A PROBLEM OF HISTORY

Note: Time prevented the airing of these ideas at Oxford, but they are included here because they seem to reinforce much of what was said then, only from a different perspective. The permanent provisionality for which this seems to be calling certainly does seem to be a common concern. The polemic tone works much better live of course, but...

I feel a compulsion to apologise at the outset for the somewhat subjective nature of the way this short paper is couched. Strangely, this compulsion itself acts as an apt self-reflexive commentary upon the point which I have in mind to make.

Something happened in 1963 which, in retrospect, I suppose we might identify as a crucial postmodern moment. Late in that year, the *Times* music critic, William Mann, wrote about the Beatles in terms which compared their musical language implicitly to that of Schubert and others, explicitly to a moment in Mahler:

> so firmly are the major tonic sevenths and ninths built into their tunes, and the flat sub-mediant key switches, so natural is the Aeolian cadence at the end of "Not A Second Time" (the chord progression which ends Mahler's *Song of the Earth*)...[1]

Although there is no suggestion of explicit influence going on here, there is nonetheless the implicit recognition that the old modernist narrative of the evolution of Western musical language from modality through tonality to atonality and beyond was no longer secure. Here was a revival, after anything from six decades to nearly a century and a half, of an older musical syntax. Moreover, this revived syntax did not lead to accusations of anachronism, except among committed modernists, who were not critically concerned with 'beat music' anyway. (Not that I am suggesting that the Beatles' music should be thought of as being postmodern, but this epithet might well be applied to the commentary.) This has not, to the best of my knowledge, been the subject of comment, although the issue of the Beatles' harmony has, and frequently. To take another example, the composer Ned Rorem, writing from the vantage point of 1969, compares the Beatles' melodies favourably with those of, specifically, Monteverdi, Schumann and Poulenc:

> "Here, There and Everywhere" would seem at mid-hearing to be no more than a charming college show ballad, but once concluded it has grown immediately memorable. Why? Because of the minute harmonic shift on the words "wave of her hand", as surprising, yet as satisfyingly *right* as that in a Monteverdi madrigal like "*A un giro sol*"[2]

To put it bluntly, the suggestion in Mann, Rorem, and other similar commentators is that the harmony of the Beatles has learnt from the harmony of earlier masters. This is the problem of history that I want to refer to because, quite simply, I believe it to be wrong. The harmony of the Beatles has not learnt from that of Schubert, Mahler or Monteverdi. Rather, the harmony of Schubert, Mahler, and Monteverdi has learnt from that of The Beatles.

By way of exploration of this eccentric assertion, let me take a more concrete example. One of my formative musical experiences was of learning to play by ear, in 1963, the Beatles' 'She loves you', particularly the hook [ex.1]. Some ethnomusicologists would talk of this sort of experience in terms of enculturation - learning the attitudes and behaviour to enable you to fit into your culture and, for me as a nine-year-old West Country

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schoolboy this was, nonetheless, my culture. (At least, we spent much time listening to the Light Programme and Radio Luxembourg.) Now we know, of course, that this sort of collision between alternative diatonic degrees is traceable back to the vocal flexibility of the blues, but that certainly was not part of my knowledge then. What, then, is to be made of these encounters, which followed for me more than a decade later [exx.2,3,4]? Aside from the obvious difference in voice-leading structure (a difference which does not, I think, account for the moments' emotional impacts), the standard line is that Brahms' use of this collision has chronological priority and that, inevitably, the Beatles' usage carries echoes of that prior discovery. My line, however, is that it is the Beatles' usage which has chronological priority, while Brahms' usage carries those echoes.

This may seem to be an almost wanton mistreatment of historical chronology and, if is was a lone instance, I might agree. However, take this third example. In 1994, a socially adequate budding musician is highly likely to have encountered the dance music of the Prodigy[3], with its extended use of chains of dotted crotchet attacks over a fast crotchet pulse. In some jazz and jazz-derived styles these may extend for up to six crotchet beats before shortening to end on the boundary of a two-bar phrase, but the Prodigy characteristically extend them well beyond this limit, at least in my limited experience of them. How, then, is such a young musician to approach the comparatively simple examples of such syncopation to appear in the music of, for example, Bartok or, 'earlier', Dvorak? Necessarily, I think, the rhythm of Bartok or Dvorak will be viewed through the prism set up by the Prodigy. I imagine that a number of readers will know how difficult it is to persuade non-music students that harmonising an elementary tonal melody 'in the style of Mozart' with primary triads which produce major sevenths and ninths with the bass is simply historically wrong, even though it *sounds*, to them, 'pleasant', 'consonant', and all the other adjectives we need to try to teach them the function and beauty of such simple (though culturally foreign) harmonisations.

