

Are the Divisions between “High” and “Low” Culture Evident in Today’s Music?

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Abstract

In this paper I will explore the concepts of “high” and “low” culture in the context of contemporary music. I will describe the historical roots of the split when music divided into mass culture, and what could be termed “art music”, and the subsequent developments with reference to contemporaneous cultural climates. Examples will be explored of artists who have crossed this artificial line, including collaborative projects. Finally the question will be addressed over whether the culture industry, specifically in the final decades of the twentieth century, has in some way blurred the division between “high” and “low” culture in music.

Keywords: Culture Industry, Music, Art, Society

1. Introduction

In recent years the field of popular music has been the subject of serious scholarly research. Academic music journals, once only concerned with contemporary “art” music and historical musicology, now include analyses of popular songs such as the Spice Girls’ *Wannabe*, which has led some people to compare today’s contemporary “high” culture to the late 17th century *prima prattica*, desperately trying to retain supremacy over the more popular *secunda prattica* opera style. However it is as yet unclear whether popular culture is in fact taking over “high” culture, or whether the two are converging, or, more likely, whether recent changes in attitudes in historiography and epistemology and the emergence of critical theory has questioned the undisputed dominance of the traditional classical canon, and opened up a previously neglected repertoire for exploration.

The inclusion of popular music material in serious compositions is not a new phenomenon. The traditional French secular chanson *L’homme armé* is found in over 30 examples by composers as varied as Dufay, Ockeghem, Palestrina and Carissimi, including sacred settings. The use of traditional folk material was an integral part of the upsurge in nationalism in the 19th century, found in Glinka, Tchaikovsky, as well as in early Stravinsky. However, in all these cases the popular material was incorporated into the conventional, “high art” compositional method, and therefore would not constitute an amalgamation of high and popular art forms. A more contemporary example of this is Chris Dench’s “Funk” (1989), inspired by New York funk / rap artist Afrika Bambaataa, which is not however based on his music, but merely uses the letters of his name, which are then treated in a traditionally modernist, “New Complexist” manner. Other contemporary composers who have used popular music in a more direct manner include Thomas Adès, as in the third movement of *Asyla*, marked *Ecstasio*, which imitates the euphoric, club-based “house” music. However in this case too the popular material is used in a very objective way, juxtaposed between more conservative movements, and Adès remains very much a “high art” composer.

2. Historical Background

At the present moment music is still very much distinguished as either “popular” or “art”, despite recent shifts in the boundaries between them. There are still differences in the way they are marketed, consumed, as well as funded, with “art” music often subsidized by government or university grants. The origins of this divide can be traced back to the advent of tonality, during the Enlightenment, when artists sought ever more rationalization and autonomy in their works. Artists’ liberation from the constraints of the church / state coincided with the rise of the reading public and the emergence of the prominent category of amateur musicians. Ironically, the quest for art’s autonomy was only made possible through its commodification, which left it vulnerable to the effects of the market economy. After the failed revolutions of 1848 artists retreated further from any sense of social commitment, and movements such as Symbolism and Aestheticism were born, giving rise to aesthetic modernism, and conversely to a music tailored for the amateur or untutored musician — mass culture. Critics such as E. T. A. Hoffmann, Schumann and Eduard Hanslick noticed this trend, and encouraged the type of consumer adverse to cheap sentimentality, who undertook “structural listening”.

The division between “high” and “low”, or modernist and popular culture, was greatest during the period of serialism, and later integral serialism. Schoenberg stated that “if it is art, it is not for all, and if it is for all, it is not art” (Shepherd, Virden, Vulliamy & Wishart, 1977: vii), a view which was later echoed in Milton Babbitt’s famous article “Who cares if you listen?” from *High Fidelity* in 1958. Although attempts were made by surrealism and Dada in the historical avant-garde to reintegrate aspects of daily life into art, these, according to Peter Bürger, were almost destined to fail, as “institutional” art was bound to bourgeois society, so for such a transformation to take place in art, society itself would have to change (Huysen, 1986: 7-8). Modernism, i.e. serialism, succeeded, and was seen as the logical continuation of the classical, Germanic canon.

The way in which the autonomous qualities of modernist works attracted theorists like Adorno is understandable, given that he witnessed how music’s functional associations could be exploited by German and Italian fascism, socialist realism and the commercial culture in the USA. However, where modernism’s attempts to transform society failed, the culture industry succeeded. These effects on art were so great that,

according to Adorno, the commodification of art turned into the aesthetisation of the commodity — its exchange value began to exceed its use value (Huysen, 1986: 21-22). This is seen most clearly in the pop art of the 1960’s, such as Warhol, Lichtenstein and Wesselmann, several of whom came to art through advertising, and subsequently whose works were used by advertisers for many years to come.

