

A contribution to discussion on jazz history

3 June 1998

Dear Arts Editor:

I want to add to the discussion in reply to IR's question about John Andrews' statement in his review: "Music is by its nature the most abstract of all art forms, yet its allure lies in its ability to concretize the most fundamental human emotions."

I very much agree with this statement, as I will try to elaborate. Music, as opposed to other art forms, is a far more abstract medium, especially orchestral music or other forms of music without lyrics. But it is precisely in this abstraction that music gains its power of universality. Although music appreciation (or criticism) may differ from that of other branches of art, the difference is a relative difference, and not absolute. What makes any great art great?

Aleksandr K. Voronsky, the great yet relatively unknown literary critic of the post-revolutionary Soviet Union, devoted himself mainly to literary criticism, but I feel that his comments in the 1925 essay "On Art" have much to add to this discussion. (Voronsky was a supporter of Trotsky and the Left Opposition in the struggle against Stalinism, and editor of *Red Virgin Soil*, the most important literary journal of the 1920s in the USSR.)

Voronsky writes: "Only one who sees with his own eyes and hears with his own ears what is unique and particular in his surroundings is a genuine artist. And these special insights reveals themselves only to him. The realist-writer does not dream up, invent or create fantastic worlds; he doesn't engage in free play of the imagination, nor does he seek embellishments for their own sake. It is as if he were reading the secret code inherent in things, people and events. The goal of the artist is not to describe or tell a story masterfully and wonderfully. No matter how well he has mastered his palette, no matter how accurately and thoroughly he has described something, no matter how good a storyteller he is, he will be an unproductive artist, much like the fig tree by the roadside, if he doesn't have the

ability to read this secret code in his own way, if he doesn't look at all the world in his own way and see something which no one has seen before him."

Everyone has had the experience of listening to a technically crafted piece of music--be it classical or popular--which, despite its skillful use of chord progressions and instrumentation, doesn't "do anything" for the listener. But is this simply a question of individual taste on the part of the person doing the listening? I believe not. If this were true, how can one explain the ability of a Mozart melody to evoke the same--some would say emotional-- response among people of various cultures and economic systems spanning centuries? Is it not that these melodies, in their abstraction, are able to capture something very pure and human, a sort of universal truth of emotion, stripped of pretense and affectation? They have been able, in an almost magical way, to crack the "secret code" of life experiences and make it accessible to millions.

Some would say that music evokes "raw emotion," "sensuality" or even "bestiality." But rather than sweeping us away from reality, great music holds the power of being able to bring us closer to it. The greatness of the musical artist is determined by his ability to evoke these universal emotions in the listener, and thereby bring us closer to the truth, not further from it.

I look forward to future installments of John Andrews' series, and to further discussion on the Web site on these and related topics.

Kate Randall

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Note: Kate Randall is a frequent contributor to the World Socialist Web Site. The WSWS does not publish the names of those who send letters to the editor without their approval.

See Also:

Two questions about jazz history

[28 May 1998]

What bebop meant to jazz history

[22 May 1998]

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