

SPEAKING IN TONGUES, OR WHY SHOULD *Eclectic* BE A BAD WORD?

Not long ago, at a presentation in Vienna, a student asked me if it bothered me when my work was characterized as “eclectic.”

“Why should it?” I replied. “It *is* eclectic.”

The question wasn’t meant to be negative; the student who asked it was writing a thesis on the music of Leonard Bernstein. But the implication was that *eclectic* was a sharp arrow in the critical quiver that, if accurately aimed, could be fatal.

The notion that artists should have a particular and singular personal manner—definable, limited, possibly ideological, consciously or intellectually perpetrated by the creator or (preferably) generated by the social circumstances of history, time, and place—is a modern one largely derived from art historians, who invented the idea of historical style. Initially, style or manner belonged to national schools (Italianate, Chinoiserie, African American) with real or imagined national or even racial characters. Later, the idea was adopted by critics and historians to designate periods of cultural history (baroque, neoclassical, impressionist).

A more recent version of this trope has leaked out from art history to become a series of categories or critical nostrums about contemporary art and artists. The central thesis is that great artists have recognizable, personal styles. Since most of the old moist applications have withered away, critics of the more abstract visual and performance arts are often reduced to a few dry generalities of taste. Within this limited vocabulary, the notion of style—a recognizable manner, often reduced to a few simple ways of going about business such as a few Mark Rothko-like color fields or Philip Guston brushstrokes—makes up a good part of what is left. The idea of style is also closely linked to the other two standards now commonly applied to the nonrepresentational arts: originality and authenticity. Modern art—in particular, the abstract arts (visual art, classical music, and modern dance)—is said to be about identifiable style and voice. Issues of content are left to the verbal or popular arts (novels, theater, song lyrics, and the movies).

We have the idea that our notion of style always existed, but this is doubtful. Many, if not most, of the historical icons of Western culture, even (or especially) in such abstract arts as music and dance, were extremely conscious about national styles



and also about popular and folk music, particularly when it came from the extremes and edges of European society. They were much less obviously concerned with creating a unified personal manner.

The idea that the stylistic unity of Mozart's music welled up from the subconscious working of the mind and ear of a childlike genius is a complete romantic myth and has nothing to do with his real musical landscape or how his contemporaries perceived his music. Mozart was a highly eclectic composer who absorbed and reused all the musical styles and voices of his time; it is only the effect of time and distance that makes his work seem unified and reduced to a postrococo or classical style. When Joseph II famously said to Mozart, "Too many notes," it is generally assumed that the emperor was referring to music too complex for his tone-deaf ears. But Joseph was well trained in music and had a good ear. It was, no doubt, the interweaving of multiple musical elements that gave him trouble; a purveyor of a purely Italian style like Salieri was more to his taste than a master of mix-and-match like Mozart. Mozart's mastery of many voices and styles and his ability to interweave them makes him the greatest opera composer of his time—or, perhaps, of any time—but the same talents are found in his concert and religious music.

Mozart was not a unique case. As the titles of Bach's works tell us, he consciously wrote in several different manners including the German, Italian, French, and Eng-

Feedback by Eric Salzman and Stan Vanderbeek, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York, 1970. Courtesy of Eric Salzman

The Conjurer by
Michael Sahl and
Eric Salzman, the
Public Theater, New
York, 1975. Courtesy
of Eric Salzman



lish.¹ Haydn, Mozart, and other contemporaries also included Spanish, Gypsy, and Turkish elements in the mix. Also baroque counterpoint (Bach was beginning to be rediscovered) and several varieties of folk music (German, Austrian, Anglo-Irish, etc.). This tendency to mix and match styles is particularly evident in theater music and opera and hence appears often in

theatrical composers like Handel, Gluck, Mozart, Wagner, Puccini, Stravinsky, and Gershwin, all of whom were criticized in one way or another for their refusal to adhere to a single manner. To choose an example from another age and another art form, who is more eclectic than George Balanchine?

In an article in the *New York Review of Books* titled “Speaking in Tongues” (February 26, 2009), Zadie Smith writes about the ability to speak in voices. Her starting point is her own experience in consciously learning and adopting the speech of an educated member of English society and the parallels she recognizes in Barack Obama’s ability to transcend the street by negotiating the class markers of speech in America. Not coincidentally, both she and Obama have been accused of inauthenticity and self-consciousness—being “not black enough”—in large part because they left behind the sound of the street in adopting their new mode of speaking, but also because of the complex intellectual process that enables them to hear and adopt different voices and different points of view. The criticism has obvious class as well as political and artistic implications. I can remember my mother correcting my own speech to this same end (so I didn’t sound so *Noo Yawk*). Only later in life did I realize that she must have done the same thing to move from the Yiddish theater, where she was brought up, into the

high-class pre-Marlon Brando speech of the uptown theater that she aspired to as an actress, writer, and director.

