

Prolegomena to a Viable Study of 20th and 21st Century Music

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The history of music has been determined by musical notation. Musical notation is an alphabet, the letters of which indicate musical pitches that correspond to the diatonic scale. All music that can be re-created into sound prior to the invention of the recording is reliant upon musical notation, or a text. If there is an exception to this, it is the oral tradition of music, by which the melody of a given piece of music has been transmitted from the past by memory and performance. Thus the history of pre-recorded music, which I will call the Western musical tradition, has been the domain of the musically-literate and educated. Today, music can be recorded as it is performed, and access to recording technology is cheap and simple. This constitutes a vast democratization of the ability to create an enduring musical work; the consequences of this are still being felt. Music has changed, and the ways in which it has changed require attention.

To write about music has always necessarily meant referring to the text of music. This problem occurs in the history of literature and art, in different ways. With the advent of the printing press, the dissemination of written works was accomplished on a massive scale, and the criticism and theorizing of literature was accessible to much more people. The history of art is similar. The difference between other arts and music, however, is that the language and text of music is arguably experienced exterior to the music itself, an effect that has heretofore been aggravated by the absence of the record.

The history of the arts has experienced similar paradigmatic shifts. Visual art eventually achieved a reproducible character of its own through refinements in techniques

of lithographic reproduction, as discussed by Walter Benjamin in his highly influential essay on “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility.” Lithographs “enabled graphic art to provide an illustrated accompaniment to everyday life,” and foreshadowed the culmination of reproducible visuals in the motion picture (Benjamin 20). The printing press had accomplished the same for the written word in the 15th century. Significantly, the status of film as a technologically reproducible art form receives special attention in Benjamin’s essay, and there are some affinities to recorded music.

From the early 20th Century it has been readily possible to point to an aural example or instance of a musical work. Prior to this, to speak of a musical thing was necessarily to refer to a text, or wispy memory of a musical performance. In *Rock Formation*, Steve Jones illustrates this point: “prior to the phonograph, music notation was the only means of preserving a composition short of memorization” (15). According to Jones, the first “technological method” of recording sound is traced to the year 1857, when a Frenchman named Leon Scott developed a machine that ‘wrote’ sound into a “cylinder of heavy paper coated with lamp black.” However, there was no way to play this “written” sound back; still, it remains significant as the first instance of writing sound without dictating it via musical notation. Interestingly, neither music boxes nor player pianos have the same significance as the phonograph in regard to musical reproduction, as they merely produced sound, without reproducing it. It is the reproduction of sound that is significant, and which allows a discussion like the following to take place.

The first song from Panda Bear's "Person Pitch" ends on a perfect 5th that falls slightly out of tune. This last note is clearly the highest note the singer, Noah Lennox, can reach. The musical notation of this song would all but erase the timbral history of this note. Certainly, all the components would be in place to recreate it. The sheet music for "Untitled #1" can contain detailed instruction on how to recreate the effect of this final note, even to the point of demanding a singer with a similar vocal range in order to create the strained sound of an overextended voice. What has always been missing in musical notation of all kinds, and remains missing in this example, is the actual 'timbre' of the sound, which here is the unique sound of Panda Bear singing that note.

In *Audiometry: Principles and Practices*, timbre is called a "wastebasket" attribute: if two tones are judged to be "different," and yet have the same pitch and the same loudness, then they must differ in timbre" (Glorig 55). The quality of timbre in music has traditionally received less priority than the trifecta of rhythm, harmony, and melody. With the advent of recording technology, timbre becomes possibly the most important attribute. In *The Ambient Century*, Mark Prendergast charts this development. He observes that "the importance to twentieth-century music of atmospheric sound, its timbre and personality—indeed its 'Ambience'—is a measure of how much innovative musical ideas intertwined with technological change," which points directly to the development of timbre in his own thesis for declaring this century one of 'Ambient' music (3). Obviously this is not necessarily a negative development; Prendergast, among others, finds that this century has produced interesting and rich music. It is fair to say that this innovation led to the electronic music of composers like John Cage, Otto Luening, and Charles Dodge, as well as rock and hip-hop. It is the last two that tend to be looked at with

suspicion, and threaten the validity of the genres as music proper. One such critic is Allan Bloom, who dedicates a chapter to music in his book *The Closing of the American Mind*, focusing on the negative effects "rock music" has on young people.

Bloom's thesis is that rock music, and generally the popular music of the time, provides "premature ecstasy," and as a result lacks "enthusiasm or great expectations" (80). He explicitly links rock music to drugs, insofar as turning off the CD player is tantamount to "[having] a serious fling with drugs—and getting over it". Rock music "encourages passions and provides models that have no relation to any life the young people who go to universities can possibly lead." The connection to drug use is made explicit here: young people who listen to rock music are satisfying their "sexual desire" and the lyrics "treat them as its only natural and routine culmination for children who do not yet have the slightest imagination of love, marriage or family" (74). In addition to being an addictive and exhausting drug, rock music is presented as a substance that awakens, satisfies, and exhausts lust in "children" through words that celebrate "puppy love as well as polymorphous attraction." Rock music's attraction goes beyond simple simpering lyric choice, for "young people know that rock has the beat of sexual intercourse. That is why Ravel's "Bolero" is the one piece of classical music that is commonly known and liked by them" (73).

