

The Fetish of the 'Contemporary'

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The focus of my own work as a performer has been upon the nebulous category of 'contemporary music', or 'new music', terms informally understood as signifying music in some sense connected to a 'classical' tradition (a term itself which could fill a whole book), in distinction to rock, pop, jazz, folk and other traditions (atonal free improvisation is a borderline candidate for inclusion in the 'contemporary/new music' category), and usually adhering in one or other sense to an atonal idiom, in the simple sense of a music which is not obviously organised around tonal centres.

This type of work is of course very far from constituting the whole or even the majority of 'contemporary music' in the broadest sense of the term, indicating simply music which is produced in or around the time when the term is being used. In this sense 'contemporary' music could equally be Rhianna or Eminem as the above – and indeed to the majority of the listening public in any Western nation, this would be much more representative of what is considered to be the music of their time. But the specific term and concept of 'new music' in its German form (*Neue Musik*) has a long history, from the end of World War One, when it was taken up by the critic Paul Bekker, then conductor Hermann Scherchen and composer Heinz Tiessen, and developed in various directions, but always signifying a music which constituted a palpable break with the recent past (which did not always exclude music which self-consciously flaunted archaisms, such as the neo-classical Stravinsky). Some type of 'newness' (or at least incorporation into a new tradition perceived as new) is in this context a necessary but not sufficient condition of 'new music'.

For a great many years, I have bemoaned the ways in which the 'classical' field has for the most part turned its back upon the music of today, other than to the extent that such music is seen to resemble the products of a hallowed 'tradition'. Radical music which challenges established patterns of listening or other musical expectations needs an open mind and fair listening, to my mind, and there remains an important place for challenging work which is unlikely ever to win a wide audience. This is perhaps more generally accepted in other artistic fields than in music.

Yet in more recent times, in both the fields of performance/composition and also in academia, I have perceived a way in which the 'contemporary' has come to assume a fetish quality, in a way which is anything but radical. I have heard countless works of music characterised by one or other form of novelty, be it the use of cutting edge new

technology or software, some off-piste approach to the use of instruments, musical structure or other parameters, some concept seen to accord with absolutely 'contemporary' concerns, and so on. Most cringeworthy (and this genre has developed an unhappy 'tradition' of its own) are those works which involve a token allusion to some voguish popular music from the time, an allusion which rarely does more than mimic the stylistic surface of the popular music in question with little thought to wider considerations of context, the traditions which the popular music inhabits, and so on.

Much of this work demonstrates very little in terms of historical self-awareness, such as might lead to work on musical dimensions other than those which can be conceived as entirely 'contemporary', and as such a lot of such work becomes redundant after a few hearings, or after some time has passed from its composition; when its contemporaneity dissipates, there is little left, and so little chance of a more lasting long-term impression to be made. There is most definitely a place for the musically ephemeral and disposable, and I would not wish to unnecessarily denigrate such work, but much greater expectations are often placed upon contemporary music in ways which it can be ill-equipped to follow up.

One classic argument against a particular variety (perhaps caricature) of 'first principles' modernism goes roughly as follows: if we tried to explain all the workings of the world – global social and economic processes, the arms trade, human relationships, and so on – purely in terms of elementary units of matter and energy, we would be unlikely to get very far. This is obviously true; an understanding of such things requires a comprehension of macroscopic processes and all that can be learned from history, systems theories, and various else. In a similar manner, I do not believe that very much radical contemporary music has not in some sense been built upon a critical relationship to musical traditions. A small amount of work in the 1950s attempted either a type of 'particle'-based approach to musical composition or an architecturally/structurally-focused approach in which microscopic detail was of secondary importance (or in some cases a combination of the two); some quite remarkable work was produced in this way, but few of the composers were able to maintain such an idiom for long. Most soon started to re-enter into a dialogue with older traditions, by no means necessarily from a nostalgic perspective, but in order to partake of the achievements of the past in order to move on from them. Even the very fact of aiming for a type of high abstraction itself constituted an indebtedness to tradition, as negation is a dependent relationship as much as any other. For all that John Cage spoke often about his distance from the centres of tradition, without the existence of such a tradition in relation to which his work was apparently 'other', he would never have made such an impact.

But this is not what I see now in many musical and academic circles. Instead – fuelled in part by narrow technocratic approaches to the study of music, as well as some of

those coming out of anthropology and ethnomusicology which are by virtue of their very methods often ill-able to study musical traditions which are not active in the present, and frequently show very little interest in incorporating into their study historical roots of present-day musics – I see attitudes and approaches which are simply ignorant (sometimes quite proudly) of musical and other history, entirely obsessed with a snapshot view of the present. Any consideration of earlier traditions or their bearing on the present can from this perspective be dismissed as merely conservative, the idle refuge of those who seek solace from a supposedly vibrant present in some lost and romanticised past.

