

SYNTHESIS OF MUSICAL STYLES ON THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: EXPERIMENTALISM AND NEO-CONSERVATISM

by Rodolfo Betancourt

The last thirty years in music have seen many changes. The proliferation of mass media, the advances of technology, and the new consciousness of world community has changed the way music is made and perceived. Two main branches of music, often considered as opposed, Experimentalism and Neo-Conservatism took the places of Serialism and Indeterminacy on the scene. However, the more recent phenomena have a characteristic that the old ones could not develop: mutual influence and merging of concepts and techniques. Even more, they share influences: Without a doubt, it was John Cage (1912-1982) the creator that acted as the main inspiration for both movements. Differences between them have their roots in their philosophical and technical approaches to music creation.

The Experimental movement originated as a response against everything that preceded it. It proclaimed the negation of the past as the way to produce the new music. On the other hand, life itself became art: The process of music making was the real work of art. "Everything we do is music", stated John Cage. From this premise the Experimental music was developed. Thus, music experience expanded as to encompass all sound -even any human experiences, including death-, regardless of origin or 'beauty'. It can be said that boundaries between arts were dissipated in the process of searching for new meanings and manifestations.

Influence also came from other arts like visual arts and theater. The concept of 'antiart' became attached to Experimentalism by way of artists like Robert Rauschenberg (i.e.: *Erased de Kooning Drawing*). In the field of music, positions like that of I. A. MacKenzie are paramount of this movement: "Art exists only as a refuge against new experience, un-recreated experience with reality: second hand-living."¹ Different branches of experimentalism can be distinguished:

- Danger Music: 'Music is dangerous', according to Paul Nougé. Added to the already stated philosophical approaches, there is also an element of political and social protest in most

¹ I. A. MacKenzie as paraphrased by David Cope in *Notes in Discontinuum*.
Cope David. *New Directions in Music*, 6th ed.

of this type of work (i.e.: Daniel Lentz's *Skeletons Don't Say Peek*). •Conceptualism: 4'33'' is the best example of this type of Experimental music, paralleling Rauschenberg's *White Paintings*. Conceptualism aims for moving the spectator as well as the performer in deeper ways than music has done before; even both 'performer' and 'spectator' often are the same. Much of Eastern philosophy of meditative stasis is recurrent in this type of works (i.e.: Pauline Oliveros' *Sonic Meditations*).

•Biomusic: Music created by natural functions like brain waves, humpback whale singing or solar wind. Sometimes elements of conceptualism are found in compositions like Oliveros' *Sonic Meditation XIII*.

•Soundscapes: Music is not created, music is perceived from the environment. I. A. MacKenzie's "Wind Sound Sculptures" are fine examples of this type of Experimentalism. There are also connections with other movements like the one for the safety and revitalization of nature and environment.

Other areas for musical experiment were found in the inclusion of other resources. With electronic music, *musique concrète*, theater, mixed-media, *et cetera*, the field for experimentation increased immensely. However, scholars tend to separate these areas of music making from Experimentalism as such. It is important to note also that in the case of electronic music and *musique concrète* the development has been so big that they became movements by themselves -often intertwined- that deserve study separately.

One of the aspects of Experimentalism is the fact that it became a matter of a selected audience. Experimental music has been connected with universities and colleges, sometimes because the need of financial support, other times because of the inclination toward experimentation in some of these institutions. Experimental music has been considered elitist, whose manifestations were far from and misunderstood by the common audience.

One of the most transcendental experimental composers is perhaps **Pauline Oliveros** (b.1932). Many of her works have influenced later composers. Her 'happening' *Valentine for SAG* (1968), for example, is a mixed-media event that also has elements of biomusic and conceptualism: Written for the Sonic Arts Group, makes playing cards an unifying theme. The four performers are asked to amplify their heart beats while a narrator discusses the history of card games, two carpenters build a fence, a croquet player hits few balls and giant playing cards are projected.

One of the composers that carried out further the concepts of John Cage is **La Monte Young** (b.1935). A former member of the experimental group Fluxus, his works are called simply *compositions* and are mostly conceptual with only verbal instructions. His *Composition 1960 No. 5* calls for a butterfly set free in a performance area with the doors open, the work ends when the butterfly flies out.

