

MAXIMIZING THE AUDIENCE

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Contemporary music seldom evokes philosophical reflections upon the Arts, yet the exquisiteness of the music of Wim Mertens demands it. Mertens' music has its roots in American Minimal Music, a tradition which holds that composition can be achieved through the use of the fewest possible musical devices. Despite belonging to this tradition, Mertens' music is distinguishable from that of Reich and Glass, who are comparatively much more concerned with conceptual, System and Process music.

These forms of musical conception may truly be described as objectified musical forms. As such they form an autonomous normative system which governs not only each individual composition but also the developmental trend of the composer. So we find that unilinear musical composition was produced over the years. But this is not to say that the multiplicity of musical compositions was simply an indistinguishable whole. On the contrary, many a composition contained its own distinctive features and defined meaning peculiar to itself. Precisely because both compositional technique and musical form were subjected to a closed autonomous normative system, repetition effectively became the dominant technique. It was almost an art in itself. To the extent that the Minimalists virtually transformed repetition into an art they managed magnificently to retain and promote their activity. So it was with those who adopted the minimal principles but refused to be governed by its rigid normative system. It is particularly inept therefore to suggest without due regard for differentiation, as does John Gill, that Philip Glass is the undisputed godfather of all variations in minimal music.

Gill's suggestion verges on the mythical when he declares that "Glas" influence began to spread when he first toured Europe with his band bumping into Bowie and Eno after a Royal Academy of Music gig in London in 1971, meeting Tangerine Dream and Kraftwerk in Germany, planting a seed that would inform Giorgio Moroder's late 70's disco productions for Summer and others. These strands spread out, appearing in a rather thin disguise as the synthpop wave launched by the Human League and crossing over into British and American disco production. Ironically, in the 1980's Glass has been hailed as the godfather of a new wave of system music composers - Michael Nyman, Lost Jockey, Regular Music, Soft Verdict and other little-known names appearing on labels like Factory and Belgium's Disques du Crépuscule. You may not have heard them, but they're out there".

Yet at the very first performance the difference between the system music of Glass and that of the others was already apparent. The repetition which influences the music of Mertens and indeed functions as its dominant compositional principle consists of a special dimension. The repetition occurs for two reasons. Firstly, it is intended to carve out a space for listening in the flowing stream of music and emotion and secondly, it is designed to enlist the feeling of pleasure. The challenge with which Mertens confronts us is that the technique of repetition remains dominant in his music but acquires a different meaning. One may even suggest that in this respect Mertens' music is conceived traditionally

and composed accordingly, to such a degree that it is impossible to experience it without the Minimalist tradition looming large. Often the function of the top-line is to act as a signifier indicative of the meaning of the music. In ascertaining the meaning of the music the listener is not involved in the process of representation in the classical sense of the word. On the contrary, it is analysis through which meaning comes to the fore. Unlike Fabre, Mertens does not presuppose a fixed experience on the part of either the listener in musical production or the spectator in theatrical performance. As is well-known, such a presupposition was deemed to be necessary for purposes of cathartic effect.

The aesthetic attitude is reminiscent of the blossoming of Russian formalism at the beginning of the century. Modern structuralism emerged from this development. In this context art is considered to be a technical-analytical procedure. Here the **forms** of the material go hand in hand with the **distortion** of reality in order to attain maximum autonomy for the work. This procedure does not inevitably lead to the kind of rigid objectivity which suppresses individual talent as was the case with American Minimalism. Nor does the procedure result in the generation of universally valid truth. Mertens' music can hardly be defined in terms of fixated objectivity or universal validity as explained above. For this reason one should develop a concept that will function as a contrast to objectivism and systematism. However, one should guard against a lapse into subjectivism in an attempt to develop a new concept. Mertens' music provides ample opportunity for a fruitful exploration of this attempt. There is reference to the here and now with respect to both listener and composer. In addition entrapment into the system is transcended with the aid of concrete references to the history of music. In this respect specific emphasis is placed upon repetition and play with fixed formulae. This technique plays a role in Stravinsky, for example. But such reference scarcely happens in a musical way in the sense of quotations of musical fragments. This does take place however in the form of quotations of the titles of well-known compositions of European history, or when titles of Mertens' own compositions are taken from Ezra Pound's **Pisan Cantos (LIR, THE FOSSE)** - and this would be a thorn in the eye of the American Minimalists.

On the occasion of the presentation of Fabre's "The Power of Theatrical Madness" not all the collected compositions were performed. Some were performed at one presentation and others were not used. It may be observed that choice and valuation could be different but not the manner in which Fabre presented his music to the theatre. Two factors were decisive here: peal determination and the creation of climax. In the theatre production the peal was already linear, proceeding from the background of very soft music to ascending dominance and gaining strength as it led to the climax. When this happens the music subsides to the point of virtual standstill thereby deepening the effect of the climax. So it is that when one listens to a recording of these compositions the experience completely different to that enjoyed at a live performance.

