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MUSIC-SOCIETY-EDUCATION, by Christopher Small  
John Calder, 'Platform Books', 1977 (£6.95)

JOHN SHEPHERD

Although its precise extent and nature is difficult to determine, it is probably true to say that there has grown up over the past decade or so a general awareness that modern Western society is facing, if not a crisis, then certainly a number of intractable and inter-related problems. Debates over pollution and energy highlight the fact that technological man's relationship with the environment is perhaps not all that it might be, while the continuing spate of urban terrorism points to the inherently pathological structure of the capitalist world. But whatever form the symptoms might take, the disease is not difficult to identify. It is a way of approaching the world which implicitly denies the intense and indissoluble relationships that exist between individual people, and between those people and the external world. In his attempt to understand and control the world, modern Western man has receded so far from his environment, other people and, indeed, himself, that the total interconnected system of man, society and the environment has ceased to be a 'unified' process experienced at first-hand, and become a series of isolated 'objects' known about in a second-hand fashion through professional intermediaries. We have scientists and engineers to manage the environment, doctors to mend our bodies, psychiatrists to regulate our minds, teachers to 'educate' our children, and social workers to cope with those who cannot cope with it all. We participate in the world by proxy with the result that people become alienated from their essential natures. And nowhere is this alienation and concomitant inability to engage the world in an immediate and first-hand manner better evidenced than in



the inability of our politicians to face up to any of the very real problems which we have created. Hence the basic pathology.

There is, of course, nothing new in this kind of critique. It has been formulated with considerable insight by many commentators, of whom Gregory Bateson, Ivan Illich and Robert Persig are perhaps the most notable. In their different ways all these authors have argued for reintegration in the world: for an attitude of mind that will allow people to live more 'within' themselves, their society and the environment. But until now scant attention has been paid to the way such matters are evidenced in the world of music. Christopher Small's *Music-Society-Education* goes quite some way towards rectifying this situation. The book analyses the world of music and its relationship to present-day society in a surprisingly comprehensive manner. And in line with his underlying philosophy, the author presents his arguments in a way that makes them accessible to anyone with more than a passing interest in music. Indeed, the absence of any attempt at professional mystification results in a candour and openness of approach that is very refreshing.

Small begins his argument with an exposition of what he sees as the principal characteristics of functional tonality, and the social conventions which surround the production and consumption of that type of music. He points to the discursive, purposeful and self-contained nature of the music (it has a 'definite beginning' and a 'definite end'), and to the way in which it is created and performed by a coterie of experts for passive enjoyment by a largely lay audience. Through a discussion of music and musical life in Bali and black Africa, the author then highlights the fact that there is a great deal of music in the world which articulates a radically different aesthetic, and which is 'produced' and 'consumed' in a much more communal manner. The assignment of any 'expert status' to a musician in pre-literate societies tends to be charismatic rather than institutionalised, for example, and the 'education' or 'training' of young musicians usually occurs naturally in the day-to-day life of the society rather than in the breeding grounds of specialised hothouses.

The effect of this comparison between the world of functional tonality and certain pre-literate musics is to establish the culture-specific nature of the former (as well, of course, as the latter): to establish, in other words, that music as the majority of ('non-musical') people in our society understand it is not a God-given phenomenon with its own internally sufficient laws, but a means of communication which conveys the deep-seated attitudes and forms of social organisation so fundamental to present-day life. Small then proceeds to an examination of those attitudes and forms. Most importantly, he shows that modern Western man's 'scientific' outlook depends on a basic epistemological split between the intellectual and the emotional: the intellectual receiving a great deal of emphasis, the emotional being viewed with considerable mistrust.

Having indicated some of the links that exist between functional tonality, its production and consumption, and the pathological nature of modern Western society, the author goes on to consider the social alternatives propounded through 20th century music. He argues that certain European composers (Webern and Messiaen are taken to be the most successful) and, in rather different ways, certain American composers (principally Harry Partch, Steve Reich, Terry Riley and La Monte Young) have musically articulated a model of society that has more to do with process and which is more organic and communal. But because of the unhealthy preoccupation with 'commodities' that is symptomatic of the capitalist mode of production, the 'message' of the music tends to be severely compromised by the way in which it is conceived and disseminated. In most but not all of these cases the strict dividing line between composer and audience persists, and the audience remains largely unaffected by what the music is saying to them. The structure of Western society, in other words, frequently succeeds in diffusing any criticisms or alternatives that arise within it. It is within this context that Small discusses the work of some improvisation groups, whose actual music-making acts as a blueprint for a more communal society. Even here, however, there are problems, for while the experience of improvisation

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provides a genuine alternative, it ultimately fails to transcend the ills of our musical culture. It is an alternative achieved at the cost of retreat.

Against the broad sweep of these discussions, the book's final two chapters consider the state of education in general and music education in particular. Small criticises the educational system (and in the context of his criticisms 'system' is a particularly revealing word) for suppressing the exploratory and creative potential of the human mind through a one-way imposition of pre-packaged, standardised, scientific-like facts. The ability of the individual to contribute to his community in any meaningful or immediate fashion (beyond the mere sale of skills or labour, that is) is rejected for a form of social indoctrination which is frequently irrelevant to the situation of the child. The general musicality of the many is prejudiced in favour of the musical status quo, with its emphasis on developing the professional musical ability of the few. Small concludes by suggesting that the education *system* be replaced by a situation in which schools act as community *educational* resource centres, with teachers acting as guides for personal development rather than as institutional mentors. Music, of course, would form an integral part of such a scheme.

There is not a great deal that, of itself, is new in this book; this is something that the author himself acknowledges with regard to his chapters on education. What is new is the way in which a wealth of material has been drawn on to develop an immensely important line of thought: namely, that if music can in one way or another reflect the pathology of modern Western life, then it should be equally possible for it to put forward an alternative model of society where people could live in a rather saner relationship with themselves and the environment. The scope of the book, its prescriptive conclusions and the accessible way in which it is written not unnaturally lay it open to criticism. For it is concerned with insight rather than with the safe and irrefutable academic fact. It would be easy, for example, to put forward another view of Webern's music than that its 'balance can be characterised as a metaphor for an ideal state, in which the needs of the individual and those of the

community are viewed, not as an opposition which needs sacrifice and compromise to preserve an uneasy balance . . . but rather as complementary, the individual being fully realized within his social milieu and the needs of the community being most fully met by completely realized individuals' (p.117). Again, there will be those, particularly musicians attempting to change the structure of the music establishment by penetrating it, who will find some of the ideas put forward in the final chapters verging on wishy-washy liberalism. But whether one should try to influence the course of society by simply getting on with an alternative, attacking the system or, indeed, by working within the system is a question to which there can be no certain answer and, wisely, Small does not attempt any.

In short, one would infer that it is the purpose of the book to instigate discussion around questions such as these, and it is to Small's credit that it may achieve this end outside and beyond professional groups of musicians, educationists and sociologists.

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