

BORN, NOT MADE

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When I was first studying counterpoint and I began bringing in my studies set to text, I always made an attempt to explain to my teacher that my interest was not necessarily in the melodic line alone, nor the overall consonance—upon viewing some of my student work recently, it clearly came to be that, after working through tricinium, I threw away the necessary rules and composed as needed—but to highlight the word as it is, and draw the attention to it so that we might savor it. It was at that point about two years into formal apprenticeship, and four or five into my independent modal studies, that I came to the conclusion my interest lie not in instrumental music, but in the expression of the four aspects of a word—rhythm, phonics, meaning, and drama—no doubt a hidden sympathy remaining from my initial exposure to Partch at age 19.

However, it was not until my later interest in John Ruskin and William Morris (brought upon through learning that Lou Harrison was profoundly influenced by Morris over the composition of his opera, *Rapunzel*, and took up calligraphy following it, which itself brought up my own interest in calligraphy), and my growing interest in pottery through Bernard Leach, that I came to place a clear reasoning for my interest in the word as the primary value of musical expression, which is inherent in Soetsu Yanagi's remark that some things are *born, not made*.

That is, when I composed according to the text, I was not creating my own expression of it, but relaying what it was as best as I could—or, as I later would come to deem this in, *Eleatic Conceptions*, allowing the object to express itself.

And pottery has become, to me, the definitive analogy for this idea, so much so that I use the making and using of pottery as the framework for my own compositional practice. What I mean by this is that the idea of a pot being born is not a denial of it being formed by hands on a wheel, but that a pot is not created anew, from some deep intellect, as to be a fabrication, as opposed to a natural object. For potters, especially those of a folk tradition, there is nothing that can be said to be “unnatural” or “invented” about a pot; rather, a pot represents a reflection of the natural world as understood by the first humans, those who perhaps saw a hollow containing water and set out to craft their own in response to their observation, which was

then passed down and developed naturally, according to the resources and environment, to create unique forms of the same essential object.

A pot might end up in a shape different from another, but its essential nature as a thing that contains is always consistent; and so it is the role of the potter not to create something, but to guide the clay into its necessary form, as if a womb cultivating a child.

And, like a child, one cannot effectively fashion it how one likes, for it, being born, is its own object, not one made for a specific purpose, but one that finds it over its experiences and the experiences that others have in relation to it, so much so that even the creator has no control over what it becomes.

To phrase it in a less obtuse way: after the potter finishes a pot, after the potter sells it, does the potter know how it lives, how it is used?

The potter does not hover about, ensuring the manner in which something must be used; rather, potter gives up the right to determine the fate of a pot when it is born. A functional object lives in its functionality, and its functionality is that it be functional; conversely, that which is fabricated has a specific purpose: it is so that screw can really only fasten, but it is not so that a pot is brought into the world like a screw be, because a pot has no definite purpose; that is, though it seems as nothing more than an object that contains, just as the screw is an object that fastens, does not mean that it cannot possess the ability to be used for any purpose other than such. Indeed, a screw is not a functional object, it is a mechanical object: it is made to play a specific role in a structural system; yet, a pot, as a functional object, exists to be beneficial to people, whatever that function may be. A potter makes an object first, and only after that is its use determined by the people that it is born to benefit.

The truth of something that is born, given a form, a shape, a life, to express, is that it is not created to fulfill any planned notion of what it is, but that it inadvertently ends up fulfilling it by being born.

Birth is different than manufacturing if only because the act of birthing does not imply a foreknowledge of what that which is born will be, and the sentiment in pottery extends to this in the difference between the one-off studio pottery and the work of industrial pottery: when one buys a mug at a store, they buy it for the sake of using it as a mug, because it has been meticulously drafted and designed to play that role, and the consumer understands that; however, when one seeks out the work of a potter, one is not looking for something specific, something that perfectly represents such a thing, but rather a thing that might take that role, or the role of another object, because the purpose of a pot is not necessarily to

