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# “Music For the Masses”: Milton Babbitt’s Cold War Music Theory

Martin Brody

It is exceptionally important to master the musical forms of the mass: songs, marches, dances, etc., forms which are part of their life. To ignore these forms would be incorrect and harmful, to master them would mean helping the creative growth of the artist and his nearer approach to the working class.

*(Lev Lebidinsky, speech at the Second International Music Conference of the International Union of Revolutionary Music, 1933)*<sup>1</sup>

Mass Culture is a dynamic, revolutionary force, breaking down the old barriers of class tradition, taste, dissolving all cultural distinctions. It mixes and scrambles everything together, producing what might be called homogenized culture, after another American achievement, the homogenization process that distributes globules of cream evenly throughout the milk instead of allowing them to float separately on top. It thus destroys all values, since value judgments imply discrimination. Mass Culture is very, very democratic: it absolutely refuses to discriminate against, or between, anything or anybody. All are grist to its mill, and all comes out finely ground.

*(Dwight Macdonald, “A Theory of Mass Culture,” 1951)*<sup>2</sup>

The composer . . . in many cases [is] unwilling to face what it is like not to be a cultural hero in what one simply has to call a democratic culture, a populist culture, an egalitarian culture. After all, we know who the cultural heroes are in a people’s cultural society.

*(Milton Babbitt, 1985 interview)*<sup>3</sup>

## Prologue: The Mightiest of Fortresses

Why is Milton Babbitt controversial? Most students of contemporary music have acknowledged the originality and importance of his work, but their characterizations of his influence have been curiously divergent. Babbitt evokes extravagant critical responses. His position has

been described as “the furthest extension of the romantic ideal of the Promethean, independent artist who flies free of the earth and its compromises.”<sup>4</sup> He has been accused of “fanatical scientism, a search for quasi-logical precision of reference . . . [with] an undertone of distress, even rage,”<sup>5</sup> and is said to be possessed by “a fine madness.”<sup>6</sup> In a less flamboyant but equally robust claim, his “work appears to have extended the musical universe in a multitude of directions and respects and has taken it near to the boundaries of human conceptual and perceptual capacities.”<sup>7</sup>

Along with such images of heroism, exploration, intransigence, and insanity, a number of themes recur: that Babbitt has argued for and exemplified a special relationship between music theory and composition (and between composers and universities); that he has proposed new and influential ways to think about the culture of contemporary music in the context of a sophisticated musical meta-theory; and that in developing this metatheory, Babbitt has extended twentieth-century philosophy of science to music. These achievements have been variously praised and decried as proving (among other things) Babbitt’s “elitism,” “relativism,” “organicism,” “scientism,” or, more plainly, “academicism.” Babbitt has been regarded as the charismatic figure perhaps most responsible for a “mountain of unlistenable academic exercises that did so much to inspire, and for the now widespread belief among laymen that *all* new music is repellent pedantry.”<sup>8</sup> Or he has been hailed as the “protean” creator who has taken us “near . . . to the heights of contemporary intellectual accomplishments.”<sup>9</sup>

The preceding descriptions are not entirely contradictory; rather, they indicate ambiguities or differences in emphasis and values—one critic’s “repellent pedantry” may well be another’s “height of intellectual accomplishment.” However, the differences in these appraisals are not simply vagaries or matters of taste. They point to unresolved controversies in our musical life, controversies that are themselves often not very well articulated, though they continue to shape our musical responses and values. And Babbitt (the person? writer? pedagogue? composer?) seems to represent these issues at their most polemic. Moreover, although the corpus of Babbitt’s prose writing to date is compact enough to consider as a whole, it often seems that commentators are not reading the same texts. Critics experience inapproachability and polemicism; apologists point to his methodical, recurrent recognition of diversity in musical culture, noting that Babbitt’s most overtly polemical rhetorical question was falsely attributed: the essay title, “Who Cares If You Listen?,” a soundbite oft-repeated by Babbitt

detractors, was an editorial substitution for Babbitt's own, less inflammatory heading, "The Composer as Specialist."

And this is where the discussion usually ends. In this essay, I would like to play it out a bit further—to test the points that resist resolution and to consider the reasons why the controversies surrounding Babbitt cannot be wished away. The focus of this discussion will be Babbitt's important metatheoretical papers that began to appear in the late 1950s—the writings in which he set out a revisionist methodology for music theory and a fresh perspective on its relationship to composition. The controversies surrounding Babbitt in general, and the complexities of these articles in particular, provide both the backdrop and *raison d'être* of the study presented here.

In his metatheoretical writings, Babbitt strongly advocates what he sometimes calls "scientific language" by waging a negative campaign against imprecise language in music discourse, by praising the salutary uses of formal theory, and by describing the close connection between musical concept, structure, and perception. Here is a key passage from 1961, a touchstone for the discussion to follow:

For the essential elements of the above characterizations [of Carnap's discussion of the term "concept"] involving the correlations of the syntactic and semantic domains, the notion of analysis, and—perhaps most significantly—the requirements of linguistic formulation and the differentiation [sic] among predicated types, beyond strongly suggesting that the proper object of our assigned investigation may be—in light of these criteria—a vacuous class, and strongly reminding us of the systematic obligations attending our own necessarily verbal presentation and discussion of this presumed subject, provide the important reminder that there is but one kind of language, one kind of method for the verbal formulation of 'concepts' and the verbal analysis of such formulations: 'scientific' language and 'scientific' method.<sup>10</sup>

The notorious structural complexity and extravagant rhetoric of this sentence surely warrant discussion; however, I will mark only the sense of a long upbeat and then an arrival at the parallel structures of the final phrase of the sentence, where Babbitt finally declares his passionate advocacy of " 'scientific' language and 'scientific' method." The flow of the argument—from concept to analysis to predication and back to analysis and concept—rationalizes Babbitt's methodological insistence on scientific language. But this discussion of the theoretical language of music is also a litmus test of the contradictory critical reception of his work as a whole: for supporters, the metatheory offers a logical and unbiased foundation for inquiry into the nature of music; critics find in it a hint of a retrograde organicist view of musical culture and a shrill, even bizarre insistence on restricting the terms of

musical discourse. In the following, I propose that Babbitt's meta-theory is more complicated, radical, and more pertinent than either his detractors or apologists allow. The interconnected arguments he unfolds (about the situation of contemporary music, the "nature and limits of music" and music theory, and the implications for twelve-tone technique) neither place him in the cultural debate in the reductive ways that previous critics have described, nor locate him "beyond culture." Babbitt's discussion of scientific language and music theory is not just a statement of method; it is both a response to and expression of a broad view of American musical culture at mid-century. Falling at the cusp joining modernist and postmodern trajectories, Babbitt's positions engage the problems of contemporary cultural construction most compellingly just when these positions are ostensibly freeing themselves of all sectarian cultural biases.

How does this engagement occur? In his groundbreaking meta-theoretical articles, Babbitt attaches several correlative themes to his apologia on scientific language. The metatheory combines a neopositivist's concern about the relationship between concept and percept with a pluralist/pragmatist view of cultural diversity and the immanence of musical values. Both facets are repeatedly concretized in Babbitt's own, post-Schoenbergian proclamations of the "emancipation of the dissonance"—or, more accurately, denaturalization of the consonance—through a critique of the metaphysical undercurrent in previous music theory. The arguments are roughly (also partially and quite synoptically) as follows: The only a priori constraints on musical structure, in its conception and reception, are given by psychoacoustics and formal logic. In Babbitt's 1961 terms, the limits of musical potential "reside ultimately in the perceptual capacities of the human receptor, just as the scope of physical science is delimited by the perceptual and conceptual capacities of the human observer."<sup>11</sup> Thus, we can (should, must) reveal (and purge) external limitations on musical thought—normative or metaphysical claims about the nature and limits of music—claims that will otherwise artificially constrain the free development of music conceptualization. Babbitt urges us "to recognize the possibility, and the actuality, of alternatives to what were once regarded as musical absolutes" and surrender any residual nostalgia for a "unitary musical universe of 'common practice'" in favor of a variety of diverse practices.<sup>12</sup> We will encourage compositional experimentation and diversity while clarifying our own, already diverse conceptual groundings as composers, performers, and auditors, by invoking scientific language, which is "the one kind of language . . . for the verbal formulation of 'concepts' and the verbal analysis of

such formulations.”<sup>13</sup> Only in this context will the more or less covert assertions of value in imprecise or metaphysical language be exposed and purged. And only in such a relativist context will musical creation develop freely.

