

DISSONANCE IN MUSIC

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There is a great deal of untruths written about music and the trouble is that some people believe such lies.

There is also a lot of prejudice. People who do not like a piece of music will tell lies about it to support their rejection of the work. There are many people who complain about 'modern ' music and condemn it as being rubbish and not music at all.

If I dislike a composer's music I give technical and musical reasons and not prejudice. Contrary to what someone has said Johann Strauss is not a better composer than Bach and Andre Rieu is not a better violinist than Nathan Milstein or Christian Ferras!

An idiot is a person who does not talk sense and does not use sense and logic. Of course, it also means a person with mental disabilities or illness and such people are not to be condemned or ridiculed. But someone who deliberately does not use sense, truth and logic is an idiot and in that context there are many in the world of music and even musicians themselves who are idiots.

Before I am criticised let me emphasis that I have checked this with dictionaries and psychologists alike.

Sir John Barbirolli was one. He said that there was no good music written after 1934, the year of Elgar's death, and that if you do not love Elgar and every note of his music you cannot be a musician or a music lover. Elgar himself was an idiot. He said that Hindemith's Viola music and Walton's Viola Concerto were examples of utter rubbish and the abuse of the instrument.

As well as idiocy, there is ignorance by which I mean a lack of knowledge or understanding and not a lack of education. People who are deprived of a good education have been badly treated.

Someone said that Elton John was simply a marvellous pianist. If that is the case let us hear him play the Liszt Sonata or Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto no 3. You may object to this and say that that comment is unfair and that he is a great pianist in what he plays and that my comparison is odious. I have heard it said that John Lennon is the greatest-ever British composer of songs.

That is also untrue and offensive. John Ireland, Gerald Finzi and Roger Quilter wrote vastly better songs. Again, you may object and say that it is wrong for me to compare serious composers of songs with a composer of pop songs and you may even unfairly malign me as a snob.

There are people who watch the ITV programme, The X Factor which is said to be a singing competition and I have heard Simon Cowell refer to singers as marvellous and who sang perfectly in tune. Nonsense. Such singers that he praised had major intonation problems; they did not sing but shout, bawl, screech, wobble on their notes, sometimes scream and deliberately introduce breathing sounds into their singing; they attempted notes out of their register and they step or lean into notes with curious affectation. This programme is not a singing competition but a vehicle to find a pop singer and it has been said that the qualification to be a pop singer is the ability not to be able to sing in tune! They have no technique, no voice projection and rely on microphones.

Lest I be accused of condemning only pop singers, I have to say that there are failures in the serious music world. There is a British female pianist who is described as great and one of finest pianists but she is not. She usually only plays Mozart and Schubert. I doubt if she could play Alkan, Liszt or Prokofiev! I can name hundreds of great pianists and she is not among them. I understand she has played a 'modern ' work by Thomas Ades.

I have heard it said that Liberace, Winifred Attwell and Russ Conway were all great pianists. If that is so, then there are ninety foot crocodiles in the Amazon and the Yeti has just given birth to a litter of 42 pups in Kensington.

In order to modulate, dissonances are usually used. For example, to change key from C major to F major you use the consonance chord of C, namely C E G C and then C E G B which is dissonant, C E G B flat which is dissonant and resolve it to A F and C

Take the music of Joseph Holbrooke. It is often feeble because it predominately uses consonances which do not produce tension or drama as in the opening of his Symphony no. 1. In his String Quartet no 1, we do have a dissonance in bar 14.

It is dissonances or discords that produce the drama and excitement in music. They have been in existence for at least nine centuries. Mozart has a String Quartet with this subtitle.

Generally speaking a dissonance is said to be chords of the second, seventh and obviously the ninth etc.

Much as I do not like Schubert's music, his Sonata in A, D959 has dissonances in bars 2, 3 4, 6 and 10 and throughout the piece, yet no one complains. Whereas Rob Barnett in reviewing a three CD set of Gidon Kremer refers to Bergian dissonance. What is Bergian dissonance? What about Schubertian dissonance? Schubert can be dissonant but Berg cannot. Berg did not invent dissonance and there is no such thing as Bergian dissonance.

This unfairness of Berg is prejudice.

Imagine Walton's Belshazzar's Feast without dissonance. The drama, power and excitement would be lost and it would not work.

Consider the classical piano concertos. The main cadenza is usually introduced by a dissonant orchestral chord, the chord of the seventh. The examples are legion but to take just one namely the cadenza, whichever one it is, in the first movement of Beethoven's Emperor Concerto. It is preceded by this big chord B flat F D B flat A flat B flat D F A flat. It is dissonant!

One reviewer of a CD spoke of the glorious Symphonic Poem: Prometheus by Scriabin saying it was sublime with no dissonances and a simply perfect work. It is full of dissonances reminding you of a painful tooth drilling at the dentist or a violent recurring bout of relentless diarrhoea.

If you read any good book on harmony and counterpoint such as Prout, Jacob and Piston you will see how important dissonances are.

Rob Barnett has shown yet again that he is not a musician, does not understand music and takes swipes at composers he does not like and stabs them in the back with the knife of ignorance and idiocy. Barnett portrays dissonance as a crime or something grossly unpleasant and inexcusable.

(See separate article [Rob Barnett](#))