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Flying with Fingers

Joe "Fingers" Wombat was born in Skye, Wisconsin, on Feb. 30, 1928. This gave him a serious complex as a child, since his birthday came only every 412 years. It was this sense of being different that drew him to music in his early high school years. He was offered the flute chair in the Skye High Marching and Drinking Band.

But Joseph, as he was still known to everyone but his mother, who affectionately called him Klutz, became discouraged with the instrument because of a congenital physical malformation, the result of his unusual birthdate. Joseph was a double Pisces, with two trines and a sextile in his horoscope, which explains his later predilection for triads in root position with added sixths. But more significantly, he had Pluto rising, Jupiter falling, and Neptune undecided. Mercury was retrograde at the time, and Venus was in Cancer the Crab, which governs cancrazans. This caused an incredible traffic jam at 48th and Broadway and—which is more important—the unusual configuration of young Joseph's hands: he was born with six fingers and no thumb on each.

This made it difficult to hold the flute, much less play it, and in the end he gave it up. For a time he took up alto saxophone, since he could hang it around his neck, but he had trouble with the octave key and, after six fruitless months of trying to learn *My One and Only Love,* abandoned that as well. In a fit of despair, he told his guidance counsellor, who thought he should become a pizza maker, that his last hope was the piano. Unfortunately, Skye High did not own a piano.

With his mother's best wishes, Joseph left home. He hitchhiked—a process rendered more difficult by his lack of a thumb—to Potsdam, New York, where, he had heard, the high school did own a piano. He had not been misinformed. At Pot. High he found an old Mason & Hamlin. It was so old, in fact, that the raised lettering on the harp stated A 435.

"That piano and I were made for each other," Fingers said in a recent interview. "On the piano, I found that the way my hands are made was actually an advantage. The problem of the thumb cross-over in scale passages was eliminated. For example, I begin the E-flat scale not on the index finger, like everyone else, but on the third finger of each hand. My scales, therefore, are completely symmetrical and balanced. I admit, though, that B-natural sometimes gives me a hard time.

"And man! The voicings I can play! Twelve notes. Allowing, that is, for a little doubling, such as the third of the chord, with the melody note in the bass."

Pausing significantly, he added: "And of course, I am the only pianist alive who plays Bach authentically."

Since Fingers was in an unusually effusive mood during this interview—a former sideman has described him as a "closet recluse"—it seemed an appropriate time to ask him about the rumor that he is the slowest composer since Hugo Friedhofer.

"Oh man," he said, "I keep hearing that, and I resent it. It's not that I can't write fast. I write slow out of consideration for those musicians who are not fast readers."

It is not only the extra digits that work to Wombat's advantage. The sheer size of his hands permits him to play what has become a distinctive element of his style: parallel fifths and fifteenths. Many critics consider him the greatest jazz pianist since Buck Hammer, the famous three-handed virtuoso discovered by Steve Allen, or possibly even since Jonathan Edwards, who revolutionized jazz piano in the 1950s. Until then critics had been complaining that the average jazz pianist had "no left hand". Edwards, it will be recalled, has two left hands.

Fingers played his first professional job in the Head Room of the Slipit Inn outside Brockville, Ontario, long the rival of Evansville, Indiana, for the title of Sex Capital of North America. It was there that he was discovered by talent agent Darryl B. Mortecum, who had been sent by the late Freddie Schreiber to encounter what was obviously a unique musical mind. Mortecum introduced him to the famous jazz impressario and comic-book collector, Arturo Versees. Versees urged him to organize his own group, the now-historic Fingers Wombat Octet.

Besides Fingers himself, who had switched to accordion on discovering that pushing six buttons at the same time produced a very unusual noise, the group featured Pres Rohl on drums, Stan Dup on bass, the French French horn virtuoso Zero Terry Valve, George "Bugle" Horne on fluegelhorn, Tom Bone on trombone, Simon Symbol on cymbalon, and Switzer Land on alpenhorn.

Like everyone else, Fingers had come under the influence of Charlie Parker, and he undertook a year-long project of transcribing Parker's solos and arranging them for octet. Unfortunately, Fingers had an old Edison phonograph that ran counterclockwise, and so all of Bird's solos were written out backwards. This led years later to a landmark plagiarism suit in which Fingers sued Med Flory and Buddy Clark on the grounds that their Supersax arrangements were nothing but his own charts played while held up to a mirror. Flory and Clark (not to be confused with Lewis and Clark, whose sole contribution to jazz was that they anticipated Route 66 by 200 years) argued that Bach did this all the time, and the suit was dismissed.

But we are ahead of the story.

