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The Times and Henry Pleasants

Part One

If there is such a thing as a perfect time to die, Henry Pleasants came close to it: on January 4, 2000, the fourth day of the first month of the last year of the twentieth century, whose music he had so cogently documented. He was, he told me in a letter received only a few days earlier, in his ninetieth year. He had felt no symptoms of aging until the age of eighty-six. But a few weeks earlier, he wrote, he had taken a fall, causing cuts requiring stitches on his hip and five on his chin.

The letter was written on what I call an acoustic typewriter, an old Underwood or Remington or maybe Smith-Corona. Henry said he hadn't used and wouldn't use a computer, and I joshed him that he should try a quill pen, but my replying letter never reached him. We had been friends for more than thirty-five years, and he was one of the influences on me.

In 1909, the year before Henry was born, a thirty-seven-year-old Arnold Schoenberg, began, as the 1973 *Britannica* put it, "writing music that could no longer be related to a single tonal center; hence the term atonality, or, as he himself preferred, pantonality."

The *Britannica* said that Schoenberg's innovations "were one of the most powerful influences in twentieth century music." They got that right. No one could have foreseen, even with help from a coven of seers, that Henry would spend much of his life opposing three tyrannies: Hitler's, Stalin's, and Schoenberg's.

Pierre Boulez, who, perhaps significantly, studied mathematics before establishing himself as a composer, said that after discovering Schoenberg's music in 1945, "I realized that here was a language of our time. No other language was possible." That's pretty tyrannical, by any standard.

In an incisive analysis of a contretemps between herself and the *New York Times* titled *A Court of No Appeals*, published in the August 2000 edition of *Harper's*, Renata Adler says, "The *Times*, of course, is still drawing on trust and respect well earned some years ago." She deplores many of its practices, including the attribution of information to "sources," not even good old "usually well-informed sources." She says that a "relatively recent, complacent kind of sloth on the part of many reporters — sitting at a desk, phoning around, either repetitively badgering or, more commonly, passively receiving quotes from anonymous, self-interested, possibly lying, or even nonexistent sources — tends to welcome, and to perpetuate, every sort of conventional wisdom and cliché."

She says this is "partly because the *Times* is committed to a certain notion of itself. In the past, this commitment took a highly honorable form. The publisher and his family, one knew, were devoted, financially and in almost every other way, to the quality of the newspaper. Now much of the paper is devoted to itself in quite another sense — as a bureaucracy, a complacent, unchallenged, and in some ways totalitarian institution convinced of its infallibility."

Evidence of this is apparent in the way the *Times* covers music, derogating books such as Ted Gioia's *The History of Jazz* and Richard Sudhalter's *Lost Chords: White Musicians and Their Contribution to Jazz 1915-1945*, and for that matter my own *Cats of Any Color* — any work in effect that diverges from the Gospel according to Wynton Marsalis and the flacks of Lincoln Center. It was evident in the obituary of Gerry Mulligan; indeed, in the first edition, the story said he had been married to actress Sandy Dennis. They were never married; the next edition corrected the error.

The *Times* obituary of Henry Pleasants was both bizarre and incompetent, written by a reporter too indifferent or indolent or both to seek a primary source (he could have called Henry's widow in London) or for that matter even to do a good job of researching secondary sources, such as *Contemporary Authors*, which has a fairly substantial entry on Henry. Surely there is a copy of it in the *Times* library.

Even the headline was wrong. The story appeared on the obit page on January 14, 2000, under the head **Henry Pleasants, 89, Spy Who Knew His Music.** This is flippant, shabby, shallow, and, finally, wrong. The story itself fixated

on his career with the CIA, which occupied about ten years of a life that lasted nearly ninety, almost secondarily mentioned his career as a musicologist, and did not say at all that he was one of the most important American music critics of the century. This was undoubtedly because he did not accept the orthodoxy of musical aesthetics as revealed by the *New York Times*.

