

CARL RUGGLES - PIONEER
as Seen by a Fellow-Modernist

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"Music which does not surge is not great music," Carl Ruggles said recently, and he intensified the term **surge** by means of a gripping motion of the hands, used by conductors to rouse an intense vibrato in the violin section of the orchestra.

Significant words these are! Music must surge, must rouse the fire of human emotion, must be dynamic life flowing with power — be this power majestic or vehement — from the subjective consciousness of men. It must have what Arthur Machen called "ecstasy" when he wrote: "If ecstasy be present, then I say there is fine literature, if it is absent, then, in spite of all the cleverness, all the talents, all the workmanship and observation and dexterity you may show me, then, I think, we have a product (possibly a very interesting one), which is not fine literature."

Ecstasy, however wide the significance of the term may be, means necessarily a subjective process. In a way it may be said to be the sudden realization of the infinitude of the unknown into the known. And as Walt Whitman said in beautiful words, which Ruggles wrote at the beginning of his latest work "Portals":

*"What are those of the known
But to ascend and enter the Unknown?"*

The mysticism and vibrant emotions of a Whitman, nowadays apologized for by the greater number of our devitalized generation, have evidently awakened a deep response in the heart of Ruggles, one of the three or four pioneers of the musical world, a man moreover whose ancestors have been American for many generations, who today at forty-seven is creating works which are perhaps the most significant and most vibrant works composed since the death of Scriabin.

Real mysticism and emotions are no longer favorites among European and Europeanized composers. Since Stravinsky, under the influence of Parisian thought and of the "cerebrists", proclaimed emotions to be musical poison, while announcing Tchaikowsky as his best loved composer, it has become most unfashionable to show any trace of so-called romanticism, and a solemn procession back to the ideas of the Seventeenth century and "pure form" has been formed which collected one after one all the composers of the day, save two or three. Ruggles is one of those rebels who did not join the march into the past, who refused to revive the corpse of tonality, who are moulding the musical substance of tomorrow.

There is a new musical substance. It may be chaotic, as yet unorganized, but it lives because it is the substance of the new musical cycle, of the musical civilization to be. Many musicians tried to approach it, to handle it. But the new virgin substance, like a wild mare, was not so easily mastered; and most musicians were scared away, lost their musical soul in the attempt and could do nothing else but to fall back to the old haven of grace, to classicism, crystallized forms, and tonality. Thus was born the new objectivism, compositions which are "musical objects" and which the sarcastic Satie perhaps foresaw when writing his "Pieces in shape of a pear."

The foundation of this new musical substance has been often called the "duodecuple scale", that is the atonal succession of the twelve chromatic notes. We will see that such is probably not the wider basis on which the more realized music of the future will be built; however it approximates it so closely for all practical purposes that this concept of the duodecuple scale will suffice us at present. These twelve notes, unrelated by any sense of tonality, constitute a new musical substance. Such a substance must be organized, must be made a cosmos instead of a chaos. And this work of organization, and in a sense of fecundation, is the great task of the pioneers who have the courage, will and inspiration to face it.

The work of organization can apparently be pursued along two main directions, which we might call **modal** and **synthetic**. The former was followed by Scriabin, his method being to take a few of these twelve tones disposed in a certain order and to treat them as constituents of a mode, that is building all the harmonies and most of the thematic material exclusively out of those selected tones. Thus was constituted a unity of harmonic substance, of resonance which created a definite psychic atmosphere for the composition. The latter attracted Schönberg who at times tries to compose synthetically by the harmonic superposition of larger tones, which seems as if produced by choirs of gongs softly touched, at others is tending towards a sort of dissonant polyphony which however, as far as we have heard, lacks very much cohesion. It is along this new polyphonic line that Ruggles is working. But instead of the dispersed and rather dry structures of Schönberg, Ruggles' work offers us a musical substance organized and dynamized by an inner breath, which either is full of peace, as in his "Angels", or stirs with an intense emotional surge, as in his "Portals", a part of which was recently produced by the International Composers Guild. Schönberg's works, interesting as they are, are mostly pervaded with the scent, poignant and significant at times though it be, of the decay of the European culture. But Ruggles' compositions are vibrant and alive, and they look towards a future of which they are the promise.

