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Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music (1971-1988)

<http://contactjournal.gold.ac.uk>

Citation

Casken, John. 1971. 'A Case of Mistaken Identity'. *Contact*, 1. pp. 22-23. ISSN 0308-5066.

A CASE OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY

In an article for the new music journal "Soundings" Michael Tippett begins his 'Categories of Judgement in Modern Music' with an attempt at placing the term 'innovation' in some kind of perspective "In more stable artistic periods when the dangers of stagnation were so often in evidence the true innovation had generally to work itself through against a hostile establishment and a hostile criticism. In an extreme innovatory period like our own, innovation as such can even become a kind of establishment, and receive a constant critical accolade. "

Tippett does not really justify the implications of such phrases asstable artistic period.....dangers of stagnation.....innovation..... and these are open to discussion.

If we search for a stable artistic period, then we would probably arrive at the eighteenth century, its music, its painting and its architecture. The introduction of Renaissance features into architecture of the Tudor period was done quite slowly until we had an established, "stable" English Renaissance. After 1600 up to and including the death of Haydn, music had gradually absorbed new ideas until there was a "stable" classical period. Innovation was then unknown. The working out of lines and forms as an objective art allowed emotion as a secondary element, and here the word "stable" can, I think, be replaced by the word "complete". Perhaps a complete work of art is stagnant.

As soon as romantic ideas came in the visual arts and in music, we do see an unstabilized artistic period, probably greater in its lasting effects than the 1600 revolution. The uprooting of convention, the completely musical being replaced by the dramatic inner man, the search for novel effects in the visual arts (e.g. works by John Turner and John Nash) - all created disturbances which were to grow out of all recognition and give birth to the avant-garde....itself a logical conclusion from the age of Beethoven, Turner and William Blake.

The 'novel effects' throughout the Romantic period were often mistaken for innovation, when in actual fact they were merely questions, searchings, and experiments with new means of expression. All romantics have searched for a personal means of expression, and in searching, they have exposed their connections with the past and their relation to the present.

From Tippett's remarks, we might expect, in our own totally non-stable period, a virile, non-stagnant art. He regards innovation as something to be got rid of as soon as possible, in order to concentrate on more serious matters, yet in taking this stand he doesn't connect stagnation and innovation. Many works of art today illustrate that just as completeness can lead to stagnation, so can the over-excitement and enthusiasm of the artist, mistakenly called innovation.

True innovation in our own period belongs to very few figures, Debussy and Stravinsky being the first; Impressionism and Cubism in the visual arts may be regarded as innovatory movements, yet both had their forerunners, and indeed Cubism can be seen to be an outcome of Impressionism. Such movements as De Stijl and Dadaism can be called innovatory, but in the overall picture, how important are these movements? They of course provide an essential link between one main source and another. Similarly how 'important' are composers such as Ravel, Milhaud, Hindemith, Dallapiccola, Britten and so on? This, of course, is absurd: it doesn't matter how 'important' a composer is. We are exposed in this progressive society (which way?) to the achievements of technologists and scientists, and we have come to expect constant newness in the arts, again mistakenly called innovation.

I think Michael Tippett's point, that our period is extremely innovatory, is misleading. Certain parts of society expect an enamelled stall every time they go out shopping, as it were, and this puts a great strain on the artist. Under this strain, he strives for newness or innovation, usually failing. A persistent search for innovation will, I feel, result in stagnation. True innovation does not exist today and if we look for this, then we must turn to composers of two previous periods in the twentieth century.

Debussy, Stravinsky, Schoenberg and Varese are the figures in the first period, and in the second we have Messiaen, John Cage and Stockhausen. All these artists were (and are) huge sources of energy and they revitalised conservative, established trends. Artists following in their footsteps do not innovate at all, as Tippett would have us believe, but carry out ideas stemming from the main sources, creating new works of art conditioned by their own lives and experiences. Certainly the period of art after the Second World War is very unstable. The over-activity of today's artist is leading nowhere, not that it should, but as a result, I think that we are beginning to stagnate, just as society is in its desire for extremes.

On the other hand, the results of improvisation, and electronic music are very liberating indeed; but does this mean that these two forms are the only cure for stagnation? (This all depends on whether I am correct in seeing imminent stagnation). The possibilities opened up by the above forms are endless; improvisation (and to a certain extent electronic music), not unlike an operatic aria, crystallises in one set period of time an irreplaceable, unrepeatable moment. Surely the value of this could never involve a question of stagnation. The very immediacy of musical improvisation is surely necessary for a demanding audience, and the spontaneity of invention of a group of musical people is a priceless as a (notated) Haydn string quartet. Disease sets in when these liberating influences are treated in a dilettante manner with assumed innovation. The role of the artist in today's society can be rescued, I feel, if it is regarded with some respect for tradition. Even Stockhausen as much as admits this, and stagnation can be cured by forgetting innovation and developing a tradition liberated by the true innovators. When Tippett says that innovation can become establishment (tradition)....does he mean that the avant-garde is not a period of art but an approach to art?