

## ***Point Counter Point: Huxley's Tragi-Comic Performance of the “Human Fugue”***

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Although music suffuses *Point Counter Point* (1928), if Aldous Huxley intended to give it a prominent formal and thematic role in his “ambitious new novel” during its conceptual stage, he did not mention that in letters explaining his ideas about it late in 1926 and early the next year. In a letter to his father from Florence on 21 October 1926, for example, Huxley wrote:

I am very busy preparing for and doing bits of an ambitious novel, the sum of which will be to show a piece of life, not only from a good many individual points of view, but also under its various aspects such as scientific, emotional, political aesthetic, etc. The same person is simultaneously a mass of atoms, a physiology, a mind, an object with a large shape that can be painted, a cog in the economic machine, a voter, a lover, etc. etc. I shall try to imply at any rate the existence of the other categories of existence behind the ordinary categories employed in judging everyday emotional life. It will be difficult, but interesting. (*Letters* 274-75.)

It probably proved more interesting and certainly more difficult than he expected, as several letters over the next two years confirmed because he repeatedly made a point about both. Huxley’s concept in this missive to his father was carried forward into the

novel itself where Philip Quarles explains to his wife, Elinor, what he intends to present in his own projected novel; he tells her that he wishes to look with multiple eyes simultaneously at virtually anything to expose “the astonishingness of the most obvious things. Really, any plot or situation would do. Because everything’s implicit in anything” (228). Not until later, in a passage from his Notebook, does Quarles mention the role that music is to play in his novel and thereby imply its function in *Point Counter Point* itself.

Derived from the Latin *punctus contra punctum*, “point counter point” signifies “note against note,” which may be depicted by a vertical line and dots representing a chord, the basis of harmony (Erickson 3; Huxley, *Letters* 296 n272). The phrase clearly implies a musical motif, but its ultimately becoming the title of Huxley’s new work was the decision of his American publisher, Doubleday Doran and Company, and not his own, a fact that reinforces the idea that music was not part of the author’s original conception behind the novel. In fact, *Point Counter Point* replaced the title that Huxley himself had expected to use, “Diverse Laws,” a phrase he extracted from a stanza near the end of *Mustapha* (1609), a closet-drama by Fulke Greville, Lord Brooke, based on atrocities in sixteenth-century Turkey.

That stanza and the next, which eventually found their way into *Point Counter Point* as the epigraph, had already been resonating in Huxley’s mind for several years prior to 1928. In *On the Margin* (1923), an early collection of his essays, Huxley quoted them in full:

Oh wearisome condition of humanity,

Born under one law to another bound,  
Vainly begot and yet forbidden vanity,  
Created sick, commanded to be sound.  
  
What meaneth nature by these diverse laws,  
Passion and reason, self-division's cause?

Is it the mark or majesty of power  
To make offences that it may forgive?  
Nature herself doth her own self deflower  
To hate those errors she herself doth give. . . .  
  
If nature did not take delight in blood,  
She would have made more easy ways to good. (*OM* 103.)

In one of his essays in that collection, “How the Days Draw In!,” Huxley introduces these stanzas with great praise: “For dark magnificence there are not many things that can rival that summing up against life and human destiny. . . . Milton aimed at justifying the ways of God to man [in *Paradise Lost*]; Fulke Greville gloomily denounces them” (*OM* 103). His context in that essay should interest readers of *Point Counter Point* because the stanzas—and presumably their source in Mustapha—exemplify the kind of poetry he considered including in a hypothetical tongue-in-cheek collection, “an Oxford Book of Depressing Verse, which shall contain nothing but the most magnificent expressions of melancholy and despair” (*OM* 102).

In addition, if the essays he selected to include in *On the Margin* may be taken as evidence, Huxley's frame of mind was somber in the early 1920s. For example, at that time he wrote of his "need of a little" optimism (*OM* 12); wrote of "accidie": "Boredom, hopelessness and despair" (*OM* 23); considered the limitations of contemporary poets: "one would not find among them a single poet of real importance, not one great or outstanding personality" (*OM* 38); ranted over the current debasement of bibliophily through sheer commercialization: "To debase a book into an expensive object of luxury is as . . . to burn it" (*OM* 66); and mused over compiling the collection of depressing poetry. Regarded from the perspective of the essays in *On the Margin*, then, Huxley's fourth novel owes as much to the author's mind-set in the early 1920s as when he was actually writing it several years later.

In *Point Counter Point* the "magnificent expressions" he mentions in "How the Days Draw In!" chiefly describe the music of Bach and Beethoven as well as some of the architecture and selected paintings of Mark Rampion and John Bidlake, whereas those of "melancholy and despair" often appear in Huxley's portraits of nearly all the principal and many of the minor characters. Although his classic novel is far from the "depressing verse" Huxley had in mind to collect in 1923, and many if not most of its characters are more pathetic than depressing, the social panorama that he depicts with varying shades of irony is a doleful one, indeed.