Henry saw and analyzed the great musical schism of our time and the far-reaching suffocating effect of post-Schoenbergian conformity. He delineated the problem in his 1955 book *The Agony of Modern Music*. This is hardly surprising in that the classical establishment — including composers writing impenetrably private music with the support of Guggenheim and other grants, professors of composition, publishers of text books (and the publishing of periodically "updated" textbooks on music amounts to a major racket), critics on newspapers, and all the rest of those whose livelihoods and social status were threatened by his revelation that this music still hadn't found a natural constituency — went into responses ranging from distaste to fury. The scarcity of his books on library shelves is probably significant, but even more interesting is that a search of Britannica Online elicited the information that he is not mentioned in its encyclopedia, none of his books is listed, and there is nothing about him anywhere in magazines. It is as if he never lived.

The *Times* obit made little of the furor he stirred. "A former colleague at the Central Intelligence Agency," according to the *Times* story, under the byline of one Douglas Martin, "said that Mr. Pleasants had served as the intelligence agency's station chief in Bonn in the 1950s. *The Invisible Government*, a book by David Wise and Thomas B. Ross published in 1964, said he had held the post 'for many years.'

"In an interview yesterday, Mr. Wise said the statement had never been challenged."

In quoting Wise, the *Times* was doing exactly what Adler describes: passively receiving information from a self-interested source. Henry detested that book, and made no secret of it, especially for its reference to him as a senior spy. He said to me, "Anybody who doesn't know the difference between a desk officer and a spy has no business writing about the CIA."

As for the strange remark by Mr. Wise that the assertion that he was CIA station chief at Bonn was "never challenged," it's ridiculous on the face of it, since Henry made no secret of it. Everyone who knew or knew anything about him knew he was CIA. That didn't make him an idiot, that didn't make him an incompetent, and that didn't make him a dilettante in writing about music, a "spy who knew his music." In the particular of having another profession, Henry was like Charles Ives, who chose to make his living in the insurance business rather than struggle to survive on his music.

The *Times* quoted a CIA spokesman as saying that the agency did not confirm whether individuals had served as station chiefs. Henry said openly that he held that post in Bonn — to me and to Robert Offergeld and others of his friends. Thus the CIA clutches paranoically to its breast secrets that are no longer secrets.

I have had friends in the military who hate the CIA and think it should be abolished, an unlikely eventuality for any bureaucracy grown that bloated and powerful. But I may have a somewhat more balanced view of that organization than many persons due in part to conversations with Henry. His value to the CIA was obvious: Henry spoke German and knew the German culture well; and he had a formidable background in World War II military intelligence. For Henry, the advantage of a career in the CIA was that it permitted him to stay in Europe and pursue his studies in his areas of primary interest — music in general, opera in particular, and jazz and American popular music — while piling up pensions that would let him pursue his first interests after his retirement when he was still in his early fifties. He translated a number of works from German, including the diaries of Louis Spohr. Henry was a major operatic scholar whose book *The Great Singers: From the Dawn of Opera to Our Own Times* (Simon and Schuster, 1966) is a significant reference work in the field.

Henry was born on May 12, 1910 — a fundamental bit of information so difficult to discover that the *Times* was unable to ferret it out — in Wayne, Pennsylvania. His father, Henry, was a physician; his mother was Elizabeth Washington Pleasants. Henry studied music, with a voice major, at Philadelphia's Curtis Institute of Music in 1928 and '29. One of his fellow students was Nelson Eddy. Henry said that had Eddy not been lured to Hollywood, he would have been one of the major singers in opera.

In 1930, when he was still nineteen, Henry became the music critic of the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, and, in 1935, the paper's music editor. In 1936, Henry married Elizabeth Szilagyi, who died in 1939. A year later he married harpsichordist Elizabeth Duffey. Henry stayed at the *Bulletin* until 1942 when, shortly after the American entry into World War II, he went into the U.S. Army.

The *Times*, groping with the mysteries of Henry's life, said, "It is not clear when Mr. Pleasants began his service with the CIA. Records show him joining the Foreign Service

in 1950 and holding various positions in Munich, Bern and Bonn until his retirement in 1954, years in which he also seems to have been with the CIA. Mr. Wise said he remained active with the intelligence agency at least until the early 1960s."

