

# Contemporary Art Music: Ameliorating the Rift

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Contemporary Art music is in a precarious state. Proponents of the avant-garde fight for it whereas most of the populace wants to hear music of the past, such as Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and Mozart's *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*, because they can not understand Contemporary music. Lack of music training contributes to this dilemma as music education continues to be cut from elementary curriculum. Whole generations have grown up since the turn of the Century, that is, the *last* Century, utterly ignorant of any new musical approach post-Wagner. The contemporary state involves a constant re-defining of what is Art music? What is the avant-garde? and, How can proponents of the avant-garde bring music back to the people instead of only to the musical elite? The most striking critique on Contemporary Art music is that common people do not appreciate it because it is difficult to understand any music since 1900. For Contemporary Art music to persevere, music education must be resurrected so that the layman can appreciate this dying Art form.

To best understand the current state of Art music, we must first take an historical approach. By reviewing where we have come from, we can better see where we are at and where we are going. We will start with the turn of the century and the advent of Modernism.

## **The Avant-Garde, Elitist, Modernist Composers**

The advent of Modernism, also brought academia; the intellectualization of music. It is here that music ceased to be popular and instead became an instrument for elitism. Only those who studied music could understand it with the depth needed to truly appreciate it. The populace was left in the dust as Debussy, Stravinsky and Schoenberg dazzled the intellectuals with their new works. Debussy's *La Mer*, now considered quite tame, initially appalled critics. Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, now considered by many to be the most influential piece of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, caused riots on the opening night of the ballet. The audience even threw vegetables at the dancers! The orchestra could not get through the piece before the audience left. And Schoenberg. The most difficult composer for 19<sup>th</sup> Century ears. He got rid of tonality altogether, and created a new form of music: atonality and later serialism.

Even today, Schoenberg and Stravinsky's music is difficult for most people whose ears are back in the time of Mozart. And it is no wonder. I estimate 90% of all music played on the radio, including the music played on classical stations, is based in pre-20<sup>th</sup> Century tonality. Secondly, most orchestral concerts include on mostly pre-20<sup>th</sup> Century music, some with the occasional, "Modern" piece, (excepting Boulez's time with as conductor of the New York Philharmonic), much to the distaste of white-haired concert-goers. Ours is the only period in music history when contemporary art music is not popular. For the last century, we have been looking back and turning a blind eye to the future. Why has this shift taken place?

Terry Teachout, music critic for *Commentary* magazine, writes that, "Musical modernism at its inception represented a revolt not against tradition in general, but against German Romanticism in particular," (Teachout, 2. Much of the following outline is indebted to this article). More specifically, Richard Wagner and his operas, including the Ring Cycle. Wagner and Richard Strauss were the last of the tonal composers. They composed using tonality freely, and modulating frequently to new keys.

Composers such as Debussy, Bartok, Stravinsky, and Hindemith represent the conservative modernist reaction to romanticism, by breaking from tonality and going in different directions. Notably, these composers tended to remain as, “Outgrowths of the classical tradition,” (Teachout, 2), relying on folk idioms from their native countries. Even so, this new approach to music, called modernism, became the New; the “avant-garde.” Representative works by the above composers are: Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring*, Prokofief’s *Romeo and Juliet*, Bartok’s *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta*, Shostakovich’s *Fifth Symphony*, as well as works by Britten, Copland, Barber, and Poulenc.

The “other,” radical modernism was brought forth by Arnold Schoenberg around the same time. His new style, atonality and later serialism, became the other avant-garde. Schoenberg’s crowning achievement is arguably *Pierrot Lunaire*, composed in 1912. (*Rite of Spring* opened only a year later, in 1913). This work is one of the first atonal works. The theory behind atonal music is that no one pitch has dominance over the others. All pitches are equal. Schoenberg’s systematic approach to atonality is called serialism, in which a tone row of all 12 pitches is aligned and the music merely follows each note in the row in order, never repeating a note before all 12 are used. Schoenberg had two pupils worthy of note: Anton Webern and Alban Berg. Berg’s *Violin Concerto* and his opera *Wozzeck* are still performed today, (Teachout, 3-5).

The effect this had on audiences, (then and now), was utter shock. This extreme form of intellectualization of music manifested itself audibly. Vociferous responses from the critics denounced atonality; the same opposition can still be heard today, though not from educated critics. Herein lies the problem: education is vital to understanding modernist music. Only modernist composers and those with music degrees can understand it. As I will contemplate more fully later on, education will play a large role in bringing music back to the people.

