



## City Research Online

### City, University of London Institutional Repository

---

**Citation:** Pace, I. (2006). The Marxist programme note: The logic of the supplement in the textual accompaniment. Keynote Paper presented at the Society for Music Analysis Autumn Study Day, 25-11-2006, University of Sussex, Sussex, UK.

This is the accepted version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version.

---

**Permanent repository link:** <http://openaccess.city.ac.uk/6501/>

**Link to published version:**

**Copyright and reuse:** City Research Online aims to make research outputs of City, University of London available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. URLs from City Research Online may be freely distributed and linked to.

---

City Research Online:

<http://openaccess.city.ac.uk/>

[publications@city.ac.uk](mailto:publications@city.ac.uk)

---

**THE MARXIST PROGRAMME NOTE  
THE LOGIC OF THE SUPPLEMENT IN THE TEXTUAL  
ACCOMPANIMENT**

**Keynote Lecture, Society for Musical Analysis Study Day  
Department of Music, University of Sussex  
November 25<sup>th</sup>, 2006**

**Ian Pace**

In the course of discussion of music and its reception, how often do we really consider quite how fundamentally small pieces of text, in the form of titles and programme notes, can affect whole perceptions of the music in question? Very little music of any type reaches listeners in the West without some accompanying text, be it in the form of a title, a programme note, a radio announcement, a publicity flier, or whatever. In terms of those such things explicitly supplied by the musical creators, I do not believe subcategories are of a fundamentally different nature so that, for example, the roles played by the title, the programme note, or the essay written by the composer about their own work differ only in the degree of their accessibility and extent of potential readership. This talk is about the programme note but what I have to say could equally well be applied to the other forms of text delineated as such.

To give you an example, I wish first to play you a short snippet of something:

[Play beginning of Ives – *Three Places in New England*, second movement]

Probably many of you recognise that as the second movement, ‘Putnam’s Camp, Redding, Connecticut’ of Charles Ives’s *Three Places in New England*. You might hear it as exuberant, joyful, somewhat brash or unhinged, but essentially good-humoured, then mysterious when the melodies subside and Ives enters into his quasi-mystical ruminations. Different forms of sonic experience coincide, but Ives seems to revel in their simultaneity. The climax is highly dissonant, arguably somewhat overwhelming, though the American popular tunes are unstoppable. The ending is stark.

Now I want you to consider a possibility. Suppose a similar piece had been written today, using most of the same musical elements and processes, but it was entitled ‘Guantanamo’. Would you not be inclined to ‘read’ a quite different meaning into the sounds presented? Would the piece not be taken to represent torture and brutality committed under the auspices of the US government in the prison camp in question, and the American songs come to have a much more ominous quality, perceived as a musical representation of a nation that crushes all those who stand in its way, in a brash, vulgar and violent manner?

One may as a listener interpret the nuances slightly differently, but I believe the overall interpretation would be significantly altered from that which is customary (unless one sees that ‘America’ already represented in Ives’s music, which is of course a possibility). The point I am trying to draw to your attention is how much just a title, or a short amount of text that accompanies a work, can affect the way in which

it is heard and received. And this element is especially potent in the case of composers who make use of the note to present explicitly political interpretations, especially by self-avowedly Marxist composers or others associated with the left. I wish to look at a handful of pieces by such composers and the roles that the programme notes play in their reception. I will also argue that such programme notes can create as many problems as they solve.

But first let me outline a general model that I think we could do well to adopt when engaging with music in this manner. Instead of thinking of a piece of music as 'pure sound' created in a singular artistic media, instead I would advocate for most music (including purely instrumental music) a model of the work as a multi-media entity existing in the realm of music and text, the text being supplied by the title, programme note, and anything else explicitly provided by the creator (for convenience's sake, I will simply use the term 'creator', which might refer to single or multiple composers, performers or improvisers – the issues remain essentially the same in each case). That which is supplied by external bodies, for example publicity and hype (that provided by the cartoon that accompanied the website for the recent RCM/London Sinfonietta Lachenmann festival being one of the worst examples) can be argued to be intrinsic to music as it exists in the wider world, especially if such things are sanctioned by the composer/creator. However, I wish to limit this discussion to a work's *conception* – to look at all its possible meanings created through external baggage would make the subject too large to handle in a paper of this size – and so will try to restrict this to the text supplied by the creator.

### **Musical Ambiguity**

For some, the very ambiguous nature of wordless music is a virtue; for others it is a problem. Marxist composers who attempt in some sense to remain true to their political convictions when composing music have a variety of differing perspectives on this matter.

Music can work with what I generally refer to as 'iconic' materials – specifically, these are musical tropes that carry with them a high degree of inherited cultural meanings. National anthems are an obvious example of these when played to audiences likely to be familiar with them – if a piece is to feature *The Star-Spangled Banner* audibly, which is then distorted in certain ways, then I believe one can fairly assume that many listeners might interpret this as some comment on 'America' and what it represents. That interpretation itself could of course take many forms – some might read it as a celebration of an un-aestheticised view of American culture in an Ivesian sense, others as representation of the hideousness of American power in the world, others as a comment on the simple vulgarity of American national symbols. These possible interpretations could be as diverse as those of Robert Rauschenberg's paintings of the American flag, for example. But because of its iconic role, the interpretation of *The Star-Spangled Banner* somehow 'representing' America is, I believe, a likely one.

Allusions to national anthems in works of Beethoven, Schumann, Debussy and more recently Stockhausen and Lachenmann all attempt to exploit such possibilities. And if this is true of national anthems, then it can also be true of other types of musical

material which carries acquired cultural implications. In Chopin's time, the genres of the polonaise and the mazurka were both associated with distinct social classes – the polonaise with the lower ranks of the ruling classes, the mazurka with the peasantry. In Chopin's time such connotations would likely have been recognised by many of his audiences in French bourgeois society and wider afield. Similar things could be said about allusions to African-American genres in music of today, for example.

These sorts of iconic properties have of course been of great interest in the recently developed field of English-speaking musical semiology. However, as I believe many working in such a field realise, such meanings can be transient and seemingly infinitely mutable.