Although, as I have said, I seem to be making a rather eccentric assertion, support can be garnered from a couple of surprising quarters. In his discussion of the nature of history, the noted historian E.H.Carr draws a valuable analogy.

> We sometimes speak of the course of history as a 'moving procession'. The metaphor is fair enough, provided it does not tempt the historian to think of himself [sic, et seq.] as an eagle surveying the scene from a lonely crag ... The historian is just another dim figure trudging along in another part of the procession. And as the procession winds along, swerving now to the right and now to the left, and sometimes doubling back on itself, the relative positions of different parts of the procession are constantly changing ... The point in the procession at which [the historian] ... finds himself determines his angle of vision over the past.[4]

Put this alongside a notable moment of historical paradigm change, the so-called quarrel between the ancients and the moderns, also known as the 'Battle of the Books', which took place across Western Europe at the time of the reign of Elizabeth I. Francis Bacon developed an unusual line of argument within this debate: he argued that, not only are we, 'the moderns', not dwarfs sitting on the shoulders of giants (the accepted, self-deprecatory argument for our superiority over the thinkers and actors of classical antiquity) but we are, in fact, the 'real ancients'. In the words of literary theorist Matei Calinescu:

> Bacon constructs a paradox involving the inexperience of boyhood and the wisdom of old age. From the vantage point proposed by the philosopher there is little doubt that it is we, the moderns, who are the real ancients, the ancients having been, when they lived, young and "modern". For those whom we call ancients are only with respect to ourselves ancient and elder, *being clearly younger than we with respect to the world* [my emphasis][5]

Placing this reading of history into Carr's procession, it is clearly our perspective which is dominant, and needs to be recognised as such. The procession may be there, but we cannot construct what it 'really' looks like. At least, having no pretensions to being a historian, this is my easy claim.

So, to conclude. The implication in Rorem that we know how to hear the music of the Beatles because we already know how to hear the music of Monteverdi is unmistakeable. And yet, my own experience of making sense of Mozart's harmonic language is necessarily, and probably forever, mediated by my prior experience and making sense of the Beatles' harmonic language. Professionally, of course, I believe I am able to bracket out this mediation, although whether I should want to is another question. Within this context, arguments for style competence and the like, arguments which I myself have committed to print, begin to ring slightly hollow, especially when proposed for the naive listener. I realise that we are not born within a narrative, but we enter it. This does not mean that I am calling for the wholesale dismantling of our grand narrative for a congeries of multiply little, personal ones, but it does mean that I am interested in acknowledging that we enter that discourse at different points and with different baggage which, in turn, multiply alters it. It is surely we who determine the changes of direction of our predecessors ahead of us.

NOTES

1 William Mann in *The Times*, 27 December 1963, quoted in Christopher Booker: *The Neophiliacs*; Fontana, 1970, p.221.

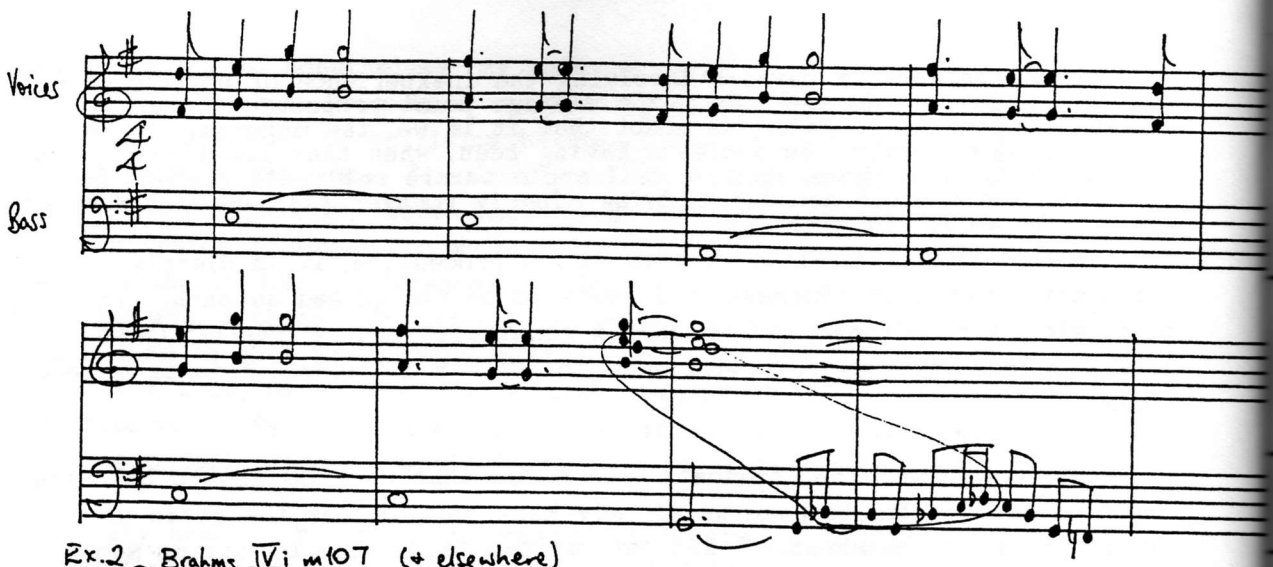
2 Ned Rorem: 'The music of the Beatles' in Jonathan Eisen (ed.): *The age of rock*; Vintage, 1969, p.155.

