

WHEN DOES SOUND BECOME MUSIC?

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Sixty years ago Edgar Varèse shocked the musical Establishment by proclaiming, "Music must sound!" Today such a statement no longer astonishes or upsets anyone, for an immense variety of sounds — some heard in nature, others produced by touching, hitting, and blowing into all kinds of manmade substances and objects — have been put together and presented as music. An objective yet concerned listener therefore might ask, "When do sounds combined in sequences and/or simultaneities constitute musically significant melodies, chords, and on a larger scale musical compositions? Can **any sound** be part of what can be significantly and validly called music — and if not, what indeed constitutes music?"

An apparently basic distinction can be made between noises, recognizable natural sounds (like animal cries, the sound of a running brook or waves breaking on a sandy beach), and, strictly speaking, **musical** sounds. In the past, musical sounds were produced by the human voice and musical instruments — musical because their use normally was restricted to the production of musical sounds. Noises did not belong to the field of music; nature's sounds were used very rarely and only episodically, but recently their use has increased. What then decides whether a sound can be considered musical? The answer is, the **culture** of a particular group of human beings.

The term **culture** may be interpreted at several levels of meaning. In this case it refers to the **expectation** which people conditioned by a particular culture have of hearing certain sounds or not hearing others. It refers to what has become customary or traditional in a number of definable circumstances — for example, attending a church service, listening to a troubadour returning from the Holy Land, or crowding a modern concert hall to hear a specially trained virtuoso or an orchestra. The specific circumstances in which music is heard are very important because, at least originally, they have much to do with the "musical" character of the sounds heard and the psychic or personal responses of those hearing them. As these cultural circumstances alter, the possibility arises of a corresponding change in what constitutes a musical sound. Sooner or later not only the musicality of various types of sounds, but also the expected character of combinations of these sounds (that is, musical "form") changes in order to satisfy a new kind of desire — the desire to meet psychological needs aroused by new social circumstances, particularly a new type of family life, education, and daily work.

This new desire may have a general collective character, but as there are several social classes and various types of human personalities, different kinds of psychological needs and levels of feeling-response inevitably coexist. Thus several types of music are produced and heard. In a society largely controlled by the media and featuring an individualistic kind of egalitarianism, all these types are given some chance of being heard. If a new kind of circumstance in which sounds reach the human ears becomes generalized, new sounds should replace or at least theoretically be added to the category of musical (because expectable and psychically satisfying) sounds. This is the situation which musicians and especially music lovers are experiencing today. Similar situations in the past brought about

an enlargement of the category of musical elements. These periods of transition in the past can help us better understand what is happening now.

When Varèse asserted that music must sound, it was not only because he felt it necessary to give the qualification musical to many recently produced manmade sounds (factory and street noises and, later, electronically generated vibrations). He was challenging something more fundamental: the idea that the music itself resides in the written score, thus in a complex and evolving **formula of relationship between musical notes**, rather than in actually heard sounds. According to the classical European tradition, the score **is** the music; the musical composition exists as a complete and significant entity in the written score, whether or not any sound is actually heard by human ears. These sounds could be — and for trained musicians they had to be — heard in the musician's mind. Here the term hearing refers to what probably can best be interpreted as an especially vivid type of imagining process producing the illusion of sound. What Varèse tried to say was that looking, however intently, at a symphonic score does not constitute a real or full musical experience. The actual sounds represented in the score by little black symbols (the musical notes) have to be actually heard by ears; the physical and auditory sensation cannot be ignored or given only a nonessential, subsidiary importance.

At least this should not be the case in this century when the traditional cultured way of experiencing music — the circumstances in which music is heard and the need or personal desire it is expected to satisfy — is rapidly changing. It is changing because technology has altered not only the general way of living but also the inner feeling of being an experiencing person — a person having meaning and essential importance in oneself and not merely as a component part in a set system of social relationships. In European music, this system was tonality. The musical urge to deal with complex tones having meaning and power in themselves as single, separate entities indeed parallels the intense emotional desire to operate, and to be valued by others, as an individual person whose beingness essentially and irrevocably matters. The development and growth of the potential of being inherent at birth in such persons turns out to be very important. Likewise in music, the production of new and rich sounds which may stir, exalt, or shock the individual's sense of being has also become a matter of supreme significance. In the 1920s Varèse expected and foresaw the development of an electronic technology which would theoretically make possible the production of any composite sound, any rhythmic or melodic sequence. (1)

