The Dissolution of the Avant-Garde

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Introduction

Between the late 1950s and the present day a key shift has occurred in the cultural significance of musical endeavour.[1] At some point in this period the primacy of the avant-garde was ended and supplanted by a culture of postmodernity. If anything, when viewed within a broader cultural framework, the rise of notions of a culture of postmodernity is directly related to the decline of the avant-garde. Indeed, I will suggest that the one is in fact a key marker of the other. Central to this discussion are the views of the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman. Bauman is often marginalised in discussions of the nature of postmodernity, in the same way that many of the more well-known key texts on postmodernism, postmodernity and post-structuralism neglect this moment of passage in favour of binary oppositional play between modernism and postmodernism, or examinations of the condition of postmodernity with only negligible reference to its forebear. What is key to Bauman's writings on the nature of contemporary society, however, is precisely this diffuse area of liminality situated between modernity and postmodernity. Thus, though the shift from the "one true church" of an avant-garde will be starkly contrasted with the ecumenicalism of postmodernity, I hope to avoid the well-worn cliché of integral pluralism as representing a "postmodern style." I shall focus instead upon the integration of compositional modes of thinking and the culture that surrounds them.

In what follows, I shall primarily be considering modernity and postmodernity as if they were temporal strata rather than musical styles or, indeed, more clearly defined historical periods, following Taylor's salutary example in endeavouring to "sidestep the inevitable dead end that results when attempting to determine whether or not a particular piece or composer is "postmodern."[2] It is therefore important to understand how one might attempt to characterise a postmodern music. Or, more accurately, how thinking about the composition of new music might exist within a postmodern space. It is also, first, vital to explain why the tendency to use the idea of postmodernism as a genre category must be avoided.

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[1] I refer within this essay specifically to trends of musical thought occurring within several musical cultures which have stemmed from the so-called classical tradition, principally musics which might be classified under the, somewhat unsatisfactory, term "Western Art Music." Despite this, I believe that the proliferation of a vast range of musical subcultures--and in this context I regard the continuation of those "classical" trends which had the semblance of cultural centrality in the 1950s as representing just one of these subcultures--suggests that the context outlined here would have wider applicability to many other strands of music-making, including those which may not previously have been regarded as "central."

[2] Timothy D. Taylor, "Music and Musical Practices in Postmodernity," in *Postmodern Music, Postmodern Thought*, Judy Lochhead and Joseph Auner, eds. (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 103.

The Case for a Postmodern Music

Although the term postmodernism is now commonplace in most disciplines within the humanities, it is only comparatively recently that English-language texts have begun to apply its precepts to contemporary music.[3] Most attempts to define the notion of a postmodern music have focussed on the idea of postmodernism as a stylistic category. Robin Hartwell's article "Postmodernism and Art Music" is typical of this trend. Hartwell suggests that "one can characterise the shift from modernism to postmodernism as a shift from a position of antagonism to the past to one of appropriation."[4] This idea is suggestive of the well-worn cliché that a postmodern music would be characterised by the inclusion of quoted material from the past. Though, superficially at least, this argument has many strengths, it is ultimately flawed. Composers who are cited as being "postmodern" in this sense might include such figures as Berio, Kagel and John Zorn. Taking a slightly broader view, Rihm's appropriation of a Beethovenian (as well as Bergian) aesthetic within *Musik für drei Streicher* (1977) would also be representative of such a trend. However, it is clear that such stylistic notions are hardly the exclusive province of contemporary culture. Stravinsky's *Pulcinella* (1919-20) and Berg's Violin Concerto (1935) represent two obvious cases of citation in the first half of the twentieth century. Nor is there any shortage of further examples in the music of the baroque and earlier. Jonathan D. Kramer's attempt to describe "The Nature and Origins of Musical Postmodernism" is an ideal example of the problematic nature of such categorisation.[5] Kramer puts forward a list of sixteen points that might be characteristic of postmodern music. However, immediately after providing this checklist, Kramer confesses:

> Not many pieces exhibit all these traits, and thus it is futile to label a work as exclusively postmodern. Also, I would find it difficult to locate a work that exhibits none of these traits … postmodern music is not a neat category with rigid boundaries.[6]

It seems, therefore, almost self-evident that the very idea of trying to make the claim that any piece individually represents a postmodern music is profoundly unsound or, at best, a pointless task. Joakim Tillman's analysis of the German debate also concludes that most of the musicologists involved in this discussion "believe that fundamental pluralism, which implies a break with the modernist ideal of unity, is the only common characteristic of postmodern music."[7] At this level, the idea of postmodernism as any sort of discrete genre categorisation becomes either untenable or so watered down as to offer little useful information.

