

CONVERSATION WITH ERNST KRENEK

WILL OGDON

WO: I am always a bit curious when I think of you living out here in the desert, Ernst. Why did you settle in Palm Springs and when did you come?

EK: In 1966. After having lived in the Los Angeles area for nearly twenty years, I moved to the desert which I had always contemplated longingly ever since I saw it for the first time when I came to this country, in 1938.

WO: Do you miss Los Angeles?

EK: Once in a while I feel some nostalgia for the colorful animation of the Sunset Strip, The Miracle Mile, the excitement of a place that looks like an exhibition to be torn down tomorrow and to be built up again after some new mod fashion.

WO: But what about the artistic and intellectual stimuli of a large city?

EK: Since most of what was demanded of me in L.A. was to function as a tax-payer and consumer of groceries and gasoline, I thought I might exercise these functions just as well at a place where landscape and climate were more congenial. For the rest, I visit L.A. quite frequently, mainly to keep abreast of the movies.

WO: If you are a "movie bug" why is it you haven't written a score for film?

EK: I have never been asked to—and that may be just as well, considering the way music has been treated there. But I feel that the film has become more and more the only medium for dealing seriously with the problems of our time.

WO: That is a surprising statement from a composer of about twenty operas—and some of them commenting on contemporary attitudes and problems.

EK: In my operas I have always taken the subject matter very seriously, and I have tried to convey some definite ideas by the words that I set to music.

WO: Most of your operas have been set to your own libretti, have they not?

EK: Nearly all of them. The most notable exception is my *Orpheus and Eurydice*, written in 1923 after a play by the Austrian painter Oskar Kokoschka.

WO: Do you write the play first? And how aware of the music are you while working on the play and vice versa?

EK: Working on my earlier operas I started sketching the music when I had completed a definite and elaborate scenario in which the progress of the plot was outlined in detail. The actual dialogue originated together with the music. This method had the advantage of being very flexible. I could expand or condense certain passages according to what the musical development seemed to require, modify expressive emphases, and the like.

WO: Have you abandoned this method of working in later operas?

EK: When I began to work on *Charles V* about 1930 I decided to complete the libretto before giving definite shape to the musical ideas of the project. I have applied this procedure ever since.

WO: This would seem to limit flexibility, something you considered an advantage prior to *Charles V*. Why did you decide to forgo that advantage?

EK: I think it was the weight and significance of the subject matter that made me feel that the statements of the libretto should be formulated very carefully so that they would live up to higher literary standards than those traditionally applied to so-called "lyrics." Consequently I worked much longer on the librettos and made fewer changes when I eventually set them to music.

WO: Specifically, what subject matter did you consider so important?

EK: While in my early operas I was mainly concerned with the idea of social freedom from oppression and personal freedom from inhibitions, I gradually became conscious of the factor of accountability, and in *Charles V* the concept of justification is the hinge on which the play revolves. The Renaissance emperor reviews the various stages of his life in an attempt to justify his abdication, his giving away his powers of action. The strong emphasis on Christian universality made this opera utterly intolerable to the Nazis, a fact that contributed to my emigration from Europe. Political overtones are also

and is in complete control of all of its operations. It is easy to oversee and to handle and, as its inventor cheerfully assured us, it is "idiot proof" so that one is encouraged to try the most unorthodox patching, which may produce some extraordinary, unforeseen sound combinations.

WO: Hasn't the use of the electronic medium changed compositional thinking? What about the virtues of exactness or of complexity?

EK: With serialism coming of age, painstakingly computed rhythmic complexity does not any longer seem to be a goal so insistently to be pursued as it was twenty or so years ago. Thus the cutting and splicing of tapes to the millimeter is not any longer required in order to realize the composer's ideas. Fortunately, it is technically no longer necessary either. Curiously enough, the electronic medium, earlier denounced as a mechanistic degradation of music, lends itself to a kind of controlled compositional improvisation much more readily than the realm of live sound because the composer can mold the sound material while he is creating it.

As I see it, there is a danger in this situation, and some composers, especially beginners, fall prey to it. They become so infatuated with the material aspects of the medium, with the novelty of the sounds they are able to coax out of the apparatus, that they forget to compose music. By "compose" I do not mean employing the traditional developmental procedures, but creating some sort of design that will hold the listener's interest.

