

Chimera II: The Margins of Mutual Comprehension

The publication in this issue of Leonard B. Meyer's superbly detailed analysis of the Trio of Mozart's G Minor Symphony became the occasion for us to reexamine and restate some of the general aims of *Critical Inquiry*.

From its inception *Critical Inquiry* was based on the assumption that we can indeed understand each other, at least to the point where critical exchange becomes meaningful and fruitful. It is this belief, for example, that has led us to eschew the more fiery debates and to concentrate instead on articles in which distinguished critics of all the arts attempt to explore the issues that divide them—the correspondence between Gombrich and Bell, for example, Booth's attempt to represent his understanding of Abrams followed by Abrams' representation of how he understands his own work, or, similarly, the exchange between Angus Fletcher and Northrop Frye. Even in our more heated Critical Response section, we have tended to reject those arguments that reflect primarily the egos of the disputants in favor of discourse that reveals the actual issues that separate them. We have been fully conscious that such a focus eliminates some of the excitement of fiery battle, and we are aware as well that we have not always succeeded in our attempt.

Our task has been further complicated by an editorial policy that insists that serious inquirers in any branch of the humanities can, without sacrificing the fruits of their expertise, be read and understood by critics of all the arts. We did not wish, in other words, to concentrate on the kind of interdisciplinary article that becomes general in its application because an art critic, let us say, mentions a few works of literature and adds a few superficial comments about music. The kind of generalization we looked for was contained in articles whose underlying questions had serious implications for critics in all fields even when the value of the essay depended upon the degree of revelation about one artist, one art, or even one important work. So, for example, we did not expect every one of our readers to have as crucial an interest in Verdi as did Philip Gossett. But we could think of no serious critic who could fail to be enlightened about the recurrent critical problem of the degree to which an artistic convention actually controls the form of a masterpiece even when the artist is consciously dissatisfied with that convention. At the same time and as a test of the fruitfulness of the underlying question, the essay had to be one of vital importance not only to music critics in general but even to specialists in the music of Giuseppe Verdi. Similarly

we understood that not all of our readers have an equally vital interest in ballads; but, at least as far as the editor of *Critical Inquiry* is concerned, if he wished to recommend to a tyro literary critic a perfect model for characterizing a genre, he would without a moment's hesitation suggest a careful study of Bertrand Bronson's "Traditional Ballads Musically Considered." Or let me cite one final example: while all musicologists and indeed many other lovers of contemporary music would necessarily be familiar with the works of Roger Sessions it would be unreasonable to expect more than a large fraction of our subscribers to be thoroughly versed in all the works of that distinguished composer. Yet it is no accident that, with only superficial knowledge about music, I find myself making reiterated use of Edward Cone's "In Defense of Song: The Contribution of Roger Sessions" as a source of unconscious plagiarism in my own literary criticism. For example, in connection with work on types of narrative progression, the following paragraph recurs in various transformations in my own inquiries:

The following passages are of the kind that the runner can read. But they write out in big letters a lesson to be learned from every level of Sessions' music. Whether one looks at harmony, melody, or orchestration; whether one takes as unit the phrase, the period, the section, or the entire movement—in every case one finds that the detail vitalizes the progression, the progression imparts significance to the detail. [P. 104]

Our problems in locating, encouraging, and publishing such articles in every field are sometimes amusingly compounded by the assurance of each specialist that those outside his immediate field have something like the same degree of literacy and skill as he does at least in the rudiments of his specialty. The literary critic, for example, who has practically memorized the works of Daniel Defoe occasionally thinks that we are editorially insane when we increase the amount of quoted material from *Colonel Jacque*. This normally does not provide us with insuperable problems, and some of our subscribers may remember that we once actually reprinted a complete short story in connection with an important article by Eudora Welty. In turn many of our writers in the visual arts forget that for many of us mere mention of the names Titian's *Sacred and Profane Love* or Duchamp's *Bottlerack* simply does not evoke a detailed mental image of the work of art as it does for them. Indeed we have temporarily annoyed some of our contributors by insisting that we reprint a photograph of this painting, of that architectural structure.