The connections between class, speech, diction, “voice” (in the various meanings of the word), style, and authenticity are very well brought out in Smith’s article, which starts from social and political concerns (outside of the inner city, a black politician cannot get elected in a white majority society if he sounds too “street” and therefore too threatening). But her concerns are as much about art and literature as about politics. A writer, particularly a writer of novelistic or theatrical fiction, obviously has to be concerned with voice—who is speaking and how—as well as with the larger artistic language of the work as a whole. And her ear, like Obama’s, is tuned to more than one way of speaking. Is that a defect or a virtue? Ms. Smith argues that it is a rare and unrecognized talent in a politician as well as a great virtue in a poet. She cites Obama’s perfect pitch in his memoirs of the various voices of the characters in his life. She also quotes the New York poet Frank O’Hara, but her prime examples come not from a contemporary poet or novelist, but from a British poet and playwright by the name of William Shakespeare.

Is a good ear and the ability to speak in various voices and tongues a virtue or a defect in a poet, a novelist, or a playwright? A painter, choreographer, or composer? The emergence of style and its separated-at-birth twins, authenticity and originality, are well established in the modern critical vocabulary as essential criteria for modern art, particularly of the nonrepresentational sort. Closely associated with this is the anti-intellectual stance taken by many American critics who allow themselves an intellectual point of view but prefer their artists and their art to be funky and instinctive. This was characteristic of the large body of writing that we might call the “pazz and jop” school of music criticism as pioneered by the *Village Voice*. John Rockwell, in his *All-American Music*, an influential book that celebrates the wide range of American music, goes out of his way to state that one of his recurrent themes is that “an excessive self-consciousness can rob a composer’s music of its vitality.” A wide-ranging, self-conscious, and intellectual point of view is permitted to the critic but not to the composer.

The invention of musical minimalism is usually credited to the mystical just-intonation drones of La Monte Young and of Terry Riley’s *In C*, a Cageian or Fluxus-

inspired effort that brought the key of C major back into vogue. But it might just as well be credited to Morton Feldman, a composer who was close to Cage but also to the New York abstract expressionist painters. Feldman, who was a large man both physically and intellectually, was a brilliant intellectual who spoke in a loud and noticeably New York voice about everything under the sun. But he created a New York-school music that was completely the opposite: small and delicate to the extreme, entirely lacking in impulse or attack and without intellectual control, development, variation, tonality, or rhythm. The minimalism of Terry Riley, Philip Glass, Steve Reich, and John Adams that followed was quite different, based on the return of tonality and rhythm and on the principles of repetition and (generally tiny and gradual) variation. The notes in Feldman's music are like the brushstrokes in an abstract expressionist painting; they are not part of a process or a predetermined form but are simply the essence of the object itself, set down purely as manifestations of the individuality of the artist and providing the subject matter of the work.²

In the late 1960s, in the face of the on-rush of minimalism in its early and rather pure forms, I wrote a large-scale, theatrical concert piece for voices and chamber orchestra, setting portions of an epic poem by John Ashbery (a friend and colleague of O'Hara's) that incorporates fragments of an old boy's adventure story. Ashbery, like Feldman, had many connections to the New York art scene, but his book-length poem *Europe* seemed to me the opposite of Feldman and the tonal minimalists in its ability to synthesize multiple voices yet avoid cacophony (closer perhaps to a Robert Rauschenberg combine than to a Guston or Rothko painting). I considered calling the work *Europe and America* but eventually settled on *Foxes and Hedgehogs*, a title that comes from a fragment of the Greek poet Archilochus which states (in its entirety) that "the fox knows many things but the hedgehog knows only one big thing." This quote was most famously used in Isaiah Berlin's essay about Tolstoy, to describe the antithesis between two kinds of artists and writers. The hedgehogs are those whose work and worldview can be defined by a big idea or by ideology, artistic and otherwise (and by extension, characterized by a unified style and voice). The foxes are those whose work and worldview is wide-ranging, multivoiced, eclectic. *Foxes and Hedgehogs* is a concert piece that was set up as a dramatic form or a series of dialectical oppositions in which



Joshua Rifkin
and Eric Salzman
recording *The Nude
Paper Sermon*, c. 1969.
Courtesy of
Eric Salzman

stylistic coherence and opposing styles would clash in both a consciously intellectual and dramatic manner. After about three-quarters of an hour of contrast and conflict, the perhaps inevitable culmination is an uproar that then dies down, leaving the soft-spoken words *the breath* as the last audible, comprehensible moment. At the premiere,³ in the silence between the hushed end of the piece and the delayed audience realization that the piece was over, a loud boo could be heard. It came from Feldman, the creator of perhaps the most comprehensive and successful form of quiet, painterly musical minimalism in the twentieth century. It was exactly the perfect response from the appropriate person.

