

Western music and its 'internalised others'; Modernism, Post-Modernist Experimentalism and the challenge of being the 'New'

Eldon Fayers

The History of Western Music can be viewed in one guise as the History of Styles. The progression from one style to another is one way of measuring changes in critical thinking about the Arts. This continuous transfiguration of style is a process that occurs not only in the practice of Art but also in the accompanying theory and philosophy. However, the often opposing positions of theory and practice consistently alter their discursive positions in aesthetic philosophy; theory begets practice and practice begets theory. This constant oscillation and debate came to define the Arts in the 20th century as 'style' became not a transition or development but a polemical stance. As a result more and more schisms occurred and Art became more democratized and fragmented. This article seeks to look at a few of those fragmented movements and examine their relative positions within their marginalization within Western Culture.

The definition of Western Music is, in its most conservative understanding, clarified as music pertaining to the European tradition. This general definition, comprises a further, conservative, category we call 'Art Music' that excludes what is defined as Popular music as well as Art music that does not 'fit' into the fixed canonic view of Culture – a view overwhelmingly shaped by the classic masterpieces from the past. New music, be it 'popular' or 'serious' was predominantly excluded from this musical pantheon. This exclusion of certain Art music types is a situation that arose within the musical mainstream and occurred soon after Modernism (for clarity it is useful to ally the 'modernist' term to the atonal Serialist music developed by Arnold Schoenberg in the first quarter of the 20th century. The moniker 'Modernism', as it was used in parallel movements in the visual and cinematic Arts, has no such concrete meaning in Music). With Modernism, music was no longer seen as going in a 'natural' direction by large parts of the cultural establishment. Instead the new developments in music were regarded more as an aggressive schism from what came before. Music turned in on itself and developed its own immobile 'museum'¹ of, ironically, popular cultural artefacts as a reaction against new music that was seen as being subversive and almost an anti-culture. This museum consisted of the old works – the Beethoven Symphonies, Verdi's Operas and Chopin's Piano works, amongst others, which fill our concert halls today. Through domination of the repertoire these works contributed towards the conservative situation of music in the 20th century.

This aggressive reception conservatism in the reception of music occurred in parallel alongside some of music's most radical innovations, the two opposing factions feeding off each other. The conservative construct of the musical canon required specific value judgment of the aesthetic worth of music and so was constrained within its own exclusive criteria. New music did not fit into this box, and so lost its cultural worth in the eyes of many. Instead it fell under the domain of the Avant-garde and the minority highbrow Arts. This caused the end of 'New' music being at the forefront of the musical landscape; no longer were new compositions the engine of dynamism. New music became the unspeakable 'Other', set apart from the musical orthodox. In addition, its affect upon the music that it claimed to be defending was, in turn, stagnation. At the same time, the canonic repertoire metamorphosed into cultural artefacts and ceased to be living, breathing works of Art. The polarized orientations of new music and historical works cemented themselves, and the dialectical discourse between the two lost energy. And so began the crisis of musical culture.

¹ 'The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works'. Lydia Goehr. Publ.1994

This crisis-centred view is a position that represents only one of the tools used to analyse the hegemony of canonic western culture. For the sake of examining the position of 'Art Music' now and over the last 50 years, however, it is necessary to play devil's advocate and use these conservative definitions of the 'right' kind of culture as a starting point for analysis. This is in order to gain a better understanding of the struggle of the 'New' to define itself in positive terms. This was in response to its marginalization and its increased aesthetic relation to the 'Other' in Western Art Music. This struggle witnessed the new 'serious' music gradually became the 'Other' in a dramatic repositioning of cultural values. Of course, regarding the use, and therefore acceptance of these conservative paradigms, it is imperative at the same time to continue the re-examination of the numerous issues affecting their validity. For sake of defining the long history of the 'Other' in stagnated Western culture, however, they serve a very useful purpose. These polarizations between different artistic factions are, obviously, nothing new. Various cultural views will and have always segregated themselves from the rest, this being the first step toward self-definition. However, for a long while the 'Other' had simply meant the inclusion of exotic sounds foreign to the bourgeois audience. Composers such as the Johann Strauss' in their waltzes, or Respighi in his Ballet music were all frequent employers of the 'Other'. With the arrival of Modernism, however, the definition of the 'Other' changed dramatically and in turn became a debate about the very essence of Art Music itself.

