

High Art Music Without Cultural Highness:  
Reflections on the effects of twenty-first-century musical culture  
on the values and behaviour of avant-garde composers

1 March 2007

The nature of the relationship between the avant-garde composer and today's musical culture is ambiguous at best. We no longer live at a time when the uncontested cultural primacy of European and American art music provides a clear set of values and ideologies to frame our understanding of the role of avant-garde composers in musical culture. Instead, we find ourselves surrounded by an increasingly large collection of diverse practices, none of which is able to claim greater or lesser cultural primacy except according to its own terms, and none of which accepts the standards of the others.

This cultural context poses challenges for avant-garde composers that are perhaps more extreme than is the case for musicians in other areas, as the values that form the foundation of the avant-garde are based, more than is the case for other traditions, on a hierarchical power structure that we can no longer assume to be true—what is high art when there is no consensus on whether or not there is a high or a low? Furthermore, composers must answer this question without the assistance of the traditional music-historical/theoretical narrative, which does not consider it. Clearly, certain traditional values of the avant-garde are uniquely at odds with fundamental aspects of today's musical culture, and how composers adapt to the lack of an a priori cultural highness—that is, to the lack of any agreed-upon standard of what constitutes value in music—will determine the extent of their role in twenty-first-century musical culture.

An exhaustive examination of this issue is not possible, given its scope and complexity, the diversity of contemporary musical practices, and the difficulty of developing a narrow workable definition of the avant-garde (to be discussed below). However, I do wish to address one particular belief of the avant-garde in detail, as well as the values and behaviours that it engenders. I have called this the cultural-value belief:

*High art music holds a kind of unique cultural value for listeners that is not present in other kinds of music and is worth preserving.*

There are two primary reasons why I think this is informative. First of all, the cultural-value belief has remained relatively constant over the past century and encapsulates many of the traditional values of avant-garde composers across a wide range of musical practices. Secondly, it is a belief that became increasingly problematic over the course of the twentieth century and has finally been rendered largely untenable by twenty-first-century musical culture. As avant-garde composers adapt to this situation, the values they hold and the ways they go about their work will have to change too. By tracing the evolution of the cultural-value belief from widespread acceptance through to its increasing inadequacy today, we can gain insights on what a high art composer without cultural highness can be, and on his or her possible roles in twenty-first-century musical culture.

So why focus on the twenty-first century, and not some other point in history? After all, many of the trends that I will examine in this paper have their origins significantly earlier. Simply put, my reasoning is that several internet music technologies appeared early in the twenty-first century that have radically changed how people acquire and use music—Napster was released in mid-1999, the iPod in 2001, podcasting and music-/audio-blogging (including MySpace) appeared in 2003, and YouTube was launched in 2005, to name a few well-known examples. These technologies have made possible the completion of certain earlier trends, and have increased the urgency for the avant-garde to reinvent itself. So while this paper is not a discussion of the effects of the internet on music, the widespread use of the internet for music-related purposes is a useful marker.

Furthermore, it seems that composers today are in fact changing somehow; they bring

attitudes to their work that the previous generation did not. One colleague of mine, for example, expressed his frustration in trying to develop a working method for electronic composition that was productive and yet not dependent on cultural highness. The hierarchy of the traditional IRCAM<sup>1</sup> composer-plus-technical-assistant model was distasteful to him, yet the rigours of computer programming were placing pragmatic limits on the kinds of music he could compose. Furthermore, even should he decide to search for a technical assistant, he would have no guarantee of finding one; many young computer musicians today have their own creative aspirations, and few want to limit themselves to simply realizing someone else's artistic vision. Why should they? With the avant-garde composer's monopoly on cultural highness eroded, the creative projects of computer musicians can be just as legitimate, whether or not they decide to officially adopt the title of "composer."

### **The Avant-Garde and High Art: Definitions and Background**

Before examining the cultural-value belief, we need to establish who avant-garde composers are. In a certain sense, this is an easy question: they are those composers who claim lineage from the European high art tradition of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (or further back still), and whose music the majority of Western listeners would label as difficult or strange. They are the composers that have dominated university music departments in North America and Europe from the mid-twentieth century onward, and who earned or still earn their livelihoods through direct (Europe) or indirect (America) government subsidies. Schoenberg, Webern, Stravinsky, Boulez, Stockhausen, Varèse, Cage, Messiaen, Xenakis, Andriessen, Lachenmann, Reich, Nono, Schnittke, Gubaidulina, Rihm; these are some well-known examples.

At this point, certain readers are without a doubt protesting to my list—the boundaries of the avant-garde community are blurry and complex, and probably the better for it. Nomenclature is also a problem, and the lack of an adequate name for what I have called the avant-garde is symptomatic of the challenges composers are now facing. The traditional narra-

---

<sup>1</sup>Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique, a French institution that has been important to the development of computer music. See <http://www.ircam.fr> for more information.

tive does not see the need for a name because it does not recognize the possibility of otherness, or at least of a serious threat from musical others. Western art music, the avant-garde, new music, experimental music, contemporary classical music, new concert music—all of these seem either too limiting, anachronistically awkward, or culturally inappropriate. Therefore, for the sake of this discussion I have few alternatives but to keep the definition above, although it is necessarily imperfect. However, some brief historical background will prove useful in further contextualizing the community under consideration.

