

Can Music (Still) Be Critical?

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Abstract:

This dissertation attempts a critique of music's potential for critique, focusing in particular on the extent to which music can make a critical intervention within an 'extra-musical', socio-political situation. I begin by outlining some of the ways in which political music has attempted such an intervention over the last century, focusing on three musical 'affordances' which can be used to argue both for music's political potential and its essentially apolitical nature. I aim to show that it is always possible to 'listen in spite of' any political content, as a result of a self-definition of 'the music itself', which necessitated the turn to 'immanent critique' by the 'critical composition' movement of the '60s and '70s. By identifying certain transcendent criteria within this musical auto-critique, I suggest that this approach also artificially limits the critical potential of music, through the affirmation of an uncritiqued definition of 'music' through which its auto-critique remains possible. Instead, I propose an alternative model of musical critique which acknowledges and makes use of these limitations, which can be related to what Harry Lehmann has called 'critical modernism'. While still limited, this model is more reflexive and more adaptable than some of the previous strategies of musical critique.

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Can Music (Still) Be Critical?

While the title of this essay promises a critique of musical critique, one of the main objects of this critique – the historically-recognised category of ‘critical composition’ – is in fact defined by its concerted attempts at auto-critique, meaning that this essay will partly be a critique of music’s critique of itself. I aim to explore the limits of music’s criticality, particularly in relation to the possibility of music making a critical intervention into what we might recognise as the ‘socio-political’ sphere. The idea that music can be ‘political’ – can be somehow ‘to do with’ politics or broader social issues, or can even function as an agent for change in an ‘extra-musical’ sphere – is as widespread as it is contested, but the notion of ‘political music’ has a particularly ambivalent relationship with ‘critical composition’. In some ways, the music that is most actively self-critical is also the music that is most sceptical towards its wider ‘political’ potential.

I begin this essay by providing a background to these two terms, outlining some of the problems of ‘political music’ and the ways in which ‘critical composition’ aimed to deal with these. I then force the two terms to confront each other, in order to show the extent to which the project of critical composition relies on certain uncritiqued definitions of ‘political’ and ‘music’ to function as normative criteria. This actually ends up precluding the kind of transformative critique of disciplinarity and value that might enable music to perform an effective critique within a new situation outside of the autonomous new music field to which its efficacy is often restricted. My proposition is that the most important task for critical music is to criticise the limits of its own criticality, predicated on the belief that the real possibility of ‘political music’ would be desirable. This would mean critiquing the process of the (re-)definition of music’s structuring disciplinarity which prescribes (and proscribes) what kind of critique music is able to perform while still remaining ‘music’.¹

¹ See J Butler, ‘Critique, Dissent, Disciplinarity’, in K de Boer & R Sonderegger (eds.), *Conception of Critique in Modern and Contemporary Philosophy* (Basingstoke: Pallgrave Macmillan, 2012) for a discussion of the role of ‘critique of critique’ in questions of disciplinarity.

In the second part of the essay, I suggest an alternative approach, using work by Corey Dargel, Lars von Trier/Björk, and Johannes Kreidler, to construct a model which proposes the use of political music's own immanent contradictions against itself, in a way that inoculates against some of the potential limitations of musical critique. I relate this model to a new theory of aesthetics proposed by Harry Lehmann, in connection to the current possibilities of a new '*Gehalt*-oriented aesthetic', as a clear escape route from postmodernism and its threatened neutralisation of critique. I conclude with a few further critical thoughts on the limits of this new critical model.

'Political Music'

To the extent that 'all music is political', in that music is a social and historical category, formulated over time by those with the power to formulate such categories, it can be ambiguous to attempt to talk about 'political music'. As it is embedded in social practices, institutions and discourses, so music is implicated within situations, the apparent 'consistency' of which – the possibility of recognising them and talking about them – relies on the inclusion and exclusion of some elements: the delimitation of borders, the internalisation and concealment of certain assumptions and reified concepts.² These in turn, as with any social situation, have been established and are maintained by those with the requisite power, and the sheer possibility of apprehending the contingency of a situation, let alone the possibility of changing it, is implicated in the distribution of power within that situation. In this way, music is already involved with politics on the level of relationships between composer, performer and audience, between institutions on a national level, within broader 'cultural scenes', and in relation to state funding and arts policy.

To talk about 'political music', however, normally means talking about music which explicitly involves itself with a socio-political struggle which is imagined to be 'extra-musical'. Often this is done with the help of text or some

² I use the term 'situation' in accordance with Alain Badiou in his *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (London: Verso, 2012). Here he posits the following thesis: 'All humanity has its root in the identification in thought of singular situations. There is no ethics in general. There are only – eventually – ethics of processes by which we treat the possibilities of a situation.' Badiou (2012) 16

other more concrete (visual or theatrical) referent. Other times, the functionality of certain musics are referenced – national anthems or folk songs, protest songs or military music – in order to summon up musical connotations which can then be framed through development of material. The question can then be asked whether all these attempt to commit music to a particular political purpose or project can be understood as *critical*. Certainly, there are many examples which might be understood as ‘emancipatory’: this might range from spirituals and protest songs to the use of toyi-toyi chants in anti-Apartheid protests. Others which could be considered ‘utopian’; by configuring, in musical structures or practices, ideal social relations (between creators, performers or audience members), music can be heard to represent, prefigure or enact these relations, as applicable to the wider world. This can be found in recent, politicised musical practices such as raves and drum circles.

Critique is, of course, implicated in both these attitudes, in that they rely on a negative attitude towards real existing circumstances to articulate the positive aspects of the changes they propose. In fact, as Rainer Nonnenmann suggests, ‘critique can be generalised so far as to say that every strong and authentic experience of beauty, love, joy, freedom and fulfillment, or conversely or ugliness, hatred, unhappiness, oppression and emptiness, can be understood as a critique of existing living conditions’.³ In fact, any kind of attempt at an ‘original’ artistic gesture could be understood as critical in that, by affirming its own necessity, it also comments on the incompleteness of the world (or the world’s self-understanding) before its own becoming. The question then returns to the particularity of the situation: within which situation is the critique being made, and what configurations of knowledge are being disturbed? Moreover, are there critiques that can be made within situations which don’t already acknowledge their own musical ‘critiquability’: the *a priori* possibility or legitimacy of music’s critical involvement within them, which is already integrated within the situation’s self-understanding and therefore effectively foreclosed?

³ R Nonnenmann, ‘The Dead End as a Way Out – Critical Composition: a Historical Phenomenon?’, in C-S Mahnkopf (ed.) *Critical Composition Today* (Hofheim: Wolke, 2006) 105

I would argue that there is a more fundamental way in which critique is inherent in all purportedly 'political' music, which requires a more careful analysis of what we mean by 'music'. Despite the many potential examples of political music, there are just as many (if not more) examples of statements claiming music's inherent 'apolitical' nature. Music is supposed to essentially resist political signification (or, indeed, any concrete signification), meaning that the very assertion of a piece of music's 'political' status must imply a critique of this prominent understanding of music (and vice versa – the assertion of music's apolitical 'nature' implies a critique of *all* so-called 'political music').⁴

Strangely enough, both positions for and against the political potential of music can be derived from the same 'affordances' that are inherent to music as a medium. By introducing some of these affordances, and some of the ways they can be deployed and contested, I hope to demonstrate the basic level of criticality that is already at work in any positioning of music as (a)political:

1. Music constitutes a 'translucent', temporal 'vessel' in which to place other materials: Music unfolds through time, and in the sense that its identity is commonly understood as constituting a certain period of time (i.e. 'this piece is eight minutes long': 'this piece = the sounds (or 'music') contained within these eight minutes'), it can be heard as staking out a temporal terrain within which other things can potentially happen. To listen to music 'successfully', within Western art music culture at least, is to be attentive for a certain period of time, and to apprehend everything that can be apprehended within that time, attempting to connect it structurally to an imagined whole. In this way, the capturing and encoding of other people's time – known as 'music' – affords space to present ideas, texts and voices which might otherwise be ignored for want of time or attention.

