

BOOK REVIEWS

PRESCRIPTIVE AND DESCRIPTIVE MUSIC *by* CHARLES SEEGER

This old-established American musicologist, composer and conductor has evidently devoted a lot of time and thought to the above subject and what he has to say in this contribution to *The Musical Quarterly* for April, 1958, is of especial value to the collector and research worker in the fields of folk musics.

Pointing out how inadequate our present system of musical notation is in enabling the composer to truly set down his involved musical thoughts (prescriptive and subjective) it is even more inadequate in representing actual musical performances (Descriptive and objective), and particularly so in dealing with other than Western musical systems.

To keep his explanations (or rather, hints) of the modern methods of Descriptive writing to its simplest terms he instances the simplest kind of music—unaccompanied melody—and in so doing points out the influence that words have upon the melodic and rhythmic line. (Here one thinks of the 18th century Mid-European religious movement of Chassidism wherein a state of ecstasy was induced by the singing of *wordless* songs in order to make contact with the Divinity thus freeing the song from any mundane influence). Seeger asks:— To what extent do our speech-conceptions of melody correspond to our music-conceptions of it; and to what extent does the visual representation of melody condition both conceptions of it? Drawbacks of our present music writing are revealed in the difficulties of conveying to the reader such composite melodic functions as tone-quality and accentuation. (One might add, subtle modulations and intonations).

An effort to expand the possibilities of two-dimensional depictions of musical performance so that qualities other than pitch and rhythm can be read off is contained in a music-writing known as “graphing” which borrows from the conventional system the uniform vertical co-ordinates for elapses of time and uniform horizontal co-ordinates for height of pitch. The elapse of time convention is no doubt inherited from writing.

A most important ingredient that is entirely missed by the conventional writing and which is so essential to the appreciation of a singing tradition is “what happens between the notes” (a point that can be appreciated by anyone who has heard African singing).

Two thoroughly unscientific things we do in transcribing non-Occidental music; first, we single out what appears to us to be structures in the other music that resemble familiar Occidental structures and ignore everything else for which we have no symbols. Second, we expect the resulting inadequate notation to be read by people who do not carry the tradition of the other music. To quote:— “The result as read can only be a conglomeration of structures part European, part non-European, connected by a movement 100% European”. To such a riot of subjectivity it is presumptuous indeed to ascribe the designation ‘scientific’.

A way out of this dilemma is to be found in the “electronic reduction of the oscillographic curve, especially of the sound track of high fidelity recording”. To quote Bartok “The only true notations are the sound tracks on the record itself.” (Your reviewer recalls being told once that there are people handling gramophone records continuously who are able to recognise the music on the records by observing the radial pattern made by reflected light. This, of course, is an extension of the Buchmann/Meyer optical method of measurement). Seeger contends that if the sinuosities are suitably compressed within a range of about 2.5 mm. to 25 mm. per second they produce a graph which can be read by anyone willing to do a little practice. Both graph and notation identify elapse of time with left to right on the page and height upon the page with pitch. They differ in that spacing is irregular in the notation but uniform in the graph. Notation can show pitch, amplitude (dynamics) and tempo only roughly whereas these are indicated very accurately on the graph. Proportion is easy to read in notation but difficult on the graph. Tone quality and accentuation are problematical in both systems. He therefore, recommends that for the present the notation and graph be used concurrently.

He has some interesting observations on the interaction of vibrato and rubato. “Vibrato is an alternation of adjacent pitch frequencies at a rate of from 4 to 10 per second and embracing from 1/5 to a whole tone in extent. Rubato is an alternation of anticipation and delay (or delay and anticipation) of successive beats customarily perceived by us as one salient deviation from the mean of variance”. Now what happens when a performer (say, a singer) wishes to pass to a higher note when at that precise moment his vibrato is in a ‘trough’? The chances are that he does not quite get onto the note but would be just that shade under it; and conversely, if he is at the peak of his vibrato and rises to his note he will be just that shade above the note. Analysis shows that most performers do not get immediately to the middle of a new note and he puts this suggestion forward as an explanation of this fact; and further, in the event of, say, overshooting the note, there will be a slight lag in time before the note is established and this would explain how vibrato can influence rubato. The converse is also true, where an attack is anticipated or delayed by rubato a vibrato that might have facilitated a decisive attack may be upset. Thus vibrato may be influenced by rubato.

