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NOTES ON POP MUSIC

by *Tim Souster*

“I haven’t heard a good new opera or a good new symphony for—eighteen months.” Thus Kit Lambert the pop impresario in Tony Palmer’s television film *All my Loving*, making, one would think, no outrageous claim, that is if one allows that he has not heard of Harrison Birtwistle and Cornelius Cardew. But one must realise that Lambert’s view is the basis of a total dismissal of modern ‘classical’ music; for him pop is new heir to the classical tradition. A like view is held by Mr. Palmer, who on the strength of a moderately successful film (success of course was inherent in its subject-matter) and of some pretentious writing in the *Observer*, has been endowed with a certain ‘authority’. For him, the Pink Floyd outdo Cardew and Stockhausen in ‘modernity’, and even the Who’s ‘Magic Bus’ (an inferior reworking of their brilliant ‘Talking about my generation’) puts Stravinsky’s *Symphony in Three Movements* in the shade. I shall not waste space on these comparisons, but mention them as an illustration of how the pop world can be blinded to what lies outside it. Lambert and Palmer are the victims of their own high-power distribution techniques whereby nothing gets through without a hard sell. The commercial basis of pop has two important consequences in this context. First, the common ground which exists between genuine musicians in the pop and ‘straight’ fields is being obscured to the detriment of every one by promotional smokescreens. Secondly the pop field has become so vast that no common factor apart from commercialism can yet be discerned. All generalisations about pop which I have read have been so exclusive as to be worthless. We must not forget that pop ranges (alas) from Engelbert Humperdinck to the Fugs, from the Monkees to the Beatles, from Petula Clark to Jimi Hendrix. Not even the presence of a constant beat or of a key is common to all these any longer. As for extramusical interpretations, we are still too far inside pop to say anything worthwhile. “Pop music is big enough as a phenomenon to cry out for efforts at sociological explanation”, writes Tom Nairn. This very size precludes any success in such efforts. In these notes I shall therefore stress the diversity of pop and the degree to which aspects of its teeming domain correspond to those of ‘straight’ music today, in the modest hope of creating even a spark of mutual respect and understanding.

Performance

“What interests me is . . . one of the most constant aspects of American music: its composite character, its emphasis on ‘performance’, and its diffuse, strenuous desire for a history, for an identifiable genealogy.”

In his ‘Commenti al Rock’ (*Rivista Musicale Italiana*, I, May/June 1967), from which the above quotation is taken, Luciano Berio stresses the continuity that exists between jazz and pop as essentially performing arts. It should not be forgotten that the confines of pop do not correspond to those of the record industry. There is a whole ‘live’ tradition closely related to the blues and constituting a legitimate development of that tradition which cannot adequately be represented on record and which is fundamentally unsuited to the ‘single’ format. It is no coincidence that the singles of the most talented performance groups—Cream

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and the Jimi Hendrix Experience, for example—have rarely made much impression on the record charts. Their music, if suited to recording at all, demands the duration of the long-playing record. Its volume moreover cannot be reproduced domestically. It is the volume of the best rock music that is one of its most remarkable features. Records are unable to recreate the effect of a 1000-watt beat-group—most domestic amplifiers having at the most 50 watts. Records therefore represent a kind of abstraction from the music, a ‘reduction’ in a literal sense, corresponding to the nineteenth-century piano reductions of orchestral and operatic music for domestic use. The ‘acoustic aura’ of live rock music, whereby sheer volume creates a flood effect transcending mere loudness, is something unknown even in the loudest ‘straight’ music. For me it constitutes an important extension of musical means at the disposal of all musicians.

Eclecticism

“Rock . . . represents a fusion of the restrictive aspects of its stylistic antecedents and a homage to the liberating forces of eclecticism.” These antecedents are as far-flung as blues, country and western music, music-hall song, Bach, Elizabethan, Indian and Arab folk music, and so on. Although one could say that pop owes a lot to the tradition which it is supposed by Lambert to be superseding, it is also true that in recent years ‘straight’ music has learnt a lot from the way in which pop treats these antecedents, from its eclecticism. To quote Berio again: “Every epic form is . . . based on the revaluation and the respectful transference into another context of the *déjà vu*. When instruments like the trumpet, the harpsichord, the string quartet and the recorder etc. are used, they seem to assume the estranged character of quotations of themselves”. This ‘revaluation of the *déjà vu* is comparable to Stockhausen’s use in *Hymnen* of national anthems as musical objects, as commonplace material for complex yet ‘comprehensible’ (in Schoenberg’s sense) processes of transformation and distortion. The use of extraneous styles for comic effect has become a cliché of American campus music. In the music of the Beatles on the other hand, eclecticism is always used gently and with a touch of melancholy. As Berio says, “the extra instruments are adopted like polished objects from a far-off world reminiscent of the utopia of the ‘return to our origins’”.

