

will ultimately end up sounding like – quite a different process from that in which Mozart is said to have “seen” entire symphonic movements, fully orchestrated, in moments of blinding illumination.

“Generating and Organizing Variety in the Arts”

Eno’s primary written statement concerning compositional processes in the abstract and social aspects of music-making was an article published in 1976.²⁷ In its broad outlines, the essay consists of a polemic against traditional methods of composition and the educational and institutional structures that have evolved with and around the concept of the composer in the past two centuries, an examination of some alternative compositional options, and a bold attempt to integrate the point of view of cybernetics – “the science of organization” – with musical and compositional strategies. It is densely written, in a detached and formal style that refrains from excessive rhetorical posturing while still managing to express a definite point of view.

Eno opens with a provocative statement: “A musical score is a statement about organization, it is a set of devices for organizing behaviour towards producing sounds.” While composers of the past two centuries have concentrated on the specific instructions given to the performers, the mode of social organization and interaction implied by the use of a score has remained essentially static. “A traditional orchestra is a ranked pyramidal hierarchy of the same kind as the armies that existed contemporary to it.” The pyramid of power has the composer and his absolutely binding “intentions and aspirations” at its pinnacle, in descending positions of power are the conductor, leader of the orchestra, soloists if called for, section principals, section subprincipals, and finally rank and file members at the bottom. This ranking system has three characteristics that are in Eno’s view problematic or symptomatic. First, it “reflects varying degrees of responsibility.” Second, “like perspective in painting, it creates ‘focus’ and ‘point of view.’” In the foreground is the intent of the composer, the conductor’s interpretation, and the performance of the soloist(s), the playing of the rank and file members is liable to be perceived as a kind of background phenomenon. Third, the orchestra’s ranking system

predicates the use of trained musicians. A trained musician is, at the minimum, one who will produce a predictable sound given a specific instruction. His training teaches him to be capable of operating precisely like all the other members of his rank. It trains him, in fact, to subdue some of his own natural variety and thus to increase his reliability (predictability).²⁸

Eno never comes right out and says that he believes this variety-reducing effect of the institutions of classical music to be undesirable or entirely negative. Rather, he borrows from cybernetics, holding up as an ideal for musical composition and performance the concept of an organism or system whose behavior is determined not through predictable subservience to a centralized control structure, but through “a responsive network of subsystems capable of

²⁷ Brian Eno, “Generating and Organizing Variety in the Arts,” *Studio International* 984 (Nov./Dec. 1976), 279-83. The article was reprinted in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Breaking the Sound Barrier: A Critical Anthology of the New Music* (New York: Dutton, 1981).

²⁸ Eno, “Generating and Organizing Variety,” 279.