Yet the novel is saved from becoming dreary and distressful by several aspects of Huxley's imaginative ingenuity, including the scintillating wit he invested in the narrative, the satire, and the occasionally inane dialogue, not to mention the asinine behavior of several characters, Dennis Burlap in particular. Moreover, the provocative

conversations at Tantamount House, Sbisa's restaurant, Gattenden, and elsewhere are often engaging; the amusing portrayals of such prominent characters as Burlap, Everard Webley, Walter and John Bidlake, Sidney Quarles, and minor ones such as Sita Ram, Molly Exergillod, and others at times overlap into brilliant caricature. Not to be overlooked, too, is that Philip Quarles' ideas on society, science, and novel-writing clearly reflect Huxley's own although the author was to find more productive ways of presenting them.

Despite all of these engaging and entertaining features among others, however, the novel overall exposes a decadent society, its aristocrats idle, degenerate, and egocentric at the expense of others, including members of their own social class no less than those beneath them; its literature trivial; its art fashionable but passé. The uproarious spoof at the end with Burlap and Beatrice Gilray at play in the bath has its dark side, too; it precedes by a few days Ethel Cobbett's suicide by gas inhalation, a consequence of Burlap's rejection of her in favor of Beatrice. All of these figures and more are the sundry voices in Huxley's "human fugue."

If Fulke Greville's two stanzas from *Mustapha* impressed Huxley for their dark response to assertions of hope amid bitter experience and despondency, the phrase "diverse laws" he had selected as the title of his "ambitious novel" was especially telling. Fulke Greville's analysis of the human "condition" concludes by questioning Nature's reason for the "diverse laws" that provoke "self-division," the conflict between passion and reason. Despite the critical emphasis understandably given to the expositions in Philip Quarles' notebook, pondering these stanzas at the outset, which Huxley has the right to expect of his readers, suggests that if *Point Counter Point* is a novel of ideas on

the order of its three predecessors in the Huxley canon, it is at once deeper than they in thought and more highly charged in emotional conflict. Once familiar with the multitude of characters, readers are likely to find themselves engaged not only with the exploration of ideas per se as in the past, but also and more profoundly with their often extended effects that link the thinkers and speakers to other seemingly distant members of their diversified social group.

Distinctly individualized, the characters illustrate their differences through behavior as well as thoughts and words, as if the ideas once vocalized were duly realized in corresponding actions some time later. Further, the distinctions between and among them are those of moral stature and personality as well as thought, speech, and behavior. In this respect, too, *Point Counter Point* goes beyond the conventional novel of ideas, which makes voice boxes of the characters, individualizing them by highlighting their one-track minds, and in the case of Huxley's previous novels especially, most have eccentricities the author often describes pictorially with the aid of humorous animal imagery (Marovitz). To be sure, he employs the same device often enough in *Point Counter Point* to give the novel a comic tone despite the darkness and even violence that occasionally limit it.

Moreover, the larger number and greater diversity of characters in *Point Counter Point* make it a more expansive fiction than any of his three earlier novels. In it Huxley presents a broad spectrum of contemporary society, an aggregate of strikingly different characters, some more tightly interlocked than others but all individualized with easily recognizable physical, intellectual, emotional, psychological, and moral qualities. His bringing many of them together no matter their differences in social status, political

views, and relative wealth, is no more contrived in *Point Counter Point* than in many a novel of the preceding generation by, say, James or Wharton that also focuses on individuals while still giving signal attention to its milieu. In this novel more effectively than in its three predecessors Huxley embodies the ideas to make his fiction live. When asked by Henry S. Canby in 1929 why he did not write a treatise instead of a novel to express his ideas, Huxley responded that “the novel form is preferable to the treatise because the fictionally embodied idea is different from, and much more alive than, the ‘same’ idea in the abstract. My book contains both abstract and (more or less effectively) embodied ideas. It would have been less effective if the embodied ones had been omitted” (9 May 29; *Letters* 312).

But the characters who embody and express the ideas must be considered not only as assorted members of society who mix and converse at various meeting places, but also more formally as components of Huxley’s novel as a work of art. The thought that lies behind the form of *Point Counter Point* is stated in Philip Quarles’ notebook as “The musicalization of fiction. Not in the symbolist way, by subordinating sense to sound. . . . But on a large scale, in the construction. Meditate on Beethoven. The changes of moods, the abrupt transitions. (Majesty alternating with a joke, for example, in the first movement of the B flat major Quartet)” (349-50). Huxley himself employs this device in chapter 2 not with a Beethoven quartet, however, but a Bach suite. Quarles’ extract continues: “More interesting still, the modulations, not merely from one key to another, but from mood to mood. A theme is stated, then developed, pushed out of shape, imperceptibly deformed, until, though still recognizably the same, it has become quite

different. . . . [A] whole range of thought and feeling, yet all in organic relation to a ridiculous little waltz tune. Get this into a novel. How?" One method Quarles suggests directly echoes Huxley's own conception as expressed to his father in 1926 when the novel was still in its beginning stage: "The novelist can . . . consider the events of the story in their various aspects—emotional, scientific, economic, religious, metaphysical, etc. He will modulate from one to the other—as, from the aesthetic to the physico-chemical aspect of things, from the religious to the physiological or financial" (*Letters*, 350).

