

Terrors of the Earth: Ivan Hewett Reflects on 20th-Century Music and the King Lear Syndrome

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# TERRORS OF THE EARTH

Ivan Hewett reflects on 20th-century music and the King Lear syndrome

Among the composers featured in the recent series of Scandinavian music at the South Bank Centre was the 35-year-old Magnus Lindberg, who declares: 'I am only interested in music which goes to extremes'. What a familiar battle-cry this has become. For some composers, 'going to extremes' is an article of faith. It's acquired the force of a moral imperative; and yet the odd thing is that this moral imperative attaches itself to a creed which doesn't really have any content. Just what quality is it that music is supposed to have to such an extreme degree? To that question there appears to be no answer. It just has to be extreme, *tout court*; so we have as many types of 'extremity' as there are composers. For John Cage music had to embody an ideal of complete anarchy; for Milton Babbitt it must be totally ordered and planned down to the last semiquaver. For Morton Feldman music had to aspire to a condition of complete etiolation and inanition; for Brian Ferneyhough it must be at a continual white-heat of intensity. Pierre Boulez has a similar aesthetic; he defines music as 'frenzy and collective spells'. Then there are the various types of 'systems' composition, in which a purely mechanical process for choosing and ordering sounds is set in motion. In the hands of Franco Donatoni the method sounds like a whimsical 'demonstratio ad absurdum', like one of Jean Tinguely's self-destructing sculptures. When practised by Steve Reich the result, dubbed 'minimal' music, is more ingratiating but no less single-minded.

These are all responses to the insistent injunction to 'go to extremes'. Their very diversity makes the attractions of the ideology only too clear. It's so wonderfully elastic that just about any method or aesthetic can be brought under its aegis. This means that the pursuit of a private obsession can be passed off as the austere submission to a moral imperative. But it would be unfair to dismiss the whole idea of 'going to extremes' as a cover for self-indulgence, however true that may be in many cases. At bottom it's a response to the dilemmas and contradictions of expressionism, which was itself a form of 'going to extremes.'

Expressionism was the first answer to the modernist question, 'What would an extreme piece of music sound like?'. The answer was: like romantic music, only more so. It will be *more* profuse in its melody, *more* rich in its harmony, *more* rhythmically subtle, *more* formally complex. Here, 'extreme' functions as an adjective, simply qualifying a number of very familiar substantive aspects of music.

This is the commonsense interpretation of the phrase, but it's an interpretation that modernism has striven mightily to avoid. This isn't just because modernism has a profound aversion to commonsense, and a corresponding appetite for delirium, though that is cer-



'I SHALL DO SUCH THINGS...' MONTE JAFFE IN ENO'S LEAR

tainly true. It's more to do with the realisation that expressionism, as a means of 'going to extremes', is fatally compromised by its adjectival interpretation of the word 'extreme.' A true modernism has to be substantively new, not just the exaggeration of what had gone before. So the modernisms that followed showed a tendency – determination would be a better word – to interpret 'extreme' as a noun. 'The extreme' suffers a peculiar hypostatisation; it becomes a thing in its own right. The hope was that it could actually be realised in some concrete form, rather than posited as an enticingly unreachable goal, as the romantics had done. But it was no easy matter to strip the romantic nimbus from that word, which had after all, been its main attraction. In order to embody 'the 'extreme' – to *seize* it, and rob it of its transcendent aspect – the modernists had to resort to drastic means. They had to disembodied art, by robbing it of content. In the void thus created 'The extreme', freed now from the obligation of qualifying something else, could be installed in its own right.

One way to achieve this was to reduce art to a parade of sensations, untainted by thoughts. It was a creed summed up in Valéry's dictum: 'Modern man wants a sensation without the boredom of its conveyance.' Here 'boredom' refers to the way traditional art functions. When a piece of music or a painting gives us a 'sensation' – of delight, puzzlement, emotional arousal or whatever – it's 'conveyed' to us by means of something that isn't itself a sensation – things such as images, stories, melodies, harmonies, forms. For the modernist mind these things don't 'convey' the sensation, they

weigh it down with irrelevancies – what Valéry calls ‘boredom’. So we have pictures without images, poems without syntax, and music without discernible melodies or harmonies – in short, the whole modernist project of an ‘art of pure sensation’.