The listener who gives an ear to the integral verse is undoubtedly at an advantage. The built in frustration, fragmentation and uniform ascent to the climax which occur in the theatre production do not form part of the experience derived from music received through a record or tape. The point is that theatrical production as live presentation is truly an autonomous composition quite apart from the equally independent production of a record as a musical composition. In this sense one may justifiably speak about autonomous compositions. In theatre production, for example, it is not so much the theatre events as their compositional

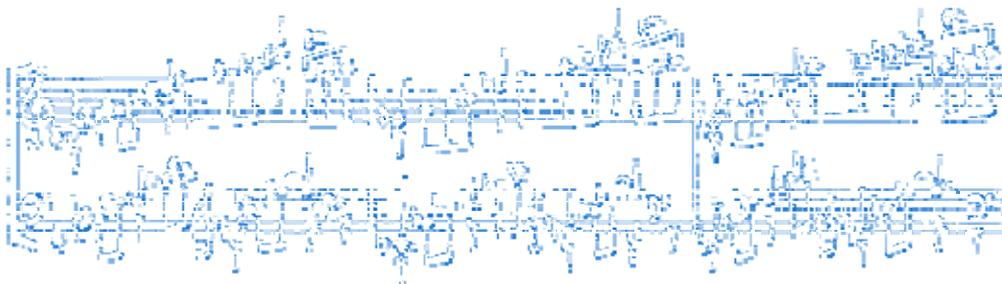
character as autonomous entity which matters most. Thus, paradoxically, it is not the theatre event but the compositional autonomy of theatrical production which matters most.

CIRCLES, **LIR**, **THE FOSSE**, and **WHISPER ME** form the first compositional complex. The second complex is formed by **MAXIMIZING THE AUDIENCE**.

CIRCLES is a composition for soprano saxophone and seven clarinets. The clarinets form a perfect mechanism for the traditional process music. It is a mechanism which is produced and even breaks through the lyrical upper line of the saxophone. In this manner the system is suited to the immediacy as well as the meaningfulness of the upper line. The line consists of a minimum number of notes. It is neither complex nor very melodious. One could even say that it is precisely this line which brings about an internal confrontation in the whole piece between mechanical system music and Mertens' own concept of music.

In this respect **CIRCLES** is a veritable reference to musical-historical trends. Its location in this context is clearly defined. At the same time it highlights certain developments within the same context. Interestingly, this confrontation acts itself out in a consciously preserved classical scheme of accompaniment relative to the upper line. In order to accentuate this the composition is not formed in terms of traditional story-telling, consisting of one specifically organised plot. The narrative character of the composition is gradually denied, as it is anchored in non-narrative aesthetics, which is the denial of representationalism. This is demonstrated by the fact that the piece simply ends. Such a finale could be interpreted as the quotation of the traditional open ending of the composition. Yet such a rather simplistic interpretation cannot hold because the discontinuation is not merely a matter of quoting, adhering to a technique or clinging to a tradition. Nor is it an attempt to solicit frustration as it is the case in Fabre's theatrical production.

The tension of the piece is the composition. This tension takes place in time, and so it has to stop - simply in order not to continue! This end is not **re**-presenting the tension but presenting the tension in its identity with the composition. The piece is based upon a modal-tonal chord-series. Almost in an irrational way the performance is provided with an arrangement which effects a certain mechanical continuity. The systematic replacement of pause with notes creates very quickly the impression of sufficiency, saturation. The intense element of the clarinets is faintly apparent here because of the dominance of statics which strongly duplicates the practice of conceptual music. In order to produce this music it is necessary to acquire an outstanding technique devised to effect exact mechanical reproduction, like it is the case with the clarinets. This counts for the essential parts of all Mertens' compositions.



Exerpt from 'CIRCLES'

The transcendence of this mechanism, its break away from the entrapment of the item, comes about when the soprano saxophone comes into the composition. This happens neither incidentally nor as a result of the installation of the upper line. Proper listening will bring the awareness that here the problem of transcendence must be posed in musical terms. It is hardly surprising therefore that only the movement determined by the virtually improvised saxophone line is apparent. The cessation cannot go unnoticed precisely because an extremely strong accumulation of energy occurs before discontinuity rules far and wide. In this connection the piece reveals remarkable neutrality. This includes the absence of contrasts in sound colouration. Increasingly the harmonic structure is filled up with the problem of transcendence which is central. This, however, does not detract from the suspense engendered by the harmonic structure.

LIR is a composition for two pianos. Here the narrative structure is even more apparent. It is a composition with a variety of contrasting material and several musical elements. The basic structure of the piece is an A-B-C-A scheme. The material of A is worked out in **THE FOSSE**. The arrangement of B dates back to a 1981 composition **GENTLEMAN OF LEISURE** - which in turn is varied in the arrangement of **CIRCLES**. Part C provides for the accompaniments of **WHISPER ME**.

