

WHAT MAKES GOOD MUSIC?

SRRE 4012 001
November 27, 2012

I like music that moves me. Who doesn't? I also have very strong opinions about what is good music and what is bad music. Bad music doesn't connect me to anything, or makes me feel alienated; good music makes me feel like I have grown closer to a fellow human. To me, becoming acquainted with a good piece of music is like making a friend; it's the human element, and little else, that counts in music for me – I love the feeling when something I love is shared by someone else. That's why I became a composer.

But is this all there is to it? Certainly not; there are many differing perspectives on what can make music good, worthwhile. For instance, what about music that intentionally seeks to create distance, music made to repulse? And what about music meant for dancing, or music made simply for the pleasure of catchy tunes? And although there are many who, while they would certainly agree with all of my opinions in the first paragraph, wouldn't care for a single note of any of my own favorite music. How, then, can a composer such as myself imbue her music with “quality”? Surely it does exist; but in what forms, and from what perceptions can “goodness” in music be recognized, or generated?

Pure musical interplay should be examined first; the way in which lines contrast and compliment one another, of darkness and of light, of tension and release, of softness and violence; music is formed from these things, I think. Any sound can be music if it is willed to be so; any organized sound can be an interesting musical piece, if you are into that sort of thing. Like characters in a play or the play of emotions inside oneself, elements are foregrounded and rotated to bring focus and interest to sound events unfolding in time. This is music. Music is transmitted through sound; since we are humans, of course, we tend to have a

preference for human music, because it is most relevant to our shared experiences.

My friend, performance artist Raymond Weilacher, proposed that Art in general functions best as a Narrative conception; as I sat laboring over some musical detail, shocked while he seemed to dash off masterful works effortlessly, he told me his philosophy, which has since served as a guide: “Art isn't about making 'masterpieces'; Art is a constant record of where you are.” This was, to me, immensely important, and very influential. Shouldn't music made in neurotic times be itself neurotic? Or shouldn't it somehow reflect these origins? Music, after all, cannot be made in a vacuum; there are very important social, cultural, and situational aspects that radically influence artistic creation. Human agency seems to function best when working in concert with what may in fact be hidden streams of “pure Will of the Universe,” as Schopenhauer posited.

Eduard Hanslick, in his *On the Musically Beautiful* (written 1854), proposes that “imagination and not feeling is always the aesthetical authority [in music]” (4). This seems reasonable at first; after all, imagination is certainly the genesis of beauty in composition, where thoughtful imagination leads to creative action. But I would argue that Hanslick, who saw feeling itself as “pathological” and “feminine,” a rationalist reacting against the Romantic predilections of his time, overlooks the function of empirical, emotive *feeling* as the *generator* of imagination. This is certainly my experience (to stoop to levels of subjectivity which Hanslick condemns); I have a *feeling*, which directs me to *imagine* and *think*, and then to *act*; and this is my personal process of composition. Conversely, as a listener, first I *feel* something in the music as it connects to my instinctual and learned experiences; then I *imagine* based off of these impressions. I feel that Hanslick, in his rush to battle the demons of

Romantic decadence, got things somewhat backwards.

Hanslick also participated in a debate regarding the benefits of music being heard as “absolute” or “programmatic.” “Absolute” music is 'non-representational,' where music functions purely within a formal framework; it is music *about* only music. “Program” music, conversely, serves an external story or narrative, somehow connected with the music.

Hanslick, ever vigilant against fantasy, proposed that “Music has no subject beyond the combinations of notes we hear, for music speaks not only by means of sounds, it speaks nothing but sound” (73). This is, perhaps, true; after all, how would we know the “story” of Hector Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* without external program notes? Of course, it could also be said that we cannot understand any other work outside of its context either, even music which is explicitly “absolute.” In this way, program notes could act as contextualization; the difference is that the composer intended the context to be provided along with the music. I have always found some explanation to be helpful; for instance, during the International Computer Music Conference, Johannes Kreidler interspersed a political piece of his with very insightful explanatory information spoken from the stage. This sort of information given from the podium gave the work an entirely different context that *made* the piece, without which it would not have made the same impact or coherent sense.

Richard Wagner, in his opera *Tannhäuser*, explores the dichotomy between two different perceptions of what good music can be, from a purely aesthetic perspective. When the hero Tannhäuser competes against Wolfram in a singing competition, Tannhäuser celebrates a music connected with sensuality and irrational pleasure, while Wolfram praises rational, simple music meant for praise and worship. This split between opinions of “good”

and “bad” music is eventually resolved at the opera's climax as it becomes apparent to the listener that *both* musics can be good on their own terms and in the right contexts; it is the interplay between forms, styles, and contents that create interesting musical moments and productions; this dramatic contrasting principle could be said to form the basis for Wagner's own music, and partially explain its massive appeal, especially to the fanatical positive reactions to the music in and around the 19th century Romanticism around which its reputation is based.

