

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

from PETER HILL

In his letter (TEMPO 115) concerning my article 'Xenakis and the performer' (TEMPO 112), Yuji Takahashi writes: 'In his Ex. 1 taken from *Herma*, Peter Hill explains that the rhythmical accuracy is more important than pitches'. This seriously misrepresents my argument. Ex. 1 was chosen to illustrate 'the process of decision-making by the player' in the performance of Xenakis's music. In this instance the player has to make a choice between exact accuracy in playing *either* the given notes *or* the given rhythm, since in my opinion a performance which attempts the former will inevitably involve some distortion of the latter. The important word here is 'choice': whichever course of action the individual player takes will depend on his own musical assessment of the passage—in traditional terms, on his *interpretation* of the music. Naturally when writing about problems of this kind I put forward my own preferences (and in this case I gave my opinion that 'the music might be better served' by achieving the right rhythm at the expense of a single wrong note). But as I also stated at one point: '... these decisions are not in any way "correct"'. The point cannot be over-emphasized: however much we may argue the issues of musical interpretation, the final decisions rest with the personal conviction of each individual musician.

Mr. Takahashi points out that my 'performing version' (Ex. 3) of Ex. 2 (from *Evrjali*) is incorrect on account of a misprint which originated in the printed score, and has since been corrected in more recent copies issued by Éditions Salabert—the third line of Ex. 2 requires a treble (not bass) clef. But Ex. 3 remains valid in principle and for the most part in detail (the whole of the second bar and the right hand part in both bars). A study of *Evrjali* reveals dozens of similar passages, where the pianist is forced to make some adjustment to the printed score if only because of chords which lie well beyond the reach of normal-sized hands. The real issue is over what form these alterations should take. Mr. Takahashi takes the perfectly sensible view that my use of octave transpositions in Ex. 3 tends to 'disrupt the continuity of the lines... The names of the pitches (G sharp, A etc) are less important than the register or the pitch zones'. On the other hand one might prefer (as I did) to preserve some of the *harmonies* by playing the specified letter-name notes, though admittedly at the expense of some contrapuntal clarity.

The final part of Mr. Takahashi's letter concerns his ideal of the performer as 'an adventurer who explores sonic nebulae following the star map provided by the composer'. This interesting view seems to challenge the traditional division between the roles of performer and composer in the creation of music, and he describes my article, presumably on account of its careful approach to the composer's written instructions, as 'merely a most academic reflection of the common view that a performer is nothing but a slave of his instrument'. Curiously enough, Stephen Pruslin criticizes the article for precisely the opposite reason, apparently taking me to task for daring to suggest any alterations whatever to the printed score. Judging by the tone of his letter Mr. Pruslin feels very sure of his ground: at least he launches his attack in a forceful and uncompromising style. But he fails to supply any specific examples to back up his argument. For instance: it is all very well to write that 'a wrong note bothers just as much as it would in classical harmony', but just how *does* Mr. Pruslin propose to play, say,

the second bar of Ex. 2 (starting as it does with a chord spanning nearly two octaves in the left hand and over two octaves in the right)? The point I was trying to make is that, in Xenakis's music at least, the 'wrong note'—traditionally regarded as a sort of 'crime' against the music—*may* on occasion detract less from the music than a faulty rhythm, a wrong dynamic or a wrong speed. Here the all-important factor is the context. The player should ask himself: by altering this note up or down a semitone (or whatever) to what extent is *the sound of the music* altered? In the opening four bars of *Evryali*, for instance, changing a note would be inappropriate: it would make an audible and appreciable difference because the music here consists of the variation of a single chord. However there are plenty of passages in *Evryali* (especially where dense textures in the extreme ranges of the piano are blurred by the sustaining pedal) where a slight alteration to the pitches would be insignificant, and to suggest otherwise, as Mr. Pruslin seems to, is absurd.

If Mr. Pruslin believes my article to be condoning a slapdash approach to the performance of contemporary music I can only say that this was the last thing I had in mind. I fully share his view that the art of the performer of contemporary music should be 'precise, honest and caring'. But the problems, the *real* problems, which Xenakis's music poses the performer can only be tackled through discussion which is open, honest and practical, and not through generalizations and platitudes of the sort which Mr. Pruslin offers in his letter.

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