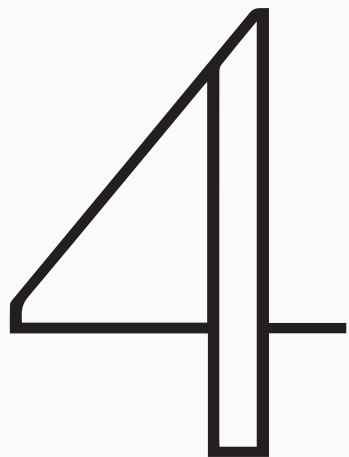




MUSICAL SPHERES

The Limitless Potentiality of Music

Ned Rorem's *Critical Affairs*

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Ned Rorem, *Critical Affairs: A Composer's Journal*. George Braziller, 1970, 216pp. Kindle version, Open Road Media, 2013.

THE BEATLES' *SERGEANT PEPPER'S Lonely Hearts Club Band* was released in 1967, and the Rolling Stones' *Sympathy for the Devil* in 1968. Woodstock, perhaps the crown jewel of the counterculture, took place in 1969. And in 1970, the forty-three-year-old Ned Rorem blithely published *Critical Affairs*. The book is about the state of the culture, ruminations on lost people and their treasures, music (specifically, his own music), and a diary of his recent year in Paris while looking at the state of his old friends and their decaying high cultural life. Does this have the least resonance for our own time? Indeed, it does. Rorem's comments seem as applicable today as they did then, which is to say that the difficulties he noticed then have only worsened. And his understanding of what it means to be a creative artist today—or if I must use that awful term, a “creative”—is just as relevant.

At the time of *Critical Affairs*'s publication, Rorem was already a well-known composer and writer. I place those descriptors in that order because, as he said in a 2002 interview: “I’m a composer who also writes, as opposed to a writer who also composes, and I wouldn’t presume to say what’s the most important or valuable thing.” Tim Page, a Pulitzer Prize-winning music critic himself, is more a fan of Rorem’s prose: “Even though I admire his compositions a lot,” Page writes, “I would say that in some ways, the diaries and the criticism are the things which mean the most to me. The bracing thing about Ned is that even when you disagree with him, he gets you thinking — and I think that’s one sign of a real master critic.” I tend to agree with Page on this, but more on that later. Thus, I think it is fair to say that Rorem viewed his compositions as the most essential aspect of his artistic life, even though his diaries and essays received significant attention. While mostly composing during the triumph of Serialism in Europe and America, he remained a defiant tonalist and Francophile, firmly in the camp of figures such as Virgil Thomson and the American symphonists Aaron Copland,

William Schuman, Peter Mennin, Vincent Persichetti, and Leonard Bernstein.

Rorem was born in Richmond, Indiana, in 1923 and pursued musical studies at Northwestern University, the Curtis Institute, and Juilliard. He studied with notable figures like Bernard Wagenaar and Virgil Thomson, the latter of whom he worked for as a copyist. He lived abroad in Morocco, and he described himself as “upper middle-class, semi-bohemian, but with a strong Quaker emphasis.”

I decided to look back at *Critical Affairs* just for the fun of it, not having read much of his other writing. In fact, I have listened to only a small part of his musical oeuvre, and I would not necessarily wish to hear a lot more. His compositions, I suspect, will be judged of their time; his writing may also be seen as topical. He is known for his tell-all writing, particularly in outing other gay composers, most notably Bernstein and Copland. Copland apparently did not mind, while it would seem that Bernstein did. Truthfulness is fine up to a point, isn't it? But some matters are better left alone, one thinks. While *Critical Affairs* does little of this lurid storytelling, it does make many telling points about music, the music business, and Rorem's view of his own music. I will focus on this.

Let's first look at those songs for which Rorem is most highly regarded. While I find them well-crafted and to the point—he decried repetition of text (well, there goes Bach and Beethoven!)—they are often dry and plain. The melodies themselves are frequently unmemorable. But then again, he did write so many of them, and singers did, and still do, seem to enjoy them. They are always exceedingly singable and not too challenging to learn. I wish he had tried for more. But then again, composers work in one of two ways. Some work slowly, fussing over every detail

as they go along over every detail. And there are those who, seemingly, work very quickly either with or without “deep inspiration.” The first group wishes for every work to be as close to perfection as possible. The latter assumes that some works will be better than others, and time will sort this out. I might put Beethoven, Brahms, and Stravinsky in the former group, and Mozart, Milhaud, and Rorem in the second group.

Remember, this does not say anything about the quality of these composers' entire outputs. It is only suggestive of the way they approached their writing, and maybe the way they made their living (i.e., fulfilling commissions at a certain speed to make a livelihood, as opposed to having a certain leisure if they had the means). Rorem apparently did not compose or write at a particular time, but it would certainly seem that he did one or the other every day, to be as prolific as he was. This suggests that he used composition and writing as complementary pursuits. If he did not feel like composing, he wrote, and vice versa. My guess is that he composed music with the fluidity of his writing style. Setting words will help with this, and I suspect this is why he liked to write songs. He could write them with unqualified speed and set a somewhat lower bar for them.