After he had rehearsed his group for a year in the Turbine Room of Consolidated Edison, Fingers unveiled it for Arturo Versees. Versees, elated at having aquired that afternoon a mint copy of Action Comics, Vol. 1 No. 1, decided to present the group in concert. That concert, *Jazz at the Waterworks,* is of course now famous, one of the milestones in the history of America's Only Original Art Form. But at the time, few were able to understand so radical a mind as that of Wombat, and the concert was a *scandale.*

Leonard Feather gave Fingers the bird, Bird gave Fingers the finger, Steve Swallow, Bill Crow, and Gary Peacock, turning their backs on John Cage, flew into a three-bass snit, and the Hawk wasn't talking. Robben Ford didn't let out a peep, but this was due less to musical sagacity than to the fact that he hadn't been born yet. Michel Colombier said that, in protest, he was going to form, with the backing of Edith Piaf, a group called Wings. Adding to Fingers' humiliation, Red Mitchell, Whitey Mitchell, and Blue Mitchell said that his music was unpatriotic. They left the concert with Luther Adler, singing *Under the Double Eagle, La Paloma,* and *Skylark.* Clearly, the night belonged to Bird, not Fingers, who for a dark moment considered giving up music for falconry.

One man alone had the foresight to anticipate hindsight and give Fingers his due—the normally hard-to-please Anglo-Indian music critic Pandit Mersey-Leslie. In a brilliant review for the Baltimore *Aureole,* he said, "The age of Bird is ended. The age of the marsupial is upon us."

(to be continued)

The Mysterious Language

One day in Jim and Andy's, Marion Evans said, "The longer I live, the more I'm convinced that the greatness of a piece of music has nothing to do with its emotional content."

"What is it then?" I said. "Logic? Structure?"

"No," Marion said, "not that either."

"Then what is it?"

"I don't know," Marion said. "But if I ever figure it out, I'm gonna write some."

I have smiled and pondered over that remark for years. It touches on questions for which there are no satisfactory answers and takes us to the fringes of human perception, the periphery of the way we experience not only music but life and the astonishing universe.

Barry Little is a noted and distinguished Canadian neurologist. He is also a fine jazz pianist who plays gigs on weekends, a slightly-built, brilliant, and sensitive man who temporarily escapes his constant dealings with lethal disorders by painting and writing string quartets.

Last year at his home in Toronto, Barry showed me a book called *Music and the Brain,* a compendium of medical essays published in England. I wanted to read it, but Barry assured me that it was sufficiently technical that even he found it slow going in places. As I browsed through chapters on acoustics, the ear, vocal production, and the nervous system, I found that one did indeed need a professional medical background to understand the book. So I tossed the big question back into Barry's lap: "Does it explain why and how music has its effect on the emotions?"

"No," Barry said.

There is probably no one on this planet with more knowledge of both the nervous system and music than Barry Little. If Barry cannot explain how music affects the emotions, I'm satisfied that no one can. Come to that, Barry cannot even explain his own passion for music. Because we are surrounded by it, we take music for granted, failing to see how mysterious it really is.

Once when I was working on a song for a film with Roger Kellaway, I wrote an image that he found arresting and vivid. "I wondered what you'd come up with at that point," he said. "I always know how to get you."

"How's that?" I asked.

"Minor ninth chords," Roger said. "You go for them every time."

It has long been held by most thoughtful musicians and theorists that minor scales are not inherently sad, major scales not inherently bright—that music has no actual emotional content or meaning; we have merely, through centuries of conditioning, been trained to think and react as if it does. And we all know that you

The greatest immorality is to take on a job one does not know.

—Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821)

can write poignantly in major. Nonetheless, the "cultural conditioning" explanation of musical-emotional effect clearly will not do. For one thing, I have never met anyone who'd *had* centuries of cultural conditioning. Children respond to music at very early ages, and Mozart was writing the stuff by three.

Behaviorist theorists would of course argue that the child merely responds to music in imitation of the way he sees adults react. The other follies of behaviorism aside, that assumes either conspicuous histrionic displays by the adults or preternatural powers of observation in the child. It also ignores a body of evidence to the effect music can have on plant growth. Jack Batten, long a music critic for the Toronto *Globe and Mail,* used to review jazz albums in a room that contained a large and flourishing fern. Then Jack began reviewing rock albums in that same room. The fern died. One could of course dismiss such "anecdotal" evidence, which science has consistently done before and since the days of Charles Fort, but there is in fact more than a little evidence that hard rock music can kill plants. An experiment by a young man (whose name I have alas lost) at the University of California in San Diego produced provocative evidence that it induces aggressive and anti-social behavior in laboratory rats.

There is then this and other evidence that music does somehow have inherent powers, emotional powers. The fact that we cannot explain how it works does not mean that it doesn't.

