

Accessible Music?

by Charles Coleman

Since the beginning of my compositional career, I've always had an unusual problem with the word "accessible". For me, this word seems to be nothing more than an opinion which is "masked" as fact, and can be manipulated by certain agenda driven people to thrust their own cause and attempt to damage other expressions of thought at the same time. This kind of tactic, I feel, is an absolute detriment to any free thinking society.

I recently read a review of a recording containing the Violin Concerto by Arnold Schönberg. This reviewer, who shall remain nameless, states in his critique that for anyone to like this piece, depends on "how hard you, the listener, feels like working, and how much the performance rewards your time and effort." The reviewer goes on to say that if you are new to this piece, then you should "start with the finale. It contains several memorable tunes and motives that recur with relative frequency, in a clear march rhythm."

After reading this, I was predictably annoyed. It is a tale I've heard before, many times. The theory that an "accessible" piece is primarily simple with a tuneful nature, and a piece that's not so "accessible" is much more complex and requires work from the listener in order to be enjoyed. Quite frankly, I find this argument utterly ridiculous! I can respect this critic in his attempt to influence the listener into buying the recording, but I believe his tactics to be a form of unnecessary "toilet training" for people that already have a decent head on their shoulders.

It is clear to me that all the great composers regardless of what musical "language" they utilize, have an innate ability to take his or her materials they come up with in their dreams, and then carefully develop these materials into wonderful pieces of music which any listener, at the very least, can feel in their soul. This issue alone makes the concept of "simple" and "complex" irrelevant. A great composer's work transcends those petty words.

There is truly an inner spirit within a great opus of any style which is a blend of the composer's otherworldly talent, along with the circumstances he or she is living through at the time, and the disciplined effort to make it all work. No matter how different the composers like Bach, Beethoven, Ives, Ellington, Adams and Prince are from each other, they all have this same aforementioned qualities that make them who they are, tune or no tune. These greats, like many others, have done all the work so that you, the listeners, do not have to.

This is the way it's supposed to be. Listening is an illuminating and soul touching experience, not work. One should simply let the music flow through the body and it would do its magic. Of course, there are numerous benefits and pleasures in hearing a piece more than once, but one would be normally doing it anyway because he or she got something out of it the first time around, not because they hope they'll "get it" after hearing it a few more times, due to their personal insecurities of not being "cultured" enough.

The fact is, accessible pieces of music are numerous in their sounds, styles and expressions, large and small. And they all sound fantastic!
It's as simple as that.