In order to illuminate Bloom's take on the concepts that appear here, as well as to give context to the current connotations of the terms he invokes, I will clarify the points of his argument as well as attempt to understand his understanding of music and its consequence. Here Bloom's critique functions as an example for why new terms or methods are necessary to discuss the history of music. Because without a revaluation of the methods currently used to critique music, people like

Bloom will continue to determine the course and opinion of musical study. For Bloom, music is a thing that “uses the passions and satisfies them while sublimating them and giving them an artistic unity” by way of the “cultivation of the soul” (72). Contrast this to his understanding of rock music:

But rock music has one appeal only, the barbaric appeal to sexual desire—not love, not *eros*, but sexual desire undeveloped and untutored. It acknowledges the first emanations of children’s emerging sensuality and addresses them seriously, eliciting them and legitimating them, not as little sprouts that must be carefully tended in order to grow into gorgeous flowers, but as the real thing (73).

The origin of this argument is unclear, but its pedigree is familiar. The line of thought is derivative of the idea that ‘classical’ music signifies intelligence and thought, in contrast to the popular music, which is for the ignorant masses. However, Bloom complicates this dichotomy further. While “Bach’s religious intentions and Beethoven’s revolutionary and humane ones” cultivate the soul, he argues, rock music is a drug insofar as it *expends* the listener.

The argument begins to look familiar: it would seem Bloom is linking rock music to deviancy. He actually clarifies this point, acknowledging that “my concern here is not with the moral effects of this music—whether it leads to sex, violence or drugs” (79). In fact, Bloom’s argument is that the “imagination of young people” is ruined by this music by way of its sabotage of the “esthetic education of man.” This is to say, rock music, in contrast to classical music, creates and perpetrates fantastic ideals that have no basis in real life. The formula of sex and decadence prevalent in rock, according to Bloom, “encourages passions and provides models that have no relation to any life the young people who go to universities can possibly lead,” and this exactly ruins their

education. No longer are the “young people” carried by the hope of real heroes and sensible passions; their senses are expended and their expectations will no longer be met, thanks to Mick Jagger, that “male and female” who could “enter everyone’s dreams” (78).

Through the course of the essay, Bloom actually makes very little reference to musical examples and citation. One of the few instances involves his anecdotal mention that “young people know that rock has the beat of sexual intercourse” which is why he refers to Ravel’s “Bolero” (73). While it is probably ridiculous in itself to conjecture that most young people enjoy this “seventeen minute” piece that Ravel described as “one long crescendo,” the claim that music can have the beat of sexual intercourse may merit some investigation (Calvocoressi 477).

This point highlights one of the problems involved in the discussion of music. There is a tendency to divide musical discussion into two mutually exclusive languages: that of the musicologist and that of the sociologist. Unfortunately, Bloom’s discussion seems to fail on both fronts. There is no musicological evidence to support the outlandish conclusion that rock music has the beat of sexual intercourse. Nevertheless, Bloom has found supporters, and this highlights the problem involved with the discussion of music. While Bloom does not indict the 4/4 “common time” of Classical music, he is somehow able to accuse rock music of the same crime in a manner that seems coherent. In *The Aesthetics of Rock*, Theodore Gracyk points out that “Bloom does not find a sexual beat in the Adagio of Mozart’s ‘Hunting Quartet’” even though the music itself is written in the same meter as many rock songs.

In a chapter called “Jungle Rhythms and Big Beat,” Gracyk discusses the rhythm of rock music, and in doing so explicates the concepts of rhythm, meter, beat, pulse, accent, and syncopation. These are the terms of the musicological tradition, which are taught in

universities today as the words to describe musical sound par excellence. Even new work in the cognition of sound by the brain maintains the terms. In *This is Your Brain on Music*, Daniel J. Levitin discusses rhythm by referring to ‘groove,’ which is “that quality that moves the song forward, the musical equivalent to a book you can’t put down” (166). Bloom’s discussion is couched in these same terms, and he ends up relying on their connotations in place of providing a real discussion or presentation of evidence.

It is obvious that Bloom is referring to the sound of rock music. The sound of rock music is different from the Classical tradition. Classical music has generally had a primary palette of timbres; much as rock music can often be expected to be a mix of drums, guitar, and vocals. Even when Wagner came to prominence with his “grandiose operatic orchestration,” he still composed with woodwind and string sections (Prendergast 2). Furthermore, Bloom finds that the sound, or timbre, of rock music itself conjures up wasteful, sexual experience. Gracyk takes issue with this claim by presenting an example from his own experience:

When I played Ravi Shankar’s performance of the Raga Gara to thirty students, most of them music majors, none of them thought it was “romantic” despite that description of it in the album’s liner notes. When I played the same group a Burundi song expressing homesickness, none of them felt homesick in response. The majority thought it was sexual (143).

