

Note of the Meeting of the Wimbledon Philosophical Society on 26/1/2019

The philosophy of Musical Experience and Responses

Introduction and Chair Leslie Dighton

Members, guests, friends particularly from Europe, and pianists and flautists present were welcomed to an evening of musical experience and philosophical conversation at Southside House.

To set the scene non-members and newcomers were reminded that the Society had previously held similar meetings in our search for better understanding of creativity, beauty and truth. We had explored in the garden of science through the discoveries of Einstein, in poetry using Eliot and members' readings, and how place and beauty can be deliberately used to establish a new narrative in response to trauma.

This evening's lens (or ears) was Music which invited its own fundamental questions for discussion during the second part of the meeting.

- . is it the most profound of all the arts? (Schopenhauer)
- . is it a means of peering into a higher realm of order and beauty? (Goethe)
- . does it extend the capacity of the brain beyond reason?
- . does it create memory, identity and community not otherwise present?
- . is it a gift from the Gods? (Dryden)

The first part would be led by Richard Serman, pianist, teacher, friend of the Society and Curator of Southside House.

MUSICAL EXPERIENCE AND RESPONSES

After a magnificently performed opening song by Anna Vibeke Eilert, an educationalist at Southside House, Richard suggested as an initial answer to 'what exactly is music?' that it was a composition of vocal or instrumental sounds combined so as to produce beauty of form, harmony and expression of emotion. He used the analogy of tone-painting to describe compositions expressly formed to convey mood and feeling by being heard and felt rather than read, or touched, or seen.

To illustrate the largely architectural nature of medieval music we heard extracts from Bach's Cello Suite No 1 performed by Jordi Savall, and contrasted that with the subsequent romantics and impressionist composers such as Debussy and Bruckner. Richard then used Bach's Weinachts-Oratorium to demonstrate the fusion of all three elements of architecture, tone painting and emotion.

He then attempted to get to the very heart of what music is, how structured sound can simultaneously describe, refer to the external, and take us into an internal realm of response where verbal definition ceases to have any real value. He quoted Aaron Copeland who said 'the composer starts with his theme; and the theme is a gift from heaven. He doesn't know where it comes from - has no control over it'. Whatever the inspiration something comes through the music that can only be fully appreciated in the act of performing and listening. The work stands or falls on its internal merits and capacity to make the listener an active participant.

There are several views about musical experience. Expressionists focus on how successfully the listener feels the same emotions as the composer/performer. Others stress the relationship between emotions in life and those embodied in the music – the preferentialist position. The absolutist position argues that it is not possible to use words to describe music at all. We listened to a lament sung in Gaelic, Love Let Me Home to My Mother, by Julir Fowlis to show how understanding the words was not necessary to experience the power of the emotion expressed.

Richard then used three Requiems – the Sanctus from Bach's Mass in B Minor, Faure's Requiem and Britten's War Requiem – to illustrate the differences in interpretation by composers to essentially the same theme.

He went on to suggest that musical responses can be similarly varied. Music can act as a reminder of an event or experience. It can also evoke themes and landscapes like a painter or writer. There was however a third type of response which he found most interesting, a form of 'emotion' that has to do with a deep and inarticulable capacity to respond to elements within music that are to do with time. Not metric time but an 'experiential' time of 'other' emotions, such as silence, space, force, simplicity, reflection, interruptions and resolutions, elements perhaps almost beyond the reach of the other arts.

DISCUSSION FOLLOWING THE PRESENTATION.

The meeting gave warm acclaim for Richard. His wide-ranging and provocative presentation was excellently illustrated and triggered an interesting exchange of views, ideas and personal anecdotes. The key points in summary were;

VOICE - we all have the instrument of voice however imperfectly we employ it. Two examples of its power were given anecdotally after a magnificent real time exhibition by Anna in an opening duet with Richard. A memory was shared of the faintest sound of the muezzin calling the faithful to morning prayer heard at a great distance in the desert of Southern Morocco that felt like the voice of God with the power of an epiphany. To other ears the singing of the shaman was similarly powerful in the inducement of visions during a mystical experience in the Amazon.

MUSIC – was it a gift from the Gods and universal in its resonance or a local phenomenon understandable only in the context of a particular culture? Dryden’s Song for St. Cecilia in 1687, reflecting the classical view of music as a gift from the Gods able to sustain the harmony of the heavens, concludes that on the final day of retribution – “the dead shall live, the living die, and MUSIC shall untune the sky”. Music is accorded universal and divine power. The alternative view questioned whether we could experience, for example, the music and lament at a Chinese funeral in the same way as the Chinese themselves would? If not, does music become local and contingent on context. The harmonic structure is particular to the Western world, which may be the reason so many Asian artists are attracted to play there.

EXPERIENCE – linked to that was another question. Was music only experiential, dependent on and restricted by actual experience? If it was, what was the scope and time of that experience? Was there the possibility of genetic transfer of non-experienced events and emotions from the distant past? Did musical time have a sideways as well as a linear dimension? Was it both existential and experiential? How would this fit with the ‘shadow world’ of permanent forms and ideas as suggested by the Shaman experience and Plato’s theory of a perfect world?

POWER – the meeting understandably had no single answer to these questions. It did however agree that music had a power both for good and evil. It was widely used in film and advertising to provoke shared emotional and behavioural responses. Politically it had been widely used to suppress

minorities and alternative ideas (e.g. the talking drums of Negro slaves), to incite hatred and violence (Nazis and Jews), to promote jingoistic nationalism (Land of Hope and Glory), and to edit the freedom and diversity of composition and art forms generally (the Soviet Union in the 30s). On the other hand, Dvorjak's New World symphony captured in its evocation of wide open prairies and spiritual music from the deep south, was felt to capture for some a yearning for peace and fraternity after the civil war in Nigeria.

COMMUNITY – music was a powerful force for local communities in villages, down the mines and at the work bench before the Industrial Revolution. No Welsh village was without its choir, and no pit town was without its brass band. Many have now gone but the tradition is still strong in E. Europe. Community through music was important in another sense too. For some people the ability to recognise themselves in a piece of music was crucial for their own identity and sense of not being purposeless and alone.

THE BRAIN – numerous experiments with both animals and children have demonstrated the ability of music to act as a calming influence, and in some cases gone further to suggest an ability to think/imagine/intuit beyond the rational capacity of the brain itself, indicating perhaps areas of the brain which are latent until provoked by music.

LANGUAGE – music is beyond language. We heard a lament sung in Gaelic, the words of which were incomprehensible but their intent as an expression of loss and longing absolutely clear. We also heard music which left us at a loss to describe its beauty in words. Tchaikovsky's Pathetique was un-named by the composer until it was finished, and named subsequently by a relative, suggesting 'pathos' emerged from the composition rather than being its central theme from the outset.

Many other points arose including memory, improvisation, Strauss as an example of base human instincts residing alongside a capacity to produce glorious music. The general conclusion was that we had feasted at Richard's table (Surman not Strauss) and asked ourselves some interesting philosophical questions as we laboured in the garden of music.