

INTERROGATORY OF A MUSICIAN

by

ALBERT RICHARD

In the same way that water carries « the sound » from one wave to another, the musical message must be transmitted directly from one being to another if it is to remain pure and free from deformation.

I should be most pleased if the meeting of experts concerned with the theme : « Music and Technology » — which is to be held in Stockholm from the 8th to the 12th June 1970 — were to open by an investigation of the terms :

HEARING — LISTENING

I would like to quote Claude Augé's definitions :

HEARING :

Perceive through the sense of audition : hear a noise.

Listen : refusal to hear of something.

Receive a testimony : hearing of witnesses.

Grant the wishes of someone : hear the poor people's prayers.

LISTENING :

Intention to lend one's ears for hearing : listen to music.

Pay attention to someone's words : do not listen to scandal-mongers.

Gather up, grant : listen to the poor people's complaints.

We should start out with a parenthetical remark : people *listen to* discs, tapes, radio programmes, machines, etc.

They have no language; they are speechless. Our *listening* is in fact stimulated by a chain of « acoustical causalities », and merely coincides with the execution of this chain of events (movements or moving matter, actions or acting matter). They can in no way be distinguished from the programmed context to which they belong.

We might ask the following question : Even if it were controlled by human will, could human thought ever consider a « machine function » as representing an example of language ?

I have the impression that the most urgent investigation which might be proposed in Stockholm is the question : *What are the biological truths inherent in music ?*

This question might be formulated in more simple terms : Can music be thought of as a fully-determined function ? Where is an expression of organic life to be found in musical achievements ?

I should like to propose, as a preface to the investigation of such questions, a short study entitled : « Interrogatory of a musician ».

Let me make a request : if the present text is to be presented at the meeting, I hope that it will be read out slowly, and clearly, and above all, if possible, without the use of any sort of electronic machine : it should be a simple reading.

Interrogator : You're a musician. Would you please explain to me « who you are ».

Musician : A Man, living matter, moving and yet undetermined in the universe.

Interrogator : But you're a musician, no ?

Musician : No !

Interrogator : Oh, come on now ! You do write music, no ?

Musician : No !

Interrogator : Why are you denying things that are so obvious, and so widely recognized by everybody ?

Musician : Your question is badly formulated. A man cannot be separated from the state of mankind, therefore he's quite incapable of replying to a question : « Who are you ? » Nothing separates an individual from all other individuals. Every living being that can be recognized as a member of « Humanity » also belongs to the mass of matter present in the universe... as an indeterminable element giving rise to a set of movements that either produce or transform life.

Interrogator : But aren't you an individual, a musician ?

Musician : No !

Interrogator : Nevertheless you're a man, and you write music ; other men read it and perform it, others hear it ; therefore you're a musician, no ?

Musician : Once again, no ! Man cannot create ; his only capabilities are those of recognizing or becoming aware of things.

Interrogator : But nevertheless, your music, you do in fact write it ?

Musician : No, once again no ! I simply note what I hear, that's to say, whatever makes itself known to me — in me. You might call that « music », but in fact it's the moving matter of my life — whenever it changes state — that dictates its message. This message is moreover undecipherable for me. I note it, I transmit it, and it takes on the form of « music » ; other men hear it, but it remains just as undecipherable for them.

Interrogator : According to you, then, music is a sort of demonstration of life ?

Musician : Yes ! Life is man's only real possession. He has no other possessions which might distinguish him from the thousands of forms of moving matter that surround him ; the life-quality of man distinguishes him from these other phenomena ; his life is a message, and he transmits it by means of the various organs of his sensibility ; but one must insist that this message is incomprehensible for man himself... and is in fact intended for a more highly organized « matter » than man. Therefore the music transmitted by a man — let's suppose that music is one of man's sensibility states — is unseparable from the notion of a life-message ; the only existing modes of expression are those which join up with the development of the object to be transmitted.

Interrogator : Are you supposing therefore that music is inalterable ?

Musician : I'd prefer to say that all the different forms of music appear to emanate from a common source of mutual dependence — in that they all depend upon the existence of life. These forms are furthermore mutually compatible.

Interrogator : Do you think that the 20th century has extended these forms ?

Musician : We should consider that our century has reached the end of a crazy thrust into obscurity. This century is turning into midnight. It's time to light up the candles — not in order to see, or even try to see, but rather as a distress signal in the night, to catch the attention of various forms of organized moving matter which dominate our human destinies. All we can do is obey. There's no time left for searching out forms of expression. Man has upset the arrangement of these messages. In an absurd way he has provoked into activity certain alien forms of organic matter which have no concern for his destiny. The catastrophe at present is total. Music has become a victim of this disaster. The message is no longer transmitted ; it is prefabricated by forces whose only desire is to dominate. The musician no longer hears anything at all ; he has become a manufacturer, and his material sources are in no way related to the direct transmission of a message.

