

The Politics of Dissonance

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Abstract

This article, for want for a better term, is to be laid out much like an abstract composition interspersed with different fonts and sizes, arrows going this way and that, drawings of body parts, bones, muscle tissue, fossils. Use your discretion, or look for inspiration in the scores by John Cage, scores which are more like cubist or futurist art than they do musical compositions.

The idea is to create a collage of phrases, concepts and quotes that can be read like a composition, but individually, according to the discretion of the reader. It can also be read from right to left, top to bottom, on one's head, over the rim of a garden trowel, cut out and rearranged on a fridge or along the edge of a toothpick. It's a generative article, it may be possible to never have it read the same twice.

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"The entire history of tonal music ... amounts to an attempt to make people believe in a consensual representation of the world... In order to stamp upon the spectators the faith that there is a harmony in order. In order to etch in their minds the image of the ultimate social cohesion, achieved through commercial exchange and the progress of rational knowledge."¹

Music creates order out of noise, order out of chaos. Tonal music, the representation and repetition of its representation normalises the process and renders unto an audience a sense of social order. The notion that noise, that music, more specifically enharmonic and dissonant music, can "destroy a social order and replace it with another" poses perhaps the greatest resistance to new music, music that diminishes aural boundaries. So what?

Despite the chaos in pure, unadulterated noise, noise carries order within itself; it is host to new information. Jacques Attali suggests that, "...noise does in fact create meaning: first, because the interruption of a message signifies the interdiction of the transmitted meaning, signifies censorship and rarity; and second, because the very absence of meaning in pure noise or in the meaningless repetition of a message, by unchanneling auditory sensations, frees the listener's imagination... The presence of noise makes sense, makes meaning. It makes possible the creation of a new order on another level or organisation..."²

The perception is that unordered noise could unleash the imagination and thereby undermine the social order determined and maintained by capital. To be dissonant is to be noisy, but it may also be the most political sound one could make. To be dissonant may be to encourage independence from capital, to quest for new sounds and forms which cannot, by their very nature, be commodified into the process of capital.

"The status of music should be *at least* 50% creative production of new music (until the end of the 19th Century almost all the performed music was *new* music!) and 50% historical orientation and study through performances of traditional music. In a progressive society the proportion should even be 75% new and 25% old music. Otherwise music is not part of spiritual evolution."³

"There is always a danger that the relative freedom of art can render it meaningless. Yet it is this same freedom which allows art, and art alone, to express and preserve the profoundest expectations of a period [in history]."⁴

We will smash the old world
wildly
we will thunder
a new myth over the world.
We will trample the fence
of time beneath our feet.
We will make a musical scale
of the rainbow.⁵

¹ Attali, J, *The Political Economy of Music*, University of Minnesota Press, ISBN 0-8166-1286-2.

² Attali, J, *The Political Economy of Music*, University of Minnesota Press, ISBN 0-8166-1286-2.

³ Stockhausen, K (n.d.) *Towards a Cosmic Music*, Element Books, ISBN 1-85230-084-1.

⁴ Berger, J (n.d.) *Art and Revolution*, Granta Books.

⁵ Mayakovsky 1919-20, *The 150,000,000*. Translation by Anna Bostock.

Stockhausen prefers that the listener should be "constantly unable to see everything that is coming... Process does not exist if you deterministically foresee the end right from the beginning so that everything is really simultaneously present."⁶

"I think it's possible that our grandchildren will look at us in wonder and say, 'You mean you used to listen to exactly the same thing over and over again?'"⁷

It was in the service of the Italian court that Piero della Francesca (approx. 1420 - 1492) was to discover and render perspective into his paintings. From the 15th Century on, the body became suspended in space, measurable, quantifiable space. Piero changed the future of two dimensional surfaces. He served his patrons well.

So to did Bach, but not without some degree of malice. Charged on occasion by his "most gracious Count and Master, Anthon Gunther,"⁸ for over-composing, Bach went on to open the musical ear to new dimensions in sound.

Both he and Piero shared more than art in common. Both were contracted as domestics, their bodies belonging entirely to a lord to whom they owed their labour.⁹ This relationship also determined the direction of their art, whether they could develop as artists or not. Others were not as fortunate as Piero and Bach, the latter who struggled with his creativity and the demands of his employers. We know less of Piero's relations with his patrons than we do of Bach's.

Despite the creative limitations of their tenure, their art become not only influential, it survived the political economy of artist-valet well into the 20th Century.

How to be Forgotten as the Least Known Composer

1. Never sign a record contract.
2. Avoid popularity. Popularity is commodification. It means repetition. Repetition is the death of music. Never let it die.
3. Never play the same melody twice.
4. Compose only for yourself.
5. Play music where it has never been played before (eg. behind your fridge).
6. Don't play your music to anyone.
7. Never make copies of your music.
8. Enjoy your creative freedom.

⁶ Stockhausen, K (n.d.) *Towards a Cosmic Music*, Element Books, ISBN 1-85230-084-1.

⁷ Eno, B 1996, Opal.

⁸ David and Mendel, *Bach Reader* (Johann Sebastian Bach's work contract).

⁹ Attali, J, *The Political Economy of Music*, University of Minnesota Press, ISBN 0-8166-1286-2.