This example demands the question of whether music can represent something consistent to all audiences: yet this key issue never arises in Bloom’s essay. Instead, there is only dismissal and sneering at music that does not function to advance the history and criticism of the Western Classical tradition. In his own appraisal of Bloom’s argument, Gracyk concludes, as I also do, that “Bloom is drawing on the stereotypes of rock that

flourish in the absence of serious thought about stylistic and aesthetic qualities as bearers of meaning” (143).

This concern, and misinterpretation, of the experience of timbre in the written history of music as contrasted with the recorded history of music can be framed in terms of the relation of music to noise. This discussion is taken on by Jacques Attali in *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, and elaborated on by Paul Hegarty in *Noise/Music: A History*.

Noise is always framed as the negative aspect of sound. More than silence, which is often named as a necessary component of quality music, noise is “not only a judgment on noises, it is a negative reaction, and then, usually, a negative response to a sound or set of sounds” (Hegarty 3). Hegarty mentions that science attempts to classify noise as something that is borne of evolution in order to protect our ears from damaging frequencies, and goes on to conclude that “noise is cultural, and different groups of hearing machines will process sounds differently.” This discussion leads up to the thesis that “noise is an excess, is thought of as being too much, and for human hearing, this occurs almost entirely through cultural perceptions, and individual reactions within that framework” (4). Noise, or all aural experience, always happens to the subject; it is not a choice that is deployed at will. A gazing subject and a reading subject are always directing themselves towards the world, and sound possesses the distinction among the senses as something that is always intruding in.

Noise is not simply a “synonym for dissonance” (Hegarty 12). Consonance is generally explained as sounds that are aurally pleasing to the ear, and this definition is sometimes grounded scientifically, as Levitin explains when he points out that although “the neural mechanisms underlying consonance and dissonance are debated, there is

widespread agreement about some of the intervals that are deemed consonant" (72). A single note can never be dissonant on its own; it takes multiple notes that "[do] not conform to the customs we have learned that go with our musical idioms" (73). Like noise, dissonance is unwanted and culturally constituted, yet dissonance "works through its rethinking of consonance, and composers using it tended to think of their work as reinigorating the Western tradition of music" (Hegarty 12). Noise is never described as such, even though Hegarty claims that all musicians, even those "against the existing institution of music... imagined at some level that they were contributing to advancing music." Dissonance is named as a part of music; meanwhile noise is the name for the cause of the riot "at a performance of Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring," and for other violent protests against sound.

The history of noise outlined by Hegarty and Attali makes its own claim to be part of the history of 20th century music; yet both authors claim touchstones similar to Prendergast's theory of the "Ambient Century," which prefigures the history of music as on its way to the recognition that "all recorded music" is, by definition, "Ambient" (4). While Gracyk takes a narrower focus, his end is the same: an account, and implicitly a validation addressed to people like Bloom, of 20th century music. Levitin calls attention to how "Western music was largely dominated by pitch," but "for the past two hundred years or so, timbre has become increasingly important." The pitch-centric approach to music has resulted in "an arcane, rarified set of terms and rules that are as obscure as some of the most esoteric domains of mathematics. To the non-musician, the blobs of ink on a page that we call music notation might just as well be the notations of mathematical set theory." It is precisely through the technology of recorded music that a relation to the sound of music can begin to take place, and an

artistic, heard work of sound can be looked at as a work of sound proper.

The history of what I have variously called the "classical tradition," the history of "musical notation," or the history of music in general has not necessarily been the history of *sound* or *noise*. Indeed, sheet music is precisely the excision of all noise; it is the purification of the sound abstracted into ovals on the page. I will go further and say that noise is the sighting of timbre. Timbre, the actual "heard" sound of music, can be thought of as the process of reducing the noise factor intrinsic to actually producing music.

Timbre here is another name for the difference between 'good' and 'bad' tone. This distinction works as a testament to the repression of noise in the history of music; pre-recorded music has been the preservation of good tone at the expense of bad tone. It is the rare 19th-century musical score that would have read: "play with broken, poorly cut reed," or "to be played on a pianoforte with rusted strings." Contemporary *avant garde* music is written and performed with instruments like the 'prepared piano,' which refers to a normal piano that has had miscellanea like bolts, screwdrivers, and strips of rubber lodged in its strings. The fact that music is now written for instruments prepared in such ways, and the sheer volume and quality of music that has been produced worldwide in the form of recorded music both speak to the need for a new lexicon and approach for analyzing contemporary music. Otherwise, the influence of someone like Allan Bloom, who proposes to invalidate the new music and all who listen to it in deference to conservative tradition, is likely to prevail in public discourse.

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