

Summary



This book attempts to discuss the aesthetics and theories of three avant-garde composers: John Cage, Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen. The main sources for the present study have been their prolific writings on music, in which basic notions, aesthetic attitudes and re-evaluations were discussed. This theoretical and critical heritage was particularly important in the development of avant-garde tendencies after World War II, since many other composers were influenced by these writings and by their real, musical equivalents.

The most important methodological premise in the present book concerns the way of understanding the term aesthetic and its relationships to discussed subjects. The reflections of composers, their texts, programs, and declarations, are regarded as their formulated aesthetic, which contrasts then with their immanent aesthetic, manifested – so to speak – in musical works and their intrinsic qualities. Although both aesthetics are equally important, I focused on the first one, which, despite its virtual shape, makes it possible to investigate the aesthetic consciousness of the avant-garde. The general meaning of the term aesthetic as used in this book corresponds to the common understanding of that discipline as knowledge and reflection upon art and its creation and perception. A particular point of departure for the present study constitutes, however, the aesthetic situation that is considered as a basic aesthetic fact, in which three elements

coexist, the work of art, the artist (creator), and the listener (receiver). All these elements are then integrated by a superior category, that is, by aesthetic value. The latter is present in work, artist and listener in a different, more or less virtual way, being the essence of the aesthetic experience.

Therefore, my analysis of the reflections of the avant-garde concerns views on musical work and its creation and perception. The book consists of four chapters. The introductory chapter deals with general (historical and systematical) problems of the musical avant-garde. The second chapter is concerned with the views of John Cage; the third with concepts of Pierre Boulez; and the fourth, with the ideas of Karlheinz Stockhausen. The book ends in a summary and bibliography.

One of the most important elements in the reflections of the chosen composers was their view concerning musical work (opus). They attributed to its realm some radical qualities which were supposed to be actualized in the process of perception. This attitude placed the avant-garde within a long development in Western music, and its basic aesthetic beliefs. Yet, the avant-garde seems to be that element of the developmental chain which ran out all the possibilities (potentialities) of the musical work. This new approach began with a critical evaluation of the traditional conventions and it pursued the formulation of new premises and constructive rules regarding musical structure. In other words, the avant-garde composers preceded their aesthetic credo with a radical appreciation of traditional concepts of form, content, meaning and expression. Such an approach resulted in a total abandonment of earlier formal stereotypes and patterns and a complete denial of form. On the other hand, however, the composers, searching for new and necessary constraints, started to formulate their own constructive rules in order to integrate the decomposed elements and neglected musical qualities in a new way.

John Cage's attitude towards musical work manifested itself as a definitive departure from a model of closed form and its determined elements. Cage opposed that traditional pattern with an opened form with a substantial degree of indeterminacy. The impact and

effect of chance granted to musical work a new ontological status which was accomplished by considering a priori its partial or total indefiniteness. The innovative character of this solution relied not only upon an unlimited number of performances, but especially upon an unlimited number of structural potentialities, i.e. upon its ontological openness. Cage's abandonment of all meanings and content seems to be direct result of a radical and critical approach to that tradition which attributed to musical works a wide range of references to emotions, archetypes, symbols, and even to the transcendental realm of the absolute as well. All those meanings and references were totally reduced. Instead of them, elementary musical phenomena emerged such as the sequence of time, sound in all its appearances, and silence. That particular phenomenological reduction had its correspondences in Cage's definitions of basic musical qualities, for example form as pure sound continuum, material as a dualistic opposition of sounds and silence, and composition (musical work) as an integration of those elements. The evaluation of tradition resulted, therefore, in a reversal of a previous conventional order: closed and determined form became an indeterminate sound structure; heteronomic functions and referential meanings were replaced by autonomic and asemantic (nonreferential) qualities.

Another avant-garde attitude towards musical work, which is characteristic of Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen, gives evidence of a constructive approach to the criticized heritage of the musical past. For Boulez and Stockhausen the opposition to the traditional qualities of musical works was not merely an iconoclastic, spectacular gesture, but also had the goal of creating a new coherent musical structure, a modern opus perfectum et absolutum. The main aesthetic premise of this attitude relied on an effort to create a precise, contextual order which governed all structural aspects of a piece. The expressed idea of order had already undergone a metamorphosis near the end of the first postwar decade. The predominant rule of numerical operations and total serial order was gradually replaced by functional generation and selective choice of characteristics of a set, which also influenced higher levels of musical structure.

The compositional choices followed specific rules borrowed from logic, mathematics and information theory; the techniques and procedures evidently became rationalized. This tendency was particularly clear in Boulez's musical thought and in his vision of the order of sounds.