3 E.g. *Experience*, 1992.

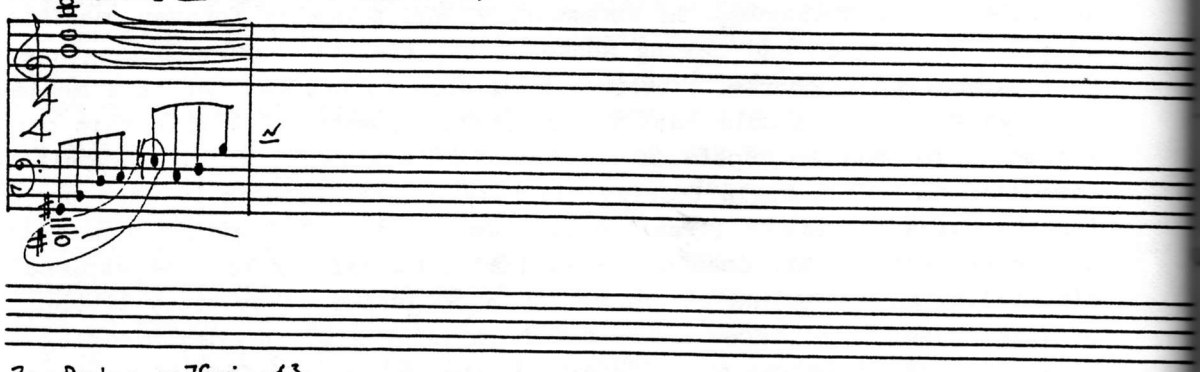
4 E.H.Carr: *What is history?*; Pelican, 1987 (1961), pp.35-6.

5 Matei Calinescu: *Five faces of modernity*; Duke UP, 1987, p.24

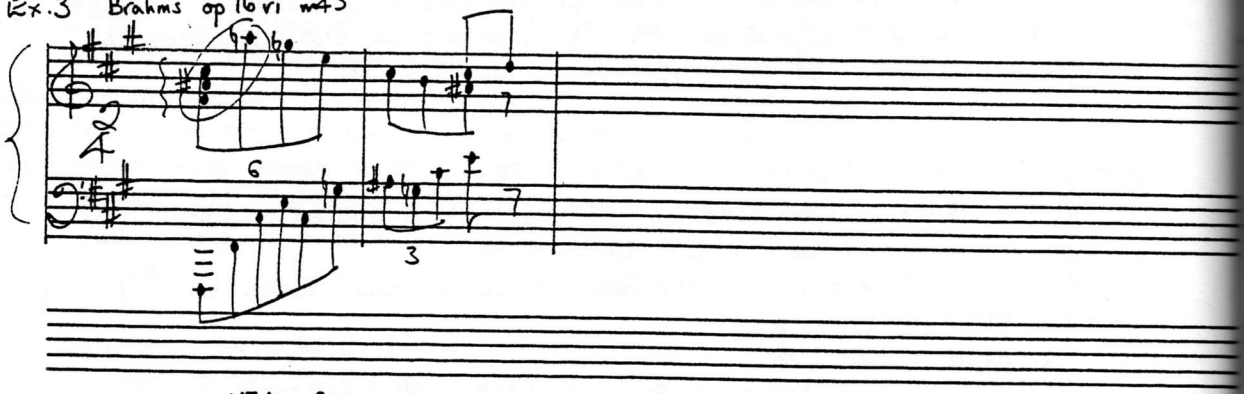
Ex.1



Ex.2 Brahms IV i m107 (+ elsewhere)



Ex.3 Brahms op76 vi m43



Ex.4 Brahms op117 i m20