At the same time, the practice of musical performance/listening which prescribes close attentiveness to (sound) objects within a particular frame, also overcodes all these sound objects as formal elements of a 'musical work', which

⁴ See J Shepherd & P Wicke, *Music and Cultural Theory* (London: Polity, 1997) for an investigation into the limits of music's claims to representation, signification and communication. See E Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful: A Contribution Towards the Revision of the Aesthetics of Music* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1986) for a formative account of music's apolitical character.

itself maintains certain *a priori* criteria of judgement, in order to preserve its identity as such (i.e. as a 'work'/as 'music'). The 'musical vessel' is not transparent but 'translucent', and can readily be detached (by listening to 'the sounds themselves', which might also be 'the music itself'). In this way, music with political content can be heard *in spite of* this content. Such a listening is actually encouraged, I'd argue, through the priority of 'work-oriented listening' over 'content-oriented listening' in modern music, whereby it is the relation *between* sounds and non-sounds (or sounds and 'meanings') which constitutes the identity and the value of the work, and certainly not the content (whether linguistic, visual, semiotic, affective) or the 'meaning' itself. In this sense, we are encouraged to listen to music in spite of its nonmusical content, and judge it as such, in order to ensure that it is still good, or still 'works', as 'just music'.⁵

2. Music has an 'immediate', 'visceral', 'affective' impact on the listener: The fact that music always, to a certain extent, produces an 'emotional' response, and often also even more 'direct' physical responses (from dancing and crying, to covering one's ears or feeling nauseous), has been held up as evidence that it can bypass 'intellectual' cognitive faculties and, in this way, cannot be entered into a rational dialogue with more concrete concepts or arguments (whether these are philosophical, cultural or socio-political).⁶ Other theorists have attempted to show that music doesn't genuinely communicate or elicit emotions *qua* the emotions that we might recognise from day-to-day life, but merely reproduces the 'formal' structure or dynamic of these emotions.⁷ This affords the possibility for music to be used as an incredibly powerful political tool, creating collective identities (imaginary affects for imaginary communities) that bind as much as they exclude, and it has been used extensively in the

⁵ Sumanth Gopinath describes some of the ways in which the critical potential of Steve Reich's early tape piece *Come Out* (1966) is adversely affected by the music's inclusion in a historicist 'avant-garde' discourse, focusing on the innovative aspects of the processing of the voice (a recording of the wrongly-convicted Daniel Hamm, one of the Harlem Six), rather than the political implications of this very processing. See S Gopinath, 'The Problem of the Political in Steve Reich's *Come Out*', in R Adlington (ed.) *Sound Commitments: Avant-garde Music and the Sixties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)

⁶ See S Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, affect, and the ecology of fear* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009) for some of the coercive, violent capabilities of musical affectivity.

⁷ Most significantly, Hanslick (1986).

articulation of nationalist identities.⁸ But it also prevents the music from guarding against its own 'misuse', which – after noting the propaganda value of certain 'great' German composers in Nazi Germany, most iconically the use of Wagner in Leni Riefenstahl's film *Triumph of the Will* (1935) – many composers considered a priority.

Two of the most prominent 'political' composers of the twentieth century – Luigi Nono and Hans Werner Henze – relied on the combination of these two affordances in their compositional praxis. They included content pertaining to the various political struggles occurring across the globe around the end of the '60s and early '70s. For Nono this often involved using real voices of oppressed people and revolutionaries in his tape pieces, while for Henze it often involved the incorporation of explicit narrative and texts in opera and cantatas.⁹ Both composers incorporated this content within 'advanced' (atonal, dense, complex) stylistic languages, which can nevertheless be heard to encompass an affirmative mediation of the content (inscribing it with its own emotional interpretation). David Ryan identifies a common feature in the approaches of these composers in that they 'focus on political music as a form of representation':

They each require an 'image' of their subject matter to be projected through the music. In Nono's case it is the dramatic embodiment of the text that creates a vivid revolutionary subject, if one 'enters' into the music in the right spirit. Therefore, the tradition of Italianate opera and earlier vocal music are palpable influences on the moulding of such musical vividness. In Henze's case, it is the romantic struggle of the composer *as subject*, an expressionist position that looks back to, say, Beethoven as a model... These positions are, in order to inscribe their representations within the music, reliant on existent musical rhetorics... they have to plug into these rhetorical modes.¹⁰

The result is a kind of 'affirmative critique', similar to how Ruth Sonderegger characterises Jacques Rancière's conception of critique:

⁸ This affordance of music is discussed extensively in M Cobussen & N Nielsen, *Music and Ethics* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2012)

⁹ For explicitly *critical* examples from each, see Nono's *A floresta é jovem e cheja de vida* (1966), protesting US imperialism in Vietnam, and Henze's *Der langwierige Weg in die Wohnung der Natascha Ungeheuer* (1971), skewering so-called 'armchair revolutionaries'.

¹⁰ D Ryan, 'Changing the System: Indeterminacy and Politics in the Early 1970s', in S Chase & P Thomas (eds.), *Changing the System: The Music of Christian Wolff* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010) 164

This type of critique seeks to retrieve forgotten, hidden or invisible acts of critique and movements of resistance by writing about them or by publishing manifestos, letters and poems that testify to critical acts. Rancière's critique is affirmative to the extent that it emphasises the actuality of critique, and critical insofar as it questions theories such as [Pierre] Bourdieu's for ignoring actually existing forms of critique and resistance.¹¹

In this sense, a composer like Nono can be heard to fulfil Rancière's call for 'the production of a double effect' in 'suitable political art'.¹² The 'readability of a political signification' (the inclusion of voices of protest) is combined with 'a sensible or perceptual shock caused, conversely, by the uncanny, by that which resists signification'. This latter effect is produced by the dislocated forms, electronic manipulations and fragmented structure of his tape pieces, which should be considered an attempt at a 'recasting of the distribution of the sensible, a reconfiguration of the given perceptual forms', in terms of what constitutes meaningful musical material, and the relationship between elements in a recognisable musical work.

This approach to political music still proved incredibly problematic, however. The representational or affirmative dimension of their musical treatment, which mediates and processes content that might be considered critical within a wider, non-musical, socio-political situation, can just as easily be enjoyed or appreciated in spite of this content. The fact that the 'emotions' (of anguish, fear or defiance) supposedly connected with the content are included in the music can allow listeners to identify with and enjoy these reified 'emotions' regardless of their supposed 'cause' in the music. The 'emotion' is not produced in the listener by the music, but is included in the music already. Ironically, perhaps, the fact that we can detach emotions and enjoy them, means it is possible to reconnect this ratified music with an image of 'the politics of the day'. We are able to enjoy Henze's and Nono's music as 'reflecting' or 'dealing with' the politics of their time (i.e. a historically-distanced, romanticised period), without

¹¹ R Sonderegger, 'Negative versus Affirmative Critique: On Pierre Bourdieu and Jacques Rancière', in K de Boer & R Sonderegger (eds.), *Conception of Critique in Modern and Contemporary Philosophy* (Basingstoke: Pallgrave Macmillan, 2012) 254-255

¹² J Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2004) 63

any sense that music should be critically applicable to our own situation. Rather than the idea that the music might attempt an active, transformative critique (which in relation to the 'failed' politics of 1968 could be deemed 'naïve'), it is possible to recognise generalised 'affects' – like pain and dismay – and then link them biographically to possible causes, which is more in keeping with our understanding of how music 'should' function.