fulfill the role of its name, but to be useful in the life of the user. Thus, to be born is to be put into place as to be used, as in the definition of the Latin word, *uti*: to use, enjoy, experience, encounter. Though it is much less about pleasure as it is about experience, so much so that, as Xenophanes remarks, things are placed there for us to encounter (B36), and, in the process, enjoy the experience of encountering them. When a person is placed in the state of being born, they are offered as a thing to be experienced, not explicitly as a physical phenomenon, but as an emotional or intellectual one as well. What I mean to say is that, as Xenophanes would probably express, the perception of a thing is one part of it, but the comprehension of it is another; I am not simply seeing an object born, but I am engaging with it in such a way that my experience of it is not one-dimensional, as its role within a structure, as, say, a screw. I do not experience a born thing, a human, a fox, a rock, as a part of a greater machine, but as it is, as it expresses itself; yet, I undoubtedly experience the manufactured thing, say, the screw, in a one-dimensional form, for it cannot really express anything other than the role that it has been manufactured to play. If I only understand a thing as having a role within something other than itself, then I cannot say to be experiencing something that is born, being made for no other purpose than expressing itself.

It could be posited that such a born object requires the body of the maker to become neither a designer nor an engineer—the sort of mid-century ideal of the totally scientific, rational views of “The Composer as Specialist” or “... How Time Passes ...”—but the prime mover, and thus, in some sense, anonymous: ineffable and egoless. The maker knows the object he creates, but the object does not know him, only that which he has made for it to know, and it is for those other than the potter, other than he who puts it into being, to comprehend it, and come to live with it; again, just as Xenophanes expresses how we might experience of the natural world. The distance that the potter has from the pot allows for this anonymous attitude, that the potter puts things into place for its own sake, to allow others to encounter these things, not put things into place for his own sake so that others counter his work in order to benefit him. The object born must always bring a greater benefit to the user, even to itself, than the maker, as an omnipotent creator who can will the universe into being has such power that there truly must be nothing to gain from doing so, understanding that the omnipotent creator, having the ability to perform any act, would understand the act of creation to be little more than a folly; however in comparison to this, that which has been put into being has everything to gain in the process, for its

existence is entirely determined by the actions of a creator in such a way that, if the creator to not engage in an act it otherwise deems trivial, then it could not be.

And I obsessively return to the work of a potter in this context because their work is truly trivial. Warren MacKenzie always reiterated Bernard Leach's statement that a potter "should be able to make 50 pots easily in a day's time." For Leach, as it was probably true for Shoji Hamada or Kawai Kanjuro, the creation of something is the most trivial, inconsequential action; it simply occurs. In some sense, it is what happens after that trivial act, that the object becomes of value to others in some way, that is of importance.

Leach assumes the potter to take the role of God in Genesis, who creates the world not out of great struggle, but with the ease of throwing a jug, and it is a few minutes of work in throwing a pot that a trivial act brings forth a thing beyond its maker, that comes to live a life of its own; and Leach, in summing up Yanagi's philosophy, declares:

Every artist knows that he is engaged in an encounter with infinity, and that work done with the heart and hand is ultimately worship of Life Itself. Sometimes a pot sings out from its wheel-head, from all its related parts, and the potter may pause in himself thinking. "No pattern this time—just a single good glaze—or none at all", and hope that fire will bless with added strength and variety that which his hands have made. Such a pot, or indeed any work of art, is not an expression of the maker alone, but of a degree of enlightenment wherein infinity, however briefly, obliterates the minor self.

(Leach 2013, 90)

Therefore, when we discuss something being born, it is both inconsequential, the pure act being something done without a thought of the result, but also highly disciplined and deeply respectful, as one is aware that one's actions will lead to a thing being born, being put into being as to be experienced as it expresses itself.

