

The Creative Emptiness of Today

Music After Modernism, by Samuel Lipman, *New York: Basic Books, 1979. viii + 256 pp. \$11.95.*

"MUSIC IS IN A BAD WAY." This no-nonsense sentence unequivocally announces the theme that Mr. Samuel Lipman's valuable book will develop. His exposition of the contemporary musical world's chronic state of debility confirms his thematic clairvoyance. Our society, as he proves, has been living musically since World War I in a moribund period of decline and fall, eking out an existence on the legacies of past greatness. The judgment, no doubt, is pessimistic, but not easily controvertible.

It can be demonstrated statistically that there is an abundance of musical activity in this country, much more than in any past era. But proliferation of orchestras and concerts is no evidence of communal exigency. Numbers are no substitute for quality—this the "depressing" state of academic musical life verifies. "The canon of great music," Lipman writes, "was closed at least forty years ago.... Fifty years ago modern music was the music then being written. Now half a century has passed, and the same music is still modern in the estimation of performers and audiences alike."

I cannot dissent from this pejorative evaluation of the state of music. Lipman's far-from-obsequious account of "the Holy Family of Bayreuth" makes it impossible not to realize from what an opulent status music has become disestablished. Throughout the nineteenth century the arts were regnant, and their overlord, as in no other period of our history, was music. To the majority of today's concertgoers *that* music still is, paradigmatically, music.

In the works of Wagner (the "shocking story" of whose "virulent and committed hatred of Jews" Lipman recounts) the Romantic era was consummated. A Titanic creator (though whether he was primarily a musician or a dramatic impresario is another matter), Wagner, not content with the acknowledged domina-

tion of music over the other arts, nor satiated by the sycophantic adulation of the Wagnerites, came to believe "that he in himself had superseded dogmatic religion." Farther this "great megalomaniac" could hardly go. But to a greater or lesser degree this sacralizing conception of music prevailed.

"So the problem for musicians in our time is both simple and difficult," Lipman writes: "after the Old Testament what room is there for the New?" There has been a "decline in the public image of serious music"; what a century ago was a substitute for religion has become a high-style form of entertainment: and the lucratively-rewarding perdurance of the Romantic past leaves little room for present-day production.

To exemplify his view of the twentieth-century composers' dilemma, Lipman discusses the careers of five of them. Rachmaninoff, the reactionary, fiercely attacked by the avant-garde for his rejection of what seemed to him the disordered ugliness of modernism, "reflect[ed] his own world—simply, honestly, and directly," in music for which there is still an enthusiastic audience. Mahler, presently successful—most recently, indeed, although he died in 1911—may enjoy his current vogue, Lipman thinks, partly because of the frustrated modern composers' identification of their cause with his, now at least momentarily triumphant. Aaron Copland's praiseworthy efforts to establish an independent American music foundered when internationalism "homogenized" the musical scene. Yet "[t]he story of Copland's music is the story of the best we in America have."

It is obvious that Schoenberg is the modern composer for whom Lipman has the highest admiration. I agree that Schoenberg's often heavy-handed involvement with extra-musical ideas may have "place[d] upon [his] music a weight it could not carry." But I find it difficult to believe, as Lipman apparently does, that the ideas of themselves will assure the continuing life of music that has provoked so many years' hostility—music that, while it

may elicit respect, rarely induces love. Stravinsky, Lipman sees as an artist devoted to "conservation in an age of dissolution." Lipman suggests here, quoting from Virgil Thomson, that Stravinsky's making music out of music's past resulted from an inability to sustain the creative drive of his early career, and that his adoption finally of Schoenberg's serial technique was part of the same pattern—one more way in which he could be himself. Were this the place and had I the space I could enjoy contesting those judgments.

The chapter in this book that deals with the activities of the postwar (II) avant-garde is notably instructive (and depressing). Efforts to impose a rigorously determinist schematization on all the constituent elements of a composition; the use of tape as a medium—computers and synthesizers; the resulting proliferation of brutally non- and anti-musical sounds; and finally (should I say, terminally?) the use of chance, the aleatory jumbling together of "whimpers, groans, and sobs," and any sounds of any degree of stridency whatever ("The sounds suggest a Rorschach test devised and administered by a Dada psychologist...."): these attempts failed. The only music that has won more than a modicum of general acceptance has been middle-of-the-road, belonging to the mainstream. No revelatory epiphanies there!

"An important result of the atrophy of musical creation in our time has been the tendency to replace the composer by the performer, to substitute star performers for star composers." And the performers' predominant interest (as I can testify who have listened often to their conversations) is in making their careers. A century ago contemporary music was the mainstay of the repertoire, and was played constantly, by popular demand. Today, "[a] performer's career can be no longer advanced, but rather only harmed, by any association with new music." Performers, therefore, in spite of their preeminence, exist in a

"parasitic relationship to the past." Audiences attend concerts to hear *Mehta's* Bruckner, *Bernstein's* Mahler, or *Van Cliburn's* Tchaikowsky. "In the will and desire to affect the course of music, today's performers appear largely lacking."