Although there have been battles over which direction music 'should' go before – most famously the dichotomy between Brahms and Wagner is seen as one that defined various aesthetic positions of late 19th century music – none has been more explosive than that over the definition of 'Modernism'. In order for the 'direction' debate to function in the first instance, it is necessary to maintain the assumption mentioned above that music has some intrinsic sentient and pneumatic identity. This essentially refers to the notion of the autonomous Artwork. Theodore Adorno's usage of this term (continued from Hegel's position on the matter) concerns the problem of mediation – the way a work (object) conveys its meaning to its audience (subject). For Adorno, mediation (in the negative sense) is distortion of direct meaning between object and subject. In the positive sense it is the actual process of conveyance of meaning between object and subject itself in which the work's 'truth content' (*Wahrheitsgehalt*) is sublimated to the audience. This would be, in simple terms, a perfect state of mediation that would allow for the integral autonomy of the Artwork and enable it to communicate directly with its audience, away from a compromised interpretive cultural context.

For the Modernists, the all-consuming historical debate on the 'direction' of Art and its relation to the social values it represents changed decisively. The discourse became instead a constant self-critical mediation of Subject and Object that was consequently amalgamated into the dialectic that took place within the autonomous works themselves. Thus the Modernists removed themselves from the public debate altogether as their music became a matter of highbrow philosophy at a critical distance from their audience. This aspect can essentially be seen as an attempt to the realization of Hegelian and Adornian philosophy. With this, the search for meaning or the identity of a musical work became a closed issue. It no longer needed an interpretative stance to illuminate it, as it conveyed all of its meaning directly within its own internal aesthetic discourse. In Hegelian terms this can be seen as the realization of the work's 'Spirit' (*Geist*), as for Hegel the work's 'Spirit' can be seen as unity, 'an 'I' that is a 'We' and a 'We' that is an 'I'.²

² G. Hegel, 'Phänomenologie des Geistes' in M. Paddison, 'Adorno's Aesthetics of Music' (1993), 'The problem of mediation'.

However, Modernism, or the general perception of it, became marginalized as western music became a museum of cultural artefacts dealing almost exclusively with the tonal works of the past. The 'new' in music was no longer an inevitable evolution, but something to be aesthetically judged as being either right or wrong in the strongest ideological sense. This results in a view of a concept of Modernism that, according to Lyotard turned into an, 'ethical, implicitly political project'.³ Lyotard specifically applies this thinking to the development of high-culture modernism – a definition that seeks to connect this new Modernism within a canonic tradition through affiliation with the concept of 'High-Culture', while still retaining its 'new' factor. Lyotard argues that a premise of the 'new' is progression and originality. These conditions arise from questioning the rules of predecessors. In the context of the creation of new creative works, this position can be interpreted in two ways.

The first presents an evolution that whilst 'new', still presents a tangible link with the past, the 'Other' presents a creative work in absolute opposition to what came before it. This is a simplistic nature of this definition when considering the two main reactions to Modernism. One is that the language used by composers Schoenberg and Webern is in such opposition to the harmony of tonality as to become the 'Other' (in this case sometimes perceived as the subordinate and dangerous) or that the said language is in fact a logical continuation and expression of what came before it. Schoenberg's aim in creating the new atonal musical language was not, in fact, to take music on a radically different trajectory. It was intended to be a conceptual rejuvenation of the German musical tradition. In this context Lyotard's definition of the 'new' becomes void due to unnecessarily strict parameters. Modernism essentially suffers from a historically oversimplified interpretation that doesn't consider the complexities and differences within the conceptual framework of Modernism.

With the Modernist debate focusing on the pure dialectic in Art came another, related, notion, according to Peter Franklin,⁴ of the *internalized* 'Other' in music. This occurred later in the 20th century as a reaction to the rather finalized artistic language of Modernism and turned into an eclectic aesthetic, loosely defined as Post-Modernism. Post-Modernism (both the theory and the practice), according to P. Franklin, seeks to restore the complex nuances between different fields of cultural activity that Adorno – by drawing on a complex mediation of historical attitudes - treated as unitary; for example the concept of popular entertainment. Thus the main issue and endless crisis of Modernism, according to A. Huyssen,⁵ is that it becomes the 'Other' of the culture ferment. In turn, the 'Other' music no longer came to be defined exclusively by that aspect of it were taken from other cultures, namely those that were non-western, but also by the concept of the 'Other' within its major canon. A more expansive dialectic replaced the strict Hegelian parameters.