Chopin's mazurkas today – are the connotations of peasant dances, in a Europe almost wholly having made the shift from feudal society to capitalism, and as such where the peasantry have nothing like the presence that they once did, really meaningful to today's audiences other than as historical curiosities? And are political interpretations of such a kind so deeply predicated upon a degree of specialised knowledge as to be relatively meaningless to the wider listening public? I believe this to be the case, and the same questions apply to the appropriation of workers' songs when only a very few of these (*The Red Flag*, *The Internationale*) are particularly well-known. But even in the case of the former, an allusion alone does not guarantee a particular interpretation, as should be clear from the following examples:

[Play Cardew – 'The Red Flag' followed by signature tune to 'Citizen Smith']

And it is in this context that the programme note, which by virtue of being expressed in words rather than sounds exhibits a lesser degree of ambiguity, relatively speaking, offers a means by which to sharpen and delimit possible interpretations of the musical works presented. One sometimes reads allusions to world events in programme notes for purely instrumental works – two recent examples would include Richard Barrett's *NO (Resistance and Vision Part 1)* and Peter Maxwell Davies' *Third String Quartet*. Both of these works' programme notes allude to the composers' opposition to the war in Iraq, though probably only the former composer would identify himself as a Marxist.

Music sociologists and cultural theorists are all too ready to make judgements about composers and music based purely upon the explicit writings or other documents relating to the matter, bypassing the sonic aspects of the works almost entirely. That is not my intention here, rather it is the dialectical relationship between text about music and its communicative or expressive properties achieved through aural means that is the central issue.

So, I would like to look at a range of works. Not all of the composers would necessarily identify themselves as Marxists – especially Finnis, whose political views are not especially coherent in this respect. But the examples chosen should present a reasonably wide range of the strategies and possibilities in terms of using the programme note in terms of articulating leftist perspectives.

## **Nono**

In Luigi Nono's *Canti di vita e d'amore* (1962), which some have seen as pivotal within Nono's output, the programme note makes the political intentions very clear. Nono writes the following with respect to the three sections of the piece<sup>1</sup>:

HIROSHIMA	the "bridge" which we must cross in order to eliminate the danger that civilians or military will be destroyed by the criminal madness,
A PURE SINGING	hope, that itself arises from Spain, "shrouded in darkness", and its echo, found in the voice of the Algerian Djamila Boupachà, symbol for all of us of a life of love, of liberty, against any new form of oppression and neo-Nazi torture.
THE TREMOR (DAS BEBEN)	the heart, in a rare expression of the joy of Cesar Pavese,

Nono describes these three situations as being of our own time, and which inspired him 'to this singing of "life and love"', stating that love does not act in order either to eliminate or escape from reality, but is a presence within the consciousness that is produced by life.

Now, listen to the opening of this piece:

[Play beginning of *Canti di vita e d'amore*]

Obviously the orchestral writing is charged and dissonant, and the vocal writing angular and strident. But those qualities can be found, say, in Boulez's *Pli selon pli* or in Xenakis's *Metastasis*, albeit in slightly different forms; in works that do not present comparably topical allusions in their programme notes (Xenakis would sometimes do so, as in his large ensemble piece *Kraanerg*, but this is the exception rather than the rule). In many ways I would suggest that this work of Nono is actually more straightforward in the relationship between music and evocation than, say, in the earlier *Il canto sospeso*. We hear this type of orchestral writing, passionate and emotive, and naturally connect it with Nono's response to the events in Hiroshima, as he has cued such a response through his programme note. But Nono goes a step further: in the score (and sometimes in programme notes) he includes a further text by Günther Anders to do with Hiroshima, which is not sung, rather it serves as the underlying determinant for a passage of orchestral writing. Part of the text reads as follows:

As long as we have not exorcised the danger, which in its first manifestation swept away 200,000 souls, that robot will be on that bridge and will sing his song. He will be on all the bridges that lead us to our common destiny.

---

<sup>1</sup> Luigi Nono, programme note for *Canti di vita e d'amore* in booklet for CD Wergo B000024QPB.

The programme note combined with this text (which speaks first of a man standing on the bridge at Hiroshima, plucking the strings of an instrument and singing), if read by the listener, gives something of a bitterly ironic quality to the music.

[Play a bit of the orchestral section]

But the allusions to singing as the voice of hope, of life and love, both here and in the note for the second section, also condition how the piece might be heard. For this second part, Nono sets the words of Djamila Boupachà, an Algerian woman who was tortured and raped in an unspeakable manner by the French police and army, on charges of having planted a bomb, and whose story was documented by Simone de Beauvoir. In the text, Boupachà speaks of the ‘fog of centuries’ (*niebla de siglos*) and the ‘infinite mud’ (*fango infinito*), but yet of the hope, of the coming of the light (*Ha de venir la luz*), which corresponds quite readily to Nono’s ideas as you saw before. But I believe that, were we just to hear the orchestral passage followed by the vocal section, then the perception would be different were Nono not to draw our attention to the unsung text during the former. Nono says that this passage is ‘not primitive programme music’, but that it forms ‘a continuity derived from a text which is purely musical in its development, through song or orchestra alone’. Yet what exactly does Nono mean by the ‘purely musical’ in the context of a text so loaded with concrete meaning as this one? Is he not trying to instil some particular way of hearing the passage in question?

Anyhow, in one of Nono’s next works, *Ricorda cosa ti hanno fatto in Auschwitz*, the role of music is made clear. This work originated as incidental music to go together with the play *The Investigation (Die Ermittlung)*<sup>2</sup> by the German writer Peter Weiss (who moved to Sweden in the 1930s and lived there for the rest of his life). This play was written on the back of the so-called ‘Frankfurt Auschwitz Trials’ of 1963-65, in which twenty-three mid- to low-level operatives at Auschwitz-Birkenau (out of a possible 6000-8000 individuals who were involved in the running of the camp) were put on trial for their actions. The trials are widely seen as having been a sham, in which several of the defendants were acquitted and a number more received only relatively light sentences. Weiss, who had attended the trials, attempted through his play to communicate the sheer horror of the events and the extent of the complicity of those involved, using transcripts from actual Auschwitz survivors. Nono made clear in his programme note the role he perceived for the music, saying that ‘what neither the word nor the staging could express and represent, had to be represented by the music: the millions of dead in the Nazi concentration camps’<sup>3</sup>. He also speaks of how the use of phonemes rather than a semantically defined text enabled a stronger and purer form of expression, in a manner that relates to Dieter Schnebel’s searches for a pre-cultural form of musical utterance, using just phonemes, that he explored around the same period.

[Play part of *Ricorda*]

---

<sup>2</sup> Peter Weiss, *The Investigation: Oratorio in 11 Cantos*, translated Alexander Gross (London: Calder and Boyars, 1966).

<sup>3</sup> ‘das, was weder das Wort, noch die szenische Darstellung ausdrücken und darstellen konnten, mußte die Musik darstellen: die Millionen von Toten in den nazistischen Konzentrationslagern’. In Luigi Nono, *Texte: Studien zu Seiner Musik*, edited Jürg Stenzl (Zürich: Atlantis, 1975), p. 129.