Henry told me that during World War II, and presumably later, the U.S. military looked for men with newspaper experience for intelligence operations: they were trained at gathering, assimilating, and presenting information. Perhaps they had learned from the British, who liked to assign writers to that sort of work. Christopher Marlowe, T.E. Lawrence, Graham Greene, Ian Fleming, and John Le Carré all served in British military intelligence.

Henry rose to the rank of major and received two Bronze Stars. From the Army he went to the CIA. He told me he was in intelligence work for twenty years. Since he went into Army intelligence in 1942, and had just retired when I met him in New York about 1963, it adds up. The change, and probably the only change, is that he went from military status to civil service qualification.

If the *Times*, even after consultation with Mr. Wise and the CIA, was unable to uncover elementary facts about Henry's life, it was also unable to *see* his Matterhorn significance: His importance as a music critic (aside from the fact that he wrote beautifully) lay in his perception of the elements of music's problem in our time: the separation of good music from its natural audience, and the corollary institutionalized celebration of the irrelevant. This has shaken our culture, our *world* culture, through almost all of the past century.

When I was hired from the *Montreal Star* to become music critic (later music and drama editor) of the *Louisville Times*, I realized that I had better refurbish and enlarge my knowledge of contemporary "classical" music. The Louisville Orchestra was commissioning a great deal of it. In the era after Debussy, Ravel, Sibelius, and Poulenc, I liked Bartok, Stravinsky, Hindemith, Khatchaturian, Prokofiev, Charles Ives, and a few more. I was not enthralled by Schoenberg and his derivatives.

I read a book called *Music Ho!* by the British conductor and composer Constant Lambert. Henry had read it too: his *Classical Music— and All That Jazz* is dedicated "To the memory of Constant Lambert (1905-1951), who, in *Music Ho!: A Study of Music in Decline*, was twenty years ahead of any of us in discerning the new crosscurrents in the evolution of Western music in the twentieth century." This book is even harder to find than Henry's works. Lambert took to task the Schoenbergians. He traced the evolution of music through to the rich chromaticism of Debussy and Ravel and the modulatory involutions of Wagner to, if I am paraphrasing him correctly, Schoenberg's conclusion that the whole mess had become unendurably ponderous, and should be abandoned in favor of a "system" in which all tones were of equal weight and value. It was a theory with which Henry disagreed if on no better grounds than that the emotion of speech is, in all languages, conveyed by timbre and pitch. And those are pretty good grounds, unless you think music is abstracted speech. On the contrary, I consider speech a complexly codified music. Birds and cats and all animals can convey emotion by pitch variants; their survival depends on it. Music comes from that basic indispensable skill. So does speech. But whichever view you take, it is obvious that they are mutually influential. My own work as a lyricist, translating songs from Spanish, French, Portuguese, and Italian, made me aware that the difficulty of the task lies in the relationship of the music to the speech rhythms and inflections of the original language. The character of the English language does not quite accord with Brazilian songs. Thus in translation the songs take on a subtly different character. I had long noticed that there is a rhythmic relationship between a nation's "classical" music, even instrumental music, and the speech of that country. I came to the conclusion that this is due to the influence on composers of the character of the nation's folk music, and that, in turn, is closely related to and influenced by its language.

Lambert said that, having reached the frontiers of harmonic development, in liege to a nineteenth-century Romantic ideal that originality consisted in inventing new musical language rather than using existing language in fresh ways, composers had begun what he called time traveling — reaching back into modes and styles of the past for methods. Prokofiev's *Classical Symphony* and some of the post-*Rossignol* work of Stravinsky, such as the *Symphony in C*, would fit this matrix.

Lambert thought that the most original composer of his time was a certain master of miniatures and unconventional instrumentation named Edward Kennedy Ellington. He wrote:

> The real interest of Ellington's records lies not so much in their color, brilliant though it may be, as in the amazingly skillful proportions in which the color is used. I do not only mean skillful as compared with other jazz composers, but as compared with so-called high-brow composers. I know of nothing in Ravel so dexterous in treatment as the varied solos in the middle of the ebullient *Hot and Bothered*, and nothing in Stravinsky more dynamic than the final section. The

combination of themes at this moment is one of the most ingenious pieces of writing in modern music.

