

TEXT 11

HAS ABSOLUTE MUSIC NO CLASS CHARACTER?

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With the deepening of the movement to criticize Lin Piao and rectify the style of work and new victories being continually won in the struggle-criticism-transformation in the realm of the superstructure, an excellent situation prevails in the country. But the class struggle and the two-line struggle on the art and literary front remain very sharp and complex. The recent weird contention that so-called absolute music has no social content but simply expresses contrasting and changing moods is a sign of a return to the revisionist line in art and literature.

Should the reactionary nature of this erroneous view be exposed or not? This is a cardinal issue of right and wrong and we cannot treat it casually. It involves the question of whether or not the Marxist-Leninist theory of class struggle should be recognized as a universally applicable truth, whether or not the proletarian dictatorship should be exercised in the ideological realm, and whether the Marxist critical attitude should be adopted towards the bourgeois arts or whether they should be "taken over wholesale" as the revisionist fallacies of Chou Yang and his like advocated; it involves the question of whether the proletarian revolution in art and literature can be carried through to the end.

Absolute music in general refers to instrumental music without a descriptive title as to theme or content and it usually is designated by its musical form or tempo. For example, "Symphony in F Major," "Concerto in C Minor," "Largo," "Allegro" and so on.

Bourgeois theorists have long spouted that absolute music is a form of "pure music," devoid of social content and class nature. They fallaciously contend that music is "simply fantasy, not reality" and that "music is music, and nothing else." The modern revisionists, while paying lip-service to music's ties with social life, actually blur the class distinction between proletarian and bourgeois music by describing absolute music as "of the people," "realistic" and so forth. Why should both the bourgeoisie and the revisionists concoct all sorts of arguments to obscure the class character of art? It is because bourgeois ideology, including bourgeois art and literature, serves to prop up the capitalist

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system. They dare not openly acknowledge the exploiting class character of their art and literature. Instead, to disguise the essential substance of capitalist exploitation, they pose as representatives of the whole people in order to deceive the labouring masses.

Marxist-Leninists hold that all works of music, both absolute and programme music, as a form of ideology **“are products of the reflection in the human brain of the life of a given society.”** Music without titles descriptive of their theme or content is by no means merely “a form of the flow of sounds.” Not giving their works a descriptive title is only a means by which composers cover up the class content of their works. In fact, a composer clearly has in mind what he wants to praise or oppose and what content and mood he means to convey, when he is composing absolute music.

When the German bourgeois composer Beethoven (1770-1827) was asked the meaning of his *Sonata No. 17*, a composition without a descriptive title, he replied: “Please read Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*.” That play, we know, preaches the bourgeois theory of human nature. Of course, the means of expression of music are different from those of literature. Music uses melody, rhythm and harmony to evoke scenes, tell a story or convey emotion, thereby expressing quite plainly or relatively subtly and deviously the composer’s world outlook, ideas and feelings. But in any case, the social and class content, thoughts and feelings so expressed can never be abstract, unintelligible “fantasy,” for they can be grasped by applying the Marxist theory of knowledge and method of class analysis.

Take for instance the representative work *Symphony in B Minor* (the *Unfinished Symphony*) by Schubert (1797-1828), an Austrian bourgeois composer of the romantic school. The class feelings and social content it expresses are quite clear, although it has no descriptive title. This symphony was composed in 1822 when Austria was a reactionary feudal bastion within the German Confederation and the reactionary Austrian authorities not only ruthlessly exploited and oppressed the workers and peasants, but also persecuted and put under surveillance intellectuals with any bourgeois democratic ideas. Petty-bourgeois intellectuals like Schubert saw no way out of the political and economic impasse, and lacking the courage to resist they gave way to melancholy, vacillation, pessimism and despair, evading reality and dreaming of freedom. This work of Schubert’s expressed these class feelings and social content. The opening phrase is sombre and gloomy. The whole symphony continues and expands on this emotion, filling it with petty-bourgeois despair, pessimism and solitary distress. At times the dreaming of freedom does come through, but this, too, is escapist and negative.