The New Conservatism main exponents have a somewhat different background as that of the Experimental ones. Traditional -serialist, tonal, neoclassic...- composers, experimental composers, even musicians that found their voices in jazz and pop music form the core of this movement. This mixture of approaches, without being exclusive of one another, forms the aesthetic foundation of this movement. It is the almost omnipresent figure of John Cage the seminal source of this movement. With him the Eastern philosophies permeated to these creators who, in essence, wanted to transcend what has been done before without negating it. That is the case of Lutoslawski, for example; it was after he knew Cage's music that he embraced aleatoric procedures without being pro-Zen or anti-serialist. Another aspect of the aesthetic values of the New Conservatism influences also the musical resources and techniques: the desire, unlike the Experimentalists, to reach a broad audience. Watkins stated in his book *Soundings* that the need for an audience is somehow driving composers to renew the concept of 'common practice', in a way similar to the classical period. Mixed media events can be found in works by these composers; in general, the use of another media resources are not an end in itself but a mean to make more appealing to the general public the musical work.

In the case of the New Conservatism, the renewal of old classic forms and methods is carried through a creative process, often eclectic. Old techniques like the use of quotations and tonality merge with the already learned experience and knowledge of experimental techniques. One of the main currents in this movement is that of Minimalism. Although its background can be traced way back in history and far in geography, Minimalism found its voice at the end of the 1960s with creators like Terry Riley (b. 1935), Steve Reich (b. 1936) and Philip Glass (b. 1937). Closely influenced by Indian music, Minimalist composers adapted the use of ragas, talas, gamura and drones. Also pop culture played a role: The work of Andy Warhol (1928-1987)

and his works in which a subject is repeated with slight differences can be considered as parallel to the musical minimalism. Minimalist techniques aim for a new simplicity in music, using small amount of material “characterized by a fondness for intervals with the simplest ratios.”² Often inclined to tonality, the formal procedures of this kind of music are not based, however, on common tonal practice: although mostly triadic, most of the harmonies are not functional, just being the constant flow and the slight changes in meter, rhythm or pitch the ultimate effect.

Other trends of New Conservatism are more inclined to what is called Post-Avant-Garde. Considered a movement that truly carried through the essence of synthesis, the Post-Avant-Garde uses the old and the new as means to achieve an intelligent output away from radical positions. The use of quotation is perhaps the technique that has been inherited from the old avant-garde and acquired new meaning.

George Crumb (b.1929) is one of the composers that has achieved a high level of artistry and simplicity at the same time as in the mixture of seemingly unrelated styles. Although his writing is not simple, the quality of his music carries basic concepts and ideas accessible to the common man. His most important composition is perhaps *Ancient Voices of Children* (1970), based on *El Romancero Gitano* by the Spanish poet Federico García Lorca. Using quotations of Bach’s *Bist du bei mir* to Mahler’s *Das Lied von der Erde*, even Flamenco music, Crumb successfully juxtaposes disparate elements. The notation is one of the most appealing features of Crumb’s music: it is functional as it is symbolic. *Ancient Voices of Children* is a piece in five movements, punctuated by three dances: “Dances of the Ancient Earth” following the first movement; “Ghost Dance” preceding the last movement and “Dance of the Sacred Life-Cycle” performed in conjunction with the central movement.

Luciano Berio (b.1925) has been reluctant to the idea of being called a neo-conservative composer. However, there are elements in his music that point in that direction without labeling him in a specific trend of music. He has “succeeded in conveying the novelty of new creative experience through music which commands a broad, even popular audience.”³ The use of

² Watkins, Glenn. *Soundings*.

³ Richard Steinitz in *Contemporary Composers*.

theatrical elements is important in Berio's music and is considered the key for its popularity. His most influential work is perhaps the *Sinfonia* (1968-69), a work originally in four movements (Bernstein asked for a fifth movement as a brilliant finale) for orchestra and voice ensemble. He was a pioneer in the use of quotation in contemporary music: in the *Sinfonia* Berio uses the scherzo from Mahler's Second Symphony as a vehicle for wide-ranging quotation. It is accompanied by the "history of music": from Boccherini and Schubert to Weill and himself are transcribed, orchestrated and transformed. A notable thinker, Berio spoke of music "not as a language, but a language of languages"⁴ working on a multiplicity of layers. Regarding his musical approach, he also remarked: "maybe this desire to try and possess everything is a little Faustian..."⁵

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⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

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