

## An Elevated Wind Music

Let me digress before I begin:

In a recent article complaining about the current mania over Harry Potter books, Harold Bloom referred to the *New York Times* as the “dominant organ of the prevailing counterculture.” He went on to say that it is wrong to assume – as the promoters would have us believe – that reading pop literature draws anyone on into serious stuff. *The Wall Street Journal*, which published the piece, was instantly flooded with irate letters defending the Potter epic, and excoriating Bloom as an “elitist” and a snob. The whole little teapot-tempest nicely encapsulated the current state of the culture wars in America, I thought, and can readily serve as a symbolic refractor for the way we treat the higher things of life. In particular, the affair bears on the subject I wish to address here.

When Bloom refers to the august *New York Times* as he does, he is elegantly making three points at once. The obvious first is that the *Times*, with the solemnity of self-anointment, is Establishment, *The Establishment*, the Arbiter of Everything. This is well known, and anyone who works in the arts – especially in music – will be painfully aware of the influence that the paper and its self-confident critics can have. But a more important if less direct point Bloom’s characterization draws out has to do with the *nature* of our cultural Establishment. It is no longer the stuffy old business of insisting on certain standards of behavior, craft, knowledge, achievement; nor the cause of holding vulgarity at bay, nor a matter of complaining that the present generation is betraying the ideals of the past. No, it is quite the opposite: as many have said, the counterculture has become the dominant ideological complex; and in the area of the arts, this manifests itself in a profound leveling, a compression of High and Low, a contempt for the subtle, the demanding, the aspiring, and a deep ignorance of the classic models of past civilization. This purely anthropological view of Culture – that culture is not higher civilization, but simply whatever people do – has been a dominant attitude in many elite circles for some time now, and it creates serious problems for those of us who still think that there’s a difference in value between high culture and ordinary entertainment. And finally, if the *Times* is the organ of the counter-culture, it means that it is, indeed counter, i.e. *against*, Culture.

But Bloom’s fate among the letter-writers shows what happens to people today who dare to voice views like this. Perhaps out of a nagging sense that by embracing the vulgar they are somehow falling short, perhaps just out of simple anger at anyone who dares to set himself up as a person upholding high standards of art and intellect, the epistolists shower Bloom with furious abuse. How dare he deny the simple pleasures of the current fad-book to innocent children? How dare he dismiss the comfy myth that reading trash leads to the banquet table of Great Literature? And how dare he pretend that *his* judgment about these matters is better than mine? One might have thought that the views of one of the most distinguished intellectuals in the country could expect at least a respectful hearing, perhaps even the power to convince. But no, a lifetime of reflection and achievement is swept aside in a torrent of obloquy.

The Bloom episode reveals a fundamental dissonance in the way we view the arts in America, and his experience with literature can be easily transferred to the other arts, with appropriate modifications. The root question here has to do

with the difference between art and entertainment, and the confusion between the two that is endemic today. The letter-writers who got into such high dudgeon over Bloom's remarks are rebutting a question he did not raise. He never said that entertainment was bad, only that the book in question should be considered entertainment not art. In all the arguing the distinctions between the two domains have simply been overlooked. Or, if we wish to take a more sinister view, they have been deliberately fudged. But however this may be, and in a spirit of civic responsibility, I would like to help matters out by offering a simple pair of definitions:

In any medium – music, literature, poetry, theatre, dance, the visual arts – entertainment is that which we can receive and enjoy passively, without effort, without our putting anything into the experience. Art is that which requires some initial effort from the receiver, after which the experience received may indeed be entertaining but also transcending as well. Art is like nuclear fusion: you have to put something into it to get it started, but you get more out of it in the end than what you put in. (It takes an expenditure of energy to start the reaction.) Entertainment is its own reward, and the reward is not usually long lasting. Entertainment is a pot of boiling water placed on a cold stove: the heating is fleeting. Art is a pot of cold water put on a hot stove: it may take a while to get going, but when it does it gets hot and stays that way! If we clearly understand these distinctions we can still enjoy our Potter books without becoming angry with Harold Bloom, and we might even have some energy left over for the enjoyment of Higher Things.

When we come to music, everything I have said applies in spades. But there is a further serious problem special to America. Despite alarming levels of functional illiteracy in the US, we can assume that most people are able to read. This gives the literary sphere a universality that music can only envy. For reasons too far-reaching to engage here, we have today a state of virtual musical illiteracy. Not just the out-of-the-way, the new, the unusual in music, but indeed the whole domain of what is typically called classical music is under threat of extinction here because it has largely passed out of the consciousness of ordinary people. When the Great and the Good of the 1920s raised the necessary funds to send Toscanini and his orchestra on their famous railroad tour, bringing monuments of classical music to the towns of the hinterland, there was still enough permeation of society by high culture for admiring throngs to appear at every concert.

Today those throngs are found at rock concerts. But lest I be "Bloom'd" let me hasten to say that they are welcome to their pop entertainment. What is bad, however, is the crowding out of the serious, the elevated, the transcendent and the permanent by popular entertainment. There seems to be a sort of Gresham's Law here to the effect that bad art drives out good, that mediocrity drives out quality, that entertainment drives out art.