The recorder in ‘Fool on the Hill’ and the string quartet in ‘Yesterday’ and ‘Eleanor Rigby’ sound in the context infinitely sad because they embody age, remoteness and therefore loneliness. The Beatles songs are full of an essential, instantly recognisable nostalgia that can only be compared to that of Kurt Weill’s songs, which must in a sense have sounded old at their premières in the twenties and thirties. Weill too, for sound political reasons, plucked at the listeners’ desire for the ‘return to our origins’.

The sound of the French horn in ‘Tomorrow never knows’ or of the Bachian piano in ‘In my Life’ carries in the context a great weight of musical history. The effect is comparable to that produced by the occasional use of clearly recognisable instrumental sound in a free improvisation group using live electronics. Cardew has described conventional instruments as “thoroughly traditional musical structures . . . in each of which resides a portion of musical history”.

Arrangement

Arrangement has been central to popular music from its birth. Today, because of the vast idiomatic range of pop music, it has become a particularly rich

field again. The potential range of reinterpretation is equally vast. Moreover many of the finest pop songs have the archetypal simplicity of basic blues themes and lend themselves to as extensive elaboration. If we take the songs of Bob Dylan and the Beatles as typical pop 'standards' we can see that there exists for the pop arranger a field of possibilities which has not been open to the straight composer since the middle ages. Joshua Rifkin's arrangement of Dylan's 'Tom Thumb's Blues' for Judy Collins illustrates how new dimensions of meaning can be added to the original by means of a subtly instrumentated, motivically relevant accompaniment, a fact which in turn shows the strength of formal *types* in pop. These are the envy of the straight composer, for whom, instead of formal types, there exists only a range of formal procedures.

The re-creative potential of pop arrangement can be seen in a comparison of the Beatles' 'With a little help from my friends' with the recent highly popular version by Joe Cocker. Whoever was (or were) responsible for the arrangement transformed not just its tempo, key, metre and instrumentation but its whole mood and, more important still, its formal type. A fairly conventional, jaunty, strophic, Beatles tune has been completely recreated in the form of a Negro 'soul' song complete with organ and female 'heavenly choir' backing. The strophic regularity of the original is replaced by a gradual build-up to a final climax. To give an idea of the accuracy of the arrangement's detail, here is a line from the original together with its transformation. The change of formal type has dictated a subtle alteration of the melody so that it starts on the tonic note rather than on the third and the fifth. The resultant strong consecutive octaves between the melody and the bass invoke a whole tradition alien to the original song, while still preserving its overall contour.

a) Beatles
 ♩ = 96
 John and Paul

Would you be - lieve in a love at first sight?

Pno., Guitar
 Bass Guitar

b) Joe Cocker
 ♩ = 44
 Female backing group

Would you be - lieve in a love at first sight?

Bass Guitar

Electricity

There are two aspects to the use of electricity in pop music and they correspond roughly to the two main types of electronic composition today—'live' and 'studio'. On the former Berio writes: "Voices and instruments are heavily amplified; a certain continuity of sound is obtained with a sufficiently controlled use of feed-back which also serves to level out the differences in intensity between the various sound-sources. Microphones, amplifiers, loud-speakers become therefore not just an extension of the voices and instruments but become instruments themselves, sometimes superseding the original acoustic qualities of the sound sources."

The phenomenon of levelling-out and of the total blending of sound (the acoustic aura) has been noted by Cardew when improvising in a restricted area. The players lose their individuality in a room-filling sound, unaware of who is producing which part of it. In this situation instruments seem to become autonomous, a tendency strikingly illustrated in a pop context by the lead-guitarist of the extremely loud American group Blue Cheer. An extended solo improvisation culminates in disjointed phrases during which the player gradually allows the instrument to pass from him into the world of feed-back, until on his knees he lays the still resonating instrument on the ground. The sound can, seemingly, only be halted by the switching off of the amplifiers. It should be remembered that any note played at this kind of intensity (400 watts) will feed-back to infinity unless halted by damping or by the stopping of another note. Moreover, the feed-back, in establishing itself, causes an isolated note to *grow* in intensity after the attack, like a tam-tam stroke. The formal counterpart of this acoustic growth is what might be called 'electric momentum', the temporal consequence of the guitar's electronically produced head of steam. Allowing this momentum full rein produces long forms which seem to balance the music's high intensity.