Huxley constructed his novel with this idea as a governing principle. Anticipating the frustrations of his characters throughout the novel, Huxley introduces it with a portrait of Walter Bidlake in chapter 1, his conscience tortured, fleeing from Marjorie Carling, his distressed mistress, to attend a large musicale at Tantamount House, where he hopes to draw the Tantamounts' daughter, Lucy, for whom he lusts, away from the party and into his arms. Chapter 2 opens with a description of Tantamount House with enough history of its owners to convey an idea of their wealth and lifestyle at the expense of the lower classes. Huxley's description of the musicians, particularly the soloist, and the music, Bach's *Orchestral Suite No. 2 in B Minor*, is an entertaining mix of the ridiculous and the sublime. As the strings

scraped, . . . [t]he great Pongileoni glueily kissed his flute. He blew across the mouth hole and a cylindrical air column vibrated. . . . In the opening *largo* John Sebastian had, with the help of Pongileoni's snout and the air column, made a statement: There are grand things in the world, noble things; . . . men born kingly;



. . . intrinsic lords of the earth. But of an earth that is, oh! complex and multitudinous, he had gone on to reflect in the fugal *allegro*. You [the assumed reader/listener] seem to have found the truth; clear, definite, unmistakable, it is announced by the violins; you have it. . . . But it slips out of your grasp to present itself in a new aspect among the cellos and yet again in terms of Pongileoni's vibrating air column. The parts live their separate lives; they touch, their paths cross, they combine for a moment to create a seemingly final and perfected harmony, only to break apart again. Each is always alone and separate and individual. "I am I," asserts the violin; "the world revolves round me." "Round me," calls the cello. "Round me," the flute insists. And all are equally right and equally wrong; and none of them will listen to the others. (27-28.)

The brief musical dialogue concluding the paragraph cues Huxley to relate his description of Bach's fugal *Suite* in performance to people of the world at large. "In the human fugue there are eighteen hundred million parts," he says, but no artist can understand more than one or two of them at a time. He then identifies one part in the *Suite*, a girl alone singing a love song, "tenderly mournful"; her song became Bach's rondeau; it also inspired an unseen poet, whose thoughts are revealed in the sarabande that follows. Huxley then begins to modulate the musical theme again but this time with ironic rather than lighthearted humor: the poet's "slow and lovely meditation [is] on the beauty (in spite of squalor and stupidity), the profound goodness (in spite of all the evil), the oneness (in spite of such bewildering diversity) of the world. It is a beauty, a goodness, a unity that no intellectual research can discover, that analysis dispels, but of

whose reality the spirit is from time to time suddenly and overwhelmingly convinced. . . . Is it illusion or the revelation of profoundest truth? Who knows?" (28). In these passages, Huxley simultaneously suggests the direction his novel will take and provides readers with guidelines for understanding it. In addition, he is clearly edging toward the spiritual truths that will lead him to *The Perennial Philosophy* (1945) seventeen years later.

The musicians are still playing as John Bidlake, capitalizing on his earlier affair with Lady Hilda Tantamount, boorishly interrupts and pesters her with inane questions and sarcastic comments about others in the audience. Huxley thereby creates opportunities for readers to become acquainted briefly with several singular figures who will reappear later, nearly all eccentrics in some manner: among others, Polly Logan and her widowed mother; and Mary Betterton, Bidlake's model many years earlier when she was young, attractive, and pleasingly plump, another of his former mistresses now aged, corpulent, and repulsive to him.

Preceding these slight portraits in chapter 2, Huxley also has introduced Lord Edward, master of the Tantamount estate, who is "in all but intellect a kind of child" with the "feelings, . . . intuitions, . . . [and] instincts . . . of a little boy"; "his spiritual being had never developed" (23). Lord Edward's is another voice in the "human fugue." Huxley quickly limns his past; as a wealthy youth he was mired in *accidie* (of which the author had written in *On the Margin*), frustrated over a lack of interests and ambition until he came across a magazine article by Claude Bernard that turned him to an intense study of biology because he discovered with immense satisfaction and relief that everything "comes down to chemistry in the end" (35). That was forty years earlier. In Bernard he

had read that a “living being” is “‘a member of the universal concert of things.’ It’s all like music; harmonies and counterpoint and modulations. But you’ve got to be trained to listen” (34-5). Intelligent but naive, Lord Edward studied osmosis, assimilation, and growth to the extent that he acquired distinction for his work yet continued to aim higher. From Bernard he learned that “the life of the animal . . . is only a fragment of the total life of the universe,” words that became Lord Edward’s lifelong theme as well as his original inspiration (34).

Yet at almost seventy years of age, Lord Edward is still more child than adult. Huxley treats satirically his laboratory experiments on newts with Frank Illidge’s aid. Jerome Meckier points out that Lord Edward is a victim of “the bungled epiphany,” a theme Huxley employed in other fiction. After reading Bernard, Lord Edward “hovers on the verge of epiphany,” Meckier says, but he does not take the final step (Meckier 21). Whereas the passage from Bernard with which Huxley would have been sympathetic describes “philosophy tinged with mysticism,” Lord Edward takes it too literally as science alone; according to Meckier, his reductive conclusion is not altogether wrong but only partially true (22). Even in his upstairs laboratory, however, Lord Edward’s ears catch the strains of Bach’s *Suite* and affect him strongly enough to interrupt his experiments and go below to listen.