3. Music has an immanent, autonomous, self-contained 'language' of its own: Music is perceived to cohere as a medium, even after the destruction of common-practice tonality which prescribed a kind of quasi-'physical' logic to the necessity of musical movement, relationships and processes.¹³ This autonomy – music's immanence of meaning – is commonly referred to as music's fundamental apolitical core. However, the retention of this very medium is only guaranteed through the retention of a certain listening practice – or 'tonally-determined perceptual behaviour' – which must functionally exclude elements of the musical experience in order to know what to include (i.e. 'that violin tone is part of the piece; that cough from the person sitting next to you isn't').¹⁴ However, many of the common metaphors by which the coherence of a musical medium – and the possibility of listening to and recognising something called 'music' – is guaranteed (i.e. the way in which the 'organisation' (of sounds) is conceptualised) afford relations to be made with similar organisational structures in the real world. The way this occurs could be seen as 'isomorphic', 'archetypal', 'translational', 'homologous', 'symbolic', 'metaphorical', 'analogical', 'reflective', 'mimetic' or 'iconic', among other similar terms, depending on which metaphor is being used.

Two particularly common quasi-metaphorical fields, by which music is related to other situations, are *language* (expression, communication, dialogue, conversation) and *work* (sound production, 'performance', cooperation,

¹³ See H Lehmann, 'Avant-garde Today: A Theoretical Model of Aesthetic Modernity', in C-S Mahnkopf (ed.) *Critical Composition Today* (Hofheim: Wolke, 2006) for his concept of the musical 'material' of tonality and its relation to the musical work.

¹⁴ Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf characterises theories of music's essential, areferential autonomy as 'imminentist', unpacking some of the fallacies of this theoretical tendency in his 'What Is the Meaning of Musical Substance?', in C-S Mahnkopf, F Cox & W Schurig (eds.), *Substance and Content in Music Today* (Hofheim: Wolke, 2014)

transformation of (musical) material). In the 1960s and '70s, a particular strain of critical-utopian musical practice emerged, responding to a renewed emphasis on 'ideas of activity and practice for the New Left', which led to a replacement of 'cultural practice (corresponding to theory) with *political* practice (i.e. action)'.¹⁵ American composers like Christian Wolff and Fredric Rzewski (along with his ensemble Musica Elettronica Viva) – as well as Louis Andriessen in Amsterdam, and the musicians behind the mixed-ability Scratch Orchestra and free improvisation group AMM in the UK – were all developing a critique of contemporary music that focused on the relations of production.¹⁶ Their music proposed, instead, a reconfiguration of these real relations (i.e. between performers, composers, audience members, musical institutions and other actors within a specifically *musical* situation), which – through a certain iconicity – can be understood as *referring* to other relations (for example, in relation to 'language' (the public sphere) or work (the organisation of labour)). Common to these projects was the opening up of musical ensembles to amateurs and 'non-musicians' – removing the often financially and culturally inaccessible levels of 'required skills' for people to be involved in creating music – and, frequently, the removal of the figure of the conductor and composer completely, to explore improvisational situations. Often the divide between audience and performers would also be dissolved, so the 'music' constituted the process rather than the sonic result.

These 'utopian' demonstrations took on critical potential in opposition to the normalised system of musical production and reception, yet Christian Wolff, for one, recognised the precariousness of the 'metaphorical' dimension of this approach: how to guarantee its extrapolation from a strictly musical to a more generally political situation. He began to insert concrete political texts into these pieces 'to avoid what he felt occurred in the libertarianism of earlier pieces (reflective of social movements of the time)'.¹⁷ As he wrote: 'The communal

¹⁵ B Kutschke 'Aesthetic Theories and Revolutionary Practice: Nicolaus A. Huber and Clytus Gottwald in Dissent', in R Adlington (ed.) *Sound Commitments: Avant-garde Music and the Sixties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 89

¹⁶ Some examples include Andriessen's *Workers Union* (1975) and Rzewski's *Les Moutons de Panurge* (1974).

¹⁷ Ryan (2010) 165

movements ... were essentially apolitical, that is, they set out to practice social alternatives without any coherent plan for changing society as a whole, and in the end would be compelled to depend on it.” In pieces like his *Changing the System* (1972-73), which combined an ‘anarchist’ relations of production with a text taken from a *Rolling Stone* interview with student activist Tom Hayden, emphasising the importance of total systemic overhaul in order to produce real social changes, there was a necessary metaphorical dimension to the music relations explored within the piece.¹⁸

And yet, by affirming this ‘metaphorical’ aspect to the piece, using it in its entirety to make a political statement, the work-character of the piece is also reaffirmed. These works *do* have an implied audience beyond the performers involved, as well as a single author (the composer) organising the intended ‘meaning’ of the work. Whatever freedom there might be within the work is merely there to fulfil the intended overall expression of the work’s meaning. So there is a ‘have cake/eat cake’ situation between an insular communal music whose identity is genuinely formed in the moment of its collective production by an egalitarian band of composer-performer-listeners, and works which instrumentalise these relations as metaphors to make broader political statements.

Critical Composition

In all of these cases, as with much political art, the limitations of the critical reach of political music – on the one hand, the inexorability of its critical intent, on the other hand, the extent to which this critique can be extended into other situations that aren’t perceived as ‘intra-musical’ – are drawn by the disciplinarity of music itself. This pertains to our understanding of what music has to be in order for us to still consider it music, as well as what ‘art music’ – as an art form – has to be in order for us to still consider it art. The location of

¹⁸ Hayden’s text is as follows: ‘Well don’t make the same mistake that we made, of thinking that the Peace Corps or the New Frontier was the simple answer, that you could find a place for yourself in there and use new, modern imagination to solve the problems of the poor people of the world, because that would be a misreading of the possibilities of working within the system. It’s the system itself that sets the priorities that we have, that distorts the facts, that twists our brains and therefore the system would have to be changed in order to change priorities and to make it possible to really see what’s happening. That’s the danger.’ Cited in Ryan (2010)

music's identity (and value) in 'the sounds themselves' both permits and encourages listeners to test their response to 'the music itself' by ignoring any 'non-musical' content, meaning that a critical intervention into a 'non-musical' political situation, which is enacted on the level of that content, is not part of 'the music'. This fundamentally problematises the idea of 'political music', suggesting that such examples of 'political music' can also just be 'music' (i.e., by definition, apolitical music), meaning that the music isn't *essentially* political. This makes 'political music' – music which becomes itself through its very 'political-ness' – a contradiction and an impossibility.

'Critical composition' – as espoused by West German composers like Helmut Lachenmann, Nicolaus A. Huber and Matthias Spahlinger between the late 1960s and the '90s – was an approach that acknowledged this particular problem. These composers aimed to critique this very definition of music, by making apparent (and thereby de-naturalising) the way in which the music is produced, received and interpreted: what Lachenmann termed music's 'aesthetic apparatus'.

