

The Door to Atonality[†]

LEITH STEVENS

Recently there has been a particularly virulent rash of writings, attacking the intellectual honesty and the artistic integrity of the present day avant-garde composer. These criticisms are filled with carplings about lack of tonality, incomprehensible rhythmic patterns, inanities about synthetic construction, arbitrary systems, serial techniques and such.

Let us examine the overall question. What do these critics hope to achieve? Do they expect to turn music back in its tracks to some personally selected point in musical development which they consider the epitome of musical expression? If so, music would be in a bad way, because each self appointed arbiter seems to have selected a different niche to which he feels music should retire.

They can no more dam the progress of music than they can dry up Niagara Falls with a bucket. Music, together with all the other arts, in order to have any validity at all, must reflect the temper, the culture, the emotional values and the philosophical climate of the time of its writing.

Above all a composer must be a humanist. He must mirror, in what he has to say, the triumphs, the failures, the victories, the disasters, the ideals, and the hope of his fellow man.

The cries against dissonance have been heard since the time of Beethoven. They surge up at the introduction of some new harmonic or contrapuntal concept, and die away as the listener becomes acclimatized to the new sound. Actually, there is no such thing as dissonance. Composers may produce a feeling of tension or a quality of shock by the juxtaposition of certain sounds, but isolated from their surroundings any and all sounds are consonant, for it is not possible to produce a musical sound or combination of musical elements that do not already exist in the scale of nature. The man who professes pain in the presence of dissonance is using a defense mechanism. What he is saying, in truth, is that he has not taken the trouble to try and understand this new sound or combination of sounds.

Some critics claim that contemporary composers are intellectualizing music. In that case what about $\frac{3}{4}$, $\frac{4}{4}$, $\frac{6}{8}$, etc.? What about the tempered scale, on which all our music is based? What about The Art of the Fugue? What about the sonata form, rondo form, etc., etc., etc.? These are all intellectual concepts, quite rigid ones in fact, and although where properly used, they have never guaranteed the success of any musical work, conversely they have never stood in the way of great genius.

There is a secondary degree, often implied if not stated, under

the heading of intellectualism. It is that intuition, instinct, inspiration and spontaneity are minimized by this intellectual approach. The writer finds this part of the charge incomprehensible. Is it the suggestion of our would-be arbiters that a composer can go off into mental limbo and through intuition and instinct dream up some combination of sounds that can be considered a musical work? This is hogwash. The results of unfettered intuition and instinct without the guidance of the intellect could only be musical gibberish.

What is this music that has caused and continues to cause so much ruckus? Its seeds were planted at the moment Richard Wagner decided the existing musical vocabulary was not sufficient to say what he must say in his musical drama *Tristan and Isolde*. Wagner's innovation was chromatic harmony (the first step away from the solid tonalities of that day) and the smoldering intensities and the anguished tension of *Tristan* remain as the one unparalleled example of this idiom in musical literature. The reason? When composers set out to exploit this new harmonic both for the composer and the audience. Until this point in history, somnolent release or hypnotic suggestion were considered legitimate reasons for listening to music. The responsibility of the audience in this chain

[†] Published in *FM & Fine Arts Magazine*, October 1963.