Now, as I'm sure you all know, Adorno said in his 1951 essay 'Cultural Criticism and Society' (*Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft*), that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'<sup>4</sup>, and he himself stopped composing in the post-war years. Notwithstanding the fact that Adorno partially withdrew this comment in later years, not least after criticism from poets Hans Magnus Enzensberger and Paul Celan, one aspect of what I believe to be implied by Adorno's statement is vitally relevant in this context: how can art ever begin to be sufficient to communicate the horrors that the world has seen. Nono, through his programme note (and through the title, though the note makes it more explicit), is asking the listener to hear the music as a representation of the voices of the dead of Auschwitz. Now, I would argue that it is wholly presumptuous and maybe even crass for any composer to claim to speak for such people, and that their music is capable of possibly capturing the sheer depths of the horror. Were the piece simply called 'Piece for soprano and tape', or were the programme note simply to imply that this was Nono's personal response to the events in question, then it would probably be unfair to judge it in this manner. But Nono makes claims for what he is doing, and so it is only natural to consider how the work lives up to such claims. This is the peril that all those who write explicitly political programme notes inevitably face, which I will return to in the context of the music of Richard Barrett. One writer suggests that Nono's music 'seems to be a psychological portrayal of the aftermath of the Holocaust – the disbelief, the sorrow, the uncertainty'<sup>5</sup>; it is debatable whether such an interpretation is supported by Nono's note, whether he refers to the reaction to the millions of dead, or their actual presence (I am inclined to believe his note implies the latter).

## Henze

Let us consider a different example, Henze's *Voices* (1973). Henze says the following about the work:

For many years I had contemplated setting a number of poems to music, but it was not until 1973 that I saw an opportunity to integrate them into a full-blown song cycle. The choice of poems and their arrangement reflect my own political thinking and my emotional commitment. Indeed, it is not so much literary content or musical structures, but my political thinking and commitment which lend this cycle its sense of unity. In some instances I was out to employ highly sophisticated post-serial structures and to endow them with content, in other words, to turn abstract elements into vehicles of a specific message. Musical resources used more directly include jazz, aleatory patterns and elements of music theater. In other cases I tried to carry on the Weill-Eisler-Dessau tradition in my own style. I also hope that the listeners will notice echoes and influences of a variety of folk song styles and the tradition that the classical lied.<sup>6</sup>

He also provides a section of text taken from Bertolt Brecht's diary of August 5<sup>th</sup> 1940 in the score:

There is a general reluctance to describe poets like Hašek, Silone, O'Casey and myself as bourgeois poets, but such an attitude is unjustified. We may have made the cause of the proletariat our own and we may even be the poets of the proletariat for a while. In this case the proletariat relies on bourgeois

---

<sup>4</sup> Theodor Adorno, 'Cultural Criticism and Society', translated Samuel and Shierry Weber, in *Prisms* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), p. 34.

<sup>5</sup> Ben Arnold, 'Art Music and the Holocaust', in *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, Vol. 6 No. 4 (1991), p. 339.

<sup>6</sup> Hans Werner Henze, programme note for *Voices* in booklet for CD Classics B0000035QN.

poets to champion its cause for some time. We, for our part, may argue that being a proletarian is neither an advantage nor an accomplishment and that the aim of our struggle is to erase all proletarian features from the face of mankind. And yet, we show limitations and weaknesses of our class which make us fellow fighters who need to be viewed critically. On the other hand, when we pass on bourgeois culture, it is culture, after all. At certain stages of development, when the proletariat has gained victory but is still the proletariat, the function of the bourgeois pioneers – which has been shown to be a formalistic one – will be overtaken by the march of events. If they are just content to develop forms for a while, it will be time for the new poets and fighters to move into action. These will then find in the works of their predecessors – in our works – not only the most advanced means of expression, but also those elements of the new culture which invariably emerge most clearly in the struggle. Dreams fly ahead of our deeds, and precisely their vagueness suggests that the new field of action is unlimited, providing a tremendous incentive. An important feature of our works is the technique of making a new beginning, devised by those who have mastered tradition, for anyone making a new beginning who has not mastered tradition will easily fall back under the sway of tradition. The best course of action is to describe and employ us as the dialecticians among the bourgeois poets. In this way we find ourselves aligned with those bourgeois politicians who have made the cause of the proletariat their own.

So, according to Henze, the unity of the cycle comes about as a result of his ‘political thinking and commitment’, rather than ‘literary content or musical structures’. Why does he feel the need to tell us this? Could this be ascertained purely from listening to the music – how would one know if it were the case? Henze seems to want to imply a reductive interpretation of the work to some extent, whereby we are made aware of an underlying unity provided by his political perspective. But this is a deeply questionable claim, I believe, as it attempts to draw attention not to the politics as expressed *in the work*, but to the intentions behind them. Unity of intention or motivation may very well breed unity of artistic result, as it does for many composers, but this is surely perceived through the artistic manifestations themselves.

Brecht, and Henze by implication (as he cites Brecht’s comment) makes claims for the necessity of bourgeois poets in order to champion the cause of the proletariat. Whilst Brecht rightly draws attention to the ‘limitations and weaknesses of our class’ which requires that he and others ‘be viewed critically’, there is implied in this statement that bourgeois poets (or artists in general) are still the only people capable of at least attempting to speak for the proletariat. That proletariat poets might equally lay claim to this may not have seem so plausible to Brecht in 1940, when still many of the proletariat were deprived of the opportunity for a decent education, but not to Henze in 1973 when the situation had changed significantly at least in the Western nations. The whole Brecht quote reads to me, when cited by Henze, as an attempt at self-justification.

There is not time to examine the work in detail: suffice to say that it presents an eclectic range of ‘found’ styles with added degrees of dissonance and tonal abstraction. There *is* a unity I perceive, but not necessarily that explicitly stated by Henze. Rather it is one of relative sameness of treatment of the genres which he inhabits.

Now, I have problems with the Henze work, or indeed with the tradition of Weill, Brecht, Eisler and others from which it emanates, much to do with the emotional detachment I perceive therein, manifestations of individualised subjectivity jettisoned in favour of the communication of relatively didactic messages, even for example in the following, the fifth movement, ‘The Distant Drum’



[Play 'The Distant Drum']

There is an obviously ironic quality to the accompaniment of words about being maimed in the street with the jaunty music. But that does not make the message any less didactic – I would suggest the total experience of text and music relatively unambiguously communicates something of the casualness of brutality, with the rather obvious word-painting at the end. But that is a different matter to the programme note. Henze is playing a clever game here – through his programme note he is on one hand attempting a type of self-fashioning with respect to traditions, by drawing attention to the lineage of the work in terms of jazz, folk song and the classical lied, whilst at the same time trying to ram home to the listener the political motivations (as if that were not obvious).

