Milton Babbitt

Rising to the Surface

BY KYLE GANN

Since spring I had been looking forward to reviewing Milton Babbitt's new book "Words About Music" (University of Wisconsin Press). When the time came, though, I did something I've never done before. After weeks of jotting down paragraphs, I wrote a long, damning article, in the heat of inspiration. Then, hours before deadline, on the point of modernizing my column, the epiphany came, and I realized I had erred. I wish you could see that column. Elegant, forceful, polished, it accessed Plato, Aristotle, and Wittgenstein with disarming ingenuity. Only fault was that it was wrong. I think I finally understand Milton Babbitt.

"Words About Music" transcribes six lectures that Babbitt gave at Madison. Being a transcription, the book makes easier reading than the journal articles Babbitt has written in his perverse academese. Now, if you're unfamiliar with terms like "aggregate" and "all-combinatorial" (explained in a glossary) you're still going to have a difficult time. Hexachords—groups of six pitches—are Babbitt's building blocks, and he spends a lot of words distinguishing the properties of those that are self-inversional from those that are inversions of their complements. If this is way over your head, think twice before you smuggle up to Babbitt on a rainy evening. But editors Stephen Dembski and Joseph N. Strausse have done a superb job of capturing Babbitt's classroom style and clarifying his musical examples, and the result is the frankest and most conversational Babbitt in print.

It's not that I hadn't liked Babbitt's music before; on the contrary, among Babbitt is that his field of discourse is hermetically sealed. Like the positivist philosophers he quotes (usually Carnap), he lives in an abstracted universe that accepts neither metaphysics nor the possibility of a relationship between music and life. To ask what music "expresses," he implies (not here, but in an earlier article "The Structure and Function of Music Theory"), is as nonsensical as to assert with Heidegger that "The Nothing itself nothings," the phrase Carnap so viciously derided. That a music's internal mechanisms can be both crucial and inaudible entails counterintuitive philosophical implications that Babbitt ignores, either because he finds them too obvious, or because his anticritical stance denies their relevance. His note-attentive analysis of a Bach chorale in Chapter Five reveals that he sees his music as an unproblematic, linear projection of classical tradition.

What turned me around, I think, was the Piano Concerto. It had perplexed me why, since I couldn't hear in it a single example of the technical desiderata Babbitt expounds so neatly, I still enjoyed listening to it. I finally realized that the elegance I admired so much, the textural nonrepetition despite extreme limitations of gesture, were not merely by-products of Babbitt's theoretical arsenal, but its implicit aim. And the Concerto is unique within Babbitt's output for the qualities that enabled me to make that realization. For one thing, events happen slowly enough (especially in the orchestra) that one can leisurely revel in the music's "grain"; for another, as Babbitt's only orchestra work available on record, the concerto allows his structures to operate in the area of tone color, where they are more obvious than in the logic-oriented fields of pitch and rhythm. If that accursed sprite changed the intervals in my CD, I would notice: probably not consciously, but as a vague disillusionment with the piece's diminished sparkling surface.

My present grip of Babbitt's aesthetic, putting it in a terminology congenial to me and quite foreign to him, is this: Musical perception, like spatial perception, is largely a function of the right side of the brain; logic and language are...
A genius or a nut?

The weight of that little "if" crushed my lovely column. What I suddenly realized (or decided, anyway), as the meaning of Babbitt's words seeped in, was that I had mistaken the essence of his music. I had missed the reality underneath the maze. I was so unabashedly enjoying the beauty of Babbitt's music. I never mind that aspect of Cage's music, because Cage graciously reassures the listener that what he hears is more, not less, than what was intended. Babbitt, by contrast, claims that he never puts a note on paper until he has several reasons why that and only that note is the correct one.

I still quarrel with some of Babbitt's statements. He talks as though his music assumes the ability to recognize intervals as identical regardless of context, timbre, or octave displacement. He even states that "the notion of interval...is the fundamental scaling principle of all the music of the past." I find that a stunning misconception. Tonal music assumes recognition of not intervals, but scale degrees (relative distance from the tonic).

The interval, in a 12-tone sense, is an abstraction that appeared relatively late in history, assuming importance only after the Tristan. Gestalt theory argues that the influence of context precludes perceptual constancy, and that's no reason interval size should be exempt. In Babbitt's Concrète Forms, for instance, I can't hear the similarity between a quick E-flat/G-flat/D motive spread over a ninth and a rising F-sharp/A-sharp motive over seven octaves away, and if, according to Babbitt's theory, their near-equivalence is crucial to comprehension, then the piece is incomprehensible.

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