If the musical performance of Bach in chapter 2 opens the door widely to many of the leading figures in the novel, it also opens the musical frame of the fiction that does not close until the end in chapter 37. There Huxley presents in an altogether different light a recording of the “*heilige Dankgesang*” (“Sacred Song of Thanks”), from the third movement of Beethoven’s *A-Minor Quartet*. By the final chapter, of course, readers are

familiar with all the characters and the ideas they voice. Spandrell, who holds to the existence of God, has invited Mark and Mary Rampion to his London flat to hear this holy song and be convinced of its inherent divinity, of which Mark, an unbeliever, is extremely skeptical. A day prior to the Rampions' visit, Spandrell's close familiarity with the "*heilige Dankgesang*" enables him to whistle its opening phrases as he walks beside the Thames. He has absorbed the music and has been absorbed by it. "The music was like water in a parched land" to him. "The music was a proof; God existed. But only so long as the violins were playing" (507). For him, when the strings cease playing, God is gone, leaving only garbage, drought, and stupidity behind.

Spandrell has insisted that the Rampions visit so they may hear the "Sacred Song of Thanks" and be convinced that God exists within its transcendent harmonies. "It was an unimpassioned music," as Huxley describes it, "transparent, pure, and crystalline, . . . a counterpoint of serenities. And everything clear and bright. . . . It was the calm of still and rapturous contemplation, . . . the serenity of the convalescent who wakes from fever and finds himself born again into a realm of beauty, . . . and the rebirth was not into this world; the beauty was unearthly, the convalescent serenity was the peace of God. The interweaving of Lydian melodies was heaven" (508-9). After listening to the entire third movement, Rampion grudgingly agrees that the music "*is* heaven, it *is* the life of the soul. It's the most perfect spiritual abstraction from reality I've ever known" (510, Huxley's emphasis), yet he refuses to accept an abstract reality over material existence.

Although Rampion firmly maintains his iconoclastic, materialistic views as the glorious music pours forth from the gramophone, he does not ridicule Spandrell's perception of God in the sounds but almost succumbs to the heavenly music himself.

Moreover, Huxley's diction corresponds with the idea of transcendence here in a manner altogether different from his quizzical tone in chapter 2. Indeed, as indicated above, by the time he had completed *Point Counter Point*, the author himself had begun to accept the truth of spiritual existence that had eluded him in his earlier years, a truth that he attempted to express through Spandrell's enthusiastic apprehension of divinity in the music and in his own narrative description of the heavenly sounds that evidently come through clearly enough to be convincing even on the primitive wind-up gramophone and heavy 78-rpm records available in the 1920s.<sup>1</sup> As the record plays out, Spandrell leaves the room to be shot and killed by Webley's Freeman, having made his point but to no effect, a failure once more in his own eyes. It could not have been otherwise as Huxley understood it. "We cannot isolate the truth contained in a piece of music," he wrote in "Music at Night" two years later, "for it is a beauty-truth and inseparable from its partner"; music, he says, speaks only "in specifically musical terms" (*Music* 51).

What is it about Beethoven's "Sacred Song" that should move Spandrell, the embittered, immoral, resentful cynic he has become, so profoundly? The answer is at least partly evident from what Beethoven himself penned over the opening of what has been called "the most beautiful slow movement ever written" (Johnson [33]): "Sacred song of thanks, offered by a convalescent to the Godhead, in the Lydian mode," the composer wrote. In describing the divine beauty of this "Song," Huxley borrowed from Beethoven's own phrasing. David Johnson emphasizes the intensely personal nature of this movement, yet "it at last subsumes the private in the universal"; Beethoven "becomes Everyman, the spokesman for us all" (Johnson [33-4]), expressing thanks in so glorious a manner. One of two alternating sections that constitute the movement, the "Song"

“undergoes . . . astonishing metamorphoses—from darkness to light, from death to life, from chaos to creation” (Johnson [34]).

As each instrument in the Bach *Suite* and Beethoven *Quartet* has its singular role in the two compositions, so each human voice in the novel presents its own story. Consequently, *Point Counter Point* comprises not only a multitude of voices but of stories as well, yet they harmonize to compose a marvelously aesthetic whole, “an interweaving of different accounts into a single narrative,” as *Merriam Webster’s* defines *harmony*. In Huxley’s novel the “single narrative” becomes a *fugue*, again by *Merriam Webster’s* definition: “a musical composition in which one or two themes are repeated or imitated by successively entering voices and contrapuntally developed in a continuous interweaving of the voice parts.” In this case, however, the themes are literary, the voices speak, and the fugue is a human one, less harmonious in the traditional sense, yet not less contrapuntal than the musical compositions of Bach and Beethoven. In a sense the voices and stories reveal in *Point Counter Point* what the eyes will observe when Philip eventually writes the novel he projects in his Notebook.

