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## Sorokin's Theory of Fluctuation of Forms of Music

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PITIRIM A. SOROKIN'S *Fluctuations of Forms of Art*<sup>1</sup> is the first of four volumes constituting his *Social and Cultural Dynamics*. The present paper is concerned chiefly with the twelfth chapter of the first volume which is entitled "Fluctuation of Ideational, Sensate, and Mixed Forms of Music." This chapter occupies some sixty of the more than seven hundred pages in the volume. The first part of the book, which is introductory, deals chiefly with methodology; with definitions and examples of what is meant by Ideational, Sensate, Idealistic, and Mixed Systems of culture; and with the general theory of Sociocultural fluctuations. The second and principal part of the book is devoted to the application of Sorokin's general theory to the specific arts—painting, sculpture, architecture, music, literature—and criticism. The other volumes have to do with fluctuation in science, philosophy, and religion; with the sociopolitical and economic sphere; and with the general theory of sociocultural change. In the first part of my paper I shall attempt a brief exposition of some of the essential characteristics of Sorokin's theory and of his application of it to music. In the second part I shall offer my criticism of his theory, pointing out what I think are fundamental errors as well as what seems to me to be valuable in the work.

Sorokin refers to his book as his "attempt to understand the character of contemporary culture and society." Objectively considered his work is

an investigation of the nature and change, the dynamics of integrated culture: its types, its processes, its trends, fluctuations, rhythms, tempos.<sup>2</sup>

It is based chiefly upon the Graeco-Roman and Western civilizations and is not intended to be a history of culture but is rather a philosophy of history, a sociology of the changes of culture. His methodology is based upon generalization and analysis. His deductions are tested inductively by the relevant empirical facts, for as he says:

<sup>1</sup> New York: American Book Company, 1937. Unless otherwise indicated, all page references in the footnotes refer to this volume.

<sup>2</sup> P. x.

Without the relevant facts we never know which of several—and per se equally logical—theories fits the empirical reality best, and most successfully orders its perceptual chaos into a comprehensible system. Pure “fact finding” is thoughtless and rarely of significant results. Pure logical speculation in the social sciences is sterile.<sup>3</sup>

#### THE MEANING OF CULTURAL INTEGRATION

The various elements of a cultural complex may be interrelated in one of four basic ways:

(a) Spatial or Mechanical Adjacency. If two or more elements of a culture simply occur together in space with little or no meaningful relation other than spatial contiguity, the basis of the relationship may be designated as spatial or mechanical adjacency. A musical example would be a potpourri in which several radically different styles are thrown together without organic or other logical connection.

(b) Association Due to an External Factor. Two cultural elements may be somewhat more closely related because of their common relation to an external factor, without achieving an organic-causal or meaningful relation. The use of vodka and skis in northern Russia and other cultural elements such as warm houses, heavy clothing and the like, are related to each other because of their relation to the common factor, the cold climate.

(c) Causal or Functional Integration. A Gothic cathedral, a filling station, or an automobile will serve as an example of this type of relation in that in each the individual parts have a causal or functional relation to each other and to the whole.

(d) Logico-meaningful Integration. The supreme type of unity may be exemplified by the scattered pages of the score of Beethoven's *Third Symphony*. As Sorokin says:

If we know the proper patterns of meaning and value, we can put these pages or parts together into a significant unity in which each page or fragment takes its proper place, acquires a meaning, and in which all together give the supremely integrated effect that was intended. I say “supremely integrated” because in such instances each part, when set in its designated position, is no longer noticeable as a part, but all the parts together form, as it were, a seamless garment. Their unification is far closer than that of mere functional association.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> P. xi.

<sup>4</sup> P. 19.

*The essence of the logico-meaningful method of cognition is, . . . , in the finding of the central principle (the "reason") which permeates all the components, gives sense and significance to each of them, and in this way makes cosmos of a chaos of unintegrated fragments.*<sup>5</sup>

#### SYSTEMS OF CULTURE

Working chiefly on the logico-meaningful basis, Sorokin proceeds to seek out the fundamental philosophies in terms of which he can interpret the Graeco-Roman and Western cultures. In this connection he sets up the categories of Ideational, Sensate, Idealistic, and Mixed Systems of integrated culture. And as these terms characterize the cultures, so he uses them to characterize the parts which constitute the cultural whole.