Whilst conservative critics denounced pop art as kitsch, a younger audience recognised in it a reflection of the lack of values in traditional high art criticism. These were reinforced in the late 1960’s student rebellions against higher institutions, where pop art and subculture in general was seen as an emancipation against traditional authority. Pop art seemed to liberate the art world from the boredom of abstract expressionism, restored the relationship between art and life, and where 1950’s exhibits contained a few hundred experts, pop art opened up a new audience of thousands. Similar movements followed in literature, where in 1964 Leslie Fiedler declared the “Death of the Avant-Garde Literature”, and in 1968 wrote to “Cross the Border—Close the Gap” (Huysen, 1986: 164-5), and in 1967 Leonard B. Meyer wrote that there was no classical canon in music anymore, but that the age was defined by stylistic pluralism (McClary, 2000: 32).

3. Effect on Music

Although the pluralism Meyer refers to primarily corresponded to “art” music, popular music and jazz began to gain more credibility. The British progressive rock scene, mostly consisting of art-school students with an anti-commercialist stance and serious musical integrity, such as Eric Clapton’s Cream, pushed the boundaries of contemporary popular music, and in doing so broke free from the standardization which Adorno wrote about in “On Popular Music” (Adorno, in Frith & Goodwin [eds.], 1990: 301-314). Jazz had modernists like John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman and George Russell, while others attempted to bridge the gap between jazz and “classical art” music, such as the Modern Jazz Quartet, who performed in black tie in concert halls rather than jazz clubs, and arranged the music of Bach in *Blues on Bach*. Other jazz musicians who incorporated Bach in their music include Jacques Loussier, Bill Evans, who also arranged Chopin, Scriabin, Fauré, Satie and Granados, and Hubert Laws, who arranged “The Rite of Spring”.

One progressive rock musician who succeeded in many ways in crossing the boundaries between popular and art music was Frank Zappa. As much a jazz / rock guitarist as an orchestral composer, his music has been performed by the Ensemble Modern, and recorded by the LSO and Ensemble Inter Contemporain conducted by Pierre Boulez (“The Perfect Stranger” , 1984). Even in his rock music he often achieved a level of autonomy by simultaneously embracing popular culture and parodying it, while drawing influence from sources as varied as doo-wop, television commercial music, Stravinsky, Ives and Stockhausen.

John Zorn’s music displays a similar kind of eclecticism as Frank Zappa’s. Having grown up with a traditional compositional background, he claims his primary formal influences are Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Ives, Partch, Varèse and Cage, as well as Carl W. Stalling, a cartoon composer. Zorn started his career as a virtuoso saxophone performer on the Lower East Side improvisation scene, and his music ranges from free improvisation to thoroughly composed pieces, often characterized by abrupt shifts of sections lasting typically less than 30 seconds. His free improvisations are organized into “game pieces” , to structure the content without specifying the material, such as *Cobra*, which relies entirely on a “linguistic” framework, while in the pre-composed pieces the material is notated on index cards, known as “file-card pieces” , almost reminiscent of Cage’s *Music of Changes* (1951) or Stockhausen’s moment form.

Zorn’s music is performed by ensembles as varied as the Kronos Quartet and Faith No More. His music bridges the gap between “popular” and “art” music in many ways, including the way it is performed — in concert halls, clubs, or a mixture of the two, and in the way it is funded — by record company contracts, revenue from performances as well as from some state grants.

The kind of fragmentation and disintegration found in Zorn’s music is typical of many theories about postmodernism (eg. Jameson), and is found in several collage-style “high art” postmodern compositions, such as Berio’s *Sinfonia* (1968-9) and Schnittke’s “1st Symphony” (1974). In the preface to the symphony, Schnittke also professes to being influenced by media:

While composing the symphony, for four years I simultaneously worked at [sic] music to M. Romm’s film “I Believe...” Together with the shooting crew I looked through thousands of meters of documentary film. Gradually they formed in my mind a seemingly chaotic but inwardly orderly chronicle of

the 20th century. (Schnittke, quoted in Rozhdestvensky: sleeve note to Symphony no. 1, Gramzapis GCD 00062)