I took *Music Ho!* to heart, and read it at least three times before taking up my job in Louisville in May of 1955. The Louisville Orchestra was in the midst of its ambitious program of commissioning new compositions, funded by a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. This project had been conceived by Louisville's mayor, Charles Farnsworth, in part as a publicity stratagem for the city. By drawing attention to Louisville through this project, he hoped to attract new business. To enhance the flow of publicity, the orchestra's board named Norman Isaacs president of the orchestra. He knew nothing whatever of music, but he was managing editor of the *Louisville Times* — in other words, my boss, the very man who had hired me to be the paper's music critic.

An official biography of Isaacs says that he started his journalism career as a high-school sports correspondent for the *Indianapolis Star*. It states: "After putting up briefly with an editor who took money from a sports promoter to run stories, he quit and joined the *Indianapolis Times*, found an ethical tutor in an editor there and rose to become managing editor of the paper at the age of twenty-seven . . . He moved to the *Louisville Times* as managing editor in 1951 . . . . "

And put together the best newspaper staff I have ever seen. I had worked on three bad newspapers, the first of which was weak, the second of which, the *Toronto Telegram*, was utterly unethical, and the third of which, the *Montreal Star* was completely corrupt, with sports writers, waterfront reporter, and city editor all on the take. At the *Louisvillew Times* I was thrilled by the quality of the reporters around me, impressed and almost enamored by Isaacs, and I was looking forward to the new music which, I thought, should be stimulating, to say the least.

I soon was beset by doubts. I found much of the music, most of it, indeed nearly all of it, numbingly dull: intellectual rather than emotional, occult rather than accessible.

The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars
but in ourselves, that we are underlings.

I assumed my failure to respond to this music was due to my own ignorance, lack of perception, even stupidity, and so my reviews were cautious, though my faint praise for many of these works was probably condemnation enough, subtle though it might be.

Hoping to break through my own presumed mantle of insensitivity, I took to attending the rehearsals of these new works. Rob Whitney, the orchestra's capable conductor, would sometimes lend me copies of the scores. Not that I was much of a score reader, but I could see who was doing what and with which and to whom. Soon I came to know many members of the orchestra. The principal French horn player, Bill Sloan, became a good friend. If you want to find out about new music, ask the musicians who have to play it.

The musicians were cautious with me, at first. I wrote for the newspaper, and anything they said might jeopardize their jobs. But when they realized that I would never violate a confidence, they opened up and let me know they thought most of this music was crap. And when I let them know, very timidly, that I thought so too, they *really* opened up. It was at this point that they told me about a new book I just had to read: *The Agony of Modern Music* by Henry Pleasants. They said it was shaking up the world of classical music. No wonder. It begins:

"Serious music is a dead art.

"The vein which for three hundred years offered a seemingly inexhaustible yield of beautiful music has run out. What we know as modern music is the noise made by deluded speculators picking through the slagpile."

That was certainly a two-by-four to get the mule's attention. Just what Constant Lambert had said, but more pointedly.

A little farther into the book, Pleasants wrote:

"Few people like modern music much. Even fewer like much of it. Most people do not like it at all. But it continues to be written, played, and talked about as if it mattered. Why? Who cares?"

Let me leap to the last two pages of the book, which *really* must have set the classical establishment off:

> It is possible to see the history of European music in the nineteenth century as a successful effort by composers to fight free of the musical conventions of the preceding century and to establish the composer as a creative authority superior to the practicing musician.
>
> In the same manner it is also possible to see the history of American popular music in the twentieth century as a successful effort by practicing musicians to fight free of the obstacles to spontaneous musical invention represented by formal composition.
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> Those who think of modern music as the final chapter in the long decadence of European music conveniently date the downward curve from Beethoven. He established the composer as a poet and philosopher, and furrowed the brow of both listener and performer. From his time dates the sanctity of the composition, the introduction of reverence into the concert hall, and the promotion of performer to the role of an interpreter of the composer's revelations.

But if one thinks of music in terms of spontaneous invention by practicing musicians, then it would seem more accurate to date decadence from the time when composers began writing out the inner voices of their harmonies, composing accompaniments and embellishments, and restricting solo improvisation to cadenzas signaled by a six-four chord whose purpose was to announce to the audience that from here on the soloist was on his own.