MAXIMIZING THE AUDIENCE forms a completely different part in this series. The composition stands in an antipodal relationship to **CIRCLES**. Here it is a matter of Dionysian work which despite repetition and elements thereof moves a considerable distance away from the Minimal Music. Even here there is a narrative structure which is supported and accentuated by associative textual elements. The build-up of the climax advances steadily according to a well-defined plan.

Here it is noteworthy that there is a clearly formulated conclusion at the end of this piece. This striving towards an all-round conclusion belongs to the more recent developments in Mertens' thoughts on composition.

While **CIRCLES**, **THE FOSSE**, and **LIR** terminate with an open end, here the end is determined. This piece is written for a larger ensemble, namely: two pianos, bass synthesizer, violin, two soprano saxophones, solo voices and a choir. The basic structure may be described as a/A/a'-B-a" : a comprises an introduction which together with a' and a" date back to a modal arrangement of the composition **INERGY**s in 1981. Relative to part A, a' forms a bridge towards a similar part B, and a" forms both the coda and the conclusion. The major parts are written in 1-4-5 harmony. The textual elements are associative flaps which are reminiscent of **RICHARD WAGNER**, **BAYREUTHER FESTSPIEL - HAUS** and **DER RING DES NIBELUNGEN**.

The many colour contrasts give vitality and spontaneity to this musical piece. The aesthetic of distraction also is adequately worked out. The piece creates a rather cumbersome impression. Compositional complexity is effected by summary and addition and not by systematic elaboration.

No wonder then that it is precisely this piece which is used in Fabre's production in order to bring about linear climax in the fragment "Dance". Here the group of actors is hindered and frustrated in spite of their obstinate and tumultuously vehement urge to dance. But even here Fabre discontinues this strong and vital composition long before the conclusion could be reached because in this way he is able to enlist the feeling of power and frustration. Furthermore this becomes his means to analyse temptation or seduction whose scintillating vitality he would like to sustain.



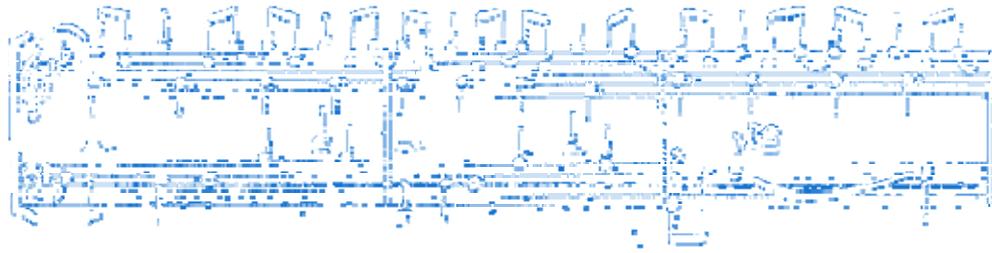
Exerpt from 'MAXIMIZING THE AUDIENCE'

The Dionysian character is slightly directed towards a momentary, spontaneous and deep egocentric experience which immediately infects the listener. Accordingly, a novel but deliberately planned polemic against system music ensues and this extends to forms of pop music. More especially the system character of the traditional western avant-garde music with its neutral and polished language has come to be rejected. The language has become so objectified that it has lost touch with the fullness of individual experience. But with the stylistic methods of the minimalists the opposite effect is achieved. Thus personal aggression, emotion, pleasure and spontaneity have much greater chance in this latter context.

THE FOSSE is devised for two pianos, three voices and a violin. The harmonic ground-pattern is similar to the A part in **LIR**. The composition must be assumed to be 'semi-aria'. In effect it is strongly geared towards textuality. It is interesting to note the outlay of the voice material. The three voices are relationally graduated and right up to the last part they remain autonomously contrapuntal. Their linear correlation is arranged in terms of an a- A-b-A' scheme.

The piece is an attempt to mediate openness, clarity, naivety and belief. There is pathos although it is much less dynamically dominant: its presence is established by its crystal clear static position. Here subjectivity is highly discernible. However, it is neither psychological subjectivism nor prejudice. Rather the individual emerges as truly individual in the mish-mash of reality. Although the individual egocentrism is unmistakable, it does not lead to autism. In this respect **THE FOSSE** is indeed a classical composition in the true sense of the word.