J. L. Mursell, quoted in Edward Paul Murray's doctoral dissertation on aesthetics: “Music depends essentially not on the stimuli which reach the external ear, but on the organizing and transforming operation of the mind” (Murray 8). This corresponds with my own point of view, as well as Murray's and even Hanslick's; but a counter-argument is offered, that of C. E. Seashore. Seashore “holds that all musical expression is conveyed in terms of the sound wave.” This perspective is rejected by Murray for “leaving no room for the concept of the mind as a selecting and organizing factor” (9). This certainly makes sense to me – sound is certainly independent of the human ear and mind, but quality rests on interpretation of these sounds; birdsong or a waterfall can indeed be “good” music, but even this is a judgment reached only after a (probably human) mind interprets it as such.

Murray agrees with Kate Hevner when she asserts that “the man on the street is not the measure of musical values. Music is kept alive rather by the 'passionate few” (11). To me this seems problematic. While I definitely prefer hearing music performed by someone deeply invested in the music itself, *listening* does not necessarily need to be “passionate” for quality to be perceived. Sure, *I* like music that is “advanced,” music made by people that share my

own passions, but I also enjoy music made simply for its own sake, or even music made simply for profit. When I was a child, I enjoyed music that I now think is contrived or boring; music was peripheral, and my experience was incomplete, but that doesn't make my youthful judgment of musical values irrelevant. At the time, it held value for me, and this cannot be discounted; although, of course, one could argue that I was still *passionate*, just also *inexperienced*. Like a dope addict, my love for music led me to increasingly “difficult” horizons, as the simpler things I used to listen to *just weren't enough any more*. It is through this analogy that we could see “advanced” music doesn't intrinsically hold more value; it only holds this value for a similarly “advanced” listener, whose experiences are certainly more “refined” but not at all necessarily having more value (I could argue that when I was a child, my inexperience made the music *even more vividly meaningful*).

Geoffrey Madell argues that listening to music is not like sympathizing or empathizing with another person; he argues that during an active listening experience, one “identifies” with the music to the point of “becoming” it for its duration. As he says: “the emotional vicissitudes of the music are not experienced as those of another person, but *your own*” (40). To me this makes sense after a fashion; initially, I wanted to protest: surely when I listen to and enjoy “low culture” music such as that of Insane Clown Posse or Brokencyde, my active enjoyment is purely anthropological, surely a distanced bemusement? As I read Madell further, his identification theory seems “more correct” than my above postulation: while definitely some enjoyment is to be had from the fact of distance, most true value I receive from the experience of listening is that it *is an aspect of myself* for its duration. Like a child playing pretend (one of my favorite activities when I was young, I might add), I can

temporarily *become* a character or a feeling during my active engagement with good music.

Of course, this view can be contested. Madell allows that the perception of an “other” in music is made easier when there is a vocalist or actor present, or some sort of program describing musical events as representing an external persona or process (137). So, in this way, music could be equally a vehicle for identification as it can be for observation of an “other” (via sympathy, empathy, or otherwise); pleasure can result from interplay between identity factors just as it can result from the observation of purely musical interplay.

The philosophy Theodor Adorno holds is very different from my own, though he is someone I generally admire. Adorno argues that “good music” can only be music that encourages confrontation and engages audiences to become critical of prevailing society; to this end, he dismisses popular music as incapable of anything but the reproduction of weary, unthinking mass culture. This belief in the revolutionary power of music (and the belief that only “revolutionary” music can be “good”) is surely shared by Chris Cutler, who, in his *File Under Popular*, argues that only radical *popular* music can achieve the revolutionary ends desired by Adorno. Thus, two theorists with shared goals but with different vehicles which embody “good” (to be fair, both theorists argue for “experimental” music with original, “radical” and “confrontational” forms, and in both this results in a predilection for dissonance, discipline, and complexity).

It is through these perspectives that music which seems to repulse can be viewed as “good.” Like the environment-transmogrifying antics of the Situationists, music that refuses to be immediately understood generates a friction that opens a door to new experiences; thus, similar to Bertolt Brecht's theories of “alienation” in drama, the listener is made aware of

various gaps which they must then seek to fill on their own through conscious action or thought. This can be its own pleasure if the listener is sympathetic with the critical aims of the artist.

