Music Then and Now

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Abstract

The “then” in the title refers to the golden age of Western music, from the Renaissance until the Romantic era. The “now” refers to modern Western music since the start of the twentieth century. Hence, the “now” includes yesterday and tomorrow—both the revolutions at the start of the last century and predictions about the future.

One way to look at the Western musical tradition is to examine its concepts from perspectives external to it. Adopting the point of view of someone from a different culture or a tourist from Mars can do this. The book does it mainly in light of twentieth-century musical crises and the consequent conceptual upheaval. It also attempts to delve to the root of basic musical concepts by contrasting them with concepts from the visual arts. Some of the chapters of the book are based on papers that have been published in Mishkafayim, the journal of the Israel Museum—an outstanding forum for interdisciplinary discussion.

From this perspective, certain questions come up: How does the musical raw material relate to the “natural” acoustic environment? Is music really more abstract than other arts? What are the musical analogues of visual concepts such as color, shade, texture, contour, and figurativeness? What are “musical holes”? What is the speech in music and what is the music in speech? What is the difference between ugly music and music that expresses ugliness? How can we identify musical kitsch and how does it differ from the banal and clichéd? The discussion of these and other questions goes beyond the strict confines of academic research, in an effort to get a bird’s-eye view of the music, its history, and its essence and to risk making general, sweeping, incisive statements.

This provocative book drastically heightens the tension between “then” and “now” by means of a series of contrasts: sound and noise, art and reality, beauty and ugliness, sanity and insanity, originality and banality, sound and silence, abstract and concrete, communicative and solipsistic, normative and eccentric. Thus it becomes clear how definitions that were accurate during centuries of musical development became inapplicable in the twentieth century, making new formulations and cognitive revision necessary. The modern musical revolution is perceived here as a singular, unprecedented change in music history (even though the radical changes of the past also involved a conceptual revision of the musical discourse). Finally, the last chapter presents the history of Western music in the framework of an interpretation of the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel,
comparing the state of music in the twentieth century with the linguistic plight of the tower builders when their language was confused.