I do not accept this, nor that history and ‘tradition’ are the sole property of conservatives. In trying to understand the roots of the current world economic situation, I might consider the opening up of world markets following the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe at the end of the 1980s, the decline of the Bretton-Woods agreement in the 1970s and the rise of neo-liberalism, combined with the consequences of the oil crisis during this period, itself related to territorial struggles and military action in the Middle East, perhaps back further to the post-1945 conditions which made Bretton-Woods possible, and beyond to the histories of nationalism and imperialism that played a part in bringing about two world wars, and further beyond still. Without pretending to be an expert on these huge historical issues, I do firmly believe that without such historical conditions, the current global economic situation might be very different indeed, and in order to at least assess the possibilities for change and how to act to bring it about, some degree of historical understanding is necessary. Furthermore, historical traditions do not consist exclusively of calamities; one might look at the movement towards expanded suffrage, incorporating the working classes and women, towards a greater acceptance of sexual diversity, away from wholeheartedly racist ideologies portraying clear ethnic hierarchies on a pseudo-scientific basis, towards positive increases in medical technology which alleviate many people from living in conditions of chronic pain as they would have done in earlier eras, and so on.

The same goes for music: almost every music style, genre or idiom which can be witnessed today itself draws upon its own history and tradition; traditions in which one can find elements to be valorised in all varieties of positive or negative ways. Much music which is either radical or even mildly distinctive has neither slavishly adhered to these traditions nor simply negated them, but learned techniques, aesthetics, possibilities, which can be critiqued and transformed in line with contemporary needs. And some of the most devastatingly modern music makes its impact because of the way it situates itself with respect to traditions and its concomitant expectations for listening. None of this is possible from a position of total historical ignorance or amnesia. Be-bop required a consciousness of the Swing Era (towards which it would be simplistic to view be-bop simply as a negation, rather

than a modification and shift of priorities) and indeed of earlier jazz and some other musical traditions. Cage had an intense interest in Satie, Duchamp, the Bauhaus, and various else, not to mention certain renditions of Asian philosophies. Salvatore Sciarrino's music not only draws upon a deep knowledge and appreciation of the music of Liszt, Debussy, Ravel (and Monteverdi and Gesualdo) and others, but equally the work of Giorgio de Chirico, Michelangelo Antonioni and others, and all the possibilities they bequeathed to music. Hip-hop from outside of the Western world (or even outside of African-American communities and the music industries which variously nurture and control them) exists in a particular relationship to musical (and spoken) traditions both from the places of hip-hop's origins and also in the places where it comes to be newly developed. None of this music simply involves an aping of its predecessors; indeed in many cases the relationship is ambivalent, but nonetheless informed and intelligent.

To create a simple dichotomy between 'tradition' and the 'contemporary' is to deny a whole range of contemporary possibilities. It is perhaps no coincidence that in certain fields (certainly in fashion and popular music) recent decades have seen ever-increasing waves of retro-mania, indicative of a need to anchor oneself in a clear past as an alternative to a groundless present. Much that is stimulating arises from such a sensibility, not least because of the impossibility of wholly re-creating past styles in different historical conditions. But there is much still to be gained from historical understanding such as makes possible an engaged and critical form of creation, which may have implications beyond the present day, and it takes a very high degree of arrogance to pretend one has nothing whatsoever to learn from the successes and failures of earlier musicians.

There is nothing necessarily 'organic' about traditions, which frequently feature fissures and ruptures as much as smooth continuity and development; but this is one reason why such traditions can be much more radical than they might be portrayed by conservatives. Equally, being 'contemporary' is by no means synonymous with bracketing out all those conditions which inform the particularity of the present day. Having some wider awareness which extends beyond the here and now is of no small importance when aiming to produce work which will indeed do that. Novelty and shock value are rarely radical any longer on their own; on the contrary, they are the lifeblood of a commodity society which needs new marketing tricks. Earlier modernism could be presented in a context when there did exist some 'general listening public' to classical music, and a deferential belief that any work in this tradition must have an automatic superiority of that emerging from other traditions. Today that public is fragmented and diffuse, and the consequent impact severely diminished; conservative listening communities can easily ignore an art which is reduced to simply baring its backside to those who care little. It is no longer enough simply to be new; it is also necessary to be meaningful, and that meaningfulness is

inextricably intertwined with the expectations of listeners that are themselves informed by traditions.