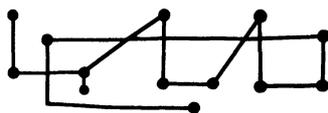


BANQUETING WITH THE EMPEROR
DESIDERATA
IN HONOR OF RICHARD SWIFT



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1.
ART IS THE OBJECTIFICATION of desire—a desire only trivially libidinous (although, metaphorically, thoroughly so)—not a question of truth, but of reality. The aesthetic object *is* wholly and authentically.
2.
Music lies less in the sounds than in the distance between. Even the solitary sound is a multitude, for in the relation of its components lies its fascination.
3.
In the musical instant is mindfulness—a mindfulness of the sensuous intelligence born of interval, the latent narratives of texture, of color.

Constellations form and evaporate, attractions arise and dissolve—instants resonant of their pasts and pregnant with their futures, each piece a universe, each instant a galaxy of suns and planetary systems (Wolpe).

4.

To the degree we are constrained, we are free. Ignorance of constraint is not absence of constraint. To the extent we are unaware of the constraints under which we work, we are bound by them. There is no power in this knowledge, only freedom.

5.

Our desires and their objectification: two things. We must not confuse our intents with our deeds. The constraints under which we work are hidden, while our intent seems clear. Intentions are our working metaphors, but hidden compulsion is the driving force of our productions.

6.

The Great Taboo of Kulture: We may not notice that the expressive is precisely the academic.

6.1. Expression of self leads to obscurity, to private language—which is no language at all. Indeed, there is no more academic a composer than the resolutely expressive. The music of that composer is—must be—hidebound by convention and normative frames of reference. Its efficacy depends upon instantaneous recognition, upon a stereotypical musical code of *affects*.

6.2. The authentically self-expressive is—must be—gibberish to the other unless—until—that other takes it to heart, makes it their own.

Merely imagine *Erwartung*. Its apprehension requires less a theorist's code book than a leap of faith—and we cannot look before that leap for there is no signification save on the other side.

7.

The esthete is to art what the pornographer is to love (Kraus). This we know, yet we conspire to forget. “Wie echt falsches Haar!” we exclaim (without Schönberg's irony), and Pulitzers rain down like balloons at a fat cats' convention.

But one composer's ground is another's gimmick: one's *Ursatz* more *Ersatz* to the other. Taste, we conclude fashionably, is beyond dispute. Beyond dispute? Perhaps, but at a cost.

8.

If we do not at first achieve taste we will at last contract it—like some social disease, from unwashed coffee cups or public lavatories.

9.

The goal:

- 9.1. *A message?* No, we don' wan' no stinkin' message. We want a repository for meaning.
- 9.2. *Irony?* No, it cannot support the edifice we imagine for there is no iron in it (Olson).
- 9.3. *The means?* Yes, this is what we require, merely the means.

10.

And redundancy, although not the goal, is the sole means. A fertile redundancy gives rise to coherence. It plumbs otherwise inaccessible depths. A fertile redundancy makes the extrinsic intrinsic, conjuring the miracle of art where the ordinary, the everyday, becomes charged with magic—the receptacle of a meaning formally explicit now implicit, formerly implicit now explicit. We mention three modes of productive redundancy:

10.1. Redundancy: Literal, but . . .

Take the recapitulation of Mozart's String Quartet, K. 575/I. The sequential repetitions of this second theme, following the rituals of recapitulation, return transposed from the expository dominant to the expected tonic. But through a miracle of stage-craft, the exposition suddenly reappears (same key, register, and instrument) like a rabbit from under the composer's peruke (Example 1).

The recapitulation was false, it seems. Here, after all, is the original unchanged. The movement is suddenly and dramatically rebalanced, miraculously revitalized. The mere winding out of an abstract formalism? Not at all. Suddenly, the thing itself.

10.2. Redundancy: From one context to another . . .

m. 32 Cello
 Violin 2
 Viola
 m. 148 Violin 2
 Viola
 Cello
 8...

EXAMPLE 1: MOZART, STRING QUARTET, K. 575, FIRST MOVEMENT RECAPITULATION

Or take Strauss (*Der Rosenkavalier*), where a luxurious trio melds lavishly into a final scene of guileless—or so the old rascal would have us believe—simplicity. And after the extravagant orchestral interlude that leads the Marschallin, with all her bitter-sweet baggage (all in $D\flat$ —or is it $C\sharp$?—major), into the wings and simultaneously clears the hothouse air for an oh-so-precious G-major duo, a poignant $C\sharp$ lingers. Poignant? Surely so, for though off-stage, the Marschallin hovers above these young lovers in this $C\sharp$, the fresh fragrance of G major disturbed by this sweet, *älter Luft*.*

10.3. Redundancy: Generative . . .

Or take Debussy, the Bawd of Euphony himself, where in his Violin Sonata (I, opening), the symmetrical unfolding and then inversion of a cycle of thirds spills out the dramatic $G\flat$ that becomes the tonal and dramatic center of the movement.

measures 5–8



Inversion around F



(see measure 134, etc., for resonances of this $G\flat$)

EXAMPLE 2: DEBUSSY, VIOLIN SONATA (OPENING)

* Not “There’s that $C\sharp$ again,” but “*Ouch*, that does not belong but is almost there and . . . yes . . . ah, there. But wait, a near miss . . .” We may not recognize this $C\sharp$ in G major as the Marschallin’s note, but what a shame it would be not to teach this to ourselves.

