

The Psychology of Genius: Two Later Essays

These essays have been included to show the development of Keller's investigation of 'creative character' in the mid 1950s. The focus is now on the concept of 'genius', a topic that preoccupied him throughout his life as it had done his twentieth- and nineteenth-century forebears. The essays also raise other important concerns: the achievement of Stravinsky and the 'mourning of the lost object'; reactions to the work of Theodor Adorno; the writing of biography; the status of history; love, aggression and their relation to psychology and art; Dementia praecox (see the Afterword to this section for Keller's observational material); the madness of 'our age's' rationalism; and the need to defend great music.

1 Towards the Psychology of Stravinsky's Genius

This was written to mark a number of concerts of Stravinsky's music conducted by the composer himself: the Symphony in C, Symphony of Psalms and Pulcinella were broadcast at 8.00 p.m. (Home [Service]) and 9.15 p.m. (Third [Programme]) on Wednesday, December 5 [1956], and again at 8.00 p.m. on Friday, December 7 (Third). The first English performance of Canticum Sacrum was given at 8.15 p.m. on Tuesday, December 11 (Third).

In his penetrating though often fallacious *Philosophie der neuen Musik*, Theodor W. Adorno plays off Schoenberg against Stravinsky whom he calls a death-mask of the past.¹ Professor Adorno usually knows what he is talking about, but his talk is not always equal to his knowledge, chiefly because it is not inspired by that respect for a great genius without which the truest observation on him lacks perspective.

The fact remains that Stravinsky's creative character in general, and his attitude to the past in particular, has proved a headache to most musicians and critics, for the simple reason that we have never encountered this kind of great composer before. All good composers start out from the past; most bad composers remain stuck in it; but Stravinsky is the first great creator who speaks through it.

Where history fails, psychology must take its place. The problem of Stravinsky's creative character is that of our time – the problem of aggression. But the problem of his aggression is, paradoxically enough, the problem of his love.

Apropos of his treatment of Pergolesi's melodies in the ballet *Pulcinella* (1919-20), Stravinsky asked: "Should my line of action be dominated by my love or by my respect for Pergolesi's music? Is it love or respect that urges us to possess a woman? Is it not by love alone that we succeed in penetrating to the very essence of a being? But then does love diminish respect? Respect alone remains barren and can never serve as a productive or creative factor. In order to create, there must be a dynamic force, and what force is more potent than love?" He felt his 'conscience to be innocent of sacrilege' and moreover considered that his attitude towards Pergolesi was 'the only possible one towards the music of earlier ages'. Less known, but equally relevant, is Stravinsky's suggestion that 'rape may be justified by the creation of a child'. Paul Valéry changed the metaphor: 'A lion consists of digested lambs'.

Psychoanalysis recognises two basic types of love, self-love apart. Genetically the more primitive is identification, which stems from the earliest, sucking stage of infancy and whose prototype is oral incorporation: hence the technical term 'introjection' for the 'absorption of the environment into the personality' (Ernest Jones); hence, too Valéry's metaphor. The other type, 'object love', is what we commonly understand by love. In monosyllables, identification is based on the need to *be* someone, object love on the need to *have* someone. Identification is the more ambivalent of the two, not only because you destroy what you eat, but also because you want to replace the person you want to be.

Ordinary artistic development always starts with identification: while the composer's own creative ego is still weak, he identifies himself with his teachers and with older masters and proceeds to imitate them. As his originality grows, these father figures recede or are absorbed by his conscience and, if nothing drastic happens (such as the Bach crisis in Mozart's life), his creative 'love relations' with the music of other composers amount to no more than sporadic flirtations resulting in, say, variations on another composer's theme, which will be children of 'object love' rather than of identification.

Alone among geniuses, with the possible exception of Picasso, Stravinsky has actually developed his capacity for identification together with the unfolding of his intense originality. At the same time, as his commentary on *Pulcinella* indicates, his creative mind also employs a good deal of highly aggressive 'object love': he makes the aggressive best of both love worlds, though identification remains the basic 'dynamic force'. No previous composer has shown any desire to compose his way 'into the very essence of a being'.

And all men kill the thing they love,
By all let this be heard,
Some do it with a bitter look,
Some with a flattering word,
The coward does it with a kiss,
The brave man with a sword!

There is some special pleading here [in these words of Oscar Wilde's], but there is a truth too. Stravinsky has in fact himself employed the bitter look, the flattering word, and the sword, but he has never killed the past by kissing it, as so many of his followers and other neo-classicists have done.

