The Systematic Refusal of Modern Music and the Cult of Classicism

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In his recent work *The Rise of Musical Classics in Eighteenth-Century England*, English historian William Weber demonstrates that both the modern-day notion of repertory and the origins of musical genre can be traced back to the English aristocracy of the eighteenth century [1]. Even though technological art has not been analyzed within the aesthetic and practical categories on which it is based, the category or genre of pure instrumental music does indeed encompass the new realm born of this art. This updating and modernization gives rise to several questions, and I will try to reply here to one of the most important: Why is all electronic music perceived as being particularly abstract, whereas everything in its history predisposed it to be seen in a totally different light?

Does the cult of classicism contribute to the seeming symbolic inaccessibility of recent cultural products? Though far from new, this idea is radical—even excessive—and points in the same direction as the observations noted by the sociology of modern culture, at least in two of its offshoots. First of all, we can agree that the old repertory and more recent cultural products do not constitute two separate and isolated worlds. In fact, they share a common destiny with tangible signs of proof, amongst which we may cite: (1) the way different products are filtered, (2) the barriers set up between what could be considered mere musical curiosities and the real raw material of creative work, and (3) the categories in which creative work is placed and the intermediaries who work on it and direct it into the channels where it is most likely to be heard. Thus, the official categories and classifications that include cultural products of a former age in fact simply recycle those products, and this reclassification is bound to have a certain influence on the supposedly virgin territory of contemporary creation.

So which 10 composers since Claude Debussy or Alban Berg could be considered the most representative of this century? Both music lovers and curious listeners are faced with this question as soon as they venture into the terrain of modern music. The question becomes more serious once one tries to classify all the different types of music from so many different and varied sources into the old, well-established categories.

The current musical scene is indeed a jungle, but not one that lends itself to meanderings of any and every sort. Enough closed circuits are in place so that before either the curious or the conformist listener even comes into contact with the music itself, the territory of this new realm is already mapped out for him or her. At the same time, these filters are reinforced by the interpretative framework—and the attitudes and expectations—that currently hold sway in the mind of the general public; in fact, they actually help to obstruct the acceptance of new, innovative work. The misunderstandings that turn a potentially interested public away from these works take root, ironically enough, in this intimate knowledge and frequenting of a pantheon of so-called “great” art.

We find concrete examples of this in the plastic arts, where both well-established art-lovers and the merely curious tend to transpose the mentality that enables them to appreciate ancient monuments directly onto the contemporary works presented to them. This point of view sharply contrasts those of the artists themselves—as well as gallery owners and museum directors—and can be summed up thus: works from the ancient world necessitate lengthy contemplation, whereas modern art generally abides a much more rapid exploration or examination. In other words, the art-consuming public spends very little time sampling the products of the current market and assumes that a quick glance will give them sufficient access to these works. This uninterrupted chain of immediate interpretative echoes contrasts sharply with the long hours passed in back rooms wandering amongst ancient monuments.

Although my purpose here is not to take sides for or against this “critical” viewpoint, suffice it to say that the idea that a work of art can be summed up in a single irrelevant idea, glance or play of visual effects offends the cultural sensibility oriented towards landmarks. This kind of framework undoubtedly plays a great part in influencing the way current works of art and their public cross paths.

Although space limitations prevent us from exploring all the outlines and main implications of this two-fold observation here, we should at least try to evaluate its consequences, in regards both to what is on offer artistically and to the way the.offer is received (i.e. the affirmation by which the romantic artist creates a heroic vision of his or her mission, one that cannot be dissociated from the establishment of monuments or landmarks made to resist the ravages of time). Here we find the artist in his or her role as missionary, a vocational role that gives rise to certain expectations. As such, the artist becomes a creator of monuments before God or a similar deity and takes on the duty of creating lasting works of art. Thus, any works conceived and intended to remain permanent stars in

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The history of literature has very little to catechisms that hold weight nowadays. The nineteenth-century idea of a pantheon as a national setting for a new cult is at the basis of the romantic consecration of the artist and the monumental quality of his or her works, as Paul Bénichou has so aptly shown [2].

**THE ARTIST AND POST-MORTEM RECOGNITION**

It is difficult to dissociate the artist-as-missionary from the context that proves to be the most favorable to his or her mission. After its third decade, the nineteenth century seems in fact to have offered younger generations on the intellectual fringes of society the most favorable conditions for a true blossoming of their talents. This was due to several factors: diverging time scales converged to construct a completely new personality, the spearhead of this new missionary body. In short, history decreed a meeting between a social group of restricted, familiar dimensions—in which context we might easily speak of a “cultural clergy” [3]—and the doctrine they took to heart as their own and which we now know developed from the attempt in eighteenth-century England to hierarchically arrange the whole territory of creative art. Pure chamber music works, abstract by nature, became objects of immense veneration, whereas descriptive works or those drawing on a certain vocal sensibility or the pleasures of narrative or theatrical art were literally condemned to the fires of hell. Indeed, the purpose of Purgatory seemed to be to receive the hybrid works of instrumental music or highly worked lieder [4]. Whether a doctrine of this kind was forged under the dictates of an ancient or a more contemporary philosophy is relatively unimportant. Theology is full of theories that have never been put to the test of practice; that the artistic theology of eighteenth-century England was put into practice is a basic and undeniable fact in the history of culture. It is particularly surprising that this cult has not only survived but extended to cover the whole of Europe, where it really began to take root in the 1830s. Make no mistake here—the cultural clergy that emerged at the time remained a minority nevertheless and possessed a status that was hardly to be envied, despite the catechisms that hold weight nowadays. The history of literature has very little to do with the official versions that we find in works by Gustave Lanson, for instance [5]. A late-nineteenth-century writer had the theater in mind above everything else; his dream was to be a journalist. Similarly, a composer from the previous century would envisage his career taking shape on the stage of the major opera houses. Given these conditions, then, we should find the history of literature or music of this period in the theater of the time and not in the so-called “purer” forms of these arts. Be that as it may, the most radical avant-gardists undoubtedly found in their positions as false guards (“porte-a-faux”) sufficient motivation to commit themselves wholeheartedly to this noble, though minor, cause. Again, a quick look at the history of the behavior and attitudes of this group towards life reveals its fragility, underlined by its particularly high rate of suicide, which was the case generally for the intellectuals of the time [6]. So we have here a fragile group with no access to social recognition: their answer to the situation was to stake their all in the present in hopes that posterity would grant them the consecration so sorely lacking in their immediate future.