According to Rainer Nonnenmann, critical composition can be defined in that it

1. reflects upon the historical and social categories and standards of music and musical listening;
2. seeks to question these predeterminations and overcome them where necessary;
3. intends to reach a critical self-awareness by breaking through conventional mechanisms of perception;
4. avoids progressions found in the traditional musical language through the use of conceptual-constructive means of organisation;
5. aims for a unity of concrete acoustic sound-structures and formal sequences;
6. relies on the belief that every material-immanent critique also has individually and socially emancipatory implications and can have, at least indirectly, an enlightening (in the broadest sense) effect on listeners.¹⁹

¹⁹ Nonnenmann (2006) 89

A good example can be found in Lachenmann's earlier pieces, in what he has called his 'aesthetics of refusal', which involves removing all the 'clichés' of expression – clear instrumental tones, recognisable performance actions with familiar sonic results – and leaving only the sounds 'around' those absent tones.²⁰ This might be click of fingernails on piano keys, the gentle ring of a string pressed on a fingerboard, the tap of a bow against the neck of the instrument, the breath of the singer: all 'noises' which would otherwise be filtered out from the configuration of sounds understood as 'music'. Nonnenmann calls these the 'mechanical-energetic preconditions of sound production' which 'divest philharmonic euphony of its fetishisation and make it clear that music is not a special sphere removed from concrete materiality and societal work'.²¹

This is some indication of a way in which Lachenmann approaches the sixth of the above statements: the 'belief' in the notion that this kind of critique can and will be translated somehow into broader social situations. This 'belief' is crucial to critical composition's functioning as anything other than a particularly self-reflexive, autonomist wing of the musical avant-garde. In fact, this belief is founded on Adorno's own philosophy of the avant-garde, which situates its critical potential precisely within its very autonomy.²² Adorno's critical 'sociology of music' relies on a Marxist affirmation of the 'historically conditioned nature of the perceived object and the perceiving subject', which renders the composer's very engagement with the (historically-sedimented) musical material as an 'engagement with society'.²³ This fundamental tenet is augmented by a praxis influenced by Herbert Marcuse, whereby 'the change of perceptual behaviour' is the 'central aesthetic and at once social concern of art'.²⁴ Because of art's potential 'affirmative character' – as an 'idealising refuge that prevents practical change – the art itself needs to '[break] with the familiar routine of

²⁰ Paradigmatic works of this type include *Pression* for cello (1969-70), *Guero* for piano solo (1970), and *Gran Torso* for string quartet (1972).

²¹ Nonnenmann (2006) 99

²² See T Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984)

²³ Nonnenmann (2006) 91. Adorno's most straightforward articulation of his application of critical theory to music can be found in T Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music* (New York: Continuum, 2004)

²⁴ *ibid.* 92

seeing, hearing, feeling and understanding, and [make] the individual and society receptive to the “potential forms of a non-aggressive, non-exploitative world.”²⁵

There is therefore a pedagogical aspect to critical composition, which takes the critique of a *musical* aesthetic apparatus as exemplary of the ways in which other situations might be critiqued, and to cultivate a more general critical attitude. It is, however, a necessary criterion of critical composition that it denies the possibility of music’s enacting any critique outside of its own material; the critique of music is a critique of music’s pretences to that effect. In opposition to composers like Nono and Henze, the critical composers ‘sought to break through and render visible the socio-historically determined mechanisms of expression and effect’, showing how these ‘only serve to channel reception and obstruct any true self-experience on the listener’s part’.²⁶ Lachenmann attested to this view explicitly: ‘Composing music to “change society”: that is a hypocritical, or – more sympathetically – a quixotic notion. To the extent that it makes its central goal that of proclaiming something to the listeners – let alone the masses – or politically activating them, music has a reactionary effect.’²⁷

In circumventing the usual pitfalls of political music, the critical composers also delimit the potential for a political music to make a critical intervention beyond its own intra-musical situation, by affirming that the only socio-political criticism that music is capable of *must be* through its own immanent criticism. But in order for this criticism to be in any way generalisable, one already has to subscribe to a materialist philosophy, after Adorno, which equates the musical material with society, or else construct such a philosophy by oneself, in *learning* to apply the criticality encouraged by this music to other aesthetic or social situations. The problem with subscribing to these as legitimate, socially-generalisable ends is that they require the listener to already be aware of the need for such criticism and to already acknowledge music’s critical potential. As Nonnenmann admits, “critical composition” can only find

²⁵ Nonnenmann (2006) 93, see H Marcuse, ‘On the Affirmative Character of Culture’, in *Aufsätze und Vorlesungen 1848-69* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1984)

²⁶ Nonnenmann (2006) 95

²⁷ Helmut Lachenmann, cited in Nonnenmann (2006) 95

fulfillment in critical listening, for only when listeners themselves become self-reflexively active can music develop its full critical potential'.²⁸

Most importantly, in order to hear critical composition as 'music critiquing itself', the resulting work must remain 'music'. It cannot lapse into 'just noise' or any other kind of 'not music'. This reaction would only result in an *affirmation* of the aesthetic apparatus. This is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, it requires the listener to already have a definition of music that is able to stretch to encompass these new works *as* music, in order for them to have an impact on the definition of the category of 'music'. The other problem is that some element must be maintained, in order to position the critical work as 'music' so that its dissident elements are understood as relating to music. It is difficult for critical music to be a painting, or a tapestry, or a sandwich. Lachenmann makes a point of including typical orchestral instruments, and even makes references to traditional genres and forms, while frustrating the expectations associated with them.²⁹ However, the criteria by which the work can and cannot be positioned as music in this way cannot then be critiqued by this music. As Nonnenmann writes, Adorno himself emphasised 'the relational correspondence between the "determinate negation" [by which such critique functions] and the "determinate position" of the material. In order to erode the material's existing occupations, these must first be posited as points of reference'.³⁰ Critical composition must affirm a certain definition of music in order to critique music.

One would hope that such an affirmation could be done with full reflexivity, but there are two limiting factors – one external and one internal – that prevent such a reflexivity, as well as critical composition realizing its critical potential. The first, as mentioned before, is music's disciplinarity. Those criteria of music which safeguard it as a discipline (as distinct from visual art, the rest of culture and life in general) must be maintained in order for such a thing as critical composition (or any composition) to exist. Functionally, this means – on

²⁸ Nonnenmann (2006) 94

²⁹ See, for example, his piano concerto *Ausklang* (1984-85), or his clarinet concerto *Accanto* (1975-76), which even features a tape of Mozart's clarinet concerto playing silently throughout the performance.

³⁰ Nonnenmann (2006) 107

the one hand – *sound* as a remainder or surplus, the trace result of any musical action, which is the irreducible criterion that prevents music from falling into visual art or performance art. On the other hand, it is the figure of the expressive composing subject, who has created the work, which is what maintains music's identity within the social sphere of 'art' as established, in relation to our own (bourgeois individualist) understanding of ourselves as subjects. The piece must also retain its work-character, and cohere together as a fragmented whole, relying on the 'force-field' which, for Adorno, made Schoenberg's work an imperfect, shattered totality rather than a series of individual and intriguing sounds.³¹ This, again, is easy to disregard if you don't first 'learn' to listen in this way, pre-empting music's critical dimension, but instead with 'fetishising' listening habits, which Lachenmann himself has lamented in terms of the 'exploiting tourism' of the next generation of composers, rediscovering his once-negativistic anti-sounds as affirmative and interesting sound objects in their own right.³² In order for an immanent musical critique to exist, it must be *composed*, and retain the criteria which allows for such a practice to be identified as such.

