

# Dysfunctional Harmony

By Kyle Gann

## Creativity

**Jung believed in five** instincts: hunger, sex, aggression, flight, and creativity. Everyone deflects, satisfies, or represses these instincts in various ways. Americans (especially Republicans) suppress creativity even more than sex. As a result, we live in a musically dysfunctional society. Concertgoing is a penance. Musicians gripe about rock's limitations, but the possibility that we could have some more evolved music as collective cultural expression seems so quixotic it's never entertained. Our official classical scene is a sham in which professors give each other awards for writing tedious music. Composer and audience have mutually acquiesced to a rotten marriage of frigid noncommunication.

The suppression of creativity is pervasive. I do it myself. I'm a dysfunctional drawer too embarrassed to even doodle, but I once followed the exercises in Betty Edwards's book *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*, and within minutes was turning out amazing duplicates of Picasso drawings. Today I can't draw a recognizable cat, but there may be a Rembrandt inside me wishing I'd step out of the way. As Edwards says, we're born knowing how to draw but it gets schooled out of us between ages 10 and 13. And in this increasingly visual culture, music is even more

squelched. Believing ourselves uncreative, we project creativity onto some safe, distant target. Artists, we reassure ourselves, are *different*, selected by God, not normal.

Which is why we worship Mozart. It's comforting to believe that *real* creators lived far away and long ago. Recognizing oneself in a new work requires summoning up the creativity within us, but kowtowing to History's Hallowed Warhorses makes no demands at all. The person who idolizes the "divine genius" of Mozart denies, projects, and is out of touch with his own creativity. I've analyzed Mozart's music, and I know his tricks—he was brainy, but not divine. That's why music's worst enemy is the classical establishment, whose every nuance hinges on a genius myth that dumps water on the average Joe's inner spark. (And it's why *Amadeus* is such a wretched, smarmy film, gratifying our most self-defeating delusions.)

Psychologist James Hillman, in *The Myth of Analysis*, asks: "Why must the person who lives largely in terms of the creative instinct be damned out of common humanity? And the reverse: why can't the common man change his heroically romantic nineteenth-century concept of genius, so charged with ambition and envy, and be done with this fantasy of the extraordinary personality? Has not each of us a genius; has not each genius a human soul? Could we not find a similar extraordinariness within ourselves in our rela-

tion to the creative instinct as we experience it?"

To acknowledge creativity in those proximate to us is dangerous, for it shines a light on what we keep locked up. That's why Cage struck a nerve. When an interviewer said to him, "If music's that easy to do, then I could do it," Cage responded, "Have I said anything to make you think I thought you were stupid?" One of Cage's aims was to erase the line not only between art and life, but between artists and nonartists. And in fact, no such lines exist. Asian and African cultures, unlike our own, acknowledge the universal need for artistic expression.

Art communicates via empathy. We all, in childhood, tried to draw a human figure, and remember how hard it was to make it come alive; that's why a figure drawn well takes our breath away. Same with sports: we feel in our muscular imagination the delicacy needed to curve that ball's trajectory into the basket. If you'd never tried it, watching it wouldn't mean much. Most teenagers try their hand at poetry, and many attempt a song, one reason rock persists. We can imagine the effort that goes into a well-set lyric enough to admire someone who does it better than we can. But how many people attempt to write smooth polyphony, or instrumental music, or auditory shapes on a canvas of time? In our educational systems, no one. The average American has no concept of what's involved in polyphonic or



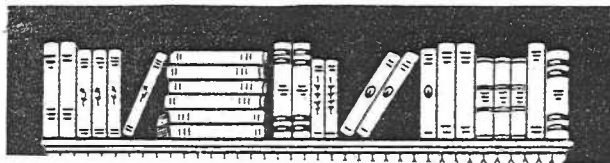
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textural musical creation, and therefore can't admire the results.

And how could they learn, with composers today trained to express creativity on such rarefied, picayune levels? I recently sat on a grants panel whose requirements included a residency in which the composer spent a few days with the audience, and I thought, Here's the future of music: a new breed of composer/teacher/creativity-facilitator to replace the lonely-genius-who-writes-in-isolation paradigm. It is as immoral for composers, as the carriers of our culture's musical creativity, to ignore their social responsibility as it is for weapons designers and bioengineers. The composer must not only trumpet her own hyperdeveloped musical sense, but tap the listener's more modest one. To have an audience is to unlock

a collective creativity.

Composers have to learn, as some have, to gear their art toward present-day categories of listener empathy. That won't make their music weaker, only clearer. Europeans and music professors will scoff at it for being too straightforward, not complex enough: fuck 'em. They're part of the problem. At the same time, audience members have to acknowledge that their knee-jerk negativity toward new music arises from insecurity about their own stifled fantasies. Their job is not to judge, but to exercise their imaginations within the music. As in any marriage gone sour, each partner has made the other what it is. Moving toward health is going to require self-inspection and remedial attitude work on both sides. And lots of courage. ■



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