This level of fragmentation and collage is taken to a further extent by John Oswald, another composer / improvising saxophonist, who coined the term "plunderphonics", which consists of music entirely constructed from previously recorded pieces. Earlier instances of the use of recorded music include, among others, Stefan Wolpe, Schaeffer, Cage, the Beatles and Zappa, however Oswald's use of it is exceptional in that all his material has been copyrighted (his composition "DAB" (1989), using material from Michael Jackson's album "Bad", resulted in a legal challenge). Oswald's technique has many similarities with sampling in contemporary hip-hop, house and techno, and he has completed commissions for ensembles as varied as the Kronos Quartet, The Grateful Dead and the Deutsche Oper Ballet. A different manipulation of previously recorded music is carried out by Hal Freedman, who in his "Ring Précis" (1982) superimposed Wagner's "Ring Cycle" over 200 times in order to fit it into a three and a half minute tape piece. A similar technique was used by popular music act V/Vm, who in "The Missing Symphony" (2003) simultaneously recorded Shostakovich's "15 symphonies" superimposed, with each one compressed or expanded to fit the average length of the 15.

One further well known "cross-over" artist, Brian Eno, should be mentioned. After leaving art-rock band Roxy Music, Eno developed an interest in music systems, and experimented with Cage-like aleatory procedures. His use of electronics has earned him the description of an "aural collagist", and he has even investigated cybernetics and self-generating systems, similar to the work of such cutting-edge composers as Karlheinz Essl and Gerhard E. Winkler. Apart from his collaborations with David Bowie and his work as a producer, Eno is most famous for his ambient music, in which he aims to create a piece that "plays itself", changing imperceptibly. In this essence Eno's music has affinities with much of La Monte Young's, such as "Map of 49's dream the two systems of eleven sets of galactic intervals Ornamental Lightyears Tracery" (1966), which examines the effects of continuous drones and waveforms on an audience, and can last weeks or months.

It has been the music of Young, Glass, Reich and Riley, and the minimalist aesthetic in general, that has been most readily absorbed into the mass public's consciousness, and minimalism has sometimes been described as music's answer to pop art. The use of

diatonic, though non-functional, tonality and excessively repetitive phrase structures has clear similarities with some types of popular music, and these techniques were almost immediately incorporated into the music of groups such as Kraftwerk in “Autobahn” (1974), while John Stratton even draws comparisons between minimalism and the punk rock of the Sex Pistols (Goodwin, in Scott [ed.], 2000: 222). The relative accessibility of minimalism has been capitalized on by the countless instances of its use in television advertising, as well as by providing a profitable second career for Philip Glass as a film composer. Its similarities to some contemporary dance genres have been highlighted by the release of Reich’s album “Remixed” (1999), featuring some of Steve Reich’s pieces remixed by Ken Ishii, Coldcut, Nobukazu Takemura and Howie B among others, while Aphex Twin remixed Philip Glass’s composition “Low”, itself an arrangement of the David Bowie / Brian Eno album. Other instances of “art” music applied by dance artists include William Orbit’s mixes of Satie, Barber, Pärt and Górecki.

The case of Górecki is a peculiar one in contemporary music, and demonstrates the power the culture industry exerts. A new recording of his third symphony reached number six in the popular music album charts, and remained in the US classical chart for 134 consecutive weeks. This exposed the music of Górecki to a young, MTV influenced generation, which even led to him being labeled a “hero of Generation X” (Howard, in Lochhead & Auner [eds.] 2002: 196). Górecki inspired the music, as well as the title, to tracks by British bands Pale Saints and Lamb, and his third symphony was played at a Smashing Pumpkins concert, as well as more recently in the British *Meltdown* festival, alongside The Libertines and Morrissey. Another admirer of Górecki’s music is the drum and bass DJ Goldie, who acknowledged his influence on his 1998 “Saturnz Return track Mother”. Over an hour in length (longer than the symphony itself), it is scored for 30 piece string orchestra and electronics without any of his characteristic drum beats.

Although the relatively simple structure of the symphony (an exact canon in the first movement, and two oscillating chords in the third) has parallels with popular music, what is remarkable about the success of Górecki’s Third, apart from the fact that it was a critical failure at its premiere, is that other recordings of the piece had existed since the late 1970’s, none of which had a fraction of the success the Elektra Nonesuch had in 1993. This demonstrates the effect that post-Fordist production, marketing and representation can have, an impact that Timothy D. Taylor argues narrows the high / low

divide more than Huyssen's concept of the high / low divide in musical production (Taylor, in Lockhead & Auner [eds.], 2002: 103).