The last element in the metamorphosis of structural order constituted chance: a dialectic opposition of determinacy of all the parameters and qualities of musical structure. Chance and aleatory appeared in Cage's, Stockhausen's and Boulez's thought, although each of them understood and explained these concepts in a different way. They all approached this new principle from different points of view, exploiting various possibilities of indeterminacy. Cage's ideas, again, resulted from epistemological a priori assumptions which reflected the composer's attitude towards the surrounding world, especially his belief in the lack of casual relations among phenomena. His thought were the results of the influence of Oriental archetypes, especially of Zen Buddhism and its philosophical consciousness. On the other hand, Boulez's and Stockhausen's ideas of change were influenced by their previous experiences and accomplishments in the field of totally organized musical structure. It was through critical approach to the idea of total order of sounds that they both discovered its dialectical opposite: irrational chance operations.

Avant-garde concepts of musical work stressed its monistic character, which resulted from identifying form with content and also from reduction of extramusical references and heteronomic functions. John Cage considered form and, simultaneously, content as constituted of pure sounds and their sequence in time. This monistic approach seems to be one of many possibilities of shaping sound materials; the opposite solution was transcendental pluralism that created meaningful and referential musical works with a predominance of symbolic functions. This latter phenomenon took place in one of the most radical avant-garde genres, i.e. in the „happening”. It appeared, indeed, as an action or situation whose dynamic elements, which were very often create by the audience, were to communicate not only specific experiences, but also symbolic (and archetypical) connotations.

In such a perspective music acquired a new, special quality as a medium of social and cultural communication; it transmitted unique messages and connotations which were inexpressible in the other codes either verbal or nonverbal.

The attitudes of the chosen composers toward musical creativity resulted from an opposition to traditional ways of understanding the act of creation, especially those inherited from Romanticism. All avant-garde composers dealt reservedly with such aspects as inspiration, illumination, and genius. They understood creativity in a new perspective in which two approaches prevailed. For John Cage it was not an elusive, conscious or unconscious creation *ex nihilo*, but rather a manifestation of being in the world. It was not a creation of specific objects (musical artifacts), but an external manifestation of relationships between the artist and the world that surrounded him. On the other hand, Boulez and Stockhausen stressed the constructive and experimental aspects of musical creation. They considered it as a way of organizing sound materials by means of precise, rational rules and also as an unlimited exploration of the universe of sonorities, that is a search for undiscovered sound qualities. It seems worthwhile to point out a specific phenomenon present in Boulez's thought. The appreciation of his own highly rationalized pieces from the fifties led him to conclusion that searching which was based only on technical procedures did not provide aesthetic value for created pieces. The necessary condition for aesthetic value was a participation of a creative imagination: a superior domain in which searchings, experiments and inventions acquired a value and status as works of art.

The problems of perception are not discussed equally by the chosen composers. They have, nevertheless, an acute consciousness of changes which traditional perceptual habits undergo. The perception of music appears, however, as that element of the aesthetic situation which is least susceptible to transformations. That feature depends on two important factors. On the one hand, on musical habits and preferences consolidated in the process of ontogenesis; on the other hand, on psychophysiological conditions (perceptual thresholds). Both areas are objects of interest for

avant-garde composers. Yet, although a change of preferences and acceptance of proposed radical patterns and values is possible, the thresholds seem to be an insurmountable obstacle. They bring into question the sens of many avant-garde innovations. Such inconsistency and contradiction emerged at the end of the fifties and the beginning of the sixties, that is, in a moment of crisis for the structural concept which was the last link in the process of development of total serialism. The belief in the innate human ability to perceive an order of sounds independently of the degree of its complication simply did not conform to reality.

Despite these negative aspects, the avant-garde contributed to the traditional understanding of perception some new aspects which did not exist in the foundations of Western thought and musical consciousness. Among the most interesting and valuable of these innovations was the idea of an antidynamic perception suspended in time and liberated from a precise (implicative) order of succession. Such an approach is prompted by the practice of meditation and contemplation which is characteristic of some culture of the Far East. These new models and patterns as well as the idea of intuitive music, being at the same time created and perceived in a specific feedback amongst the performers-improvisers, opened up the deepest ways to perceive and to experience the nature of sound, to get at its essence. In that context music reveals the greatest aesthetic depth among all the arts, the biggest dimension of transcendentalism.

All elements of the musical-aesthetic situation are unified, as I mentioned earlier, by a common category, aesthetic value. It defines the essence of avant-garde art, its sense and functions in a process of cultural communication. How then are values created by the avant-garde? Is it reasonable to ask for their identity despite the radical, opposing attitudes of particular composers? The questioning of traditional aesthetic values seems to be the main trait of the avant-garde. The negation considers on the one hand expressive and semantic functions and on the other hand such classical values as clarity and harmony. No trace of the intention to create beauty is found in the analysed reflections. This fact is also corroborated by many musicological sources

which share this view of the anti-aesthetic character of created values. The reflections of the chosen composers seem to confirm this hypothesis. However, one can hardly resist feeling that the musical creativity of the avant-garde includes a specific complex of values that refer not to sensitive perception but rather to the cognitive realm. It is certain truth about the world and being in it that constitutes an aesthetic value in this context.