

[A further loose-leaf chapter in my ongoing polemical memoir — *An Uncommon Music for the Common Man.*]

Unearthed—other normals

In an exhaustive survey of avian musicality, D.G. Haskell—a professor of biology and environmental studies—tells us about the remarkably inventive singing capacity of white-crowned sparrows that suggests a human social condition:

‘[The] balance between individuality and conformity is essential to the function of the sparrow songs.’<sup>1</sup>

It is evident from Haskell’s narrative that his sparrows have an extraordinary creative range within their capacity for sound-making. Some offering unique variations upon the sparrow song-book. Humans, meanwhile, require extra physical aids—musical instruments, amplification, and electricity—to in anyway match the complex output of the sparrow. But, the point here is not so much the unequal natural physical ability, but the cultural dimensions that each species negotiate. For the versatility of a particular sparrow acts often to work against its biological imperative. A female, towards whom the male sparrow (at certain times) is communicating, may be confused: unable to recognise a newly developed sparrow song as one from a potential mate. While not suggesting that *Homo sapiens* musicians are enacting some mating-rite (although I guess in certain contemporary settings this might occur!), I bring our attention to the notion of ‘normality in music’.

It is clear, from Haskell’s acknowledgement of birds as ‘a cousin species’ to *Homo sapiens*, that anthropomorphism has a looser negative hold on scientific thinking than previous. The advent of DNA markers constrains, or modifies, the idea of distinct, or absolute species signatures. Haskell goes further by interpreting bird song variation; extending the biological imperative towards a cultural interpretation. Taking his lead, it is worth pursuing this thought-experiment, to examine the thrust of human individuality.

Human culture is a complex of normalities that sometimes induces unthinking responses. It is against this rigidity that art is often at its most efficacious and controversial. So much so, that art is sometimes not recognised as ‘art’ at all. So ingrained are ‘normal’ responses within the practice and consumption of ‘music’ that anything, not thus conforming, is heard not as music. It is noise. This seems to be the default position in contemporary Western capitalist culture, of anyone experiencing

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<sup>1</sup> Haskell, D.G., *Sounds Wild and Broken*, Faber & Faber, 2022 p.157

experimental music or improvised music for the first time. It was certainly the case for myself when, as a teenager, I was first introduced to jazz. The bits 'in-between' the tune were initially, and intriguingly, mysterious and unrecognisable.

Conformity in biology is perhaps a necessary condition for perpetuation. But it is within the individualised components of life that mutations occur. This is the site-mechanism for evolutionary development. Conformity in human culture is likewise an agent of continuity. But it often becomes the default position of an inhibiting conservatism. Conformity within any society is essentially the compliant critical mass required to maintain any form of hegemony. And, as with religion, or authoritarian political power, its strength resides in an imposed (often physically enforced) dominating narrative. It becomes 'normal' and 'there is no other way'. Hence, cultural change may require an alternative critical mass. For a paradigm of an 'informal music' there needs to be a sufficient body of committed protagonists—and a cohort of sympathetic listeners—to create a hegemonic atmosphere. At the same time the new paradigm will, hopefully, leave space for further possibilities.

Haskell—in his description of the prehistoric remains of bone flutes, and the cultural implications therefrom—remarks that the musical establishment has not been as moved as twentieth-century modernist visual artists, who appear to have been influenced by pre-historic cave art. Archaeologists, literally, unearthed early bone pipes at some of the cave painting sites, suggesting that these places had multiple socio-creative purposes. Carbon dating aligns the wall art with evidence of musical activity.

Haskell references Klee, Arp and Miró. Absent, in his view, are musicians who did not adopt a parallel passion for the Palaeolithic. There appears to be no musical cohort extolling the exploratory creative culture attributes he (with admiration) projects onto prehistoric people and, indeed, other species adaptiveness to their respective environments. Haskell suggests that technological development arising from electricity perhaps obviated the closer emulation from musicians than he observed in purveyors of the plastic arts. I believe, however, he fails to note the stubbornly conservative, and regressive, nature of the music establishment in modern Western market economies, and the extreme forms of commodification, and fetishisation, that grips music.

One could argue that the solid objectivity of a painting or sculpture, combined with an increasingly febrile art-market, more easily facilitated this transference of pre-historic influences into modern art. No analogous context exists for music.

