Terry B. Ewell, "Music as Wittgensteinian Games," MA thesis, University of Washington, 1988.

CHAPTER 3:

THE FIRST GAME - COMPOSING

3.1 The Composer's Muse - the Other Player

Roman Ingarden writes:

> . . . the basic postulate of an aesthetics . . . is the encounter between man and an external object different from him and for the time being independent of him.
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> This object, thing, process, or event may be something purely physical, or a certain fact in the life, and experience of the observer, or a musical motif, a snatch of a melody, or a harmony of sounds, a colour contrast, or a particular metaphysical quality. All this comes from the outside and puts a particular pressure on the artist in the unfolding of an extremely rare intuition, even though it is only an intuition of the imagination. The role of this "object" is to move the artist in a particular way: it forces him out of a natural quotidian attitude and puts him into a completely new disposition.[1]

A survey of literature written by composers about their creativity reveals various ways of talking about the intuition spurred by the "external object." The intuition is so closely coupled with the external object that it is not surprising to find some composers designating both of them by one word. This intuition or external object has

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[1]Roman Ingarden, "Phenomenological Aesthetics: An Attempt at Defining Its Range," in *Selected Papers in Aesthetics*, ed. Peter J. McCormick (Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press; München/Wien: Philosophia Verlag, 1985), p. 34.

variously been called an "inspiration," a "seed," a "germ," or a "musical idea." George Henschel writes that Johannes Brahms said to him one day:

> . . . That which you would call invention, that is to say, a thought, an idea, is simply an inspiration from above, for which I am not responsible, which is no merit of mine. Yea, it is a present, a gift, which I ought even to despise until I have made it my own by right of hard work.[2]

Hindemith presents his own term for this inspiration:

> The word "idea" is a very vague term for what we really mean when we talk of the composer's creative imagination. The German word *Einfall*, from the verb *einfallen*, to drop in, describes beautifully the strange spontaneity that we associate with artistic ideas in general and with musical creation in particular. Something - you know not what - drops into your mind - you know not whence - and there it grows - you know not how - into some form - you know not why. This seems to be the general opinion, and we cannot blame the layman if he is unable to find rational explanations for so strange an occurrence.[3]

Leonard Bernstein provides us with a comprehensive discussion of exactly what this "*Einfall*" might be. (His idea of a trance will be discussed below in 3.3.)

> Now, what is conceived in this trance? Well, at the best, the utmost that can be conceived is a totality, a Gestalt, a work. One is very lucky if this happens. In other words, you may not know what even the first note is going to be. You have a vision of a totality, and you know that it's there, and all you have to do is let it come out and guide it along. Guiding it may be a fairly conscious process, but you

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[2]Cited by George Henschel, *Personal Recollections of Johannes Brahms*, pp. 22-23, as quoted in Walter Frisch, *Brahms and the Principle of Developing Variation* (Berkeley/ Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1984), p. 33.

[3]Paul Hindemith, *A Composer's World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952), p. 57.

know it's there. You have the conception - that's the greatest thing that can happen.

The next-to-greatest thing that can happen is to conceive an atmosphere, in other words, a general climate, which is not the same as a totality of a work, because that doesn't involve the formal structure. However, it is an important thing to have conceived if it has come from somewhere inside. Every work, every real work of art, has a world of its own that it inhabits, where there's a certain smell and a certain touch. . . . this textural atmosphere, or climate, is a vitally important thing. From this may proceed, then, the totality of the formal structure.

Well, that's the second-best thing you can conceive. But if you're not that lucky, you can still conceive a *theme*. In other words, it can be a basic, pregnant idea or motive, which promises great results, great possibilities of development. A theme that is fertile will immediately present itself to you as such. You know without even trying to fool with it that it's going to work, upside down and backward, and that it's going to make marvelous canons and fugues. . . . You know immediately when you get such a theme that you're going to be able to do wonders with it.

This is very different from conceiving only a tune, which would be, I suppose, the fourth-best thing you could conceive - less important, less desirable to think of than a theme. Because a tune, after all, no matter how beautiful it is, is finished when it's over. Tunes can't be developed; themes can.

So there we have four stages of possibilities. I suppose there's a fifth stage, the least desirable, and this would be, in our famous trance, to conceive a bit, a harmonic progression or a figuration, a little design, an effect of some sort, an instrumental combination; something that will occur to you from which a great many other things may grow by association. That is the least that comes to you in this trance, but it may provide a start for something bigger.[4]

There are instances where this conceived thing is esteemed to possess a life of its own. Ernest Newman comments on a letter written by Hugo Wolf to Eckstein

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[4]Leonard Bernstein, *The Infinite Variety of Music* (New York/Toronto/London: A Plume Book from the New American Library, 1966), pp. 269-270.