Hartwell's construct, however, does provide a useful rider that, concomitant with this loss of historical consciousness, postmodernism would insist on the "'presentness' of any experience."[8] That is to say, following the Jamesonian model of postmodernism as

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[3] Although certain notions drawn from postmodern thinking, of course, heavily influenced the so-called New Musicology.

[4] Robin Hartwell, "Postmodernism and art music," *The Last Post: Music after Modernism*, ed. Simon Miller (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), pp. 32-33.

[5] Judy Lochhead and Joseph Auner, eds., *Postmodern Music/Postmodern Thought*, pp. 13-26.

[6] Ibid., p. 17.

[7] Ibid., p. 88.

[8] Hartwell, ibid., p. 33.

collapse of historical consciousness, all previous historical styles become equally valid compositional options, despite the fact that, if we follow Jameson fully, these styles gradually become devoid of any implicit meaning, or historicity, which they had previously assumed. As a logical conclusion of this possibility, it is clear that the presence of composers promulgating a style based on citation would be a likely marker of the emergence of a postmodern music, but to describe an individual piece, or the use of such a practice, as postmodern would limit the notion so greatly as to make it practically useless. Rather, the traces of a postmodern music would have to be much broader. The necessity for pluralism is far more easily observed in the presence of multiple, equally valid stylistic directions across the whole spectrum of musical endeavour, rather than searching for these characteristics within an individual piece. That is to say, it is not the presence of a stylistically defined grouping that allows us to observe the existence of postmodernism as a musical category. It is the combination of the temporal co-existence of multiple contradictory styles--necessarily more than two, to circumvent the idea that this is little more than a dialectical binary opposition with a historically directional component--all of which are accorded an equal validity. It is in this connection that the dissolution of the avant-garde, and the rise of a postmodern musical culture are intimately linked. Indeed, the point at which the avant-garde ceases to exist is almost certainly the moment at which postmodernity can really be said to have begun.

Quite clearly, then, the two positions of postmodernism as style and postmodernity as moment are fundamentally incompatible with one another. To be able to say that this or that piece is an example of a "postmodern style" denotes by obvious implication that certain other pieces are not examples of such a style. To be able to make such a statement would force one to be unable to accept the idea of a historical category, as there would still be a functional dialectic opposition between modern and postmodern musics. Given the impossibility, however, of finding sufficient stylistic markers to make any accurate judgements about genre, it seems much more coherent and useful as an argument to enter into Bauman's currency, and view the apparent clash between modern and postmodern as an example of the guerrilla warfare he predicts.[9]

The Impossibility of a Postmodern Avant-Garde

Although there are many definitions of what avant-gardism actually *is*, some of them in direct conflict with each other, the description given by Bauman provides an effective synthesis of many such definitions and reminds us of what one might think of as the common view. The clarity of Bauman's description justifies quotation in full:

> Literally, "avant-garde" means the vanguard, an advance post, a spearhead or the first line of a moving army: a detachment which moves in front of the main body of the armed forces--but remains ahead only to pave the way for the rest of the army … The avant-garde gives the distance which separates it from the bulk a temporal dimension: what is being done *at present* by a small advance unit will be repeated *later* by all. The guard is seen as "advanced" on the assumption that "the rest will follow suit." It goes without saying that we know for sure on which side is the front and where is the rear, where is "before" and where "behind." (We know too that the stretch between them does not stand

[9] See, especially, Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodernity and its Discontents* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), p. 96.

still--the front line itself is on the move.) The concept of the avant-garde conveys the idea of an essentially orderly space and time, and of an essential co-ordination of the two orders. In a world in which one can speak of the avant-garde, "forward" and "backward" have, simultaneously, spatial and temporal dimensions.[10]