To get slightly more technical, let us look at exactly *what* critics were responding to. In a single word, it is dissonance. Dissonance is the music term for harsh, jarring sounds. Sounds that should be resolved into something consonant. Something pretty. The consonant sounds of the past are what everyone is used to. Contemporary pop music is based in the same consonant sounds produced by theoretical works around the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Pop music today has not yet departed from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. (Some exception may be given to Radiohead, one of the most forward thinking rock groups of today). Igor Stravinsky offers an enlightening view on the function of dissonance in music:

For over a century music has provided repeated examples of a style in which dissonance has emancipated itself. It is not longer tied down to its former function [of leading to consonance]. Having become an entity in itself, it frequently happens that dissonance neither prepares nor anticipates anything. Dissonance is thus no longer an agent of disorder than consonance is a guarantee of security. The music of yesterday and of today unhesitatingly unites parallel dissonant chords that thereby lose their functional value, and our ear naturally accepts the juxtaposition. Of course, the instruction and education of the public have not kept pace with the evolution of technique, (Stravinsky, 34-5).

Even back in 1942, Stravinsky was not only aware of the problem with dissonance, but of the solution: education. As I will describe later, Aaron Copland was also forward thinking about educating the populace, even in the midst of his modernist tendencies.

Jennifer DeLapp, in her article on Copland: “Fighting the Musical Museum: Aaron Copland’s *Music and Imagination*,” outlines some of the key aesthetic ideals of Modernism:

1. Tradition and historical self-consciousness. Related to this idea is T.S. Eliot’s concept that we have to know the rules in order to break them. Composers come from a tradition, the past, and work through that tradition to the next modernist ideal: progress. This is the idea that out of tradition, we must move on towards something new: to evolve. The art critic Clement Greenberg reflects on the function of avant-garde: “The true and most important function of the avant-garde was not to ‘experiment,’ but to find a path along which it would be possible to keep culture *moving* in the midst of ideological confusion and violence.” Musical modernists argue that atonality is the next logical step, (DeLapp, 113).
2. Progress. DeLapp posits that the idea of progress, “Lent credence to Schoenberg’s claim that his advanced dissonance was a necessary forward step in the directional process that had dominated musical evolution,” (DeLapp, 113).
3. Autonomy. Again, DeLapp explains: “Autonomy separated the artwork from direct social function, and enabled it to inhabit a separate sphere, which could inform and improve daily life, but was not a part of it,” (Ibid. 114-5). This argument sounds ludicrous to us because it is. However, modernist thinkers truly believed that they could change the way we live. Elliott Carter, another great Modernist composer said that, “It might be that you’re really serving the society better writing something that is striking and original and unusual, than by writing something that is immediately accessible to the public,” (Ford, 4).

Charles Jencks in his influential book, *What is Post-Modernism?* in his analysis of modernism, writes that people believed that modernist architecture would solve the world’s problems. Though this didn’t work, it is important to understand the Modernist position because it is exactly this understanding that the post-modernists react to.

As the world progressed, so did music. World War II came and went. The composers following the war were left in a different state: “The chaos into which the West had been plunged by World War II created an opening for cultural ideologues with comprehensive, world-ordering systems, and serialism filled the bill to perfection,” (Teachout, 4). The Late Modernists embraced total serialism, a technique where every aspect of music, (pitch, volume, texture, timbre, and rhythm), was pre-planned; thought out beforehand with mathematical precision. Literally. Numerology became a driving force in Messiaen’s *Quartet for the End of Time*.

Composers such as the young Pierre Boulez and Olivier Messiaen in France, and Milton Babbitt in the US, also wrote music in this vein. Boulez is quoted as saying that, “Every musician who has not felt ... the necessity of the serial language is USELESS,” (qt. in Teachout, 5). This same kind of thinking can be found in the writing of art critic, Clement Greenberg, who ruthlessly defended the intellectual avant-garde. Tonal composers were once again left behind. Terry Teachout argues that at this time, “The general perception in musical circles was that serialism had triumphed.”

## Reactions to Musical Modernism and Post-Modernism

Today we are still in the midst of modernism. Late modernist composers, such as Elliott Carter and Pierre Boulez, are still composing. In 2001, Boulez won the Pulitzer Prize in music. Yet today, we are also confronted with other strains. The rejection of modernism brought about post-modernism. In music, that led back to tonality and down other avenues, such as the aleatoric music of John Cage. Aleatoric music invoked chance to determine the music. When John Cage performed a piece that involved tuning 12 radios to different stations, he did not know what was going to be on them, thus invoking chance and called the result, music.

