
MUSIC

Remembering the Notes

Knowing by Heart

By Martin Cooper



“YOU FORGET YOURSELF” used to be a stern rebuke which nevertheless contained an implicit compliment; for it presupposed a certain standard of behaviour accepted by both parties and only disregarded in a moment of unpardonable forgetfulness. No one would have used such a rebuke to a tramp, because it was not felt possible to presuppose in a tramp a self, or standard of behaviour, that could be either remembered or forgotten. “*You forget yourself*” was in fact the obverse of that more overtly exclusive, Chesterfieldian counsel “*Remember who you are.*” Both have a distinctly old-fashioned air about them today and are among the countless idiomatic élitisms, overt or implicit, of the language, no longer in common use but still no doubt suspiciously well understood.

There is a context, however, in which *to forget oneself* is a counsel of perfection, and who you are—or were—is the only thing that one can be sure of remembering. I heard the performance of Verdi’s *Requiem* conducted by Toscanini at the Queen’s Hall in 1938; and until I really thought what I meant, I used to say that I remembered it. Now I am more guarded, for what I in fact remember is the effect that it had upon me at the time. If I were asked to identify Toscanini’s tempo for the controversial opening bars or the distinguishing characteristics of Kerstin Thorborg’s singing of the mezzo-soprano solo part, I could hardly give a firmer answer than someone who had not been present at the concert. In what sense, then, have I forgotten or remembered that experience? I feel convinced that, although I cannot recall to my consciousness any details, Toscanini’s interpretation has had a deep influence on my understanding of Verdi’s *Requiem* itself, and also more generally on my unconscious standards of interpretation and performance. For these are built up like a coral reef, in minute fragments and beneath the surface, to emerge as resistant to change, as inconveniently sharp and jagged as the coral reef itself.

IN WHAT WAY OTHER THAN THIS can artistic standards be formed? We are no more obliged to remember consciously the details of that formation than we are obliged to remember the food which builds our bodies. Reading offers perhaps clearer examples than listening to music. I first read *Anna Karenina* when I was 18 and had none of the emotional experience needed to appreciate Tolstoy’s understanding of the conflicts in Anna herself, of Karenin’s pathos or Vronsky’s ambiguity. At that first reading these were all subordinate to the immediately winning personality of Levin; and it was only twenty years later that I comprehended the whole web of relationships and the art with which it was spun. Yet at that second reading I became aware how much I had absorbed of the story and how certain scenes, which I could be said to have “forgotten”, had in fact coloured my imagination as a boy and no doubt formed particles in that reef of standards which, once formed, acts as a barrier against the pretentious, the second-rate and the *faux bon*.

Premature acquaintance with another, admittedly very different masterpiece, Beethoven’s *Missa Solemnis*, was a purely negative experience, for this was something quite beyond my powers of comprehension when I first heard it at the age of 22. I was only conscious of being in contact with a huge explosion of intellectual and emotional energy which often offended my pleasure-loving ears, baffled my musical understanding and my sense of musical propriety, and left me for the time being effectively alienated. Only the experience of many subsequent performances and some hard work outside the concert-hall have gradually enabled me to come (humbly, too, it might be added) to terms with music whose supreme greatness has a Himalayan quality, challenging the brave but warning the rest of us to stick to the plains, or at least to attempt no more than the foothills of aesthetic experience.

If there is no sure method of testing the accuracy of one’s memory of a performance except by comparing it with a recording or a tape, the remembering of music itself presents other problems, first among which is the variety of senses in which we use the expression. *To remember* a musical composition may, in ordinary speech, mean anything from being able to conduct a whole opera (or play a whole concerto) by heart to being able to whistle the next two bars of a Schubert song and, perhaps, to identify a wrong note in the vocal line or a wrong harmony in the accompaniment. Remembering a piece of music is generally used to denote something rather less precise than “knowing” it. Whereas we speak of remembering general outlines and characteristics, we say that we “know” such facts as the number and description of a symphony’s

movements and perhaps salient points of orchestration—"that marvellous bit for the horns in the slow movement", or Orsino's "dying fall."

NONE OF THIS VAGUE and essentially passive acquaintance with a work has anything in common with the precise and active memorising essential to the performer. This ability to memorise is one of the many subtle ingredients which together constitute the difference between the true solo-performer and the member of an orchestra or a chorus, neither of whom is asked to commit his part to memory.

