

Rock and Classical: A Hairline Apart?

By STANLEY SILVERMAN, composer of the opera, "Elephant Steps"

OFTEN I have read the call for the new art, based on the amalgamation of so-called serious music and rock. We are told that this imminent coming together of long hair and longer hair will be the wave of the future, and that its practitioners will be hailed as musical messiahs. Is Van Dyke Park or MacArthur Park, or whatever his name is, truly the greatest thing in American music since George Gershwin, as one record company blurb put it? What about Gunther Schuller? Wasn't he the greatest since Gershwin because of his exciting work combining jazz with concert music? Was Gershwin the greatest since Milhaud, Milhaud the greatest since Ives, or Ives the greatest since Beethoven? Or was Beethoven the greatest third-stream composer of all because he incorporated the drinking song and the scherzo, the rock of his day, in his serious works? The point is that we have experienced our present state before.

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The arts today, just as society, are extremely fragmented. During periods of social upheaval, many artists attempt to bridge the gap between advanced art and popular taste. This was true after World War I, when composers such as Stravinsky, Milhaud, Weill, Hindemith, and Copland utilized popular music in their works. The practice extended even to Schoenberg in his *Serenade* (Op. 24) for cabaret instruments, and it is felt today. The attempted amalgamation between serious and popular elements has been a continual and natural part of music history in general.

Closely related to this development has been the re-examination of past materials, known in the era following World War I as neo-classicism. It was the practice of neo-classicists at that time to compose in the manner of an

earlier period, in an effort to resume contact with the tradition that had been disrupted as much by the pre-war advances of Stravinsky and Schoenberg as by the war itself. Today many composers are reacting in a similar way to the serial and aleatoric advances of the post-Webern period. Using the techniques of collage, they are reinstating tonality, not by composing their own music in the manner of an earlier period but by quoting the old music directly. In this attempt to touch the old masters, we find composers such as Lukas Foss drawing on Bach, Berio drawing on Mahler and Stockhausen drawing on Schubert, perhaps as Marcel Duchamp drew on the Mona Lisa for inspiration. I cite these three composers because their attempts have been successful.

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A similar trend is occurring in pop. I am not referring to groups performing Bach or Baroque music on electric or electronic instruments, a trend which may be valid but is not particularly original. If I am to identify the neo-classical trend in rock, I must put it in the perspective of rock's own history, with Elvis, Jerry Lee Lewis, and the Everly Brothers assuming the roles of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms. The Beatles, in fact, are looking back even further, rediscovering goodies in the pop of earlier decades. Further evidence of this revival can be found in the re-emergence of black soul music and blues as well as modern jazz.

This about face from electronically oriented "studio" rock, which reached a high point with Sergeant Pepper, has led the important performers back to the Vienna of the pop world, Nashville. True, the groups are ordering Moog Synthesizers and other advanced electronic paraphernalia for their arsenals, a situation I liken to (Continued on Page 2)

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the need for an effective anti-missile system. Recently, however, the significant recordings have shown a definite trend toward recreating the sounds of the old rock. This is obvious in the new Beatles and Rolling Stones albums as well as in the recent releases of folk artists Joan Baez and Judy Collins, who are stepping back from elaborately orchestrated art songs.

I first noticed this return to the simple life during the height of the psychedelic or acid rock days of 1967, the time when rock and contem-

porary music seemed to be heading in the same direction: electronics, simultaneity, and collage à-la-Ives. A new folk music came on the scene from Canada, sung and played by Leonard Cohen, Joni Mitchell, and Gordon Lightfoot. Add to them the second generation talents of Arlo Guthrie, and to a lesser extent, John Hammond, and Bob Dylan's return to the fold in "John Wesley Harding." All of these have one thing in common, the rejection of the complex, often awkward use of studio technique, and the substitution of solo voice with guitar.

This recent development differs from earlier folk music in that content expanded to include the urban frontier, and lyrics became more subtle and sophisticated, compared to the heavy-handed "message" lyrics of pre-1965 folk music. It is in the area of lyrics that we find a true cultural sophistication in a world that is more often than not marred by a distorted emphasis on instrumental virtuosity—a virtuosity I find not so virtuoso anyway. It seems to me that the important guitar-song writers of the 60's, Paul Simon, McCartney and Lennon, Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell and Leonard Cohen, have struck a balance of words, music, and performance reminiscent of Elizabethan lute songs.

I find the similarities between the two schools remarkable. For example, the present day use of lead guitar, rhythm guitar and electric bass brings to mind the similar use of lutes in the Elizabethan consorts, in which the melody, harmony and bass line were assigned to three lutes of different sizes. Also common is the use of parallel harmony, which corresponds to the technique of "barring," a method of moving chords from one position to another on a fretted instrument without changing the fingering of the left hand.

This leads to the fundamental difference between rock and concert music. Rock is more often than not composed on the guitar. It is

hand music based on guitar technique. Consequently there is a lack of commitment to voice leading, inner lines, modulations and variations, the very staples of western, keyboard-oriented concert music. When rock is instrumented, as in "Eleanor Rigby," the instruments take on the qualities of the guitar.

In short, I would characterize rock, at least "live" rock, as being a vehicle for the fingers, bringing into play touch and a general kinetic response to beat. Above all, it utilizes the ear with a sense of abandonment. "Serious" musicians, on the other hand, stress control, and, rather than depending on the ear alone, place a special emphasis on the mind and the eye. Even the alea-

toric or improvisatory music I have played has been so riddled with rules that a sense of abandonment was almost impossible. Rock, like jazz before it, is players' music, composed collectively and put together by ear. This accounts for its immediate accessibility to its listener. Indeed, it is this accessibility and hold on the listener that have attracted many audience-starved composers of serious music who would also like to be where the action is.

And so some cross-fertilization has taken place. In rock, this has led to the breakdown of the three-minute length barrier in songs, as well as the stringing together of these songs into cycles and cantatas. In serious music, we have seen the

introduction of electric instruments into conventional forces. And both rock and serious musicians are making heavy use of mixed media, light projection, and so on.

These trends may seem to indicate that amalgamation is possible. However, in my view, this no more than a détente. In fact, both rock and serious music, as I have pointed out, are stepping away from each other.

It is the separation of these identities that I have tried to exploit with my librettist, Richard Foreman, in our opera, "Elephant Steps." In it, I have made use of a panorama of pop music, including rock, as well as a serious operatic language. I have not attempted to bridge the languages, but rather have im-

posed pop music on the opera in a seemingly inappropriate way as in Cocteau's use of music in film and theater. This was done in order to retard the emotional identification of an audience with the stylistic consistency to which it is accustomed.

The emphasis in this eclectic approach was on maintaining the individuality of the components, rather than obscuring them through collage. The examples of the movie "2001" and the new Beatles album seem to point the way to eclecticism, rather than amalgamation, as a means of accommodating different elements in a single work. If rock and "serious" musicians get together it will be by keeping their identities intact, not by merging them.