

# Philosophy of Music, Illustrated Seminars

Wednesdays (weeks 1-8), 4 pm Ryle Room, Philosophy Faculty

The seminars will be presented by **Christoph Denoth**, internationally-acclaimed classical guitarist; conductor; currently Musician-in-Residence at Balliol College; and **Denis Noble**, Emeritus Professor of Physiology, author of *The Music of Life* and leader of the *Oxford Trobadors*.

1. **Is music a science?** (16 January) There are senses in which scientific, analytical approaches can be applied to music. Thus we can determine the materials, parameters and proportions (intervals and harmonies) that enable music to be quantified. We can even count the notes. But, fundamentally, music is not a science. The quantifiable parameters are a pre-condition but are not sufficient, as listening to artificial, computer-generated music shows. To create music requires intentionality, emotion and expression. Palomo's *Nocturnos de Andalucia* will be used as illustration.
2. **Symbols and Numbers in the music of 17th and 18th century.** (23 January) The music of composers in this period can be analysed numerologically to discover that they were playing with numbers derived from names (including that of J S Bach – e.g. in the *St Matthew Passion*), from the Bible and from other sources. They were happiest when such numbers 'made sense'. But these were not public aspects of the music. They were characteristic of closed, secret societies.
3. **Music interpretation and affect.** (30 January) Good interpretation of music requires a fine sense of appropriateness. As in judging wine, many interpretations are 'over the top' and would be incomprehensible even to the composer. Yet, a composer can be surprised by an interpretation that he or she hadn't thought of, yet finds appropriate. Some aspects of music cannot be interpreted without the relevant experience (of suffering, love or whatever).
4. **The guitar in the music of 20th century (part one)** (4 February) Tonal or atonal is the question here. How we can understand the language of a composer? How do we react in our affect world when a piece is not "tonal"? What has changed in the concept of music in 20<sup>th</sup> century? How do we correspond with harmony and disharmony? Can we change our way of listening and understanding contemporary music? We will use as examples: Schoenberg *Pierrot Lunaire*; P. Boulez *le marteau sans maitre*; B. Britten *Nocturnal*; P.M. Davies, *Hill Runes*; H.V. Lobos *Preludes, guitar concerto*; and others.
5. **Zen and the performing arts.** (13 February) "Each beat and each tune indescribably profound, no words are needed for those who understand music." (*The Oxherder*, Zen Buddhist parable). As in Zen meditation, the aim is to remove the 'I', the 'will'. A musician performs best when it 'just happens' and he/she can even observe themselves performing. Taoists had a similar philosophy.

6. **Phenomenology of music.** (20 February) A piece (Schubert's *Ständchen* will be used as an example) may take one period of time played in a large hall and another in a small venue, even when the musician is playing the same tempo. Why is this? It has to do with development, using expansion, compression and other dynamics of musical execution to generate the interpretation. A repetition that looks identical in the score cannot be so in performance, even when the musician, unusually, seeks to play in exactly the same way. As with other art forms, such as painting, the artist is aware of how his performance is to be perceived. Palomo's *Nocturnos de Andalucia* will again be used as an example.
7. **The Music of Life.** (27 February) This will be a live lecture-performance based on Denis Noble's *The Music of Life* (OUP 2006) using music from *The Oxford Trobadors*.
8. **The guitar in the music of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century (part two)** (5 March) "Atonal or fretonal" is the question here. How we can understand the language of a modern composer? How have we changed our abilities to hear? Are we able to leave the traditional ways in our perception to enjoy music? What has changed in the concept of music in 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries? Are we stuck in diversity which is no longer reducible for our mind if we hear some kinds of contemporary music? What of the future and - have we changed our ability and perception to understand the music of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries? We will use as examples: P. Boulez, *le marteau sans maître*; Luciano Berio *Sequenza*; Anatol Vieru; *guitar concerto*; Leo Brouwer; *Sonata*; and others.

## References

- Ansermet, Ernest (1961) *Die Grundlagen der Musik im menschlichen Bewusstsein*. München: Piper.
- Dart, Thurston (1954) *The Interpretation of Music*. London: Hutchinson.
- Leppert, Richard & McClary, Susan (eds) (1987) *Music and Society. The Politics of composition, performance and reception*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Maconie, Robin (1990) *The Concept of Music*, Oxford: OUP.
- Merwe, Peter van der (2004) *Roots of the Classical. Popular origins of Western Music*. Oxford: OUP.
- Noble, Denis (2006) *The Music of Life*. Oxford: OUP.
- Sacks, Oliver (2007) *Musicophilia. Tales of Music and the Brain*. New York: Random House.
- Sundin, Nils-Goran (1983) *Musical interpretation and performance* Stockholm: Mirage.
- Smend, Friedrich (1950) *Bach bei seinem Namen gerufen*. Kassel.
- Tatlow, Ruth (1991) *Bach and the riddle of the number alphabet*. Cambridge, CUP.
- Hans Gerd Brill (1994) *Die Gitarre in der Musik des 20. Jahrhunderts*

.....