Contemporary Western culture can absorb, even welcome, songs of this type, for their simple shock value, so as to present the society as a model of tolerance and pluralism, as Helmut Lachenmann has described in the context of many works of this type, calling them 'narcissistically coquettish pseudo-radicalism'<sup>7</sup>. Whilst I do not believe this comment of Lachenmann's to be entirely fair in the context of Henze (he did not specifically aim it at him, though other comments make reasonably clear that his feelings towards Henze's work are of a similar nature) – Henze's political commitments (and those of some others) seem sincerely held, rather than being a form of narcissistic posturing. But it is clear from the note that Henze wishes to cover his tracks and create a framework for listening: if one believes that post-serial structures can themselves exhibit 'content' (as I do), then Henze's notion of 'endowing them with content' becomes a dubious assertion (I would suggest that he is actually referring to endowing them with *reified* content). And the assertion of unity based on political thinking possibly is a disclaimer against those listeners who might find other forms of rather banal unity. Once again, when political claims are made for a work through a programme note, then the work itself needs to be measured against them.

## Spahlinger

Now let us consider a very different type of work, Mathias Spahlinger's *musica impura* (1983), for voice, guitar and percussionists. In a setting of poetry by Pablo Neruda, who created the concept of 'impure poetry', Spahlinger writes:

From the obvious impossibility of representing the pronounced phrase by music and music's incapability to directly communicate a content, I hope to draw expression from an inadequation, a powerlessness of western music in the face of real suffering.

[Play first few moments of *musica impura*]

Spahlinger's attitude is more subtle than that either of Henze or the Nono of the works cited earlier (the later Nono is somewhat different). Rather than trying to assign

---

<sup>7</sup> 'Produkte einer mit sich selbst kokettierenden und spielenden Scheinradikalität'; Helmut Lachenmann, 'Komponieren im Schatten von Darmstadt', in *Musik in existentielle Erfahrung: Schriften 1966–1995*, ed. Josef Häusler (Wiesbaden; Breitkopf & Härtel, 1996) p. 343. Translated by Richard Toop as 'Composing in the Shadow of Darmstadt' in *Contemporary Music Review*, 23/3–4 (2004), p. 45.

semantics to the music through the programme note, he does the converse, using the note in order to steer the listener away from trying to interpret the piece in such a manner. All that he affirms is the hope ‘to draw expression’, which is sufficiently broad as not to indicate a concrete ‘content’. Yet there is a strategy at work here, I believe as well – Spahlinger was surely aware at this stage of the criticisms levelled at his own work as well as that of Lachenmann and others of being *musica negativa*, or some sort of aural representation of a ravaged, ugly world at which one can only gaze in horror. By explicitly *refusing* the possibility that music could even do this, let alone that he would try to do so, Spahlinger perhaps cunningly allows a continuing role for musical composition on the part of a composer with leftist sympathies.

## Huber

Nicolaus A. Huber, in the programme note for his solo trombone piece *presente* (1979), attempts a somewhat different strategy.

*presente*, a work for solo trombone, is one of my “Rhythm Compositions.” I have attempted in this work to take as my starting point certain musical platitudes like fanfares and flowery jazz. I take their proportions, however, in earnest. The opening fanfare-rhythm sets forth the structure of the entire work: It consists of four attacks during the total interval of four quarter-notes. The ratios of the numbers of attacks and their respective durations are ordered crosswise: that is to say, the ratio 1:3 of the numbers of key-strokes is mirrored as 3:1 (quarter-notes) in their durations.

All structures are composed of four links. The fourth link, corresponding to the triad on the fourth beat, is composed as a breaking-out and thrusting-forward. There occur four forms, characterised as “Fanfare”, “Flowery Jazz”, “Melody”, and “Song”. Among them, “Song” (it concerns itself with the Moorish Soldier’s Song) is an exception: out of a platitude emerges something which engages and challenges the general public. The closing note of the song is sounded towards all four points of the compass. It closes the chain of links - material as well as significant – from political song to repetition of notes to fanfare to rhythm composition.<sup>8</sup>

[Play a couple of mins, then skip to around 10’45”]

Now, whilst admiring this work, I feel Huber leaves himself very vulnerable by the claim that ‘out of a platitude emerges something which engages and challenges the general public’. How can one know this for sure, whether the ‘general public’ will be ‘engaged’ or ‘challenged’? And what is really achieved by asserting this as if it were an *a priori* conclusion? Is this an attempt at an insurance policy against such a work’s being received and appropriated as something relatively less ‘challenging’?

## Finnissy and appropriation

That is a very real danger that composers face, I would suggest. As an example of this, I would cite Michael Finnissy’s programme note for his piano piece *North American Spirituals* (1998), part of *The History of Photography in Sound*, about which he writes:

Billings – Ives – Cowell – Nancarrow. Confronting Afro-American spiritual responses to slavery: Nobody knows the trouble I see; By and by; Go down, Moses; Steal away. Appropriated by Michael

---

<sup>8</sup> Nicolaus A. Huber, programme note to *presente*, in booklet for CD Telos B000XRO5W4.

Tippett in *A Child of our Time* to signify the voices of defiance and hope everywhere and at any period of history.<sup>9</sup>

In place of this, the pianist Marilyn Nonken writes the following:

While paying homage to the black American tradition, Finnissy's work also traces American experimentalism to its earliest roots, alternately evoking the 18th-century composer William Billings (author of the Manifesto to the Goddess of Discord) and Charles Ives. Ives is perhaps the most recognizable influence, and his music is referenced in the work's opening hymn tunes and, later, in a section of brutal forearm clusters. There is a remarkably crystalline quality to Michael's writing, however, a high resolution that distinguishes it from Ives and renders it absolutely contemporary. In the best postmodern sense, *North American Spirituals* speaks many languages, communicating in several distinct dialects almost simultaneously.<sup>10</sup>

Responses to her performances of this work have included the following:

Finnissy's music has been described as severe, although the present selections (which also included *Kemp's Morris*, written in 1978) are considerably less aurally contentious than his *Seventeen Immortal Homosexual Poets* heard locally less than two years ago. Nonken's performances, which stressed lyricism, abounded in color and nuance, made convincing contextual and rhythmic sense of the sudden storms of sound and the prolonged buffers of silence, and brought clarity and direction to the sometimes self-obfuscating complexity of Finnissy's textures.<sup>11</sup>