In support of these claims, Babbitt attacks each of the traditional absolutist arguments limiting music conceptualization, whether they take the form of analogies between planetary structures and the overtone series or of organicist views of music history. For example, he considers Mersenne’s “[pursuit of] the perennial ‘why’ of the correspondence between the interval content of the major triad and the first six divisions of the vibrating string”: “[Mersenne] supplies a characteristic ‘justification’ for the ‘use’ of but six by citing the numerical identification [sic] with the then known number of planets. Beyond the intimations of the cosmic scope and affinities of music, there is the implication that certain classes of objects hierarchically ‘justify’ others . . . [leading] one to conjecture as to whether, in all seriousness, the discovery of a seventh planet invalidated the theory of the music founded upon the assumption of the ‘incorrect’ number.”<sup>14</sup> And, in a similarly vehement polemic against historical teleology, Babbitt describes the heroic figure of Schoenberg and his musical innovations as paradigms of cultural difference, not traditionalism; he focuses on what distinguishes Schoenberg from his predecessors rather than smoothing over “the jagged edges of abruption” between Schoenberg’s innovations and their precedents: “However pedagogically convenient and intuitively suggestive a quasi-genetic approach [to explaining the historical origins of twelve-tone music] may be, eventually it succeeds only in obscuring both the character of the system and the profound differences between the twelve-tone system and those musical systems in which the historical forerunners of the twelve tone operations appear.”<sup>15</sup> The normalizing effects of “time and practice,” which tend to distill out artistic differences for the sake of an elegant historical narrative, must not interfere (any more than false metaphysical imperatives) with the exploration of the full range of musical possibility.<sup>16</sup>

However, by resisting metaphysics and dismantling the structures of absolutism in music theory in favor of a value-neutral, positivist epistemology, Babbitt positions himself at the edge of a precariously relativistic precipice: if the criteria of music theories are merely that they be conceptually clear, then an infinite number of “theories,” “compositional systems,” or, simply, “pieces” can be equally viable; musical composition is cut loose from constraints and boundaries. The “human receptor” can no longer rely on traditional claims and

justifications of value to limit the range of what is musically possible. How, then, will the proliferation of diverse musical concepts and practices be contained? Babbitt backs away from this abyss by invoking the same principles that led him to it: “[While t]here are an infinity of analytic expressions which will generate any given composition . . . the relation between a formal theory and its empirical interpretation is not merely that of validity to truth . . . but of the whole area of the criteria of useful, useable, relevant, or significant characterizations.”<sup>17</sup> *The whole area of the criteria of . . . significant characterizations*: With this move, Babbitt shifts the discussion away from claims about inherent values in (or characterizations of) particular compositional techniques or practices to the criteria for verbal characterization of any and all musical practices. Without attempting to define “use,” “usability,” or “relevance,” etc., Babbitt indicates a role for “scientific language” beyond the expression and protection of cultural diversity. In an especially provocative passage, he begins to clarify this larger role:

Perhaps there have been eras in the musical past when discourse about music was not a primary factor in determining what was performed, published, disseminated, and—therefore—composed . . . when—indeed—the compositional situation was such as not to require that knowing composers make fundamental choices and decisions that require eventual verbal formulation, clarification, and—to an important extent—resolution. . . . The composer who insists that he is concerned only with writing music and not with talking about it may once have been, may still be, a commendable—even enviable—figure, but once he presumes to speak or take pen in hand in order to describe, inform, evaluate, reward, or teach, he cannot presume to claim exemption—on medical or vocational grounds—from the requirements of cognitive communication.<sup>18</sup>

Already, these words may seem quaint. Recently, Babbitt’s *requirement* of verbal formulation has been largely by-passed in the process of determining what is “performed, published, disseminated, and—therefore—composed.” However, it is important to note that music theory was conceived by Babbitt as the primary source of authority in an era lacking anything approximating a common practice or the prestige of aristocratic patronage. For Babbitt, scientific language is the sole, firmly required medium of the musical cognoscenti (“*knowing* composers [must] make fundamental choices”), a foundational discourse in an otherwise foundationless configuration of practices. Indeed, it is a precondition of musical citizenship: “[C]oncerns with . . . verbal and methodological responsibility . . . must be central to the instruction of the student of music theory . . . if he is to attain that rarest of all

states, that of the concerned and thoughtful musical citizen.”<sup>19</sup> While Babbitt’s emphasis on responsible musical discourse recognizes and encourages diversity among and differences between musical practices, it also provides what seems to be the last viable basis for drawing a line between responsibility and irresponsibility, citizenship and exclusion. The point of emphasis here is the ambivalence in the advocacy of “scientific language.” Babbitt manages to refashion a conservative orthodoxy out of a radical, if anxious, acknowledgement of cultural relativism.

But why should “verbal and methodological responsibility” be the touchstone of citizenship? And why should the advocacy of cultural diversity be so ambivalently linked to concern about its containment? If Babbitt favors an open conversation among the participants in musical culture, why does he insist that the rules of this conversation be so stringent? I believe that Babbitt’s emphasis on musical discourse and his concomitant proposals for theory and composition relate closely to his informal visions of musical culture as a whole. In turn, both have strong precedents in the politics of American culture from Babbitt’s college years in the 1930s to the emergence of his mature work during the Cold War. I will sketch the outlines of this alternative intellectual biography in the remaining sections of this essay.

\* \* \*

In the classic metatheoretical articles, Babbitt’s comments about musical culture tend to appear around the edges, in the introductions and conclusions that surround his detailed, sustained arguments. In a more recent published lecture, he has been more explicit:

I don’t think there’s anything melodramatic or exaggerated about bringing up the question of the actual survival of serious music. . . . [S]urvival seems unlikely when the conditions necessary for that survival are so seriously threatened. These conditions are the corporal survival of the composer in his role as a composer, then the survival of his creations in some kind of communicable, permanent, and readable form, and finally, perhaps above all, the survival of the university in a role which universities seem less and less able or willing to assume: that is of the mightiest of fortresses against the overwhelming, outnumbering forces, both within and without the university, of anti-intellectualism, cultural populism, and passing fashion.<sup>20</sup>

According to this formulation, composers must not only survive corporally and have some means for distributing their work, they need to be protected from the large world outside, a world of “anti-intellectualism, cultural populism, and passing fashion.” Universities



must not only hire composers and house their works in libraries, they must provide a bulwark against cultural forces that threaten the life of serious music. (There is a characteristic touch of Babbittian satire in his “mighty fortress” reference, an allusion to Luther’s hymn and its formidable history, just when Babbitt is making one of his most blunt statements about the failure of contemporary cultural authority. However, the effect of the humor here is uncharacteristically self-effacing; the wit in incongruously juxtaposing the institutional and spiritual resources associated with Luther or Bach and contemporary academe seems adequately ironic to undercut Babbitt’s own rhetoric, as if he were particularly anxious about the virulence of his arguments.)

In any case, Babbitt’s polemic claims about universities and populism clarify the lines connecting his metatheory to his view of the cultural landscape as a whole: scientific language is the medium of the responsible musical citizen. If the university is the fortress against cultural populism, and cultural populism threatens serious music, then scientific language safeguards serious music. Babbitt draws a line between serious and populist music; scientific language is at the boundary.

In the following, I speculate about why these distinctions and functions might be so powerful for Babbitt, rooted as they are in the cultural debates and critical discussions of art, literature, and mass culture carried out by such prominent “New York Intellectuals” as Clement Greenberg, Dwight Macdonald, and Sidney Hook. Reflecting on this largely unacknowledged context of Babbitt’s work will, I believe, provide us with a particularly useful perspective on our own cultural predicament. The original impetus for this project came from Babbitt’s own autobiographical comments in recent interviews and writings, and I will begin my contextualization by recapitulating some of the surprises I encountered in them.

### **“Some of my best friends were Trotskyites.”**

In conversation and informal lectures, Babbitt often repeats an anecdote about his early years on the faculty at Princeton. As a former student and protégé of Roger Sessions, Babbitt explains, he was shielded by Sessions from the anti-Semitism of the music department.<sup>21</sup> Trying to make the most of an awkward situation, the young faculty member composed his *Music for the Mass* (1940) “to comfort my chairman.” As Babbitt indicates, the piece then won the prestigious Beams Prize in composition and was later mistakenly referred to

in a book on twentieth-century music as “Music for the Masses.” In concluding the story, Babbitt clinches the joke by proposing an explanation—his was a setting, after all, of the *ordinary* of the mass.

The ironies of the story hinge on a double incongruity, not only the composition of Christian sacred music by a composer of Jewish extraction, but also the inadvertent pun (echoed by Babbitt in his “explanation” of the joke) that associates him with mass culture. The question begged, however, is why the mistake should be so funny. What is the significance in this slip from *mass* to *masses*—one that implicitly transforms Babbitt from a genteel, assimilated academic into a radical cultural politician? How deep is the irony in making Babbitt into a composer of “music for the masses”?

Similar reminiscences have begun to appear in Babbitt’s published oeuvre as well. A book of often anecdotal lectures, a conversational memoir, and excerpts from several informal interviews have appeared in print.<sup>22</sup> The apparent spontaneity and candor of these texts suit their genres. In most cases, the printed text reads as an unmediated record of speech (lectures, conversations). Breezy, dense, vitriolic, at once improvisatory and calculated, torrentially brilliant—the tone of this transcribed talking will be familiar to Babbitt aficionados. Babbitt’s narratives interweave detailed accounts of his own intellectual and artistic development with an evocation of the American musical scene from the mid-1930s to the present.