(dated the 27th of March 1888):

> . . . he says that the music to "Das verlassene Mägdlein" was composed without any effort of volition on his part. He greatly admired Schumann's setting of it, and had no intention of doing one of his own; but being deeply affected by the poem, the music came to him, he says, almost against his will.[5]

Mikel Dufrenne's writings on the inspiration of an artist are also consonant with this thought:

> When he [the artist] is said to be inspired - sometimes to the point of possession - he doubtless has the feeling of being forced to serve the work through a labor whose end he cannot foresee. It appears to him that it is not he who wills the work, but the work which wills itself in him and which has chosen him (perhaps in spite of him) as a means by which to incarnate itself.[6]

There is even a sense of willfulness to Hindemith's *Einfall*. It is as if the composer caters to its desires:

> In writing melodies or harmonic progressions he [the composer] does not have to select them arbitrarily, he merely has to fulfill what the conceived totality demands.[7]

Thus the external object and the intuition which reacts to it may indeed exert a strong force over the outcome of a musical composition. The composer struggles with this *entity* (an intuition prompted by an external object) that on occasion might be thought more directly to determine the end result of the composition than the

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[5]Ernest Newman, *Hugo Wolf* (New York: Dover Publications, 1966), p. 182.

[6]Mikel Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, tr. Edward Casey (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), p. 33.

[7]Hindemith, *A Composer's World*, p. 61.

composer himself. The composer interacts with this entity in a manner that I believe can be described by my music-game analogy. Thus the *first game* will be defined as a music-game between the composer and an entity (or entities) - the result of which is a composition. The composition may be fixed as notated music, recorded music, or performed music (where it is fixed in someone's memory). The entity can be almost anything: an aesthetic response to the qualities of something in nature, in a chord, in a melody, in a timbre, in a certain combinatorial property found in tone rows, in a concept, in a musical relationship, or even in a rule. The rules in the first game are the means by which an entity is manipulated, transformed, used, or played with in order to make a composition. There can be hierarchies of rules and entities (rules within rules and entities within entities). For the sake of simplicity I will be confining most of my discussion below to a singular entity.

3.2 The Setting for the First Game

Judeo/Christian theology recognizes two creative methods. The first is creation out of nothing (*ex nihilo*) which can be attributed only to God. The language of most of the *Old Testament* - Classical Hebrew - explicitly recognizes this special creative power which is possessed

by God alone. The verb בָּרָא (barah) in what is called the simple form or *Qal* conjugation means to "shape, fashion, create, always of divine activity."[8] This is the conjugation of the verb which is used in the opening chapter of the *Bible* - Genesis 1. The second type of creation is the making of something out of materials already in existence. Creation in this fashion is attributed to God, man, and other spiritual beings. Thus it is the Judeo/Christian point of view that man can be creative only by the reshaping of materials already in existence.

For a moment, let us consider man to be like a vessel or a container. In order for something to be taken out of a vessel, something must first be put in it.[9] Bruno Nettl writes about the divine filling of a human vessel in the following:

> The concept of inspiration, sometimes divine, and of acquiring music directly from supernatural sources, is very widespread among human societies, simple and complex. Haydn worked regular hours and depended on some kind of inspiration; when it did not come, he prayed for it (Nohl 1883:173), like the Plains Indian seeking a vision who is also, in effect, praying for

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[8]*A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs (London: Oxford University Press, 1907, 1968), p. 135.

[9]I am not ignoring the fact that human vessels may come with a degree of "hard wiring" perhaps independent of the forms of inspiration given below. Assume that the term vessel allows for these predispositions (after all, vessels do have inherent qualities apart from their contents. For example their shape).

songs.[10]

The filling of the vessel by human sources is later discussed by Nettl:

> In quite a different way traditional Western composers learn a basic body of music theory, comprising a kind of vocabulary and the rules for its use, on which they are to draw for composing new music. The Iranian musician begins his career by studying and memorizing the *radif*, a body of music that he then uses as inspiration for improvisation and composition of set pieces, avoiding going beyond its bounds. In each culture the musician is given something . . .[11]

A cultural background becomes an important human resource for a composer's creative work. This cultural background can be instilled in an individual through a variety of means.

> Culture is the sum total of what individuals learn in common with other members of the group to which they belong. Basically, it is what an individual has learned from the people who reared him, most of which they learned from their elders. Cultural knowledge also includes what the individual learns from his fellows and from his teachers when they formally or informally pass on group knowledge.[12]

When there is no living cultural resource to learn from, writings and other recorded material may also serve as a means of imparting cultural knowledge to an individual. It is important to note that innovation is not an act by a

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[10]Bruno Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Twenty-nine Issues and Concepts* (Urbana\Chicago\London: University of Illinois Press, 1983), pp. 27-28.

