

## DESCRIBING THE STORM

### CHAPTER FOUR

If there is no God, there can be no meaning for man except that which he creates for himself. Modern music has expressed this concept in a most powerful way. One might well say that the history of modern music is the story of man's failure to attain to anything solid or permanent as he has sought to create his own meaning. We look, then, at

#### *Modern Music*

If we ask what the leading difference is between modern music and the music of earlier times, the answer would surely be the element of *the spontaneous*. Traditional music—whether of the concert auditorium or of the parlor—was structured. It was written (and could be written) in musical notation. The musician could play it by reading what was written there, since the framework was one of order, form, harmony, and plan. The concept of music, in other words, reflected a biblical view of the world. But what happened when the new framework of thinking began to dominate music? Man began to think of himself as a part of a big cosmic accident—a universe that was not created, and which does not have a plan behind it. The only thing that man can do in such a universe is to try to create meaning out of himself. Thus the characteristic element in music reflecting this new framework of thinking is spontaneity—and the element of chance.

As we understand it, this is the ultimate foundation of modern music. Some have suggested that the original Negro jazz was very different. It is even argued that it developed out of a Christian origin in the blues. This may well be true, to some extent, at least. It may be that the spontaneous element in the blues was an expression of hope, derived from the Christian faith, as over against the sense of oppression and deprivation of slavery. In any event, it is clear that when the white man copied this music and spread it through Western culture, it was used as a way of expressing the framework of thinking that we have been discussing in these lessons. The rhythmic element in the new music expressed the concept of a mechanistic universe. The element of “ad lib” or spontaneous variation expressed the concept of human autonomy (auto = self, and nomy = law: man became a law unto himself, or, in other words, created his own meaning). But you will notice, if you think back over the last few decades, that the music scene is constantly changing. One might well say that the most basic thing about it all is that it cannot arrive at anything fixed. The reason is not so much in the changing novelty itself, as the theory out of which it comes. The theory forbids anything fixed or stable.

Up to this point we have given our own viewpoint. At this point we will quote from a European writer. He is discussing the work of a well-known symphonic composer, Mr. John Cage. Here it will become clear that the new framework of thinking does indeed explain some of the strange “happenings” in great concert halls of the world.

The power of art to communicate ideas and emotions to organize life into meaningful patterns, and to realize universal truths through the self-expressed individuality of the artist are only three of the assumptions that Cage challenges. In place of a self-expressive art created by the imagination, tastes, and desires of the artist, Cage proposes an art, born of chance and indeterminacy.

Back in the Chinese culture long ago the Chinese had worked out a system of tossing coins or yarrow sticks by means of which the spirits would speak. The complicated method which they developed made sure that the person doing the tossing would not allow his own personality to intervene. Self expression was eliminated so that the spirits could speak.

Cage picks up this same system and uses it. He too seeks to get rid of any individual expression in his music. But there is a very great difference. As far as Cage is concerned there is nobody there to speak. There is only an impersonal universe speaking through blind chance.

Cage began to compose his music through the tossing of coins. It is said that for some of his pieces lasting only twenty minutes he has tossed the coin thousands of times. This is pure chance, but apparently not

pure enough, he wanted still more chance. So he devised a mechanical conductor. It was a machine working on cams, the motion of which cannot be determined ahead of time, and the musicians just followed this. Or, as an alternative to this, sometimes he employed two conductors who could not see each other, both conducting simultaneously; anything, in fact, to produce pure chance. But in Cage's universe nothing comes through in the music except noise and confusion or total silence.

There is a story that once, after the musicians had played Cage's total chance music, as he was bowing to acknowledge the applause, there was a noise behind him. He thought it sounded like steam escaping from somewhere, but then to his dismay realized it was the musicians behind him who were hissing. Often his works have been booed. However, when the audience members boo at him they are, if they are modern men, in reality booing the logical conclusion of their own position as it strikes their ears in music.

We might add that one of the "compositions" of John Cage is called "Silence." It consists of precisely that: four and a half minutes of total silence! One could almost laugh, if it were not so sad—and serious. But it is. When man rejects God, and God's word revelation to man, he ends up here—doomed to silence. For what *can* man say (musically, or in any other way) in a universe that has no meaning? When man refuses to think—and speak—God's thoughts after Him, he is consigned to this predicament. And more and more evidence is seen today in the realm of musical art. Take, for example, the work of Pierre Schaeffer, who invented a machine whereby the source of sound itself can be broken up. It is said that he can take a human voice and "cause it to fall apart." So, again, there is something recognizable and identifiable to begin with, but when the artist has done his work it ends up as something no one can identify. It is the same effect in music as "break-up" has given in the sphere of visual art. The reason is that it expresses the same framework of thinking about man and the universe. Pop music too has expressed the new framework. And no one has had a greater part in demonstrating this than the Beatles. Here it was not only the music (which we cannot illustrate in lessons of this kind in sound) but also the words that conveyed the new concept of man and the universe. We quote from Owlsey's LSD.

