

# Music Theory

## Fermata For Thought

BY JOHN DUARTE

**E**VERY now and then I make a general point about music and how you should approach it. Countless books and other publications deal with the mechanics of music, telling you how it's put together and how it works. But these shouldn't be misunderstood. Of course, you should comprehend what they tell you, but you should also understand what they are *not* saying.

At every stage in history, music—popular and formal—has had a more or less definable character that people have felt comfortable with. Pop audiences have always been larger than those of the formal variety. But music mirrors life, and there are always people who see how it might be different and better; these individuals are often called rebels. If it weren't for rebels, society and music would be the same now as they were 2,000 years ago.

Few composers have ever worked with the primary objective of adhering to a book of rules, and no great composer has ever kept to those of his own day! So every textbook ever written does no more than tell you how it was at the time it was put together, usually spelling out what was regarded as good, acceptable, or unacceptable. A textbook summarizes and analyzes the situation of its own time, and may be significantly out of date by the time it hits print. It may also fail because its conclusions are arrived at by consensus. It might read something like this: "When A is followed by B, the most usual result is C; it might be D or even E, but F is unthinkable." But composers' minds don't work that way. For example, judging by Cherubini's rules of 1835, Bach and Handel wrote lousy fugues. It's only a short step from that kind of thinking to believe that Stalin was a liberal democrat!

The rules are no more than a safety net; if you faithfully follow them, you won't write bad music, but you will write mediocre music—and maybe boring, mediocre music at

that! It takes a rebel or two to keep things moving along. This doesn't mean that breaking the notational rules guarantees worthwhile progress; many musical and social revolutions have come to nothing. Most great artists learned the rules first, breaking them through rational choice, not ignorance.

I suggest that you do the same in your music. Light the fuse and see what happens. History has a way of deciding what is valuable and what isn't, who is a good or great

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You might be satisfied with immediate fame and the financial profit it can bring, in which case you'd be a cynical opportunist rather than a musician and not likely to be following this column. The public has always been grossly unreliable as an assessor of musical worth (some critics have fared no better), largely because its attitude has been misguided—and shaped by the vicious circle

of "I like what I know, and I know what I like." The public prefers comfort to challenge. In pop music, the present situation is a bit different: The profitable youth market needs a steady supply of novelty, a new set of idols and role models and something that represents progress. Sometimes listeners get it, but sometimes they get pure trash. The same applies to followers of "art" music, which today is too diverse and complex for most people to understand—the last word is important.

A while ago I overheard two amateur guitarists practicing a duet. It sounded both familiar and grotesquely unfamiliar. Eventually I realized what was happening: The arrangement of a well-known piece by Manuel de Falla involved one of the instruments using a capo. The players hadn't noticed the fact that one part was written with one flat and the other with two sharps! When I pointed this out, one of them said, "We thought it sounded a bit strange when we started working on it, but we've gotten used to it." The other player added, "We've rather gotten to like it." Their attitude was misguided, but it encapsulated something important: As amateurs, they had come to the music with goodwill and willingness to believe that the composer was right and knew what he was doing.

We cannot fully understand how all new music works, but we can come to it with goodwill. The key is to listen with an open mind and no preconceived expectations. See whether it says anything to you, even if you can't put it into words. This is the way music has always progressed—through gradual acceptance of sound rule-breaking and the rejection of pretentious garbage. Try it. ■



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