In what follows, I shall adopt this perspective as axiomatic. It is important here, also, to outline the entwined relationships of the avant-garde and the modern society that validated the possibility of its existence. As Baudelaire correctly identified much of modernity's power as deriving from the binary pairing of "the transient, the fleeting, the contingent" and "the eternal and the immutable,"[11] so Habermas elegantly concluded that "actuality can be constituted only as the point where time and eternity intersect," reminding us of "the kinship of *modernity* with *mode* (or *fashion*)."[12] It is important that this is conceived of in terms of counterpoint, rather than opposition, since the trajectory of modernity cuts a path between these two extremes. Or rather, it recognises that the passing moment is a necessary way-stage on the route of such assumed everlasting truths. The avant-garde's role in this passage is clear: they are the explorers, the cartographers of yet unknown realities. In short, the avant-garde is the agent of the "always-becoming" of modernity. Bauman suggests that the end of the avant-garde in this sense can be equated with the end of modernity, and identifies key characteristics that would help us to demonstrate that such a change had occurred.

Though Bauman takes issue with the rhizomic trope appropriated by Deleuze and Guattari, it is not this, perhaps most contentious, aspect of their reconfiguration of knowledge claims that I hope to synthesise with Bauman's thoughts. Deleuze and Guattari's ideology confounds modernist approaches to spatialisation, by introducing the notion of non-commensurable plateaus of activity, which are connected only in a non-directional manner, by lines of flight. As Deleuze and Guattari define it: "The territorializing factor, must be sought elsewhere: precisely in the becoming-expressive of rhythm or melody, in other words, in the emergence of proper qualities (color, odor, sound, silhouette…)."[13] It therefore becomes impossible to be "on the border of fertile land," because the very notion of crossing that border, even coming *to* a border, has been destabilised. Indeed, it is impossible to determine whether the place in which one stands is border or hinterland. If one is in a "fertile land," it is almost certainly a homestead of one's own devising.

The territorial markings of this (re-)found state are simply those of a personal signature, though the imprimatur of signature need not be defined, of course, merely by graphological markings. The construction is, indeed, circular: the signature is instead that which is the "constituting mark of a domain, and abode."[14] As Derrida observes, it is the self-reinforcing iteration of signature that now validates the artwork: the very "I-ness" of

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[10] Ibid., p. 95.

[11] In his essay, "The painter of modern life," cited in David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Social Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 10.

[12] Jürgen Habermas, trans. Frederick Lawrence, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1987), p. 9.

[13] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, tr. Brian Massumi (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 316.

[14] Ibid., p. 316.

an object becomes once more of great significance.[15] Validation cannot be achieved through an exterior concern, be that temporal or spatial. This codification of signature

> is in a perpetual state of transcoding or transduction. Transcoding or transduction is the manner in which one milieu serves as the basis for another, or conversely is established atop another milieu, dissipates in it or is constituted in it.[16]

The complexity of this relationship is what serves to bring about the rebirth of interest in philosophies and cosmologies of chaotic activity, though, as Deleuze and Guattari remind us, "chaos is not without its own directional components, which are its own ecstasies."[17]

This impinges upon the creative act in the desire to remain individual, such that a piece can be recognised as authorially belonging to a single figure. Not originality, but individuality has become the most prized goal. The identification factor, the musical signature, becomes a rather primal territorial marking. As one would expect with such a marking it is also intended to ward off would-be trespassers upon this territory. Rihm's observation that the provision of a ready-made system to a young composer is useless is representative of this trend, since he thus refuses to provide the marker posts that another composer might require to follow his path. Furthermore, the writings of Lachenmann and Grisey both propose what are, in effect, aesthetic criteria, while they studiously avoid providing concrete procedural examples of how they have constructed their music. Ferneyhough, too, adopts a similar principle, though in a markedly different style. His presentation of the potential of material, rather than of his *actual* compositional process represents an equally strong form of obfuscation of his own compositional methodology. By acting in this manner, he only provides quasi-systems and, most importantly, does not demonstrate concretely how he actually utilised the available material himself. Through the avoidance, therefore, of endeavouring to attract followers to their cause, each of these composers therefore implicitly rejects the idea that they are the ones on the correct path forward. Even where Grisey proposed an idea or ideology that he believed to be a novel one, it remained evident, through his lack of concrete examples of praxis, that his hope was not to acquire disciples for his cause, but instead to cause composers operating within various stylistic categories and camps to ask questions about what they were doing. The principal question, indeed, had to be whether what they were doing was sufficiently individual.[18] In order to achieve this individuality it is actually vital that there be no avant-garde. Although it is certainly possible for personal systems to cut a path forward, it is equally clear that, if there *is* to be a forward trajectory, only one personal system can be in the lead at one time. Where composers are predominantly seeking forms or styles of composition that differ from and defer to one another, it would only be wise to follow the signposts dictated by another composer to a very limited degree.