[W]here Ives's music has the feel of fingers ÷ as if it were a tour of the country finding everyone playing the piano, playing hymns in churches, songs in parlors, ragtime in saloons, marches and quadrilles in community halls - Mr. Finnissy's sources are discovered in a more distant and rarefied fashion...At its best, and helped by a beautiful performance, his piece suggested a neglected churchyard, with tombs (hymns and spirituals) garlanded by ivy, their inscriptions partly effaced by lichens.<sup>12</sup>

Now, I believe Finnissy's approach to coming to terms, musically, with the very phenomena of racism and assimilation are extremely subtle and powerful, not least because they resist the type of affirmation of commodified expression as provided by the spirituals in their now culture-industry-owned form. Rather, he brings them into an uneasy and complex dialogue with material derived from white American music, most notably in the forms of mediated hymns from William Billings, in which the tenor part is replaced with the pitches of one of the spirituals (and the other parts modified in line with some of Billings's own explicit 'rules'), causing stark dissonances and harmonic processes that seem to connote the absurdity of 'assimilation', at least if one is aware of how the piece was created. But when the reception is to say that the result is 'garlanded in ivy' and stresses 'lyricism', is this not a form of aestheticisation of racism?

---

<sup>9</sup> Michael Finnissy, programme note for *North American Spirituals*; reproduced in Christopher Fox, 'Michael Finnissy's *History of Photography in Sound*: Under the Lens', *The Musical Times*, Vol. 143, No. 1879 (Summer 2002), pp. 26-35.

<sup>10</sup> Marilyn Nonken, programme note for CD 'American Spirituals', CD CRI CR877. Note the attempt to appropriate Finnissy within the American aesthetic ideology of postmodernism.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Manning, 'Nonken Reigns', *Boston Globe*, October 31 2000.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Griffiths, 'Greeting Ives as an Old, Familiar Friend', *New York Times*, October 17 2000. It is worth noting that on the same day as this review appeared, the American Civil Liberties Union had to file a complaint about a black American student being 'shackled, detained and repeatedly strip-searched by Immigration and Naturalization Service officials over the course of almost two days' (see <http://www.aclu.org/immigrants/discrim/11755prs20001017.html> (accessed 15/10/2006)).

## Cardew, Rzewski and others

Other composers simply used programme notes to link what would otherwise be relatively straightforward neo-tonal music to explicit political causes, or simply to use the arena of the concert to draw people's attention to specific events. Cornelius Cardew's *Bethanien Song* (1973) refers to a poor district in Berlin, where he was involved in a campaign to create a children's clinic, rather than an arts centre. Cardew's programme note says:

This is a piano arrangement of the song which addresses itself to the working people and says 'we need a medical centre for our children because we care about the future whereas the capitalists don't care about the future'.<sup>13</sup>

[Play beginning of *Bethanien Song*]

Many of the works of Frederic Rzewski use the programme note in a similar way, simply to mention political events or songs which are drawn upon, or memories of occasions that made a major impression upon the composer (for example the Hiroshima bombing, alluded to in the programme notes for Part 4 of *The Road*, an arrangement of an earlier choral piece which protested French nuclear tests). But in the context of the *North American Ballads*, Rzewski writes the following:

I think of these "ballads" as representing the things I believe in. They were all written around the same time (1979-80), and they are all based on traditional American work and protest songs. ....

[....]

These piano pieces make use of traditional songs in a way similar to Bach's use of Lutheran hymns in his chorale preludes for organ. Nearly everything is derived somehow from the basic tune. In each piece I built up contrapuntal textures in a similar way, using classical techniques like augmentation, diminution, transposition, and compression, always keeping the profile of the tune on some level. The melody may be cut into smaller pieces, stretched, compressed, transposed into other tonalities, and stacked up against itself, but if you look for it, it is always present.

These tunes, and tunes like them, seem to have a special appeal to the human ear. You can change and distort them, subject them to all kinds of transformations without destroying them, unlike a twelve-tone row. They can act like a kind of tonal "cement" in a musical composition, permitting wide-ranging improvisation without losing a sense of where "home" is.

It seemed to me that there were certain universal archetypes that can be found in folk music of widely differing traditions: The great Lutheran hymns express these archetypal emotions, just as do the great religious hymns and folk ballads of the American South. These melodies often seem to describe some kind of "human" form, perhaps related to the mother's voice or the rocking motion of her arms; and that these are perhaps recognized by specialized parts of the brain, like those specializing in recognition of human faces.<sup>14</sup>

Rzewski's approach to the note, and to some extent that of Cardew (or Christian Wolff), is simply about giving background in terms of motivation and inspiration, which relate to political events, but otherwise do not significantly differ from more conventional programme notes. Obviously this does have an effect on the perception of the works themselves, but it seems less about attempting to circumscribe such

---

<sup>13</sup> Cornelius Cardew, programme note to *Bethanien Song* in booklet for CD B&L MNCD011.

<sup>14</sup> Frederic Rzewski, programme note to *North American Ballads*, in booklet for CDs Nonesuch B00006JI9X.

perception as simply to give some background, which can be taken on board or ignored.

## Barrett

So, let me turn to the composer whose work inspired this conference in the first place, Richard Barrett. In his large scale cycle *Opening of the Mouth* (1992-97), Barrett writes the following as part of his notes:

The 'mouth' of the poet Paul Celan was opened by the holocaust: his complex constellations of images indeed include that of giving a voice to the dead, to those whose mouths were empty before being closed, the countless and the nameless. Celan's language itself is a language from beyond the destruction of the German language by the Nazis, the 'thousand darkneses of death bringing speech' in Celan's own words, its 'bearing witness' also a witness to its own impossibility as, between 1945 and 1970 (the year of Celan's suicide by drowning), the poems are distilled from lyric utterances to hard and opaque fragments, concretions of a need and an inability to articulate something which is both more and less than memory. The millions of people murdered and burned have been distributed throughout the atmosphere which enters and leaves our lungs.

The composition of the music began from a contemplation of these two strands of influence, resulting in a work which embeds settings of four Celan poems within a large musical structure as a kind of journey through an (inward) underworld, attempting to answer a question at the centre of Celan's life: how is art to respond to the atrocities of the death camps, indeed to the 20<sup>th</sup> century with its many atrocities, without resorting to the anecdotal and the histrionic: the former is the material of history, while the latter usually fails to conceal its superficiality behind a barrage of lament.

It would have been an obvious ploy to attempt to wrench the emotions of the audience with some sort of pseudo-expressionist hysterics. However even the most casual reader of Celan will notice that he eschews the histrionic almost completely, and for this reason, as well as for reasons of my own (which bear at least some relationship to Celan's), the vocal parts in *Opening of the Mouth* achieve their impact by their distance (at the surface level) from the horrors. To my mind there is no alternative: Celan has not 'beautified' the events to which he constantly refers; he proposes a poetry which transmutes the ashes of language into a medium capable of its own beauty.

