

As I listen to certain styles of contemporary music, I often feel a disquieting lack of response. Is this due to possible over-complexity in the planning? Is the uniformly dense texture or unrelenting dissonance wearing thin on the listener? Perhaps so, but on closer inspection, I have come to believe that formal considerations are the most critical. Simply stated, these pieces all too often lack an inner conviction--a drive to their conclusion. There is a lack of energy, of physical and emotional energy, the energy forms that I would describe as humanistic, ~~in this music~~. These pieces do not sustain themselves. I am not convinced by their logic nor moved by their shape. Thus, today I would like to discuss the role which energy plays in defining humanistic art forms.

Humanism--simplicity of language? lyricism? heightened melodicism? the negation of complexity? form? The thought connections initially arise. Perhaps these are the natural connotations, yet I feel that they limit too severely any move toward a New Humanism. I believe that there is room within a humanistic trend for complexity, for mathematics, for calculation. After all, the serialist composer Anton Webern could be seen as a humanist-naturalist. Many of us might not argue against this inclusion. Yet there is an odd mixture of complexity and simplicity about his music.

Thus, I am pressed to broaden my definition of humanism into what I view as the infusion of the totality of 'humanness' into artistic expression. By totality, I mean the intellectual, emotion and physical awarenesses. The intellectual is certainly as 'human' as the emotional or physical. I would preserve the role of rational processes within humanistic art. Yet, simply because the intellectual in the easiest aspect to discuss, it should not predominate over the others.

Then, how does one approach the physical and emotional elements in the arts? I return to my earlier list of humanistic associations--lyricism, simplicity of language--are these emotional ingredients? Perhaps, but the more I reflect upon the emotional and physical elements within music, the more I am led to consider form as a critical element. This focus is due to the role of energy in art--be it emotional or physical energy. Perhaps these might be confused, and understandably so, for our human energy forms of emotion and body are interrelated and we often do not know when we are driven by one or the other, or both!

However, I choose to make the following distinction with regard to music: for me, emotional energy is expressed primarily through harmonic and structural means, with rhythm playing a secondary role, whereas physical energy is essentially rhythmic, while formal and harmonic considerations are less critical. I shall return to this topic later with specific musical examples.

Why am I concerned with energy?--because it is a manifestation of the emotional and physical aspects of a total humanness which is often overlooked in art, but not in universally humanistic art.

What is humanistic art? One might readily turn to the beginnings of the Italian Renaissance and St. Francis of Assisi. In the Canticle of the Sun he writes:

Praised be my Lord God with all his creatures, and especially our brother the Sun, who brings us the day and brings us the light...

St. Francis is not dealing here with the concept of light. (spiritual light)
Rather, he speaks of actual sunlight--for its physical joy, for the warmth upon the skin, the visual pleasure. This is a human poem, for it speaks of the senses.

And yet I have said that humanism relates to energy and ultimately to form....One cannot deny that personal content is also vital. But the shaping, directing, ordering of a personal, sensual or emotional sentiment is critical. What sustains the duration of the music? If a work is humanistic, it must speak from an inner conviction, and it is precisely the strength of this conviction that must sustain and drive the form until its end.

Thus, a humanistic creation cannot exist and affect unless it speaks from an inner conviction. This conviction is a source of energy and energy is a human characteristic. I previously made the distinction between emotional and physical energy forms. Of course, these two may be combined, but they have distinct manifestations as well. I would like to illustrate the differences with passages from IN MEMORIAM.....

The form of this piece is not pre-set. It follows its own natural growth pattern of regeneration, as a life form. I believe that musical form can mirror the form of life experiences. Events recur, emotions grow into intensity. There are times of explosion in our lives. The artists who speak to us recapture this energy.

Returning to IN MEMORIAM--if you, the listener, feel that this piece sustains its own duration, then you may agree that it has done so because it is a totally humanistic expression--written from an inner conviction in the material, generated by intellectual, emotional and physical energy. If you, the listener, are not only convinced by the form, but transported along with it, then this can only be done by the inner conviction and the energy of the composer. This, to me, is humanism--the combined focusing of the intellectual, emotional and physical forces.

Thus, while many other artists may approach Humanism from the viewpoint of language (i.e. complex or simple) or subject matter (a return to Nature?), I choose to consider Humanism in its forms, for I believe that expression is possible within a variety of styles, but a message conveyed without energy and without some degree of urgency is hollow.

lecture at Trinity College (?) © 1982