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Who Listens if You Care?

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In 1977, Chris Maher, composer and massage artist, articulated his vision of what he termed "Marxist music." His idea was simple: no musical material could be owned—all music makers should be able to take whatever they want from whomever they want and use it as they see fit. "Material" could range from a melody, a sound, a formal principle, to an entire piece of music (as in Maher's "New Improved Morton Feldman," in which Feldman's spare sonic world is "enhanced" through the use of digital delay). Maher contended that only in this way could music—rather than an individual's musical career - grow and develop freely. By invading and destroying the notion of musical "property," the scope of musical possibilities would be infinitely expanded. An individual's "piece" would still exist and could still be valued, in any and every sense, but, more importantly, his or her ideas—or, more precisely, any real or imagined musical ideas that could be construed from his or her piece—could be built upon, taken in unexpected directions, used by all.

We were young then, and despite the well-known historical precedents for this position—famous borrowers such as Handel (melodies), Barry Manilow (chord progressions), and Webern (formal principles)—I remember that we found the idea somewhat scandalous and terrifying. This was tied into the seeming impossibility of making careers for ourselves as composers: the task seemed to be "finding a voice" or coming up with some kind of original or innovative structural idea. This daunting task was achieved through "the work" one put into one's music—not simply time or deep thought but some ineffable blend of the two, of quantity and quality. This work was what ultimately mattered: our pieces—the product—would be perfect reflections of it, and, in the course of time, this work—if we but had the strength to persevere tirelessly—would be recognized, lauded, rewarded. Our dedication would magically be transformed into stunning, creative work, and from there glory and achievement would be ours. There was a hidden, mystical equation: talent ("quality") times work ("quantity") divided by fate would equal good fortune, fame, success.

The inevitable disillusionment from our naive faith did not result from any

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inherent failing in this equation. Most of us ultimately were able to do what we wanted to a greater or lesser degree, and the fact that various bozos managed to get famous on a gimmick didn't seem very irksome once we got used to it (none of us lost much sleep over the Milli Vanilli thing, for example).[1] What caused the destruction of this Calvinistic world-view was rather that Maher's dream became reality, in a far more encompassing way than even he could have imagined. For, as we now all know, the need for new products to market and sell has combined with the digital ability to refashion everything under the sun, and this very un-Marxist combination of consumerism and technology has led to the fulfillment of Chris's dream.

In a deeper way than ever before, all music is available to all people, all the time. In the West, this simple and delightful fact has been patently obvious since Karlheinz Stockhausen's 1966 *Telemusik*, a musique concrète piece for which the source material is traditional music from dozens of cultures, all of whom, the composer asserts, "wanted to participate in *Telemusik* . . . not 'my' music, but a music of the whole world, of all countries and all races." But this early harbinger of things to come, like Brian Eno and David Byrne's 1980 *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, a pop version of the same thing, has turned out to be a relatively primitive form of musical imperialism compared to the present state of musical multi-nationalism. Across the globe musicians are begging, borrowing, and stealing from each other at a rapacious pace. Brazilian muzenza ensembles are singing praise songs to Bob Marley, Gambian koro players are rushing to finish commissions for the Kronos Quartet, and hordes of rock icons are scurrying around searching for newer, hipper even more undiscovered grooves.

In the West, this process has involved the merging of every concept of musical "otherness": exotica has been annexed, declared null and void. Up until now, the maintenance of any mainstream—be it the standard concert repertoire, top-40 radio, swing, academic modernism, etc.—included a notion of its opposite, the "out there." This is what allowed Cab Calloway to describe bebop as "Chinese music," or Pierre Boulez to pronounce that "the non-serialist composer is useless." Such statements help define a genre, to alert people to accept no substitutes.

