

FORUM

This space is temporarily devoted to disseminating debates taking place about sound production and the [UN]COMMON SOUNDS project.

I B A N U R I Z A R

Contemporary music versus experimental music*

On more than one occasion I have been to a concert of *experimental music* with friends or acquaintances, who — through a lack of understanding of the medium— come out with the same hackneyed phrase: this isn't music; it's just noise. Those of us who enjoy diving deep amidst the structures of sound and space know how to accustom ourselves to the sensations brought to us by that magma of sound that forces us to mentally travel different states of consciousness, in keeping with our socio-cultural situation.

The fall from grace of so-called concert music was a result of the divorce between the artist and the audience. This divorce became increasingly patent throughout the twentieth century, as composers became fixated on the idea of breaking with the rules that had underlain western musical harmony for centuries. Dissonance was assimilated, as a promising new element for opening the doors of sound wide open. Wagner had taken music to the height of grandiloquence and maximalism. Schönberg sought to open up the range of sound possibilities by bringing in the twelve-tone technique, and Stravinsky fired the starting gun for a revolution which would ultimately lead to an ever-greater rift between the artist and the listener.

Meanwhile, popular music continued on its way, feeding off increased education and the industrial revolution. The difference between written music and the oral tradition became a thing of the past. Edison had merely kept sounding the death knell of oral tradition, first rung years before with the transcription of popular melodies for safekeeping, a custom which would be kept up with the appearance of recording and reproducing apparatuses. In 1877, Edison managed to record sound for the first time. Ten years later he would make the first recording of "classical" music.

Many composers used popular melodies from the oral tradition as the inspiration for their work, which was intended to delight the ears of that pure and educated audience, with its almost inexplicable rejection of popular music. But the composer... oh, the composer!! Since Beethoven, the figure of the composer had taken on a life of its own, with the composer

*This article is published as Zehar's contribution to *documenta 12 magazines*, a collective editorial project linking worldwide over 70 print and on-line periodicals, as well as other media (www.documenta.de).

Ray Wilson *DIY-Synth*

depicted as an artistic personality and not as some mere worker at the service of the clergy or the bourgeoisie. The difference between concert music and popular music became the paradigm of the most classist and reprehensible ethnocentrism, traces of which continue to contaminate and condition musical creation and enjoyment. The rise of musical nationalisms during the nineteenth century had repercussions on musical creation, with composers and musicologists like Bela Bartok collecting popular melodies which they then used as the inspiration for their works — works that symbolised love of the homeland and the national spirit. Seeing all this, it is difficult to believe in the separation of those two worlds of concert music and popular music.

Adorno (1903-1969), in his *Philosophy of New Music* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006), analyses the social condition of twentieth-century contemporary music, from an excessively academic stance for my taste, but he cast light on many of the issues he addresses, in that very many of the questions he tackles vis-à-vis contemporary music are reflected today in more “popular” musical practices. The term “contemporary music”, like “classical music”, encompasses a certain aesthetic or musical practice whose social hierarchy still operates

today. Adorno spoke of the separation between the audience and the artist, in that the channels of musical expansion, clearly educational and conductive in nature (press, radio, etc.), leaves an audience used to arias and harmony bereft. The artist, who is often unwilling to explain his work and its whys and wherefores, is believed to be hiding behind the incomprehensibility of his work to justify its quality. The result is that the listener takes up a position against his music with a feeling of orphanhood which is difficult to overcome. Incomprehension is born out of ignorance. The artist does not seek beauty with music, but social relevance, and that brings him into opposition with an audience which is occasionally receptive but generally indifferent.

The word *experimental*, placed before the word *music*, gives us a term we love to use; it allows us to sum up in just two words that whole universe of sound which not even recordings are capable of capturing in all its magnitude. The same thing happens to this term as with *contemporary music*: It is explained but not understood. If we take the term *experimental music* to group together the most daring of “popular” musical practices and *contemporary music* for academic musical practice, then something very odd emerges: aestheti-



Prague Symphony Orchestra 2004

cally they end up merging. Artists with no formal musical education can keep up a musical discourse which comes close to entirely academic movements, just with a change of venue, and of course, of audience. The audience for contemporary music and the audience for experimental music are far from belonging to the same socio-cultural background, but nonetheless, in both worlds I perceive a certain elitism vis-à-vis their relative positions within the overall corpus of music. Do terms such as “advanced music” mean that other types of music are backward? If one type of music is termed “educated” (*musica culta*), is there such a thing as “uneducated” (*inculta*) music? These terms question the validity of other types of music whose innovative nature may not be reflected solely in the tools they use.

In contemporary music we have the figure of the musical illiterate, the person who does not understand dissonance or music science and is incapable of taking in the development of musical history. Their discourse is rejected as being inept. They don't know about music and therefore they might as well be deaf. How are they going to understand a type of musical practice which has nothing to offer them? Does this condition the value of the work? Perhaps. Something similar happens with experimental music. Technology applied to music extends the possibilities for manipulating the sound material, but in turn it constructs an increasingly complex discourse, as if this manipulation were distancing it from a social reality and bringing it closer to some other one. The “popular” audience will find it difficult to assimilate the application of technology in music and the resulting plethora

of proposals: the academic aesthetics of many musical practices makes them off-putting. This type of practice is associated with a specific setting and aesthetic, which has been laid down through musical history. The assimilation of certain musical proposals is hindered by the mis-en-scene unrelated to their social corpus, and it is from here that the incomprehension arises. Do different musical proposals need to be adapted to a receptive setting and audience? Or is it the audience which has to adapt itself to the different proposals? Terms such as “contemporary music” and “experimental music” remain all-encompassing but they will find it difficult to decipher the aesthetic or behavioural codes in each of the musical proposals that have arisen over history. ❧

IBAN URIZAR Born in Elgoibar in 1975. After completing a degree in music he moved to Barcelona to take a PhD in musicology. Working under researchers such as Josep Martí and Jaume Ayats he became involved in the field of ethnomusicology, where he found himself an intermediary space between musical anthropology and sociology. He promotes and participates in several groups of music and projects, and has also composed music for some short films. He is currently lecturing at the Universidad del País Vasco, and also teaches the trumpet in music schools.

NOTE

I have decided not to append a bibliography, as I do not believe in direct references. Any reference to authors, texts or books I have used in writing this text will have been affected by other authors, texts and thoughts, and it would therefore be unfair to limit my references to a list of books.