Interrogator : You're probably speaking of mechanized music ! You feel then that such means are unsuitable for transmitting the message which you described ?

Musician : That question appears essential to me. Before setting out to reply, just what do you really mean by « mechanized music » ?

Interrogator :

First — Every sort of machine or material substance that records music or, initially, sounds.

Second — Every sort of machine or material substance that reproduces music or sounds.

Third — Every imaginable mechanism or automaton, and every sort of treated sensitive matter that produce sounds, whether they be organized, unorganized, or organizable.

Fourth. — Every process that reproduces, in any form whatsoever, a noise, a sound, or a segment of noise or sound.

These four categories cover everything that linguistic usage usually defines as « mechanized music », and of course include such minor categories as magnetic tape music, electronic music, experimental music, electro-acoustical music, disc music, etc.

Musician : Before replying, I'd like to analyze under three headings certain aspects of mechanized music :

First — Its temporal fixity (with respect to our perceived time) upsets the life and death of music.

Second — The possibility of listening to the same piece of music whenever one likes is a guarantee for destroying its message, since this message is then displaced in its authentic transmission context (which is no longer the instant at which the message first occurred).

Third — Permanent control (which is possible at all levels of machine usage) destroys all possibilities of unity ; it inevitably brings about retouching by means of added fragments.

Before leaving off, I'd like to say a few words about music... or if you prefer : about « musical messages expressed by means of sounds ». The perception of our controlled time makes it no longer possible to measure duration. In order to do so, one would have to stop time itself, so as to be sure that the present is in fact... present ! Impossible ? Yes, but I must point out that music has always attempted to go beyond this impossibility. Musical language breaks away from durations. Everything has been said about time in music, but nothing yet has been said about the biology of music itself, that's to say, concerning the life and death of music. In this

sensible world which we know, with its questions of « perception » followed by « recognition », musical time is beyond our power. A thousandth of a second of music can last as long as a perceptible hour of human life. This makes me think that the organized forms of matter that lead us must have access to a perceptual scale quite different to our own. Now I'll reply to your question. One should consider that it's a serious crime to violate and upset the life of a sound. Its birth and death are encompassed in a time lapse derived from the laws and the material forces which control us. In any case, mechanized music merely reproduces events, without resuscitating them. It puts music on a stake, and fixes it down like a dead object, eternally confined to its very first life-form. Machine-produced sounds and sonic objects (from electronic or experimental music), because of the fact that they are governed by preliminary considerations brought about by the intention to « emit », lose their verity as direct messages. One of the most essential verities in the human sciences — which have been dimmed by the obscurantism of the 20th century — can be phrased in the following manner : Without a material accomplishment, involving every possible function of matter, transmission of the human life-message no longer takes place. The only way of coming to grips with biological verities is through direct gestures, without any intermediate transfer ; this contact is an outcome of the notion of human freedom, concerning not only gestures, at one end of the scale, but symbolic acts at the other.

Interrogator : How do you finally feel about contemporary music ?

Musician : The musical message is a cry given out by human life, and directed towards hundreds of millions of human lives ; it's a sort of hyphen between the epochs : past-present-future. A single life, as well as life in general, will always be formed out of hundreds of millions of previous lives ; this life-source is an amorphous agglomeration of matter, condensed out of countless numbers of scattered « life-fragments »... which have lived, are living, or will live. This century's blindness has traced out a path for music, which must necessarily become — once again — an order of obedience... obedience with respect to the laws of Nature, or more precisely, Human Nature, governed by the eternal principles of organized matter, and making use of man in order to transmit a message which man cannot decipher.

Note (to be thought of as a « conclusion » of the interrogatory) :

Those who read or hear these reflections should try not to make use of them for deriving thoughts which might be too hasty. They might rather cast a glance in the direction of the facts which have given rise to these reflections.

The person who put forward these reflections is devoting his entire energy, and therefore everything that can be considered authentic in a human being, towards the construction of a « sign »... which might be recognized by other human beings.

This « sign » might indicate to other men the traces left upon Things and upon Living Beings by those who still retain a conception of the respect of all that links us to our origins.

ALBERT RICHARD

*Translated from French
by William Skyvington*

ALBERT RICHARD is the director of LA REVUE MUSICALE in Paris. His numerous publications in the musical field have played an essential rôle in making known the work of contemporary composers such as Xenakis, Cage, Boulez, Schaeffer and Ballif.