Artie Shaw, who now teaches a course at Oxnard College in California, cautions his students against the use of abstractions such as "beautiful" in discussing art, pointing out that they describe subjective responses; they do not tell us anything about the work in question. But then, of course, like all of us, he slips into the use of such terms himself, which illustrates the slipperiness of the thing we are trying to grasp.

In the period of his training, a composer—and all jazz musicians are composers, engaged in what Bill Evans used to call "spontaneous composition"—learns that certain things

The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers.

—Shakespeare, *King Henry VI Part II*

produce certain emotional effects. He can tell you how to get an effect but he cannot tell you why it works.

It is said that music comprises three elements, rhythm, melody and harmony. They are in fact reducible to one. It is arguable that the only element is rhythm, since a tone consists of nothing more than a number of beats. Most of us can hear vibrations between 30 beats a second and 16,000. When two notes are sounded, a new pulse is established (pulses, actually) where the waves of the two tones reinforce each other. We have set up polyrhythms. The study of harmony, beginning with the overtone series, is an examination of the aesthetic application of the physics of vibrating bodies.

Not only is life itself a series of vibrations. The very stones under our feet are not there except as vibrations. The old image of an atom as a tiny ball with tinier balls orbiting around it is gone: there is an action, but nobody knows what it is that is acting. One can view the universe, from the atom up through the molecule to the beating of our hearts and the throbbing of the blood in our veins and our echoing footsteps to the turning of the planet and its long annual journey around the sun, out to the great wheeling galaxy of which we are a part and all the galaxies and binary stars and pulsars, as one vast and awesome polyrhythm. We exist in and of and by vibrations. We perceive our puzzling universe through rhythms—the molecular excitation in a cup of coffee that we call heat, the spectrum of light frequencies by which we see and call things red or blue or yellow, and those slower vibrations in the air that we call sound, and, when we have organized that sound along the lines of principles that please us, music.

In his fascinating book *Supernature,* microbiologist Lyall Watson examines various effects of rhythm on the human system. It is believed that the broken divider lines on highways, flashing by as a visible rhythm, often induce hypnotic sleep in drivers, causing accidents. Something similar happens in France, whose long straight country roads are often lined by poplars set in place like sentries before the age of the automobile.

Watson describes a case of a man who was highly sensitive to a strobe effect of 48 cycles per second, which happens to be the flicker rate of motion pictures. The man became homicidal in movie theaters.

If a rhythm carried by the optic nerve to the brain can induce intense emotion, there is no reason to presume that one carried by

the auditory nerve cannot. All sounds carry an emotional charge of one kind or another, some subtle and some not so subtle. Have you ever rubbed a piece of chalk across a blackboard at a right angle to it? Have you ever had your shovel hit a rock while digging? Some people cannot bear even the thought of such sounds.

If rhythms, including those very rapid beats that we interpret as tones, can produce negative emotions, it is unreasonable to suggest that they cannot produce other emotions, such as inspiration, serenity, compassion, joy, sadness, eroticism. When the controlling society in the 1920's thought jazz was "sexy" music, they were right—it is, although it is more likely to sublimate the feeling and satisfy it than inflame it. And it can of course express a full range of emotions.

A sound can be funny, in and of itself, a sound such as the low oscillating *buuunnnng* that you get by snapping a ruler on the edge of a table. I do not know why boings and bongs and plunks are funny. I know only that they are.

In the long evolutionary process, animals developed abilities for enhanced survival and shed those that did not. We are assumed to have five senses, sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell. We have experimented with aesthetics based on smell—perfumes, for example. There are times when cuisine does indeed seem to be an art. And feckless attempts have been made to develop an art for the sense of touch, for example a round rod wrapped with materials of various textures, such as silk and sandpaper, which you are supposed to run through your hand. But our true arts have been developed out of only two senses, sight and hearing, which are themselves extremely advanced and sophisticated developments of the sense of touch.

Literature can be defined as an art that makes no use whatever of the physical senses, except insofar as the ideas and images involved must come to us through sight or sound. Literature is the non-sensual art. The effect on the emotions is entirely through the brain's understanding of concepts and images carried in the words. It is the idea that affects your emotions. A man learns early that women are sensitive to erotic speeches, providing of course that they are sufficiently subtle that they do not violate the need to appear proper. But such a speech will do you no good if you deliver it in English to a lady who happens to understand only Ju.

Although both are based on the detection of vibrations, there are essential differences between the senses of sight and sound. Sight, the more complex sense since it involves the perception of the frequencies of light, is a very specific sense, and a selective one. You see what you *choose* to look at, and if a scene in a movie grows too gruesome for you, you can simply shut your eyes and cease to see it. But hearing is not selective. The eyes focus precisely on objects in front of you, although the peripheral vision takes in an arc of a little over 180 degrees. Hearing takes in not only a full circle around you but, if you are suspended in the air, a globe of which you are the center. Walking along on the ground, we hear a dome of sound. *Hearing is our warning system,* the sense that never sleeps and cannot be turned off, except by disease or injury. And everyone is familiar with the fear instantly induced by a sound from behind, even a very quiet one.

