



McInroy & Wood

*“The heavens themselves, the planets and this centre
observe degree, priority and place
insisture, course, proportion, season form,
office, and custom, in all line of order.”*

- (Troilus and Cressida)

At a memorable concert last week, during the annual fountain of culture poured out by the Edinburgh Festival, Steven Isserlis played Elgar's cello concerto. It was composed in 1919 and the programme note referred to the work's air of resignation and regret at the passing of an age of tranquillity. For Elgar that meant the loss of classical form and structure in music and the arrival, with Schoenberg and the post-Romantics, of composers who burst through the conventional boundaries of artistic expression.

Audiences today are accustomed to modern idioms and the absence of classical structure, but, for all the interest in new music, festival-goers still require a core offering of established works, cast in familiar forms and grown from the roots of cultural understanding and experience which they all share. Aesthetic satisfaction derives in good measure from the orderliness and predictability in the structure of familiar works which can only evolve over generations. In the arts, it is structure which binds together the common experience and expresses it in a form which all can understand and enjoy.

Down the centuries nations have recognised the stabilising value of form and structure in their economic affairs no less than in the arts. Trading nations like Britain have often co-operated in designing structures within which to order their common objectives. Since the last war Robert Schuman's 1950 plan for a European Coal and Steel Community which became today's EEC, and the pending North American Free Trade Agreement have each expressed the common experience and shared ambition of the participants.

But a stable economic framework requires above all a stable currency, and upon that depends the realisation of all the economic and political ambitions.

The agreement forged at Bretton Woods in New Hampshire in 1944 and, more recently, the European Monetary System each reflected a desire among leading industrial nations – in Europe particularly Germany and France – to create a stable monetary framework for economic co-operation. Each brought benefits to the developed nations at least, but neither proved capable of adequate adjustment as the economies of the participants moved apart. No design for economic co-operation can be expected to endure unless it remains grounded in the practical experience of the members who conceive it. Otherwise the original vision becomes a phantom which, like a piece of contemporary music cast in a remote and unfamiliar idiom, will be perceived as idiotic and bizarre.

The difficulty is that however much nations may share a longing for economic stability, they cannot share the same heritage. Monetary agreements may point towards a future together, but money itself points to a divided past. The Queen's head, the American eagle, Mount Fuji are not just labels, but watermarks washed through the soul of a nation by the ebb and flow of its history. Each expresses a particular culture and a concern for sustaining it.

In post war years support for the Bretton Woods Agreement, and latterly the EMS, was fostered in successive periods by a shared commitment to European reconstruction, to countering the Communist threat, to coping with the shock of the oil crises, and to wringing inflation out of the leading

economies. None of those common problems survives today and the lack of a shared imperative has loosened the joints which held the structure of European co-operation together.

That is the weakness in the European partnership which currency speculators have rushed to exploit to the virtual destruction of the ERM, and a system designed to reflect and meet the desire for economic stability has become a focus of petty squabbling. The financial sector is in this context a destabilizing influence, as Monsieur Balladur has remarked, since it thrives on movement and turnover and, in pushing an inherently unstable structure to its own advantage, may cause the whole edifice to collapse. The City of London is hardly to be blamed for the result, any more than its European counterparts, though M. Balladur's misconception has had the hilarious effect of obliging the British Government, once pledged to defend the ERM at all costs, to congratulate the vandals for sacking its own citadel.

The tragedy is that we are unable to maintain a structure for economic co-operation and stability without being choked by the collar of necessity. Perhaps prosperity has somehow dimmed the vision of Europe – there are, after all, historians of art who see a parallel sadness in creative lives like that of Mendelssohn whose talent, in his 'teens as prodigious as Mozart's, seemed to wither with his wealth.

If the disjointed governments of Europe require a compelling reason to re-assemble a structure of economic and monetary co-operation they need look no further than the dole queues of Liverpool, Lyons and Hamburg. There is suffering on a scale which touches many and is recognised by all. Shared experience of unemployment and a commitment to tackling it could strengthen the structure of European co-operation sufficiently to support all the pressures of divergent cultures and competing instincts which are piled on top of it.

Amid the wreckage of the ERM and the disappointments and frustrations of a European community which has forgotten what once it held in common, yet yearns for prosperity within its frontiers, the language of the arts still speaks of shared experience and stable values. It can speak a message to the heart of Europe now.

In all music there is none more ordered, more confined by structure than that of Bach, who never wrote a note unless it conformed with his rules of harmonic invention. Yet far from limiting the expressive range of his music as one might suppose, the rigid structure somehow gives it a power and pathos expressive of the deepest human experience. It was to that structure and form which Elgar looked with such longing in 1919. If in 1993 the nations of Western Europe can recognise as clearly the value of the structures which are now being dismembered but which have expressed their ambitions and secured their prosperity for almost half a century, they may yet develop a system for living and working together as enduring as the music of Bach.

14th September 1993