

## Letters

Dear Editors,

Your last editorial<sup>1</sup> invited comments in response to the (as you term it) 'pungent' article by Ian Shanahan.<sup>2</sup> Shanahan diagnoses a condition of 'malaise' in current 'Serious Art Music' composition, the symptoms of which, he says, are embodied in music which 'compromises', is 'unoriginal', is 'dishonest' and hankers after 'commercial reward', all of which ultimately 'threaten to kill it off' (p. 34). I wish to take up the invitation to respond.

That is to say, I would if I could. He does not specify the composers against whom he rails. Except for his own *Cycles of Vega*, he does not discuss particular pieces of music by either the preferred composers or the non-preferred. He cites seven composers who do *not* manifest the unwholesome pathology (p. 36). But Shanahan does not say who *is* compromising/copying/lying/selling-out, nor *how* these conditions are perceivable.

Shanahan does not define such terms as 'postmodernism', 'modernism', or 'originality'. Tens of thousands of critics around the world have made and are still making reputations (and careers) through their respective, often polarised accounts of these issues. A clarification of Shanahan's understanding of these terms is of paramount importance to the presentation of his argument. It did not ensue. Shanahan therefore leaves no scope for any discussion—just as he tries to leave no scope for any other artistic voice to operate in his cosmology of composition.

Purportedly a discussion of the 'malaise' of recent Australian music, the hidden agenda of his article is rather, that 'there is only one correct way to write music: Ian Shanahan's, and you'd better do it his way'. Shanahan is vitriolically ungenerous to the composers he denigrates (whoever they may be). He calls them 'terrible artists' (p. 34, bold print Shanahan's) (presumably not in the sense that they 'inspire terror'—although, from the histrionic tone of his article, maybe they do to him . . .); 'culprits' (p. 34); 'defilers' (p. 34); 'pseudo-populists' (p. 34); 'charlatans' (p. 35); 'self-aggrandising' (p. 35); 'turncoats' (p. 35); 'hacks' (p. 35); 'dishonest' (pp. 34-37); and 'simpletons' (p. 35 and p. 36). He claims to know their 'ultimate aim' (p. 35) but does not cite the source of this 'knowledge'.

Some of the other generalisations may be summarised as follows: #1: Shanahan denigrates 'pastiche'. But *when* do compositions become 'pastiche'? If Varèse wrote that 'lovely dictum' quoted by Shanahan on p. 35 (that is, 'the modern composer refuses to die') more than 50 years ago—and if postmodernism is a

condition that exists *now*, as Shanahan himself acknowledges (p. 35), then following *his* argument as it is presented in his article, are wilful modernists not merely pastiche-artists themselves, ones that merely 'refuse to die', even after their 'natural' (and original) lifespan is, chronologically and aesthetically, *over*? In other words, Shanahan's denigration of composers who choose to incorporate 'older' styles could now just as feasibly be extended by his methodology to those who choose modernist styles.

#2: Although Shanahan asserts that music is not able to say anything (p. 37),<sup>3</sup> he does ascribe to it the power of metaphor. Shanahan upholds—indeed, *insists* upon—'Science' as providing the correct and 'absolutely relevant' (p. 35) basis for making analogous forms in music in the service of 'replicating the complexity of the Cosmos' (p. 35) (this, supposedly, does not fall under the banner of charlatanistic, 'pale imitation' [p. 34]). But when Science cannot agree about such inquiries as those which delve into the origins of the universe, how can an 'intuitive' musical analogy account for existence? Furthermore, where is it carved in stone that music *should* serve as an 'accurate metaphor for reality' (p. 35)? Scientist David Bohm writes that '[a]s a matter of fact science as we know it cannot give a meaning to life as a whole'.<sup>4</sup> Have all 'great' artists been ones who have only based art on scientific formulae (plus the odd interpolated dollop of 'intuition' [p. 36]—which is not, however, explained or developed by Shanahan)? Shanahan is allowed to adopt whatever 'ethical dimension' that he wants for his own 'Creative Act'-ing (and how heinous it would be if he were not); but he should not prescribe for others. No-one should be denied the right to believe in his/her artistic point of view; one should compose his/her pieces through any system that s/he wishes.

#3: When Shanahan castigates the 'compromisers' for changing their style in the 1980s (p. 35), is he stating in this article that *he* has therefore already made for himself a rigid artistic and philosophical bed in which his own creativity evermore will lie, never to develop or change? Where would that leave him with regard to 'experimentation', which is for him an ongoing artistic moral necessity (p. 36)? Just as artists should be 'allowed' to find the systems of structuring the music they choose to write, so should they be 'allowed' to change those systems *when* and *as* and *if* they see fit!