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[15] Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," in *Limited Inc*, tr. Alan Bass, Jeffrey Mehlman and Samuel Weber (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1988), pp. 19-21.

[16] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 313.

[17] Ibid., p. 313.

[18] In this context, Heidegger's position as one of the most significant forebears of post-structuralist thought becomes of significance. For Heidegger, in order to exist authentically, it is first necessary to adhere to one's own self. Indeed, the word Heidegger utilises for authenticity, *Eigentlichkeit*, also has strong connotations of "that which belongs to oneself."

It is not, though, simply the adoption of a personal trajectory that is significant. The signifying effect should also be more than the ability to recognise a composer via their style. This, indeed, would hardly represent an especially unusual factor. While Stockhausen may indeed have been striving for ways of working only forwards, so that each subsequent piece becomes an "event" in that it represents a new piece of progress in his compositional style, here--and Lachenmann is the foremost example of this--each piece becomes an event because it is merely *different* from the previous one. It must also, therefore, have its own individual signature. Indeed, one could adapt Lachenmann's own familial construct of the individual piece and re-apply it to an entire *oeuvre*. The fundamental factor, however, is no longer that each piece must represent individual progress, but must represent simultaneously sameness to and difference from previous pieces in the output.[19]

Nevertheless, rather than the somewhat absolutist idea that this plurality would involve a potentially infinite number of composers, all pioneers in a space of their own devising, with the ultimate collapse of belief that progress, in an absolute sense, is attainable, pluralism exhibited itself for the most part in factionalised groups, or clans. Ferneyhough attractively describes the situation in the early 1980s: "a clear-headed re-examination of the implications inherent in particular stylistic norms is conveniently diverted into satisfyingly primitive expressions of clan spirit."[20] The primary clans of course were the New Complexity, the New Simplicity, the spectralists, and on a less significant footing, minimalists and adherents of Lachenmann. Here, however, we find precisely the situation that Baudrillard might have predicted. Despite the end of an avant-gardiste way of thinking about music, it becomes contingent that the trappings of argument and debate are retained, in a simulated repetitive re-run of the factionalism which was originally expected dialectically to form a trajectory towards the future.

It is, at this stage, useful to consider Peter Bürger's analysis of the avant-garde, which initially appears greatly limiting, with his insistence upon "the intent of the avant-garde movements to reintegrate art in the praxis of life."[21] Because of the paradoxical notions of success and failure that became implicit in avant-gardiste praxis itself--to be successful, that is popular, denotes failure; to fail, which is to be generally derided, is a clear mark that one is moving in the correct direction--avant-garde movements gradually began to distance themselves from life praxis. The two driving forces of avant-gardism, ultimately, are in conflict with one another, and are themselves responsible for tearing avant-gardism itself apart. The alternative is, in effect, ghettoisation. In order to solve the conflict, a *sui generis* reality must be found: a simulation of life praxis, as Baudrillard might have it.

It is little surprise that the collapse of an avant-gardiste mentality would have gone almost unnoticed. How does one distinguish the "moving army" of avant-gardism

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[19] It is clear that Derrida's notion of *différance* represents another paradigm of a similar, though perhaps more complex, effect.

[20] Brian Ferneyhough, "Form--Figure--Style: an intermediate assessment," *Collected Writings* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1995), p. 21. Ferneyhough himself, of course, is not entirely above engaging in such guerrilla warfare. He refers to comments on "expression" made by members of the group of composers around Rihm as "vacuous *ex cathedra* pronouncements."

[21] Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, tr. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 87.

from the "directional components" of chaos? As Bauman articulates the change, what has disappeared is the front line of the battle:

> Instead of a regular army, the scattered battles are fought now by guerilla units; instead of a condensed offensive action with a determined strategic goal, endless local skirmishes take place, devoid of an overall purpose; no one paves the way for others, no one expects that the others will follow.[22]

More precisely expressed, modernity's intimate involvement with the fleeting has been retained; its meaning, or the apparatus through which it acquires its meaning, however, has been excised.

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[22] Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodernity and its Discontents*, p. 96.