Nonetheless, it is tempting to dismiss such reminiscences, like the even more informal anecdotes that punctuate Babbitt’s conversation, as a marginal entertainment—decorative and virtuosic, but unconnected to the arguments of Babbitt’s theoretical writing. However, if we elevate this kind of writing/speaking to the same level as the theory, puzzling incongruities appear. Taken seriously, Babbitt’s recent self-presentation complicates our own established image of his accomplishment and his antecedents.

For example, consider the following excerpt from an interview, in which Babbitt affiliates himself with the New York leftist intellectual scene of the 1930s and 1940s:

About my time [as an undergraduate at Washington Square College, 1933–35] NYU was the swinging place. Washington Square College was where it was at. Anyone from [James] Burnham to Sidney Hook, all the people were there. These guys were the Stalinists, the Trotskyites, the Lovestonites, the Cannonites—I’ve lived through all of this. Some of my best friends were Trotskyites. Sidney Hook before he changed. Sidney Hook, who had just gotten his PhD. with John Dewey, wrote a book called *Toward the Understanding of Karl Marx*. He was the guru of Marxism, and he was a brilliant guy and still

is. He and James Burnham—what does the name James Burnham mean to you? Burnham was for years a columnist for the *National Review* and wrote a famous book called *The Managerial Revolution*. That's before your time too. James Burnham and Sidney Hook were in the left wing, ultra-left wing party called the American Workers Party. NYU and Washington Square College were just torn to bits by it.<sup>23</sup>

There is a hint of ambivalence, if not dismissiveness, in Babbitt's expansive and bemused appreciation of the "gurus of Marxism." In a surge of nostalgia, however, Babbitt associates himself with Hook and Burnham, two faculty members in the NYU philosophy department during his undergraduate years, who were among the most prominent figures in the overheated political and cultural debate of that moment.<sup>24</sup> Early in the decade, Burnham joined forces with Phillip Wheelwright, the senior philosopher at NYU, in founding *Symposium* (1931–33), a journal of "philosophy, logic, and the arts," a conjunction of fields strikingly congruent with Babbitt's mature interests. Burnham and Wheelwright also wrote *Philosophical Analysis* (1932), a book that, along with *Symposium*, Babbitt cited as an important influence:<sup>25</sup> "[I came] to NYU, to encounter Burnham and Wheelwright's *Philosophical Analysis*, and a magazine [*Symposium*], and I always forget the name of it . . . it lasted for only three or four years . . . I still have the copies. And they discovered I. A. Richards, and they published a lot of practical criticism. I was surrounded by this, and it excited me and interested me. And I felt this was much more interesting than anything going on in music theory."<sup>26</sup> The first article to appear in the first volume of *Symposium* was John Dewey's "Qualitative Thought." It is easy to imagine the interest that Dewey's discussion of structure in the arts would have held for Babbitt: "The logic of artistic construction and esthetic appreciation is peculiarly significant because these exemplify in accentuated and purified form the control of selection of detail and of mode of relation, or integration, by a qualitative whole. The underlying quality demands certain distinctions, and the degree in which the demand is met confers upon the work of art that necessary or inevitable character which is its mark."<sup>27</sup> In the same journal, Babbitt would have encountered other stimulating articles: Richards' "Belief" (1, no. 4), Morris Cohen's "Faith of a Logician" (1, no. 1), and Wheelwright's "Poetry and Logic" (1, no. 4). However, Babbitt must also have been disappointed by the course *Symposium* took over its brief history. By the final year of publication, Burnham's politics had moved radically to the left, and each issue of *Symposium* began with an editor's comment in which he advocated a

reformed version of American communism. “Poetry and Logic” gave way to Burnham’s “Marxism and Aesthetics” (3, no. 4), and the work of other radical culture critics such as Dwight Macdonald filled out the pages of the journal.<sup>28</sup>

Burnham also came to be closely associated with Sidney Hook, a disciple of Dewey who composed volumes on the interconnection of Marxism and pragmatism. Both Hook and Burnham were committed leftists by the mid-1930s, and, in their leadership of the American Workers’ Party, they called for “a new communist party and a new communist international.”<sup>29</sup> In a matter of only a few years, however, Hook and Burnham would be among the anti-Stalinist intellectuals to support Trotsky and eventually surrender their socialist positions altogether. Progressively more disenchanted with developments in the Soviet Union and with the efficacy of his own theories, Burnham wrote what has been called the “last rites delivered over the grave of Marxism,” *The Managerial Revolution* (1941).<sup>30</sup> After the war, Hook and Burnham both participated in prestigious anticommunist causes, such as the Committee for Cultural Freedom.<sup>31</sup>

However, Babbitt also encountered another variety of leftist intellectual in his years as a student at NYU and the period leading up to World War II. Speaking about this time in a decidedly different tone, though in the same interview in which he discussed the glory days of *Symposium*, Babbitt was overtly hostile to what he called the “ultra-left wing” and to a kind of leftist different from Hook’s or Burnham’s—the kind who never or only belatedly “changed,” remaining loyal to Stalin and the Soviet Union, even in the face of the infamous Moscow Trials, the Hitler–Stalin pact, and other contemporary events in the late 1930s that disillusioned many prominent intellectuals such as Hook and Burnham. Babbitt also refers to John Dewey’s commission to investigate Stalinist charges against Trotsky (1937), which, in exonerating Trotsky, clarified the Stalin/Trotsky question for many prominent western intellectuals and artists. Babbitt’s own position was unequivocal:

We found ourselves reading magazines, such as one called *Musical Vanguard* . . . full of articles saying, “well, in Russia they run things better than they do here with regard to music.” Aaron Copland said that, for example: that things seemed to be better with regard to the young musician in Russia today. . . .

People who later wanted to be regarded as intellectual martyrs, as political heroes, called John Dewey a fascist! Why? Because John Dewey brought together a group of serious, professional thinkers . . . to investigate the Moscow trials . . . So one was living with this kind of dangerous irrationality all the time.<sup>32</sup>

He concludes his remarks with a startling pronouncement: “This [not just Dewey’s aesthetics or Richards’ criticism] affected the intellectual atmosphere at least as much as reading Schenker, Lorenz and Kurth.”<sup>33</sup> While the voice is unmistakably Babbitt’s, the juxtaposition of politics (American communism and Trotskyism in the period before World War II and the discussion of American vs. Soviet musical culture during the heyday of socialist-realist aesthetics) and music theory (Schenker, Lorenz, Kurth) is dramatic and incongruous.

Certainly, an engagement in politics was de rigueur among aspiring intellectuals in Babbitt’s student milieu, and the polarities bred by the political movements and ideological divisions of the 1930s—Stalinist/Trotskyist, bourgeois/proletarian, avant-garde/mass art— informed American artistic culture for some time thereafter. In the words of one of Babbitt’s Trotskyist friends, Dwight Macdonald, who became an editor of the influential journals *Partisan Review* and *Politics* in the latter half of the decade, “Over here, wrote Emerson to Carlyle apropos the America of the 1830’s, everyone you meet has a project for universal reform in his pocket. So did everyone that someone like Emerson might have met in the America of a century later (but our scripts were all Marxian). An interest in *avant-garde* politics was expected of every proper intellectual.”<sup>34</sup> Babbitt’s recollection of his antipathy to the *Music Vanguard* (and Copland’s comments therein on the comparative situations of young Russian and American composers) suggests that he was highly engaged by the debates over proletarianism, radicalism in general, and music during the mid-1930s. Babbitt must have been painfully well aware that radical politics played an important role in defining a fragile American musical culture in search of techniques and values. As Copland declared in his article “Note to Young Composers” in the inaugural issue of the *Music Vanguard*, the proletarian movement threatened to overthrow the great bourgeois lineage of European musical tradition: “It is no secret that many of the young composers who had taken one or the other of these two older men [Schoenberg and Stravinsky] as their models have now thrown in their lot with that of the working class.”<sup>35</sup>

Recalling the period over forty years later, Arthur Berger elaborated on Copland’s claim:

[A]rtists were being supported and commissioned to carry out projects with Americana as their subject matter. You can easily understand that the mannerisms and devices issuing out of Vienna were too remote for this purpose. . . .