#4: Shanahan believes that music is '*fully capable* of transforming the very lives of those who engage in it' (p. 34, italics added). He does not say *how* this is possible, and he does not describe either the state from

which the listener emerges nor that to which s/he is transformed.

#5: As for the notion that there is a definite predominating style currently—this is just not the case in a pluralist world! Contemporary theorists disagree on many things, but the overriding factor on which most concur is that 'we live in a pluralist world'!

#6: How can music compromise, when 'to compromise' means 'to settle a dispute by concessions on both or all sides'?<sup>5</sup> What are the terms of the dispute? What purely musical parameters—if music is not 'saying' anything linguistically—constitute concessions?

Further, Shanahan's musicological methodology is characterised by contradictions. #1: The most glaring of these lies in Shanahan's notion of historicity. He states that the public 'rightly knows' (p. 34) that 'true art' is 'difficult', and that they can detect charlatans. Moreover, 'great art' is indeed 'shielded' by its own inherent 'honesty' (p. 37). If Shanahan's main concern is on behalf of future music history and what is to be considered great *then*, then why the need for this anguished diatribe?! After all, according to Shanahan, both the public and true art's own internal protective armour will take care of history. Lastly, if "relevance" is a 'wrong-headed notion' and a 'false view of musical historicity' (p. 35)—again, why the need for his article?

#2: Shanahan uses a (non-referenced) quote from Adorno (p. 37). Elsewhere, Adorno also admonishes his readers to consider: 'is a true social conscience free of ideology in music, or else—which is more plausible—do they interpenetrate each other, and for what reasons?' To this end, 'it would be necessary to inquire into the historical, social, and intra-musical conditions of a musical conscience.'<sup>6</sup> Where is Shanahan's own inquiry?

#3: If Shanahan describes music of the uncompromising variety as 'mysterious' and 'magic' (p. 34)—then how can he so blithely and simply encapsulate it as merely 'original' and audience-unfriendly (p. 35)? Shanahan further contradicts this point by saying that the audience is 'always' actually able, with 'uncanny ability' (p. 34), to discern artistic fakery and respond favourably to the genuine artistic article, relegating it to a permanent position in the venerated history books. (Shanahan *does* acknowledge the contradiction—albeit obliquely—on p. 34, where he calls the public 'a paradox'). Yet this public mass (the composition of which remains undisclosed) becomes reduced two pages later to *one solitary human being* (p. 36) who may be able to apprehend 'true Artistic creation' (p. 35): this culling of audience numbers is presented without comment from the author. Perhaps even more problematic here is the implication that all humans are

not equal—that it is indeed a 'greater cause for celebration' (p. 36) to 'reach' one solitary individual than a larger mass; so this one individual is therefore more discerning and, in turn, superior. Who, moreover, are these people? Who is this person? The very urge to create 'for history' or for an enlightened audience consisting of one-person-plus-creator is transparently elitist. Is this the sort of social conscience Shanahan wishes to reflect in his writings?

It was illuminating to read his account of the 'conceptual dimension' (p. 36) (tantalisingly brief as it was) of his piece, *Cycles of Vega*. I enjoyed the energy and passion that emanated from Shanahan's article. I took umbrage, however, at the nature of the form taken by the spirit. He writes at the outset of the article that in his view, composers 'should know why' they compose and then 'come clean about it' (p. 34). Just as art is not derived *ex nihilo*, so should music commentary be supported by sources and specific examples. Shanahan's article, however, lacks these. The result is gross generalisation and prescriptive dictatorialness—not to mention the many contradictions. I was therefore unable to address the issue of the 'malaise' of Australian music as presented by Shanahan. Despite Shanahan's wish to the contrary—'I hope I don't give an overall impression of being some kind of bigoted crackpot' (p. 34)—he created, for me, exactly that impression.

As a music *critic* writing for posterity, Ian Shanahan would perhaps fare better were he to adopt Woody Allen's riposte when asked if Allen were trying to achieve immortality through his work: Allen's reply, 'No, I'm trying to achieve it by staying alive.'

Yours sincerely,

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Context* 2 (Summer 1991), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> All page numbers refer to Ian Shanahan, 'The Malaise of (not just) Australian Music', *Context* 2 (Summer 1991), pp. 34-37.

<sup>3</sup> It is interesting that Shanahan chose to align himself here with Stravinsky, one of the most dedicatedly prolific pastiche-ists of this century!

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Louwrien Wijers, 'Looking Back at *Art Meets Science and Spirituality in a Changing Economy*', *Art & Design Profile No. 21: Art Meets Science and Spirituality*, *Sociology of Music* 4 (London: Academy Editions), p. 87.

<sup>5</sup> *Collins English Dictionary* (Sydney: Collins, 1986).

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Ivo Supicic, *Music in Society: A Guide to the Sociology of Music* (New York: Pendragon Press, 1987), p. 41.