture, dynamics. But because such music often lacks specific psychological proportioning, will not the listener's psychological state be subjected to ambiguity? And am-

biguity courts boredom. Stravinsky always reaffirmed the classical dictum that music form is strongest when rhythm felt by the body is expanded toward a goal.

On a deeper level of the conflict of life with art, one might say that while life is motionless against the endless continuum of time, the art of music enables men to experience time physically during their lives in a manner unavailable through any other medium. The composer's prime task, then, is to discover new ways of dividing time; it is the listener's challenge and reward to discover in music those equivalents that shape lifestyle. Then art itself becomes the teacher. If the highest ideal of any study is to illuminate life, music is not exempted.

Using art as a guide for life requires a strenuous force of intellect that everyone must learn to supply in individual measure. But intellect is subject to the rational, and the rational mind is the ultimate goal through which life is lived. This is not a popular notion today, but the traditional formula for truth—"aequatio intellectus at rei" (the verifiable equation of the intellect to the thing and the thing to the intellect)—is yet to be disproved. Our way of thinking about music can serve as a guide to a lifestyle, for the essence of art is the articulation of the human being. Music is an assertion that comes from man, and assertion is the core of man's being and existence. If man's existence is to assume a will to be, a will to being in the world, to be a self in the world, and to be a self that has a world, then we, as musicians, must seek our own verifiable assertions about music. To understand any art, we must understand and verify the artistic language that belongs to that art in its most specific sense. We must, for example, be specifically aware of relationships between music and time. For something to be objectively true, intention must be realized in existence. In musical terms, if a piece of chance music always changes intention in performance, can it claim to exist as an artistic unity? Does it possess a sense of necessary fulfillment?

As a lifestyle defines itself by its intentions, so art realizes itself through intentions. Then art, ephemeral as it is, becomes a form of human existence, and the demands we make or expect of an art can in turn offer clues to a form of existence or lifestyle. As problems encountered during the creative process are solved and the work emerges, we can ponder the correspondences between our tastes in music and the way we wish to be in the world. In ancient Greece, the Epicureans and the Stoics both accepted music as an adjunct to the good life. Between these two philosophies, music students may just find the best of all possible worlds. ▮