Curiously enough, Americanism [at that time] went hand in hand with political leftism. . . . Now it should be obvious that the demands of a proletariat [sic] music required greater accessibility than could be vouchsafed by the type of music emanating from Vienna.<sup>36</sup>

This stark opposition of Europe and America, the Schoenberg–Stravinsky tradition and proletarianism, must have troubled the young Babbitt. For Babbitt, the suggestion that younger American composers must devote themselves to the development of working-class culture must have seemed a bleak prospect. In this environment, the problem for Babbitt was clear: to delineate a vision of American musical culture that might incorporate European achievements without being stifled by (or assimilated to) them and also offer an alternative to the class analysis (and working-class affiliation) of the left-wing intelligentsia. As early as 1933, for example, Babbitt’s composition teacher, Roger Sessions, spoke out forcefully against the invocation of politics and nationalism as organizing principles for musical thought.<sup>37</sup>

What has all of this to do with the mature Babbitt and his insistence on scientific language? I propose that Babbitt’s metatheory, with its overt anti-ideological pluralism, its emphasis on language, rationality, and formalism, and its anxieties about conserving standards of musical citizenship (however much these anxieties might be pushed to the periphery in his writings), offered an alternative picture of American musical culture to that which opposed Europe and America, Stravinsky or Schoenberg and the “working man.” Babbitt’s positions emerged in a cultural and political climate that was at first resistant, but later more congenial, to his particular interests in European tradition, music theory, and philosophy. Moreover, Babbitt’s writing retains a largely unacknowledged trace of the specific terms and concerns that informed anti-Stalinist positions on culture (especially as they came to be recast before and during World War II in terms of “mass” rather than “class” culture). The values and meanings that Clement Greenberg, Dwight Macdonald, and other prominent critics associated with the terms of their mass culture critique—such as “avant-garde,” “kitsch,” and “extraversion”—are, I believe, closely connected to those that Babbitt later associated with “populism,” “scientific language,” and “musical citizenship.”

### **“Words and War”: Scientific Language vs. Propaganda**

In November 1945 Babbitt published a brief poem, “Battle Cry,” in Dwight Macdonald’s journal, *Politics*.

Lie seeks out lie  
Untruth follows untruth  
This can be read  
In the Book of the Dead.  
Make it your maxim  
and fill it with lead.<sup>38</sup>

Macdonald, by then a self-described anarchist–pacifist, founded *Politics* in reaction to the *Partisan Review*'s retreat from political positions during the war.<sup>39</sup> It would be extravagant to ascribe anarchist, pacifist, or socialist opinions to Babbitt based on his association with Macdonald's journal.<sup>40</sup> However, for any author, a connection with *Politics* signalled a strong anti-Stalinist position. The question of free, clear, noncoercive speech, in opposition to the state policies of both Germany and the Soviet Union, was central to almost everything that appeared in *Politics*. Within a few months of the appearance of "Battle Cry," Macdonald published articles by numerous prominent New York Intellectuals, among them, C. Wright Mills, Clement Greenberg, Daniel Bell, and Mary McCarthy. Simone Weil's "Words and War," an impassioned demand for clear thought and speech as a remedy to the treacherous obscurities and sloganeering of war, seems an obvious companion piece to Babbitt's poem. Her contrast between "known qualities" and "empty absolutes" even seems to adumbrate Babbitt's critique of metaphysics and imprecision in music discourse: "Clouds of empty absolutes hide the problem's [the elimination of war] known qualities, even the fact that this is a problem to solve, and not an inescapable fate. They dull our minds, they carry us to our deaths."<sup>41</sup> Alongside Weil's polemic, Karl Jaspers reported on the struggle for academic freedom in Germany during the war, Macdonald denounced "the big lie" in both Stalinist Russia and the American Communist Party, and Nicolas Nabokov brought word of "the music purge" in the Soviet Union.<sup>42</sup>

Throughout the history of *Politics* (1943–49), Macdonald also published a series of articles on mass culture.<sup>43</sup> While these may not contain the full diversity and complexity of the discussion of mass culture, Macdonald's was one of the strongest voices raised in a critique of mass culture as an "instrument of social domination."<sup>44</sup> Numerous critics, including Serge Guilbaut and Andrew Ross, have identified the discussion of mass culture as a central component of cultural criticism in the latter part of the 1930s and through the 1940s.<sup>45</sup> In Ross's words, "[T]he appearance of fascism—characterized by a form of social and ideological organization that appeared to transform classes into 'masses'—ensured that the social concern of American intellectuals would increasingly be with the model of a mass society and mass culture."<sup>46</sup> For Babbitt's Trotskyist friends, indeed for many American intellectuals, the Soviet Union, as well as Germany, came to be seen as a dangerous proponent of mass culture. The formation of the Popular Front by the seventh congress of the Moscow Comintern in 1935 announced a shift in the Communist

cultural program from an emphasis on proletarianism, per se, to a less obviously politicized approach to art that might have greater immediate mass appeal. The American Communist Party leader, Earl Browder, referred to its cultural program as “the artistic recreation of the great process going on among the people of the creation of a broad democratic front.”<sup>47</sup> Despite an overtly antifascist posture, the mass culture strategies of the Popular Front became a touchstone of the American critique of Stalinism. At the same time, events such as the Moscow Trials and the Hitler–Stalin Pact contributed to a disillusionment with Russia on the part of many American intellectuals and a sense of polarization and “dangerous irrationality,” to recall Babbitt’s words, at home.<sup>48</sup> Reports both of Soviet suppression of art that did not conform to the requirements of the state and the infiltration of cultural fifth columnists in America regularly appeared in the progressive magazines. In 1944, for example, Kurt List, writing on Russian music in *Politics*, warned against the threat of Soviet contamination: “Whether our music will succumb to the shallowness and the easy success of the present Russian style will largely depend upon the future political influence of the Soviet Union. With politicians of all shades jumping on the Russian bandwagon, it is not unexpected that musicians are following.”<sup>49</sup>

Mass culture, identified with the Soviet Union and Germany, and with “debased” and “mechanical” capitalist production, was seen, both in principle and practice, to be an instrument of authoritarianism and totalitarian states. As Greenberg put it in 1939, in the important essay, “Avant-garde and Kitsch,” “every man, from the Tammany alderman to the Austrian house painter, finds that he is entitled to his opinion. . . . Here revolvers and torches begin to be mentioned in the same breath as culture. In the name of godliness of the blood’s health, in the name of simple ways and solid virtues, the statue-smashing commences.”<sup>50</sup> What is the antidote to the violence ensuing from unfettered popular opinion? For Macdonald, Weil, or the Babbitt of “Battle Cry,” as well as for Greenberg, a part of the answer could be found in reducing the pervasiveness of propaganda (“lie seeks out lie”)—in identifying and suppressing those dangerous “names” (“godliness,” the “blood’s health”) used to validate and consolidate totalitarian power.

A complementary defense against mass art lay in the promotion and production of a different kind of artistic work, work that was doggedly individualistic, unafraid of complexity, irreducible, resistant to appropriation. The anti-Stalinist/antifascist critique of mass art provided politically engaged intellectuals and artists with powerful



arguments for the rehabilitation of modernist masterpieces. No longer “un-American” or “antiproletarian,” European modernist culture might now be viewed as a paradigm for America and an answer to the artistic production of totalitarian states. As the *Partisan Review* editor, Philip Rahv, proposed in “Proletarian Literature: A Political Autopsy” (1939), “There are certain forms of demagogy . . . which a medium as palpable as fiction—unless it degenerates to the level of pulp propaganda—excludes by its very nature. Thus the media of art, if only by that fact alone, prove their superior humanity to the media of politics.”<sup>51</sup> Palpability vs. propaganda: For Rahv, the media of art resist authoritarian violence *unless they degenerate*. As I suggest in the following section, one of Clement Greenberg’s contributions to the anti-Stalinist critique of culture was an especially full account of the conditions of non-coopted (or, to use Rahv’s term, nondegenerate) art, one that is suggestive of Babbitt’s later metatheoretical writing.<sup>52</sup>

### **The Reflected Effect: Scientific Language and Artistic Autonomy**

Greenberg’s analysis of mass culture went far beyond a generic warning against propagandistic language. He provided the densest, most elegant synopsis of the history of this moment in American cultural production and criticism: “Someday it will have to be told how anti-Stalinism which started out more or less as Trotskyism turned into art for art’s sake, and thereby cleared the way, heroically [!], for what was to come.”<sup>53</sup> Greenberg’s own critical contribution to this trajectory focused on his discussion of the distinction between “avant-garde” and “kitsch.”

As Greenberg suggested, Trotsky (opposing Stalin and the cultural policies of the Soviet state) provided leftist intellectuals with exemplary declarations of the need for self-legislated art. (Recall that Trotsky was vindicated by John Dewey’s commission report in 1937 and that Babbitt singled out this incident in the reminiscences of the 1930s cited above. The exoneration of Trotsky by a figure of Dewey’s stature had enormous impact on American intellectuals.) As proposed in a letter to the editors of the *Partisan Review* signed by Trotsky in 1938, “Artistic creation has its own laws—even when it consciously serves a social movement. Truly intellectual creation is incompatible with lies, hypocrisy, and the spirit of conformity. Art can become a strong ally of revolution only insofar as it remains faithful to itself.”<sup>54</sup> Through the mediating term “intellectual creation,” this Trotskyist

polemic proclaims the opposition of “lies, hypocrisy, and the spirit of conformity,” and self-legislated art. The lies of totalitarianism require not only corrective language, per se, but also the creation of art that will be immune to cooptation. Replacing the emphasis on revolution with the more modest aim of salvaging serious culture from the totalitarian threat and capitalist mass production, the Trotskyist opposition of conformity and true artistic creation comes close to Greenberg’s famous categories of “kitsch” and “avant-garde.” (Greenberg published “Avant-garde and Kitsch” in the *Partisan Review* in 1939, a year after the Trotskyist letter appeared and shortly before Rahv’s “autopsy” of proletarian literature, quoted above.) Greenberg offers a detailed account of the conditions necessary for art to be entirely “faithful to itself.”