In their estimable analyses of the novel, neither Jerome Meckier nor Peter Firchow perceives the existence of harmony in the actions and discussions that occur in *Point Counter Point* between the opening (Bach) and close (Beethoven) of the musical frame. Where Meckier finds “opposition and disharmony” (127), Firchow also sees “discord and meaningless noise” (99). Their critiques are thorough, profound, and illuminating throughout, yet the harmony escapes both critics, possibly because their expectations are of the grand ethereal harmonies of Bach and Beethoven where Huxley has harmonized themes, stories, and lives, employing Bach’s *Suite* and Beethoven’s *Quartet* as

touchstones of musical purity to contrast with the voices of his tainted, egocentric, and all-too-human characters. He has choreographed their lives in such a way that the harmonies among them incorporate dissonance as part of their overall pattern between the two sides of the novel's frame rather than existing as a sequence of consonant musical chords, as harmony was generally understood prior to the twentieth century. Consequently, readers who attempt to listen only for traditional harmony inevitably will be disappointed.

Huxley was fond of music to the extent that he wrote numerous essays about it, reviewed performances, and occasionally incorporated it in his fiction, as in *Point Counter Point*. From his letters and publications, however, one gathers that he admired relatively little music written by then-recent composers and even less by his contemporaries. In a long letter of October 1915 to his brother Julian in Germany, the 21-year-old Huxley wrote from Oxford describing the music of Richard Strauss as “the most typical of modern Germanism. The brutal and the sentimental join hands; weltering sensuality, noise and violence for their own sakes. . . . Look at Strauss with his vulgar beastliness, his sensationalism, his big noise that goes on without check or diminution.” As in contemporary German art, he continues, “The gross and the large dominate” (*Letters* 80). Of what music by Strauss might Huxley have been thinking? According to David Hamilton, “Between 1905 and 1911,” i.e., only a few years before Aldous’ letter to Julian, “the biggest noise in the operatic world was Richard Strauss, whose *Salome* (1905), *Elektra* (1909), and *Der Rosenkavalier* (1911) eclipsed everyone else’s new works in acclaim, controversy, and diffusion” (Hamilton np.[4]). More than likely, then,

Huxley was thinking of all three, and if the sentimentality of *Der Rosenkavalier* disgusted him, the violence and power of the two earlier operas repulsed him with their loud, unfamiliarly harsh tones. His hostility to Strauss's operas in 1915 leads one to speculate over what his reaction might have been to the clashing, strident sounds in parts of Krzystof Penderecki's *The Devils of Loudun*, an opera based on a dramatic adaptation of his historical account of 1952 with the same title, but its premier performance did not occur until June 1969, five and a half years after Huxley's death.

In contrast to the German heavy-handedness he then despised, was the "slavonic music . . . sparkling with life and strong, . . . gracefully and vitally" (*Letters* 80). Huxley in his twenties looked favorably on Igor Stravinsky's early works in particular among those of the composers of his time, possibly because it was he in the early 1920s who led "a return to the authentic ideals and formal methods of the 17th and 18th centuries, recast in modern idioms," as in his *Pulcinella* (1920) and compositions of the mid-1920s, including *Oedipus Rex* (1927), a year before the publication of *Point Counter Point* (Apel 880, 569). In 1923 Huxley wrote in an essay entitled "Barbarism in Music" that "*Petrushka* and *The Firebird* can certainly be listened to a good deal more often than most works by other Russian composers," although he also acknowledged that it was still too soon to ascertain to the durability of *The Rite of Spring* ("Barbarism" 324). Indeed, only two years later he expressed serious reservations about *The Firebird* in comparison with Beethoven's *Grosse Fugue* ("PopMus" 252). "Stravinsky's forms" have been described as "additive rather than symphonic, created from placing blocks of material together without disguising the joins" (Norton/Grove Encyc. 732). It is easy to see how this description may be as aptly applied to the construction of *Point Counter Point*, in



which, apart from underlying thematic associations, nearly each chapter is a discrete unit rather than a continuation of the preceding one.

Furthermore, the whole structure of Huxley's novel was affected by the music of his day, a major concern regarding *Point Counter Point* that has yet to be examined. Of Stravinsky's music, Joseph Machlis has written: "No matter how daring his harmony, he retains a robust sense of key. He achieves excitement by superposing streams of chords in different keys. For all its explosive force his harmony, like his rhythm, is immensely refined" (Machlis 528). Darius Milhaud, also, a member of *Les Six* in France from about 1917 into the early 1920s, is associated with polytonality, the use of several keys sounding simultaneously, which goes beyond the bitonality of Stravinsky's *Petrushka*; yet regardless "how free his use of dissonance, Milhaud adheres to the principle of a key center," as does Stravinsky, says Machlis (558).