Comparable to the 'studio' branch of electronic music is the recorded pop created during the recording session, and not reproducible in live performance. A landmark here was the Beatles' *Sergeant Pepper* LP, in the preparation of which hundreds of hours of studio time were spent in the application of electronic techniques. In addition to the normal recording technique of the artificial balancing of disparate elements, there became incorporated the multiple superimposition of tracks, extreme filtering, backwards tapes and the exploitation of the spatial effects made available by stereophony. Continuing the development of these innovations, Jimi Hendrix in his LP *Electric Ladyland* has produced some of the most sophisticated, travaillé and, indeed, resourceful pop on record. His virtuoso deployment of guitar sonorities has led him to master tape-manipulation. His musicality has empowered him to achieve an amazingly successful blend of his distinctively passionate vocal and instrumental style with radical instrumental and electronic noise-improvisation passages very reminiscent of the AMM improvisation group.

Antivariation

"The inclusiveness of rock", writes Berio, "is connected with the absence of a predetermined structure." This is not strictly true. An enormous proportion of conventional pop records retain the predetermined structures popular songs have always had. Even otherwise extreme groups like the Who never diverge from the music-hall norm in their simple verse-refrain songs. More experimental groups such as Cream, the Grateful Dead, the Jimi Hendrix Experience and the Nice are still dependent on blues form insofar as they show a tendency, even after long improvisatory flights, to pay lip-service to a peroratory restatement of the theme. In this kind of pop one often feels a tension, an inner contradiction between the music's electric momentum and the restraining formal influence of its historical antecedents. This is particularly to be regretted in a number like 'Spoonful' from Cream's LP *Wheels of Fire*, whose form corresponds closely to the progression found in most Indian classical music, from a relatively loose, slow beginning to a fast, tense close. Unfortunately the blues rules are obeyed and a chorus in the opening slow tempo is tacked on to the piece's

wild and constant *accelerando*. The return is anticlimactic rather than culminating.

In 'Sister Ray' from the Velvet Underground's LP *White Light White Heat* the process of expansion is not frustrated, but allowed to play itself out. This group is connected with Andy Warhol, the pop artist notorious for his endless, antivariational films. They collaborate in particularly extreme forms of *son et lumière* manifestations. In their systematic and relentless assaults on the senses they invite comparison with the unvarying single sounds favoured by the most provocative member of the American 'straight' avant-garde, Lamonte Young. One of Young's latest 'pieces' consists of unleashing a constant, amplified sound reminiscent of an iron-foundry in full cry, and leaving it to its own devices for a number of hours. In the Velvet Underground's 'Sister Ray' an extraordinary process of metamorphosis is unleashed whereby the players, seemingly guided by the sound itself, gradually pare down the music to its basic essentials, reducing it to a single chord and then to a single note while the beat becomes divided into absolutely regular pounding quavers until something very like Lamonte Young's foundry sound is reached. No recapitulation is attempted. The dictates of the acoustic situation are obeyed absolutely.

A mindless experience? Of course—and one from which one returns greatly exhilarated. Is it coincidental that the same could be said of the last four minutes of 'Hey Jude'?

MAXWELL DAVIES'S 'THE SHEPHERDS' CALENDAR'

by John Andrewes

The Shepherds' Calendar, which was commissioned for the UNESCO Conference on Music in Education in Sydney in 1965, was performed there for the first time on May 20 of that year¹. As the circumstances of its commissioning suggest, the work is designed for a chorus and orchestra of young people, and the forces were chosen not only with a view to what might be expected to be available in a large school, or group of schools, but also as being suitable for illustrating and commenting upon the words of the text. There are two main groups of performers, disposed on opposing sides of the stage: Group 1, consisting of the chorus, attended by 3 clarinets and bassoon and 3 percussion players, on one side; and Group 2, consisting of solo string quartet, flute, oboe, trumpet, trombone, with two further clarinets, 6 recorders and seven percussion players, on the other side. A further small group, consisting of treble soloist accompanied by glockenspiel and handbells, is placed as far as possible from the two main groups, preferably in an elevated position. The reason for this will appear when we come to discuss the text and the manner in which it is treated. But before leaving the subject of the instruments, it should perhaps be mentioned, as just one example of Maxwell

¹ The first performance in England will be given by The Finchley Children's Music Group and The Youth Music Centre, conducted by John Andrewes, at a Macnaghten Concert at International Students' House, London, on 17th March 1969.