Although *Foxes and Hedgehogs* and some similar works were often performed in the 1960s and 1970s,⁴ it was minimalism that carried the day and that continues to dominate new music performance in this country and, increasingly, abroad. My notion was that, just as the conflict between neoclassicism and dodecophony had dominated the musical dialectics of the earlier part of the century, and serialism versus aleatory or chance music was the postwar dialectic, so the late twentieth century was going to be dominated by the clash between minimalism and whatever its multivoice opposite might be. Just as clearly, it seemed to me that the place where this drama was going to play out had to be the theater—specifically the small downtown or out-of-town stages

where the age-old connections between music and theater were not completely broken or totally ossified, where some sort of conflict or dialectic principle was at home, where abstract form was a lesser concern, where the door was still open to the street and one could still hear other voices and tongues. Theater by its nature seems to involve something beyond the artist's "I-me-me": that is, speaking in other voices, consciously putting characters and voices up there. To this end, I organized a music-theater company that functioned for a little more than a decade in the improvisational manner of the theater and dance ensembles of the period. Later I founded and artistic-directed a music-theater festival and created a series of eclectic music-theater works in various collaborations and forms.⁵ Although these works were mostly small in scale (compared to *Foxes and Hedgebogs* and *The Nude Paper Sermon*), they were poststyle in the way that they incorporated the eclectic multivoice idea, often consciously (pace John Rockwell) recycling ideas from the near and distant past as well as multiple voices of the present.

It has always seemed to me obvious that the breakup of the old connections between music and theater (in popular music as well as in opera) and the domination of abstraction in the performing arts of the last century were closely connected. The obvious need was to try to recreate the idea of music-theater outside the precincts of the opera house (too expensive, too ossified) and the Broadway theater (too expensive, too ossified). Although a lot of contemporary theater, dance, and performance art is highly music-dependent, this has to be a theater that is music-driven or, at the very least, in which music plays a role equal to physical movement, visual arts, language, and dramaturgy. Although not all forms of performance art are multivoiced, eclecticism is always at home in a theatrical context, particularly in those forms of theater that concern themselves with conflict and in which the door is open, at least a crack, to the street.

This has not been an easy task. Aside from a few large-scale festivals, some now moribund, there has never been a music-theater theater, and large opera houses and Broadway theaters did not wither away (as some of us hoped) but continue to dominate music-theater. A collection of early recordings placed in a vault underneath the Paris Opera in the early years of the twentieth century was recently opened, revealing that melomanes of 1908 were listening to the same things as the melomanes of 2008. Insofar

as new work has penetrated those hallowed halls, much of it belongs to the minimalists or the revivalists. Indeed, in the clash of musical foxes and hedgehogs that took place in the last quarter of the last century, there is no doubt that it was the hedgehogs and the nonintellectuals that prevailed.

Maybe that's about to change. Obama-style change is, to a great degree, anti-ideological and multivoiced. Zadie Smith's "Speaking in Tongues" suggests that the connection between the social and political evolutions of recent times and the artistic movements of the age on the other, may be closer than we think. I certainly hope she's right.

—*Eric Salzman*

NOTES

1. Whatever the English manner was. Apparently the seventeenth-century musical public knew what an "English Suite" was, although scholars today are not quite sure. Bach had trouble in both his court and church jobs with his rich and complex mix of elements. There have even been recent claims that some of his more extreme examples cannot actually be by him because they are not in the "proper" or pure Bach style.
2. Oddly enough, Feldman, who is along with John Cage and Elliot Carter the best-known and most-performed contemporary American composer in Europe, did not make it into Rockwell's book.
3. November 30, 1967, Hunter College Playhouse (now the Kaye Playhouse) in New York City, with Dennis Russell Davies conducting soloists and the Juilliard Ensemble.
4. *The Nude Paper Sermon*, a commission from a record company for Renaissance ensemble with soloists, chorus, and electronic sounds (texts by Stephen Wade and Ashbery), and *Feedback*, with visual artist and filmmaker Stan Vanderbeek, were related works; some European examples are *Die Soldaten* by Bernd Alois Zimmermann, *Intolleranza* by Luigi Nono, *Atomtod* by Giacomo Manzoni, and Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Momente*. When *Foxes and Hedgehogs* was performed by Pierre Boulez and the BBC Orchestra in London in the 1970s, it was savaged by the British critics, who obviously understood it quite well and also found its message and technique to be inadmissible (abruptly ending my career in the U.K. although, fortunately, not in Europe).
5. The American Music Theater Festival was founded in Philadelphia in 1984 by Marjorie Samoff and me, and it ran in its original form as a festival into the mid-1990s; similar efforts took place in Europe, notably the Munich Biennale, founded by Hans Werner Henze in 1988.