Content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or part to anything but itself. . . . The non-representational or “abstract,” if it is to have aesthetic validity, cannot be arbitrary or accidental, but must stem from some worthy constraint or origin. This constraint, once the world of extraverted experience has been renounced, can only be found in the very processes or disciplines by which art and literature have already imitated the former.<sup>55</sup>

The final, rather studied prepositional phrase of this passage closes elliptically with an adjective (“the former”) that refers to the already disappearing term (“the world of extraverted experience”) at the beginning of the sentence; the verb form of the closing phrase establishes the historical grounding of the process of self-reference (emphasizing “processes or disciplines” rather than any original object of imitation). Greenberg’s intricately self-referential writing may remind us of the elaborate self- and cross-references in many of Babbitt’s long sentences. And the search for a “worthy constraint” unbound from representation and “extraverted experience” recalls Babbitt’s “criterion of significance,” unhindered by metaphysics or ideology. (Note also the echoes, in Greenberg’s contemplation of formalism and the constraints of art, of John Dewey’s coupling of “artistic construction” and “quality” in the earlier essay, “Qualitative Thought,” cited above. Whether or not Greenberg was as enthusiastic a proponent of the early issues of *Symposium* as Babbitt, “Avant-garde and Kitsch” provides an urgent social context for the revival and revision of Dewey’s structuralism, with a special emphasis on contemporary art.)

I will return to Greenberg’s “extraversion”/(introversion) distinction before closing this discussion. But first, I should note that Greenberg, in this formulation, explicitly contrasts his characterization of

abstract, neo-avant-garde art to that of kitsch. (By contrast, Babbitt restricts his discussion of kitsch [populism, mass culture] to his non-theoretical comments.) While the avant-garde distinguishes itself by distilling all traces of content from formal artistic processes, the latter uses “debased and academicized simulacra of genuine culture” for its materials.<sup>56</sup> The high art of the avant-garde can “keep culture moving in the midst of ideological confusion and violence,”<sup>57</sup> while kitsch supports obfuscation and constitutes ideology.

Why is kitsch so powerful an instrument of “confusion and violence”? Because it imitates the “effects” rather than the “processes” of art.

[T]he ultimate values which the cultivated spectator derives from Picasso are derived at a second remove, as the result of reflection upon the immediate impression left by the plastic values. It is only then that the recognizable, the miraculous and the sympathetic enter. They are not immediately or externally present in Picasso’s painting, but must be projected into it by the spectator sensitive enough to react sufficiently to plastic qualities. They belong to the “reflected” effect. In Repin, on the other hand, the “reflected” effect has already been included in the picture, ready for the spectator’s unreflective enjoyment. Where Picasso paints *cause*, Repin paints *effect*.<sup>58</sup>

Again, Greenberg seems to echo Dewey’s discussion of qualitative thought. However, the point of emphasis here is that kitsch is coercive; it inherently contains its own responses, leaving neither choice nor effort to the receiver. Hence, it can be appropriate for the requirements of the state. By contrast, only the “plastic values” or serious contemporary (avant-garde) art are accessible to reception. Such art is created and received for its own sake; its autonomy ensures that it cannot be subjected to state control. Thus, the avant-garde’s renunciation of “extraverted experience” is linked to its insistent and exclusive concern with its own plasticity; this in turn ensures its inherent distinction from the effects and uses of mass art.

It is probably clear by now how Greenberg’s discussion of avant-gardism helps to explicate the connection between Babbitt’s “official” discussion of scientific language and his informal antipopulism. Greenberg’s criteria for inclusion in the category of avant-garde art (and culture) resonate closely with Babbitt’s for inclusion in the category of serious music (musical citizenship). Just as avant-garde art is “about” plastic values and the causes of artistic experience, serious music is to be understood in terms of scientific language, not the vacuous, “incorrigible” language of “easy evaluative” and “expressive descriptives.”<sup>59</sup>

Both Greenberg and Babbitt dualistically oppose high and mass culture and view the distinction in terms of the contrast between purely structural and extrinsic descriptions or properties and qualities. Both take the experience of mass culture in the late 1930s and 1940s as a reference point. Both provide an authoritative and distinctly American apologia for a commitment to the exemplars of European modernism. However, while Greenberg distinguishes avant-garde and kitsch by describing the *inherent* nature of the works of art that fall into these categories, Babbitt frames the discussion in terms of language, specifically the language for regulating the characterization of music. For Babbitt, the metatheorist, writing in the 1950s and 1960s and cognizant of the contemporaneous epistemological writing of Willard V. Quine and Nelson Goodman, the distinction between high art and mass culture—“autonomous” and “coopted” art—could not be framed in terms of any inherent properties of music “itself.”<sup>60</sup> The discussion necessarily shifted from the inherent properties of music to the properties of language used to describe music. (Greenberg’s own claim, that there are *intrinsic* characteristics distinguishing works of avant-garde and kitsch art, would have been difficult for him to make if it were applied principally to music; music would not have provided him with the visual arts’ strong intuitive distinction between representation and abstraction.) The difference between Greenberg’s approach and Babbitt’s involves a linguistic turn necessitated by the intellectual developments during the twenty years that separate “Avant-garde and Kitsch” from Babbitt’s important metatheoretical essays. However, both sets of oppositions provide a *modus operandi* for excluding the products of mass culture from the realm of serious art.

In short, while insisting on a de-politicized discussion of music composition, Babbitt has persistently worried about the problems of musical citizenship, cultural difference, and diversification, the limits of musical thought, and the survival of high culture. His comments on these matters retain traces of the anti-Stalinist/mass cult anxieties he and his contemporaries experienced in the 1930s and 1940s. Indeed, speculating about the remnants of these anxieties in Babbitt’s later work helps to explain the tensions between the relativistic and elitist aspects of his metatheory. As I suggest in the following section, the New York Intellectuals’ discussion of cultural pluralism during the 1950s—following the mass culture critiques of the previous decades—coupled an acknowledgement of cultural diversity with a rationale for insulating a cultural elite in ways that significantly parallel the cultural commentary inherent in Babbitt’s metatheory.

## The Vital Center: Scientific Language and Pluralism in the Cold War Era

It might be argued at this point that I have gone to extraordinary lengths only to paraphrase an interpretation of Babbitt that has already been well articulated. As Kerman put it in *Contemplating Music*, “[Babbitt’s] distress, even rage, erupting into repeated assaults and innuendos directed against various predictable targets . . . issued obviously (and openly enough) from the same sense of modernist alienation as was expressed very differently by Schoenberg or, to take an even more extravagant case, Adorno.”<sup>61</sup> Kerman goes on to propose that, unlike Theodor Adorno, “Babbitt at Princeton was pointing out that avant-garde music could find its niche after all—though only by retreating from one bastion of middle-class culture, the concert hall, to another, the university.”<sup>62</sup>

For Kerman, Babbitt’s positions identify him as an “alienated modernist,” like Schoenberg and Adorno. Although both Adorno and Babbitt stated their antipathy to popular culture in no uncertain terms, those familiar with Babbitt’s informal comments about Adorno will be skeptical about any putative connection between him and the critical theorist, whom he once met in Washington Square.<sup>63</sup> However, Babbitt’s particular brand of modernism is a far cry from Adorno’s vision of Schoenberg—the hermetic, self-sacrificing artist who presents a “surviving message of despair from the shipwrecked,” and who retreats from complacent notions of beauty while “point[ing] out the ills of society rather than sublimating those ills into a deceptive humanitarianism.”<sup>64</sup> (For one thing, Babbitt would probably consider such statements meaningless, whether in connection with his own music and thought or Schoenberg’s.) While Babbitt’s methodological preoccupations and taste might discourage him from explicitly stating many of the cultural implications of his theory, his approach to music contains a cultural critique much more closely aligned with Greenberg’s and Macdonald’s of the late 1930s than Adorno’s. What this means, I propose, is that their brand of modernism was more “critical” than “alienated,” not so much withdrawn and self-sacrificing as socially committed and engaged. Fighting for the preservation of significant distinctions within and between artistic works could be construed, as Greenberg suggested, as a heroic act, a kind of skeptical patriotism. This fight required an elite critical perspective within the cultural mainstream rather than an ascetic retreat or self-denial. This point recalls Kerman’s formulation of Babbitt’s “retreat” to that “bastion of the middle class,” the university. Babbitt’s university—understood in terms of postwar cultural politics—was close to the front lines

of cultural debate: in Babbitt's own term, a "fortress" in the culture wars, for academic composers, not a "greenhouse," as Kerman describes it in his comments on university-based new music.<sup>65</sup>