"Only a hardy soul would prophesy a new golden age when nothing at all save the creative emptiness of today seems in sight." I agree with Lipman that the "highly touted return to the presumably eternal verities of melody and harmony" is no solution. The eternal verities, I think, reside elsewhere. It appears to me, in fact, that the problem cannot be solved by technical and methodological revivals or innovations, for it is rooted in morality and is symptomatic of the breakdown of a deracinated culture in a desacralized society. (Lipman, to my mind, misses the mark here.) From behind the Iron Curtain a young Russian art historian, targeted by the KGB, writes: "We need new creative efforts, we need a new language. We must speak of what is beyond modernism and conservatism alike, of what is eternally living and absolute in this world of the relative, of what is simultaneously both eternally old and eternally young."¹ Of course!

Samuel Lipman is his own man and has not been taken in by the Establishment. Clear-eyed discernment, combined with lucidity and literacy such as distinguish too rarely music-critical writing, make this book a commendable achievement. His sophisticated awareness (not restricted to music) of the cultural ambience of his time helps to make these essays pleasurable as well as profitable for any educated person—musician or not—to read, and by this reviewer recommendable without reservation.

Reviewed by DONALD POND

¹Evgeny Barabanov, "The Schism Between the Church and the World," *From Under the Rubble* (Boston, 1975), p. 192.

The Russian Mystic

Vladimir Soloviev: Russian Mystic, by Paul Allen, *Blauvelt, New York: Steinerbooks, 1978. xx + 449 pp. \$15.00 (paper \$9.95).*

TO AMERICAN READERS, Vladimir Soloviev is no longer the unknown quantity that he was half a century ago. Yet English literature on Soloviev is not substantial; in fact, not all of the Russian's works have even been translated into English. Thus, every new and serious book on the Russian mystic should be welcome. In his recent study, Paul Allen evidences both painstaking research and a devotion to his subject. Even a Steinerian predisposition does not seriously distort his presentation.

As his title indicates, Allen focuses on Soloviev's "mysticism," a more than justifiable approach since Soloviev was one of the most genuine and captivating mystics of all time. Allen ought, therefore, to be excused for glossing over other facets of Soloviev's creativity. *Vladimir Soloviev: Russian Mystic* is basically an historical, biographical, and, to a lesser extent, systematic study. It evolves with the chronology of Soloviev's life, focusing mainly on his mystical experiences, beginning in early childhood. The book is divided into seven periods: each encompassing seven years, except the last section, which covers only five years. The division is somewhat artificial—Allen attributes mystical significance to the number "7"—but the book is not seriously handicapped by that format. The first period is naturally poor in content, but we do learn from it that Vladimir's father, the famous historian Sergei Soloviev, at first wanted to become a religious philosopher, then later discarded philosophy in favor of history. (Vladimir's grandfather, a priest, became the prototype of Father John in "Three Conversations.") Allen evokes the atmosphere infusing the home of the philosopher's parents, showing the father engrossed in his historical writings, seldom communicating with his children. Vladimir and the other small children

naturally clung to their mother, who was intuitive and mystical. (She was, by the way, a relative of the famous Russian philosopher and mystic, Gregory Skovoroda, who died in 1794.)

The second period, describing the philosopher from the age of seven until he was fourteen, is rich in inner experiences. At the age of ten, while attending a church service, Vladimir had his first vision of Saint Sophia. (Soloviev later recorded this experience in his poem "Three Meetings.") At the age of thirteen Vladimir began reading the materialists and nihilists avidly; he lost his faith in God. This worried his mother very much, but his father wisely decided not to reprimand him, seeing his son's disbelief as a phase that would soon pass. At the age of eighteen Vladimir returned to religion, and since then held that science should be religion's ally, not its enemy.

The third period (depicting the philosopher's growth from a "raw youth" of fourteen into a twenty-one year old) may be called a formative one. Apart from his studies at Moscow University, Soloviev also attended lectures in the Theological Academy, where Professor Yurkevich exerted an extremely beneficial influence on him. At the age of twenty-one Soloviev defended his master's thesis, "The Crisis of Western Philosophy." This was his first intellectual triumph. After Soloviev decimated his opponents, the historian Bestuzhev said, "We can congratulate Russia on a new genius."

The young philosopher between the ages of twenty-one and twenty-eight accomplished new feats of intellect, concurrently undergoing new mystical experiences. He travelled to England to study ancient mystical literature in the British Museum. In fact, his second vision of Saint Sophia took place in the Museum; during the course of it a voice told him to "go to Egypt." Soloviev obediently interrupted his studies and went to Egypt, where, in the desert, his third and most complete vision of Saint Sophia occurred.

After he returned to Russia he became a professor of philosophy. His lectures were so successful that he decided to deliver