One might be misled, while studying those works and their genesis, by the seemingly laborious treatment by which they are produced. Ruggles has laid out for himself a few rules which require great skill and patient effort to stand by. Not only are his various polyphonic parts in definite relationship with one another, but he avoids strictly the repetition of notes both in the vertical and horizontal writings, that is melodically and harmonically. While writing a melodic line he will try to exhaust as many of the twelve notes as possible before returning to the original one, so that the **twelve centers of his musical substance are constantly energized**. It is like the painter who would take care that in each square inch of his canvas all the colors of the spectrum are represented. Follow the example further and imagine that the canvas be set rotating; the impression produced on the spectator would be white light.

Ruggles' process is therefore a synthetic one, an alchemical one. And so is Scriabin's, but instead of using simultaneously the twelve tones the Russian composer uses them only by groups; but each group is represented intensively until the ear of the listener, and his

psychic nature, are saturated with them. Then something happens — or ought to happen: That of which the groups of tones are but differentiated aspects, reveals itself. **That** is to the chromatic tones as white light is to the seven colors. What is it? The psychic reality of Tone — the Hindu musicians would say, the deva of the raga (mode), a deva being a force of nature, physical or psychical, personalized as a god.

Ruggles, in other words, writes in the twelve-tone mode, and as he wishes to hear all twelve units, or centers of "sonal" energy, with equal intensity, so that a real **democracy of tones** may be produced, he avoids repeating one note until as many as possible of the others have had their chance to sound. Thus homogeneity of substance and resonance is created; cosmos supercedes chaos.

Ruggles' musical substance is thus absolutely a democratic one, which fits splendidly well with his sense of kinship with Walt Whitman. Scriabin's substance is hierarchic to some extent. He admits themes and transposition, which is opposed to Ruggles' conception. The former's music contains individual forms within the great flow, corpuscles within the great body of sound. The latter has almost nothing else but two elements: matter (the balanced twelve tones) and spirit (that is rhythm). Between the pure rhythm and pure substance, there is particularly no intermediary. However rhythm obeys certain laws of periodicity, which bring back the same kind of substance, so that "form", dear to present day musicians, is present.

The writer believes that the next step in the development of this new musical substance will be one which will combine the elements brought out by Scriabin and Ruggles. But this will be possible only as something more universal and more consciously new than the duodecuple scale becomes manifest, that is as the octave ceases to be the unit of musical substance, and something larger takes its place. In such a short article one can only state what this wider unit will be without discussing the many questions which such a statement must arouse. Let us then only say that the cycle of musical substance which until now has been, both in the East and the West, the octave, is being extended to the cycle of seven octaves, or twelve fifths, which cycle has been given the name the "Zodiac of Sound" because of its direct correspondence to the great cycle of the sun as it passes through the various constellations.

Seven octaves encompasses almost the entire piano keyboard. To consider this vast space as the unit of musical substance means really to **universalize music**. From the narrow quasi-familial circle of the octave, music is about to grow into the wide quasi-cosmic space of this "zodiac". While the change may not effect at first the tones we use, or only slightly so, it will modify deeply our musical **perspective**. The day the octave ceases to be the musical unit, tonality is dead forever, and our entire concept of harmony must be re-created. Chords as a result will grown vaster and vaster, the spacing of polyphonic lines will be revolutionized, and our ears will have to get used to relating widely separated tones.

Following such a line of thought one can see how the harmonic system of Scriabin, his chord-building by series of fourths, and the new atonal polyphony of a Ruggles, can be reconciliated. Thus we may hear in the future vast "motets" in many parts, twelve being the

perfect number, encompassing in their sweeping motion the entire field of our sonal universe, seven and more octaves. This is not but a dream. While being in complete ignorance of the writer's research and works, Ruggles made sketches for a vast polyphonic composition which exemplifies fully the very ideas which were being written in a book soon to published **The Rediscovery of Music**. (1)

This shows better than arguments based on abstract speculation that the trend of the progressive music of the day, or at the very least of a stream of it, is going in the direction aforementioned. By going ahead with undaunted ardor and most uncompromising will into the musical unknown, Carl Ruggles proves himself to be of the race pioneers and adventurers. His ancestors for many generations, we are told, were navigators. He has received from them not only his blue, piercing eyes, but the love of the vast horizons and the power to ride over tumultuous waves, which waves may as well be those of the great sea of sounds unfurling over the new land, the land of the American civilization, which pioneers even now are building, unnoticed, hampered, yet undaunted.

1. Editor's Note: Unfortunately, Rudhyar was unable to find a publisher for **The Rediscovery of Music**.