With respect to song, Rorem says that the genre is about the “marriage” of poetry and music. It is a “third entity of sometimes different and greater magnitude than either parent. When planning to write a song, I seek poems more for sound than meaning, more for shape than sentiment.” I find this comment odd, but perhaps this is why his songs often seem superficial. How could they *not* be, if he is not engaging with the emotional content of the poem? A poem is almost always about some personal response to the world. How can a composer not hope to explicate

this in his musical response? In my view, the composer provides a musical “reading” of the poem in some shape or fashion; the composer brings his intuitive understanding of it as presented in the musical domain. Some enigmas may be allowed to remain. There can be numerous settings of the same poem, as long as they “work.” The good composer makes this happen, and in so doing, creates a “marriage” that should be strong and continue through time.

Regarding the differences between a lyricist's relationship to his popular (or show) composer

naturally, I feel I'm cheating.” All of this is telling, as is a comment about his entire compositional output: “Of the forty hours I have thus far composed, I can bear to listen to twelve. Of the twelve, I am not ashamed of six. Of the six, I am proud of but one.” Less than one hour of music that he claims as his own, after about thirty years of composing! This is an astonishing statement for a distinguished composer to utter.

Rorem decries rock music's adherents for their “Nowism,” as if nothing in the

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and that of a poet and a classical composer, Rorem states: “A lyricist is a collaborative craftsman. Poets' work ends with their poems.” While Elizabeth Bishop did not particularly like how Rorem set, or the performance of, her *Visits to St Elizabeths*, he responds that it “succeeds more than many of my pieces, being often sung, loudly applauded, and singers say it ‘feels good.’” Notice that he does not say he loves it or that it is one of his best works. His response is solely about external responses and nothing about his own. In a final comment about song, he says “Good poetry makes better songs. The further out the poet, the nearer must be his musician. I compose what I need to hear because nobody else is doing it. Yet I feel guilty about what I do best—setting words to music. Because it comes easily, meaning

past is worthy of their attention. He finds this boorish and obnoxious, not to mention illiterate. They truly know nothing, he writes, nor have they heard of anything. Have they heard of *The Rite of Spring*, or Bach's *St. Matthew's Passion*? And if they have heard of either, have they actually experienced, that is to say, listened to the music? This is as true now as it was then, but the situation has only gotten worse. Younger audiences are positively entranced with being part of the current stream of juvenilia in music. Taylor Swift is now a model of the genre. Her followers are in the billions, but what she does is not about music, but about the show. According to various sources, Swift's recent *Eras* tour hired a fleet of around 50 trucks to transport the equipment. While a course is taught about her

at Harvard, her music and lyrics are banal, tedious, and of negligible value. Rorem would have found all of this absurd.

Rorem claimed that “as a social phenomenon rock is ever more intriguing, though as musical experience, it is now virtually nil. Whereas *A Day in the Life* will remain a landmark in the literature of great song, *Sympathy for the Devil* is terrible music with terrible words, terribly performed.” What about the fifty-five years since? What of Pink Floyd, The Carpenters, the Bee Gees, et al.? I suspect that Rorem found all of this music rather banal, as do I. And what of the totemic Mick Jagger and the recently deceased Ozzy Osbourne? About them, I believe that Rorem would have agreed with Roger Scruton’s consistent take on this subject. Scruton thought that the lead singer in popular music is a totem or icon, a representative of a tribe or group, rather than a singular individual. He argued that the names of pop stars often function as symbolic identifiers for fan communities, rather than simply reflecting personal identities; that their musical, as opposed to performative, capabilities are non-existent, and that the music they sing is worthless. The phenomenon is entirely cultural and has nothing to do with the music *per se*. Music is about flow and motion for both Scruton and Rorem. It must move, and this is just what pop generally does *not* do. And together they understand most pop music as empty and contributing to a decline of musical and artistic culture.

In one sentence, Rorem encapsulates the two defining problems of our time: “Their patronizing of their elders is not hip, but old as youth itself, and about as intelligent as anti-Semitism.” The silliness of the patronizing of elders remains a major problem in our youth culture. Only now it is the intelligentsia of the academy and media that goad on our “youth”

to be patronizing, glib, and superficial in their cultural tastes. And their parents, who do not know much better—and who themselves might even wish to remain hip!—are no better. And in the outbreak of the plague of antisemitism after October 7th, 2023, our younger generation demonstrates their utter disregard for history and a moral deficiency of astounding scope.

Rorem’s comments on music in general can often take a wonderful philosophical or poetic turn. Music is about making choices: “...music, like love, must be selective. But do not confuse love for music... (and) Inspiration is not provided, but emerges from solitude, while love...comes from the outside...If musical art has always reflected what we call the times without proposing solutions to the times’ problems, it has also rendered the times...through what is generally conceded to be communicative beauty. Music cannot not be beautiful, even when ugly.” (my emphasis). Beauty in this final comment is somewhat more akin to truth. There is always an element of beauty in truth, even if it is a bit brutal. One also thinks of the “elegance” that mathematicians seek in their equations. Consider Einstein’s simple and elegant statement about what guides our universe: $E=mc^2$. Doesn’t music tell us something equally wondrous about our world? Maybe this also explains why Einstein, even though rather bad at it, played the violin throughout his life.