This is an interesting and ingenious theory that seems to have some experimental verification. However, your reviewer would like to know just how much vibrato content exists in quick passages and would the same effects then be noticeable. A further thought is this: if you consider a violinist playing a note with a vibrato, is it not a physical impossibility for him to go to his new note without finishing his vibrato motion in the most favourable direction and further, beginning the vibrato on his new note in that same favourable direction? This would surely be a set of *invariable* conditions.

Altogether this paper is a most convincing support for the use of modern graphing technique, not the least benefit to be derived therefrom is knowing "what happens between the notes".

H.S.

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AFRICAN SONG SAMPLER. Antioch College, Yellow Springs, Ohio, United States of America. 1958.

This little booklet of 32 songs is the fruit, with additional sources, of an 'African Music Workshop Evening' held at Antioch College in May 1957, at which a number of African students contributed songs from various parts of Africa.

In the form of a group-singing book, it seems, like some other folk song books, to ring of the kind of sentimentalism that is characteristic of the modern folk song revival especially in Britain and the United States. With such statements as . . . "folk music communicates directly the common experiences and feelings of all people", and again, "Music . . . is unrestricted by cultural conflicts and misunderstanding", the tone of international fellowship is set. The second statement I would question, for in the Sampler itself, which is obviously intended for people brought up in a Western musical tradition, many of the songs have been 'adapted' both in the rhythm, and I suspect in the melodies also, some set to four-part harmonies, and in one case quite new countermelodies invented, all with the probable intention of making them more acceptable to the Western ear. This must also be one of the reasons why the selection contains so many songs of town origin, another being that these are probably just the kind of songs sung by most educated Africans who visit the United States. I would also question whether some of the verbose English translations convey the simple spirit of the original texts.

Singers will find a few good songs, such as the rather epigrammatic West African ones, but it should not be taken as a representative sample of African song as a whole; there is much more variety than these pages would suggest. While agreeing with the Antioch College editors that there are few better ways of promoting good attitudes towards African people than by an understanding of their music, I feel that this collection gives a rather watered-down impression of the genuine article.

A.T.N.T.

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RHYTHMES DU MONDE—Le Bulletin des Missions. Revue trimestrielle, 32e année, 1958, Tome VI, No. 1, Nouvelle Série: Abbaye de St-Andres, Bruges, Belgium.

This number of *Rythmes du Monde* contains the texts of lectures delivered to the missionary section of the 3rd. International Congress of Sacred Music. There are eight main articles, and the authors are primarily concerned with the problem of developing Christian music in accordance with different musical traditions. It is evident that Roman Catholic missions have already done much work in this field, and have achieved considerable success.

There are articles on Islamic, Asian and Indonesian music; but most of the journal is devoted to discussion of African and African-derived music.

Frère Basile, of Roma, Basutoland, in a French version of the article in *African Music*, Vol. I., No. 00, laments the appearance of music which is neither African nor European, but points out that African Christians are generally opposed to anything that suggest a return to pagan music, since they are more concerned with the associations of traditional music than with its inherent musical qualities.

Reports from other parts of Africa show that Christians prefer Gregorian chants which are closely related to traditional African modes. In some regions, however, it appears that even Gregorian chants are not easily adopted by Christian congregations: the Father Superior of the Mission at Mkumbi, in Southern Rhodesia, says that his congregations usually "murder" the plainsong melodies.

Nevertheless, several successful attempts have been made to produce new liturgical music on traditional African lines. A *Kyrie* and *Gloria* have been composed in Ngambay on three tones, following the three tones of the language. Several Masses have been written, some with drum accompaniment, and two attempts have been made to incorporate African choreography into religious drama. One writer admits that in most of the Masses "truly African rhythms and harmonies are often neglected, and only the melodies preserve the general flavour of indigenous songs." One hopes that these experiments are a prelude to the *musical* development of traditional African music, and not merely a series of adaptations