But something of the romantic project remained, namely its view of art as a kind of priestly calling. It was the sacerdotal solemnity of Mallarmé and Debussy that the Dadaists were determined to deflate.

Dadaism was as anti modern art as it was anti everything else, but it had one thing in common with it: a taste for extremes. Cocteau, who flirted briefly with the movement, declared ‘when you’ve gone too far, there’s only one thing to do: go further’. In his case, though, the aim was rather different. Cocteau was writing in the springtime of modernism, when to *épater les bourgeois* was an excitingly new thing to do. When, at the beginning of the Cocteau-inspired ballet *Relâche*, we see a fireman pouring water from one bucket to another, the choreographer’s aim was purely to provoke. Audiences were not used to that kind of foolery in the sacred temples of art, and were duly scandalised.

Behind the naughty-boy pranks lay a serious purpose. That Cocteau achieved it so completely was due to the complete consistency between intention and execution, which none of his more serious followers achieved. What he wanted to do was debunk art’s claims for serious attention; the danger was that, in order to attack the enemy he would have to treat it seriously. But by mocking art rather than criticising it he spiked his critic’s guns. He didn’t just knock art off its pedestal, he removed the pedestal as well. His ‘extreme’ gesture was all too successful; it robbed ‘extremity’ of its transcendent aspect and rooted it in the breaking of social decorum. The absurdists of the 50s, while paying lip-service to the Dadaists, resented this demotion of the artist from psychopomp to court jester, and contrived to restore the mystique of art – even while appearing to mock it. By adopting a pose of utmost seriousness, they surrounded their work with just the kind of reverence and solemnity that Cocteau had taken such pains to remove.

The pedestal was now firmly back in place; and perched invisibly there was ‘anti-art’. But the danger with exalting a negativity, as Cocteau saw so clearly, is that it very soon acquires positive characteristics. ‘Anti-art’, to justify its new importance, had actually to be something; and so the secondary aspects of the Dada enterprise, aspects which were originally invoked for their power to shock, now became valued in their own right. Chief among these was boredom.

**B**oredom would appear to be completely unrelated to that other key concept of modern art, ‘sensation’. In fact they are Siamese twins, as the history of Dadaism makes clear. What links them is the way they bypass the critical, appraising mind. In their different, extreme ways, their effect is purely on the nerves. Shock is a kind of maximum stimulation; so great, in fact, that the mind is stunned, and registers it as mere sensation. When people criticise modern art for being ‘sensational’ they unwittingly confirm that it’s achieved what it set out to do. Boredom is its opposite; stimulus is completely lacking. Loosed from its foothold in the real world, the mind wanders fretfully in circles, like an engine running in neutral. Prolong the lack of stimulation for long enough, and symptoms of mental breakdown set in.

For some modern artists, these pathological symptoms were actually to be welcomed and encouraged. They were a sign that the bad

old habits of mind, such as critical appraisal and judgement, were at last being subverted. John Cage was fascinated by boredom, and set out to produce it in his music. In a piece like *Williams mix* he sets out to dissolve any sense of purpose or pattern in the music, which just sounds like a random assembly of sounds. His aim, he said, was to let sounds be themselves, unburdened by the duty, normally imposed upon notes, to convey a meaning or shape.

Dadaism, the absurd, chance procedures, happenings – these are the aspects of modernism that reveal the consanguinity of boredom and sensation. What they both point to is the deliberate avoidance of anything that can be called *content*. Admit any sort of content into art – anything that appears, at least to some degree, intelligible – and the mental paralysis induced by random sensation – a paralysis for which ‘boredom’ is a wholly misleading name – disappears. At once the mind, and the feelings, become alert; time starts to move again; and self-possession replaces the bewitchment of self by random sensations. The possibility of genuine interest – and therefore of genuine boredom – returns.

A lack of content is not just an accidental feature of ‘sensation’ and ‘boredom’ (I put these words in quotation marks to distinguish their peculiar modernist usage from the everyday ones), it’s a necessary condition of them. But then one’s bound to ask why, if the most characteristic goals of modernist art are contentless, are they of such persistent, bewitching interest to the modernist mind?

The answer is that, although these states are empty in themselves, they lent a kind of shadowy substance to another empty idea – that of ‘the extreme’. It dignified what was really nothing more than a slogan – ‘going to extremes’ – with the appearance of a content. It was a combination of hopefulness and sleight-of-hand – as if counterfeit money could magically be made real by the act of spending it. But in the end the self-deception was bound to become apparent – for how could one nothingness be used to support another?