11.

A fertile redundancy arises from a mindfulness of interval and the intelligence that lies within, between, and among intervals. Intervals of time, intervals of space, intervals of . . . (but that is yet another story). Thus the Great Harmonic Problem of aggregate composition vanishes. It is, of course, a dodge. Redundancy lives no more in the twelve- than in the seven-tone. In the latter no less than in the former it leads to interior organizations unique to the ideas and motions of the work.

12.

And in the music of Richard Swift, as in all compelling music, there is redundancy—here, in String Quartet VI, the familiar redundancy of aggregate progression. Amidst that redundancy, intervals and their interplay resonate, a native intelligence thrives—one unique to the work and its musical project. Here, in the opening of this work, the extrinsic (middle-ground, pre-compositional? . . .) redundancy of aggregate progression becomes, immediately, intrinsic structure. Tune packets appear, interval kits defined by register, contour, rhythm, color, or all at once. Thus we create the singular from the redundant.

13.

And the registral activity . . . ? “Yes,” sigh the fops of fancy, “and in every register it spells *J-E-L-L-O*.” Well, it happens not to be that sort of redundancy—or only trivially so. It is rather the canonic interplay of intervals, *Hauptmotive* without a tail—but with a tale to tell, a tale less of canonic imitation perhaps than of “octave couplings” (fields of activity flipped from the inside out, from the outside in).

14.

We scan the texture, picking up something here, something else there. . . . No self-conscious artifact fashionably (and tautologically) calling attention to itself. No post-modern irony, no neo-expressionist *Angst*, rather, a playfulness, an elegance . . .

(We are after a sense of the experience here. Our language is not mystical by intent, but rather too dull a tool. But we will not let that stop us. . . .)

. . . Fully conscious of itself, yet unconscious of (or unconcerned with?) anything apart from itself, String Quartet VI quickly, playfully, earnestly responds to its recent past. Some minuscule minstrel retells every adventure, getting it wrong, of course, and the tale passes round-the-horn like a baseball after a first-inning out, like a game of musical chairs from the

Well-Tempered Clavier. These pint-sized bards digress, their course meanders. Obstacles appear: The ametrical, prosy scrim that is the field of the work parts, revealing tiny metrical machines at work behind the scenes—only brief glimpses, but enough to create a succession of equally spaced accents that crop up in every line here or there—surface manifestations of some celestial clock-work. And on . . .

15.

We merely graze a surface—a fractal landscape that arises from the iteration of a simple but elusive . . . what?—motive, idea, plot, *Grundgestalt*? (Interval sets expressed in time, color, and register bob most often to the surface of experience.)

16.

In sum, String Quartet VI embodies itself—nothing more nor less. From the second violin's spare opening registral identities arise and then (with each successive iteration) resound. There is still noise in the channel, so we scan the texture inventing identities that lead to near-identities and then across boundaries between identities of one time and kind to those of another. We are led on to fresh models of identity, but also back to repeated experience—complex identities tied in some fashion to rudimentary identities previously experienced and now recalled.

BUT WHERE TO GO FROM HERE?

We begin again—this time from the beginning.

17.

Citizens, artists, composers!

17.1. We sit at our banquet table as the naked emperor moves flatulently among us. We conspire ignorance. We attribute the stench to our fetid fantasies, the corpulent presence to our barren bodies. One among us rises and cries out. He is insane, clearly. There is no one here but us. We turn him a blind eye, a deaf ear; and to the emperor, our bare bums. There is no emperor among *us* (—and if there is, surely he wears sharkskin and musk). Thus do we make inmates of our keepers, madmen of our seers, mutes of our minstrels.

17.2. That a whole sentence can come from half a man I cannot believe (Kraus). Yet the biographer plots against this disbelief.

The emperor squats obscenely upon each page as if the subject alone were blind to his presence. Thus, pathetically, we hope to reclaim our sanity, our humanity, our authenticity.

- 17.3. I shall tell you an untruth, and that untruth shall make you free (Cabell).
- 17.4. The naked emperor is among us, and he tells us what to wear. And we listen. (God help us, we listen.) Yet we hear nothing—nothing but the dry wind whistling shrill and tuneless between our ears.
- 17.5. The tiger menace of things to come is red in the sky (Dowson); yet outside the banquet hall, here and there, an old sailor, drunk and asleep in his boots, catches tigers in red weather (Stevens). Here and there mute minstrels find voice and sing of an *alter Luft*, an *älter Luft*.
- 17.6. Let those who have ears hear! (Nietzsche)

18.

Art is the objectification of desire, and wholeness is the object of that desire, and the works of Richard Swift are wholly and authentically—more real than the cold chicken on our paper plates, more real than the naked emperor on the dais. They *are* wholly, yet are wholly created.

And not by half a man.

19.

Dick—

*If they throw stones upon the roof
While you practice arpeggios,
It is because they carry down the stairs
A body in rags.
Be seated at the piano.*

(Stevens)

—be seated at your piano.