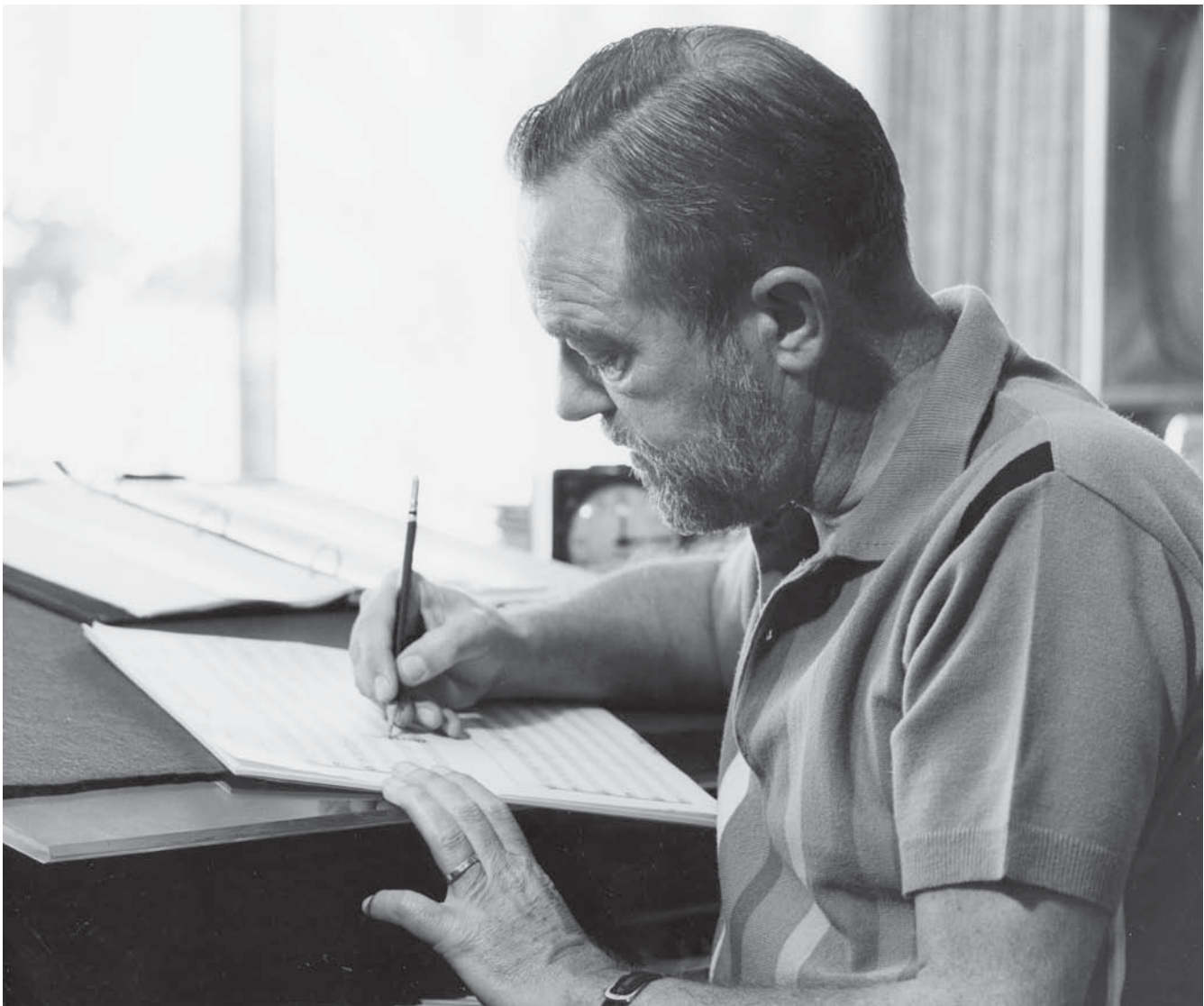
of realization, of composer, performer and listener, have only in very recent times become an accepted fact.

There is one other musical development which has had its share of disappointment. We refer to music concrete and its twin or counterpart, electronic music. These are in essence efforts by composers to arrive at that final control of the sound without the interposition of the very inaccurate

and in most cases confusing musical terminology with which we all must suffer. Any composer who has been interpreted by a conductor will understand the difference between his intentions and the result. There may be certain cases where the results exceed expectations, but these are rare.

We have made small progress but we have achieved an approach to a most important principle.

Music, painting, sculpture and literature is not a sometime thing. It is our individual responsibility to find a way to keep abreast of the progress of the arts, to learn to look forward to new developments, rather than to say, this is my own personal ultimate, don't bother me with anything new!



Leith Stevens composing at his home in Palm Desert, CA