Turn off your mind relax and float down-stream  
it is not dying, it is not dying,  
lay down all thought surrender to the void,  
it is shining, it is shining.  
That you may see the meaning within,  
it is speaking, it is speaking,  
that love is all and love is ev'ryone  
it is knowing, it is knowing.  
Without going out of my door  
I can know all things on earth.  
Without looking out of my window  
I could know the ways of heaven.

The weird sounds of voices climbing up into space—the transcribing of a human voice backwards on the sound track—all of these things, and many more, gave expression to the new framework. And by such artists this new framework was powerfully communicated to a whole generation. We had "happenings" which expressed the idea of a chance universe in which the masses now think they are living. In the midst of it they have been taught to think of themselves as "creators of their own meaning." They have become "the now generation" because this is all there is in such a universe.

Here we must remark upon another aspect of popular music today. Because of the new framework—which is now shared more and more by performer and public alike—it becomes more and more difficult to satisfy the demand for something that is new and original. We believe this is the reason why pop music groups become more and more "far out" in a variety of ways. In New Zealand a pop group called *The Split Enz* (no doubt derived from the TV commercials about the hair shampoo that cures split ends of hair) began to dress in weird, almost clown-like garments, with hair made to stand erect (as if electrified). Other things that are now commonplace are male singers who dress in what appear to some, at least, to be female garments and vice versa. We can well imagine the difficulty that these entertainers have in coming up with something that is new enough to be considered really creative. This, we point out, is the logical outworking of the new framework of thinking. If man is in a chance universe—a universe that has not received a fixed meaning and significance because God created it and planned

its history—then all attempts to create meaning and significance are doomed to failure. In order to have meaning there must be something (or rather someone) with reference to which it has meaning. To say it another way, there must be absolutes. If there are no absolutes, then—in the end—even the novelties become boring. We are approaching this point in Western culture.

Again we point out that we are not suggesting that all music that is being written today—or performed today— is like this. No, there is some music that still has (some more, some less) the influence of the old framework of thinking. But we must understand that those who are “far out” often express the essential idea of the spirit of the times. And while we cannot accept this—or approve of it—we must understand it. We must understand it well enough to see the plight of our fellow men, so that we can interpret the gospel to them. One way in which we can do this is by remembering one all-important fact: the universe is not what the new framework says it is, and the very inconsistency of “new framework” people bears witness to this fact. This is very clearly seen in the person of John Cage. Now it just so happens that John Cage is an expert on mushrooms. But this was not always the case. During a time in his life when he was working on some of his “music” he lived on Long Island in New York, and when he took walks in the woods he noticed mushrooms growing there in a great variety of sizes and shapes. He also liked to eat mushrooms. But here is the inconsistency. If a person is willing to take a chance and eat just any mushroom of any sort, it might very well be fatal. So, in the realm of art John Cage lived as if the new framework is true. But in the realm of mushrooms John Cage rejected the new framework of thinking. “I became aware that if I approached mushrooms in the same spirit of my chance operations,” he says, “I would die shortly. So I decided that I would not approach them in this way.” The point is that men cannot live consistently on the basis of the new framework of thinking. In order to live at all they must live at least to some extent on the basis of the Christian view of the universe. It is because of this inconsistency that we find that which is good and true also in modern music, and even more in those who make it. Our task, then, is to make our neighbors aware of these things, and then to bear witness to them of the biblical framework of thinking. Even such a man as John Cage is forced to admit (by his actions) that the universe is what we Christians say it is, rather than what he says it is in his music.

### **Questions:**

1. Why did the element of the spontaneous become prominent in twentieth-century music?
2. What other explanation is sometimes given of Negro jazz music?
3. As jazz became popular in general culture, what did the two elements of rhythm and “ad lib” express?
4. Why is modern music constantly changing (often at a very fast pace)?
5. What are some of the concepts of music that John Cage rejected?
6. Why did Cage imitate the method of the yarrow sticks?
7. What are some aspects of his “music” that gave expression to this?
8. What does Francis Schaeffer mean by saying that those who boo Cage’s music are, in effect, pointing the finger at themselves?
9. Why is “Silence” perhaps the truest expression of the new framework?
10. How does the work of Pierre Schaeffer reflect the same basis as Cage’s work?
11. In the lines quoted from the Beatles’ record, find those expressions which reveal to you the new framework.
12. Why does it become more and more difficult for pop artists?
13. Why is it that there is (sometimes) value too in modern music?
14. How does Cage’s approach to mushrooms help us to witness to new framework people?

### **Projects:**

1. Bring a record to class which expresses the new framework. Be ready to give your reasons for selecting it.
2. Give an illustration from your own experience of the way in which modern music (a) expresses the new framework of thinking, and (b) influences the younger generation to think in this way.