As the historian, Peter Gallison, has shown, such a view of culture was powerfully foreshadowed by Babbitt's self-acknowledged epistemological influences, the Vienna Circle positivists themselves. As Gallison proposes,

the two movements [the positivists and the Bauhaus artists] faced the same enemies—the religious right, nationalist, anthroposophist, *völkisch*, and Nazi opponents—and this drove them even closer together, toward the conjoint life they had in mind. Both enterprises sought to instantiate a modernism emphasizing what I will call "transparent construction," a manifest building up from simple elements to all higher forms that would, by virtue of the systematic constructional program itself, guarantee the exclusion of the decorative, mystical, or metaphysical. There was a political dimension to this form of construction: by basing it on simple, accessible units, they hoped to banish incorporation of nationalist or historical features.<sup>66</sup>

We have already seen how Babbitt's own "systematic constructional program" dealt with history and excluded metaphysics, and we have observed the anti-*völkisch* current in his thought. Was Babbitt (or Greenberg) explicitly aware that "the Vienna Circle and Dessau's Bauhaus vision of transparent construction was anathema to the Nazi movement; [that] it cut any transcendent national purpose from the state, from architecture, and from nature"?<sup>67</sup> Was he cognizant of the parallels between his own politics and those of his positivist antecedents? Someday, this story, too, will have to be told.

During the early 1950s, in the context of Cold War, anti-Soviet sentiment, a critique of mass culture along Greenbergian lines echoed loudly in the American discussion of culture. However, the participants in this discussion grappled just as conspicuously with the question of cultural pluralism, emphasizing the importance of encouraging diversity in a free society. The phenomenon of cultural pluralism itself, like Greenberg's avant-garde art, was to serve as an antidote to the insidious, homogenizing, and totalizing encroachments of mass culture (which was seen as an instrument of state oppression in the case of the Soviet Union). Conversely, safeguarding the conditions of autonomous, artistic expression, answerable to no authority outside of itself, could be proposed as one of the fundamental principles of cultural pluralism.<sup>68</sup> After the war, avant-garde art continued to occupy a privileged function: to oppose mass culture. In this context, serious, avant-garde art could be seen as "affirming America." In the influential book, *The Vital Center*, Arthur Schlesinger proposed that

modernist masters such as Stravinsky or Picasso “reflect and incite anxieties which are incompatible with the monolithic character of the ‘Soviet person.’ ”<sup>69</sup> Moreover, as Schlesinger stated forthrightly in the *Partisan Review*’s 1952 forum on American culture, “the only answer to mass culture, of course, lies in the affirmation of America, not as a uniform society, but as a various and pluralistic society, made of many groups with diverse interests. The immediate problem is to conserve cultural pluralism in face of the threat of the mass media.”<sup>70</sup> Andrew Ross has suggested that Schlesinger’s “agenda was clearly to distinguish American social experience from what was lumped together as fascist and Soviet ‘totalitarianism.’ ” According to Ross, the pluralistic model that emerged was promoted by intellectuals whose

role [was] therefore central to the process of legitimation—to serve, again not always consciously, as the bearers and shapers of a language that makes some forms of discursive experience available while it ignores, excludes, or suppresses others. A certain vocabulary is presented as permissible, not all of it hegemonic (some counterhegemonic ideas are contained within it), and not in any way unified, but which nonetheless marks the temporarily legitimate boundaries of consciousness.<sup>71</sup>

Ross’s description of intellectuals shaping and bearing a language that at once permits diversity and limits the boundaries of permissible thought strongly recalls our previous discussion of Babbitt’s ambivalent advocacy of scientific language. Schlesinger’s vision of cultural diversity, like Babbitt’s, implies conflict. Both implicitly distinguish healthy diversity from another kind of cultural proliferation, which is unhealthy and needs to be contained. The proliferation of the former kind of diversity is needed to counterbalance and contain the latter.

In recent writing, in which Babbitt has been especially candid about the problems of contextualism in music and diversity in musical culture, he comes close to acknowledging the contradiction between simultaneously promoting and containing diversity. In the same published lecture in which the “mightiest of fortresses” image of the university occurs, just as he introduces the theme of cultural diversity, Babbitt introduces an anxious qualification while reaffirming composition as an intramural university activity: “The first thing I have to do is disabuse you that I’m talking about a particular kind of music and a particular kind of university. That would often be inferred, particularly from me, but I mean nothing of the sort. . . . Music has never been so pluralistic.”<sup>72</sup>

In any event, Ross’s description of the process of legitimizing some forms of “discursive experience” while excluding others, com-

bined with Greenberg's and Macdonald's cultural norms and categories, provides a provocative (if partial) answer to the questions raised earlier: Why should Babbitt so closely link concept formation in music to "scientific language"? Why should verbal and methodological responsibility" be the touchstone of musical citizenship? And why should the advocacy of cultural diversity be so intimately linked to concern about its containment?

### The "umbilical cord of gold"

In considering ethnographies of literature and art in *The Predicament of Culture*, James Clifford has suggested a beginning and end point of this study. What he says about museum collections of art objects applies, in large part, to our approaches to music discourse: "I propose that any collection implies a temporal vision generating rarity and worth, a metahistory. This history defines which groups or things will be redeemed from a disintegrating human past and which will be defined as the dynamic, or tragic, agents of a common destiny. My analysis works to bring out the local, political contingency of such histories and of the modern collections they justify. Space is cleared, perhaps, for alternatives."<sup>73</sup> Critical, analytical, or theoretical writing about music is itself a form of collecting, redeeming the artifacts "collected" (discussed) "from a disintegrating human past," and defining the persistent legitimacy and importance of some kinds of music rather than others. Like Clifford, I too have been concerned with the political contingencies of a history, but one that justifies a particular kind of music discourse; this discourse, in turn, is often used to justify particular musical practices.

To a large degree, the kind of "space clearing" that Clifford mentions has already occurred within American musical culture; indeed, as we have seen, Babbitt himself is among those who have begun to clear the space. However, as I have also suggested, he has erected his antipopulist fortress in this perilously open terrain. In proposing a cultural/historical context for Babbitt's metatheory, I mean to suggest that the time has come to finish the job of space-clearing that Babbitt began. However, in dismantling his modernist fortress, we should be careful to keep the bricks, if not the mortar, as we continue to rebuild (and topple) our own cultural constructions.

In light of this claim, the story I have told about Babbitt has specific implications for the discussion of our own current situation. If we accept the premise that an insistence on scientific language (rather



than a looser, less exclusionary attitude) is linked to the historical project of distinguishing between high and mass culture, how are we to proceed if we no longer subscribe to this dualism? Even as early as 1939, Greenberg recognized the fragility of the circumstances necessary to support his conception of avant-garde culture:

The avant-garde's specialization of itself, the fact that its best artists are artists' artists, its best poets poets' poets, has estranged a great many of those who were capable formerly of enjoying and appreciating ambitious art and literature, but who are now unwilling or unable to acquire an initiation into their craft secrets. The masses have always remained more or less indifferent to culture in the process of development. But today such culture is being abandoned by those to whom it actually belongs—our ruling class. For it is to the latter that the avant-garde belongs. No culture can develop without a social basis, without a source of stable income. And in the case of the avant-garde, this was provided by an elite among the ruling class of that society from which it assumed itself to be cut off, but to which it has always remained attached by an umbilical cord of gold. The paradox is real. And now this elite is rapidly shrinking. Since the avant-garde forms the only living culture we now have, the survival in the near future of culture in general is thus threatened.<sup>74</sup>

I have quoted the entirety of this paragraph from “Avant-garde and Kitsch” because it is so richly suggestive for our current discussion. The second sentence evokes the famous published title of Babbitt's essay, “Who Cares If You Listen?,” while the first recalls the original title for the article, “The Composer as Specialist.” The question of survival raised in the conclusion of Greenberg's paragraph is echoed in the “mightiest of fortresses” passage from the last chapter of *Words About Music*, cited above.<sup>75</sup> And, of course, Babbitt hints at his own version of the “umbilical cord of gold” in that passage: the university is responsible for the “corporal survival” of composers as well as the dissemination and protection of their work. To paraphrase Babbitt, we need only replace Greenberg's phrase, “elite among the ruling class,” with the single word, “university,” the benign patronage of which (tenure, academic freedom) is meant to protect the composer's autonomy. Within the enclosed space of the academic “fortress,” the composer presumably needs no umbilical cord, but may participate untethered in symbiotic, nourishing exchanges of gold and academic discourse.

Whether or not any part of this view of high art continues to seem viable or desirable, it exists in relation to a conception of “kitsch” that may now seem entirely too monolithic. Thus, the high/mass culture distinction is likely to seem entirely too severe. We are

far more likely to refer to the precarious marginality of the high modernist wing in American new music, rather than the heroic containment of its antithesis—especially as the brief para-aristocratic reign of the university composer gives way to the new arrangements of a music academic disciplinary perestroika.

