35 LUKAS FOSS

b. 1922

Confessions of a Twentieth-Century Composer 1986

In his piece *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* (1978), based on the famous poem by Wallace Stevens, composer-conductor Lukas Foss wrote a series of musical vignettes to coincide with thirteen aspects of a blackbird's existence which, in turn, served as a metaphor for humankind as observer (represented by the poet, and now, additionally, by the composer). In his fascinating A. W. Mellon Lectures at the National Gallery of Art in 1986, Foss first presented several personal ideas about art, and then proceeded over the course of the six lectures to develop their various aspects through his observations of himself as composer, conductor, audience, and commentator.

As a composer, Foss has been known for shaping and molding his pieces from a wide variety of techniques, ranging from medieval music to the most avant-garde innovations. As the music director of the Buffalo Philharmonic, the Brooklyn Philharmonic, and the Milwaukee Symphony, he attracted notice by presenting a range of contemporary works as well as familiar and unfamiliar classics, all infused with imagination and freshness. These Mellon Lectures reveal a man of great erudition, musical worldliness, sensitivity, and humor. Using himself as a model, Foss speaks with an almost disarming simplicity and candor while tackling the major aesthetic problems of our time.

In the first lecture, Foss addresses what seems an age-weary topic, the act of creation. But what he says is convincing to anyone who loves music, from the professional to the armchair listener, because his own musical persona clearly contains both. Could not the same be said of Mozart, Schumann, Messiaen?

Perhaps some of my enthusiasm for these lectures derives from the fact that I have offered my own students advice similar to that which Foss so articulately presents: that composition starts with immersion in the past, imitating that which you love, until you find yourself. Loving communion, he believes, is the artistic experience, as the performer immerses himself in his art, and paradoxically through the music of others, finds himself. This self-finding is true in both love (in the sense of being in love) and in art. There are many such statements. Who can resist this marvelous insight—so self-evident, easy to say, and hard to follow, espe-

cially when trying to build a career? One more: "You do not have to stick to your project. Let things change if they have to. [Stravinsky always]...had a definite project, but reserved the right to go another way. But as a performer, this can be a problem. Changing your mind is terribly important for an artist. It means you've had an insight. But as conductor, [it] can drive an orchestra up a wall." This attitude may seem very sixties ("going with the flow"), but then the heart of Foss' middle years were at that time, and he still shows much of the interest in musical freedom and theatrical adventure in the concert hall that was a hallmark of the period. Foss relishes the musical surprise, which he gleefully links to Mozart.

At the same time, he has a healthy respect for the intellect's tempering of the capricious side of his creative personality. He suggests that his teacher, Paul Hindemith, was perhaps too sane and sober and lacked the irrational—an element which Arnold Schoenberg's idea of order had in very full measure, and without which any method, system, or approach in the arts is peculiarly unattractive. Foss nonetheless lionizes Hindemith and extolls at length the subtle beauties in his music. I have not seen this kind of analysis of Hindemith presented anywhere else so clearly and convincingly.

One senses through these lectures that Foss has always struggled with the act of composition. "Lukas still suffers when he composes!" John Cage once remarked, and Foss speaks in several lectures about ephemeral styles such as folk music and minimalism, which please for the moment. "With that music I feel good; with great music I feel happy. [With folk music and minimalism] I woke up from feeling good, and then found I was as miserable as I was before! Happiness is created by something where a door opens up a new love or understanding. It has changed you, you are not where you were before. A hallmark of a good piece is that it bears repetition. Great music is 'in' with every change of fad."

To be fresh, interesting, and surprising without lapsing into cliché (and worse, faddism) emerges as Foss' greatest challenge. For that reason he is always willing to stretch the ears almost to the breaking point. In retrospect, one might wonder if what one heard in some Foss pieces was, indeed, entirely right. Foss is taken with Schoenberg's quip, "My theory does not quite work—that's why it's interesting."

Finally, in discussing his life-long preoccupation with Mozart, Foss perhaps most closely comes to describing his own aesthetic. To Foss, Mozart puts together things that do not seem to belong together, and nothing modern composers write is for him quite as baffling as Mozart's strange little Minuet in D for piano (K. 355). Second-rate composing means putting together only things that fit. "Mozart puts together things that do not seem to fit—but in retrospect, things *do* fit—there is nothing wrong. Why does it feel right in retrospect? You can never find the answer, but it leaves you with a new understanding—about music, about life, about surprise, truth, etc." This description could serve as the manifesto for many composers in the aleatoric movement in the sixties.

These lectures provide an invaluable summary of the credo of a major musical figure

of our time as well as what many would agree is the *raison d'être* of the artist. As far as I am concerned, the tapes of these unpublished lectures should be required listening for all young composers; they provide a unique opportunity for audiences to do something every pre-concert lecturer seems to attempt: to enter the creative mind of a serious composer and emerge having some definite sense of what is going on. And last, they present a pleasant reminder of old truths which most seasoned musicians can themselves well afford to review. The blackbird has observed a great deal, and he has much to tell.

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