Can rock learn anything from classical music?

Philip Clark asks two musicians, Tim Hodgkinson and Mike Oldfield, what effect classical music has on rock composers like them.
music grown-ups like. Rock music was eventually eaten up by commercialism, and I'm interested to see how equipped classical music is to deal with similar forces. It's got this great big cultural capital to it; all those orchestras, all that money, all that belief. It's a huge thing. It would take a lot to bring it down. But the music the classical industry promotes often isn't so interesting. I see Mike's interpretation as being rather optimistic.

PC Something that Tubular Bells and the music Henry Cow played in common was an interest in unusual time signatures. Where did that come from? Dave Brubeck? Stravinsky?

MO I was just trying to keep up with people like David Bedford and Lol Cuddihill.

TH Lol didn't know about 7/8, did he?

MO Yes he did.

TH But he didn't play in 7/8.

MO We all did 7/8, 5/8 and 13/8. I wanted to do it and I just accepted it.

TH The early version of Henry Cow was basically a blues band, and when I had to play in 7/8 it was quite a shock. In all honesty, I couldn't really do 4/4 properly. I guess Brubeck was important to the realisation of other time signatures, and my own personal background was in jazz. I couldn't listen to rock music at first. I just couldn't get the thing about singing. I thought The Beatles were, like, really naff. But friends insisted on sitting me down and playing me rock, and I suddenly understood that people could sing about something and it had a point.

Oldfield revealed that his induction into rock was as a "volunteer engineer" who inadvertently "wiped" a Henry Cow tape in the studio. But it had a profound effect...

MO Working as an engineer, I realised there was a different way of approaching music. The music world has become so obsessed with categories, but music is really just vibrations in the air. On my third album I used an African troupe. They're just musicians and they played brilliantly, but I didn't see them as "ethnic".

PC Classical composers always have to be aware of the dangers of Western cultural superiority surely? The problem of composers exploiting jazz and folk music to gain street cred without fully engaging with the cultures never goes away.

TH Composers have proved to be very good at exploiting jazz. I knew Michael Tippett, but I thought the way he attempted to get jazz into some of his pieces was terrible. It sounded so naff because it needed to be played right. Bernstein knew how to do it. West Side Story is great, but landed him in a conflict where he felt he wasn't been taken seriously as a composer.

There are lots of famous people who get upset for not being famous in the right way.

PC Tim, you said earlier that rock music could gain from the "energy" of classical music, which surprised me a little.

TH Well, there doesn't seem to be much point in classical music drawing on Prog Rock for instance, because that's just handing the same influences back. There is the rock music which is the opposite of what Mike and I did — something much more stripped down and violent; "proper" rock, punk and heavy duty hard-core R&B. I've been amazed at how classical composers will say they like rock music, but the people they cite are really dull. I hope experimental musicians would like Zappa or Captain Beefheart, but they tend to go for middle-of-the-road things.

PC How do you see politics impinging on your work? Tim, you have an allegiance to hard-left politics; Mike, you seem apolitical.

TH I've always thought that the "thing" itself — the music — is the most important thing. The message has another role, but if the music is crap then there's no point. I remember hearing People's Liberation Music led by Cornelius Cardew. He'd switched from the radical musical avant-garde, working with Stockhausen and dealing with Boulez, to the political avant-garde, but he went from good classical composition to bad rock. The lyrics tried to cram lines about "British imperialists out of Northern Ireland" on top of phrases that they wouldn't sit on. They thought it was OK because they were articulating a message. But that's rubbish — if you're going to do music, that's what you're doing.

MO I'm trying to understand because I've never seen a connection between music and politics. It's like trying to connect football with croquet.

TH It all depends on how you view politics. Some think politics just happens on the radio and in Westminster, but there was a moment in the 1960s where it all bowled together. I was very confused myself. For a few months I thought we should put LSD in the water supply and the world's problems would be solved. It's about putting individualism aside and thinking that, through collective effort, the world might change.

PC Mike, did you think about how an audience might relate to a piece like Tubular Bells?

MO Tim, you were there, on keyboards, when we played it at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in the early 1970s? I thought it was a disaster but the audience loved it.

PC What was disastrous about it?

TH We didn't play anything in the way Mike wanted us to! I remember you weeping in the corner. It was so different from your vision.

MO I remember watching musicians moving their fingers and noises happened to come out. But when I played it in the studio I was the music. That's the last time I wrote everything out. I wrote out your part myself. It took ages.

TH I know and you wrote it out wrongly. That's why I couldn't play it.

PC And on that bombshell... 😱

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