The boundaries of any particular mainstream are by nature always in flux, shifting and indeterminate. Even so, such defining gestures—this is music, that is not—are possible and necessary. Territory can expand, but a line has to be drawn somewhere: language must be employed to corral, tame, and ultimately include or exclude the new sound under scrutiny. One can appeal to nature (as does Rameau in justifying his use of chromaticism in "L'Enharmonique"), to

1. The pop-rap group Milli Vanilli, consisting of Robert Pilatus and Fabrice Morvan, won the 1990 Grammy award for best new artist. Rumors soon surfaced that the group's debut album was actually the work of three backup singers and that the duo had not sung a single note. Upon confirmation, the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences requested for the first time in its 33-year history that the Grammy be returned.

morals (saying, for example, that certain types of music are "corrupting" or "degenerate"), to common sense ("My 3-year-old could do better than that"), or to taste and sheer willfulness ("I don't know much about music, but I know what I like").

Nowadays such posturing is less viable, because the very notion of "otherness" has become a marketable commodity, incorporated into the aesthetic. Before, depending on who you were and where you stood, the "other" could be a lot of things: non-Western music, early music, computer music, etc. Now all these things have merged, and a typical "new age" recording might use synthesizers imitating Shona mbiras, Balinese genggong imitating synthesizers, all in the service of evoking a fictional Druidic ritual. As critic Joshua Kosman points out, the "authentic performance" movement has caught on partially because it can be recorded digitally and marketed as the "latest thing." People don't give a shit where the music they like comes from, when it was written, for what purpose, by whom, or how it's played. It's the end of history, in a way Francis Fukuyama could never have anticipated. A sampled mbira is as good as a real one—we know what it's trying to sound like, so what possible difference could it make. There's no point in asking if it's live or Memorex anymore. "Otherness" in Western music is now nothing more than a quality of sound to be lifted and used as quickly as possible.

This point is brought home by the obvious irrelevance of today's copyright laws. The musical material most likely to be borrowed is clearly not protectable—a quality of sound, a rhythm, an inflected phrase. If worse comes to worst, give your music away (just keep the nude, transsexual pictures of rock stars off your CD cover and the industry will probably never even notice).

Whether one's motivation is fun or profit, the end result is the same: an imperialistic groove, under which any and every form of music past or present can be subsumed. "The groove" can be defined in a number of ways—as a steady 4/4 disco beat, suitable for DJ mix-and-matching, as a new age wash of sound, suitable for the inducement of bliss and calm, or anything else that feels good. Music thus becomes a service industry, providing listeners with a pleasurable, regulated, and non-threatening surface wash of sound. This results in another Marxian quandary: the byproduct of Maherian/Marxist music is that the listener is now completely cut off from the "means of production," and basically couldn't care less—if I hear the Harmonic Choir on the radio, it is at this point completely irrelevant to me whether David Hykes does it acoustically, electronically or whether it's him doing it at all. And why should I care—such issues are of anecdotal value only, useful in building a reputation, adding to a resume, writing a feature article in *Ear* Magazine.

The traditional boundaries of genre, intended audience, "culture," have been so thoroughly crossed that even when you try it's impossible to take a cohesive stance toward any particular piece of music. One can only applaud when Public Enemy's Chuck D. says that his group's goal is to be a "musician's nightmare," but how is one to respond to David Byrne's use of Cuban rhythms

and musicians to sing a song about rent control? Is it exploitative and neo-colonial? Who the hell knows—the beat is good, the words are compelling, and you can dance to it. These are important things. It's catchy, it seems to have vision and imagination. But how does that feeling come about? How much of the power of the music is derived from evocations of other things, from Eddie Palmieri to Ricky Ricardo? (Again, these confusions cut across cultural borders: in 1988 Indonesia's biggest pop star was named Ricki Ricardo, and the biggest hit single was a rock song using traditional gamelan instruments called "Bring Back the Old Bali"). Even if we wanted to, how could we determine what taboos are left to break, what boundaries left to cross?

This situation has had a number of extremely positive effects. Even fifteen years ago, the lack of respect accorded non-Western music (and other "others") seemed somehow unjust. The availability of every form of music to anyone with a record player or a college radio station in the vicinity was an accomplished fact, and yet most college music departments continued to pretend that you could teach "music" as if the term meant something that had existed only in Europe, subsisting until the birth of Bach, flowering until the beginning of this century, and currently experiencing ongoing and agonizing death throes. It seemed important to argue for opening things up, recognizing other vital traditions, talking about musical hybridization, etc.