But here, alas, our problems with music are occasionally transformed into editorial vicissitudes. Even the most elaborate musical annotation is not of much use to those who cannot read music with facility. (Some of our best musicologists, for whom musical notation is almost a

native language, find it difficult even to conceive the state of ignorance that prevents an educated person from glancing at, let us say, the score of the Trio of Mozart's G Minor Symphony and hearing it, fully orchestrated, in his imagination.) Normally we are able to solve this problem satisfactorily by making certain that each musical article can be understood on two levels: for those who understand musical annotation, all requisite musical evidence is included; for those interested primarily in the underlying aesthetic questions raised in the essay, the text—especially when complemented with recordings—is almost entirely self-explanatory.

Now, however, I come to the occasion for including this second "Chimera." Almost simultaneously with the initial conception and decision to publish *Critical Inquiry*, Leonard B. Meyer began to plan and write "Grammatical Simplicity and Relational Richness: The Trio of Mozart's G Minor Symphony" which appears in this issue. Unlike most of the articles we publish, this one was written especially for us. It was, in a way, to be a crucial experiment carried out by someone whom we consider one of the best living musical theorists to test the very margins of mutual comprehension of serious humanists. It was, from our point of view, an experiment as well of an even more crucial nature. For years groups of music critics had wondered whether a major piece of music was amenable to a complete and detailed stylistic analysis of the sort performed almost routinely in literary criticism. Our anticipation of seeing the completed article has increasingly sharpened during the past two years since, in addition to the other virtues we expected from Meyer's work, the general aesthetic problem suggested in the phrase "grammatical simplicity and relational richness" was one that had long fascinated us and one which we have never seen adequately treated in connection with any art. It is much easier for a literary critic, for example, to find something novel to write about an abstruse line in Eliot's *Four Quartets* or Robbe-Grillet's *Le Voyeur* than it is, let us say, to discuss the richness of the surface simplicity of Byron's "So, We'll Go No More A-Roving." In short, Leonard Meyer's analysis promised to be everything we had looked for in *Critical Inquiry*, and our pride in being the first to publish it was increased by our certainty that, however controversial, the permanent value of the essay would help ensure the function of our journal as a repository for profound critical thought.

There were only two problems. First, the length of the essay meant that we would have to devote the greater part of one issue to its publication. We believed and believe that it deserves such extended treatment. The second problem is more difficult. While those musicologists whose opinions we most admire were unanimous about the importance of Meyer's accomplishment, some raised the question about whether humanists who are not specialists in musical analysis would be able to understand the value of the essay without considerable facility in read-

ing music. It was at this point that my coeditors unanimously elected me as musically the most illiterate of our small band and insisted that I become the test case to determine the extent to which someone with my educational and natural deficiencies could understand Meyer's accomplishment. I will not pretend that the task was a simple one. After I had read the article twice, crucial passages still eluded my comprehension. Though I can dodder along in following a musical text, doddering is in fact the apposite phrase. Finally I locked myself in my study with my recording of the Mozart Symphony and the essay. Where before the musical examples had puzzled me, they began to grow clear and, as they did, and as I replayed and then reexamined the crucial passages that Meyer referred to, other things grew clearer. I understood the Mozart Symphony in intellectual terms that I would have thought impossible for one whose reaction to music and especially to Mozart had never gone beyond the intuitive before. I understood why for years I had been moved so profoundly by the Trio of that great work. Finally, I began to understand and even to deal for the first time—in poetry and narrative as well as in music—with the relation between surface simplicity and intuited richness.

Every bit of effort I had devoted to Meyer's essay was repaid many times by a degree of understanding I did not think possible for me. Not one of the many pages devoted to "Grammatical Simplicity and Relational Richness: The Trio of Mozart's G Minor Symphony" could have been put to better use. I can only hope and indeed I believe that, whatever the surface difficulties, your experience will be as profoundly rewarding as mine was.

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