Post-Modernism, defined by Jencks, involves, “An attack on the present tense motivated by the idea of living across time, in an historical and cultural continuum that stretches into the future,” (Jencks, 14). The contemporary composer Ellen Taaffe Zwilich would agree: “I’m always changing and in fact that’s something that I very much enjoy about composing. I like the idea of being in a continuum, not only with my own past, but with the music of the past and the present; having these connections and yet always trying something a little new; you know, jumping into the water not quite sure of whether you can swim,” (Ford, 16). Post-Modernism also, “Attacks Modernist elitism, academicism and puritanical repression,” (Jencks, 19). Thus, post-modern music often appeals to the populace. Bottum defines another aspect of post-modernism, the pluralism of music today: “In all previous ages of music a new musical form succeeded by replacing its predecessors. But now each new form joins its predecessors in our endlessly expanding library of music,” (Bottum, 9).

One of these new forms is minimalism the first new form of popular Art music that truly appeals to the populace. Teachout explains that minimalism is, “Constructed ... out of simple melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic cells, repeated ad infinitum in gradually shifting patterns,” (Teachout, 7). He continues: “It did not constitute a genuine return to functional tonality ... they wrenched familiar devices from their traditional contexts, transplanting them into new settings for ironic effect,” (ibid.). This is a very post-modern approach. Steve Reich, Philip Glass, and John Adams are each well-known minimalist composers. Glass’s *Einstein on the Beach* was an immensely popular, 5-hour, minimalist opera, with a cult following that rivals *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

Another reaction to modernist intellectualism is a movement emerging in the mid 1980s which Terry Teachout calls, “neo-tonalism.” He defines it as:

A new generation of American composers ... influenced neither by serialism nor by minimalism but by the music of the long-unfashionable tonal modernists. [They] embarked on the task of going back to the future – of reattaching classical composition to the mainstream of musical tradition ... [they] speak the language of tonality, and do so without irony or self-consciousness. This is what sets them apart from the post-modern movement: they are neither embarrassed nor paralyzed by tradition. Rather, they accept it as a given, (Teachout, 7-8).

Representative neo-tonal composers are Daniel Asia, Michael Daugherty, Elliott Goldenthal (who wrote the soundtrack to *Batman Forever* and *Interview with the Vampire*), Libby Larsen, and Paul Moravec. Their music is more readily accessible to the populace, many modernist critics would still disregard them.

## The Future of Music

In April, 2002, the Santa Barbara composer Henry Brandt received the Pulitzer in music. His music is very eclectic drawing form such diverse styles as jazz, dissonant modernism, comical sound effects and even lovely melodies, (Woodard), a very post-modern approach. John Cage said that music this century, “Has not produced a mainstream but a delta with a multiplicity of musical rivers. In fact, I would say now that we are certainly an ocean,” (Ford, 173). Amid this ocean are more arguments, involving the inevitable necessity: money.

“The orchestra is a lost cause: it’s too expensive and too much trouble,” says Elliott Carter, a contemporary modernist composer, (Ford, 8). Pierre Boulez would agree with him. Boulez complains about the difficulty of getting enough money to get the number of rehearsals necessary to produce quality works, (ibid. 22). With this in mind, I believe that there will soon be a shift back to the intimate ensemble performances, more prevalent in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Music can come back into fashion at the informal social gathering. All one needs to do is to be intentional about one’s community.

## The Post-Modern Dilemma

After trekking through the Twentieth Century, we are now at a place in which to view the current state of music. In keeping with post-modern eclecticism, we are in pluralist musical times, regardless of whether or not late modernist composers and critics accept all of the music produced. The dilemma for the contemporary composer is whether to write intellectual “avant-garde” music and face being labeled “elitist” by the populace, versus writing accessible music and being labeled “kitsch” by the musical modernists, (to use the terms of art critic Clement Greenberg). Composers and contemporary rock groups who write accessible music merely to appeal to the masses are often said to have “sold out.”

So what’s wrong with “pretty music?” Intellectuals argue that it isn’t cerebral enough and the masses say, “Nothing!” And what’s wrong with modernist serial music? The masses would say that it just isn’t pretty and the intellectuals would say, “Nothing!” And there it is.

In his article, *Classical Music in Twilight: Variations on a Descending Theme*, Charles Rosen points out that, “The music that survives is the music that musicians want to play,” (Rosen, 6). Charles Rosen offers a different perspective on the problem:

The problem of communication between contemporary composers and the public is a real one, but it is far from new. And any solution that suggests someone is at fault is misguided. The public has a right to listen to what pleases it; the composer, a right to compose as he wishes ... The problem is how to enable musicians to make a living doing what they prefer to do, and this is not solved by having them play music they do not like or compose in a style in which they have no faith, (Rosen, 3).