That is the reason the public would not accept quadraphonic sound. We have an absolute need, rooted in primitive nature, to find out the cause and source of a sound by looking toward it. A little serious reflection on the way we hear would have saved CBS, RCA and other companies from wasting a lot of money, in the long run the public's money, on a concept that was doomed from the start.

Some years ago, Walter Carlos made a recording called *Sonic Seasonings,* consisting of electronic sounds suggesting those that one hears throughout the year. The recording, though not music *per se,* induced in me strong emotional responses, unlike anything ever achieved by Morton Sobotnick and the other whoosh-bing-tinkle-and-eeeeoooowww boys. Various of nature's sounds—soft wind, the rustle of leaves, running water—induce quiescent emotions. Others, such as thunder, induce alarm, even in dogs.

We seem automatically to classify the sounds we hear. We compare electronic sounds with others we have heard, feeling that that group of notes sounds like tuned pie plates, something else sounds like running water, like wind, or the tinkling of shattering glass. Electronic music ironically is a lot less abstract than the sound of a flute or a French horn.

I am inclined to think that a sensitivity to meaningful sounds is inborn and then becomes refined by experience. We are said to be born with only two fears: falling and loud noises. The sense of hearing is designed to induce immediate emotion, so that you will jump to safety at a sudden sound before you even know its cause. But you will feel reassured, even deeply moved, by the sound of the sea, our ancient home.

Music and literature, including of course various forms of drama, exist in time—you experience them during a period of minutes or maybe hours. Graphic arts exist in space. The argument that it takes you time to digest a painting has nothing to do with the painting; that's *your* problem. The painting just sits there in space, minding its own business. The Mona Lisa is there in the Louvre, whether anybody is looking at it or not. Metaphysically, one can argue that if it isn't being observed, its attributes do not exist. Physically, however, it does exist. But if at the moment no one anywhere in the world is playing the Beethoven Fifth Symphony, whether live or in a recorded version, then that piece of music literally does not exist. Yes, there are scores, but they are only diagrams that tell you how to make that symphony. They are no more the symphony than a blueprint is a house. Poems and songs unfold *in time,* one word after another, one note after another, disappearing even as they are occurring. The literary and musical experiences are inherently temporal and intangible.

Temporal art carries a vastly greater emotional charge than spacial art, due in part to the element of unfolding surprise. Music carries even more of it than literature, since it does not depend on comprehension. T.S. Eliot has said that poetry can communicate before it is understood. Well, perhaps; it is a questionable hypothesis. And even if it can, it cannot do so with anything approaching the immediacy of music. Even Napoleon, who was not noted for any great understanding of the arts, said, "Of all the arts, music has the most influence on the passions."

Hell is full of musical amateurs; music is the brandy of the damned.

—G.B. Shaw (1856-1950) *Man and Superman*

Instrumental music is rooted in vocal forms, and songs are narrative in character. European "classical" music is rooted in opera, which Saint-Evremonde described as "a bizarre affair of poetry and music in which the poet and musician, each equally obstructed by the other, give themselves no end of trouble to produce a wretched result." Actually, the poet and musician had long been associated and at one time were one and the same thing. Music was an integral part of Greek drama, although only one fragment of Greek dramatic music has survived to give us a hint of what it was like. Opera arose out of mistaken attempts around 1600 to imitate what Greek drama was presumed to have been like. The idea of prose drama without music is actually a very modern one.

Drama is elaborated narrative in which a number of persons recite the speeches of characters in the story. Prior to the discovery

of moveable type and the spread of the ability to read, narrative in all forms, including epic poetry, was heard and *meant to be*. In the development of narratives meant to be read, including the novel and short story, all we did was to take forms of communication through the ear and reassign them to the eye, leading to a remarkable new kind of art in which the recipient sits in silent solitude and reconstructs the images and incidents of a story in his intangible and invisible mind. This is an extremely recent historical development, superb and unnatural, and anyone who thinks literature is not intended for the ear needs to consider the fact that we all make miniscule movements of the vocal muscles in reading, no matter how fast or well we do it.