The other, internal limit is the extent to which the composers themselves have internalised a certain transcendental belief in music's potential which they implicitly contrast with the 'false consciousness' of tonality, or a 'tonally-determined' listening practice.³³ Nonnenmann himself illustrates this poignantly when he talks about Nicolaus A. Huber's belief that tonality 'had become music's second nature for centuries', which begs the question what music's first nature is supposed to be.³⁴ Nonnenmann goes on to make the suggestion that, far from being an end in itself, critical composition is 'conceived as an offer of new sonic and auditory experience, with the goal of a liberated music and a form of listening liberated from its preformations'.³⁵ This notion of a liberated music is reminiscent of the implicit notion of an 'un-alienated' world that underpins much of the Frankfurt School's critique: the unspoken idea that the world, which has

³¹ Nonnenmann (2006) 101

³² Cited in E Hockings, 'Helmut Lachenmann's Concept of Rejection', in *Tempo*, New Series, No. 193, German Issue (Jul., 1995) 6

³³ Nonnenmann (2006) 92

³⁴ *ibid.* 97

³⁵ *ibid.* 100

become successively more alienated through modernity, could and should 'return' to this state.³⁶

It is my belief that both the external (disciplinary) and internal (ideological) limits of critical composition rely upon and reproduce a definition of music which in turn affirms and reproduces its own possibilities and limitations, regarding its potential to intervene in other, extra-musical situations. Critical composition can only enact its criticism by affirming the autonomous nature of music, and can only claim its wider political import by defining music's relation to society and history in a particular way. Critical composition's inability to critique these aspects means that it ends up uncritically denying music any further critical power, and reproducing definitions of 'music' and 'political' which limit music's relevance to a particular situation, or enable and encourage the defusing of critique. Considering the fact that music is a wholly artificial, historical category that could mean *anything*, that many social phenomena that we'd identify as 'music' in other cultures even today are understood in completely different terms (which implicates them in very different political and social situations and affords them different levels of critique in these situations), and that in some other cultures, the practice of what we would consider as 'music' is censored or banned because of a real fear by those in power of its critical potential, the kind of statements that these composers make regarding the essential, natural limits of musical critique and its potential for broader political intervention seem, in turn, highly uncritical.

One relatively early instance of a composer seeming to recognise this terminal predicament was Nicolaus A. Huber, with his piece *Harakiri* (1970), intended as the suicide (or murder) of music. The piece consists of four discrete elements: a long pedal drone on slackened strings, producing a dull hiss sound; a long orchestral crescendo; a thunderclap and rainstorm sound effect; and, finally, a spoken declaration condemning the use of crescendos in music. The piece was commissioned by Clytus Gottwald, who was the new music producer at the S ddeutscher Rundfunk in Stuttgart, but on receiving it he refused to perform it,

³⁶ See F Freyenhagen, 'Adorno's Critique of Late Capitalism: Negative, Explanatory and Practical', in K de Boer & R Sonderegger (eds.), *Conception of Critique in Modern and Contemporary Philosophy* (Basingstoke: Pallgrave Macmillan, 2012) for a critique of Adorno's philosophy along these lines.

kicking off a high-profile debate between composer and commissioner as to the value of the piece. Gottwald claimed the piece was 'not a composition, but directed against composition'.³⁷ According to Beate Kutschke's account of the debate,

[Huber] encouraged Gottwald's interpretation by creating the impression that *Harakiri* was opposed to music and that he intended to abolish composition in general. "In *Harakiri*, the acoustical event does not establish itself immediately as music. In this respect it is *not* music. By avoiding congruence between what can be heard and music, I made it difficult to mistake what are presented as *elements* of music as music itself".³⁸

Gottwald, who was an Adornian of the 'negativist' critical composition school, replied to Huber: 'If composing, in your view, has become impossible, such an impossibility needs to be *composed*: one should not dodge it' [my italics].³⁹ This paradoxical exhortation unwittingly captures the impotence of critical composition strategies in the manner of Lachenmann. Huber instead wanted the piece to function as the public denunciation of the possibility of critical composition:

Compositional problems are altogether pseudo-problems; they are our problems; that is the reality... The less that *Harakiri* relieves us [and] the more it imposes upon us, the better. Nothing *should* be carried out in *the piece*! Does Marx's *Das Capital* carry out the revolution?⁴⁰

By effectively denying the music all critical power, Huber had no alternative but to relocate his critique to the extra-musical realm, ending the performance with a spoken declaration by the ensemble: 'Fight the intellectual profiteers/fight the uninterested pleasure/fight the subjective expression/fight

³⁷ Kutschke (2009) 82

³⁸ *ibid.* 84

³⁹ Gottwald, cited in Kutschke (2009) 82

⁴⁰ Huber, cited in Kutschke (2009) 91

the exploiters of human underdevelopment/fight empiricism/fight the finished works/dispossess the possessors of music'.⁴¹

An alternative model for critical music: the ideal music situation and the politicising intervention

In the remainder of the essay, I will describe an alternative strategy through which I believe music can circumvent some of the terminal problems listed above, and regain some kind of critical potential. The example of Huber's piece involves an extra-musical intervention that undermines the integrity of the rest of the musical content (as 'critical', as 'composed', as 'music'). Similarly, my model for critical music relies on the idea of an intervention that undermines the music's unproblematic identity as music. But rather than attempting to escape the aesthetic apparatus of the music – its expressive clichés and illusory harmoniousness – this model relies on the reflexive rehabilitation of this apparatus. Beginning from the (knowing) assumption of music's 'proper' functioning from composer to work to performer to audience, via expression and communication, composers can then make strategic interventions into any part of the process, which invalidate the integrity of that process and hence 'poison' the entire structure (and the sonic 'result'). The way to do this is to introduce interventions which politicise the process: effectively inserting the declaration 'THIS IS POLITICAL' into the otherwise smooth functioning of the musical structure. As explored extensively above, music *cannot* be political (i.e., it must also have the possibility to transcend political content in order to still be (good) music). What these interventions achieve is twofold: 1) they undermine the integrity of the musical work, while 2) rendering the resultant 'failed' music in explicitly political terms.

⁴¹ cited in Kutschke (91)

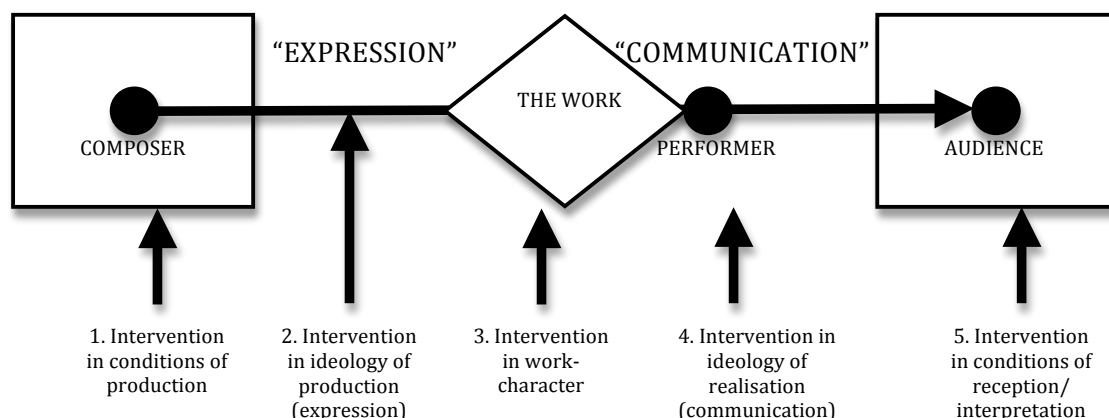


Fig. 1: Diagram representing the 'aesthetic apparatus' with five intervention points

Figure 1 shows what I believe to be a version of the 'aesthetic apparatus' (pertaining to several dominant contemporary Western music cultures), which I will now term – following Jürgen Habermas – the 'ideal music situation'. Habermas developed the idea of the 'ideal speech situation' as part of his theory of communicative action, which formed the basis of his broader approach to critique:

Habermas's claim is that even the most rudimentary forms of validity-oriented discussion point towards *idealised* forms of argumentation. He demonstrates this by way of an analysis of the normative presuppositions of everyday communicative action, showing that participants in this form of action unavoidably commit themselves to "strong idealisations" ... It is only because we assume that our communicative exchanges approximately satisfy these idealised preconditions that we can – indeed must – treat as a problem the discovery in given cases that they do not.⁴²