There is an implicit reference to this faculty in a linguistic usage common to French and English, but not (I believe) to other European languages. Where the other Romance languages refer plainly to the faculty of recall (*a mente, a memoria, de memoria*)—and German (*auswendig*) and Russian (*naizust*) both stress the exterior, parrot-like element in memorising—French and English both speak of learning "by heart." (It is no doubt a good thing for us that we are not quite alone in this, or we should undoubtedly be accused of a characteristic sentimentality and ignoring of the intellect, from which the French connection saves us.) But how in fact is the "heart" involved?

The medieval division of the soul's faculties, which still provides a good rough guide to their respective functions in determining human activity, casts some light on the subject. Intellect (or understanding), memory (the power of recall) and will (the motor force) all play a part in the memorising of music. The proportions in which they are concerned will vary, both with the individual artist and with the type of music which he has to memorise. The singer and the player of all instruments (except the piano) are concerned with a single line of sound—its rhythm, its contour, the minute variations of colour, dynamics and pace which mark its course, and the precise relationship of that course to the music which surrounds or supports it. The part played by the intellect in a singer's memorising the role of, say, *Tosca* will clearly be very different in both quantity and quality from that in a pianist's memorising Beethoven's *Hammerklavier* sonata.

To commit to memory the fugal finale of the *Hammerklavier* without understanding its structure is, I suppose, theoretically possible, but only to those rare performers who enjoy a power of total recall. Normally an intellectual grasp of the musical structure is absolutely essential in this

case. The power of recall in its humbler manifestations is, of course, the raw material of memory and is to some extent involuntary; so that there is a sense in which music may be recalled like any other physical sensation. For the serious performer, however, the power of recall must ideally be reinforced first by understanding the structure and the nature of the work: and then may be further fortified by visual and what may be called generically "tactile" aids. The look of the music on the printed page is probably to most performers a far less potent aid to memory than the feel of it under their fingers, in their throats or on their lips, as the case may be.

In a recent essay on "Memory and Attention in Music"¹ Diana Deutsch also traces a hierarchy, within any existing musical language, of

"a priori probabilities of occurrence for notes standing in various positions along the scale. In traditional Western diatonic music for example, statistics show that the tonic is most often followed by the subdominant or dominant and then, in decreasing order of probability, by the supertonic and the mediant."

In fact she is recording information instinctively possessed by any musical practitioner and even by any music-lover who, as it were, knows the musical language concerned.

IT IS THE DISAPPOINTMENT of this expectation which has told most strongly with music-lovers against serial music, where they are not instinctively aware of any possibilities or probabilities, and there is therefore no intrinsic ebb and flow in the listener's consciousness. Where there is no generally accepted harmonic norm, it is only possible to achieve the sense of relaxation by alterations of pitch and, most importantly, dynamics. Serial music is for this reason more difficult than diatonic to commit to memory. Arnold Schoenberg was unwilling to recognise this, on the grounds that

"a musical creator's mind can operate subconsciously with a row of tones, regardless of their direction, regardless of the way in which a mirror might show the mutual relations, which remain a given quantity."

In fact he has been proved right in the sense that many performers today are able to memorise serial music, just as many singers can perform serial works, judged at first to be unsingable. On the other hand, the majority of music-lovers, even those who have had some musical training, still find a major difficulty in appreciating music composed according to a conscious method rather than conceived in an existing, shared language: and this is fundamentally the performer's difficulty in memorising such music.

Every musical performance involves an infinity

¹ *Music and the Brain: Studies in the Neurology of Music*. Edited by MACDONALD CRITCHLEY and R. A. HENSON. Heinemann, £11.50.

of minute physical gestures differing according to the instrument played, but all dictated by the brain—striking and releasing, increasing and decreasing pressure of hand, arm or breath. Together these produce the infinitesimal variations of tempo, rhythm, colour, touch, attack and release that distinguish one interpretation from another.

Ideally, all these movements should have become instinctive before the performer goes on to the platform, though he will still make minute variations in each performance. In perhaps the majority of performances, however, it is soon clear that the part played by the performer's brain is virtually unconscious, and relates to the correct performance of these physical gestures rather than to re-living the composer's experience. In that case, memory is quasi-automatic and what may be roughly described as emotional.

And this brings us to the third of the faculties identified by the schoolmen—the will, or motor force, without which understanding and the power of recall are useless. However primitive it may be, every musical composition has both a skeleton (*i.e.* a musical structure that can be tabulated) and a living body (*i.e.* an emotional life) which can be roughly plotted on a graph but cannot be expressed in words. To memorise the skeleton is comparatively simple, but to recreate the living entity is comparable only to the actor's re-creation of character on the stage.