[...]

*Opening of the Mouth* is not 'readily comprehensible'; nevertheless, for those who are willing to listen (since everyone with the requisite equipment is *able* to listen and comprehend), their experience of the music will I hope eventually resonate into clarity. Indeed the way the words are set (single syllables sometimes stretched out for over a minute) is at least partly intended to reflect the experience of reading this unprecedentedly compacted poetry, a process requiring time and the closest attention, even (or particularly) when the page is empty apart from a few words. For large stretches of the music, the voices provide a background, coloured by the phonemes of the text, for the (paradoxically?) more directly 'expressive' sounds of a succession of solo instruments.<sup>15</sup>

A short excerpt from *Opening of the Mouth* could not possibly do the work justice. What I think is interesting to note here is how Barrett is explicitly, via the programme note, attempting to address the issues faced by other 'political' composers. Barrett's approach here seems closest to that of Spahlinger, of all the composers I have mentioned earlier (though he might not thank me for that comparison), and a very long way from that of either Henze or Rzewski. Where I would take issue with both note and conception has to do with the ways in which the Holocaust itself has become mystified and politicised not in the name of preventing genocide and mass suffering

---

<sup>15</sup> Richard Barrett, programme note for *Opening of the Mouth*, for CD ABC Classics 465 268-2.

existing again, but rather for the purposes of Zionist propaganda, in order to justify the oppression of the Palestinians, and even in the name of US and British imperialism in the Middle East – one need only recall in recent times the countless allegations of Saddam Hussein as ‘another Hitler’ and the like. And Celan himself, who wrote the triumphalist Zionist poem ‘Denk Dir’, portraying the conquest of Jerusalem by Israeli forces in 1967 in messianic terms drawn from Biblical mythology<sup>16</sup>, cannot be wholly extricated from this process. Whilst the notion of ‘giving a voice to the dead’ is problematic for the reasons elucidated above in the context of Nono (though Celan, whose parents perished in the Holocaust, perhaps has more of a right to attempt to do so than many others), the ‘inability to articulate something which is both more and less than memory’ resonates too easily with the sort of mystification that is presented by those who wish to assign an ontological role to the Holocaust (a charge I believe not inappropriate for the post-war Adorno), as an alternative to rational attempts to understand the processes that made it possible (and might make something comparable happen again in the future).

Now, knowing Richard’s motivations well, I would not for a moment accuse him of such aims. What I do ask is whether the work (in the context of its programme note) is somehow resistant to being appropriated in such a matter? Could these words not be acceptable at a Likud party meeting? And if so, does that not raise questions about how well Barrett engages with oppression and genocide as a *contemporary* issue, rather than as something historically or ethnically specific? And does that not raise further questions about the danger of linking musical works to specific events, whose interpretations may change over time?

In his programme note for the orchestral work *NO (Resistance and Vision Part 1)*, Barrett writes the following:

Detailed work on this composition was begun more or less at the same time as US and British rulers ordered the invasion of Iraq, supposedly as the next phase in their so-called “war on terror”. “Terrorism”, as Noam Chomsky has pointed out, is defined by the US Army itself as “the calculated use of violence or threat of violence to attain goals that are political, religious or ideological in nature... through intimidation, coercion, or instilling fear”, in other words what the US government and its allies have been perpetrating throughout the non-Western world for decades. “Terror”, in a slightly different sense, is what countless millions of people worldwide have been experiencing since, through the attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq at the very latest, it became clear that the aforementioned perpetrators will stop at nothing in their drive for global domination and the wealth and “security” that comes with it. The world has therefore become considerably more dangerous, and in places previously considered relatively “safe”, as a result of their actions. The amount of fear in the world has increased. So much should surely be clear.

On the other hand, the question of whether and how an artist could respond to such a situation is far from clear. Obviously, making art should not be a substitute for the various forms of direct political action, by means of which people are still able to express the principle of democracy despite the obscene warping of this word that we constantly see around us. But the avenue of “political art” in the mid-20th-century sense has been closed; today there exists no focus for an artistic narrative such as was provided by, for example, Hitler or Stalin, only the impersonal workings of a technologised imperialism, whatever convenient faces might float in front of it. In what way can an artist’s response *as an artist* have any meaning? Is it enough to make a response in terms of (in this case) a music which attempts to engage its listeners in active participation rather than passive consumption? Is it enough to set the scene for the music by means of a provocative title? (No.) I am

---

<sup>16</sup> See Ellis Sharp, 'The Complicity of Paul Celan' (2006), *scarecrow poetics/essays* , at <http://hodmandod6.blogspot.it/2006/03/complicity-of-paul-celan.html> .

certainly not claiming to have answered such questions in the music. Does the music even ask them? Can it? I don't know. I'm trying to understand, and not to be intimidated into a retreat to aestheticism. My approach, such as it is, could be characterised as "resistance and vision". That is to say, music which offers firstly resistance to the insidious penetration of corporate values and (therefore) "dumbing-down" into all aspects of culture, and secondly a vision of how music (and, by extension, its social context) could possibly be otherwise; and, naturally, these two "motivations" are two facets of the same one.

This composition is not "absolute music". There is no such thing. On the other hand it isn't a "description" of a situation but a response to one. It might be objected that there is something contradictory about making a symphony orchestra, one of the most conservative of cultural institutions that presently exists in Western society, the vehicle for such a "progressive" response. Indeed there is. But the first step in a strategy of "resistance and vision" must be to expose contradictions. And part of the present "vision" is the idea that, beyond those contradictions, an orchestra presents us with a rare model of a relatively large number of people working exceptionally closely together in pursuit of a shared aim. Thus each individual member of the orchestra (as in my previous orchestral composition *Vanity*, but if anything more so) has an essential contribution to make rather than being submerged in a "section". In this sense the music is composed "against" the orchestra rather than "for" it, although at the same time it is intended to be composed "for" the meaningful participation of musically-engaged people in a large group, which, whether this particular music even begins to achieve its objectives or not, is what an orchestra should surely be.

What does all that mean, concretely, in terms of sound and structure? Obviously a composition evolves out of a largely "internal" apprehension of possible sound-forms, out of an impulsion, a desire to give communicable shape to promptings from the (necessarily) lonely depths of oneself. On the other hand there is the question of identifying and acting upon "what is to be done", what kind of sound-forms could articulate a response to this time, this place, this bombardment by lies and escapist trivia. How is this "dilemma" to be confronted and surmounted? By constantly attempting to cultivate in oneself a change in consciousness whereby it is no longer a dilemma, and there is fusion rather than conflict between individual and social artistic priorities. Marx already implied this idea in his description of socialism as "a higher type of society whose fundamental principle is the full and free development of every individual". That would seem to imply that within *this* society all attempts at such development are probably doomed. However, the alternatives (retreating into quasi-monastic isolationism, or launching oneself as a lifestyle-content-provider into the commercial market, or in certain celebrated cases doing both simultaneously) are unthinkable - and probably also doomed.