When **anything** is possible, serious psychological problems arise in the development of the individual person. Too many options are confusing and may produce psychological paralysis. Too much permissiveness leads not only to anarchy and unfocused experiences, but to an overloading of the mind and of the capacity to give a totally significant response to the multiplicity of possible choices. The inevitable result is an almost compulsive return to an ancestral system of relationship. Thus a "new consonance" has become the foundation of most minimal music, while the repetition of sounds provides a sense of relaxed stability and non-intellectual simplicity. The obsessive rush of modern city life and the rat race of business and professions, which once moved at a calm pace making possible intuitive and

empathetic responses, demanded an antidote. Many people, more or less fascinated by Oriental traditions and the apparent calm and composure of gurus, found this antidote in subjective states of introversion and in "meditation music."

The artificiality and extreme intellectualism of the system which Schönberg and his School imposed upon a disintegrating sense of tonality paralleled the development of totalitarian police States. The alternative presented by most ancient Asian traditions has featured traditional procedures that induce would-be individuals to **conform** to a collective, theological approach to the meaning of human life and of the whole scheme of cosmic existence. Nevertheless there have been attempts to modernize ancestral traditions which brought inner security at the cost of a binding allegiance to exotic theological systems. However, the basic issue in music as well as philosophy and psychology is whether we consider our Western civilization to be in a period of accelerated growth leading to a glorious future of peace and prosperity for all, or in a state of transition between a disintegrating culture and one whose actual birth is perhaps still in a distant future.

A new music develops, if not out of a totally new sociopolitical situation or religion, at least out of radically changed circumstances, as a definitely new phase of the culture and new conditions of performance supersede what had been experienced until then. Plainchant took form when a Catholic culture developed in monasteries and, soon after, in Romanesque churches and Gothic cathedrals. The "New Music" of the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries resulted from the troubadours' experience of the Crusades and the remarkable rise of a new ideal of womanhood; instrumental sounds and profane words were mixed with the sacred use of voices intoning scriptural texts, and as increasing trade and travel spawned the rise of a new class, the bourgeoisie, secular music adopted the structure of devotional motets, the structure acquiring a more personal, and eventually tonal character.

The early tonality system was still imbued with religious concepts and the theocentricism of the perfect triad. Then came the growth of Court-music, the aristocratic opera, and the synchronous development of a rationalistic and formalistic classical music through the eighteenth century. The Industrial Revolution led to the rise of the wealthy bourgeoisie and the dominant power of money, and with Romanticism to the dramatization of the efforts of tense, rebellious individuals to find a prestigious place in the new social order, as "virtuosi" — and a person can act as a virtuoso or a "star" (famous and well paid) in any field.

A new situation, however, is now developing as magnetic tapes, electronic instruments, radio and computer technology are bringing to nearly every home not only sounds of all kinds (whether or not they assume the character of music), but the possibility of producing theoretically as yet unheard combinations of vibrations perceptible to human ears. The individualization of music and the fragmentation of the musical consciousness of the people of a particular culture — and this now means almost the whole of mankind — may be reaching an extreme state. Human beings may live much of the time in a world filled with sounds, yet lose the sense of music.

As I understand and use the word, music implies culture. Are we today expanding to the point of the nearly total disintegration of what Europe developed during the last 2,500 years, allowing every technical procedure which profit-conscious and culturally irresponsible intellects are impelled to invent — or are we already feeling the need to conform to stabilizing principles of musical organization? And if so are these principles derived from a new type of **mind** calling for a new religion and culture?

The word religion is used here in its broadest sense; it refers to the collective desires and thinking capacity (usually in symbolic terms) of a relatively large collectivity of human beings who are, to some extent, integrated as a "people." More specifically it implies what I have defined as a "collective psychism" which unites the psyches of the people almost as strongly as the life-force integrates the activities of the material cells of a living organism. Music, I believe, is the most direct language that can be used to stabilize and communicate the psychism of a culture. The answer to the question posed by the title of this article is therefore sounds become music when the particular life-circumstances in which a culture is formed impel intuitive leaders to select those sounds (and their means of production) which best identify and communicate the developing psychism of the people integrated by the culture.