Absolute music composed in Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries are products of the European capitalist society, upholding the interests of the bourgeoisie and serving the capitalist system. The content and the ideas and feelings with which they are saturated have an unmistakably bourgeois class nature. Marx pointed out: “**Capital comes [into the world] dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt.**” And it is this blood and dirt that bourgeois music extols. Although certain compositions were to some extent progressive in the sense of being anti-feudal, they failed to mirror proletarian thoughts and feelings of their time; and they are, of course, still more incompatible with our socialist system today under the dictatorship of the proletariat. Then why dismiss their class content and extol them? Yet even today there are some who would feed our young people on these musical works uncritically and intact. Where would this lead our young people?

Some devotees of bourgeois absolute music often try to cover up its class nature by holding forth in empty terms on the contrasting, changing moods it presents. This is a reactionary viewpoint of the bourgeois theory of a common human nature transcending classes. For these moods are none other than those of delight and anger, joy and sorrow which vary, as do all men’s ideas and feelings, according to the times and society people live in and the class they belong to. Lu Hsun mercilessly repudiated this bourgeois trash that all men share common emotions and feelings. He said: “Of course, it is human nature to know delight and anger, joy and sorrow but the poor are never worried about losing money on the stock exchange, an oil magnate cannot know the trials of an old woman collecting cinders in Peking, and victims of famine will hardly grow orchids like rich old gentlemen. . . .” Are there any feelings that are not stamped with the brand of a class?

“Joy” can be presented in sharply contrasted ways. Thus the music for the despotic landlord’s birthday celebrations in the third scene of the modern revolutionary dance-drama *Red Detachment of Women* uses frivolous melody and erratic rhythm to expose the landlord’s wanton extravagance and profligacy built on the suffering of the working people. In contrast, the magnificent stirring music of the dance by soldiers and civilians in the next scene presents the brilliant sunshine and jubilation in the revolutionary base. Did these two musical passages project the same emotions?

Again, take the subject of “sorrow.” The grief of a feudal monarch after his overthrow is expressed in the verses written by Li Yu, the last king of the Southern Tang kingdom in the 10th century, as he hankered in captivity after his former decadent life in the palace.

*Carved balustrades, jade flagstones still remain,
But those rosy cheeks are gone.
How great my lord's grief?
Endless as the spring river flowing to the east!*

But the proletarian fighter Lu Hsun portrayed sorrow of a very different kind when he wrote:

*A host of dark, gaunt faces in the brambles,
Yet who dare shake the earth with lamentation?
I brood over our whole far-stretching land
And in this silence hear the peal of thunder.*

This indignant denunciation of the savage oppression of the people by the Japanese invaders and Kuomintang reactionaries conveys the class hatred and national enmity of millions of working people. This militant lamentation has nothing at all in common with the grief of a feudal monarch over the loss of his kingdom. To claim that one melody could be used to express these two diametrically opposed feelings would be sheer charlatanry.

As for empty talk about “bright,” “healthy” melodies, devoid of class content, this is the metaphysical approach which the revisionists usually resort to when peddling their bourgeois wares. Chou Yang once brayed that the American bourgeoisie whom Walt Whitman extolled was “the new man,” “healthy, broad of mind, with high ideals, a pair of working hands, and eternally optimistic” and that that “shiny example” was “worthy of emulating and copying.” But we are aware if the proletariat really were to “emulate” and “copy” the bourgeoisie, then what awaits us is not “bright skies” but the darkness of the dungeon.

The bourgeoisie may well believe that the works of the 18th-century Austrian bourgeois composer Mozart embody “bright” and “healthy” sentiments. But we working people know clearly that these sentiments cannot compare with the exuberant and impassioned feelings expressed by the chorus *The Sun Rises* in the seventh scene of *The White-Haired Girl*. Brimming over with jubilation, this chorus extols Chairman Mao, the red sun in the hearts of the Chinese people, as well as the Communist Party, and evokes the soul-stirring scene “**of the land of hibiscus glowing in the morning sun**” and the emancipation of the downtrodden peasants. No bourgeois music can even remotely compare with this unrestrained healthy burst of joy evoked by this chorus.

