

2nd solo podcast:  
What is meant by contemporary?

We can, perhaps, agree that 'contemporary' is an overused word whose exact meaning has been lost.

Presumably it refers to what happens in our time.

But often this same word has been used to suggest 'cutting edge', whatever that means.

'Cutting edge' is associated with the notion of progress, an inevitable product of time's arrow, an inexorable evolution towards the better and the new.

As we have abandoned the old disciplines in favour of none at all, relying on innate talent to guide us along our artistic paths, we have, perhaps unwittingly, harnessed our horses to the scientific notion of progress, which has witnessed a very real evolution. The advance of science is however predicated on the assumption, a modest one, that whatever is true today may not be true tomorrow. In Karl Popper's terms it is the falsifiability of any theory.

Unlike science, in the arts, just as in religion, we cannot falsify anything.

For instance, I can say, 'God exists', and you can gainsay me, and neither of us can prove anything one way or the other. I can also say, 'This tub of boiling mud represents whatever I choose it to represent, as does Rauschenberg's piece in San Francisco MOMA ,and you could say 'Nonsense', but neither of us would prove either point.

For this reason, I would postulate that nothing new, or lasting, has come to replace the old artistic disciplines, since these disciplines represent millennia of evolution.

In my previous podcast I described at breakneck speed the development of music from a single line into a system with many interdependent lines, which necessitated rules for the coexistence of the lines or voices, in order to maintain an aesthetic standard that had evolved over millennia.

I suppose the only common factor between scientific discovery and the development of artistic disciplines is that some methods survive the test of time. This is of course not synonymous with truth, which in science means current theory empirically tested. We cannot empirically test a single artistic discipline. What criteria would we then apply?

We can say that the survival of certain works of art and music suggest the existence of a universal criterion for beauty, if not for truth. These criteria have of course wobbled over time, but by and large they have been absorbed into our sensibility, so that we do not find Beethoven's works ugly or insipid or superficial. That much we can agree on. I am leaving out the enfants terribles whose existence is simply to tear up the canon, and whose narcissism obliges them to claim notoriety at the expense of others - these are the false prophets.

Now, to get back to the question of what is contemporary, closely associated with 'cutting edge', with progress, with the discarding of the old, we can see that the application of these standards is false when it comes to the arts.

The arts owe their universality to the tried and tested.

Before I am accused of being a stick in the mud or a sentimentalist, I wish to say that all progress in the great European musical tradition was based on the influence of composers' forbears. Each and every great composer was influenced by one or more of his predecessors. Mozart was influenced by Bach and Handel, Beethoven by Haydn, and so on.

None had the temerity to believe he was 'creating' something, and by the word create I mean something out of nothing.

I would venture to suggest that many composers and visual artists believe that they have to 'create' something out of nothing because there is the faulty idea that art comes, like the universe, out of nothing. This allows for great arrogance and narcissism, and is particular to our time, when previously the greatest artists in every field recognised their forbears and paid them homage by, initially, consciously or not, adopting their methods, styles, techniques, and so forth.

First and foremost the artist is a workman, someone who refines their ability to develop and control their expression in a chosen field.

When, and only when, they begin to recognise just how difficult it is to achieve some sort of freedom, in whatever field, do they realise how long the journey towards artistic freedom is.

But in a society where the notion of artistic freedom is based on the absence of technique, skill, experience, without mentioning respect for the masters, anyone can decide at any point to do anything.

I can for instance decide that feet clad in shoes best represent social strata, and then photograph many feet to illustrate this. It might even be interesting, but does it amount to a work of art? Of course not. It is merely the categorisation of pairs of feet in shoes. But never underestimate the galleries or art critics, who may come along and maintain that my photographs are an important artistic statement.

To me this best exemplifies the present use of the word contemporary.

The contemporary artist might quickly be excommunicated by the art world for painting a vase of roses, however well.

The meaning no longer rests in the painting itself, in its beauty, in the artist's skill, but in its relevance to Now, to some concept entirely disconnected from the work, to its perceived contemporaneity.

Shall we attempt a new definition of the word contemporary?

I suggest a meaning that is better connected with content and less with appearance.

What is contemporary? It is what happens in the now.

If you are the sort of painter who chooses through his or her interest to paint a vase of flowers, if that comes from the depths of your being, and by that I of course differentiate between a mere momentary impulse to paint flowers,

then that would be contemporary, for it exists in the present, and by definition is now.

Similarly a composer who chooses to work on a fugue in D major, because in him, at a certain depth of course, the sound of a theme, or some leitmotif, manifests itself in D major, And indicates that counterpoint is an inevitable part of the piece, then at this moment contrapuntal writing in D major is a part of our contemporary landscape.