These considerations are indeed also the background to the musical work I've done in at least the last fifteen years. During that time my compositional output has aspired to the condition of politically-engaged art, which I have always regarded as the highest form of art in so far as it looks forward to the next phase in human emancipation, whenever and whatever that might be. But time is running out and this background needs to be brought to the foreground.

I recently read a concert review by a respected English journalist who approvingly paraphrased Mallarmé to the effect that "music consists not of concepts but of notes". Music does *not* consist of notes. It consists of *sounds*. Notes are just a necessary medium of communication between composer and performer. The sounds of a composition are the physical embodiment of its ideas. This doesn't mean that the relationship between the two has to be so simple as to be blatantly obvious. I hope those sympathetic enough to have read this far will also be sympathetic enough to bear that in mind.

Finally, since you will be hearing this music for the first time, it might be apposite to point out a few "landmarks". *NO* can be divided into six main "scenes". The first consists of a six-times iterated sound-form on brass, woodwinds and percussion which becomes more internally-differentiated as it expands in duration, with a high C# held by violins throughout. The second expands downward in register from the high violins to an "impossibly" complex string texture, which is then heard again, this time layer by layer, alternating with a sequence of harmonically static "choral" events as its timbres gradually mutate. The third scene (beginning with an irruption from the percussion) generalises this alternation into a fragmented and interwoven form where the orchestra is divided into seven heterogeneous groups of between four and 25 instruments. The fourth, longest and "slowest", focuses

on unfolding further the melodic thread which began with the high violins of the opening. The fifth builds up a canonic structure which eventually collapses into the sixth, itself a continuation of the series of outbursts in the first, this time disintegrating into a “pointillism” of noises.

*NO* was commissioned by the BBC and is dedicated to Edward Bond. It forms the first part of a cycle of compositions collectively entitled *resistance & vision*, which will comprise ensemble and theatre music as well as music for orchestra.<sup>17</sup>

There are a number of questions which I think are raised by this note. Where I take biggest issue is in the notion that ‘there exists no focus for an artistic narrative such as was provided by, for example, Hitler or Stalin, only the impersonal workings of a technologised imperialism’. Why, just because the latter doesn’t present an obvious ‘face’ as can be contemplated in an anthropomorphic sense, might it be any less of a focus for an artistic narrative? Indeed, when global capitalism and the technologised imperialism that supports it are so prevalent, and the machinations and ideologies of global capitalism affect the production of music so strongly (even permeating that realm of activity that benefits from state subsidy, but is nonetheless under increasing pressure to make its products ‘sell’), surely this is a fundamental focus of any artistic narrative? Barrett is of course well aware of these things, and attempts to address them in the succeeding sentences, pointing out the perils of aestheticism or the simple use of a provocative title (to which one might add a provocative programme note). The posited ‘resistance’ to ‘dumbing-down’ is not necessarily so different in type from engaging listeners ‘in active participation rather than passive consumption’. The question is how it might be achieved.

Barrett claims that an orchestra presents ‘a rare model of a relatively large number of people working exceptionally closely together in pursuit of a shared aim’, and that an approach which privileges the individual contributions of the members within a ‘section’ gives a notion of ‘what an orchestra should surely be’. One form this frequently takes in the work is the use of frequent *divisi* in the strings, and the assignation of quasi-soloistic parts to the same of the back desks. Yet the latter, though it has meaning in terms of spatial distribution, raises as many problems as it solves, and needs to be measured against the existing reality of the modern orchestra. For the back desks do not get *paid* the same amount as those higher up; allowing them equal participation and responsibility is surely, from a Marxist perspective, something of a sham when they are not receiving the requisite salary for so doing.

Barrett’s approach is essentially utopian: whilst he is not making unrealistic attempts to portray a future paradise, he does seem to imply that music can offer a glimpse of a elements of a better world, a ‘higher type of society whose fundamental principle is the full and free development of every individual’. This seems his way of creating a ‘fusion’ between ‘individual and social artistic priorities’. Notwithstanding the clear disclaimers made in terms of being able to answer certain fundamental questions, such a programme note creates high expectations against which listeners, including some who are sympathetic to the politics thus expressed, inevitably judge the actual work. Barrett admits that the attempts may be doomed, but that the alternatives he presents are doomed as well.

---

<sup>17</sup> Richard Barrett, ‘*NO* – programme note and interview’, at <http://richardbarrettmusic.com/NOinterview.html>.



[Play some of *NO*]

Whilst *NO* is a fine work, I cannot believe it really exhibits such exalted possibilities. That would require a degree of enthusiastic participation and sense of liberation on the part of orchestral players which the realities of contemporary orchestral life mitigate against. In the first performance, there was little sense of this being particularly different from many other orchestral works in the senses to which Barrett draws our attention. This situation might be different with another orchestra or conductor, but I believe that to be unlikely under present conditions. On the other hand, were one to blame Barrett for writing with expectations that exceed the current state of performance, then one would equally have to do so with a whole range of past composers from Beethoven onwards. That would not be an issue were it not for the fact that Barrett himself makes an explicit link with specific topical realities i.e. the 'War on Terror'. If the work may be played in future times in ways that would reflect Barrett's desires for it, the political situation may have changed such as to irrevocably alter its purported meanings.