Earlier, in the same chapter referred to above, Haskell refers to music's compositional form: "Text is a crystallisation of sound". Here, I think, we can see the root of a misunderstanding. Because the literal meaning of his metaphor 'crystallisation' indicates a fixed immutable condition: a highly ordered microscopic structure. I may, of course, be taking Haskell's metaphor a mite too literally. Nevertheless, without 'the text' there is no Western music. Although many classically trained musicians would balk at the idea that any proffered composition was as immutable as a crystal formation, in relation to the unstable condition of most so-called musical compositions, I refer you to what Cardew noted: [that] 'compositions are fired into the future'. He didn't speculate (as far as I know) on what may happen when they hit the ground.

Tonic *sol-fa* may survive, and be developed by informal music-makers but, mutable or otherwise, the composition is the binding, and metaphorical, contract for keeping things as they are. We should not forget, though, that tonic *sol-fa* is also part of music history.

Evolution in music may develop in stages, although its progressive lineage may not be obvious. In visual art, according to Haskell, Arp, Klee, Miró, and others, moved steadily away from direct representative imagery, guided (and guarded) by the logic of perspective, to portray other kinds of reality. These 'modern' creations, seen as perversely countering orthodoxy, were often derided as crudely primitive. Such artists certainly do not appear to have been particularly moved by the advent of scientism.

A more plausible explanation may be found in responses to Palaeolithic cave art. For archeological discoveries had begun to interest a wider public, maybe because of growing awareness of Darwinism. So, the inspiration for many artists may well have been stimulated by early human creative activity.

Of course, there were (are) swirling controversial cross-currents in what is perceived as the Enlightenment. It depends upon a multiplicity of (sometimes) diverse views. It is not a solid monolithic structure. Human knowledge, and understanding, is multi-faceted, and at times its meaning and direction are sites of fierce contest. There was (and there remains) resistance to, as well as respect for, the technocratic. Some early twentieth century artists were surely sympathetically drawn—through vivid examples of pre-historic art—to a long-suppressed, perhaps discredited, contrasting human expression.

The caves of Lascaux offer an astonishing vision of early human sensibility. Perhaps evidence of a micro-enlightenment moment in human history, of which there must have been many (if unrecorded) during humankind's movement towards self-consciousness and the development of adaptive

strategies. Or, is Lascaux merely infantile graffiti? Clearly, though, for many the vitality of the drawings is inspirational: vibrating through time. They exist in every moment of being seen. The musical world has no such residual pre-historic inspiration. Sounds produced thousands of years ago have long since died on the air. The remaining evidence merely dried-out broken bones, unearthed by delving into the layers of ageing cave-floor detritus. One such example resides in the south German museum at Blaubeuren. It bears the marks of human adaptation. Once, it would have made sound-art, perhaps alongside cave paintings.

Despite any parallel sonic evidence to match the visions of Lascaux, music at the turn of the 20th century was itself in a fomenting phase. What emerged to become serialism has been given various founding interpretations. From twelve-tone democracy to atonal anarchy. However, it is its increasing reflection of mathematical certainty that, arguably, registers most. There are flickers of Lascaux audible in Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* and *Firebird*. While Milhaud, and others, flirted with the exotic irregularities of jazz, and Messiaen was infatuated with bird-song. These are all signs of intellectual curiosity, and of a desire to expand the technical and cultural parameters of music.

There was, though, no discernible response to Palaeolithic remnants. How could there be? When the only evidence was enshrined in a few old bones!

All this discontent, or a desire for a dimensional shift, still echoes. A younger colleague recently wrote:

“The piano as a metaphor for the world, for the self. I like to acknowledge its existing structures and limits, lean on them, and bend them at the same time.”<sup>2</sup>

There was, however, a distinct turn away from even-temperament—a realisation by many practitioners that there was something illusory, and even oppressive in its strictures. Maybe this can be seen as an aural equivalent to an escape from the tyranny of perspective.

The ‘official’ musical world was thus infected. But it took longer for the contagion to take a hold. Arnold Schoenberg and Anton Webern were the most prominent early protagonists. But it was one of Schoenberg's students—the percussionist John Cage—who perhaps did most to decouple music from its most controlling of tenets. Other contrarian figures interceded: notably Luigi Russolo, and Edgar Varèse, while David Tudor inhabited the musical world with an aural vision of a rainforest. This, maybe, was as close

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<sup>2</sup> Marjolaine Charbin, liner note to the CD *The Cry of a Dove Announcing Rain*, Matchless Recordings mrcd113

as modern music (then) had got to replicating a sound-world analogous to Palaeolithic bone pipe music.

There always was other strands of musical expression. The vernacular, relegated to the back of the congregation by religious piety and power, and not admitted to the clamorous new carnivals of ruling class entertainment. The folk arts, though, were often mined for themes and dance rhythms to furnish emergent chamber music for the bourgeoisie. Open season. It is interesting how this predatory relationship so mirrors the imperialist appetites for material. Nevertheless, the under-classes continually managed to self-invent, and maintain a perverse kind of raggéd dignity.