This rings true. Countless musicians are trying to pay off college loans *and* perform music they love. There are economic reasons for not pursuing a career in music, most notably, because it is not lucrative. In spite of this fact, most musicians would not choose another path because there is something that they love and something that forces them to do it. The composer, Ellen Taaffe Zwilich explains, “I write because I have to; I write out of some need in myself,” (Ford, 15). J.

Bottum, in his article, “The Soundtracking of America,” in *The Atlantic Monthly*, defines this growing rift concisely:

Like every other art, music naturally grows more sophisticated over time, as its creators and audience become more educated about a particular form-and then it naturally rebels against its sophistication, as musicians become sated and listeners prove unable to follow their technical advances, (Bottum, 6).

It is precisely this rift which has led to our current state and to what some have called the death of classical music.

### **Who Killed Classical Music?**

Several articles and books have recently been published announcing the “death” of Classical music and attempt to place the blame somewhere: be it the high pedestal that elitism gave the concert scene, the mass marketing of music, or the business of music, *something* has to change. As with most dilemmas, no single answer is apparent. Perspectives need to change and corporations need to be taken down. At least the first is possible. This next section will briefly review recent critiques of Art music.

#### *Orchestral Pedestals*

It can't help the situation that for years, yes, thank you modernists, the orchestra has carried an air of elitism. In Lionel Basney's article, *Who Killed Classical Music?* in *Books & Culture* magazine, he first quotes the 1993 ASOL report, *Americanizing the American Orchestra*: “The image of the orchestra [is] an exclusive, arrogant, possibly racist institution that resists sharing the secrets and norms of participation.” Basney then notes the recurrent calls for orchestras to, “come down off their pedestals and mingle,” (Basney, 9). This sounds like a good idea. Basney tells a story of an orchestra playing a concert at an elementary school. Is this a worth-while endeavor for highly trained musicians? Educating children about music is definitely a good thing. However, there must be a way that does not involve wasting the time of trained professionals.

Another aspect of the orchestral pedestal is the ritual of the concert. Charles Rosen notes that, “Abstract formality is emphasized by evening dress, and by the element of ritual that surrounds a concert,” (Rosen 5). The whole superficial process of dressing up and going to a concert, or, an even more upper-class event, the opera, has a certain sense of snob appeal. But snob appeal comes right out of the tradition of modernist elitism, from which we are attempting to escape while retaining artistic merit *and* bring music back to the populace. We need to do away with snobbery without sacrificing quality. Yet, this brings up another problem: expensive tickets, which I will address shortly.

On the flip side of the orchestral pedestal is what J. Bottum argues in his *Atlantic Monthly* article, *The Soundtracking of America*:

In the soundtracking of America-in the constantly segueing fragments that fill our public and private spaces-music is merely the inescapable background, the relentless mood-setter, the arbiter and signal of proper behavior ... You can see it even more clearly in the expectation that Americans will appreciate the

"Hallelujah Chorus" in TV ads for Baskin-Robbins ice cream and Bayer cat and dog flea treatment, will prefer elevators with piped-in snatches of middlebrow classics like "Flight of the Bumblebee" and the William Tell Overture, and will be pleased that shopping malls provide them with musical clues to decorum and the appropriate emotional attitude, (Bottum, 4, 8).

We should be shocked and appalled by this misuse of Art music. Yet, we are not and probably have not even thought about it. On one hand, music must come down off its pedestal, but on the other, it needs to retain its prestige as Art.

### *The Business of Music*

As I mentioned earlier, high ticket prices add to snob appeal. They also help the orchestra to remain on its pedestal because face it, only middle to upper class citizens attend orchestra concerts. Bums who live on the street, no. 1, probably don't care, and no. 2, if they had the money, they would buy food, not orchestra tickets. Concerts are listener oriented. As Charles Rosen points out, the audience determines what they want to hear because they are the ones who purchase the tickets, (Rosen, 2). In this vicious cycle, the semi-educated, upper class, Mozart and Beethoven lover, concert goer determines the program; not the musicians and certainly not the intellectuals.

Secondly, "The music business, like publishing, is controlled by multinational conglomerates that care nothing for art," (Rosen, 2). Again, the musically uneducated rich. David Hamilton points out that, "In some cities, orchestras and conductors try to give unfamiliar and new music a significant place in their seasons and, by recording it, to gain national exposure for themselves," (Hamilton, 2). Money is always a defining feature.