WHISPER ME is much more directed to the subject than in the previous composition. The piece is devised for two cellos, two altos, two french horns, piano and voice. It is extremely intimate and so compressed that both voice and breath are almost stuck together. The regularity of breath constitutes harmony: it is not so much the duration but the measure of breath that counts. The interplay between breathing and timbre defines the totality of expression. This interaction is interwoven with the integration of voice and horns. The performance almost effaces itself. It becomes the present/non-present arrangement quite different from part C of **LIR** though closely related to it. The accompaniment is transformed into music. As such it becomes the music in which the voice is increasingly dissipated until it vanishes totally. Nevertheless this composition is thoroughly structured in accordance with a system although the system is in no sense determinative. Measured in terms of units, the structure of the composition is "16/1/8/1/4/1/2/1/... sustained chord".



Exerpt from 'WHISPER ME'

It is interesting to note the long duration of the final sustained chord. This clearly reveals how the structure of the whole piece is permeated with regularity. It also shows how the harmony is directed towards totality and perhaps infinity. The scheme: topline - central voices - bassline, which until now has been functional in the oeuvre of Mertens, is dissolved and it no longer stands out clearly and distinctly. The confusion concerning the piano line as a topline is more apparent than real. In this sense it is symbolic and its symbolism features at various levels. First of all there is the mutual influence between topline and accompaniment. It must be noticed that the topline as the main signifier is now and then no longer clearly distinguishable from the musical substructures as such. Evidently the topline endures even in the musical substructures. The piano line may even be regarded as an improvisation. Seen from this perspective the piano line could be understood as the embodiment of voice and breath. Here interchangeable and non-determined elements of meaning are also incorporated. A specific type of disengagement defines the quality of the aesthetics of seduction. It must be recognised that the realisation of the compositions is not completely determined by their textual conceptualization alone. The creative process takes place in phases and is facilitated by the novel studio technique and more specifically the multi-track technique. Through this it is possible to compose in several layers and to determine these layers separately, before the composition acquires its final form. The whole that emerges is accordingly the result of a textual as well as an electronic-auditive process.

This technique is specific for the procedure followed by Mertens. One or more bassline and accompaniment layers are first created, and after this it becomes possible to conceptualise one or more toplines. This development, generally spoken, does not exclude other architectural and compository procedures. But the latter are scarcely developed in Mertens' work. It would appear that the choice of a comprehensive scheme involving 'topline - central voices - bassline' is rather primitive and dilettantish. One can surely make a criticism of this. Yet it remains an important element through which musical experimentation is carried out, for example, in **WHISPER ME**. This particular composition technique is well known in contemporary music since **MESSIAEN**. He does no longer assume that one chord can be connected with the other within the framework of preconceived formulae. The connection itself becomes the object of compository reflection and manipulation. In the case of **MESSIAEN** it even leads to the production of sheer noises. The conventional character of tonality becomes a moment of an encompassing and highly complex score. Undoubtedly, every opera and piece of theatre needs, in the final analysis, many levels of meaning and signification.

It is impossible to describe and discuss contemporary music without considering the notion of the new and of progress. This applies to art music as well to pop music. The concept of the new has a certain objectivity because it is persistently involved with ongoing developments which are independent of one particular person. There is the dominant

feeling that the so-called avant-garde is indeed a word which indicates a certain lacuna and that the avant-garde is not a specifically concrete factor of today's artistic, cultural and social life. This observation is applicable to contemporary music, art music as well as pop music. So it is that the use or non-use of the word "avant-garde" has become a problem. It is surely no solution, as others suppose, never to decide to utter the word avant-garde again or to declare the concept old-fashioned and unusable. The fact is that the term avant-garde has been transferred from art to pop music. A cursory look at contemporary technological development and its social impact, particularly in the sphere of communications media, will readily attest to the observation just made. The objectless, non-referential, predominantly libidinous and seductive character of the modern video clip also attests to this. In this respect certain developments, including those of Mertens, reveal their avant-garde character in their quest for the origins of the voice. In much the same way the search for the meaning of the body as well as the meaningfulness of the meaning itself also highlights the spirit of the avant-garde. Voice and instrument socialise necessarily. There is no music without socialization, music **is** being-together. Therefore, the past can neither be destroyed, negated nor annihilated: if that were to happen then silence would reign far and wide. Avant-garde and post-modernism show that new attitudes and methods are necessary in order to escape from that deadly silence.

Mild irony, non-aggressive relativism, the play with traditional music figures, collage and montage are aesthetic principles as old as our age, but they nonetheless appear to be highly realistic methods. **Fiedler** once observed that whoever wants to reach a wider public today, whoever wishes to distract and to please and to reach the dream world of the masses already creates the avant-garde. But the realisation of such desires should not result in the fact that the same public would then have acquired the means to escape from today's world and turn it into a complete desert. Surely, the danger of "the day after" is not only connected to the nuclear threat but it also concerns the responsibility of both the artist and the admirer of art to preserve art. In this respect listening to **Mertens'** music is indeed something like the ensuing struggle between a flight into a dream and remaining faithful to reality. It is the age-old struggle between apathy and pathos.

Prof. Dr. Jan M. Broekman, November 1984

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