Once a solo performer has mastered the technique of his instrument his first task is to acquire a repertory, which means learning by heart works with the great majority of which he is already very familiar. Since performing talent generally shows itself early and includes a large element of mimicry, most young artists come to the works they set out to memorise with a very clear conception, a blend of what their teachers have told them and what they have admired in the performances they have heard in the concert-hall or on record. Most bring at least some contribution of their own to their performances. But perhaps the greatest threat to a young artist's development lies in the temptation to continue into maturity to reproduce, unconsciously and to an increasing degree mechanically, the emotional diagram or stereotype of a work that he accepted as a student. One of the unmistakable hallmarks of a great artist is an ability to re-live at every performance the emotional life of the work which he is playing. The commonest formula for success with the public, on the other hand, is to reproduce on every occasion the conventional stereotype of a work with the maximum of technical brilliance, personal charm, and just the right amount of rhetorical exaggeration needed to make every feature tell.

WHY IS THIS “simulated emotion”, this scrupulously observed and skilfully presented stereotype—a package-deal in an attractive wrapping—often more effective with the public than the genuine re-creation, the personal re-living of a work?

I think it is probably because there is always something disturbing, an element of the unexpected (and, to the conventional mind, of the slightly indecent) in the spectacle of birth, even the rebirth of a work of art. A “brilliant” stereotype is guaranteed not to disturb and demands the minimum of attention. Moreover, the conditions of concert-giving today make it increasingly difficult to avoid stereotyped performances except by contradicting the work's nature.

At least ninety-five per cent of the average performing artist's repertory consists of music written between 1700 and 1920, already much performed and very often familiar from recordings by great artists. The great majority of young performers are content to follow in these by now very well-known tracks, while the few who deliberately react against tradition often reveal themselves as wilful rather than original. It is only a very small minority who are willing to accept and, as it were, digest the traditional conception of a work and, fortified by that sustenance, to make their own fresh approach to the music, to re-create and re-live it as a personal experience. This process in fact demands qualities of character and intelligence rare, and perhaps even unnecessary, in the performers of the past, for whom much of this music was all but contemporary. The dazzling virtuoso and the natural charmer will always have their public, as they should. But the originality most characteristic of the latter half of the 20th century is less of personality than of character, more consciously concerned with intellectual and emotional truth than with sensuous beauty.

DOES THIS MEAN IN EFFECT THAT memorising today is less “learning by heart” than it was formerly? Is the role played by the emotions smaller than it was, say, a century or even half-a-century ago?

We have no means of giving any certain answers to these questions. But it seems probable that in this, as in other similar cases, we are not so different from our great-grandfathers as we used to think. Where we are different is in the obsessive analysis of our own processes, in the explanations we feel impelled to give ourselves of our own feelings and actions, that self-consciousness which in its extreme form makes the lives of many intelligent and sophisticated people re-

semble exercises before a looking-glass, a kind of *ballet aux miroirs*. This self-consciousness can severely restrict and deform, if it does not altogether cripple creative powers. And it partly explains the particular jejune, sterile quality of much that is written, composed, and painted today. A kind of naive intellectual pretentiousness is the commonest fault in all the contemporary arts, and will no doubt be identified by our great-grandchildren as easily (and as contemptuously) as we identified the emotional gluttony and hypertrophy of bad 19th-century art.

The reaction against that hypertrophy was violent and prolonged, and there was a time between the two World Wars when arbiters of intellectual and aesthetic elegance, led by Stravinsky, might well have laughed at "learning by heart." There is a good account of Viennese musical taste in the 1940s in Alfred Brendel's recent book *Musical Thoughts and Afterthoughts*.²

"Piano students played Beethoven as if he had learnt composition from Hindemith. Romanticism was disparaged as something vague, disorderly, dreamy, Utopian. . . . It was identified with pathos, sentimentality, luxuriance, frequent arpeggio chords and the neglect of strict time-keeping. . . . What went unnoticed was that Classicism itself was one of the illusions of the moment. Despite an occasional undercurrent of aggressiveness, and despite its apparent reluctance to take itself seriously, Classicism simulated an order which no longer existed."

In chronicling the signs of reaction against this unnatural austerity Alfred Brendel speaks of the "nostalgic revival" of Schubert's sonatas and Mahler's symphonies. And we should not blink the fact that all such revivals and nostalgias are the hallmarks of an age orientated towards the past rather than the future, and in danger from the mentality of the connoisseur or the museum-director. This has always, with rare exceptions,

run counter to contemporary art; and it has often given rise to acute personal enmities between the connoisseur (expert in the art of the past and unable to conceive other criteria in judging the art of his own day) and the creator and his champions.