Habermas proposes the 'ideal speech situation' as a 'reconstruction of the universal condition of mutual understanding, of which competent subjects already possess intuitive knowledge'.⁴³ This idealised situation then becomes the

⁴² M Cooke, 'Habermas's Social Theory: The Critical Power of Communicative Rationality', in K de Boer & R Sonderegger (eds.), *Conception of Critique in Modern and Contemporary Philosophy* (Basingstoke: Pallgrave Macmillan, 2012) 194. See also J Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991)

⁴³ Cooke (2012) 195

referent against which any real speech situation is compared, as a basis for criticism. In Maeve Cooke's elaboration of Habermas's critical theory, and in order to deal with the fundamental problems in assuming the universality of this 'intuitive knowledge', she suggests introducing a 'radical reflexivity' to the theory, employing 'a two-step justificatory strategy':

The first step consists in acknowledging the historicity of the idealising suppositions identified by formal pragmatics as unavoidable features of everyday linguistic practices... The second step consists in arguing, in processes of critical reflection oriented by ideas of truth and justice, that such normative ideas constitute a *relative* gain in rationality – historical learning – vis-à-vis communicative practices in other societies.⁴⁴

This kind of 'radical reflexivity' must be assumed in the critical model I'm proposing, which is at any rate an (ironic) inversion of Habermas's theory. The 'ideal music situation' is ironically affirmed, in order to manufacture a 'real' music situation (through an intervention which breaks the rules of this ideal situation) that will force criticism of the kind that Habermas promotes. We are already familiar with this kind of 'intervention' in the role of the 'music critic' (i.e., at 'Point 5' on the above diagram). This kind of critical intervention was certainly Adorno's praxis of choice, and Benjamin, in his *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, describes this very function of the critic as 'the "mortification" of the work of art':

That is the destruction of its illusion, the excavation of its historical roots and the exposition of the traces of its production... But this mortification should not be understood as destruction for its own sake. For Benjamin, it lies as the basis of a "rebirth" of the work of art, for it prepares its transfiguration and resurrection in the realm of philosophical truth.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Cooke (2012) 206

⁴⁵ T Lijster, 'The Interruption of Myth: Walter Benjamin's Concept of Critique', in K de Boer & R Sonderegger (eds.), *Conception of Critique in Modern and Contemporary Philosophy* (Basingstoke: Pallgrave Macmillan, 2012) 159

In each case, the myth of music's 'direct communication' is undermined by the unwelcome intervention of the critic, preventing the listener from forming their own 'objective' judgement (i.e. on the mythic terms of the artwork), but instead opening up the work's dialectical relationship with its own untruth, which for Benjamin makes it valuable.

This kind of politicising intervention can also be enacted at other points in the ideal music situation. An example is Corey Dargel's *Last Words from Texas* (2011).⁴⁶ The eight songs on this EP appear, to all intents and purposes, like little synth-pop miniatures, delivered by a singer-songwriter; they are tonal and melodic. The intervention in this case is the imposition of transcripts of the last words of prisoners, executed in Texas between 1993 and 2010, used verbatim as the song lyrics. Dargel's setting of these words neither attempts a total Brechtian detachment, nor an attempt to express the full horror of their import – the last utterances in the face of death – through some kind of Expressionist extremism. Instead, he sets them as if they were any other song lyrics, divorced from their original context, and matches their surface sentiment with the appropriate expressive musical language. Hence, on the first track ('Date of Execution May 13 2010'), the sentiment of the words focuses on the repetition of the phrase 'I'm sorry', and the music is relatively downcast (a minor key, a gradually descending accompaniment line), whereas the second track ('Date of Execution May 04 2006') focuses rather on the phrase 'Thank you', and is comparatively upbeat. As another example, the words to the seventh track ('Date of Execution May 19 2010') are focused on love and even come with an intimated 'refrain' – 'We need to love each other like we used to' – which Dargel fittingly sets to a melodic refrain, allowing the words to take the musical shape of clichéd pop song structures, against an almost ecstatic accompaniment motif.

Dargel's settings render these words within the 'ideal music situation' of the singer-songwriter, for whom a certain 'authenticity' of direct subjective expression, and a belief in the power of music to aid the direct communication of an idea or emotion, is generally taken for granted. But, at the same time, our knowledge of their provenance entirely undermines the integrity of any such

⁴⁶ The EP can be downloaded from Dargel's website from free: www.automaticheartbreak.com/2011/12/last-words-from-texas-free-ep-download-2/

setting, by throwing the supposed expressive situation of the regular singer-songwriter lyrics into contrast with the very particular expressive situation of the last words of a person on death row. These include the incredible singularity of this particular speech act – its importance but also its impotence – which makes the content of the words simultaneously incredibly momentous and practically interchangeable. This importance/impotence corresponds, albeit grotesquely, to generic song lyrics, which are presumed to transcend everyday speech (the musically-augmented song is supposed to ‘say more’ than mere words can), while at the same time remaining unable to function as actual communication in any real speech situation, but float freely as commodities.

The other side of the ‘last words’ as utterance is its functionality, in that it exists as the last act that the condemned has in order to delay their execution. While there are still words to speak, there is still time before death, but as words are limited, the very speaking of these words constitutes time elapsing. The more words the condemned speaks, the more time they wrest for themselves, and yet at the same time, the more words they speak, the closer they bring themselves to their execution. The absolute singularity of this speech act transforms the very substance of the pop song as ‘sung time’; this is the idea that the identity of a song is produced as it elapses, so by the time the song becomes itself, it is over. These ‘last words’ are emblematic of an absurdist faux-freedom whereby the condemned is effectively encouraged to collude in their own execution, by accepting the terms of the ‘last words’ and enacting these words (along with their fateful completion) themselves. The end of every song on the EP is the end of a life, meaning that the duration of each song is representative of the prolonging of a life.

The intervention of these words within this conventional interpretive framework effectively renders the enjoyment – and even the re-performance of these songs – as ethically unacceptable. We must reject any claim that the singer-songwriter is expressing freely and communicating directly, given that he is communicating words that were produced under conditions of horrifying duress. But, fundamental to this critical model, the reason that we must reject the music is the same reason that we must reject the political situation that has intervened in the music. In this way, a critique of Dargel’s songs on ethical *or* musical

grounds is the same as a critique of the continued use of the death penalty in Texas.

Another example of this critical model at work can be found in another piece involving the death penalty: Lars von Trier's movie *Dancer in the Dark* (2000), which features a central performance and music by Björk.⁴⁷ In this case, the ideal music situation being rehabilitated is the entire genre structure of the Hollywood musical, with its prescribed expressive and dramaturgical functions for musical numbers. According to the ideal music situation of the musical number, non-diegetic songs are supposed either to interrupt the flow of the action to provide access to a character's (or a group of characters') inner thoughts and feelings, or to move the plot forward without interfering with the diegesis of the musical's world (i.e., the fact that everyone is suddenly singing shouldn't seem strange or problematic to the logic of the musical's world).