One might hazard a guess that the reason for the disappearance of the ‘chance’ school of composers (Cage has had no successors) is that, far from giving a genuine content to the idea of ‘the extreme’, they served only to highlight its nullity. So too with the other attempts to hypostatise ‘The extreme’, including those composers who stand at the farthest possible remove from John Cage; composers such as Franco Donatoni and Steve Reich. Whereas Cage tried to banish method, these composers exalted method above everything. One could say that their pieces exist only to exemplify the method of construction. In their anxiety to avoid an extremism of gesture, these composers tried to abolish expressive gesture altogether. The result was to create an abyss between intention and effect; the totally ‘mechanised’ pieces of Donatoni, and similarly predetermined organised pieces of Boulez, such as *Structures*, actually sound completely random. The same abyss is evident in the music of Cage, which is not ‘boring’ in any special sense, but merely boring.

This was the heavy price these composers had to pay for escaping from expressionism. But it wasn’t just that their success was formally self-defeating. It was also tinged with melancholy; for in literally translating ‘The Extreme’ into method, anti-method, sensation, or whatever, they robbed it of its attraction. Perhaps this is what Mallarmé meant when he referred to ‘the horrible vision of a work that is pure’; horrible, because it would mark the final end of the quest that gave his life meaning.

Thus did the victories of ultra-modernism turn out to be hollow. One might think that this would have been enough to discredit the whole idea of going to extremes; but not so. It's only the idea's particular incarnations, its proxies or emissaries, which fail, and not the idea itself. That, as its description suggests, remains indefinable, vague, in fact little more than an emotional disposition. And therein lies its attraction. Despite its association with modernism, the idea has a deeply reactionary undertow; it has a natural tendency to return to its original romantic, adjectival interpretation. Modernists have had a bad conscience about this, which accounts for their repeated attempts to give the notion a real content. But when the effort fails – as it must – the natural tendency to pair extremism with expressionism reasserts itself.

By purging the idea of the 'extreme' of all content – by treating it as a mere adjective – expressionism preserves the glamour and mystery of the artistic enterprise. For what could be more bewitching to artists than the beckoning horizons that the word 'extreme' opens up? Bewitching, and flattering; for these horizons are themselves conjured up by the artists' own febrile imaginations. The lack of content guarantees the most seductive quality of extremes, the fact that they remain permanently out of reach. The more one pursues an extreme, the more it retreats to the horizon; and as it retreats, so distance makes it ever more enchanting. It fosters the illusion that there is something to be pursued and possessed, that it's only distance that makes extremity seem so vague. Behind the rhetoric of 'perpetual revolution' in modernist art, there lurks the hope of a final consummation, a final revelation. We see this eschatological hope in Boulez's remark in his article 'Technology and the composer':

Whether in the evolution of formal structures, in the utilisation of determinism, or in the manipulation of chance, and whether the plan of assembly be based on cohesion or fragmentariness, the field is vast and open to invention. At its limits, one can imagine possible works where material and idea are brought to coincide by the final, instantaneous operation that gives them a true, provisional existence...

But of course it's *only* in imagination that such a 'final, instantaneous operation' could take place. Any attempt to realise it must be self-defeating; the goal can only be preserved by forswearing the attempt to reach it. By acknowledging this, expressionism acquires an aspect of austerity, of self-denial, in piquant contrast to its orgiastic and frenzied gestures. But more than that, it has guaranteed its own future. There will always be one step further in the direction of 'the extreme'; whereas Dadaism and Absurdism achieve their aim in the first attempt, and so annihilate themselves.

This is why Expressionism is not a passing phase of modernism, it's the permanent condition of modernism, and one that has to find ever more extreme forms. So Boulez's Second Piano Sonata has to surpass Schoenberg's Three Pieces op.11, and Ferneyhough's *Carceri d'invenzione* must surpass Boulez. In fact one could go further and say that 'going to extremes' is now a permanent condition of art. To refuse that imperious injunction is to refuse to be an artist at all. Never mind that it's a command that can hardly be made sense of, let alone obeyed. The mere attempt commands respect, even a kind of awe; the same awe we feel when we see the old and powerless King Lear say, 'I shall do such things... what they are I know not. But they shall be the terrors of the earth.'

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