The two attitudes were perfectly summed up in the persons of Bernard Berenson and Herbert Read. Which of these two men was in the wrong? Neither—or both, in the shared belief that each was in some way engaged upon the same pursuit as the other.

MUSIC DIFFERS FROM the visual arts in the sense that the music of the past can be re-created, by performance, in a way that has no parallel in painting or sculpture. The reaction described by Brendel has certainly recovered for us works that seemed irretrievably dead, such as Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsodies* in his own hands.

And yet there can be no return to the emotional self-indulgence and personality-parading which were once thought part of a musical performance. The quality of an artist's emotional comprehension of the work he has to perform is still the chief determinant of the quality of his performance. But that comprehension is itself qualified and supported, modified in expression and extended in range and depth, by what are basically intellectual factors undreamed of by the instinctive performers of the past. Perhaps the ideal of control—which presupposes a highly developed consciousness—is the most important modern addition to the performer's ideal. This control does not preclude moments of emotional outburst, even violence, nor does it imply a merely safe interpretation. It does, on the other hand, require a knowledge of the work as a living organism—a "knowing by heart" that is much more than a feat of recall and resembles rather a personal relationship, both in the qualities which it demands and in the experience which it communicates.

² *Musical Thoughts and Afterthoughts*. By ALFRED BRENDEL. ROBSON BOOKS, £5.25

NOTES & TOPICS

Unreal Estate

The Wrongs of Copyright—By MICHAEL HOLROYD



A SA DEVICE for turning men of letters into businessmen, the law of copyright has been a convincing failure—and nowhere more so than America. In that most businesslike of countries where, even when life is held cheap, property will be expensive, authors might reasonably expect the protection of a strong national copyright. Instead they have found, from the days of piracy to the modern technological revolution, that many moves aimed at fortifying the law have produced an opposite result. The idiosyncrasies of US copyright became so tedious and were so little understood that writers and publishers were tempted to ignore the law altogether, with results that affected British and other foreign authors whose books were published there. Unable to participate in the international Berne agreement in 1955, American copyright showed signs of drifting back to the knockabout world from which the 1909 copyright provisions had been intended to rescue us all. The law giveth, and the law taketh away. The situation grew so confused that writers were entitled to ask: what has gone wrong?

To begin with, it seems doubtful whether Congress ever understood that copyright is property. As a commodity it is too abstract, too sophisticated, for political digestion. Lawyers and Congressmen treated it more in the nature of a charity or even, in some instances, of a threat to free speech. Because it is invisible they claimed they could not see it, and tended to think more of the owner of an original document (which they could see) than its author. Unlike its twin, patent law, there has never been big money in copyright: so the American mind took a long time to wake up and is not yet fully awake.

In the book world, printers are far stronger than either publishers or authors and it is their interests that, before 1955, were largely reflected in various alterations to the law. Unlike their co-producers, printers take no risks. They are the

only party certain to make a profit on every title published and on every issue of a periodical. Publishers have a left and a right hand—the University Presses and the Commercial Houses: and it is a pity that one seldom knows what the other is doing. American writers are distressingly similar to writers in other parts of the world: born anarchists, paranoiacally incapable of mutual cooperation even for their own advantage. Literary agents and booksellers look on and make the best they can of a ramshackle situation. Books are reduced in price so fast that it is almost a free-for-all. There is no organisation in America—comparable to the National Book League in Britain—that represents all these groups in dealing with the government. So little general improvement is likely.

The 1909 copyright law was an engagingly out-of-date contraption even when it was first introduced. Under its provisions you registered a book for twenty-eight years from the date of publication and then, if you had a long memory and some head for mathematics, you registered it again for a further twenty-eight years. Some remembered, others did not. There were, of course, benefits in bad law for some people. They are in no sense crooks who take maximum advantage of legal anomalies. Small publishers, whose trade is mainly with libraries, have been enterprising in the exploitation of cheap unauthorised editions—books that legally or illegally pay no royalties. An amiable muddle congealed the book business and was symbolised by the oddly-named Universal Copyright Convention (UCC—an appropriate sound) which had been formed after the Berne agreement.

THE CHANGES so urgently needed have come with a peculiarly democratic style and speed: that is to say, slowly, clumsily, and with massive compromise. During 1960 and 1961, new copyright measures had been codified and printed, and by 1964, ten years after Berne, a draft was introduced to Congress. It was shuttled around, lobbied, altered and talked about for a further ten years. In 1974 a version passed the Senate, but failed with the House of Representatives. The