Therefore literature and music share not only the fact of being temporal arts but that of being aural experiences. Spacial or graphic art is radically different, being factually and psychologically static—no matter how much nonsense is written about "dynamics" and "movement" in paintings. Your eye moves. The painting doesn't. Indeed, it should be remembered that until the development of photography in the Nineteenth Century, which usurped what had until then been the function of the painters, causing them to seek the abstraction of modern art and inspiring volumes of tortured rationalization to justify it, even painting carried a narrative responsibility, representing historical, religious, and mythological subjects. Pierre Auguste Renoir, who was both a musician and a painter, was well aware of the impact photography was having on graphic art. It is undoubtedly not an accident that his son, Jean Renoir, became not an abstract painter but a great motion picture director. The motion picture, not abstract art, is the true heir of painting, and of course it is also the heir of drama, from which it differs in certain fundamental ways. Andy Warhol almost understands this.

Instrumental music has long had an uneasy relationship with music whose function is more obviously narrative in purpose, such as the song, although occasionally a composer—Richard Strauss, for example—seeks to have the best of both worlds by writing music that claims to tell a story, something music alone cannot do. The best it can do is to evoke the story's connotative emotions. Composers escaped from opera into the abstraction of instrumental music, and jazz musicians threw singers out of their groups as soon as they thought they could get away with it.

Indeed, many jazz musicians are hostile to singers, although they often conceal this fact because most singers are female and females have certain attributes for which jazz musicians have a traditional and intemperate craving. The only musicians, probably, who are not hostile to singing are those who have been bitten by the bug themselves, including Oscar Peterson, Dave MacKay, Jimmy Rowles, and Gene DiNovi. For the most part good vocal accompanists will be discovered to be musicians who themselves like to sing.

What painting and music do have in common is that they involve the senses more than literature does—and music does so much more than painting. To some extent color influences mood. This is undoubted. And all beauty affects mood—the first time I saw the Winged Victory, I was moved almost to tears. But the visual sense is nowhere near as intensely emotional as hearing. Except to the extent that painting has a slight mood effect through the color sense, *music is the only art that works directly on the nervous system and requires no degree whatsoever of intellectual comprehension to induce its emotional results.* That is, I think, what Walter Pater meant by, "All art constantly aspires toward the condition of music." Artists in other fields envy, consciously or unconsciously, the ability of the musician to work directly on the nervous system and create emotion through total abstractions—his absolute freedom from subject matter. The obtuse prose of modern art critics suggests that even today, well along in the era of abstract art, explanation is necessary to the appreciation of "modern" painting. Music doesn't need a thing, not explanation, not justification—it needs only to be heard. Try as artists in other fields may (T.S. Eliot's poetry of imagery and allusion, Jackson Pollack's paintings), they cannot achieve this freedom.

There is one theory of music that holds that it is symbolic speech. That seems to me a fairly shaky hypothesis. It seems far more likely that speech is abstracted music. Although they do not use the complex symbol-sounds of words, animals communicate by pitched cries—dolphins by a complicated system of tones. The sensible conclusion is that speech in fact derives from nature's music, that our far-off ancestors "sang" before they spoke. We added to the pitched cries various articulative devices, rather the way we added keys to woodwind instruments and valves to horns, and then compounded this by using cup mutes, harmon mutes, plungers and so forth to add to jazz a series of more vocal sounds—trying to go home to the singing, as it were.

In my book on lyric-writing, I analyzed at length the factors that cause a perfect fit of words to melody. The more obvious factor is perfect rhythmic fit: weak syllables must go on unstressed notes, stressed syllables on stressed notes. Otherwise, you have clumsy matching, the most notorious examples of which are in *The Star-Spangled Banner*. But there is a more subtle factor, one that all good lyricists are aware of, whether consciously or intuitively—matching the intervals with speech inflections.

Chinese is one of a group called tonal languages. In such languages, altering the pitch of a word can change its meaning entirely. European languages are not considered tonal languages. But I submit that to a larger extent than is generally supposed, they are.

Because of writing that book, I have been listening acutely to the way we actually speak and communicate meaning. It is surprising how often fourths and fifths and forms of the major triad occur in our speech inflections. The intervals are careless and out of tune and filled with glissandos, of course; but they are there.

One can alter the connotations, the emotional under-meaning, of an expression by altering the intervals with which it is uttered. Take a sentence like "Put it back." Try saying "put it" on one tone and "ba-ack" as a melisma falling from the sixth to the fourth. It has a teasing, I-caught-you-didn't-I sound. Then say "put it" on one tone and "back" about a fourth below. It has a weary, annoyed sound. Now say "Put it back" all on the same note. It becomes threatening, a little sininster.

The second inversion of the major triad, then, has a playful sound even in speech. Is it possible that music has real rather than merely conditioned "meanings"? I think it is.

Consider the word *invalid*. If you go up about a fourth on the second syllable, it means that the thing is not valid, not pertinent. But if the second and third syllables are on the same tone about a fourth below the first, it means a person who is chronically ill.