Nowadays, artists find themselves in a totally different position and have full and proper social recognition. Moreover, the wide diversity of ethical and aesthetic criteria at play is patently obvious. But the divergent types and styles of cultural products present to the uninitiated onlooker as disunited a front as that of the current trade unions of France. Although militant proposals appear quite regularly, they never manage to gain unanimous approval. In the minds of some, the myth of total ubiquity in cyberspace has perhaps replaced their aspirations of gaining a place in the pantheon for universally appealing and relevant art. Neither a common program nor even a common front currently unites writers, sculptors, composers and other contemporary creative artists. Conversely, the artistic monuments erected or consecrated in the previous century continue to occupy a preponderant amount of space within society. Modern centers of creativity are only mines of treasure to be discovered by their contemporaries when the right information circulates in the right places, contacts are correctly set up and principals find themselves in the right place at the right time; for most artists, these conditions simply either do not exist or they pass the artist by. Thus, the socialization of our relationship to art takes place for the most part today in schools and museums.

**THE SOCIALIZATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP TO CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL PRODUCTS**

In the dissemination of cultural products, the most sought-after educational models carry considerable weight, as do the well-equipped meeting places [7]. Direct contact—with all the virtues it implies—and the circulation of symbolic objects within our different social structures are thus very restricted. It is not enough for contemporary onlookers to simply view the variety of artistic products on offer—which in any case they do only via the mass media—in order to be able to cast aside the cultural schema or models already installed deep within their collective consciousness. Models from the past live exceptionally long lives; they survive like so many potential historical contradictions, the effect of which is often wrongly estimated these days.

A brief research project I performed might present this retarded effect in concrete terms [8]. My research, though limited to a group of established music lovers who regularly attend certain “places of conservation,” reveals some edifying facts. For instance, we learn that for most of the curious public who venture into concert halls, contemporary music represents an entity that is radically redefined, thanks to familiar faces. Thus, we find a gap between Olivier Messiaen, Pierre Boulez, Bruno Maderna and Luigi Nono—whose reputations make their names familiar to us—and the actual musical experience of their works. In reply to questions based on a long list of French composers from the last 50 years, the subjects of this inquiry had to identify the composers based on two points: their reputations and the broad outlines of each of their styles. Generally speaking, there was widespread familiarity with the names, a remarkable fact considering the depth and breadth of the list submitted for the survey. In fact, it reproduced the curious census of French composers encompassed in Larousse’s *Dictionnaire des Grands Musiciens* published in 1985 [9]. No other encyclopedia aimed at a wide general public has so clearly and so frankly assumed its function of canonization before death: from Reibel to Mache via Aperghis, Blancquart or Amy—a
whole influential generation, in fact. In contrast to mere name recognition on the part of the great majority of the subjects chosen for the survey, the pinpointing by category led to many more discrepancies—the subjects able to go beyond the single proposed adjective that categorized each composer on the list were, frankly, few and far between. One particular result, on the other hand, does confirm all my introductory remarks and implies that we can measure the basic, primary socialization of the dominant relationship to contemporary cultural products. When the subjects were asked to distinguish some of the more well-known classical pieces of the standard repertory from works attributed to twentieth-century composers—especially those whose work includes electronic music—a clear majority opinion appears. Electronic art is associated for the most part with the most abstract forms of composition. Generally speaking, musique concrète—which has always tried to take its raw material from the living matter that confronts our ears every day of our lives—comes up against the impenetrable, established ways of categorizing. Contemporary music conceived within a scholarly and well-documented tradition wears a halo that is particularly opaque and difficult to penetrate. The wide range of soundscapes and new musical universes dreamed up by our modernity, all of them alive and well, have nevertheless been swallowed up by tidal waves surging out of the past.

References and Notes

3. By “cultural clergy” I refer to the band of people in various spheres of the teaching profession who promote and make sacrifices upon the altar of the often-exclusive cult of “ancient monuments.” This “clergy” has gradually created its own independence on the open market of culture that has come into being since the late eighteenth century. For a more detailed analysis, see Emmanuel Pedler, *Sociologie de l’Opéra* (Marseille: Editions Parenthesis, 1999).
4. *Lieder* are German art songs of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.
7. For more on such models and meeting places in the context of the sociology of education, see Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture (Theory, Culture and Society)* (London: Sage Publications, 1990). For the same in the context of French cultural sociology, see Pedler [5].
8. This enquiry was realized in 1997 in the Provence-Alps-Côte d’Azur Region of France via several mailing lists of season-ticket holders at various opera houses and concert halls. The study’s main aim—to evaluate how these patrons receive information on contemporary music—was reached through interviews, followed by a brief questionnaire about the concert goers’ musical tastes.