From this point of view the great evolutionary accomplishment of jazz appears to be the elimination of the composer. Just how far serious music stands from this course of evolution can be seen in the fact that while jazz is removing the composer as an obstacle between musician and audience, the composer of modern music seeks to remove the musician as an obstacle between his own inspiration and his listener.

There is no absolute elimination, of course, of either composer or practicing musician. In jazz there is a germinal idea, a basic melody, which somebody has to invent; and serious music, if it is to be heard, has to be played. But in jazz the composer is flattered to have his original idea serve as a take-off point for the imaginative excursions of fellow practicing musicians, just as Vivaldi was doubtless flattered to be plagiarized and embellished by Bach. The contemporary composer of serious music, on the other hand, writes purposely in such a way as to reduce the performer's intellectual and inventional contribution to a minimum.

Thus the jazz accomplishment is simply defined. It has taken music away from the composers and given it back to musicians and their public. The simplicity sought by serious composers through intellectual and technical experimentation has been achieved by practicing musicians guided by popular taste. Because of popular guidance their product is culturally valid. Because of the absence of popular guidance, the accomplishments of the serious composer is not.

This is obviously something the serious composer cannot admit, even to himself. But the fascination good jazz has for him indicates a strain of susceptibility seldom apparent in his own compositions. Not even a man so dedicated as the composer to the concept of the composer's absolute social autonomy can be entirely immune to the trends of his own time.

He is fated to go on writing sonatas, symphonies, and operas as long as society as a whole continues to believe that these old forms and the symphony orchestra have a monopoly on respectability and cultural superiority. And there we leave him, apparently unaware — if not notably blissfully — that jazz is modern music, and nothing else is.

The book was bitterly attacked, of course. Mark Schubert, dean of the Juilliard School of Music, called it "scurrilous, unfair, destructive, and specious," but then Juilliard had a vested interest in training composers. On the other hand, the conductor Erich Leinsdorf called it "frighteningly sound and logical." The critic Paul Henry Lang, who ran the New York *Herald-Tribune*'s music page, wrote two charged attacks on the book. Olin Downes of the *New York Times* cautiously endorsed the book, a fact which apparently went unnoticed by the writer for the *Times* of Henry's obituary.

Ernest Newman, the critic and biographer of Wagner, wrote:

"It is difficult for the musical critic to achieve any immortality except one of opprobrium. He is remembered solely for his few misses; his many hits are not counted to him. If he talks sense, his views become the commonplace of musical opinion, and no one thinks of crediting him in particular with them. If he talks nonsense, this is regarded as peculiarly his own . . . . "

This is on the mark. Nicolas Slonimsky went to the enormous trouble of compiling a book of critical misjudgments, titled *A Lexicon of Musical Invective.* The copy I have was given to me many years ago by Marian McPartland, presumably as a cautionary. And the book is fun to read. But it is also, on balance, historical nonsense, a case of selective reporting, omitting all possible instances when critics got it right. And in contemporary Serious Music (Henry Pleasants used that term in preference to "classical music" and he capitalized it), the situation is untenable. Because of the myth of past critical error (in jazz, this takes the form of the legend of all the critics who "missed the boat on Charlie Parker" when in fact many of them did not), the critic is intimidated.

In his next book, *Death of a Music*, Pleasants wrote in a chapter titled *The Critic*:

> Hardly more enviable than the position of the composer, faced with an indifferent audience and exhausted materials, or that of the performer, condemned to go on playing the same music year in and year out, is that of the critic, who must hear more of the uninviting new music and more of the well-known masterpieces than other people do and manage somehow to put a good face on it.
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> He has little choice in the matter. Our musical

society has determined his proper role in life to be as much promoter and propagandist as critic. Such is the force of superstition and custom that today's critic accepts his inglorious role without complaint . . . .

Ever since (1910) criticism has observed certain undocumented but well-understood bounds, among which the sanctity of the masterpiece and the assumption of infinite progress are the most clearly defined .

