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In Defense of the Individual

Alan Theisen

While recuperating from a recent illness, I had the opportunity to catch up on a little reading pertaining to musicology. One book I decided to read was *Source Readings in Music History: The Twentieth Century*, edited by Oliver Strunk (with the revised edition edited by Leo Treitler and Robert P. Morgan). The anthology provides essays and articles on 20th century art music, written by leading composers and critics from that era such as Schoenberg, Busoni, and Adorno. However, I found the essay penned by American composer Evan Ziporyn, titled "Who Listens If You Care?" to be intellectually irresponsible and of dubious taste.

It would be easy to dismiss this man's statements, but the assertions presented are so terrifying that as a person who regards his values of human integrity and art highly, I feel it necessary to criticize and expose the fraud committed against the reader.

Ziporyn presents the notion of "Marxist music," the principle being that no musical material could ever be owned, i.e.; that all composers "should be able to take whatever they want from whomever they want and use it as they see fit" (Strunk 42). He partially attributes this superficial attitude toward what he calls the daunting task of "finding a voice or coming up with some kind of original structural idea" (Strunk 42). This should be enough

for any intelligent individual to recognize the fundamental root of Ziporyn's argument: the justification of a lazy, mediocre composer to rob the ideas of a productive, original artist. However, to mask his role of artistic moocher, he continues to provide a smokescreen of false evidence to support his relativist position.

Ziporyn decides that all-inclusiveness has become a characteristic of music in our cultural aesthetic, and a very marketable one at that. He claims that once upon a time, we could objectify a musical response, but due to the homogenizing of musical ideals, this is no longer so. This has progressed to such an extent that "even when you try, it's impossible to take any cohesive stance toward any piece of music" (Strunk 44).

Without checking his premises, he assumes this statement to be true. This allows the intellectually inferior, chasing the unearned dollar, to subsume any existing music, past or present, into his or her own compositions. These musical communists provide a heap of sonic garbage that drugs the listener and reaches for his or her pocketbook. Here we come to

Ziporyn's fatal intellectual flaw: "Music thus becomes a *service industry* (emphasis added), providing listeners with a... nonthreatening surface wash of sound. ...The listener is now completely cut off from the 'means of production' and basically couldn't care less... And why should I care - such

Theisen looks over some of his original compositions in front of Bennett Auditorium.

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value only, useful [only] in building a reputation..." (Strunk 44).

The terror is realized. To justify the failure of poor composers (those without originality or goals), Ziporyn advocates the destruction of property laws to rob the creative of their efforts. The diligent, nonpandering man of ability is reduced to the role of mere civil servant, doomed to

"The terror is realized. ...The diligent, nonpandering man of ability is reduced to the role of mere civil servant, doomed to provide the weak with a 'wash of sound'."

provide the weak with a "wash of sound." Ziporyn believes that this communist system would result in the flourish of newer and more creative musical masterworks, but he never addresses a fundamental issue: at what cost to the individual and his efforts?

How would these works of "originality" be produced and by whom? By what standard does he dare offer that this system is moral or just? He submits no answers, nor could he ever.

Under the Ziporyn system, the individual loses all rights to his most important asset: his mind. The brilliant mentality of a creative artisan becomes the property of everyone. To deny a man of his mind is to deny his will or means to live. What other method does an individual have to survive?

Ziporyn's intellectual communism precludes (actually, necessitates) a like economic system. A composer, like any other productive and working person, must earn his food due to his efforts. If I, as a composer, give of my means to another due to his necessity, I negate my power to provide for my well-being. This policy of altruism extends past the arts and into the realm of total economics. Lawyers would have to give free legal advice, doctors would perform operations at no charge, and janitors would clean toilets without compensation; after all, as Ziporyn would state, their minds contain no valuable property or learned skills.

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The next logical step in the process would be personal and ethical apathy. Why achieve only to have your efforts swept away from you? No man would decide to acquire the necessary knowledge to perform heart surgery or complete a *sonata-allegro*

movement if his intellectual property would be robbed from him by those who scream: "Unfair! Unfair! That knowledge

wasn't yours! You stole it from someone else - that's all! And I need it more than you!"

By nature of the system, no person with the intelligence to produce works of art would do so. Ziporyn's theft negates two necessary elements of

ethical artistic creation: individualistic achievement and competitive compensation.

Philosopher and novelist Ayn Rand asserts that without property rights, "...no other rights are possible. Since man has to sustain his life by his own effort, the man who has no right to the product of his effort has no means to sustain his life. The man who pro-

duces while others dispose of his product is a slave." (Rand - 3)

Mr. Ziporyn, while gleefully erasing the name of Beethoven, erases his own. ♦

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Theisen composes at the piano in Marsh Auditorium.

About the Author

Alan Theisen was born Oct. 4, 1981, in Port Huron, Mich. He developed a love for art music at an early age, dancing around his home to Stravinsky before starting kindergarten. Al began composition as a hobby at around 14 years of age, imitating the neoclassical forms of Stravinsky and Prokofiev.

Throughout high school, he participated in music-related activities, including playing saxophone in the school wind ensemble, performing as a soloist in and conducting the jazz ensemble, and serving as drum major and student conductor on various occasions. On top of all this, Al excelled academically, graduating first in his 1999 high school class.

Due to his academic talent, Theisen was awarded the Honors College Presidential Scholarship to attend The University of Southern Mississippi. He has performed at the World Saxophone Congress in Montreal with USM's Sax-Chamber Orchestra, has completed six major works soon to be published by Da Capo Music of Manchester, England, and is currently sketching his first symphony.

Compositionally, Theisen is inspired by the works of Bartok, Shostakovich, and Barber.

Philosophically, he is an advocate of reason and the glorification of individual human achievement as championed by influential novelist Ayn Rand.

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