

Tempo

A QUARTERLY REVIEW OF MODERN MUSIC

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In a talk entitled 'The crisis of the word' in the BBC Third Programme (that was) series 'The Radical Years', George Steiner put forward the proposition that "we can see today a retreat from the word . . . to other media, to other idioms, and above all, to music. There is a lot of evidence . . . that music is taking on a more and more commanding role in the way we try to find order in our consciousness . . . It may be that we are all a little afraid of the silence and solitude of a man reading a book alone."

There is perhaps something in the idea, though the evidence could no doubt be differently interpreted, and the argument is fragile. What is the essential difference between a man reading a book alone and a man listening to a gramophone record alone—or between a large audience at a concert and a large audience at a play? Perhaps only that reading, and listening to a play, are primarily intellectual activities, at whatever level, and listening to music is primarily not. In this sense music has always served as an escape from intellectual concerns (as well as from many other things). It has even been suggested that one reason why music flourished so well in nineteenth-century Vienna was that it was fostered by politicians to prevent people from thinking too much.

Mr. Steiner is probably right to see music fulfilling a similar role today. What may strike readers more closely concerned with music is his lack of awareness of, or at any rate lack of concern at, the parallel to the 'crisis of the word' within music itself today—a subject touched on by two of the contributors to this issue of *Tempo*, Hans Keller (p.34) and by G. W. Hopkins (p.41).

The distinction between 'making sense' and 'having a sense' is a useful one, the first implying, in the terms of Keller's argument, doing so within a 'general language' of sounds and their relationships that may exist independently of the actual composition, the second meaning creating an aurally perceptible and intelligible ordering of sounds that has no necessary relationship to any other vocabulary or ordering of sounds. This ability is music's vital difference from, and in certain respects advantage over, the word as a means of communication—if indeed communication is the correct term for something in which the medium truly is, and always has been, the message. Music communicates, or as Stravinsky put it, expresses, nothing but itself and its composer's abstract imaginative inventiveness.

Because it has no content outside itself, not only can music accommodate change far more readily, and far more radical, than the word, it can also be 'understood', however new its self-manifestation, to a satisfying degree in a relatively short time, by anybody, without previous experience or education, simply by attention to itself. Here perhaps is an explanation, if Mr. Steiner's observation is correct, of its increasing attractiveness to a society that is growing ever more mistrustful of the authority of the intellect, and wants to wish every manifestation of inequality, even intellectual inequality, out of existence.