About the present one knows only that music must go on, that it must progress, that it is, indeed, progressing — however difficult it may be to applaud the evidence — and that tolerance, temperance and ambiguity are the parts of wisdom for those who sit in judgment. Such is the dogma . . . .

He may dislike individual compositions, and say so; but he says it politely; and more in sorrow than in anger. He will not say how bad he really thinks they are. This would expose him to the charge of being destructive. A destructive critic, according to the indulgent mores of contemporary musical society, is a villain. The critic is rather inclined to agree. He has accepted the Chamber of Commerce injunction: If you can't boost, don't knock . . . .

By defending modern music in principle and occasionally disparaging it in detail he accommodates at once the superstition of progress, the distaste of modern audiences for modern music, and the requirement that he should function, from time to time, as a critic . . . .

This has prompted him to overestimate, wishfully, uninspired, new music that calls itself serious.

These passages are a perfect evocation of my life in Louisville, an uncanny diagnosis of the timidity of my reviews. But of course I did not read them then. *Death of a Music* was not published until 1961, by which time I was at *Down Beat.*

The Agony of Modern Music stiffened my spine, and my reviews of the Louisville Orchestra commissions became, if not scathing — they could hardly be that, given that my managing editor was president of the orchestra — less than ecstatic. Henry Pleasants, whoever he was, had given me a measure of faith in my own perceptions.

"The key," this Henry Pleasants wrote, "would seem to be the word 'understanding.'

> The notion that music is something that has to be understood persists despite the fact that no one has ever defined precisely what it is that one is supposed to understand. It is possible, of course, to understand compositional structure, the elements of melody, harmony, and rhythm that go into it, and the techniques by which structure is achieved. But that is not what is meant by understanding.
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> The implication is rather of indefinable meaning than of definable structure. Music is assumed to convey to the initiated an intelligible communication, preferably of philosophical character. The language and commentary abounds in such terms as depth, struggle, conflict, suffering, solitude, confession, obscurity, enigma, reflection, introspection, imagination, lucidity, fantasy, mystery, idea, ideology, sentiment, communion, description, expression, spirituality, dream, poet, etc.

To summarize, Henry Pleasants argued that music was to a large extent evaluated by what was *said about it* rather than what is was. The music, to be important, had to be intellectualized, or, to coin a term, intellectualizable. The more impenetrable, the better; the less comprehensible by the "masses" the more likely it was to be "good". The inferiority of general public taste being what it was, the more likely that popularity was *ipso facto* proof of music's lack of worth. Therefore all "classical" music that was accessible, seductive, enjoyable, and — egad! — beautiful, the more it was beyond the pale. Hence the long twilight in which the music of Tchaikovsky has lived. Critics said of his symphonies that they lacked form. Some of them said that his incredible gift for melody militated against him, since such lines did not lend themselves to structural development. Hence the contempt for Gershwin's *Concerto in F*, which did not conform to accepted sonata form. "It has its own form," Bill Evans, who admired it, said in dismissal of such judgments. Hence the condescension to Rachmaninoff, whose music was cursed by its rapture and accessibility. Hence the contempt for Edvard Grieg. I said to Bill Evans that I liked Grieg but for a time had affected not to. He said, "Same thing happened to me."

I said, "I know what happened to me, but what happened to you?"

Bill said, "The intellectuals got to me."

Ah yes. They destroyed me as a painter. Or at least they were a significant factor in my destruction. I had originally intended to be not a writer, not a songwriter, not a singer, not even a musician — although I was deeply interested in all of these — but a painter, and to that end I spent two years as a student at the Ontario College of Art in Toronto. If I liked magazine illustrators, who — shame! — used projected

photographs rather than freehand drawing for the outlines of their work, it was obvious to those of my fellow students in love with Braque and Picasso and other "modernists" that I was shallow, and *did not understand art.* None of them said that, of course, but keeping my silence about their intimidating superior knowledge, I just got discouraged. They were of course reading James Joyce and T.S. Eliot, and I just did not think "the burnt-out ends of smoky days" was one of the great phrases of the English language. That I was unenthralled by Eliot, even though I memorized pages of him, and by W.H. Auden, was further proof of my lack of depth. I did not have the conviction then to say — but I do now — that Johnny Mercer was an artist at a far higher level than Auden or Eliot could even have aspired to.