But these things do not happen in a vacuum. For the vast majority of people, for whom culture and learning are not (alas) primary concerns, the kinds of cultural manifestations they encounter are the result not of some mystic upwelling of ur-entertainment-forms from the soul of the *Volk*, but rather the product of somebody's conscious decisions as to what shall be made available to them. The spirit of discovery is rare in people and most will not bestir themselves to ferret out the new or the demanding. And so they take what they are given, and what they are

given comes from those who market and disseminate. These are the elites who lead and determine (again alas) the shape of our contemporary "culture." Now in the commercial sphere, where the making of a buck is the prime directive, we expect art/entertainment objects to be minimally demanding and maximally marketed. But what truly disturbs is the aping of commercial vulgarities and vulgarity by those who are supposed to know better, be better informed, have better taste and higher sensibilities – than the unthinking mob. I refer of course to those who are supposed to lead – whether they are individuals of wealth and influence, or heads of important cultural or educational institutions, or public thinkers and commentators, or (God help us) politicians. These are the people who should, by example, be showing the larger society the best and the highest in culture and learning. Unfortunately, in a weird perversion of the democratic ideal, most of these leaders show their egalitarianism not in social mixing with the "masses," but in aping their tastes. This brings us to private and institutional sources of cultural philanthropy, and, finally, to the universities.

One of the saddest spectacles of contemporary life in America has been the recent attempt of institutions in the arts and scholarship that heretofore have held as their duty the preservation, promulgation, and development of the best and most enduring (as well as the new, the adventurous, the challenging) in human endeavor – to be *relevant!* I shall not rehearse this sorry tale again, but only want to say that in the case of music, as it is presently embedded in a university context, there is a great danger that the traditional posture of university music – salubrious stuffiness – may be replaced by the vapid and inconsequential. There is the chance that various current forms of scholarly silliness – usually politically driven and deeply hostile to the "elitist" idea of excellence and achievement – may undermine the typical university interest in the out-of-the-way, the progressive, and the hermetic.

This danger threatens all elements of the university musical scene – scholarly, compositional, performing, and therapeutic – but in the special case of music for winds there is also a traditional component that militates against adventuring into the unknown: the University Band.

Please, I beg, do not misunderstand. I recognize, support, and applaud the social function the university band has long discharged, but that is not what I am addressing here. In these paragraphs I am concerned with the possibilities inherent in an instrumental aggregation whose historical literature is neither over-rich nor over-ripe. As with the case of music for percussion (whose classic literature has been created in our own recently deceased century), the absence of a commanding repertoire of masterworks from the past offers a great opportunity for the composers and performers of today to do what very few singers, violinists, pianists, or orchestras can or will do: to make paradigms for the future. This is surely something that ought to concern universities at the core of their reason for being.

We are certainly fortunate to have so much of the music of the past preserved and alive for us in continuous performances. While the endless repetition of masterworks from the past does get tiresome, no one, I think, would want to suggest a cessation of these perennial recreations. Moderating the excessive repetition of a constantly shrinking core of works from the past, muting the marketing and hype that leads to this contraction, broadening the palette of the so-called standard repertoires – all of these changes would be helpful. Certainly we

would never wish to lose contact with our musical patrimony. But at the same time, the typical conductor, string player, pianist, singer, oboist, and so forth – namely those for whom a rich historical literature exists – will always be tempted to remain within the safe confines of the traditional literature and not be troubled to look beyond its borders. Any of us who presume to compose new music and thereby add to the expanding patrimony will not neglect trying to persuade these often reluctant performers to interest themselves in the new and interesting. But how much easier it is with those musicians who do not already possess for their instruments great works from the past!

In spite of a fairly sizable historical repertoire (classical wind serenades, wind quintets, military marches, isolated efforts such as the Hindemith symphony, the Schoenberg variations for wind band, or the Stravinsky *Symphonies of Wind Instruments* – and, indeed, several works of Varèse that can be performed essentially with a wind-band and percussion complement), there is not much in the history of wind ensemble music that one would rank alongside, say, the great orchestral works of past or present. Just for this reason, there is a rich opportunity – not to say necessity – for the enrichment of this part of the instrumental scene. The multifaceted timbral range, the agility of all registers, the evenness of acoustic response over the whole audible spectrum: all of these characteristics of large wind ensembles fit them to carry a literature of “symphonic” character, expressive, dramatic, and complexly structured.

I believe it is the duty of leaders of such groups to encourage substantial new work for their ensembles. But for such encouragement to be meaningful, it must be informed, not only by knowledge but by taste as well. There is a vast quantity of use-music continually churned out whose presence or absence on the scene means little. So I mean to say that we do not need more Potter-book-style compositions, for there will always be plenty of those. We do not need to be entertained in the wind medium; we need substance, elevated discourse, craft, subtlety. Let us have adventuring into more rarer realms, where dense, complex, and profound musical thoughts may be expressed. Especially in a university setting, but certainly by no means limited to it, such a program seems not only reasonable, but also consonant with the very core of our musical purposes. Only a lazy and cynical construction of these purposes would make one think otherwise.

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