

Composition is a Political Act

and in my vocabulary, the words
political,
cultural *social,* and

are all inextricably tangled.

What is the music, anyhow?

When I think back on

Significant Musical Experiences in my life, I don't
recall disembodied sounds,
but instead remember entire situations.

But music has been
traditionally treated
(at least in "western" cultures) as
this objective stuff
which can be prodded, processed, and theorized about
until the
essence is distilled into a colorless and odorless liquid.

The *sound*,

and the signifiers of the sound are

What's Important.

The periodic displacement of air molecules.
The waveform displayed upon the oscilloscope.
The dots on the paper.

Pay no heed to all that other stuff behind the curtain;
if it isn't *in the music*, then
it certainly doesn't count.

I remember one Music Theorist
(who bought heavily into this bizarrely positivist view of
What's Important)

complaining about the

"weird"

articles that had begun to appear
in the journal *Perspectives of New Music*

-- you know the ones,
the funny fonts,
the strange spacing and odd sentence syntax.

He claimed that he had
an infallible method for deciding
which articles were worth reading:

"I just look for the ones with the justified margins."

Does this formatting change what I am saying? In the context of this paper, probably not, because the formatting is no longer an implicit item. In the context of *Perspectives of New Music*, the formatting did have much to do with the content of the article. That's what I think those wildly formatted papers

were designed to show: that all the "extra stuff" was a vital part of the message being conveyed. An awareness of the larger frame in which human communication takes place was at least one of the items on the agenda.

And no wonder! This larger frame had been almost completely exorcised from the halls of Serious Musical Art. The creation and performance of music had become objectified beyond belief (really!). Of course, nearly all Real Musicians would agree that the content of music is derived (at least partially) from the context. But context here doesn't mean the great wide world of human interaction, instead it refers to this recursive, self-referential and diminished thing that we now call "the music". Any extra-musical associations or intersections are seen as exactly that -- *extra-musical*. What is the music, anyhow? It's in the sound, the periodic displacement of air molecules, the waveform displayed upon the oscilloscope; the dots on the paper. Right?

"By pointing to these [notes, sounds, theoretical constructions], I'm only using them to get at and point out features I hear *in the music*," claims the theorist. It always seems, however, that this act of pointing -- and the manner in which the pointing is done -- shifts the whole enterprise in a direction 180° opposite from what I hear and value in music. Not only is the music reduced to this pointable thing, but the act of pointing is considered to be this apolitical, asocial activity which is completely beyond context.

At this point in my notes for this paper, I have scribbled "Von Karajan". I don't entirely recall what I intended to write, but the man certainly resonates with these ideas about context.

Questions of Nazi activities aside, the mastery of political games (all in the service of the music) by the conductor is a textbook example of the cultural schizophrenia exhibited in the western classical tradition. We forgive all petty manipulations, all cold-blooded maneuvering, all inhumane

treatment of fellow beings as long as the Great Art Object is produced. What goes into this Object, and how can it be so neatly separated from the circumstances of its creation? For me, these are questions of survival. This attitude pervades our entire society.

How to achieve **SUCCESS** in **MUSIC**!!!!!!!

1. Write some **GOOD MUSIC**.
2. Have coffee, lunch, dinner with the **RIGHT PEOPLE**. This is how you get your **GOOD MUSIC** performed.
3. Apply for **GRANTS** so you can continue writing **GOOD MUSIC**.
4. Have coffee, lunch, dinner with the **RIGHT PEOPLE**. Be sure they know about the **GRANTS** you are seeking.
5. Enter **COMPETITIONS**.
6. The **RIGHT PEOPLE**. Perhaps you will win the **COMPETITIONS**. This will prove that you

write *GOOD MUSIC*.

7. Be certain to write all these things on your **RESUME**. Show this **RESUME** to the **RIGHT PEOPLE** whenever possible.

8. Rejoice in the fact that you have now achieved **SUCCESS**. You also have a lot of *GOOD MUSIC* to show for your efforts.

8a. These instructions most certainly have nothing to do with identifying the *GOOD* in your *GOOD MUSIC*.

8b. Neither do the **RIGHT PEOPLE**. You work in a vacuum.

One final story:

You walk into a record store,
and purchase a CD with Von Karajan conducting Great Composer X.
You've never heard of this Von Karajan fellow.

All you have is the sound.

That's all you need for your critical listening and judgement

Being brought up in our society, you realize what a concert is all about, you've been to enough orchestra events to know what goes on.

But all you have is the sound.

Naturally you have been immersed in enough of our culture to know what a maestro is -- you watched the Bugs Bunny cartoons when you were younger, you've seen the caricatures of Lenny Bernstein in different newspapers and magazines.

But now all you have is the sound. What's Important.

You also have an idea of what "musical genius" is all about, and you recognize that Artists are somehow exempt from social rules.

And the sound, the Object,

The periodic displacement of air molecules.
The waveform displayed upon the oscilloscope.
The dots on the paper.

that is What's Important.

When you start to play the game, what rules do you follow?

How is the game perpetuated?

What if you decide not to play?

And what does this have to do with the music?

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