One has a responsibility to create works of such high quality, despite their base forms, because they must ensure that those born are given the greatest possibility of living a life in which the manner in which they are experienced is the most fulfilling for those who experience them. I do not wish to act as if I understand the role of a parent, as I cannot say I have had such an experience, but it seems to me that the primary responsibility of the parent is to not manufacture the child as to conform to a certain role, but to allow for them to develop in such a way that they fulfill the necessary ideal of a full, well-rounded life: that the experience of their existence is beneficial those around them. And this responsibility, this burden, is not easy to uphold; a potter can throw a cup in less than 15 minutes,

but in the process of doing so it is their responsibility to bring forth something, with all their discipline and skill, that is not simply beautiful to look at or easy to use, but something that the experience of using in one's daily life is beneficial beyond its ability to contain. A child can be made to work, to uphold a system, just as a cup can be made to hold water, but it is not what they are made to do, and how well they do it, that determines whether or not they are beneficial to society, irreplaceable in the sense that they have changed the lives of others through their experience; rather, it is something unquantifiable, and perhaps often unrecognizable at first glance, in how they come to fulfill their purpose by being born, experienced, and cherished.

But I have perhaps gone far too ahead of myself in speaking with such pseudo-philosophical language when all I really wish to discuss is the nature of creativity, originality, and authorship in musical composition! My, perhaps long winded, metaphor of the born object, one that comes from the essence of the craftsperson like a child from its mother, is to defend something quite different from how we might view music in composition, performance, and consumption, and to question the merits of a musical society that is built upon rampant careerism, the cult of extreme virtuosity, and the "culture industry," as opposed to one that is built upon music not being placed either "on the stage or in the pit," as Partch would put it, but rather one that is placed within the self and its relationship to its society, one highly musical or otherwise.

And so appears my trite epithet:

Non Musica, Sed Vita;

not music, but life

If music today is to follow certain attitudes, and conform to certain roles in order to be taken seriously, then I would rather deny it, for it seems to me that it lacks a necessary connection to the vital, to the lives of those who partake in it. Let us not make "music" for cultural consumption, then, just as the functional potters insist that they do not make "art" for collectors; instead, let us be like the composers of the old liturgical chant: anonymous and creating music to be lived with, music that conveys not only the souls and attitudes of those who make it, but also conveys how those people who engage with it ought to live their lives. A functional pot has a place within one's life, and the knowledge that it was created by a potter who desired it to be used and treated as something intrinsic to one's daily life is something more than how one feels about a manufactured cup, which exists to

solve a problem, but nothing more than that. Even the most rudimentary pot, made for wholly functional, not artistic, purposes, possesses something greater than a manufactured item: the intention itself.

The moralizing quality of something is not in the object itself, but in the intention of its creator, of the value it has in one's life. Without this attitude, what value is one's work? I assume they will profit from it, but then what separates the craftsman from the industrialist if profit is the only concern? No man can serve two masters: for either he will seek one at the expense of another! If the power of the craftsperson be in their potential for producing wealth, then the quality of the work will follow; but, if the power of the craftsman be in the work itself, and not in its earthly value, then it will be true that where their treasure is, there will be their heart as well.

The most ethical form of a craftsperson requires them to self-efface, for to deny the name is to deny the monetary value of it; yet, in our society this appears to be a heavy order, for what artist is willing to deny authorship, to deny their own work? We do not become "artists" because we desire to work without personal satisfaction; yet, the more anonymous the artist is, though it might be so that the less he communicates explicitly denotes that he is the author, the more his work reveals who he is, for when we begin to view the work and come to understand it, we see him within it. It is just as the beautiful answer Partch put to such a dilemma:

Originality cannot be a goal. It is simply inevitable.

(Partch 1974, xi)

And Yanagi echoed this in his argument against signing work: a work inherently possesses the signature of its creator; that is, in it he places, without second thought, all his ideas, beliefs, attitudes, desires, hopes, dreams. It is not the means by which he conveys himself, but the manner in which he ends up conveying himself, that becomes his signature. The one without these manufactures according to what they believe will be accepted; however, the one who embraces these creates in the only way they can to express those things.

Therefore, such a work, even in its most generic form, even in a form so tightly constricted, as in the case of a dodecaphonic piece, expresses nothing of its factors or its means, but only the direct expression of the composer. And though there is much more to express about this, it best left with a saying of Abba Poemen:

Teach your mouth to say that which you have in your heart
(Ward 1975, 189)

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