

Music...A Look at the Ars Nova  
Nadine Eskoff  
Upbeat  
V.3, n. 8, 1970

One medium of any society, cult group, or time era which seems to express the realistic inner motives of man is music. In the various, numerable forms which exist whether it be instrumental, vocal, rhythmical or a combination of these, music consistently reflects a true state of man's being and existence. Every era has its '*Ars Nova*', or 'new art.' Each exposes the ideas of man, whether they be social, political, religious, or just concerned with one's everyday labors. Every era has conservatives as well as radicals. The Middle Ages saw the age of knights, armor, castles, and fair maidens; one may have lived in Germany with its *minnesingers*; or in France with troubadours and *trouveurs*. These young men were well educated, of noble blood, but felt that they did not belong to the established society of their parents and so, they ended up wandering from court to court, writing poetry, putting them to song, and playing their constant companions – a lute, mandolin, or guitar. They were the hippie of the Dark Ages, expressing an inner grievance of the youth.

As one looks back on the various forms of music which exist, whether they be old or new, it becomes obvious that music is a universal language. Though music expresses the unique situation of a group or country, an outsider, whether he be from a different country or era of time, is still able to understand the message conveyed by the song. The four basic elements of music – melody, rhythm, harmony, and dynamics – are present, as it is their usage and structures which make the piece unique. Nationalism – music of the people – is often an important sidekick of music. Whether a piece be religious or secular, the lives and ideas of a people can easily be felt. Their habits and folk songs are in the melody, while their tension and a rate of work comprise the rhythm. Our own American Southern folk songs of the late 1800's were a source of inspiration for Stephen Foster, Aaron Copland, and many other American composers.

Looking back at history, a musicologist can easily diagram the various historical events with complementing music. It might be classical, or folk, yet everything can fit into a neat package. But today, with our *Ars Nova*, the task may be much more difficult. The world has become much more complicated, but in an interesting way. Backgrounds of people in one country or group are so extremely varied. This can ever be observed within family groupings. Education is at its premium, yet primitivism still also exists, and often the two are mixed, perhaps out of intrigue. In the music of today, new instruments and techniques are being mixed with standard harmonies and values. The various categories of tastes have their own unique characteristics, yet also share common interests. From Classical to Psychedelic hard rock, an interesting wave is erupting! The world in general seems to be uneasy and in constant controversy, and so is the music world, even within its own special classes.

The Modern Classical world, the music of Stravinsky, Schoenberg and Bartok, has unfolded many interesting planes. The one standard that is constant with this music is the

fact that one must be a skilled musician in order to perform this type of music. The styles, forms, and techniques of this music, on the other hand, are as varied as one can imagine. The strong influence of Jazz, both rhythmic and melodic, have become a basic element of this music. Igor Stravinsky in his 'Rite of Spring,' a modern ballet, uses many primitive ideas. Bartok's 'Concerto for Orchestra' is full of American folk songs, but the contrapuntal ingenuity, plus the blend of humor, irony, and deep emotion, reflect the complexity of the human mind in the 20<sup>th</sup> century world. George Gershwin's symphonic poem, 'An American in Paris,' is written in a traditional structure, but is still emotionally and harmonically modern. This tone poem gives a visual story of a tourists' visit in Paris through music written without dialogue.

The Avante Garde or experimental music of today is interestingly changeable, non-sensible, and is constantly full of surprises. Though most of the works of such men as John Cage, Milton Babbitt, and Lucas Foss may not be lasting in history, their fresh and adventurous ideas will certainly be felt in the future. These men are not afraid to try any new idea or leave any stone unturned. Foss' 'Fragments of Arcillicas,' for example, has a gong suspended in a basin of water, then struck. This is the only accompaniment to the solo of countertenor. John Cage might tape various sounds, not always musical, cut the tapes into two inch strips, intermix them and then splice them together into one new tape and alas, a new composition is born. Some, however, may refer to it as a decomposition.

The rock and psychedelic music of today uses many of the above techniques. Harmonically, the rock music is nothing more than simplified Bach and Mozart. Jazz rhythms are added. The instrumentation — electric guitar, amplifiers, course-singing vocalists plus the ever present set of drums, all change rock to fit the personalities and problems of those involved in performing or in serious participation. It certainly is a very interesting reflection of this era, expressing not only the tensions and problems present, but also the new thoughts on love, morality and the inner peace of man.

Although the forms and styles of today's music are endless, regardless of destiny, today's music will have served an essential purpose – to provide a background out of which one can create music that truly reflects the aspirations, ideas, and spiritual complexity of man's society.