Lionel Basney also points out what he calls the "Michael Jordaning" of music, (Basney, 9). He points to the three tenors phenomenon, involving the mass marketing of three revered tenors, Luciano Pavarotti, Placido Domingo, and Jose Carreras, to concerts of 56,000 fans in Dodger Stadium. Rosen comments, "The character of music cannot survive when played in a large stadium with amplification," (Rosen, 4). In fact, Rosen goes on to critique the artificial nature of the public concert saying, "The public performance is an invention of the twentieth century ... The public concert ... detaches the works from their social and ideological settings ... [and] allows the aesthetic values to come forward only by pushing other kinds of meaning, (religious, domestic, educational, celebratory, political) in the background," (Rosen, 5).

These harsh words are well founded. In the past, there were many other contexts for music, the concert hall was only one of them. Today, it is the one that gets precedence, completely ignoring the fact that most music was composed for more intimate settings, such as the informal social gathering, the church choir, and the solo playing for one's own enjoyment. This is an avenue down which to pursue music in the future.

### **The Role of the Contemporary Critic**

Is there still an avant-garde? If you are in the modernist camp, then yes, there is, and they are it. But in our pluralist post-modern age where all is acceptable, it is uncouth to say that any one kind of music is better because we should accept all of it. Yet, there must be someone who will be able to evaluate music on standard criteria. Not all music can be 'good music.' Even

the most post-modern of us want to call some music “Kitsch.” And we can not have our cake and eat it too. That is, we can not have a kitsch without an avant-garde.

The contemporary critic has a difficult role. Music critic Donald Vroon distinguishes between two kinds of critics: the synthetic listener, who listens for line and flow and for pure beauty of sound, and the analytic listener who focuses on details, (Vroon, 2). He posits that each critic hears the same thing, they just respond differently. A subjective analysis of music requires an educated critic; Hume asserted this years ago. But, as Fred Blanks identifies, this is hard to come by: “Direct, honest, reasonably objective, well-informed music criticism has been sidelined by the emergence of arts coverage containing a dominant proportion of hype, disguised advertising, subjectivity, personal barrow-pushing and tub-thumping,” (Blanks, 1).

Music critic, Roger Scruton may be implied by this statement. Scruton blames the current problem with contemporary art music on the refusal of composers to write tonal music. Scruton writes: “The suspension of tonality ... should be seen for what it is: an act of rebellion against the only way we have of making sense of things,” (qt. in Rosen, 2). This sort of criticism does not help the situation, it only promulgates the narrow views that the uneducated have held about music for the past century.

### **Bridging the Gap: Bringing the Populace Back to Music**

We do not need to bring music to the populace, we need to bring the populace back to music. Music, in its current state is rich in tonality and genre. Post-Modernism has given us the gift of diversity. We can listen to and appreciate whatever we like. As composers, we can compose music as we think it should be written. And as critics, we have a wealth of music to choose from. No one person will like everything, that is understood. However, we must work towards making as many listeners as possible *informed* listeners. This can be done through education and exposure.

Is marketing the answer? Certainly not. Discourse *is* the answer. By opening up a dialogue between composers and music intellectuals and the public to explain how contemporary music works, new appreciation may be fostered. Lionel Basney comments, “We must influence by convincing schoolchildren and adults ... that the gifts of high culture are not the preserve of an elite but the birthrights of their humanity. This education will not only *concern* music; it will have to be *by way* of music,” (Basney, 42).

Aaron Copland was aware of the growing rift between modernist composers and the listening public. While clinging to his modernist views, he finds a way to bridge the gap. Many of his works, such as *Appalachian Spring*, are more accessible, and for a specific purpose: to bring the public back in. The goal is for the composer to again be openly received by the populace for doing what is in their nature to do:compose. Copland concludes *Music and Imagination*:

One of the primary problems for the composer in an industrial society like that of America is to achieve integration, to find justification for the life of art in the life about him ... The artist should feel himself affirmed and buoyed up by his community, (Copland, 111).

Charles Rosen concludes his article, *Who’s Afraid of the Avant-Garde?* with these words: Easily accessible works may have a quick and immediate success, but they do nothing to restore the intensity of experience which is the foundation of serious

music ... History teaches us that it is the art that is tough and that resists immediate appreciation that has the best chance of enduring and of returning. We must do all we can to foster it, to beg composers to pay no heed to the pressures of the music business but to listen only to their own inspiration, (Rosen 2, 13).

There is hope for the future of Art music. I think the most inspiring words are, (ironically), from Pierre Boulez:

I don't see a future for modernism; I don't see a future for post-modernism. You are not modern – you are merely expressing yourself according to the coordinates of your time, and that's not being modern, that's being where you are, [composer's should] not try to catch the spirit of the time, but create the spirit of the time, (Ford, 24, 28).

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