Notice the way someone will call out "Yoo-hoo." It is invariably a descending major third. Or consider "Oh-oh." The degree of alarm it expresses depends on the falling pitch. It is never said on a rising pitch; it is an expression with a negative meaning. The pitch may fall a fifth, a fourth, or a major third. But it takes on its most alarming sound when it is a falling tritone—the interval once forbidden and known as *diabolous in music*, the devil in music. If a mechanic opens the hood of your car—the bonnet, as they say in England—and says "Oh-oh" as a falling major third, it means he's detected a bit of a problem. But let him say it as a falling tritone and lengthen both notes, "Ooooh-ooooh," and you know the bill is going to be large.

The French extract an enormous range of meanings, from compassion and dismay to delight and surprise, from that expression, "Oh-la-la," depending entirely on the pitch of the component parts.

This sensitivity to intervallic variation is, if it is not inborn, at very least something that comes into being within months of birth

Even babies respond to pitch, laughing at "Peek-a-boo," spoken as the second inversion of the major triad. That inversion, incidentally, turns up often in the melodies of children's songs, such as "Baby By, see the fly..."

If I have successfully confused the non-musician, I apologize. A triad is a three-note chord, one of the basic building blocks of music. If you can sing the scale, sing *Do-re-mi-fa-sol.* Now just sing *do-mi-sol.* Those are the notes of a major triad. If you put *mi* on the bottom, you have the first inversion of the chord. If you put *sol* on the bottom, you have the second inversion. If you're still confused, turn on television some morning and watch the *Today* show. The opening three notes of that big band theme melody, written by Ray Ellis, are the second inversion of a major triad.

If I am inclined to question the concept of music as merely symbolic speech, ascribing to it a much more direct emotional effect than mere symbolism, this is not to deny the effects of speech on music. There is a strong interaction between a nation's speech and music.

The language of a people affects not only its songs but (because simple songs heard in childhood unquestionably influence composers' later conceptions), it affects even its most sophisticated instrumental music. German is full of regular stresses and emphases. So is much German music. Mexican Spanish, which is rhythmically quite different from the Castillian, has a feeling of triplets about it. So does much Mexican music. *Mexican Hat Dance* approximates the way Mexicans often speak.

In 1963, I worked for a time in Paris with Charles Aznavour, translating a lot of his songs in preparation for his first Broadway one-man show. Some of them were easy to render into English, but others were not. Many of Aznavour's songs are written in

The best is the enemy of the good.
—Voltaire (1649-1778)

Alexandrines, the meter of epic French poetry and the verse dramas of Racine and Corneille. An Alexandrine is a line of iambic hexameter—six iambs. An iamb has one weak and one strong beat. Thus an Alexandrine is a line of twelve syllables, occasionally thirteen. Music written for such lyrics will therefore be a melodic analogue of Alexandrines—and the lyrics in English will necessarily be in Alexandrines. English poets, including Pope and Dryden, have established by experiment that Alexandrines are awkward in English. The lines seem long and wordy. One that I wrote for Aznavour, for example, was: *The autumn weaves a woolen blanket for the sun...*

The longest line that seems comfortable in English is iambic pentameter, which is not only the rhythm of Shakespeare's plays but the rhythm of American blues. ("Don't the moon look lonesome shinin' through the trees..." That is pure iambic pentameter, except for the double pick-up at the beginning of the line.)

The French language contains principles of articulation that we do not have in English, devices that make the language flow more smoothly. It is possible to speak French more quickly and yet clearly than it is English. French articulates a little like trumpet, English more like trombone. And one of the things I noticed in New York, when Aznavour began to record these songs in English, was that in some of them tempos had to be dropped a little.

French is a comparatively unstressed language. We put a strong emphasis on the first syllable of the word *NAtion.* The French pronounce the two syllables with almost equal stress. Thus French, when well-spoken, has a balanced and even flow about it, a somewhat detached quality that is oddly comparable to the educated Frenchman's Cartesian way of thinking. Whether the structure of a given language underlies the way its people think or, conversely, the way its people think determines the nature, sound and structure of their language, is a speculation that probably cannot be settled. No doubt a reciprocal process is involved.

Unless a composer deliberately submits himself to foreign musical influences, as in the cases of Berlioz, Franck, and Delius, he is likely to write music that is influenced by the music of his childhood, which in turn is influenced by the country's language.

Debussy's hostility to German romantic influences on the music of France may have had more to do with an aesthetic ultimately shaped by the character of his language than even he knew. (We do know he was strongly influenced by poets, including Mallarme.) In any event, his music—with its wonderfully floating, even quality, its lack of stress and rant—is very like the French language, and Debussy is in this sense the most completely French of all composers. (He even signed his late music, *Claude Debussy, musicien francais.*) Ravel's music is quite different from Debussy's, despite the tendency in their time to lump them together. And Ravel used to say, "*Je ne suis pas francais, je suis Basque*"—I'm not French, I'm Basque.