An Ideational culture is one in which (a) ultimate reality is regarded as super-sensory, non-sensate, transcendental; (b) the main needs and ends are spiritual; (c) the extent of their satisfaction is the largest, maximum; (d) the method of satisfaction is mainly through the modification of self through the minimization or elimination of most of the physical needs. A Sensate culture is one in which (a) ultimate reality is regarded as sensate, empirical, material; (b) its main needs and ends are material, sensate; (c) the maximum satisfaction of these needs is sought; (d) the method of obtaining the satisfaction is chiefly through the modification of the milieu, the exploitation of the external world. These two cultures are opposites. They probably never exist in their pure forms but various cultures are generally predominately one or the other. A culture which is a balanced synthesis of the two types is called Idealistic. In connection with these chief cultural types Sorokin suggests a number of logical satellites of which I shall mention only one. Aesthetic values in an Ideational culture are mainly "ideational," subservient to the main inner values, religious, nonsensate. In a Sensate culture they are "sensate," secular, created to increase joys and beauties of a rich sensate life. In an Idealistic culture both are equally emphasized.

We must pass over the chapter on concrete illustrations of the chief types of culture mentality to the one on sociocultural fluctuations.

#### SOCIOCULTURAL FLUCTUATIONS

In brief, a process is defined as any change of a given logical subject in the course of time. To be meaningful, a statement of a process

<sup>5</sup> P. 32.

should include the specification of (a) the unit—that which is in process, (b) the time relationship, (c) the spatial relationship, and (d) the direction of the change. How a subject can change and yet retain its identity is illustrated by the statement, “How Mr. J. B. Jones has changed in the last ten years.” What is meant, of course, is that while there is a certain substratum which has not changed, other elements have. A complete change would imply an end of any process. Sorokin goes on in the remainder of this section to discuss such topics as: “Forms and Degrees of Uniqueness and Recurrence,” “Are Sociocultural Processes Unique or Recurrent?,” “Punctuation and Pulsation of Sociocultural Processes.”

#### FLUCTUATION OF FORMS OF ART

Part two of Sorokin's book is devoted to the application of his theory to the forms of art. After a consideration of various theories of sequence in the arts, Sorokin concludes that no valid generalization in this respect can be made. Nor is there a uniform lagging of certain arts behind the others. Such theories, while they may contain much suggestive material, generally exceed the limits of the facts upon which they are based.

#### FLUCTUATION OF IDEATIONAL, SENSATE, AND MIXED FORMS OF MUSIC

The next five chapters are devoted to painting, sculpture, and architecture, after which comes the chapter on music. This is followed in turn by the single chapter devoted to literature and criticism.

#### DEFINITIONS AND EXAMPLES

Ideational music may be defined as that music in which the sounds are merely the symbols for supersensual meanings.

A given combination of sounds, as perceived by the ear, may be most ugly—most inharmonious, unpleasant, unenjoyable—and yet, if it means to the mind something great, for which it is a mere symbol, a mere “symbolic” stimulus, it is great, “heavenly” Ideational music.<sup>6</sup>

Sensate music means audible beauty, music at its face value, regardless of any hidden meaning. If there is meaning, it is the meaning of the perceptual, empirical world (descriptive, program music). The ear is the supreme judge. Whatever meaning there is is secondary

<sup>6</sup> P. 532.

and unessential. The singing of primitive peoples, when excited, when they have an abundance of energy, or when they sing merely because music and singing are pleasant and biologically useful, is sensate music. But the music of magic and that of religion are Ideational. The two forms are coexistent. Examples of Ideational or symbolic music are cited in Egypt, in India, in China, and in other Oriental countries. The doctrine of the *ethos* in Greek music is mentioned as an example of Ideationalism in that music. In discussing the Gregorian chant as an example of almost pure Ideational music Sorokin says,

. . . from the standpoint of a sensually audible criterion, the chant is no music at all; it is something queer; unenjoyable, primitive, dry; in brief, it has none of the earmarks of what we are accustomed to style music—neither measure, nor harmony, nor polyphony.<sup>7</sup>

But Gregorian music is by no means of purely negative value. It is, in the words of Combarieu,

. . . above all forms of expression of profane art because it is connected with such a disposition of soul which itself is above all the sentiments in which the musical expression takes habitually its place.<sup>8</sup>

The chief *Mixed form* of music is the Idealistic in which Ideational and Sensate values are perfectly blended. Many compositions of Palestrina, of Bach, of Beethoven are examples of this type. They are neither quite Ideational like the Gregorian chant nor are they quite Sensate like many sensually beautiful pieces of music. The two types coexist in various degrees of mixture in the music of any people.

#### COMPARISON OF MEANS IN IDEATIONAL AND SENSATE MUSIC

Among the other traits of Ideational music we find: no polyphony, melody almost all within one octave, poverty of means, no beautification.

And such asceticism was due not to chance or "primitiveness" but was conscientiously and intentionally introduced through deliberate elimination of any sensual beauty.<sup>9</sup>

And even the Mixed Ideational-Sensate music of Bach, Beethoven, Haydn, Handel, and Mozart uses modest means compared with that

<sup>7</sup> P. 537.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted on pp. 538 f.