Now fortunately everything has been turned on its head: cultural critics crawl all over themselves to explain the influence of talking drums on hip-hop; Greg Sandow, composer and critic, once an ardent defender of David Del Tredici and Charles Wuorinen (two ideological enemies currently to be found side by side in the same rubbish heap of history, the "New Music" bin at Tower Records), can now boldly state that "most [!] heavy metal guitarists are influenced by Bach solo violin suites"; Peter Gabriel, a platinum-selling rock star, releases a hit album of "source material" sampled for use in his own work. And even within the academy, the College Music Society issues urgent calls to teach non-Western music, and—luckily—conservative academic trendsetters like Allan Bloom and E. D. Hirsch either don't know enough about music or care enough to target it.

In other words, I'm not complaining: how can I in an era when Boulez' neo-fascist post-war pronouncements seem like medieval schisms, or oracles from another planet? Non-western music doesn't have to fight for respect anymore, and that's an amazing turn of events.

It is also of course true that, here and around the globe, there are still lots of traditional musical uses and users, not just your average Balinese villager (who may have a Michael Jackson poster on his wall), but the classical music lover (for whom Schoenberg is noise), or the academic computer musician (for whom all 19th-century music sounds alike), etc. I am merely asserting that there now exists a large number of us for whom musical boundaries have lost their former meanings. I am talking about people for whom an average day's listening might include the Monroe Brothers, Japanese muzak, Bugandan

horns, Sibelius symphonies, and any and everything else, a list more resembling a Borgesian encyclopedia than a radio playlist or concert program. We are the rootless cosmopolitans of music, endlessly wandering in search of a community, an aesthetic, a musical life.

It is difficult for us, faced with this onslaught, to know how to proceed, either pragmatically or philosophically. If we are composers, what instruments to write for? If we teach, what subjects? What set of musical values, technical and aesthetic, are we to subscribe to? Why are we doing it anyway? Even attention and money aren't sufficient motivators, for as Robert Moore puts it, "You can now do whatever you want, because no one will care in any case." What then are we to do?

The answer, I believe, can be found by re-examining the troublesome analogy between music and language. Is music a language at all? Is it a "universal" one? For people who are still able to divide music into traditions, genres, etc., music is like language in that humans do it for other humans (presumably) to hear it, and they do it following spoken or unspoken structural rules that are shared and make sense to various groups of people. Particular musics are associated with particular cultures—your average Balinese, for example, can distinguish between "Balinese music" and everything else in the world. As long as music is defined in this way, as a cultural byproduct or sign system, it's easy to keep our bearings. Music is a code, by definition comprehensible to people within a cultural group. Unfortunately, this also means that any particular music is by definition misunderstood by everyone else in the world, no matter how carefully they listen. In other words, any Ghanaian's subjective hearing of Ghanaian drumming is automatically valid, "authentic"; any non-Ghanaian's invalid, albeit useful, enjoyable, etc. When things are couched in these terms, it becomes clear how inappropriate such distinctions have become, how ridiculous it is to assert the relative validity of anybody's response to any music.

One solution to this is to redefine music as "organized sound," as any collection of noise that is deemed "music" by anybody. Viewed in this light, music is still a sign system, a language, but it's one in which any ordering of "phonemes" is automatically intelligible. (A "musical phoneme" can be defined as any subjectively discerned unit of sound, or as the equivalent of a "syllable" in language.) "Organized sound" might as well mean "sound," since the listener does the organizing—this means everything we hear and don't hear, any combination of sound and silence, and . . . my God! What does sound have to do with music!!!

Phonemically transferable music (music as organized sound) is thus both inherently "universal" and inherently incomprehensible, a sign system in which everyone in the world has their own code book, a language in which no two of us speak a mutually intelligible dialect. We are faced then with an awful choice: a Babel of conflicting tongues or an endless outpouring of gibberish. Either way we're in trouble—either way communication seems impossible.