The greatest painters, at least to my taste, were those who best presented reality. My particular heroes among the classical painters were Caravaggio, Velasquez, Vermeer, Bellini, Holbein the Younger, Franz Hals. Hals' paintings seem almost photographic in their realism, but if you inspect one from close range you find that he was remarkably daring. What incredible control of color and the brush he had. And the security of his line!

And photography killed all that. It made it unnecessary.

Or that was the conventional wisdom.

The English painter David Hockney has recently called this into question with a hypothesis that is causing in artistic circles (curators, art historians, that sort of people) something of the furor that *The Agony of Modern Music* stirred in the Serious Music establishment. What we mean by photography is the process of fixing an image on a chemical plate of some sort from light assembled and focused by a lens.

But as far back as Aristotle and Euclid — at least — the principle of the pinhole camera was understood. If light passes through a small hole into a dark area, it lights on the wall of an enclosure as a realistic picture of what is in front of it, except that the image is reversed. This, of course, is true of the eye: the eye receives its information upside down and in reverse; the brain compensates. In time the camera obscura, Italian for darkened room, came into use and had become common by the middle seventeenth century. The effect, Hockney says, was not lost on the artists of the time, and he is convinced that those major painters I have just named were using a lens-and-mirror device as the foundation of their paintings. He says that in a few short years, the awkwardness of the drawing, the stiffness of the poses, in painting were gone. Not gradually disappearing as painters got a better grasp of perspective, which we were taught in art school, but rather abruptly, as they used lens-and-mirror technology.

Any artist knows that straight-line perspective is comparatively easy. That's one of the first things you learn in art school, particularly in architectural renderings. What presents acute problems of perspective is any object of curved design, from a vase to a violin. Caravaggio painted *Boy Playing the Lute* in 1595. Hockney says, "Not only has Caravaggio rendered a lute in complex perspective and seemingly effortlessly, with absolute authority, but he's thrown in a violin lying there on the table for good measure."

He discusses other painters of the period. He says: "Notice the constant sense of assurance. And with no drawings, no sketches! There are no preparatory studies with Caravaggio. At any rate, none have survived. Or, for that matter, with Velazquez. Or Vermeer. Or Hals. Or Chardin. Hardly any. Suddenly they all seem to be able to render the image, just like that, onto the canvas itself."

Hockney is not disparaging these great masters. Much to the contrary. He says, "The lens can't draw a line, only the hand can do that, the artist's hand and eye in coordination with his heart. And, in any case, optical devices are quite hard to use. You have to be a good draftsman to be able to take advantage of them at all."

Hockney cites criticism of Caravaggio by other artists in his time, who said he couldn't paint without a model, that he painted "in cellars" — that is, dark places — "with a single source of light and on one plane without any diminution."

Hockney says that "few artists could do it as well as Caravaggio. But, still, it's clear from attacks like these that they must be talking about optical devices of some sort — devices whose use is further confirmed by the evidence of the paintings themselves. I mean, for instance, compare the mathematical foreshortening involved in one of the slain battle figures in a picture of Uccello's with the uncanny rendering of the Apostle Peter's outstretched arms in Caravaggio's *Supper at Emmaus* with the near and far hands almost the same size — precisely the effect you'd get, incidentally, with certain kinds of telephoto lens."

When Paul Delaroche first saw a daguerreotype, he said, "From today, painting is dead."

By 1870, Hockney says, "the photograph had pretty much established itself as a cheap form of portraiture, and artists, for their part, started to fall away. Cézanne, for instance, starts to look at the cup before him with *both* eyes, and painting his doubts. Awkwardness returns to European painting , for the first time, really, since Giotto. Surely this is part of why the artists of Europe suddenly started turning toward Japan, and China, where the lens-based methodologies had never held sway.

"Soon Cubism arises and, in this context, can be seen as

an ongoing critique of monocular photography and, by extension, I suppose, of the entire lens-based tradition that preceded it."

Hockney thinks that Cézanne and other painters of his time knew about the use of lenses in painting and turned away from it, and in time the technology was forgotten.

