

A PROBLEM OF HISTORY

Note: Time prevented the airing of these ideas at Oxford, but they are included here because they seem to reinforce much of what was said then, only from a different perspective. The permanent provisionality for which this seems to be calling certainly does seem to be a common concern. The polemic tone works much better live of course, but...

I feel a compulsion to apologise at the outset for the somewhat subjective nature of the way this short paper is couched. Strangely, this compulsion itself acts as an apt self-reflexive commentary upon the point which I have in mind to make.

Something happened in 1963 which, in retrospect, I suppose we might identify as a crucial postmodern moment. Late in that year, the *Times* music critic, William Mann, wrote about the Beatles in terms which compared their musical language implicitly to that of Schubert and others, explicitly to a moment in Mahler:

so firmly are the major tonic sevenths and ninths built into their tunes, and the flat sub-mediante key switches, so natural is the Aeolian cadence at the end of "Not A Second Time" (the chord progression which ends Mahler's *Song of the Earth*)...

Although there is no suggestion of explicit influence going on here, there is nonetheless the implicit recognition that the old modernist narrative of the evolution of Western musical language from modality through tonality to atonality and beyond was no longer secure. Here was a revival, after anything from six decades to nearly a century and a half, of an older musical syntax. Moreover, this revived syntax did not lead to accusations of anachronism, except among committed modernists, who were not critically concerned with 'beat music' anyway. (Not that I am suggesting that the Beatles' music should be thought of as being postmodern, but this epithet might well be applied to the commentary.) This has not, to the best of my knowledge, been the subject of comment, although the issue of the Beatles' harmony has, and frequently. To take another example, the composer Ned Rorem, writing from the vantage point of 1969, compares the Beatles' melodies favourably with those of, specifically, Monteverdi, Schumann and Poulenc:

"Here, There and Everywhere" would seem at mid-hearing to be no more than a charming college show ballad, but once concluded it has grown immediately memorable. Why? Because of the minute harmonic shift on the words "wave of her hand", as surprising, yet as satisfyingly right as that in a Monteverdi madrigal like "A un giro sol"²

To put it bluntly, the suggestion in Mann, Rorem, and other similar commentators is that the harmony of the Beatles has learnt from the harmony of earlier masters. This is the problem of history that I want to refer to because, quite simply, I believe it to be wrong. The harmony of the Beatles has not learnt from that of Schubert, Mahler or Monteverdi. Rather, the harmony of Schubert, Mahler, and Monteverdi has learnt from that of The Beatles.

By way of exploration of this eccentric assertion, let me take a more concrete example. One of my formative musical experiences was of learning to play by ear, in 1963, the Beatles' 'She loves you', particularly the hook (ex.1). Some ethnomusicologists would talk of this sort of experience in terms of enculturation - learning the attitudes and behaviour to enable you to fit into your culture and, for me as a nine-year-old West Country