In the *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, Willi Apel points out that "[c]onsonance and dissonance are the very foundation of harmonic music, in which the former represents the element of normalcy and repose, the latter the no less important element of disturbance and tension" (Apel 201). This is a perception that Mozart understood and applied with remarkable foresight andchutzpah well over two hundred years ago in the last of his six string quartets dedicated to Haydn in 1785. Would that we knew how Huxley might have responded to it.<sup>2</sup>

On the way to developing serial music almost a century and a half after Mozart's "*Dissonant Quartet* " was first performed, Arnold Schoenberg "attacked . . . the tonal structure of harmony," then central to western music. Among the immediate sources of his conclusions are: "the steady increase of dissonances . . . and more . . . frequent use of

several successive dissonances chromatically related to one another” as well as the revival of counterpoint, to which Paul Hindemith also contributed significantly (Apel 766, 569). Under Schoenberg’s strong influence, Robert Erickson writes in terms similar to Apel’s, dissonance in early twentieth-century music and after was no longer “discord [and] ugliness, but tension” (Erickson 96). Huxley’s admiration of early music may have led him to the French *ars nova* from the early fourteenth century; of this music, Apel says that “the treatment of dissonances . . . reminds one of the dissonant counterpoint of modern composers (e.g., Hindemith)” (Apel 59). Whereas in early music dissonance and consonance were treated as opposites, however, since the mid-nineteenth century, with such exceptions as Mozart’s *String Quartet No. 19*, they have been considered in relation to each other; beyond that, in place of opposition, contemporary music “substitutes the notion of graduated dissonances, from very weak to very strong” (Erickson 96). “The dissonance propels the individual voices ahead, and in doing so supports the drive of the individual melodic lines. The lines in turn move in such a way that vertical patterns, alternating between states of tension and relaxation, ensue” (97). Erickson’s description applies equally to *Point Counter Point*.

For a fuller understanding of Huxley’s novel, then, these developments in early twentieth-century music should be related to the structure of *Point Counter Point* in order to identify correspondences, which Meckier has suggested could be done mathematically with counterpoint (128-29). The parallels imply that although Huxley may not have taken most contemporary music seriously as art, as a young intellectual in Oxford, London, and across the Channel, he could not avoid being sensitive to its influence even if not consciously aware of it. Like it or not, it was a significant component of the post-

war era, especially in western Europe, and it consequently affected his writing, particularly his construction of *Point Counter Point*, where conflicting viewpoints and actions among all the characters also contrast with the brilliant music of Bach and Beethoven in the musical frame of that novel.

The problem for most readers is the difficulty of perceiving the intricate relationship that exists in this novel between the subtle, musically influenced form and the social, critical, satirical, and general literary content. Yes, the critics are right about finding “disharmony,” or “discord,” through much of *Point Counter Point*, but it belongs there as an important component of the musical structure of this experimental novel written during the mid-1920s, a period when “the harmonic revolution,” as Aaron Copland calls the early twentieth century, was fully underway (Copland 55). It is not going too far to state that in a literary sense Huxley’s classic novel with its contrapuntal structure and polytonal harmonies was part of that revolution. The major ideas subject to constant conflict appear and repeatedly reappear supported and countered, like chordal series in different keys, by individual voices of assorted egocentric characters introduced mostly in pairs or small groups chapter by chapter.

The lines quoted from Claude Bernard in chapter 3 not only brought meaning and purpose to Lord Edward’s life many years earlier, but they also reveal symbolically what Huxley attempts to illustrate with his novel and the methodology he employs to do it. Bernard’s words and those of Lord Edward that follow them are worth repeating to emphasize in the present context the universality of music and by extension its role in Huxley’s method of composition in *Point Counter Point*. Reading that “[t]he living being . . . is a member of the universal concert of things,” Lord Edward exultantly

perceives, “It’s all like music; harmonies and counterpoint and modulations. But you’ve got to be trained to listen” (34-35). This is precisely the point: “you’ve got to be trained to listen.” With these words, knowingly or not, Huxley explained during “the harmonic revolution” how to read and understand his novel in terms of both substance and composition.

A few prominent themes—courtship and marriage, death, negative parental influence, and religion or faith—emerge, submerge, and reemerge time and again like musical motifs as the situations in which the characters are enmeshed gradually develop, resembling those of a well-wrought symphonic poem with multiple sections thematically unified. Murray Roston’s exploration of the musical form in this novel is necessarily limited because his essay is more comprehensive than a more detailed investigation would allow, but he correctly assesses Huxley’s experimenting with form in *Point Counter Point* and integrating it thematically as a major achievement (Roston 45).

Although the flute unquestionably predominates in the Bach *Suite*, no single voice in *Point Counter Point* is equivalent. Yet of them all, Rampion’s most forcefully expresses his argument supporting the value of a balanced life in the actual world over a preoccupation with the heavenly one, the existence of which he denies. By balanced, he means with “mind and consciousness and spirit” at one side and “body and instinct and all that’s unconscious and earthy and mysterious at the other. . . . And the only absolute [one] can ever really know is the absolute of perfect balance” (*PCP* 478). Huxley sympathized strongly with this Lawrentian viewpoint endlessly professed by Rampion, although D. H. Lawrence himself complained in a letter to the author, “your Rampion is

the most boring character in the book--a gas-bag, . . . rather disgusting” (*Letters of DHL*, ed. AH [1932], 758).