Scott Lash and John Urry argue, in *Economies of Signs and Space* (1994), that in several industries such as recording and publishing, many duties which were once all handled in-house are subcontracted to a variety of different providers. This has resulted in a much more flexible mode of cultural production, and categories such as classical music, which were once confined to a "classy" image, became more destabilized. There is abundant evidence for this suggestion, such as the rock-star personas some performers carry, such as the Kronos Quartet, Vanessa Mae and Nigel Kennedy, not to mention the many opera cross-over groups such as Il Divo, G4 and All Angels. The Finnish violinist Linda Lampenius, known as Linda Brava, appeared nude in the April 1998 issue of *Playboy*, and the violinist Lara St. John appeared nude on the cover of her 1996 recording of Bach Partitas, covered only by her violin. This seems to contradict Boulez's comment that "there are musics which bring in money and exist for commercial profit; there are musics that cost something, whose very concept has nothing to do with profit. No liberalism will erase this distinction" (Foucault & Boulez, in Scott [eds.], 2000: 166). Even star musicians who carry a serious persona are represented by a cartel of agents who vastly inflate their fees, as Norman Lebrecht showed in his 1996 study *When the music stops... Managers, maestros and corporate murder of classical music* (Laing, in Clayton, Herbert & Middleton [eds.], 2003: 315).

Separating music from its social circumstances — trying to isolate the "purely musical" aspects of a composition, is futile. Music has always emerged due to and dependent on political circumstances, therefore today's popular music cannot be ignored: "a culture is a whole way of life, and the arts are part of a social organization which economic change clearly radically affects" (Williams, in Gray & McGuigan [eds.], 1997: 5). Traditional harmonic analysis of popular music will undoubtedly perceive it to be inferior to "art" music, just as Monteverdi's "secunda prattica" appears inferior to Palestrina judged by the conventions of the "prima prattica".

Any attempt at constructing a linear canon through the 20th century will also be inconclusive — composers such as Bartok and Orff appear to lead to dead-ends. Furthermore, there would appear to be contradictions within the canon, as, for example, Debussy was an admirer of Gounod and Richard Strauss but not Schoenberg, Stravinsky preferred Weber and Tchaikovsky to Wagner, while Webern even admired Johann Strauss. Huyssen goes as far as negating some of the modernist aspects of Wagner by

revealing an early incarnation of the culture industry in his circumstances, suggesting his use of the leitmotif resembled a form of advertising, and the spectacle of Bayreuth created a kind of fetishization see (Huysen, 1986: 38).

The musical examples of high and mass culture fusions are too numerous to mention. The use of jazz in art music has become commonplace, from the jazz-suites of Mark-Anthony Turnage such as “Blood On The Floor” , to Louis Andriessen’s combination of classical and jazz performers in “De Volharding” and his use of boogie-woogie in “De Stijl” . Electronic composers such as Oval, Ryoji Ikeda, Kim Cascone and Christian Fennesz are classed as popular musicians, although they regularly collaborate with established “high” artists, and some contribute articles to academic journals. David Clarke writes an enthusiastic defense for the genre of IDM, or intelligent dance music, stating: “Hence I invoke dance and postdance genres here as possible examples on the way to envisioning a more mutable, pliable construction of autonomy, adapted to our relativized, postmodern frame” (Clarke, in Clayton, Herbert & Middleton [eds.], 2003: 170). This statement is reinforced by the recent European *Ether* concerts, in which music by Aphex Twin, Squarepusher and Boards of Canada was performed alongside Ligeti, Cage and Stockhausen, and was described by *the Sunday Telegraph* in the UK as “a story where classical music breaks out of the past and, with the help of underground electronic pop, storms the future” , and by Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* as “a miracle” (from South Bank Centre promotional material).

The bi-polar art / popular distinction is far too simplistic, as Bourdieu described, since there is no such thing as an objective “public” , but only a shifting social character defined by differing survey methodologies, or as Stuart Hall wrote “there is no fixed content to the category of ‘popular culture’ ...[and] there is no fixed subject to attach to it— ‘the people’ ” (Hall, quoted in Middleton, in Clayton, Herbert & Middleton [eds.], 2003: 253). The generation of composers now working is the first to have been raised with the full effects of the media revolution, as well as today’s audience, so would undoubtedly have been subjected to a wider range of influence than previous generations. This postmodern situation implies neither the end of modernism nor its continuation, since modernist works are still produced by composers such as of the New Complexity or Lachenmann. The resulting musical landscape can be described best by Michel Foucault as:

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One cannot speak of a single relation of contemporary culture to music in general, but of a tolerance, more or less benevolent, with respect to a plurality of musics. Each is granted the right to existence, and this right is perceived as an equality of worth. Each is worth as much as the group which practises it or recognizes it. (Foucault, quoted in Foucault & Boulez, in Scott (ed.) 2000: 164)

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