WO: Does the coming of age of electronics tempt you to abandon live performance?

EK: On the contrary, I think that the combination of electronic sounds with vocal and instrumental resources offers fascinating possibilities. Earlier experiments in this direction were not very successful, but this is plausible enough since one had to deal with entirely unknown quantities and qualities. Compositions of this kind are, in terms of social relations, no different from the traditional type. Purely electronic works will probably find a more adequate response when they are listened to privately by small groups of individuals, coming over the radio or the speaker of a tape recorder. Sitting in a large hall and staring at an empty platform while being besieged by the sounds scattered around by a battery of loudspeakers is usually a depressing experience.

WO: You don't seem to hold this opinion alone. But what of the recent environments in Europe and Japan that immerse the visitor in

excited by musical results that I probably would never have obtained had I not set up the serial machinery.

WO: Certain recent works of yours offer optional routes to performers and various less controlled textural results to listeners, do they not?

EK: There are two ways in which I deliberately opened the door to unpremeditated sound combinations. In two or three orchestral works (e.g., *Horizon circled*) I wrote movements in which the basic twelve-tone set is played in each of the consecutive time segments, the durations of which vary from one to eleven units. The density of the twelve tones present in each segment varies accordingly. Furthermore the location of the individual tones within each segment is not precisely determined, only relative positions are indicated so that the players have some leeway in sounding their tones. The purpose of this arrangement is to impart to the music a floating, unstable, and "un-square" character.

Another step forward in determinacy has to do with the concept of the mobile. In my orchestra piece *From Three Make Seven* I composed two blocks of music. Of each of these I made three versions at three different speeds, and each of these versions was orchestrated in three different ways (wind instruments, strings, and percussive devices), so that there were eighteen elements to work with, different but closely related to each other. In each element seven time points were indicated at which the elements could be synchronized. The plan of synchronization, the number and sequence of run-throughs and other aspects have to be decided upon before the performance—there is nothing left to improvisation. But the number of possible combinations is enormous.

A similar idea is the basis of my *Fibonacci-Mobile*, a piece for string quartet and piano-four hands. Here the individual elements are proportioned according to a section of the Fibonacci series of numbers: 2 3 5 8 13 21 34, and again the shorter (faster) and longer (slower) elements may be combined in many different ways.

WO: Isn't all this a demonstration of progressive ways of writing variations?

EK: Yes, but it is a form of variation which would have been inconceivable without atonality and serialism, atonality being a necessary assumption, because the simultaneities of sounds unpredictably resulting from the chance operations will be acceptable only in atonality, and because serialism offers the cues for those operations.

WO: Have advanced stages of predetermined serialism, such as that of *Quaestio Temporis*, raised the ante, so to speak, on communicating or perceiving musical "thoughts"?

EK: To ears and minds attuned to the traditional concepts of theme and development serial music may indeed cause some difficulties of perception. This music does not seem any longer to move from point to point, from a clear beginning to an end that is seen as the consummation of a thought process, but its constituent elements are rather perceived as solid or even elastic objects set up against each other in spatial relationships. I have noticed that some specimens of later serial, or perhaps post-serial music have a very pronounced static character. Now, accepting or rejecting this may be entirely a question of taste, for there is no law prohibiting music from being static. But I wonder whether nearly completely giving up linear design may not be too high a price to pay for developing the new static image, for it seems that many of the so-conceived compositions fail to sustain the listeners' attention, especially if they become as long as some of the younger composers appear to be inclined to make them. In some of these works I seem to detect a sort of neo-primitivism, which reminds me of the situation of the mid-eighteenth century when "progressive" or "modern" meant to be childishly simple. But spurning the awesome involutions of late Bach was probably the corollary for gaining any new territory at all.

WO: Some of the early tillers of the soil of serialism have now abandoned those fields. Are you planning to do so?

EK: I remember having said some twenty or more years ago that I thought the twelve-tone technique would become for those who have gone through its strictures, a kind of second nature so that they would be able to write music of a dodecaphonic character without having to employ the mechanics of this discipline. I think that this applies to serialism as well. Personally I do not think that the potentialities of serial procedure are exhausted, and I am still deriving much satisfaction from employing it off and on in various degrees. My impression is that some composers who have abandoned serial discipline try to overcome the dangers of static stagnation through increased emphasis on sensational sound qualities, or other features that might be called gimmicks—by which I mean tricks that are designed to attract attention to nothing but themselves, similar to what Richard Wagner called "effects without cause."

