

DEEP LISTENING from LEAVES BEFORE THE WIND

By Michael Colgrass

I have long been troubled by the lack of attentiveness of many listeners during concerts. Especially toward the beginning of a concert people tend to fidget and cough, rattle programs and even whisper to their partners. Although these mannerisms are irritating I realize that following a busy day many people have to overcome obstacles to get to a concert on time - finding a baby-sitter, rushing dinner, fighting traffic - and when they finally do get to their seats in the concert hall it may take them a while to settle down and concentrate. And I'm no different. More than once I've noticed at intermission that I'd been talking to myself for most of the first half of the concert instead of listening to the music!

So I asked myself if there might not be a way to help listeners leave the cares and responsibilities of the world outside the concert hall and focus their attention on the music the moment the concert begins. My thoughts first turned to what people want from a concert. Some are music lovers, others like the social event, still others are curious and want to develop a new interest. The one thing common to all listeners in my experience is that they want to enter another world - one of fantasy and delight. Among the best compliments anyone can pay a performer or a piece of music is, "It was mesmerizing," or "I was transfixed" In short, listeners are seeking a form of altered state that will transport and rejuvenate them.

I often talk to audiences prior to concerts, usually giving factual information about a work - pointing out themes, textures, orchestration, etc. - words that appeal to the conscious, logical mind. But the real power of music is beyond logic. What, then, if I attempted instead to invite listeners into my subconscious mind by describing what goes on when a composer is actually creating? In this state of mind a composer turns off the outside world and focuses his or her attention inward on the creative self - which I think may also be an ideal state for the listener to enjoy music.

A perfect opportunity to try this idea came my way last summer when Elyakim Taussig, Director of the Stratford Summer Music Festival, asked me to do something "experimental" with the Orford String Quartet. These were informal morning concerts for small audiences and seemed perfect for this experiment. I planned a talk where I would actually go into a creative reverie on the spot, so to speak, for listeners to witness, with the hope that they would enter that netherland with me. To add the proper atmosphere we blackened the stage, elevated the Orford Quartet about three feet, covered the stage with black cloth to eliminate the visual reality of the stage floor, installed pin spotlights that would illuminate the hands and instruments of the players but only peripherally their faces, masked the windows so no sunlight could intrude and had the audience sitting at tables with candlelight. As the audience was filtering into the hall, the Ravel String Quartet in F Major - the only work on the program - was playing on a stereo unit extremely softly, almost like very quiet Muzak, intended to be unheard consciously.

The four players, wearing black, came onto the darkened stage one at a time (at approximately 1 minute intervals) while the audience was still arriving and settling down at the small tables. The effect of this one-by-one entrance of the musicians in half darkness on stage was that the audience gradually became quiet before the house lights were turned down and were already watching the stage in anticipation. Then the house lights dimmed and a spotlight came up on me, sitting casually on the steps leading to the stage.

I introduced myself, welcomed the audience, and began talking informally about what it feels like to compose music - a kind of stream-of-consciousness report of a journey into a composer's mind. I invited the listeners to follow my subjective moods as I described them with the idea that they might thereby empathize with me and be able to "feel the way Ravel felt when he composed his String Quartet"

To ensure that the audience's attention was properly paced for the entire four movements of this 25-minute work, short sections of each movement were played very softly by the Orford while I talked about what each movement felt or looked like to me as a listener: the 1st movement was associated with the idea of "going inside oneself," the 2nd "becoming like a child again," the 3rd "being creative in an individual way," and the 4th "returning again to everyday life." We had a special lighting for each of these movements - yellow for childhood, blue for creative, etc. - to make a visual association with my descriptions and the music. After we had sampled the four movements in brief, I invited the audience to "enjoy just sitting back and hearing and feeling the music the way Ravel did when writing it ... just like a time when you created something that was really your own" The spot faded on me and the Quartet played the entire Ravel non-stop. This introduction lasted perhaps 14-15 minutes.

The audience was inordinately quiet and still during both our introduction and the performance and, at the end applauded the Quartet enthusiastically. (The idea had been built into the 4th movement that they "return again to everyday life." From all the reports we heard, the reactions to this whole presentation were anything but neutral. Of the critics present at the five days of performances, three were very favorable and one hated it. Among audience members the senior citizens seemed especially pleased with this format and one man, who returned for several performances, said "I felt I didn't have to understand the music to enjoy it." On the other hand, a younger woman approached me angrily and claimed she came to concerts to see the musicians and was upset because their faces were unlit. I sympathized with her desire to enjoy the visual aspect of a concert and pointed out that at least their hands and instruments had been lit, and she said "No they weren't, I couldn't see anything!" I was puzzled by this remark and mentioned to a friend that this was one listener with whom we'd failed. "On the contrary," he said, "she was obviously listening so deeply she'd blocked out the image of the musicians. Probably a first for her"

Many people have had no musical education whatsoever and yet are, I am convinced, wholly capable of enjoying so-called "serious" music. And I have met scholars who sometimes became so involved in the analysis of music that they forget how to enjoy it. What is the best way to enjoy music? I have no ready answers, but one thing this "deep listening" experience demonstrated was that listening - like composing - requires a special frame of mind, regardless of music education. What that frame of mind is and how to achieve it is the question. Arnold Schoenberg said that a composer's best music comes to him "as in a dream." If this experiment in Stratford was any indication, that state may also be the best one to be in when listening.