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Reviews and Reports

THE UNCONSCIOUS AS INFINITE SETS, By I. M. Blanco
Duckworth, 1975 (£14.00)

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Music has been described as evolving between the nebula of emotions and the geometry of reason. Certainly for centuries a close connection has been upheld between the expressions of emotions, mathematics and music. For composers and listeners alike the evolution of this connection occurs as much, if not more, below the level of waking consciousness as at it.

Any book, then, which offers a connected study in depth of the three issues of the emotions, mathematics and the unconscious *should* be of interest to musicians. The emphasis is on 'should', for while it certainly does provide just such a study, Blanco's book is not written for musicians and will demand considerable effort on their part if they are to exploit its relevance. It is a sad fact that most musicians' education does not leave them as well equipped as they might be to make that effort. This is a pity since this book is something of a breakthrough.

Blanco starts by summarising Freud's observations on how our mind works: the structures of our imagination when we dream or, as we say, are not fully conscious. The elisions, the condensations, the displacements, the suspended negation (anything goes): these were some of the aspects of our dream-consciousness that Freud noted in *The Interpretation of Dreams* and each opens up a world of possibilities to a musician. Think how Berg handles them quite explicitly in *Lulu*.

What Blanco has done is to interpret these combined features logico-mathematically (analogies here to Allen Forte's premises in his set-theoretic analyses of atonal music). In these, our unconscious structures, Blanco suggests we make use of:

- a) Infinite sets where a proper subset is no longer distinguishable from an improper one;
- b) a symmetrical mode of Being, since as Parmenides, Leibniz and Einstein saw, an Infinite set implies a symmetry;
- c) a dual system of logic, a bi-logic, since we are aware of this symmetrical mode of Being in our waking consciousness.

We can, after all, talk about our dreams; indeed it is an important way of coming to terms with them. Yet in our waking consciousness we use many asymmetrical, finite assumptions. We order events, we give them priorities, we accept inequalities, we distinguish proper subsets, we admit contingency. We have to filter our understanding and experience of a symmetrical mode of Being through our everyday asymmetrical mode. For Parmenides this meant relating the way of Truth to the way of Seeming; for Clarke, in the 17th century, it meant that Leibniz' 'sufficient reason' often lay in the mere will of God. For Cage, Xenakis and others it means confronting randomness.

Much of what Blanco concludes for unconscious experience applies to our emotions. In either case we are concerned with this subtle balance of symmetrical and asymmetrical modes. (Another analogy: Lendvai's study of Bartók's music.) This is a crucial area for tension in music as in our psyche generally. Weyl and others have shown the mathematical underpinning to symmetry: the geometric transformations and the group automorphisms. Blanco corroborates and extends this underpinning to our emotional dream-conscious expression. Ultimately that could mean music.

The gain? On a vastly expanded scale, similar to the gain we enjoyed when we wrote 'crotchet = 32' rather than a vague 'allegro'. By this more precise notation of pace we reduced guesswork and made possible informed comparisons between one pace and another, and between our pace today and yesterday's or tomorrow's. If we follow Blanco we can begin to notate with something of the same precision the shifts in our balance of symmetrical and asymmetrical modes, in our degree of different levels of consciousness (Parmenides would say levels of Truth) or of different emotional logics.