If music is sound and sound only, then nothing we can do can be more or

less understood than anything else. If, on the other hand, music consists of myriad discrete languages, a native speaker confronted with "the other" in any form can do a number of things, among them: 1) ignore it and stick to the purity of the mother tongue (this can be done either as a Boulezian progressive or as a Rochbergian reactionary); 2) exploit it by subsuming it into your own, grander music (*My Life in the Bush of Ghosts, Telemusik*); 3) learn to speak the other like a native (Lou Harrison, Joseph Conrad); 4) respect it and come to terms with it, either by creating self-conscious hybrids (*Finnegans Wake*, Harry Partch), or ones which are designed to have mutually exclusive meanings for different listeners (these are the hardest examples to find—but this was the intention of my own collaboration with Balinese composer Nyoman Windha in *Kekembangan*, a piece for gamelan and saxophone quartet. Malinowski's inclusion of uninterpreted myths in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* can also be viewed in this way).

Acting linguistically, speaking and writing, all of the above stances can be taken with a clear attitude toward comprehensibility. To be understood, one must subscribe to the hierarchical relationship between languages; in other words, speak one of them at a time. Creating artificial languages—hybrid or synthetic—is possible, but by definition produces incomprehension. But the mere possibility of "phonemic transference," which renders every cultural distinction potentially relative and ephemeral, makes it impossible to honestly assert that this same structure, this same test of understandability, applies to music. Please understand me: it is not our ability to articulate a definition of music as organized sound that creates this relativity, but rather that the experience of "useful misunderstanding," of a meaningful "inauthentic hearing," forces us to consider such a definition. As soon as we have heard the music from another culture in "the wrong way"—listened to West African drumming in 3/4 instead of 12/8, misconstrued the emotional meaning of a praise song, etc.—then we understand how pointless it is to insist that music operates as cultural language only. Despite the rigidity of the language/sound dichotomy, we seem to know that we can make sense of music without thinking of it as a system of signs or sounds. We don't need it to be a symbol of anything at all. And our problems have nothing to do with music, but only with our need to talk about it, to explain music in any way whatsoever.

Our lost youthful vision, that mystical combination of work, integrity, etc., long abandoned, was essentially a Platonic one. We wanted to dig deep within ourselves, to excavate beneath our petty experiences, ideas, etc. in search of the cool and the weird. Making good music meant simply stumbling across that nameless quality that we prayed was in there somewhere. (Our response was, in retrospect, the only reasonable one available to us as products of a system that glorifies individualism. For even if each person is now a society unto himself, with a personal background, interests—and this is the implicit goal of the individualistic project—then the only values can be individual ones, and the search for quality can only be an internal one.)

Plato would have banned music altogether, it being too unwieldy and uncapturable to be controlled by a rational state. And Plato was right, because to talk about music, to categorize it, define it, explain it, is to attach linguistic constructs, rational states, to phenomena that only resemble linear thought in the sense that they move uni-directionally through time. The only way to get around this, outside of banning music, is to separate music from linguistic thought, to stop searching for so much meaning. I'm not suggesting that we stop talking about music, stop trying to figure it out, but simply that we get rid of the notion that the value of music is in this incessant chatter, rather than in the music itself. Viewed in this way, what Maher's Marxist music seeks to dispense with is not "musical property," but the ability to even articulate the phrase. Once we stop believing that our descriptions and analyses enhance, encapsulate and embody the music in any intrinsic way, then issues of musical ownership will become irrelevant and will simply wither away.

We must begin to listen only to our inner voices, whatever their source, to insist that the Platonic ideal doesn't need a name, a language, a category. We must rid ourselves of the notion that a piece of music can or cannot be politically correct, exploitative, collaborative, traditional, iconoclastic, whatever. We must stop trying to explain music, stop caring whether it's a sign system, a random or deliberate collection of sounds, or a symbol of anything other than itself. We must—we must—oh, shut up and listen, will you?