The problem our present society has to face is the fragmented character of the people it only superficially correlates in terms of material productivity, the need to survive, and the expectation of personal comfort and success. Several factors have contributed to the situation: the kind of education and school system which resulted from the permissive and individualistic approach promoted by educators and psychologists early in this century; the pressure exerted by the ubiquitous media; the spread of sound-technology; and the possibility for a mostly middle-class and relatively affluent youth to travel. Insofar as the raucous sounds of rock music gave a characteristic identity and substance to a new youth culture (or subculture) and came to express a particular kind of psychism, these sounds have to be considered music; but their extreme character very soon produced a compensatory reaction: a relaxing, introverted, and soothing music for meditation, and in general minimal music. The creators of such music, however, found their inspiration in Oriental gurus and in the music of old and now mostly disintegrating cultures, rather than in some possibly emerging new religion. A still larger number of young and middle-aged people today are seeking renewal, stability, and security in the most traditional forms of Christianity, whose ability to inspire a new type of music seems to have vanished long ago.

A truly new music needs a new faith, which in turn requires a new vision of reality, a new mind and collectively aroused group-feelings evoked by the vivid awareness that humanity is entering a totally different realm of possibilities. Are these possibilities revealed by a new kind of knowledge toward which the most progressive and unconventional scientists are groping, overburdened as they are still by the basic empirical restrictions of seventeenth-century European science? Are they to be actualized by an uncontrolled technology geared to monetary profit and the uncreative desire to make every activity of mind and body easier and faster? Is a truly new music to be created that would give to the

immense variety of possible sounds generated by modern technology the character of music? It might be a "cosmic" kind of music whose principles of organization would transcend the tonality system and the various kinds of "musical forms" derived from its dualistic character (the tonic-dominant and theme-countertheme polarities). Similarly, the development of non-Aristotelian and non-European types of logic has been attempted; for instance, a Zen kind of logic based on a five-fold sequence of propositions.

At any level of mental activity new possibilities of relationship between the components of an organized system can be actualized; a music may be created embodying revolutionary principles of integration operating at a level deeper than that of musical formalism, because only such principles can produce the consistency and purpose needed to structure, identify, and communicate a new kind (or quality) of collective psychism. Where there is no active psychism to give collective living a basic "tone" or essential quality, music has lost its power, and the livingness of culture has become formalism. A repudiation of all forms may also act as a negative kind of formalism. It may do so unless music, freed from these traditional forms, can impart a tension able to dynamize in a definite direction a process of psychic or spiritual transformation — the transformation of the listeners' innermost feeling-responses and mental awareness. These feelings and mental images are what is meant when music is said to be an expression of "the soul." This soul is essentially that of a collectivity of persons — a people, a culture.

However, the ambiguous term, soul, need not be given a transcendent meaning. Rock music reveals the soul of a collectivity of human egos desiring to act and be counted as an integrated group within a confused society which engenders them, yet has no significant place and function for them. Minimal music and "space music" reveal another aspect of the generational soul. These are aspects of a collective psychism whose incoherence and tensions — and often despair — tell vividly but tragically that the new faith and world-view needed for the development of a new culture and a new music are, at best, still in an embryonic state. Until this future collective organism of humanity reaches a substantial condition of being at the level of an integrating as well as inspiring psychism, the multitude of sounds technology is making possible cannot find their proper function in a truly new and vital music. Moreover, the varied ways of listening to them in circumstances imposed by a social system featuring at the same time an ideal of extreme individualism and an actual subservience to peer-groups or social class, cannot provide the initial "sacred" environment that could adequately nurture this "music of the future" of which Wagner, Liszt, and Scriabin could only dream.

Varèse proclaimed "Music must sound!"; but the Pandora's box he and sound engineers opened under the pressure of a Western civilization, which may be slowly collapsing amidst the musical remains of ancient cultures, has released an incoherent multitude of sounds the likes of which no culture has ever accepted as elements of music. The great issue now is how and when these sounds can be integrated in a music able to assimilate as significant factors an immense variety of composite vibrations, because its scope is no longer determined by local conditions, but has become global and possibly cosmic. The issue can

hardly be met by composers compelled to function as sound engineers. It requires the embryonic growth of a new mind and a consecrated will to psychic and intellectual transformation — a new philosophy of existence, intense enough to assume the character of a new faith, and a new vision of the character and meaning of being human.

1. Editor's Note: Rudhyar is able to speak authoritatively regarding Varèse ideas and vision because the two men were close friends, especially during WWI and the 1920s.