

INTRODUCTION

Thoughtful Pleasures

Many years ago, a former student of mine, well versed in both Cageian koans and ProgRock, emerged from a concert looking even more bemused than usual. “It was difficult,” he lamented, “I didn’t know if I was supposed to understand the music or enjoy it.” It was a casual comment, thrown out between the takedown of gear and the retreat to the bar, but, for me, it encapsulated a major quandary of Postmodern music. Were comprehension and enjoyment condemned to live at different addresses?

From its naughty lyric content to the pounding physicality of its sound to the hyperbolic hedonism of its performers, Pop music has always been unabashedly driven by the pleasure principle. This pleasure can take many forms: the fluffy crushes on wholesome boy bands and girl groups, the ambiguous sexuality of Glam rock, the S&M undercurrents of Punk and Grunge and Hardcore, the no-nonsense rutting rhythm of Techno and Funk. With the anti-logic of star-crossed love, justifying one’s Pop tastes inevitably comes down to the argument, “but I like it” (as the Rolling Stones once said).

“Serious” music, however, is perceived as more refined, genteel or, to put it another way, repressed. Although music of the Renaissance and Baroque was largely dance music (Antonio Vivaldi may well have been the Giorgio Moroder of his day), Classical and Romantic composers edged away from the dance floor, and Modernists removed themselves to the cramped cafe around the corner, where bodies sat still while ideas flowed. Since its inception in the 19th century, the avant-garde has stood in opposition to thoughtless pleasure, and as a consequence has found itself in the peculiar position of accompanying bohemian, hedonistic lifestyles with defiantly itchy and uncomfortable music.

But are pleasure and thoughtful invention necessarily at odds, or is this apparent opposition merely a convention of recent European art music? Ordinary people may not have danced to “serious” music since the gavotte was hot, but surely, Berlin’s Love Parade [1] notwithstanding, there’s more to life than dancing. Is there no fun to be had above the waist? Can there be no thoughtful pleasure?

Certainly much post-Cageian, post-summer-of-love music broke with Modernism’s aloofness. Consider the gratifying, sternum-thudding din of Rhys Chatham’s guitar pieces; the heaving, well-oiled muscularity of Gordon Monahan’s speaker swingers; the blissed-out Maryanne Amacher fan, raptly wrapped around her subwoofer for 2 hours. The acoustic experimentation and formal methodology owe as much to Alvin Lucier as they do to CBGB. Here are clear examples of a thoughtful core enveloped in a seductive coat of physicality. The sheer joy of playing is not limited to guitar pyrotechnics: pianist Matthias Osterwold once told me, “I love Bach, but I love playing Chopin, the way it feels under my fingers.” And there’s meditative pleasure as well: the trancelike states induced by the perfect Perfect Fifth of the Indian *tambura*, the rise and fall of Gregorian chant, or the hallucinogenic acoustics of La Monte Young’s *Well-Tuned Piano*.

For nigh on a half century, journalists have tried to raise Pop out of the cultural gutter and convince us of its intellectual merit, but there has been scant critical attention paid to the feel-good factor of “serious” music, except to condemn (Ned Rorem) or extol (Milton Babbitt) its paucity. We felt that the time had come to talk of libido and Ligeti, Tenney and transcendence, in the same breath. For this volume of *Leonardo Music Journal* we sought out articles and personal reflections on the role of pleasure and sensation in music.

The response was eclectic. Pleasure in music, even in “new” music, has many parts: the thrill of creating, the pleasure of playing, the bliss of listening, the smug satisfaction of owning.

Certain topics recur: rhythm, toe-tapping and otherwise; the rumpy-bumpy of machines and bodies; the pseudoscience of musical appeal; overt and covert sexuality; the exhilaration of playing in public.

Rhythm plays a pivotal, if controversial, role in this issue. Ben Neill asserts that the future of the avant-garde lies in computer-driven “beat science,” as evidenced by the sonic (if not formal) experimentation of recent dance music. David Byrne and Bob Ostertag, on the other hand, expound on the beauty and the shortcomings, respectively, of machine-derived rhythms and their cultural and physiological ramifications. Ricardo Arias takes the contrarian position as he extols the joy of the unexpected and uncontrollable in decidedly undanceable improvised music. Robert Wilshire recounts the difficulties of adapting high-speed, high-volume dance music to a choral setting. Arthur Elsenaar and Remko Scha invert the human-machine interface in their history of electrical stimulation of the body.

The authors draw on a variety of techniques to explain, and even quantize, pleasure in music. Reinhold Friedl sees sadomasochism underlying both the ubiquitous oscillation between expectation and resolution in the psychoacoustics of melody and harmony, and the social conventions of music. Leonardo Peusner uses graph theory to map “pleasing” melodies to similarly satisfying visual patterns. Through his use of the idiolectic term “comish music,” Frieder Butzmann evokes a linkage between the mechanisms of “success” and “failure” in both music and humor.

Several composers discuss giving “nonmusicians” access to the joy of composing and performing. By incorporating the results of research in music cognition, Gil Weinberg designs instrument/software hybrids that allow the general public (including infants) to produce “rich and meaningful music,” guaranteed to please. With her *Sheer Frost Orchestra*, Marina Rosenfeld gives ordinary people “a way to be involved in a mystical and enthralling activity: playing electric-guitar music live.” David Soldier applies a tongue-in-cheek Turing Test to compositional collaborations with children, elephants and statistical data to determine whether it is possible to distinguish between “real music” (made by “real” composers) and “naughtmusik” (made by nonmusicians).

Bruce Crossman and Amnon Wolman focus on the adaptation of sensual or overtly erotic text material—Crossman looks for “resonances” between Filipino poems and traditional instruments, while Wolman creates an electronic accompaniment and tableau-vivant staging for monologues of gay sexual conquests.

Yale Evelev contributes an autobiographical account of his life as a professional “musical hanger-on,” from childhood through his days at the legendary Soho Music Gallery to running Luaka Bop Records. Robert Poss posits that our brains preserve the most splendid of musical memories in “glorious low-definition mono.”

Finally, David Rosenboom returns to the central question: the “antiquated and artificial debate about mind versus body.” Rosenboom urges listeners to perceive rather than evaluate music, to tear down the “iron curtain around the joy of sound now.” Although individual essays herein might espouse a specific path to pleasure, taken together they demonstrate the perversity of what Rosenboom calls “the pleasure filter,” the sneaky little machine of intellectual conceit that keeps us pure and passion-free.

The CD accompanying this issue grew out of a chance conversation with Christian Scheib in which he described a project he has been working on with Susanna Niedermayr for ORF Radio in Vienna, collecting new music from emergent scenes in Eastern Europe. “High” and “low,” “pop” and “avant-garde” stand promiscuously cheek-by-jowl, as if, indeed, the distinction were moot.

Welcome then, to the world of bump and mind.

NICOLAS COLLINS
Editor-in-Chief

Reference

1. For information on the Love Parade, see <<http://www.loveparade.de/>>.