This point brings us back to methodology. Over forty years after Babbitt's important essays on metatheory began to appear, the discussion of models of diversity, group constitution in musical culture, and the cultural history of musical praxes may play as liberating and clarifying a role as have his theoretical innovations. Moreover, the two kinds of investigation are not discontinuous: notions about culture, the institutions and practices that support them, and the metaphors invoked to carry them, play a crucial role in shaping our technical languages and artistic perceptions. The feminist critic Teresa de Lauretis proposes a more generalized and succinct statement of principle: "Practices—events and behaviors occurring in social formations—weigh in the constitution of subjectivity as much as does language."<sup>76</sup> From this point of view, the discussion of and experimentation with different cultural categories, approaches to musical discourse, institutional affiliations, and communal practices may be considered part of the creative musical process as much as theorizing (in the sense of Babbitt). To the extent that such discussion and experimentation borrows from contemporary ethnography and cultural history, they may constitute a relativistic position more radical than Babbitt's but still able to accommodate his methodological advances. At the same time, they may help us find alternatives to the stark opposition of "negative dialectics" and "positive" formalism that so often divides critical theory from music theory.

It was Babbitt's already radical move to show us how much language could inform the "constitution of subjectivity" for the paradigmatically nonverbal, nonrepresentational art, music. In spinning the terms again, emphasizing the complex, historical embeddedness of subjectivity and our conceptions of intersubjectivity, it is tempting to tamper with one of Babbitt's own evocative titles: "Contemporary Music Composition and Music Theory as Contemporary Intellectual History." We may simply want to reverse the terms of this formulation, to see historical and ethnographic narratives about music as (among other things) efforts to stimulate new conceptualizations and practices of theory and composition. However, to the extent that this project replaces the kinds of interactions between theory and composition described by Babbitt, the simplification will be unsatisfactory.

Theory, history, composition, and criticism will, as I have suggested, continually maintain a dialogue in broadening cultural contexts. As the art historian T. J. Clark formulated it in a discussion of Jackson Pollock:

How do we map the context of exploitation, misuse, rereading, misreading in the culture *onto* and *into* a certain practice, a certain set of intentions—intentions realized? Aren't we all still struggling with that?

"Struggling" really is the word. We still don't have even the beginnings of an adequate set of terms—set of coordinates—with which to *do* the mapping. . . . Internal *versus* external is like "originality" *versus* "only afterward," or, come to that, "text" *versus* "context." Not that our work will ever magically escape from these metaphorical divisions, but the more pressure they're put under, in the actual process of historical inquiry, the better for all of us.<sup>77</sup>

Babbitt's revolutionary metatheory taught us how music discourse might, rationally—without magic—try to find a way out of the metaphorical divisions Clark poses. In reasserting their power and struggling (and failing) again to transcend them, we may come to feel the crosscurrents of pressure emanating from both Clark's "process of historical inquiry" and Babbitt's "scientific method and scientific language."

### Notes

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3. Susan Blaustein, and Martin Brody, "Inventing an American Musical Culture: an Interview with Milton Babbitt," excerpts trans. into French in *Contretemps* (Geneva, Switzerland, 1987). The interview was conducted during Jan. 18–20, 1985. Excerpts from the unpublished portion of the interview will be cited in the remainder of this paper.
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8. Rockwell, 36.
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10. Babbitt, "Past and Present Concepts of the Nature and Limits of Music," *International Musicological Society Congress Report* (New York, 1961), 398–403; repr. in *Perspectives on Contemporary Music Theory* ed. Benjamin Boretz and Edward Cone (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1972), 3.
11. Babbitt, "Past and Present Concepts of the Nature and Limits of Music," 9.
12. Babbitt, ed. "Who Cares If You Listen?," in *Contemporary Composers on Contemporary Music*, Barney Childs and Elliott Schwartz (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), 244; originally published in *High Fidelity* 8 (Feb. 1958): 38–40, 126–27.
13. Babbitt, "Past and Present Concepts of the Nature and Limits of Music," 9.
14. Babbitt, "Past and Present Concepts of the Nature and Limits of Music," 15.
15. Babbitt, "Twelve-tone Invariants as Compositional Determinants," in *Problems of Modern Music*, ed. P. H. Lang, (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1972), 108.
16. Babbitt's expression, "Twelve-tone Invariants," 108.
17. Babbitt, "The Structure and Function of Music Theory," *Perspectives on Contemporary Music Theory*, ed. Boretz and Cone, 13–14.
18. Babbitt, "Structure and Function," 12.
19. Babbitt, "Structure and Function," 21.
20. *Words About Music*, ed. Stephen Dembski and Joseph Straus (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 163.
21. For example, Babbitt told the story recently during a lecture at the Harvard Music Department (Nov. 4, 1991). He also narrated it in the interview with Blaustein and Brody cited above.
22. Dembski and Straus, *Words About Music*; Babbitt, "On Having Been, and Still Being, an American Composer," *Perspectives of New Music* 27 (Winter 1989): 106–12. Two interviews with Babbitt that I conducted—one (already cited) with Susan Blaustein and the other with Dennis Miller (Mar. 14, 1985 at the Juilliard School)—provided much of the stimulation to write this paper. Portions of the latter interview appeared in the program booklet to the recording *Piano Works of Milton Babbitt*, Harmonia Mundi Recordings, and "Milton Babbitt: An Appreciation" (League-ISCM Publications: Boston, 1985). Another interview, conducted by Marion Guck and Fred Maus (Aug. 6, 1988)—which will be quoted in the following—is currently being prepared for publication.
23. Interview with Blaustein and Brody.
24. A great deal has been written about the politics and culture of the New York intellectual scene from the 1930s to the present. Richard H. Pells's *Radical Visions and*

*American Dreams* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1973) and *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985) and Alan Wald's *The New York Intellectuals* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987) have been especially helpful to me in sorting through the primary texts.

25. P. Wheelwright and J. Burnham, *Philosophical Analysis* (New York: Holt, 1932).
26. Interview with Guck and Maus.
27. John Dewey, "Qualitative Thought," *Symposium* 1 (1931): 17.
28. For example, see Macdonald's two-part "Notes on Hollywood Directors" in *Symposium* 4 (1933): 2–3.
29. Sidney Hook, "Why I am a Communist: Communism Without Dogmas," *Modern Monthly* 8 (1934): 23–24; repr. in Wald, 4.
30. James Burnham, *The Managerial Revolution* (New York: John Day, 1941), as described in Pells, *Radical Visions*, 352.
31. The Committee for Cultural Freedom, an organization of intellectuals that (it was eventually revealed) was funded by the CIA, has been written about extensively. See especially, Peter Coleman, *The Liberal Conspiracy* (New York: The Free Press, 1989).
32. Interview with Guck and Maus.
33. Interview with Guck and Maus.
34. Dwight Macdonald, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (New York: Meridian Books, 1958), 3.
35. Aaron Copland, "A Note to Young Composers," *Music Vanguard* 1 (Mar.–Apr. 1935): 14–16. In the interview with Guck and Maus, Babbitt is likely to be referring to the following comment of Copland's: "The creative artist's life has never been an easy one in any epoch. (Undoubtedly, in the Soviet Union they order these things better.)"
36. Jane Coppock, "A Conversation with Arthur Berger," *Perspectives of New Music* 17 (1988): 49. Berger goes on to comment on the complexities of the changing relationship between proletarianism, mass culture, and European modernist composition. I will touch on the same issues in the following, though my emphasis will be on the opposition of mass and high culture rather than class analyses of culture.
37. See Roger Sessions, "Some Notes on Dr. Goebbels' Letter to Furtwaengler," *Modern Music* 11 (1933): 3–32; repr. as "Music and Nationalism," in *Roger Sessions on Music: Collected Essays*, ed. Edward T. Cone (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 271–81.
38. *Politics* 2 (Nov. 1945): 346.
39. Macdonald announced his withdrawal from the *Partisan Review*, and his intention to found *Politics*, in a letter to the editor (*Partisan Review* 10 [1943]: 382).
40. In recent years, Babbitt has described himself as a conservative and has indicated his antipathy to leftist movement politics as far back as his student years. Certainly, "Battle Cry" takes a cynical attitude toward the "maxims" of war. I asked Babbitt about the poem after the Harvard lecture already cited. Indicating that it was a response to what he viewed as America's belated entry into World War II, he

referred to the poem as an example of what he called “my elitism.” Babbitt and Macdonald could hardly have agreed about the war; not long before publishing “Battle Cry,” Macdonald was still calling for “revolutionary action against the warmakers.” In referring to “elitism,” I took Babbitt to be associating himself with intellectuals such as Macdonald—skeptical anti-Stalinists who remained engaged by, however critical of, mainstream political and cultural thought (and who defended the production of “autonomous” high art). In our conversation about Macdonald, Babbitt referred to him as a close friend and colleague for over forty years.

