

SILENCE AND OTHER MUSIC

Gerard McBurney *As John Cage showed, it is hard to talk about silence. But in your music you have often approached silence and from many different angles and perspectives. Could you say something about where in your life this impulse towards silence has come from? What does this silence mean?*

Giya Kancheli Recently I read a wonderful quote by Eduard Hanslik: "All other forms of art try to influence us by persuasion, while music catches us off guard." Music does indeed possess this incredible quality. However, I am particularly amazed by the mysterious silence that precedes the birth of sound. There is also a type of sound after which silence is perceived like music. We all have deeply personal feelings that we try to express in different ways and music "which catches us off guard" does not need to be made concrete. And still, silence is prepared by music and silence itself becomes music. My dream is to achieve that kind of silence.

GM *Many different kinds of music of the earlier 20th Century were driven by the urge to dissonance. In your music, that search for dissonance seems almost to have been replaced by a search for consonance. And yet consonance in your music is by no means a stable quantity. What do you think are the most important lessons we should learn about consonance?*

GK Let's imagine that our lives, just like a piece of music, are made out of consecutive consonances and dissonances. There are situations in life when the two sound at the same time. The same thing happens in music and it is in these instances that the artist directs the hand of fate. In my case, this process is completely spontaneous and uncontrollable, especially since I find the line that divides consonance from dissonance blurry. As an explanation, I would like to quote Schoenberg: 'Consonances and dissonances are not divided by a deep abyss. The same harmony (interval or chord) is perceived by different generations in various ways. Today's consonance is yesterday's dissonance, just like today's dissonance is tomorrow's consonance. In other words, one could say that every consonance is an 'aged' dissonance.'

GM *At the heart of your earlier music lie the seven symphonies. 'Symphony' is a difficult word in 20th Century music. For the senior Soviet composers (Shostakovich, Prokofiev) it seems to have implied a classicism, an engagement with the great musical monuments and traditions of the past. But for many Western modernists it was a term to be despised and one associated with some of the most conservative musical figures in our culture. What drove you to write 'symphonies'? What sort of symphonies are they, in your opinion? What does the word mean to you? Was the writing of such pieces something that just happened naturally for you or was it the result of a self-conscious decision to engage with particular large-scale forms?*

GK The attitude of so-called 'Western modernists' to large-scale forms, such as symphonies, leaves me puzzled. I think that the genre of symphony, like any other genre, is subject to change (for example, one could compare it to sonata form in the work of Scarlatti, Haydn and Beethoven). I can understand if some of the Western modernists despise my symphonies. But despising a genre as a whole is beyond my understanding.

Although I realise that the last of the Mohicans after Mahler is Shostakovich, I would still dare to call my single movement pieces symphonies. And composers like Lutoslawski, Berio, Corigliano and Penderecki continue to write symphonies too. In Georgia, my symphonies were received in different ways. The absence in my work of a cyclical form typical of large-scale compositions provoked criticism. Yet I am still striving to achieve a sense of cycle in a single movement, and it is not up to me to judge the advantages and the disadvantages. My single-minded conviction was based on the fact that it took me three years of endless reflection and exhausting work to finish each one of the seven symphonies. When I think of the 20 years that I dedicated to the writing of symphonies (I stopped in 1986 and called my seventh symphony *Epilogue*), I must mention the role played by Djansug Kakhidze. It might seem strange, but his fantastic talent and unique manner of conducting were the main stimuli behind my activity. Therefore, I consider him to be not only my first interpreter, but also my co-author.

GM *In more recent times, a good number of your works have borne more or less religious titles, such as the Prayers' cycle (Life without Christmas), Psalm and Abii non viderem. There are religious texts in Styx and elsewhere. Often your music suggests liturgical or contemplative impulses. You are not the only post-Soviet composer to have followed this path. Friends and colleagues including Pärt, Schnittke, Gubaidulina and Knaifel have moved in similar directions. How do you understand this noticeable drive on the part of composers raised in the Soviet Union towards spiritual and religious music? What part do the religious assumptions of the audience have to play here, especially if that audience – as many Western audiences do – finds the associations of religion difficult to accept or take seriously? When we listen, should we care about what religious beliefs you yourself may or may not have?*

GK The generation raised behind the Iron Curtain in an era of imposed atheism could not adopt a simple attitude towards religion. I'm not an exception. I don't want to elaborate on the subject of my relationship with religion, because this is a very intimate matter. And even though I consider myself to be a believer, when I think of the role of religion in the history of humanity, I find it difficult to define my personal attitude towards it. As to your question about the religious assumptions of the audience, the answer is very simple. If these assumptions are born in the process of listening to music, then there is something wrong with the music.

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