Chou Yang and company also raved that “music is a universal language,” in order to concoct a theoretical basis for their attempt to peddle the wholesale Westernization of music. In fact, every class

speaks its own language and there is no such thing as a so-called universal language transcending classes. *The Internationale* which rings throughout the world is the common language of the proletariat only. The bourgeoisie trembles at the sound of this melody. Lenin aptly said: **“In whatever country a class-conscious worker finds himself, wherever fate may cast him, however much he may feel himself a stranger, without language, without friends, far from his native country—he can find himself comrades and friends by the familiar refrain of the *Internationale*.”**

For over eighty years this stirring song has inspired workers of all countries to unite to smash the old world and fight for the realization of communism. All reactionaries, however, regard this battle-song of the proletariat as a fearful menace and do all in their power to prevent *The Internationale* from circulating among the people. Hence, do the reactionaries share a common language with the proletariat?

Liu Shao-chi, Lin Piao, Chou Yang and their gang, however, shared a common language with the bourgeoisie and all reactionaries at home and abroad, for these renegades, like all imperialists, revisionists and reactionaries, opposed proletarian revolution and proletarian dictatorship and vainly tried to restore capitalism in China. This was like the futile efforts of Confucius, the mouthpiece and defender of ancient China's slave-owning class, who, grieving that “the rites were lost and music was ruined,” tried desperately to propagate reactionary music aimed at numbing and enslaving the people while frantically attacking the new rising folk music in order to preserve the collapsing slave system.

Like the other forms of art, music has always been an instrument of class struggle, and on the art and literary front the class struggle and the two-line struggle have always been extremely acute. In the course of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution and the movement to criticize Lin Piao and rectify the style of work, great victories have been won on this front and intellectuals have made much progress, but the pernicious influence of revisionist wares peddled by Liu Shao-chi, Lin Piao, Chou Yang and company for a long time, such as “art and literature of the whole people” and “art and literature to nourish people,” is deep-seated and still far from being eliminated. Some people talk about bourgeois classical music with great relish, are mesmerized by it and prostrate themselves before it, showing their slavish mentality for all things foreign. They are nihilists with regard to national art. Their reverence for foreign things is actually reverence for the bourgeoisie. If this erroneous thinking of extolling foreign things and belittling Chinese things is not criticized and repudiated, then proletarian art and literature will not be able to develop and Chairman

Mao's revolutionary line in art and literature cannot be implemented.

We do not exclude foreign things indiscriminately. We should conscientiously study the revolutionary theory developed by Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin. We should learn from the revolutionary experience of the working class and revolutionary people of all countries and learn from and acquire advanced sciences and technology. We should critically assimilate certain techniques from classical bourgeois music, but we must not uncritically swallow anything and everything. And we must never throw ourselves at the feet of bourgeois artists. As Engels said: **"The characterization of the ancients no longer suffices today."** We must adhere to the principle of **"making the past serve the present and foreign things serve China,"** learn from the experience in creating the model revolutionary theatrical works and turn out proletarian music and art worthy of our time.

Comrade Chou En-lai pointed out in the political report to the Tenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China that "we should attach importance to the class struggle in the superstructure, including all spheres of culture" and that "we should continue to carry out well the revolution in literature and art." The historical experience of the class struggle on the art and literary front shows that the ideology of the bourgeoisie and all other exploiting classes cannot be buried and done away with by a criticism or two. We must conscientiously study the documents of the Tenth Party Congress, implement the spirit of the Tenth Party Congress, take the Party's basic line as the key link, further deepen the movement to criticize Lin Piao and rectify the style of work and link them to reality in criticizing revisionism and bourgeois world outlook; we must continue to advance along the revolutionary path pointed out by Chairman Mao, and we must never go backwards. We must be on guard and resist a return of the revisionist line in art and literature. We must resolutely defend and develop the fruits of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution and carry the proletarian revolution in art and literature through to the end!