Apart from Rampion, the most vibrant and expressive voice belongs to Spandrell, the most dynamic yet most pathetic character in the novel. His attitude became twisted when his widowed mother, whom he had idealized and adored, married Major Knoyle, a military man and a stranger, from the myopic perspective of her adolescent son. Although she repeatedly assures the Oedipal Maurice that she married only for his sake, he never forgives her for such unfaithfulness and becomes a bitter and cynical sadomasochist as a result.

Spandrell is but one of several major figures in *Point Counter Point* whose lives are indelibly affected by abnormally strong and mostly unfortunate parental influences, one of the prominent themes in the novel identified by Philip Quarles and discussed by Peter Firchow (*PCP* 350, Firchow 101ff). Another such character is Mark Rampion; he was reared by a puritanical mother to resist the instinctive and physical side of his being, and as a result, at times his “love for his mother turned almost to hatred” (*PCP* 134). It took him years to overcome such conditioning and develop his philosophy that “to be a perfect animal *and* a perfect human—that was the ideal” (133, Huxley’s *emph.*). Rampion admires William Blake because the mystical poet was “civilized,” he says, adding, “Civilization is harmony and completeness. Reason, feeling, instinct, the life of the body--Blake managed to include and harmonize everything” (123). Rampion complains that his mother is too reserved and should rebel, but his wife, Mary, the daughter of aristocratic parents who disinherit her upon her marriage to a common villager, disagrees because his mother is happy as she is, and Mary likes her that way. Unlike Mark, she has

no difficulty sloughing off her aristocratic past in favor of living naturally; more curious and open-minded than her family, she does not miss what she has cast aside.

Like Rampion, Walter Bidlake and his sister, Elinor, were shaped by the values and behavior of their parents, and the influence remains strong on both as spouses and parents themselves. Walter's sensitivity is the product of his imaginative mother's influence, whereas his seduction of Marjorie and his "madness" (179) for Lucy Tantamount that finally draws her consent are clearly reflective of his father's outrageous philandering, as Lucy's free-wheeling sexuality is of her mother's adultery with John Bidlake years before. Elinor, also, is moved to accept Webley's propositions after rejecting them on several occasions, and when it appears that she may succumb at last, he is slain before any resolution of her conflict between body and conscience/"spirit" can occur. As a parent, also, Elinor seems to follow a pattern created by her own mother, whose active imagination and intellectual training as a child govern her thought and behavior as an adult to the extent that she has become largely skeptical of the real world in favor of her fanciful one. Consequently, Elinor, too, is neither religious nor deeply affected by such family tribulations as her son Philip, Jr.'s problematic behavior or her husband's intellectual preoccupations with their effects of aloofness and indifference to what Rampion would call aspects of instinctive animal life.

"Naturally cold, [Philip, Sr.] found it easy to be reasonable" about other people's problems (340). He "had never deeply and whole-heartedly admired anyone" (340). "Luckily," he tells Elinor one evening in India after a discussion of justice and injustice with their host, "people don't leave much trace on me" (86). Although somewhat distant herself, Elinor is more sympathetic than he; for example, she is shocked when their driver

runs over a dog on the road and grins about it (95). Nevertheless, she and her husband are of a kind; the difference is one of degree.

The son of Sidney and Rachel Quarles, Philip “had neither loved nor disliked his father” before the old man’s affair with Gladys Helmsley, his secretary and mistress (442). Sidney is the most outrageous figure in *Point Counter Point*. As a young man fresh from the university, he had exhibited great promise; handsome and athletic, he also had a glib way with words that appeared illustrative of his learning, and he would become master of a huge estate. Enchanted by all he seemed to be and offer, Rachel married him before she turned twenty, and her life after that became a blend of stoicism and devotion to Christianity; she assumes control of the household and estate as he proves increasingly incompetent, fraudulent, and over-sexed.

The combined influences of his parents on Philip led to his rebelling against their way of life and escaping from the kind of existence it foreboded for him; consequently, he turned inward to study life and write novels about it, focusing on ideas. His Notebook reveals his thoughts--and presumably Huxley’s--on writing a “novel of ideas” in which the “character of each personage must be implied . . . in the ideas of which he is the mouthpiece. . . . [Its] chief defect . . . is that you must write about people who have ideas to express, . . . [i.e.,] about .01 per cent. of the human race. Hence the real, the congenital novelists don’t write such books. But then, I never pretended to be a congenital novelist.” Then he added, “The great defect of the novel of ideas is that it’s a made-up affair . . . for people who can reel off neatly formulated notions aren’t quite real; they’re slightly monstrous” (351). Of course, this is precisely what Lawrence recognized when he called Rampion “a gas-bag.” Philip sees the problem, as Huxley surely did, but the

author seems to have disregarded it in modeling Rampion so closely on his view of Lawrence and thus created a caricature more than an authentic portrait. For Huxley, however, this was probably of little significance because as Peter Firchow observes of the ideas espoused by the various characters, they are present less for their intrinsic value than for their diversity, which allowed the author “to portray a large spectrum of as many points of view as possible” and represent contrapuntally “the isolation of his characters within their closed systems of thought” (Firchow 105).