In contrast to Debussy's music is Bartok's. The Hungarian language has a kind of disjointed rhythm in which a short stressed syllable frequently comes before a long and unstressed one. And that is an element in the style of Bartok, who was deeply rooted in his country's folk music. It turns up in Kodaly's music too.

In the tendency to categorize jazz as "black" or "white"—more prevalent, I think, a few years ago than it is now—a remarkable cultural phenomenon has been overlooked: white American jazz musicians have a strong tendency to play or write in the musical styles of their national origins. The Italian Americans, such as pianists Michael Renzi, Gene DiNovi, and Joe Massimino, composer Henry Mancini, and many many others, are very lyrical players or writers. This will be found to be true even in Canada, where tenor saxophonist Eugene Amaro and trumpeter Guido Basso, whose solos can be heard on records by Rob McConnell's Boss Brass, play with that Italianate melodicism. Even Italian drummers are lyrical players, "pretty" in the best sense of the word—Louie Bellson, Pete Magadini, Ronnie Zito, and Nick Ceroli, for example. For some reason, the Italian drummers seem to play beautiful brushes.

The Irish too are lyrical players, and often very humorous ones. The Irish speak English with a lilt, a certain musicality (as do their cousins, the Welsh) that is a lot like their folk music. I have kidded Gerry Mulligan that his solos sound like *I Met Her in the Garden Where the Praties Grow.* That is a gross overstatement, of course, but there is a small germ of truth in it. Indeed, Gerry pointed out to me that Zoot Sims is also Irish. And when Gerry took the late Judy Holiday to hear Zoot, she said, "There he goes—playing that Barry Fitzgerald tenor again." Think about it—Barry Fitzgerald's laughter. There is a wonderful laughter in Zoot's playing that I find irresistibly infectious, as did Paul Desmond.

And if you tried to imagine the playing of someone half Irish and half Jewish, you'd have Desmond. That is what he was. Try to imagine the music of someone half Welsh and half Russian. Think of the strong vocal tradition of the Welsh, their marvellous choirs, and then about Russian melancholy, mysticism, and exotic coloration. Cross them in your mind, and what do you get? Bill Evans—who felt an affinity for Russian mysticism and music. I've heard Bill play Rachmaninoff preludes, and he loved Scriabin.

It is possible, of course, to overstate the matter of the influence of national origins on American jazz musicians. There are many exceptions. Nonetheless, once you start to notice this principle, it is surprising how often it holds true.

I am suggesting then that hearing is the most emotional sense. And we seem to hear tonally, even in speech. Whether or not music functions as symbolic speech—and I think there is something much more primal about it—the sensitivity to tones begins very early in life, we become conditioned to a kind of

"melodicism" even in learning to talk. And there is unquestionably a strong relationship between an ethnic group's speech and its musical style.

And then came Arnold Schoenberg and said that all tones are equal, that in essence tonality is merely the product of an arbitrary and meaningless cultural conditioning.

I think he was wrong, and that the public has not taken atonal classical music to its bosom because it is antithetical to the way we hear, whether or not we hear the way we do as a result of cultural conditioning or for more basic and primitive reasons. Atonalism has even less chance of achieving an audience in jazz than it has in classical music.

And that can be said even before we consider the implications that flow from the so-called Chord of Nature created by the overtone series. But we have run out of space, and consideration of that and related questions will have to wait until the next issue.

Do It Yourself

The do-it-yourself record companies have been with us for some time—a reaction to the indifference of the major labels. One of the leaders of the movement was the late Stan Kenton, who got his masters back from Capitol and reissued them. Paul Weston has gradually been doing the same thing with his own records and those of his wife, Jo Stafford, along with their hilarious alter egoes, Jonathan and Darlene Edwards. George Shearing and Marian McPartland have both had a shot at this kind of distribution. There are many others. And so again, I wish to make two albums available to our readers.

The first of these is by Meredith d'Ambrosio, a singer all too little-known outside the Boston area, where she usually works. Meredith d'Ambrosio is a startling singer, not because of spectacular forte high notes or ingenious explorations of the harmony, but for her utter self-effacing simplicity, her devotion to the honest presentation of the song.

Miss d'Ambrosio is a pianist, and a good one. She is her sole accompanist on this record, and she is (like Blossom Dearie) perfect for herself, with a lovely touch and tone and voicings (which occasionally hint at one of her heroes, Bill Evans) that are intelligent, discreet, and pretty. And she is always the servant of the song.