The 'alternatives' that Barrett presents (all of which are perhaps doomed) need not be the only possibilities. There are other ways of writing 'against' an orchestra than that which Barrett attempts, but I would hazard a speculation that today he is more reticent about, for example, fundamentally rethinking the nature of instruments and inherited aesthetics of performance and structure than he was, say, at the time of works such as *I Open and Close* or *Tract*, as these can be represented as wilfully 'negationist' approaches and attitudes. I do not believe they are, any more so than they are Beethoven or Brahms (who understood the expressive possibilities of writing 'against' instruments as well as anyone). When all is said and done, *NO* does not present a radically different approach to writing for the orchestra than that which is presented in a whole host of earlier works by other composers. That is not in itself a criticism I would make of this or other works for sonic or expressive reasons – indeed Barrett's attempts at a *rapprochement* with aspects of a symphonic and orchestral tradition deriving from Wagner, Bruckner and Mahler amongst others is itself very interesting and fruitful – just an attempt to view it in terms of the ideals it sets itself through its programme note. To write serious, through-composed music for orchestra does continue to have a real political meaning in an era of dumbing-down, populism, and emphasis on superficial novelty, as is exhibited in many orchestral works of today. At the same time, the relatively conservative institution of the orchestral concert remains a haven of middle-class privilege and seems likely to do so for some time. To make a meaningful political statement in that context would seem to require some more radical confrontation with the very expectations provided by that institution, which Barrett's work does not really do, at least no more so than many other works of its type. The programme note deflects this issue into being one of global politics and the unfreedom provided by capitalism, expressed in the broadest of terms. Where I feel *NO* fails to achieve its perhaps unachievable premises is through its relative aloofness to the specific manifestations of the political issues he addresses in terms of the institutions and social settings it inhabits, other than in terms of the orchestra as micro-society. Whilst trying to address these issues in terms of the players, it does not really do so in terms of the listeners. Allusion to the context of composing in the shadow of the 'War on Terror' seem a poor substitute from this ongoing issue.

## Conclusion

In one of his most important essays, 'Commitment'<sup>18</sup>, Theodor Adorno looks very critically at artistic work which explicitly relates to concrete political concerns. Adorno's focus is here on literature, in particular the work of Brecht and the writings on literature of Sartre, saying that:

Literary realism of any provenance whatsoever, even if it calls itself critical or socialist, is more compatible with this antagonistic attitude [provided by conventionalism and anti-intellectualism] toward everything strange or upsetting than are works that through their very approach, without swearing by political slogans, put the rigid coordinate system of the authoritarian character out of action, a coordinate system which such people then hold to all the more stubbornly the less they are capable of spontaneously experiencing something not already officially approved.

It is dangerous to attempt to summarise this complex and sophisticated essay, but of crucial importance is Adorno's claim that:

Those works that through their very existence become the advocates of the victims of a nature-dominating rationality are in their protest by their very nature also always interwoven with the process of rationalization. To deny that process would be to be disempowered, both aesthetically and socially: a higher-order native soil. The organizing principle in every work of art, the principle that creates its unity, is derived from the same rationality that its claim to totality would like to put a stop to.

And whilst Nono, Spahlinger, Huber and Barrett in particular are well aware of many of these dangers, and respond to them with varying degrees of autonomy and subjectivity in their compositional work, still the programme note for many of them and others does seem to serve that totalising function that Adorno refers to. Today Barrett is more explicit about his Marxist beliefs than Spahlinger or Huber, who talk about them less (though they obviously inform their thinking); yet society can tolerate and appropriate a token 'Marxist composer' so long as they don't stray too far from their pre-assigned role in terms of the reified categories brought with it.

Under capitalism, Marxism has meaning in terms of interpreting history and society, but more importantly as a guide to political action. But in terms of art and culture I am not convinced it has meaning other than in a strictly negative sense. Art, certainly music, hardly has the potential to effect social change for the better, though it might play a part in consolidating and reinforcing the least desirable aspects of society as produced by capitalism. One of these is the subsumption of the creative individual towards fulfilling a merely functional role. Music, by virtue of its very ambiguity, is less prone to this than some other art forms with a more clearly identifiable semantic dimension. Yet the use of the Marxist programme note can serve in part to counteract this, and significantly affect the possibilities of reception in this sense. To engage with the complex psychological world and the group dynamics amongst players presented by Barrett's *NO* takes considerably more thought, attention and consideration than to simply measure it against utopian ideals and topical allusions that are provided through the note.

---

<sup>18</sup> Theodor Adorno, 'Commitment', translated Shierry Weber Nichol森, in *Notes to Literature*, Volume 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), pp. 76-94.

I would go so far as to suggest that the notion of a 'Marxist composer' is essentially meaningless. There is of course such a thing as a composer who also holds Marxist beliefs, and one whose compositional activity is informed by their wider political outlook in this respect. But to be a 'Marxist composer' to me implies that there is such a thing as a 'Marxist composition'. For many of the reasons outlined above, I am not convinced such a thing can really exist in a meaningful sense, other than in terms of compositional intention, which is not necessarily an intrinsic aspect of the work itself.

'High culture' itself can be and is used for the purposes of sustaining unequal social structures, as the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu amply indicates<sup>19</sup>. And 'mass culture' can serve the function of distraction, mind-numbing, an imposed artificial sense of collectivity as appeals to the authoritarian personality, and the like. It would be hyperbolic to reduce either category merely to such attributes – if I believed that, I would not be involved in culture myself. If there is anything positive a Marxist (or for that matter, a social democrat) can do, it is surely to attempt to keep open, expand and enhance the field of cultural possibility that exceeds the above, and thus the forms of expression and experience such a field might make possible.

As Barrett in particular makes clear, if Marxist composers want to change society, they would do better to get involved in actual political activity rather than attempt forlornly to do so through their art. In one sense I would agree but with a fundamental qualifier. Marxists will not, in my opinion, change society for the better with their art; *however*, if they who are Marxists intend to continue to produce art, then the dangers of their art serving to bolster the more reactionary aspects of society is something they cannot ignore. In short, it hardly bodes well if the political activity works for one thing whilst the artistic activity works against that.

If anything can be appropriated (which I am loathe to believe), then the game would be lost and Marxists could do little other than simply attacking both high and low culture *per se* rather than producing more of it and thus helping to bolster an unjust society. But I do not believe this and wish to end on a social democratic note. If one does not believe that the market provides for the widest possibilities for culture in a quasi-democratic manner, then there must be a role for other forms of financial support organised through different means such as public subsidy. Culture can at best provide forms of experience and stimulation that are not otherwise available in the rest of society and a route for the expression of a wide range of subjectivities (though the heavy class bias, not to mention that of gender and ethnicity, in the British music world and elsewhere makes this currently more of an ideal than a reality). The very principle of public subsidy is under attack, and the relatively small amounts that are thus provided may be vulnerable to further cuts. It is, in my opinion, the most fruitful thing that all types of left-of-centre artists might do is to use their verbal outlets to attempt to make a convincing case for the maintenance (or increase) in such subsidy. Without the infrastructure that makes non-market-beholden culture possible – and possible for subsequent generations, not just for those who have managed to grab their slice of the cake at present – then programme notes alluding to specific events from a Marxist perspective will become almost comically irrelevant. Marxists and social democrats are, whether they like it or not, intimately entwined with actually-existing

---

<sup>19</sup> See Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Aristocracy of Culture', in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, translated Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), pp. 11-96.

institutions, social and financial structures and aesthetic ideologies. These issues do not become any the less immediate in the context of cultural production by attempting to deflect attention in the direction of geopolitics.