Nonetheless, as individuals, some appear more credible than others. Like Rampion, Everard Webley also presses hard to make his case forcefully, and he is highly persuasive at times. Not only Elinor, but Philip, too, finds himself musing over Webley’s impressive image and commanding presence. After witnessing Webley astride his white horse at the head of his Freeman and comparing that recollection with a photograph of the leader he saw afterward, Philip has difficulty reconciling the two images; Webley spoke “nobly” and looked “monumental” in person on the horse. The photograph, however, makes him appear as a “cautionary scarecrow,” which leads Philip to wonder if the photo taken in one instant of a series can be so reductive or if his own impression is false. “Can the whole be something quite different from its parts?” Physically, yes, he says, but how about morally? This leads him to wonder, “Can a collection of low values make up a single high value?” (403).

If one considers this question with respect to *Point Counter Point* as a whole, the answer must decidedly be yes because in it a multitude of low moral values is exhibited through a society of individuals preoccupied with their own welfare, each with a distinct singular voice. Yet what comes of them all combined is a classic novel in which the



voices harmonize with the multiple themes and stories, and the society represented may be regarded, like the novel, as a composition of many parts, all mutually dependent. In this respect it resembles the fugal music of Bach and Beethoven, less lovely, perhaps, and less glorious, but no less true than they. “By means of the technique of counterpoint,” says Firchow, “Huxley skillfully manages to weave all these themes together, thereby developing a variety of characters and giving the novel a structural and thematic unity” (Firchow 102). Framed by the music, the contrapuntal melodies and harmonies of Bach and Beethoven resonate through the substance of the novel and mightily help to unify it. Peter Bowering observes that “[m]usic, in Huxley’s novels, is invariably a source of positive value,” and in *Point Counter Point* the Bach *Suite* and Beethoven *Quartet* are both presented as “supreme manifestations of the spiritual consciousness” (Bowering 89). To be sure, Huxley found his “ambitious novel” increasingly difficult and ever-more interesting to write because he was determined to present in a musical format a cross-section of British society and simultaneously infuse the form with the content of his fiction, making them coalesce harmoniously but not always with consonance. Although the harmony often becomes dissonant through Huxley’s irony, the dissonance deepens the narrative, and its overall effect is beneficial, not detrimental. He created a diversified community of generally eccentric, single-minded, often frustrated characters representing a panoply of ideas from the reasonable to the ludicrous, ideas attacked and defended in a series of intense conversations that make *Point Counter Point* a modified novel of ideas with formal innovations that place it on the edge of post-modernist construction. Ultimately he fulfilled his intentions with it, and it is now justly considered by many

readers to be his most successful and, apart from his dystopian *Brave New World* (1932), his most popular work of fiction.

## Endnotes

1. At the end of 1945, the same year that *The Perennial Philosophy* was published, Huxley responded to a graduate student who had written to ask him how the ideas in *Point Counter Point* were related to the form of the novel. Huxley explained: “The conclusion . . . is the concentrated expression of that kind of aesthetic mysticism which runs through the book and which is the analogue . . . of the ultimate, spiritual mysticism. Anyhow, it was through the aesthetic that I came to the spiritual—having begun by rejecting the spiritual in favour of the aesthetic and by identifying it with the aesthetic, making the part include the whole. The sense that even the highest art was not good enough, that if this was all it was a pretty poor thing to be man’s final end—this was, at bottom, the impelling motive” (30 Dec 45; *Letters* 538).

An excellent illustration in the novel of Huxley’s reference to mysticism here, some seventeen years after the fact, is the state that Marjorie Carling passes through after falling under the strong Christian influence of Rachel Quarles. “‘The Peace of God,’ she whispered, ‘the peace of God that passeth all understanding.’ Peace, peace, peace. . . .” “She felt as though she were melting into that green and golden tranquility [of the sunlit landscape], sinking and being absorbed into it, dissolving out of separateness into

union”(423). Marjorie’s experience here anticipates Spandrell’s similar response to Beethoven’s music in the final chapter.

2 In July 1922, Huxley wrote to his father that he and Maria planned “to go to Salzburg on the way to Italy, to hear the musical festivals--modern Chamber music Mozart opera” (sic, *Letters* 208). Had he the good fortune then to hear Mozart’s *String Quartet No. 19 in C Major* (K.465), he might have been astonished--and disturbed--over its contemporaneity among those “modern” compositions although written nearly 140 years earlier. David Dubal says that this “so-called *Dissonant* Quartet opens slowly with what was then [in the mid-1780s] an almost alarming display of dissonant chromaticism. Even Haydn was somewhat shocked at its audacity” (103). More specifically, Alan M. Kriegsman states:

The *C Major Quartet* has come to be known as the “*Dissonant*” because of its daring slow introduction, filled with startling “cross-relations” (A natural against A flat, for example, in the second measure), insistently chromatic voice-leading that presages much to come later in the quartet, and a disturbing harmonic ambiguity. . . . Even today, after all the dislocation our ears have been subjected to, all this sounds radical and strange. In Mozart’s day it sounded so strange that many of his admirers thought that the parts had been incorrectly printed.

Similarly in the third movement, the minuet, the “skyrocketing leaps in the first violin part are inverted in the distraught trio (in C minor) into dizzying, dissonant dives” (Kriegsman 11-12).

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