Her intonation and enunciation are impeccable. Her high notes are always pianissimo. She uses vibrato only occasionally, and then it is very controlled in speed and width. Her way of approaching intervals is a delight. Down-up, bing! Right on the note. No sliding into place, no uncertainty about the center of the tone. It's like watching a bird as it alights on a fragile branch without even shaking it. There is an immediate temptation to compare her to Jackie Cain and the late Irene Kral, but in point of fact she has only one quality in common with them: perfection. Otherwise, she is—as they are—her own woman. Nonetheless, the comparison is useful in the attempt to describe her: if you like them, you will certainly like her.

The album, which is entitled *Meredith: Another Time,* includes 18 songs, which makes it a double album, although it is on one disc. (Remarkably, there is no pre-echo on the record.) Dedicated to Alec Wilder, it contains six songs with words or lyrics or both by that much-missed gentleman, including *It's So Peaceful in the Country* and *While We're Young,* as well as Alec's lyric for Thad Jones' lovely *A Child Is Born.* The standards are *Love Is a Simple Thing, Aren't You Glad You're You, Skylark, Lazy Afternoon.* The rest of the songs are less known, including Dave Frishberg's delightful *Dear Bix* and *Wheelers and Dealers,* the latter a tart comment on the current state of society. Bob Dorough, who shares with Frishberg an ability to come up with some wonderfully off-the-wall lyric ideas, is represented by *Small Day Tomorrow,* written with Fran Landesman. Miss d'Ambrosio herself is represented by *The Piano Player (A Thousand and One Saloons)* with which any musician or singer will feel an immediate identification—particularly in the line "when the music sounds good, even to me".

Miss d'Ambrosio produced the album herself, as noted, and released it on the Shiah label. Since she has to pay mechanical royalties on all those songs, the price through *Jazzletter* is $10.75.

The only thing I can add is that there is a quality to this album (whose reputation is gradually spreading, by the way, entirely on its merits) that I can only describe as...serenity.

My two favorite Pete Christlieb stories concern Igor Stravinsky and Supersax. Pete, a tall, amiable, humorous man who happens to be one of the finest tenor players of his generation, is the son of the distinguished bassoonist Don Christlieb, one of Stravinsky's favorite players. Legend had it that when Pete was a kid, he swiped Stravinsky's car and turned it over. "I did *not!*" Pete said, when I finally checked on the story. "I just took off in his car and sailed around the block. It was a big Buick. I still remember it."

Stravinsky, the legend has it, broke up laughing.

Pete is still a car freak.

Now at one time Pete had to play as a sub in the Supersax group. Those charts are very strange to look at—blizzards of notes going by at ferocious speed. The next day, another musician asked Pete what it was like to sit in for one night with Supersax. "It was rather weird, man," Pete said. "Like trying to change your fan belt with the motor running."

Pete has a new album, which he produced himself and put out on a label called, sensibly enough, Pete Christlieb Records. Its title is *Self-Portrait.* It is first-rate. For one thing, it isn't just another blowing album—although some good blowing does indeed occur. A lot of thought, care, and good writing went into it. Some of the writing is by Lou Levy, who plays piano on the album, some is by Joe Roccisano, who plays alto and woodwinds, some is by Pete. One tune, *Close Enough for Love,* is a Johnny Mandel tune from the movie *Agatha.*

Also on the album are Pete's friend Warne Marsh on tenor (and how unlike each other they sound, although Pete says Warne was one of his idols as he was growing up), Steve Huffstetter on fluegelhorn, Jim Hughart (one of my favorite bass players), Mark Berk or Nick Ceroli on drums, John Morell on guitar, and Jerry Steinholtz and Joe Porcaro, percussion. Huffstetter plays a beautiful long solo on *Mari,* a gentle and lilting thing in three by Roccisano. Don Christlieb plays bassoon or contra-bassoon on some of the charts. One of the most intriguing moments occurs in a tune called *VuJaDe:* Pete induced his father, who is not a jazz player, to do an improvised solo. He had never done it before. He does very nicely indeed and the solo has, interestingly, a Stravinskyish quality about it. And what a wonderful bassoonist Don Christlieb is.

Lou Levy's playing has always been top-drawer, but it has changed in recent years. While he remains your archetypical bebopper when that is the groove he wants to pursue, his playing has grown somehow bigger. His tone has grown warmer, deeper: he seems to get down into the keyboard more than ever before. But then as Dizzy said once, "Hell, you're *supposed* to get better."

Mike Melvoin plays organ on some tracks, good funky organ.

As for Pete himself, he has that big fat burry sound, and endless inventive energy. One can hear immediately why he commands so much respect among other musicians.

The album is in a few stores, but if you can't find it, it's available through the *Jazzletter* for $9. The bread is going straight to Pete to help him recoup his recording costs. I hope another album is not far behind this one.