These revelations of Hockney's — at least I consider them revelations; others consider them theories, and untenable ones at that — are presented in an article by Lawrence Weschler published in the January 31, 2000, issue of the New Yorker. Anyone interested in art should really read it in full.

I wish Henry Pleasants had read it. He died twenty-seven days before it was published.

For that matter, I wish I had read it when I was still an art student. The fiction published in Cosmopolitan and other magazines was illustrated by paintings of some remarkably fine artists, most of whose names I have forgotten. So too the covers of paperback books. Poor me. In my ignorance I even admired Alex Raymond and Norman Rockwell, wanted to capture reality in my paintings, and thought there must be something defective in me that I couldn't become enthralled by the abstractions of "non-objective" art that some of my fellow students admired. It is significant that, as in the world of classical music, the Ontario College of Art drew a distinction between those who intended to be painters and those who wanted to be commercial artists. I was in the latter course; it was as if I aspired merely to be a songwriter or a jazz musician rather than a Serious Composer. What they forgot to tell us was that some of the most significant and influential Canadian Serious Painters, such as A.Y. Jackson and Tom Thomson, began as commercial artists. .

In the entry-year class, there were three young hot-shots, guys who could draw like mad — who could "eyeball" it, as Hockney puts it. One was named Ed Winger, the second was Doug Wood, and the third was me. But the ambition to abstraction that surrounded me undermined my confidence, which was pretty slight to begin with. Other factors entered into the equation, and in my second year I dropped out of school, got a job on a newspaper, and began to write. It was the worst mistake of my life. I wish I had continued as an artist. Long afterwards, when I was wondering why I had not done so, I found some of the answer in something Antonio Carlos Jobim said to me: "We value least the talents that come easiest to us." I am sometimes asked why I don't take up painting again. But it would take me two years of full-time hard work to get my chops back to the condition they were in when I was eighteen. *If* I could get them back to that level at all.

But I can tell you: *Line in graphic art is the equivalent of melody in music.*

Now. There was in that opening-year class a kid named Bill Smith. Winger and Wood and I used to laugh at him, he was so utterly devoid of talent. A triple threat man: couldn't draw, he had no color sense, he had no eye. He wasn't quite at the stage of children's stick figures, but he wasn't far beyond it either. In our sculpture classes, we had to make mere shapes in clay: pyramids, cubes, and so forth. If you think that's easy, try it. Bill Smith couldn't do any of that. We had classes in lettering, still life, and life drawing. I had never seen a nude woman before, and on the first day of the first class I thought I would faint with excitement. We had classes in illumination, as in medieval manuscripts. I was a particular whiz at that, able to do the tiniest floral patterns in red and gold. Nobody could figure out how I was doing it. I didn't tell anybody I had by pure chance discovered Chinese calligraphy brushes in a little shop and bought some of them. They were incredible to work with. To the argument that none of the artists of whom Hockney speaks left any evidence of their techniques in using lenses, Hockney replies that artists are secretive about their techniques. I certainly was, even at my level, and many early jazz trumpeters played with a kerchief over the right hand to hide their fingering.

Poor Bill Smith. We felt sorry for him.

The years went by. I moved away, then in 1970 went back to Canada for a few years. And I found that one of the hottest painters in the country was someone named William Ronald. He was even big stuff in the galleries of New York. I saw quite a few of his paintings, splashes of color on one surface or another. I was told repeatedly that he was a great artist. One of his pieces, a huge painting of unshaded colors, was hung in the main entry hall of the National Arts Center in Ottawa. It had, as I recall, only two colors, both of them completely flat. It was a horizontal panel. The top part of the "picture" was in a light color, some sort of off white, as I recall, across which undulated the lower part of it, in some variation of red. I don't know whether it was in oil or acrylic, but it doesn't matter really: it could as well have been done with Kemtone and a roller. I was told that the Arts center had paid William Ronald $35,000 for it. And that was in 1970 money. It was one of the worst pieces of shit I have ever seen hung on a wall.

And who was this William Ronald? His full name was William Ronald Smith. The same Bill Smith Winger and Wood and I used to feel sorry for.

To be continued