The songs in *Dancer in the Dark* fail to integrate themselves into the logic of (the protagonist) Selma Ježková's world. For example, in a scene between Selma and her friend Jeff on a railway bridge, a musical number ('I've Seen It All') in which she shares her feelings with him is revealed quite clearly *not* to have happened, when it ends and nothing has changed. But not only do the musical numbers in the movie fail to move the plot forward in the smooth and idealised manner of Hollywood musicals, they actually act *against* the interests of Selma, by failing to interrupt the flow of time, and instead obscuring the reality of what is happening. So, during the dance number in the factory ('Cvalda', which clearly takes place in Selma's imagination), she absentmindedly breaks one of the machines and risks the job on which she relies for her son's healthcare. Later on, another imagined musical number ('In the Musicals (Pt. 2)') takes place during the court hearing for the murder that she was compelled to commit, preventing her from engaging seriously with the situation and giving a proper defence. Finally, in a situation analogous to Corey Dargel's songs, she attempts to begin her own musical number while waiting to be hanged, staving off the imagined 'finale' of her story by singing 'The Next to Last Song', while invoking the escapist

⁴⁷ Björk also released the music for the film as the record *Selmasongs* (2000).

transcendent properties of the Hollywood musical number to freeze time and redeem her, according to its accepted genre laws.⁴⁸

The politicising 'intervention' in *Dancer in the Dark* is the social realist storyline, depicting the thoroughly intersectional oppression of a disabled, immigrant factory worker and single mother. The intense genre clash between the post-Dogme, critical realist storyline and the Hollywood musical clearly invalidates the integrity of *Dancer in the Dark* as a musical. It *cannot* be enjoyed by listening to it in terms of the ideal music situation of the musical. And yet, once again, the same intervention that causes it to fail as a musical also politicises that failure. *Dancer in the Dark* is a critique of the illusory, escapist functions of entertainment music – and the culture industry in general – in the tradition of the Frankfurt School. Selma's desire to escape the realities of her life through the illusory escapism of Hollywood musicals – a desire that is actively destructive – is nevertheless identical to *our* desire to listen to *Dancer in the Dark* as a successful musical, with music and dance numbers that we can enjoy and appreciate in the manner of any other musical. Again, a critique of the movie *as a musical*, as well as a critique of the negative impact of mass culture on the character of Selma in the movie, is the same as a critique of the culture industry in a world that actually does contain people like Selma.

With those two examples in mind, Habermas's theory of communicative action, even employed reflexively (or ironically), clearly provides only an initial theoretical template. In order to grasp the purported impact of the 'politicising intervention', the ideal music situation can be combined with the Benjaminian idea of 'the violent interruption of mythical violence' which Thijs Lijster suggests is the essence of Benjamin's notion of critique.⁴⁹ We can view the uncritiqued assumptions of direct expression and communication, that ideologically underpin notions of 'how (good) music *should* function', as a mythic structure, similar to Benjamin's notion of the law, which hides its own historical nature (the violence with which it was established and by which it is maintained), in order to dictate what is and isn't music, and what 'successful' music *should* be or

⁴⁸ This can be contrasted perfectly with the fate of Mack the Knife in Brecht's/Weill's *Der Dreigroschenoper* (1928): a villainous anti-hero who is saved from execution at the last moment by a knowing activation of the kind of *deus ex machina* genre convention that Selma pathetically tries to summon.

⁴⁹ Lijster (2012) 163

do. According to Benjamin, the way to reveal the mythical status of such structures is through 'divine violence': the interruption of the myth by 'pure means': 'A form of violence that is not a means to a certain political goal, but that seeks nothing more, and nothing less, than the destruction of a political system'.⁵⁰ For the interruption of this musical myth, we can invert this formula, and replace 'political' with 'musical'. Pure means, in this case, is the non-musical. And nothing is more alien to an immanent myth of musical autonomy (i.e. more 'non-musical') than politics.

Johannes Kreidler and the *Gehalt*-aesthetic turn

Both the examples given above rely on the affirmation of culturally-entrenched 'ideal music situations' that are more specific to (relatively narrower) popular genres than to the problematically expanded 'art music' apparatus. The breadth of this apparatus – its Cagean imperative to 'let sounds be themselves' – can mean that the ideal music situation remains hidden (although still prevalent) and cannot be resurrected without suspicion. One contemporary composer who has made use of this critical approach is Johannes Kreidler. *Fremdarbeit*, or 'Outsourcing' (2009), was a commission by the festival Klangwerkstatt Berlin that Kreidler outsourced to a Chinese composer and an Indian programmer, for a fraction of the commission fee. He supplied these musicians with samples of his work, and specifications for the final product, and they wrote pastiche pieces which he then had performed at the festival, as 'his' composition. As a conceptual work, *Fremdarbeit* calls to mind various questions that have been asked countless times, many decades ago, in the world of visual art: questions of authorship and authenticity etc. Not only have these questions not been posed so extensively in music, but the way that Kreidler approaches them enters them into a political frame which initiates the self-critique of the music in a similarly politicised manner. The 'intervention' here is made at the very start of the ideal music situation, in the conditions of production (Point 1 on Fig. 1) by reproducing the practice of outsourcing prevalent in contemporary production

⁵⁰ Lijster (2012) 163

relations: not only *symbolising* but actually properly *enacting* it. By the time we reach the actual performance of the music, we cannot enjoy listening to the musical 'product' while leaving the integrity of the ideal music situation intact. On the one hand, the ideology of the expressive composing subject is undermined by the outsourcing of the compositional act, meaning that the musical result *cannot* be the authentic expression of the composer (or even of the Chinese composer, who was aiming at a pastiche). But on the other hand, if we *do* enjoy the sonic results, then that also invalidates the necessity of the expressive composing subject. We therefore risk being complicit in the openly exploitative conditions of the composition, and therefore in *all* exploitative production relations.

In its intervention into the conditions of musical production, Kreidler's piece invokes the pieces by Rzewski, Wolff and Andriessen discussed above, but differs from them in three vital ways. Firstly, rather than changing the production relations on a symbolic, interpersonal level (between a group of friends of the same socio-economic class), he changes them on a very concrete, material level, involving real contracts and fees on a globalised labour market. Secondly, and as a result of this, rather than intervening at the quasi-symbolic level of 'composition/performance = expression/communication', he intervenes at the level of 'composition/performance = labour/production'. Finally, by borrowing an exploitative socio-economic model for his intervention, rather than a utopian socio-political model, he basically precludes any kind of 'objective' assessment of the 'value' of the final sonic product.

The composer clearly recognises the risk that the provocatively exploitative compositional act will be recuperated as an innovative 'statement' authenticity and authorship, which is interesting or valuable 'in its own right', thereby justifying its depoliticisation. Hence, Kreidler makes a *second* intervention, at the point of the work's performance (Point 4 on Fig. 1), by 'moderating' each performance. In this role, he introduces the concept of the composition and each resultant work, being careful to mention the fees paid to everyone involved, and even explicitly linking the relationship of exploitation to similar relationships in the manufacture of other commodities. In this way, he foresees and prevents the possibility of ignoring or listening around the context.

He calls this a 'prepared listening', comparable perhaps to the preparation required to experience the music of Schoenberg or Lachenmann as critical, but in this case it is built into the performance.⁵¹

Johannes Kreidler has expressed his affinity with the theories of philosopher Harry Lehmann, whose concepts of reflexive modernism and the *Gehalt*-oriented aesthetic are probably the most similar to the critical model described here. By no means expressly discussing critical or political music, Lehmann frames his theory as the most credible future direction for *all* art. He borrows from Niklas Luhmann's systems theory a conception of art history based on 'progressive differentiation'.⁵² From a 'constitutional phase' of the autonomous art system (spanning the Renaissance through to Romanticism), art maintained a 'content-oriented aesthetic' (*inhaltästhetisch*), wherein three constituent components of art (work, medium and reflection) were firmly bonded. Through a 'first modernity', these components were negated one by one, beginning with the medium during the phase of 'classical modernism', then the work during the phase of the 'avant-garde' (leaving only the autonomous 'reflection'), before the period of post-modernism cancelled the negation of the medium, which became its own autonomous component. According to Lehmann:

