

Wandelweiser

Hit or Miss?

In baseball, a very interesting situation occurs every time a ball is pitched. First the catcher gives a hand signal to the pitcher, telling him which pitch to throw. The catcher is making this choice based on a thorough knowledge of each batter and of the pitcher's strong and weak pitches. Once he agrees to the pitch, the pitcher throws, as best he can, the pitch indicated. There are many variables that can influence how the pitch is thrown: speed, spin on the ball, the change of direction of the ball, etc. Each pitch, though it might be called the same thing as another, is therefore unique. The hitter, whose job, of course, is to hit the ball, can, on the basis of his knowledge of the pitcher, guess what pitch will be thrown, but he cannot be certain. He is much more dependent on his perception of the pitch from the point when the pitcher starts his windup until he sees the ball coming towards him. He aims his bat, swings and then either hits or misses.

I think that this scenario is very much like that which occurs every time a piece of experimental music is played. Experimental music is a way of making music which began around the same time as Schoenberg's musical revolution, but which offers an alternate history of music in this century, with composers such as Charles Ives, Henry Cowell, Harry Partch, John Cage, Christian Wolff, LaMonte Young and Alvin Lucier as some of the central figures. In parallel to baseball, we would identify the experimental music composer as the catcher: someone who creates signs which are to be read, who issues directions. Like the catcher, the composer has a storehouse of knowledge about the whole situation, and makes predictions based on this about what could Happen. He then decides on the best solution and takes a chance on it.

In that he reads the signs and then does his best to realise them, the musical performer is like the pitcher. However, in experimental music (as in baseball) much depends on the performer's realization of the directions. As a composer of experimental music myself I usually assume that about 50 percent of what an audience hears is dependent upon decisions made by the performer. He is after all, at the moment of the performance, the one with the most control of the situation. An experimental piece provides a framework for the performer, defining some aspects of a piece very carefully, but leaving important features open for the performer to decide.

In this scenario, the audience is the hitter. An audience member does not know everything behind a work they are experiencing. In my music, it is usually the case that a performer should prepare a new version of a piece for each performance. This means that even if an audience member knows the piece from one performance, he cannot completely predict how it will be structured in another (although the sounds might be the same). The most important attribute of the audience member is his sensitivity to all of the qualities of sound which come his way (in the same way that a hitter must be sensitive to all of the aspects of a moving baseball). The main difference in the two situations, is that when I write a piece, I would much rather have the audience hit a home run than to miss the pitch.

In baseball, everything comes together at the moment of the swing - the success of the hitter in reading the pitcher, the ability of the pitcher to throw a good pitch, the ability of the catcher to call the right pitch - all these are condensed into the moment when the hitter stretches his arms out and swings the bat at the ball. All the hitter cares about in that moment is the hit - he is sensitive not to his own feelings, but simply to the way the ball and the bat connect or miss. Baseball in this way, is essentially binary - hit : miss.

The same, I think applies to music. It is often said that music provides a great variety of emotions, and it is hard to argue with this. However my own experience indicates that, prior to deciding what I feel in a piece (a secondary and quite variable decision), I must first be convinced that I feel (i.e., experience) anything at all.

As I was growing up near Detroit, the music that meant the most to me was rock'n'roll, and particularly Motown. Two of my favorite songs then (and now) were (are): "Papa Was a Rolling Stone" (which is about a poor black family in the inner city, where the father has just been killed) and "My Girl" (a kind of musical version of Shakespearean sonnet), both by the Temptations. At the age of seven, as someone who grew up in a relatively well-off white family and who had not yet begun to discover love (I didn't even like girls at that age), I obviously had no understanding of what these situations were,

So the feelings described were a mystery to me. Nevertheless this music communicated an entire world to me, a world which I still struggle to find words to describe. Because of experiences like this, I believe that music creates (as opposed to revives) feeling. Also that the first and primary feeling created from music we love is joy at our ability, based on the most subtle sensory discrimination, to respond. This must be very like joy a great player feels when hits a home run, the exhilaration of pushing his senses to their limit, in hitting an object which is moving very quickly in a complicated trajectory.

All of the sensory apparatus, including the ear, are indeed incredibly subtle. As Ronald Johnson, in his poem *Ark* writes: "The outer earshell leads to a membrane drum - and what pressure needed to sound this drum is equal to the intensity of light and heat received from a 50 watt electric bulb at the

distance of 3,000 miles in empty space. At the threshold of hearing the eardrum may be misplaced as little as a diameter of the smallest atom, hydrogen." It is this incredible sensitivity, possessed by anyone with normal hearing that music stimulates. But this sensitivity, in order to be fully appreciated, must be challenged.

As a composer, I am interested in challenging the ear. This is not in order to be difficult, but because I know that in meeting this challenge, the senses and the mind have the opportunity to experience the kind of joy discussed above. For this reason, my music focuses on a kind of listening which emphasizes the limits of perception: the tiny, practically inaudible variations of sound which occur in an apparently stable tone; the sometimes invisible border between sound and silence; the almost imperceptible sense of time passing; the infinitesimal difference between something which is almost simultaneous and something which is truly simultaneous. In this realm the senses become aware of how subtle they are, and if we succeed can make us feel lucky to be alive.

In this century, new music composers have explored various kinds of discourses, with many going in the direction of greater complexity. The more complex the piece, naturally the harder the music is to follow. The difficulties which lie before the untrained musical listener are significant: often, only someone who understands the complicated history of new music and its techniques and procedures can really appreciate the music. I work towards another goal: to seek to make a musical object which exists in as direct a relationship to a listener as possible. Anyone should, through careful listening, be able to understand what is happening in one of my pieces. Like most of the others associated with experimental music, I attempt to strip away as much of the obvious formal complexity from a work as possible: the work is direct and simple. What it gives up in complexity, is hopefully balanced by its impact. It should be very much like a baseball, coming

towards you as you prepare to swing at it. Everything that came before and after does not matter: what one sees is the pure fact of a ball flying and turning through the air, following its own peculiar trajectory.

We come together for a musical performance, hoping something special will happen, and sometimes, for reasons that are not entirely clear, something does. Whether something happens or not is dependent on what occurs between the musicians and the listener, and is therefore utterly dependent on our relation with you. Therefore, for me, it is the relationship with the individual listener that really counts, and although I can never have any certainty of success, I can prepare the groundwork. I trust my own sense of what is important in music, to set up a situation where I think something special could happen. I call the pitch, and the performer takes over. The audience member steps up to the plate and takes a swing. Hit or miss?

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