Further exploration of these socialist and Marx-inspired theories is warranted – isn't my main point, from the beginning, that good music relates to human themes, in socio-cultural contexts? This is important, I think. Adorno and Cutler are both concerned with what they perceive to be the commodification of music by capitalist society into something divorced from its social origins; that music as disseminated by the structures of the music business was becoming increasingly fetishist, synthetic, and manipulative. Cutler, at least, allows that such music can still be *good* if it transcends its crass, money-making, or commercial origins in the ears of an inventive young listener who makes the music his own. However, I must incite here again the idea of context: if you desire revolution and hate capitalist business structures, you will enjoy music that expresses this; if you don't care, you probably won't care for that sort of music.

Seemingly distinct from, but perhaps closely related to, the sociopolitical concerns of Marxist theoreticians is the idea of music as a vehicle for Romantic self-expression. Emotion, conveyed through music, is powerful. Tension and release in musical terms can be sculpted in the image of human feelings and drama; Richard Wagner is a famous exemplar of this brand of “music for use,” although other examples, from Beethoven to Berg to the band Van der Graaf Generator, can be cited. Explicitly, music becomes a means by which feeling is telegraphed to a listener, by which direct states of identification or empathy can occur; it is in this approach that the most direct transmission of “the human element” flourishes. Formal

structuring recedes in favor of the irrational instincts of the human psyche.

In the 18th century, however, music was seen as almost purely formal, functioning as a craft rather than as an art. Music was often in the service of dance or religious ceremonies. “Good” music of this variety is beautiful by means of its form and catchiness, like modern electronic dance music (I personally feel there is a strong similarity in the form-related compositional methods of Mozart and Daft Punk, perhaps by way of Philip Glass). In this sort of music, the composer “expresses” little; musical value rests in its ability to sustain interest and emotional engagement over sustained periods while also allowing for external uses (such as for dance, individual interpretations, enjoyment of the performers, fun, reflection, etc). Worthy of special mention is “ambient” or “furniture” music, such as that created by Erik Satie or Brian Eno, which is not to be “listened to” per se, but rather enjoyed as background or mood.

As far removed as possible from any of the aims previously mentioned would be the non-expressive, non-intentional music of John Cage. This is music not expressly “for” any purpose, other than to “let the sounds be themselves.” In Cage's view, sounds can be beautiful on their own without the intervention of human intent – chance and spur-of-the-moment irrational gesture become music itself, not to establish a particular mood or purpose but simply to *be*. Related to this philosophy could be the mathematical constructs of the total Serialists, who also sought to remove human influence on musical materials through the use of computers, process, and rationalization (supposedly) quite removed from human judgment of aesthetics.

Of course, this idea is problematic; surely the composers of supposedly “non-

intentional” music enjoy their own music, otherwise they would not create it. Again, context is important here: both total serialism and indeterminacy flourished possibly as a reaction against the horrid atrocities of World War II, when the agency of Man for Good was seriously called into question. Thus, seeking to remove human Will to Power from music can still be seen as a manifestation of a sort of reactionary Will to Powerlessness, a preference for beauty in the accidental or serendipitous or transient. Pleasure and “goodness” proceed from non-judgmental, passive processes of Nature.

Differing views on music can be like different languages, or different personalities. In this way I tend to synthesize my own experiences of the “good” in music. Given a cultural context or personal biography, a previously inscrutable piece of music opens up and becomes a wellspring of beauty. Just as words can be little more than vaguely onomatopoeic gestures without the contextualizing agent of language surrounding them, music becomes most meaningful when the listener understands the position from which a composer creates. The listener must have a *reason* to invest her time into active listening; greater understanding proceeds from greater knowledge, but is given emotional meaning from the identification of the listener with emotions perceived in the music.

Bibliography

Adorno, Theodor. *Philosophy of Modern Music*. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster

(trans.) New York: Seabury Press, 1973.

Cutler, Chris. *File Under Popular: theoretical and critical writings on music*. Brooklyn, NY:

Autonomedia, 1993.

Hanslick, Eduard. *On the Musically Beautiful*. Geoffrey Payzant (trans.) Indianapolis, IN:

Hackett Publishing Company, 1986.

Madell, Geoffrey. *Philosophy, Music, and Emotion*.

Murray, Edward Paul. *The Relationship of Aesthetic Judgments in Music, Personality*

Characteristics, and Music Training in Prospective Elementary Teachers.