Returning again to the relationship between words and music and why Rorem favors the latter modality: “If this paragraph is never completed but dissolves right now, will anyone (myself included) ever really care? However, if this afternoon I improvise a strand of melody, tomorrow and over the following days, that strand may lengthen and

continually double back upon itself to weave a slow carpet of music which never, never, never before existed. These words are anybody’s. But the musical carpet, no matter how dreadful the pattern, is mine, and will remain always faithfully on the floor of my private room.”

Words are thus ephemeral for him. Clearly, this is not so about the poetry he sets, particularly that of his favorite poet, Walt Whitman. Yet they seem to mean less to him than the music does. Music has a mystery that words do not have: a limitless potentiality, something so personal it cannot quite be fathomed; so self-descriptive that it is akin to a fingerprint or snowflake—something unique in the universe. The music is his alone, as it is for every composer, but who then must send it out into the world, if it is ever to realize its intention? Or perhaps like Bach’s *Art of the Fugue*, it might just be a conversation between the composer and his sonic medium, or between him and God—any human realization of the composer’s intentions be damned.

Finally, what then, or should be, the backdrop for a sane human existence? John Cage thought that sound and silence, or even actions, occurring over time are the definition of music. Thus, his “happenings” blur the distinction between music, performance art, and life itself. Rorem has no patience for music that blurs the distinction between life and the art of music. Music must retain its sacred quality connected to the artist’s inner world.

Rorem equally condemns the serious, or classical, music world of his time. He finds the lionization of Pierre Boulez and the serial avant-garde, well, peculiar, as well as its analogue in American academia, of the serialist Milton Babbitt and his followers. Audiences generally don’t like the music. But they are “told” by its adherents and marketeers that it is great, and thus they reluctantly listen.

But on many levels, as demonstrated by music theorist Fred Lerdahl and linguist Ray Jackendoff’s generative theory of tonal music, it really doesn’t make any sense; it doesn’t cohere as a language that the human ear can make sense of. And thus, contrary to Schoenberg’s notion that schoolchildren would be whistling his tunes, this just hasn’t, and never will, take place. He takes a shot at Lukas Foss, who never heard a new musical “style” he didn’t embrace, and I suspect he hated Bernstein’s *Mass*, which is all over the map stylistically. Now, it happens that Lukas wrote five wonderful symphonies for which he should be much better known. And Rorem liked Bernstein’s early music, before he became “Lenny.” Rorem is nothing if not judgmental, but then, any good composer should be. Most new music is bad music, and deserves to be called out.

If Rorem is hard on himself, as we have seen above, he is equally and justifiably so about all other music. Which is to say, he calls all genres to task: “The past four years have spawned ever fewer genuine works in any form; this, I feel, is due to the direct alliance of art with the New Left. If the state of the body and soul appears better for it, the state of music as a lasting social contribution is worse.” This is even more true today, as considerations of new works by orchestras are no longer made on quality, but rather on the background of the composer. Newness, cross-genre, sound design, and multi-media are in, while the “older values” of harmony, melody, and counterpoint, development, and motion are definitely out. It is time for shock and awe, which might be useful in a military zone, but really doesn’t work in a musical space. What applied in the 1950s applies to our present time. “The decade of the 1950s saw music’s decline as a fine art, despite the rise of such distinguished craftsmen as Boulez.

Nobody but his colleagues cared much. How could people enjoy Boulez's complexities when John Cage's fun was guaranteed culture, as was the simplistic gorgeousness of Elvis Presley, who began to be sanctioned by the intelligentsia?" For our time, substitute the names of Ligeti (whose music has been vastly overrated), Mason Bates, the classical turntable player, and Taylor Swift, the billionaire queen of pop.

Since Rorem was a composer and a diarist, and sometimes a musical diarist, let me finish by recommending two recordings worthy of your attention.

Winter Pages was written in 1981. It is a work of intimate chamber music in twelve short movements, and not surprisingly, each about the length of a song. Lyrical and suave, it runs about thirty-six minutes in duration. About it, Rorem says: "The suite of twelve pieces is a diary of the season, each entry leading to the

next, reworking the same concerns which nevertheless shift their mood according to the weather...My nonvocal works are songs without texts. Indeed, so firmly do I rely on the poor singer within me longing to get out that the music feels almost like verse without words."

Piano Album I and *Six Friends* can be heard on a Naxos CD performed with tenderness and elegance by pianist Carolyn Enger. Only two of these thirty-three miniatures are longer than two minutes. Written between 1978 and 2001, these small gems are delightfully piquant and can be sampled as you wish.

Critical Affairs is filled with ideas worthy of pondering. And so we have done just that. But it is his music, if anything, that I think Rorem would like to be remembered for. And even if that is only two or three hours of great music that might just stand the test of time, this would be no small feat. A