

[Some Poetic Notions about the Proscenium Applied to Music Though It Isn't a Tennis Match]

Frost's bit of drollery, "free verse is like playing tennis without a net," suggests that "free" means also "undisciplined;" something his own "free verse" (his best) refutes. And that a prefabricated form--say a sonnet or proscenium or any other sort (to fudge the distinctions)--is indispensable to art. The simile, "like tennis"--masked in good-natured and personable wit--conceals something within, urging us to pick up again our rejected burden of the pursuit of the authentic. External "frame-ups" often mirror internal ones. Charles Olson hit on a more holistic and forward looking pursuit--where "form is the shape of content." I place it, for the purpose of comparison, against Frost, in hopes of gaining a toehold.

The proscenium has provided a means for artistic continuity and development and a context for deep focus: a single mantra, re-uttered, leads the practitioner to wider understanding and contemplation. Its strict lines and edges abet and augment the selection strategy. Photography, the quintessential art of the proscenium; seeks to remove what doesn't go in the rectangle, and thereby, create the photo. Film, an orgy to the gormandizer, proffers the perfect degree of excess--T.V. to the addict, a complete, debilitating, supply.

Here, exterior and interior are discrete conditions; art happens within the brackets, not-art, without. Thus, the coughing of a patron or the flushing in the W.C. is not to be considered part of a performance. Historically, the artist in the West who refuses to embrace these preconceptions engages in a de facto act of sabotage--possibly to restore negative capability, something, too often sucked out by the form's confining demands. The inventive singers from West Papua have quite the opposite problem in their improvisational cantos sung under the canopy of the rain forest. No song is true unless it incorporate everything happening at a moment. Thus the ruffle bird's repeating verse or the rush of the brook or sighing of the wood in the wind must be fully integrated. Theirs, a music of inclusion, whose practitioners could only wonder at what to do if ever faced with the prospect of our leftovers.

Despite its apparent sonic escape, music's proscenium was "fixed" in the socioeconomic theater of the 19th century. Now our fixation on that particular "concert hall" caters to prefabricated tastes, which the hall attenuates and channels. This jingoistic and secular church succors its congregation with a "classical music," deracinated from its context and mass produced for the customers of high culture. All this enables "Here Comes Everybody" his pretenses, while denying the people an experience with reality.

Strange regulatory device, the proscenium persists in its negative manifestation--as do too many institutions of culture--to mitigate genuine artistic expression. Do true lovers of Western classical music never wince at yet another program of Mostly Mozart or Basically Beethoven? Rarely are contemporary works programmed outside the pseudo-bohemian centers. Meanwhile, in the universities, many performers are untrained and unencouraged in the new music, so will avoid playing it, or when they do, be content to play it badly. Serious musicians will study and practice a lifetime to achieve a meaningful interpretation of a Brahms' Sonata, yet will accept a mere "accurate" read as legitimate and sufficient in a performance of contemporary music. No wonder the audience isn't listening, but hankers nostalgically for the past.

I don't mean there's a conspiracy. But the money follows the laws of inertia, and the

invisible hand, too, can be totalitarian.

There is no escape from the frame--the "Grotesque" tradition would even have it be the whole of art. Nor can one really take security in it, as in Debussy's (Diaghilev's?) *Jeux*, where the security of the net does not keep the disintegration around the players at bay. Frost's remark betrays a fear of the "other" within, an Apollonian fear of the unconscious. This kind of interior proscenium is far worse than the limitations imposed by an exterior one. It robs composers and listeners of their encounter and responsibility with the unknown and of the implicit difficulty and dangers of discovering "what it is" that they are in the midst of.

At its best, the concert hall has functioned as a memory theater sustaining and reanimating great music. For centuries, forward looking(/listening) composers working within these constraints--sometimes with the aid of new technologies--have rendered moot our question of going "beyond the proscenium."

But at its worst, the proscenium reproduces the past and controls the future. A discharge of the negative aspects of our inheritance--to be replaced with a genuine articulation of what we know and are--is the medicine this sickness needs.. The dead should be compost, nurturing the living, no manichaeian containment vessel. Williams argued for "no ideas but in things." Well, make a thing, body and soul, an inflorescence, a lotus.

It is true that art is impossible without form. Let us then not play "like tennis," but listen to Olson:

The art--ever the "shape of its content"--must be "equal to the real itself."

Coda

But what about the page, anyway? Isn't written poetry the most limited by the proscenium of the page? And do I not say that living is a matter of learning to thrive within the limits? Is there a contradiction? The question is no longer how to escape or respond to a particular proscenium, but how to make each of our new creations (in this time and place) "live" with the frontiers forming about them.

John Campion

Poem for Beyond the Proscenium

JC

When people speak

the language of their Gods

 a crèche
 naturally selected
culture an inflorescence

moves in an ecological niche

like rivers to the mill
roots connect underground

when you pull one up

a star

 falls
 from the sky