It is an immanent possibility of this entire thought-model that, in analogy to the post-modern re-inclusion of the artistic medium, there can still be a re-inclusion of the work of art in the art system... The innovative move that could take us beyond post-modernism's understanding of art would consist in a rehabilitation – carried out openly within the art system – of the work of art as an autonomous, self-organizing "combination of forms". The ensuing works would be more binding than the open, ambivalent, self-deconstructive works of post-modernism, as their use of their medium would no longer be broken through irony, but rather functional once more.⁵³

⁵¹ Similarly, the piece's presence on the web is within two Youtube 'documentaries', with the composer re-emphasising the context of the piece (in German with English subtitles), even introducing one performance video: 'Tonight's goal is that no-one here tonight will ever vote for the FDP [German neoliberal party] again. Videos can be found at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L72d_0zIT0c and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PKPkikyXMzE>

⁵² H Lehmann, 'Avant-garde Today: A Theoretical Model of Aesthetic Modernity', in C-S Mahnkopf (ed.) *Critical Composition Today* (Hofheim: Wolke, 2006) 12

⁵³ Lehman (2006) 27

He calls this possible new phase ‘reflexive modernism’, in which work will be characterised by a ‘*Gehalt*-oriented aesthetic’. The word *Gehalt* is often translated as ‘substance’, and is to be differentiated from *Inhalt* which means content. It is also to be differentiated from the *Inhalt*-oriented aesthetic of arts ‘constitutional phase’. The *Gehalt*-oriented aesthetic ‘is not a matter of representing a self-description of society that has already been socially accepted, but rather the presentation of an experiential pattern inscribed upon the work of art that is taken up by the individual on a trial basis, and in some cases provokes a new self-understanding in society’.⁵⁴ This aesthetic has in common with my critical model a heightened reflexivity, in which

the field of possibilities has greatly expanded... Art can be produced as an open work, a closed work or an anti-work; it can take advantage of both old and new media or avoid any predefined medium, and it can – but need not – be based on a system-immanent concept (including all hybrid variants).⁵⁵

In other words, like in the works mentioned above, a composer can pick up and use an old ‘aesthetic apparatus’, and *interrupt* it, but that interruption can be *more* than an ironic, postmodern comment on the apparatus itself. Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf introduces the *Gehalt* aesthetic in similar terms to mine, but instead of politicising interventions, he refers to ‘individuations’ which are ‘incorporated ... at certain points in order to turn [a] general idea into an individual one; one would then be telling a *particular* story’.⁵⁶ He goes on to say:

Substance [*Gehalt*] appears to be authoritative in a manner that is directly opposed to immanentism. On the one hand, it exceeds the pure aesthetics of form, as decisions about the further development of the music are made within the form, but cannot themselves be justified formally – rather, in terms of their “content”. On the other hand, it enriches the music precisely in its autonomous linguality, as advocated by ... Adorno. Substance is thus the irruption of a non-formal element

⁵⁴ Lehmann (2006) 37

⁵⁵ *ibid.* 39

⁵⁶ C-S Mahnkopf, ‘What Is the Meaning of Musical Substance?’, in C-S Mahnkopf, Frank Cox & Wolfram Schurig (eds.), *Substance and Content in Music Today* (Hofheim: Wolke, 2014) 18

that is nonetheless not content. The aesthetics of substance is thus neither an aesthetics of form nor of content, but rather something qualitatively other.⁵⁷

The *Gehalt* aesthetic, if it can be realised in the way Lehmann and Mahnkopf promise, would seem to counteract some of the potentially problematic qualities of music explored in this essay, which tend to undermine musical critique. Not only does it mediate between concrete 'content' and the music's immanent sonic 'material', but it supposedly does so from *within* the piece, and therefore cannot be detached. To some extent, the *criticality* of all of the music mentioned in this essay is a function of *Gehalt*. This is clear when Mahnkopf points out that 'the substance of a work, according to Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, is something that only articulates itself through an interpreting reception, most of all in the shape of philosophy'.⁵⁸ Adorno's philosophy restores the substance to music, but in a functional *Gehalt* aesthetic of composition, this same substance would be folded into the composition, and become manifest to the listener *as* they hear the music. Were it to achieve this, critical music would also get around the problem of its requiring a certain amount of education in order to apprehend its criticality correctly, thereby opening it up to a far broader audience, and rendering it capable of making a far more incisive critique:

Above all else, the end of the large-scale progressive differentiation of the art system holds one chance: to release the work of art and free the recipient from the art system... This enables a liberation of the subject of aesthetic experience from the system-immanent logic of outdoing that has driven the art system forward in the last 150 years. It would definitely constitute a gain if the art lover did not, in order to experience and understand the most advanced contemporary art, first have to know which negation a work was employing to distance itself from other art.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Mahnkopf (2014) 20

⁵⁸ *ibid.* 18

⁵⁹ Lehmann (2006) 40

Conclusion

If the reflexivity that is vital to the function of the 'interventionist' critical pieces described above really is related to the 'immanent possibility' of a new moment in art history, then the future of critical music could be looking bright. There are limits to a model of 'interventionist' critical music as well, though. Firstly, as noted above, it requires the unequivocal, unsubtle imposition of a very strong, negative political element (the words from death row, Selma's hopeless story, the real exploitation of other composers, along with Kreidler's explicit 'moderation'). This is all very well, but it also restricts the music to criticising things that are *already acknowledged as negative*. The structure of the critique functions by associating a musical expressive structure with this negative phenomenon, thereby implicating music (and, by extension, other situations) in that negative phenomenon, and expanding the remit of a critique. Arguably, that is all music can hope to do.

Moreover, in this model, a negative critique cannot be balanced out with the suggestion of a positive alternative. We can perceive this from the relation of the model to Benjamin's structure of critique. We can extend Lijster's discussion of 'the law' to include other mythic structures, like 'the ideal music situation':

The interruption ... makes us realise the mythical character of the law. The critique of violence cannot, however, by itself overthrow the law. It is not itself a form of divine violence, but can merely create the space for its possibility.⁶⁰

We should also consider the limits of Habermas's critical theory, as it relates to this critical model. While Habermas emphasised that the 'ideal speech situation' is 'a methodological fiction or thought experiment rather than as something that can actually be achieved', his reliance on it as a normative criterion against which all real speech situations can be compared has invited reasonable critique of his critical system, most vitally: how it is that he gained access to the ideal speech situation – this transcendental criterion that must constitute, for his system, an absolute truth – and how he can justify that his

⁶⁰ Lijster (2012) 164

concept of the ideal speech situation *is* indeed the ‘true’ one.⁶¹ His assumed belief in his access to absolute truth has, indeed, found him accused of ‘authoritarianism’.⁶²

In the same way, we cannot know for sure how ‘real’ or ‘prevalent’ these ideal music situations are for other music listeners. They certainly don’t necessarily transfer between different music cultures, and therefore across national, class and generational divides. For this reason, any such critique must certainly be made *within* a music culture, and can only be addressed to those reasonably familiar to that music culture. However, music cultures can be quite broad, and we can deduce a shared ideal music situation from the presence of similar patterns of musical tastes, and similar interpretations of musical pieces, which do often manage to transcend various cultural boundaries.

At the same time, these ideal music situations are liable to be reshaped over time. After all, for this critical structure to work, it requires the assumption that music is essentially apolitical. If lots of successful critical works of this type were to appear, then presumably this assumption would be problematised, and potentially this particular critical strategy would (ironically) become less useful. This is unavoidable though. As demonstrated by their mutual contradictions, critical and political music strategies will tend to exhaust themselves. This is just a sign that they are functioning to some extent. As long as musicians are still asking the question expressed in this dissertation’s title, there will still be the possibility for an affirmative answer.

⁶¹ Cooke (2012) 201

⁶² *ibid.* 206

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