

**A COMMENTARY ON
RICHARD STOVER'S ARTICLE
"THE CRUX OF THE PROBLEM REGARDING
ATONALITY IN WESTERN ART MUSIC"**

Copyright © Syukhtun Editions 2003

Theo Radić



Richard Stover writes of the value system at the core of thousands of years of occidental music, summed up as “choosing what sounds good or relevant,” regardless of the theories and dogmas prevailing at a given moment in history. Nobodies like Shakespeare and Barrios emerge from nowhere with excellence no one can explain that blossomed in earthiness *outside* the academic milieu of universities and conservatories. Stover believes that the multi-millennia musical tradition of the west has arrived at a sort of dead end: “Essentially I am of the opinion that using 12 tones for our musical system is in fact the problem.” The solution according to him is to “abandon 12 notes entirely (probably gradually also) and evolve a new system of harmonic acoustics.” For me, the issue of musical creativity lies not in how many parts one divides any given length of any given string to create any given number of intervals. My strides in the new-fallen snow of Stockholm’s Lill-Jan Woods may be measured in more centimeters or less inches, but they are still the same footprints in the snow. As a tai chi dancer I make art of my strides, not by mathematically measuring the distance between them, but by being light-footed and creative on them. In tai chi we learn the value of having a “center”. Likewise, I value the tonal “center” of western music – as does Richard Stover – but I do not agree that the system at the core of thousands of years of musical evolution in the occident should be “abandoned” by modern musicians.

Just as poetical vibrations were codefied into written symbols, bringing an end to the oral tradition, so were musical vibrations codefied into written symbols. This latter event took much longer to evolve. Some 1,500 years after writing was established in the occident, musical notation came into existence, as a direct result of the written tradition preceding it. The musical notation we use today began as nearly illegible accent marks called *neumes* written over the texts of medieval choral songs. *Neume* means “nod” or “wink,” and one can imagine a choir leader nodding or winking at his singers to indicate a rise or descent in pitch. Alphabetical signs for sounds, words and ideas preceded by one and a half millennia the musical signs with which they were sung. Up to the 9th century choral music had been taught by ear. Just as with oral poetry, performances that were formerly memorized slowly yielded to sight reading from texts and musical scores. Paper began to usurp mankind’s memory. Around 871 a monk in northern France began placing small accents (*neumes*) over the Greek and Latin texts of choral songs as a reminder of changes in musical pitch. (Pauses and how long a note was held were not yet indicated on the paper.) This was the simple beginning of the complicated musical notation to be used by Bach, Mozart and Beethoven almost 1,000 years later. The words of early poets and song-writers written on paper were the foundation of modern musical notation. In the ancient oral

tradition, words emerged out of music. In the newer written tradition, music emerged out of the words. The unobtrusive little accent marks placed over words in choral texts were written more and more clearly over the centuries, becoming bolder blacker, until choral music notation was developed in the 13th century. In sheet-music for songs today, one sees the traces of this evolution. The black, flag-waving notes of the melody dance on their staves over the lyrics, just as the primitive little accent marks hopped over the tops of words in medieval choral music.

The invention of the printing press and refinements in the art of making paper not only resulted in a revolution in the written word, but in musical notation as well. The new technique brought with it a way of writing notes more exactly, with silent pauses, syncopation and dynamics (piano, forte, etc.) recorded on paper with precision. A single line with dots over, on, or under to indicate pitch gradually evolved into the system of five lines used today. This was the direct result of "Guido's hand." Guido of Arezzo was an Italian monk, musician and choir master for Arezzo's cathedral who lived from about 980 to 1050. He built upon the one-lined system of notation and developed it into a system of four lines, based on the lines on the inside of his left hand. With his right hand Guido pointed to different joints on the fingers of his left hand as he led the choir, to indicate how high or low the notes should be sung. The hand was also drawn on paper, with different colors indicating the tones. A "key" (clef) was placed on the lines to "unlock" the system of notes by indicating the main note. The modern treble clef (C_1) is the remnant of a medieval "G" and the bass clef (C_2) is the remnant of an "F". "Guido's hand" made polyphonic music possible – choral music with different "voices" sung simultaneously. Guido of Arezzo is the originator of "do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, si, do." He based this diatonic scale on the first letters of a profane melody in Latin ("do" later replaced "ut" and "si" replaced "sa"):

*Utqueant laxis, Resonare fibris, Mira gestorum, Famuli tuorum,
Solve polluti, Labi reatum, Sancte Iohannes.*

The French still retain Guido's original version, using "Ut majeur" to mean C- (do) major. His system of four lines evolved into five and was divided up into "measures" each having the same number of beats that established the pulse of a given piece of music. (The 3/4 time of the waltz was originally the beat of religious music, the three beats coupled to the idea of the holy trinity.)

12 tones, 26 letters, 6 colors – there is a sort of finality about these systems for me. The horizon in front of the creative spirit is as wide and vast in scope for us today with our octaves as it was for Papa Bach. Just as the 6 primary and secondary colors of the rainbow were used in the Altamira caves 30,000 years ago, and the masterpieces of the Renaissance, so were they used by Claude Monet and Henri Matisse. This finality of the color spectrum reflects the finality that I feel about our ultra-ancient octaves. They will serve us well in the millennia to come, if, that is, our self-annihilation does not come first. Barrios' genius came to us at the same time as Schoenberg's experiments with atonality, which Stover sees as "a bunch of dissonant eccentric rotten fruit that hardly anyone wishes to bite into nor even spend much time around as the stench is overwhelming." This valid judgement would seem to be one used *in favor of* keeping the 12-tone system, not "abandoning" it. At the same time as the atonalists, Barrios was creating in the tradition of Tárrega and Bach, and surpassed all other guitar composers. Why should this magnificent tradition be "abandoned"?

I hear wonderful unidentified music on the radio. I guess Mozart. No, it was Haydn! How sweet this resemblance! More music... oh, that is definitely the Mendelssohn "sound". Wrong

again! It is Schubert! How splendid this plagerism! The Mendelsohnn “sound” of a *Midsummer Night’s Dream* originates surprisingly with Schubert. Is that Richard Strauss? No again – it is Mahler I hear. The health of this eternal metamorphosis has been maintained just fine with the 12-tone system. The family resemblance passed on from genius to genius over the artistic generations is the veritable face of the deity. I would go further and say that it is, as Cézanne saw painting’s function in society – *le salut*, salvation.

The tradition behind all musicians today – from heavy metal zombies to pop sweethearts; from rock-and-rollers to mature classical musicians – is an enduring creative phenomenon of thousands of years. It has *not* – heaven forbid! – lead us to a dead end. The 12 tones are like a dozen eggs. Make your omlettes, cakes, aiolis, *glaces au four* and other treats to your heart’s content. A dozen seeds for further growth to the ultimate stand-off: will Art in some way gain extraordinary magic to prevent the suicide of the homo sapiens, or will the present chaos, excitation and downfall lead to our self-annihilation? *That* is the question. (I am not over-flowing with optimism concerning this.)

It is ironic that Richard Stover expresses so much aversion for Schoenberg and his atonality, and such love for Barrios and his tonality, and yet advocates “abandoning” the very system that made such splendid music possible in the midst of the dissonant chaos around us. Stover’s analogy of the great tree of western music is a very good one. But the rotten fruit of atonality should not be confused with the tree that bore it. Putrefaction provides the fertilizer for further blossoming on the Tree of Tonality.

To sum up: “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.”