41. Simone Weil, “Words and War,” *Politics* 5 (Mar. 1946): 77.
42. See Karl Jaspers, “The Rebirth of the University,” *Politics* 3 (Feb. 1946): 52–57; Dwight Macdonald, “USA vs. USSR,” 5 (Spring 1948): 77; Nicolas Nabokov, “The Music Purge,” 5 (Spring 1948): 102–6.
43. A “Popular Culture” section was regularly featured in *Politics*. In the first issue, Macdonald published “A Theory of Popular Culture” (Feb. 1944), which he later reworked under the title “A Theory of Mass Culture” (see note 2). For some of Macdonald’s other contributions, see “On Lowbrow Thinking,” 1 (Aug. 1944): 219–20 and “Field Notes,” 2 (Apr. 1945): 112–14.
44. Macdonald, “Theory of Mass Culture,” Rosenberg and White, 64.
45. See Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), and Andrew Ross, “Containing Culture in the Cold War,” in *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989).
46. Ross, 50.
47. Earl Browder, “Writers and the Communist Party,” 1938, quoted in Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Jovanovich, 1961), 160–61.
48. See Guilbaut, 21, *passim*.
49. Kurt List, “The Music of Soviet Russia,” *Politics* 1 (May 1944): 108.
50. Clement Greenberg, “Avant-garde and Kitsch,” in *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 17.
51. Repr. in Philip Rahv, *Essays on Literature and Politics* ed. A. J. Porter and A. J. Dvosin (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), 303.
52. Was Rahv self-consciously echoing and inverting the Nazi expression, “entartete Kunst”?
53. Greenberg, “The Late Thirties in New York,” in *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 230.
54. Leon Trotsky, “Art and Politics,” *Partisan Review* (Aug.–Sept. 1938); quoted in Guilbaut, 31–32.
55. Greenberg, “Avant-garde,” 6.
56. Greenberg, “Avant-garde,” 10.
57. Greenberg, “Avant-garde,” 5.

58. Greenberg, "Avant-garde," 15.
59. See Babbitt, "The Structure and Function of Music Theory," 11–12.
60. See, for example, the discussion of nominalism in one of Babbitt's most admired philosophical sources: Nelson Goodman, *The Structure of Appearance* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951), esp. 31–35.
61. Kerman, 101.
62. Kerman, 101.
63. In the interviews both with Brody and Miller and Guck and Maus, Babbitt has discussed his personal disdain for Theodor Adorno. He met Adorno through the mediation of Roger Sessions and the sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld. Adorno's writing on music would never pass Babbitt's tests of clarity and verification for responsible musical discourse.
64. Theodor W. Adorno, *The Philosophy of Modern Music*, trans. A. G. Mitchell and W. V. Blomster (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), 102–3. This may be an appropriate point to mention another bit of Adorno's construction of modernism that has contributed to the current critical view of what (still) tends to be called "uptown" music. Referring to twelve-tone music as "mechanistic," "absolutely determined," and "obstinately rigid" (*Philosophy of Modern Music*, 71, *passim*)—hence (for him) admirably detached from the complacent habits of cultural expression—Adorno may inadvertently be the source of much of the current critical invective against musical "intellectualism."
65. See Kerman, 104: "The academy has become a sort of greenhouse; even a writer so contemptuous of the use of metaphorical language as Babbitt cannot avoid sometimes succumbing to the 'organic fallacy.'" In this context, it is interesting to recall the ironies of Babbitt's "Music for the Masses" anecdote, especially in reference to his Judaism. Alan Wald has pointed out that many of the New York Intellectuals who came into prominence during the 1930s were the first American Jews to achieve prominence in the academic elite. Theirs was a struggle for engagement in a newly forming American culture—not a withdrawal from a European culture in tragic decline. A good deal has been written about this and about the sensibilities of those intellectuals, both Jewish and non-Jewish, forming the affiliation of writers referred to as New York Intellectuals. As Richard Pells put it, they "thought of themselves as quintessentially urban, refreshingly cynical, and above all erudite. . . . The intellectuals who clustered around *Commentary* and *The Partisan Review* were instinctive outsiders, descendants of immigrants and ghetto dwellers . . . suspicious of populist sentimentality as a prelude to the pogroms" (*The Liberal Mind*, 74).
- Babbitt's anecdote reminds us that he was the first Jewish composer to be hired at Princeton, just as Hook was the first Jewish philosopher at NYU and Trilling the first Jew in the Columbia English department. Babbitt, like Hook, Trilling, Greenberg, Meyer Schapiro, and Philip Rahv, was, as Irving Howe puts it, among "the New York writers [who] came at the end of the modernist experience, just as they came at what may yet have to be judged the end of the radical experience, and as they certainly came at the end of the immigrant Jewish experience." Certainly, one of Howe's descriptions of these often-Jewish intellectuals fits Babbitt perfectly: "They could talk faster than anyone else, they knew their way around better, they were

quicker on their feet" ("The New York Intellectuals," *The Decline of the New* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970), 218. The point to emphasize here is that this sensibility, however critical it might be, was not one of isolation and alienation.

66. Peter Gallison, "Aufbau/Bauhaus: Logical Positivism and Architectural Modernism," *Critical Inquiry* 16(4) (Summer 1990): 710–11.

67. Gallison, 744.

68. Macdonald, for example, continued his longstanding critique of kitsch and mass culture in the postwar period, as the quotation at the beginning of this essay exemplifies. His discussion of the way kitsch "mixes and scrambles everything" adumbrates Babbitt's comments on "unscientific" musical discourse "which permits anything to be said and virtually nothing to be communicated" ("Structure and Function," 11), hence obfuscating meaningful distinctions.

69. Arthur Schlesinger, *The Vital Center; the Politics of Freedom* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1949), 79.

70. Schlesinger's untitled contribution to "Our Country and our Culture, Part III" *Partisan Review* vol. 19 no. 5 (1952): 592.

71. Ross, 56.

72. *Words About Music*, 164. Here Babbitt's discussion of pluralism and the problem of diversity is, in many ways, his most explicit. Chapter 6, "The Unlikely Survival of Contemporary Music," discusses "the crux . . . of the problem of diversity" in musical culture in terms of *contextuality*, that is, in terms of the internal, individualized differences between musical works. "This is where it began. Those middle-period works of Schoenberg . . . are to as large an extent as possible self-referential, self-contained, and what I'm given to call 'contextual.' Contextuality merely has to do with the extent to which a piece defines its materials within itself" (167). For Babbitt, the paradigm of diversity is the structure of the individual work, rather than the characterization of different ideologies, styles, and/or other shared identities. Indeed, words like "ideology," "style," and "aesthetics," or for that matter, "culture," are not, for Babbitt, reasonable concepts for conceptualizing music. Again, the emphasis is on preserving and valuing intra-work structural individuation and intra-work structural distinctions.

73. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 13.

74. Greenberg, "Avant-garde," 8.

75. As the composer Jeff Stadelman has pointed out to me, there are also echoes here of the closing passage of "Who Cares If You Listen?" (The connection should not be overlooked; it pertains significantly to the question of Babbitt's relationship to Adorno and to the characterization of his academic "retreat.") Babbitt states:

Granting to music the position accorded other arts and sciences [in universities] promises the sole substantive means of survival for the music I have been describing. Admittedly, if this music is not supported, the whistling repertory of the man in the street will be little affected, the concert-going activity of the conspicuous consumer of musical culture will be little disturbed. But music will cease to evolve and, in that important sense, will cease to live. (250)



Reading this passage in *Contemplating Music*, Kerman puts his emphasis on the word *evolve*, which he interprets as a swerve into historical organicism. I propose a blander reading of “evolve” and wish to place more emphasis on Babbitt’s quest for an alternative institutional context for new music, one that would be unhindered by consumerism, philistinism, and the pressures of mass culture. Two points should be emphasized. First, Babbitt’s advocacy (in “Who Cares?”) of a “withdrawal from the public world” should be read in the context of Greenberg’s ruminations on the avant-garde and Macdonald’s critique of mass culture. In this context, Babbitt’s use of the term “public music” and “public world” seem to drift very slightly from “mass culture” or “kitsch.” The withdrawal from *this* public world (mass, kitsch, consumer culture) need not be interpreted as a retreat into hermeticism. In any case, Babbitt’s disdain for the egalitarianism of the “market place of the concert hall” (248) conforms with the rhetoric and values of Greenbergian avant-gardism, especially as these came to be identified with conservative, Cold War reactions to Soviet cultural politics. Second, as I have suggested through much of this essay, Babbitt sees wide-ranging, discursive connections between institutions, language, dissemination of values, and behavior of the groups and individuals engaged in various aspects of musical praxis. To borrow Greenberg’s terms again, Babbitt seeks to piece together the remnants of a “living culture” after the avant-garde/ruling elite arrangement has dissolved.

76. Teresa de Lauretis, “The Violence of Rhetoric,” in *Technologies of Gender* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 42.

77. T. J. Clark, “Jackson Pollock’s Abstraction,” in *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris, and Montreal 1945–1964*, ed. Serge Guilbaut (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 243.