

Tempo

A QUARTERLY REVIEW OF MODERN MUSIC

Edited by Colin Mason

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 51-36700

Some recent writing about pop music has reached such dizzy heights of foolishness that, as the efforts of *Private Eye* and Peter Simple have shown, it is almost impossible for mockery to go further. The absurdities have come from both sides of the barrier that separates the worlds of pop and straight music—a barrier whose solidity Tony Palmer underestimates when he writes: ‘Pop music, after all, because of its limitless appeal—which has no class, no age group, no prejudice inherent in it—has become the first truly mass satire’. Well, there are other possible divisions of people, other bases of appeal and discrimination, if ‘class’ is not to be read as ‘classification’, in a sense so comprehensive as to make it meaningless—for instance, to name two that I am not thinking of, sex and IQ. For all Mr. Palmer’s delusions, most people seriously (or even not so seriously) concerned with ‘serious’ music, among them no doubt many readers of *Tempo*, and perhaps even most people over twenty-five years old except parents of teenagers, are probably less aware of pop music than the champions of pop are truly aware of ‘serious’ contemporary music. In this sense most of us on this side of the fence are, although perhaps justifiably sceptical, not qualified to have an opinion on whether the Beatles’ songs are the best since Schubert, or their latest record the most important musical event of 1968, whereas the commentator quoted by Tim Souster at the beginning of his article probably has more right to make his observation—though what might that good new opera or symphony eighteen months ago have been? Boulez doesn’t think there has been an opera worth mentioning since 1935.

It is perhaps this widespread doubt among the musically serious about the intrinsic value of most of what is being produced in their own sphere today, rather than about its social relevance and ‘minority appeal’, that is partly responsible for the current interest shown in pop music by serious musicians, and for encouraging the belief among some on the pop side that they have broken the barrier and are pushing us to the wall. But the barrier between the two sides remains absolute and unbreachable, for the function of serious music, whether or not that function is successfully fulfilled by what composers are producing today, is fundamentally different from that of pop music, and it is only due to a poverty of linguistic discrimination that they are both known by the same generic name. History has given various demonstrations in the past of the undemocratic nature of art proper, and of the separate place of popular art—even at its best, as in the waltzes of Strauss. The waltz figured conspicuously in nineteenth-century ‘serious’ music, but not with the force of an important influence, let alone a vital renewal. In our own century jazz has proved still less influential, though it too has been a stimulus. The same will surely prove true of pop music; certainly it is this tradition, if any, that it is heir to, and serious music has no more to learn from it, and is no more profoundly challenged by it, than it was by those predecessors.