<sup>9</sup> P. 542.

of the representatives of Sensate music such as Wagner, Berlioz, Mahler, or Richard Strauss. These composers

. . . use and abuse any means which can increase the sensual effects, and in this quest they naturally turn to those which also are sensate: be it massing of voices; their enormous range; their modulations; all kinds of consonances, and especially dissonances; chromatics; contrasts of rhythms, intensity, etc.<sup>10</sup>

Low-grade Sensate music manifests the same tendencies in movies, vaudeville, etc. Its characteristic slogan is: "The richest, loudest, and biggest in the world."

#### COMPARISON OF STYLE

By purity of style Sorokin means the inner self-consistency and the exclusion of foreign elements. On this basis, Ideational music is pure in style, while sensate music cannot be so. Ideational music does not need lipsticks and powder, does not try to captivate the public; Sensate music does: like a movie "star" it lives as long as it captivates the public. Although Palestrina, Victoria, Bach, Handel, Mozart, and Beethoven all have a considerable purity of style, inasmuch as their music is largely Idealistic, they do not have the purity of the Gregorian chant. Wagner, of course, is unthinkable, an impure mixture

of music, of poetry, of dancing, of stage, with all the imaginable tricks and effects and stunts; of popular topics and legends. In brief, it is the most magnificent incarnation of impurity, in the noblest forms of Sensate art.<sup>11</sup>

#### COMPARISON ON THE BASIS OF AUTHORSHIP

Ideational music is not the creation of an individual, but of a group. It is a "communion of a soul with itself," not music for the listener. All this is reversed in Sensate music. The author seeks recognition. The music is individualistic.

#### COMPARISON OF ENVIRONMENT

Ideational music can only function in a society that is homogeneous mentally; "otherwise its 'audible signs' would be incomprehensible and as such unrecognized." For Sensate music the market is heterogeneous. Its appeal is to the ear, "and to be pleasant for the ear is much easier than to be great ideationally."

<sup>10</sup> P. 542.

<sup>11</sup> P. 543.

## COMPARISON ON THE BASIS OF CRITIQUE

Aesthetic theorizing and criticism is not essential for ideational music. Rather it needs moral censors, to find whether the auditory symbols convey the proper super-sensory message. Sensate music, however, since it merely aims to please sensually, requires the assistance of aesthetic theory. In Idealistic music, criticism is little developed because the art is so beautiful as to be its own justification. But in the Sensate period, since there are no universally recognized masterpieces, we find a great increase in the number of theorists, professional "art lawyers," whose business it is to defend the works of the period and "sell" them to the public.

## FLUCTUATION OF THE MAIN STYLES IN TIME AND SPACE

Both forms of music are present in all cultures and at all stages, but the proportion of each form, as well as its purity, is not constant. In preliterate cultures both forms are present: Ideational, in magical and religious music, and Sensate, in music for sensual joy arising from surplus of energy, love, intoxication, and what not. But all is rude and primitive. In Oriental cultures both forms are present, too, but Sorokin omits any extensive discussion for want of data.

In the Graeco-Roman culture up to the 5th century B.C. the music is predominantly Ideational. Sensate music was growing, however, and in the 5th century Idealistic music predominates. Sensate music dominates the Hellenistic period which immediately follows. In Roman culture there is first Ideational music, no Idealistic period, but a decadent Sensate music.

Medieval Music is predominantly Ideational for some 900 years. From the 11th century on, Sensate music increases in quantity until by the 16th century a balance between the two forms is reached, which results in the great period of Idealistic music. The signs of the change have been suggested in the earlier comparison of Ideational and Sensate music. Sorokin introduces a considerable amount of data which we can pass over at this time. The Idealistic period continues until the early 19th century, when the Sensate form emerges more and more radically, reaching its highest peak in the music of Wagner and other Romantics. After the end of the 19th century this Sensate music begins to show all the symptoms of disorganization, demoralization, and degeneration, and this condition has continued up to the present time.

Such, in barest outline, is Sorokin's theory of fluctuation of Forms of Music.

#### CRITIQUE

In the few minutes left at my disposal for evaluation and criticism of Sorokin's theory I shall attempt (1) to show that the criteria of Ideational and Sensate art as defined are not especially significant as applied to music, because they do not get at the crux of the problem of musical processes; (2) to point out some specific instances of errors of fact, methodology, or interpretation; and (3) to indicate a few of the many and considerable values of Sorokin's work.