WO: Do you include contemporary "collage" pieces among these?

EK: I am afraid that the few specimens I know belong there. They also are apt to arouse the suspicion that the authors are trying to ride on some celebrities' coat-tails, which presumably was not their intention.

WO: And how do you regard graphic music and similar notational experiments?

EK: Again I feel that some of these endeavors touch upon gimmickry since the unfamiliar and often very involved symbols make grasping the composer's ideas more difficult, slow and uncertain, rather than facilitating it, which in my opinion should be the ultimate purpose of any kind of notation. I apply this criticism also to some of the elaborate prefaces and instructions we find in so many new scores because they are more likely to befuddle the reader than to tell him in generally understandable technical language how to go about playing the music.

WO: In your book *Music Here and Now* you prophesied a future in which one might compose music by writing directly on sound track. Wouldn't this have resulted in a graphic score?

EK: Not exactly, since the lines drawn onto the sound track would not be graphic symbols of sounds, but sounds themselves translated into a different medium and activated by light. I understand that this idea was later carried out experimentally here and there. Of course this method has become obsolete through the rapid development of electronic music-making.

WO: Do you find that our present electronic technology offers you the flexible yet faithful performing resources desired when you wrote *Music Here and Now*?

EK: We were at first attracted to the electronic medium by its possibility of practically unlimited accuracy of timing, which looked particularly enticing because of the increasing rhythmic complexity of serial music. Liberating the composer from the risk of malfunction of live interpreters was a "consummation devoutly to be wish'd," apart from the temptation of making new, unheard-of sounds. At that time the help of an engineer was necessary since the installation in Köln, where I did my first electronic work in 1956, was part of the public broadcasting station and could not be handled by outsiders.

The Buchla modular system—like some others that have been developed recently—represents remarkable progress over the older installations because the composer can set it up in his private study

very strong in *Pallas Athene Weeps*, which I wrote in America in 1954. The destruction of the Athenian democracy at the hands of the Spartan tyrants was a metaphor easily to be interpreted in terms of situations of our own experience. Through my preoccupation with serial music I became more and more intrigued with the philosophical problems of time and space. Witness the *Golden Ram*, written in the early sixties—a playful and sinister paraphrase of the ancient Greek legend of the Argonauts and the Golden Fleece, spanning thousands of years and two continents.

WO: If you found your “serious operas” capable of considering such important ideas, why do you now feel that the film might be a better medium for dealing with serious subject matter?

EK: Only much later I became aware of having, in *Charles V*, applied some dramaturgical devices that suggest techniques more germane to moving pictures than to the stage, such as for instance splitting the place of the action, rapid changes of locale, flashbacks, and the like. The inclination to use such devices consciously became more pronounced in my later operas. The flight of the Golden Ram over the Atlantic and his landing among the Navajos in our own time, the journey of the ship *Argo* through the clashing rocks of the Symplegades, the transformation of a dragon into the Indian princess Medea—these and many other details very loudly call for filmic treatment. Therefore I welcomed the opportunity of writing two operas for the European T.V. In one of them, *The Magic Mirror*, I am again playing with the mystery of time, as the action switches from ancient China to modern Europe. The other T.V. opera, as yet untitled in English, treats the dialectical relationship of predetermination and chance—as it was hammered into my consciousness through the preoccupation with serialism—in a whimsical vein, illustrating it as a contest between computer and roulette. Thus it turned out that the more seriously I seemed to take opera, the more I felt a gnawing suspicion that opera was basically an absurd medium, best suited to self-irony. I remembered how many opera fans were cheerfully declaring that they did not care at all whether the happenings on stage made any sense, and I came to the conclusion that the only person that took the libretto seriously was the composer.

WO: What did you find particularly interesting about working in the medium of television?

EK: Apart from those things mentioned earlier, it is the possibility of focusing the attention of the viewer onto any detail I wish to bring to his attention, the possibility of juxtaposing events far distant from