The two symphonies which he will conduct twice next week are extremely healthy children of his ambivalent identification with more than one past, and if the first movement of the Symphony in C (1939-40) is a little uneasy about its synthesis of Stravinsky's characteristic, undeveloping *ostinato* technique and classical sonata development, the resultant formal friction turns out to be as valid a part of the structure as is, for instance, Beethoven's un-operatic attitude in *Fidelio*.

The *Symphony of Psalms* (1930), on the other hand, does not evince such seeming imperfections: it is a spotless and gigantic masterpiece, profoundly expressive in its very suppression of expressionism, its in-turned, self-castigating aggression. Identifications with the past span a wide field, stretching back into the archaic, and when the opening four-part fugue of the second movement (with the answer in the dominant) raises its voice through what we might call the life-mask of Bach, we realise that the term 'neo-classicism' is just not good enough.

The severe limitations that Stravinsky's identifications impose upon his intense imagination are precisely what he wants. His urge towards formal stringency and simplicity goes beyond the requirements of unity and clarity: he does not discipline his inspiration; rather he is more

lavishly inspired by self-discipline than any other composer. Again, his love, this time his artistic self-love or self-respect, is unlike the usual artist's: again it is vehemently ambivalent, combined with, perhaps even outweighed by, aggression turned inward.

Symbolic of this self-restrictive, form-conscious simplicity is the fact that all three major works in next week's programme show cyclic devices on the one hand, and recognise C as their tonality on the other (though two of them do not start out from home): no doubt the first concert programme of this kind in our entire history.

After Schoenberg's death, and too late for Professor Adorno to revise his theory about the antithesis of Stravinsky's and Schoenberg's attitudes, Stravinsky embarked on his serial period which has now culminated in his first twelve-tone music – the three middle movements of the *Canticum Sacrum* (1955), whose first and fifth movements, moreover, mirror each other in self-restrictive retrograde motion. My own little hypothesis, on the other hand, here seems to receive its final confirmation. The 'identification with the lost object' (Freud, *Mourning and Melancholia*, 1916) is no news to the psychoanalyst, who will see in the previous ambivalent relation between the two musical leaders of our time an ideal foundation for Stravinsky's 'introjection' of Schoenberg's method: by way of creative mourning, Stravinsky identified with Schoenberg's serialism as soon as it had become a thing of the past. In justice to Professor Adorno, we must remind ourselves that his 'death mask of the past' now assumes a new significance, but we must continue to reject the negative evaluation implied in, or insinuated by, his formulation.

For the rest, great geniuses are few and far between, and we cannot afford to miss them when they come.

NOTES

Source: *The Listener*, 56/1444, 29 November, 1956, p. 897.

- 1 [Ed:] Keller had reviewed Theodor Adorno's *Philosophy of New Music* (in its German edition, J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), Tübingen, 1949) in *Tempo*, 16, Summer 1950, p. 32:

Adorno's Philosophy of New Music

Unreadables attract each other on their basis for their common contempt for the common idiot. Thus Adorno and his unsuccessful pupil in matters twelve-tonal, Thomas Mann, appear to like each other more than they need to, and thus, too, I myself am prejudiced in favour of the present book. But while the truth is invariably unreadable because it is always complicated and usually beneath expectations, unreadability is not always the reader's fault, but sometimes nobody's (as in the case of Kant, whose thought processes necessitated a special language), and sometimes, as in the case of Adorno, everybody's. As far as it is the author's, it consists of (a) condensations which cannot be due to space considerations, since he often says the same thing five times over in five differently condensed groups of propositions, where a single full-length exposition would have needed far less space; (b) his highly developed art of begging all questions of evaluation; (c) his obsession for using the same word, twice in a sentence, for different concepts and leaving it entirely to God to decide how far A is the contrary of A (this is known as dialectics); (d) Anglicisms of vocabulary as well as grammar which seem to require a readership composed of German-, Austrian-, or Swiss-born naturalized British or American subjects who have retained a firm knowledge of German philosophical terminology and at the same time made English their mother tongue; (e) a snobbish and quite forgivable partiality for what, in music, he himself detests, i.e. archaic language ('denn' instead of 'als' [than], 'ward' instead of 'wurde' [was], etc.).

Yet Dr. Adorno offers innumerable penetrating and imaginative observations, interspersed with strokes of genius-like insight, on almost everything except the subject indicated by his title (for 'philosophy' read often 'psychology'). No excuse for the reader who puts the book aside because it is too tough (which it isn't) or because it could be much less tough (which it could). I personally shall read it thrice. Meanwhile I cannot refrain from taking my savage revenge upon the author's torrent of equivalent condensations by condensing them into a single sentence: the upshot of it all is that while Schoenberg is a true map of psychic life, Stravinsky is a false death mask of the past. True, this doesn't say all Dr. Adorno means, but then, does Dr. Adorno?