This is where I come in. As part of what is, often disparagingly, described as 'the counter-culture' of Western youth in the 1960s. Here, in western Europe, post-2nd World War settlements of reconstruction—mostly in a social-democratic spirit—occurred. A more open and freely enquiring atmosphere prevailed. For perhaps the first time in British history working-class youth had loose-change in their pockets and purses. While in the USA the socio-economic advances of the New Deal, were being contested by a neo-liberalism, to which the mostly youthful radical forces in the US tried to resist.

This spirit of resistance continues. And, although (necessarily) framed to suit contemporary conditions, it somehow still moves and inspires a more assertive, and self-confident cohort of the independently-minded. Creating, for example, a music that no longer defers to the morés and conventions that anchored authority. An alternative critical mass is emerging.

Much of the archeological evidence—and attendant anthropological speculation—ironically does not suggest the continuance of Western European 'progress'. Maybe the lessons of 'the Enlightenment' had been too compromised by the accompanying injurious physical and social effects of industrialisation and imperialism. For (at least one of) Modernism's tap-roots seems to have penetrated deeply into human history towards another kind of sensibility. Perhaps the intervening sedimented layers of human history were lacking in nutrition, had been contaminated; no longer fit for a new world.

By now, as I hope to have established—at least as a provisional thesis—there is an informal musical community as curious of the state of the physical world as any 'pre-historic avant-garde'. But while we are not contending quite so compliantly with music orthodoxy, or any other expressions of conformity, there has—meanwhile—been an anti-Modernist reaction to deal with. The forces of reaction are also capable of adaptation.

The shape of 'post-modernism' revels in its ambiguity. 'What it is not' is more important (for this faux-philosophy) than 'what it might be'. It is delinquently deficient in definition. There is a Trumpian twist to 'its' shape-shifting. Its linguistic construction allows assertion to masquerade as reality. All these notions of 'alternative facts' are confusing, demanding, needlessly time-wasting, and therefore distracting.

We are free, however, to re-imagine the sacred-social spaces—where earlier inhabitants of this world celebrated their self-consciousness with inspirational marks and sounds. Those sites perhaps only lasted a short time because of the vicissitudes of Palaeolithic life. But clearly, they reveal energy, intent, and probably joy in conscious living. In this much, we must emulate the past. Humanity requires such perpetual reinvigoration. What we can do (within the 'vicissitudes' of a capitalist culture) in our own sites of creative exploration—our London workshop, and the various ad hoc informal music concerts.

There exists, an albeit fortuitous, coincidence. The London improvisation workshop, which was first convened in 1999, has mostly conducted its sessions in the Borough Welsh Chapel, situated just south of London's Southwark Bridge. In a remarkable book called *The Dawn of Everything—a new history of humanity*, the authors—one an anthropologist, the other a comparative archaeologist—suggest that many pre-historic sacred places, in situations as geographically varied as Mesopotamia and pre-Columbian North America, were also places of communal production.<sup>3</sup> Here, doubtless, insights and the development of techniques—e.g. in pottery, bread making, animal skin-curing and the knapping and grinding of flint hand-axes—were practised, refined and shared. And maybe, these sacred (or should we call them secular?) places became centres of preserving (and possibly controlling) such techniques. This, to my mind, mirrors what we do at our workshop sessions. Our meetings are not performance-based. And, although some of the music made therein might well qualify as such, our purpose is practical: to develop techniques and responses. To notice and investigate, utilising creativity, and serendipity.

Whatever implications can be drawn from the perceived life-strategies of pre-historic humanity, the anthropological surmise is convincing evidence of the power of creative collectivity and social memory. So-called modern mankind would do well to heed such an elementary lesson.

[Without the kind of information about 'the ancients' that has emerged in recent times, the like of Sun Ra and The Art Ensemble Chicago, intuited, and identified, as primitive. The African-American jazz response was varied.

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<sup>3</sup> Graeber, David and Wengrow, David, *The Dawn of Everything—a new history of Humanity*, Penguin, 2022

Many played the tonic *sol-fa* game as well as (and often more competently) than keepers of the Western classical tradition. But Sun Ra *et al* refused to pay obeisance to the ideological encrusted hegemony of Western classical music. Theirs was a road towards another place and other normals: 'The Second Stop was Jupiter'!]

Therein with our own activity (in a building intended for religious observances) we insist upon a secular right to autonomous creative collective agency. This is *our* preferred normal. And the noisier it is, the better.

Edwin Prévost—October 2023