[11]Nettl, *Ethnomusicology*, p. 30.

[12]Conrad M. Arensberg and Arthur H. Niehoff, *Introducing Social Change - A Manual for Community Development* (Chicago: Aldin, 1971), p. 16.

society, but rather the accomplishment of individuals in a society. H. G. Barnett writes:

> If the elements of the cultural inventory remain disparate and disconnected in time and place, the situation is no more propitious for innovation than it is when the resources of the society are scanty. The cultural materials that provide the basis for a new conception must come to a focus in the mind of some individual. There must be a concentration of ideas in the personal experience of the innovator.[13]

The relation between an innovator and a community is wonderfully symbiotic. The growth and change in a culture (much like changes in a language, 1.3.1) depend on these individuals. Yet at the same time the innovator is reliant upon his society and culture for his innovation. Bernstein comments on the composer's need of a culture for creativity:

> What is conceived? What conditions this conception? What is it that makes you conceive whatever it is that you are conceiving? I should say, first of all, sticking purely to musical matters, the memory of all music you've ever heard before. This is not disparaging. I'm not talking about derivativeness or being imitative of other music. All musicians write their music in terms of all of the music that preceded them. All art recognizes the art that preceded it, or recognizes the presence of the art preceding it. . . . even experimental composers, revolutionary composers, self-styled radicals, are, in writing revolutionary music, recognizing the music that preceded them precisely by trying to avoid it. Therefore, in a sense they are composing in terms of the music that preceded them.[14]

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[13]H. G. Barnett, *Innovation the Basis of Cultural Change* (New York, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1933), p. 41.

[14]Bernstein, *The Infinite Variety of Music*, p. 271-272.

In their study of jazz, Perlman and Greenblatt[15] show how improvisations are constructions out of pre-existing materials. The cultural heritage for jazz is considered by them to be a key element for the process of the extemporaneous composition of these works.

3.3 Initiating the First Game

It appears that there are at least a few composers who have a certain degree of control over when they are ready to enter into a music-game. I again refer to Bernstein:

> . . . half the time I cease to be a creator and switch off that magic little off-and-on switch and become a performer again. . . . At this very moment I have just ended a performing period and started a creative one again, and so the switch went on again last week; but for the last few months I've been conducting.[16]

Bernstein writes of a receptive trance that particularly aids him in composing:

> The question is, "Do you compose at the piano, or at a desk, or where?" Well, the answer to that is that I sometimes do compose at the piano, and sometimes at a desk, and sometimes in airports, and sometimes walking along the street; but mostly I compose in bed, lying down, or on a sofa, lying down. . . .
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> Now, this is a kind of trance state, I suppose, which doesn't exactly sound like a very ideal condition for working, but rather a condition for contemplating, but there is a very strong relation

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[15]Alan M. Perlman and Daniel Greenblatt, "Miles Davis Meets Noam Chomsky: Some Observations on Jazz Improvisation and Language Structure," in *The Sign in Music and Literature, ed. Wendy Steiner (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 169-183.*

[16]*Bernstein, The Infinite Variety of Music,* p. 266.

> between creative work and contemplation. It's very hard to describe it. People have tried to describe it for centuries. One of the closest descriptions of the state (I should think) can be found in certain mystic Oriental writings.[17]

There are aspects about Bernstein's "trance" condition which bear a resemblance to the clairvoyant states ascribed to Schubert and Wolf.[18]

Other composers appear to have little control over the start of a music-game. The music-game can commence in virtually any place for them. George Sand wrote of Chopin:

> His creation was spontaneous and miraculous. He found it without seeking it, without foreseeing it. It came on his piano suddenly, complete, sublime, or it sang in his head during a walk, and he was impatient to play it to himself.[19]

It is my belief that no matter how deeply a composer may feel that he is forced to compose, there still is a choice on his part whether to play the first game with it. It is interesting to note that Hindemith considers his *Einfall* to be "common to all people, professionals and laymen alike."[20] It is the choice of what to do with the entity that decides whether the first game is initiated.

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[17]*Ibid.*, p. 266.

[18]See Newman, *Hugo Wolf*, p. 181.

[19]As quoted in Percy A. Scholes, *The Oxford Companion to Music*, 10th ed., ed. John Owen Ward (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), s. v. "Composition," p. 222.

[20]Hindemith, *A Composer's World*, p. 58.