An example of this is the Experimentalist tradition pioneered by John Cage and Cornelius Cardew in the second half of the 20th century. In order to consider that a core element of Experimental music is the 'Other', a short exploration of Experimentalism is needed. The term 'experimental' is often used to characterize unusual or avant-garde music of any sort. However, the phrase, 'experimental music' refers more specifically to a particular genre of vanguardist music developed in the U.S and U.K in the 1960s. Traditionally, in Western music the Composer has taken on an absolute role in the compositional process; the notion of authorship is an undisputed fundamental in the concept of Western music. The Composer structures and controls all aspects of a musical performance. Regarding 'experimental music',

³ F. Lyotard, 'Modernism, Deception, and Musical others...' (P. Franklin) 'Western Music and its Others' p.143

⁴ Franklin, Peter. "Audiences, Critics and the Depurification of Music: Reflections on a 1920s Controversy." *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 114, no. 1 (1989)

⁵ F. Lyotard, 'Modernism, Deception, and Musical others...' (P. Franklin) 'Western Music and its Others' p.143

however, John Cage characterizes it as single or set of musical actions, 'the outcome of which is not foreseen'.⁶ In Alvin Lucier's, 'Music on a Long Thin Wire', an 80-foot wire is suspended, set in motion with a sine wave oscillator and then amplified. Lucier described the event highlighting that 'all changes in volume, timbre, harmonic structure, rhythmic and cyclic patterning, and other sonic phenomena were brought about solely by the actions of the wire itself'. The experimental composer, then, designs a set of initial conditions, which could be technical, conceptual or social, and leaves them to take on a life of their own. Experimental music invites the listener into a self-determining scenario of evolving sounds rather than one that is composed for us in advance.

Brian Eno describes experimental music as 'operating as an evolutionary process.'⁷ It begins with a particular set of sonic fundamentals or organizational elements. These elements are then submitted to environmental effects or aleatoric mutations that render the original organizational elements irrelevant and irreconcilable. The process is often open-ended, without a determined stopping point. The experimental composer initiates preliminary musical events but renders his or herself powerless to influence their evolution or self-perpetuating character. The composer's traditional autocratic creative role is transformed into an observational one. Against this movement and the broad notion of Post-Modernism in music, Modernism becomes yet another 'Other'. Furthermore, Experimental music arguably contains its own 'Other', in that it often, due to the indeterminate nature of its compositional premise, contains elements that are not the absolute product of the Composer's subjective mind. If Modernism represents the opposite cultural value to Popular music, Experimentalism avoids that particular problematic dichotomy. For the Western Canon, theory has been a means of justifying the canon's existence and exclusivity. Experimentalism represents the undermining of Music Theory as being a system of value judgment. Theory in Experimentalism remains just that, something hypothetical.

The issue of the use of the 'Other' as a decorative aspect of western musical language is one that has been heavily explored in the area of Edward Said's Orientalism. The 'Other', is seen as both exotic and inferior by the ultra-modernists hell bent on the 'purity' of musical language, through its superficial use in Art and especially music. However, John Corbett attempts to redefine or at least open up a different understanding of the use of the 'Other' or non-western elements in western Art music in the 20th century.⁸ He questions how the Oriental functions in the Experimental tradition and how legitimately we can regard it as being an essential part of a 'new' music as opposed to being a decorative aspect used to assert a cultural hegemony. Here J. Corbett seeks to prove the irrelevance of utopian separatism as causing the same problem that it seeks to solve. He argues that the move to unravel 'authentic' ethnic music from its 'hybridized' new forms can be seen as a reassertion of the, 'peculiar western power to define 'pure' expressions of cultural ethnicity as opposed to their tainted counterparts.' He believes that the Experimental tradition has given legitimacy to underlying compositional concepts that are taken from other cultures and used in the composition of western art works. He argues that there is a positive underlying, 'epistemic framework'⁹ in Western Art that provides a context for Western Art Music's ability to turn to the music of other cultures. Corbett explicitly questions how Orientalism functions in the Experimental tradition and how specifically Orientalism takes its form in Experimental music.

⁶ J. Cage, 'Composition as Process: Indeterminacy', 1958 Lecture, 'Silence'

⁷ B. Eno, 'Generating and organizing variety in the Arts', Essay, 1976

⁸ John Corbett, 'Experimental Oriental: New Music and other others', 'Western Music and its others' p.163

⁹ *ibid.* p.165

Experimentalism, however, is not wholly informed by Orientalism influence. Experimentalism, especially in John Cage, uses specific concepts as a compositional fundamental rather than as a purely decorative aspect. Cage's music does not retain a clear aural semblance of the 'Oriental'. This is because he only deals with the core philosophical or ideological concepts as opposed to a more explicit language. This is a further subversion of the essential western concept that the Composer has an absolute controlling role in the creation of a work of art. Cage's application of what J. Corbett highlights as the use of the 'Oriental' in experimentalism is validated by his view of the use of non-western music and philosophy as a potential strategy for the disruption of the western preoccupation with harmony, structure and intentionality. Cage's increasing interest in the most general concepts of Zen Buddhism is based not on the acquisition of new sonic objects but concerned with posing unanswerable or indefinite musical questions. His use of what is called the musical 'Koan' – an unsolvable riddle or paradox used in Buddhism to derail rationality – is therefore not just an 'other' cultural acquisition that is merely demonstrated in his composition, but a conceptual essentiality.