#### FUNDAMENTAL THEORY NOT ESPECIALLY SIGNIFICANT

The change from Gregorian music to the great music of the 16th and subsequent centuries is not due merely to a change in cultural philosophy from other-worldliness to empiricism, but rather to the great growth in technical musical means. In this connection, it seems to me that Sorokin makes two serious errors. One is in assuming that the Gregorian music has no beauty of aesthetic surface; and the other is in asserting that the limitations of this art are intentional and deliberate. In support of my contention that Gregorian music does have sensory beauty, I quote from the first book on the history of music which happens to be at hand, Hugo Leichtentritt's *Music, History, and Ideas*:

The solemn tranquillity of Gregorian chant, its wonderfully sensitive and appropriate proportions, its broad and noble melodic contours, its restraint even in agitation, its highly ingenious and interesting construction. . . . etc.<sup>12</sup>

It is not necessary to labor the point for I am sure most musicians will agree that the Gregorian chant has a beauty all its own. As for the limitations being intentional, I think I need only say that the music of any period is conditioned by the stage of musical technical development that obtains in that period. The music of the early Christian church could not have been polyphonic or harmonic, nor could Palestrina have written the Well-Tempered Clavichord. The music of a period is further conditioned by the character of the society of the time, particularly as it fosters or hinders musical activities. And finally the presence or absence of great musical genius is a factor in the character of the music of any period. These and similar matters

<sup>12</sup> Op. cit., Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1938, p. 48.

are important in the processes of music, not whether or not music is regarded as a symbol for a transcendental meaning.

#### SOME SPECIFIC ERRORS: PURITY IN STYLE

Sorokin defines purity of style in music as “. . . its inner self-consistency and the elimination of everything that does not belong to it.”<sup>13</sup>

He admits that Palestrina, Victoria, Orlando di Lasso, Bach, Handel, Mozart, and Beethoven, all have a “considerable purity of style”; but it is not so “pure” as that of the Gregorian chants. His explanation of this sounds lame and ambiguous:

It has already an admixture of the noblest music with elements heterogeneous to the main theme.<sup>14</sup>

If the heterogeneous elements are meter, polyphony, harmony, etc., we have only to recall that earlier the statement was made that “from the standpoint of a sensually audible criterion, the chant is no music at all.” This leads to the *reductio ad absurdum*: Something which scarcely rates as music is purer in style than Palestrina or Bach!

#### THE RÔLE OF AUTHORSHIP

The point is made several times that Ideational music is created collectively, whereas Sensate music is individual. I shall not discuss the very debatable question of collective creation in music. I would only say that the question of authorship simply does not make a meaningful criterion for the distinction between Ideational and Sensate music.

#### HOMOGENEOUS SOCIETY AND IDEATIONAL MUSIC

In reply to the theory that Ideational music requires a homogeneous society, I should call attention to the fact that the Gregorian chant still lives today. It has its devotees, as it were, but so does jazz and so do the various other style species. It is difficult to see the point of the distinction.

#### QUESTIONABLE STATISTICS

There are numerous other details which invite investigation and criticism, but I must be content with the consideration of one more matter—the statistics used. Sorokin bases his statistics of the number

<sup>13</sup> Pp. 542f.

<sup>14</sup> P. 543.

of religious and secular composers and compositions, and of theatrical and non-theatrical compositions, on the ones mentioned in certain histories of music. But the inadequacy of such a procedure must be obvious. General histories are highly discriminatory and could hardly be expected to give unbiased lists of all types of composers and compositions. For example, Sorokin obtains 163 as the number of theatrical compositions in the 18th century (including opera, musical drama, musical comedy, oratorio) and 207 for the 19th century. One wonders if he would not obtain very different results if more comprehensive lists were consulted. Francis Carmody's list of opéra-comiques in Paris from 1708-1764 alone gives nearly 1000 items.<sup>15</sup> Certainly statistics based upon such lists would be more convincing. Similarly the data and statistics by which Sorokin reaches the conclusion that the use of the minor has been on the increase since the 16th century are decidedly open to question.

#### IMPORTANT VALUES IN SOROKIN'S WORK

In spite of my quarrels with many of the details of Sorokin's treatment of music, I feel that I should be very remiss in my duty if I did not acknowledge some of the many and important values of the work. First of all, I want to pay tribute to the man who has had a sufficiently comprehensive insight into the intricacies of cultural history to enable him to evolve a theory applicable to all its ramifications; and who has had the courage to attempt to put it to the acid test of application within the several fields of art, science, philosophy, religion, and general sociology. In the midst of the ever-present necessity for specialization we need relief from the deadening effects of over-specialization; we need to gain a sympathetic insight into the nature and problems of other fields, and some notion of the long-range and immediate forces at work in the cultural processes of today. Certainly Sorokin's work constitutes a significant contribution to the overcoming of this difficulty. It is most stimulating to see him apply his methodology to very complex subject material. Nearly every page suggests a half dozen topics for further study and investigation. It seems to me this is one of the greatest values a book can have.

<sup>15</sup> Carmody, Francis J., *Le Répertoire de L'Opéra-Comique en Vaudeville de 1708 à 1764*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1933.