J. Corbett asserts that Experimentalism has an essential indeterminate character. The indeterminate is seen as being the 'Other' and more of a cultural purchase from aleatoric procedures pieces based on the Chinese oracle 'I Ching' (book of changes). Through the use of the I Ching as an underlying concept, it was possible to eliminate the Western governing principle of structure and supplant stylistic taste with process. Cage sought to divorce composing from 'the mind as ruling factor'. This could be seen as an expression of zeitgeist in a very real sense, a recalcitrant musical force, and an attempt to liberate sounds from their social and political connotations. However, the experimental tradition has a distinctly different aesthetic to the indeterminate compositions of Modernism, even though both would fit Cage's definition of, 'outcomes not foreseen'. Indeterminacy emerged from a 1950s 'avant-garde', represented by Stockhausen's 'Klavierstück XI' and Cage's 'Music of changes'. Indeterminacy represented a move away from a highly structured world of Serialism. On the other hand, experimental music originated later, in 1960s 'counterculture', and emerged as much from conceptual and performance art as from current compositional practices.

Essentially, though, the concepts of indeterminacy and experimentalism, within the context of Cage's work, stem from the same root. Cage developed a variety of techniques that would permit a relinquishing of control over his compositions, with the aim of inverting the role of the composer into one of listener and discoverer rather than author. Indeterminacy is arguably flawed and contradictory in its intention to relinquish control as it uses elements of determination, such as dice throwing, to inform performers in making choices of their own. The concept of physical sound taking on its own trajectory, as in Lucier's 'Music on a Thin Wire', untouched by human subjectivity, and therefore defined as 'experimental', is not honestly explored in indeterminacy.

In his essay, 'Composition as Process: indeterminacy', Cage criticizes indeterminate compositions as being too vulnerable to subjective interpretation and therefore determined by our own subliminal, preconceived inclinations. In 'Klavierstück XI', Stockhausen provides the performer with a large manuscript consisting of a series of note groupings. The instruction is then for the performer to choose from amongst these groupings in order to create the performed work. In this piece the instrumentalist's freedom is as a function of the combinative nature of the work. The structure allows the performer to play the sequence of series in his own subjectively chosen order. In Luciano Berio's *Sequenza* for Solo Flute, the performer is provided with a text that predetermines the sequence and intensity of the sounds to be played. However, the performer is free to choose how long to hold any one note

inside the 'fixed' structure imposed on him which is itself determined by the fixed pattern of the metronome's beat. Cage criticizes these works in his essay, including his own 'Music of Changes', created as a performance through a process of coin-tossing, as 'indeterminate with respect to their composition....but determinate with respect to their performance'.¹⁰ Cage is arguing that such compositions do not allow the same freedom to the performer that they allow to the composer. Cage proposes a more radical indeterminacy, in which compositions are absolutely indeterminate with respect to their performance. Arguably Cage points the way to a musical concept that would move the idea of indeterminacy more clearly in the direction of experimentalism; when compositions are conveyed not as indeterminate objects but as indeterminate processes.

Essentially the concept of 'Other' in music has become an issue clouded by the impossibility of defining that 'Other' against any fixed concept. The Western Musical Canon has traditionally been the measurement but no longer represents anything of fixed cultural value. J. Fabian argues that, 'cultural anthropology tends to position its object at a temporal distance from itself, even when the people in question are contemporaneous with the inquirer'.¹¹ This highlights a fundamental issue both for those concerned with a critique of the 'Other' in Western Music and also those involved in its creation. On one hand it supports criticism of the 'other' processes used in the construction of Experimental Music especially J. Corbett's assertion that the, 'Cloak of ideological blankness does not hide the underlying value system'.¹² On the other hand it can be used to highlight that the intention of the Experimentalists is not to imitate but to *regard*, albeit at a certain cultural distance. Although Experimentalists have often defined the Oriental as a generalized set of potential 'new musical resources', it is also a more expansive term that, through debate and analysis, allows Western Music to reconsider *itself* as the 'Other' with a positive outcome.

The cultural hegemony of the West is founded in the past. Its deconstruction is of utmost importance. The 'dominance' of Western culture not only infringes upon other diverse cultures, it also discourages innovation within and therefore results in cultural stagnation with a focus on the past. This reconsideration of cultural positions and identities is one that spills over into the West's gradual reassessment of its identity in the wake of political and cultural power shifting elsewhere. The question of cultural identity for a globalised, and increasingly 'weakened' West is an issue that goes beyond a purely aesthetic concern for the world of Music.



¹⁰ J. Cage, 'Composition as Process: Indeterminacy', 1958 Lecture, 'Silence'

¹¹ John Corbett, 'Experimental Oriental: New Music and other others', 'Western Music and its others' p.170

¹² *ibid.*p169