It should be kept in mind, first of all, that the avant-garde is not historically synonymous with high art, although it was able to achieve the political status of high art for the period from approximately the late 1940s until the dissolution of cultural highness in the 1990s. Before that date, avant-garde music had to fight for acceptance from the high art community, which maintained its own ongoing stream of composers that some might argue continues unabated until the present day. Music history has smoothed over this distinction, but the composers who started their careers in the first two decades of the twentieth century (the period in which the avant-garde first appeared), did not necessarily see themselves as part of the same tradition. Igor Stravinsky, writing on Richard Strauss, for example: “I would like to admit all Strauss operas to whichever purgatory punishes triumphant banality.”<sup>2</sup> Stravinsky started out as a successful high-art neo-classicist but moved further and further into the avant-garde, completely embracing Arnold Schoenberg’s twelve-tone technique in the 1950s. This makes him a prime example of this shift from high art to the avant-garde in the musical power hierarchy of the last century.

On the opposite end of the spectrum is Krzysztof Penderecki, whose famous avant-garde work, *Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima*, won him the first prize at the International Rostropovich Competition of Composers in 1961. However, since the late 1970s his music has become increasingly neo-Romantic, eschewing the dissonant atonal techniques of his earlier years in favour of traditional musical sounds and forms. Should he be considered an avant-garde composer, or perhaps only in his earlier period? I do not think such distinctions are particularly useful, but his example does show the complexity of the relationship between high art and the avant garde. It is

---

<sup>2</sup>Stravinsky and Craft, *Conversations*, 75.

impossible to draw clear historical lines, or to claim (as is often done) a linear progression from high art to the avant-garde.

Another important point to be made is that avant-garde music never attained the economic success that earlier high art music did. Beethoven earned his living on commissions and the publication of his music; Arnold Schoenberg, on the other hand, did not. Before emigrating to the United States in 1933, Schoenberg was on a lifetime subsidy from the German government (terminated by the Nazis because he was Jewish). After emigrating, he was forced to teach composition for the rest of his life; first privately, then at the University of Southern California (USC), and finally at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA). Schoenberg received only four commissions from the time he moved to Los Angeles in 1934 until his death in 1951.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, high art was able to earn a lay respect from the general public that the avant-garde never has. The large concert halls that began appearing in Europe and North America in the middle of the nineteenth century could not be filled entirely by the ranks of the bourgeoisie. Capitalists recognized that cultivating a respect for high culture among the middle class would allow them to fill ever-larger halls and make ever-larger profits.<sup>4</sup> They were successful in this endeavour. To this day, recordings and orchestral concerts of Beethoven and Mozart are still profitable, but recordings and orchestral concerts of Schoenberg or Webern have always been break-even propositions at best.

Another problematic aspect of the relationship between the avant-garde and high art is that many avant-garde composers have taken their inspirations from a variety of non-European or non-high art sources. John Cage, for example, often talked about the influence of Zen Buddhism on his development of aleatoric compositional techniques, and some of his first successful compositions were written for pieces of junk that he had transformed into percussion instruments with his friends. To further complicate the issue, Cage was never very proficient at the techniques of European high art music: when he studied with Schoenberg in 1934, the latter told him he would face “serious obstacles” because of his poor grasp of traditional harmony.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup>Crawford, “Schoenberg in Los Angeles,” 10.

<sup>4</sup>For a good discussion of this development, see Thompson, *Soundscape of Modernity*.

<sup>5</sup>Jeff Goldberg, “John Cage Interviewed,” 55–56, quoted in Crawford, “Schoenberg in Los Angeles,” 20.

Yet Schoenberg had a respect for Cage's creative compositional approach that is paradoxical considering Schoenberg's insistence on the importance of a eurocentric music education, and especially its harmonic aspects.

Clearly, the above is only a brief introduction to the issue of definition, but it highlights several key points. The avant-garde community has never been a static entity, and the complexity and diversity of the practices it can incorporate is one of its defining characteristics. Furthermore, while the avant-garde cannot simply be considered the high art music of the twentieth century, it cannot be completely separated from twentieth-century high art music either.

However, within all of its diverse practices, a common thread in avant-garde music is the cultural-value belief that I have identified above. This is true whether discussing the rock-inspired brass-and-bass-guitar music of Louis Andriessen, Philip Glass's minimalism, or Milton Babbitt's set-theoretical pieces; and this commonality is the reason that I have chosen to use the cultural-value belief for this discussion. Nearly all composers in the avant-garde until very recently would have agreed that their music is or can be high art, that it holds a kind of unique cultural value for listeners that is not present in other kinds of music, and that there are pieces in the genre and/or their oeuvre that are worth preserving. Furthermore, the cultural-value belief encapsulates many of the traditional values of the avant-garde: respect for the high art tradition, elitism, innovation, originality, cultural progress, the preservation of value, and hierarchy, to name a few. These are values that have become increasingly problematic with the disappearance of cultural highness in the 1990s and the subsequent technological developments of the early twenty-first century.

### **Cultural Highness and the Cold War**

In order to create unique cultural value, the avant-garde has traditionally relied on the concept of cultural highness: for our purposes, the idea that certain kinds of music have a higher intrinsic value than others. Avant-garde composers were able to do this for a variety of reasons, but cultural and political forces during the Cold War played a major role. Furthermore, these forces were able to lull the avant-garde into a false sense of security that led it to take them for granted.

When the Cold War ended, cultural highness—already on the decline—disappeared completely, leaving the avant-garde in the difficult position of having to find new ways of producing unique cultural value. To trace this development in detail would require a book-length study, but I will nevertheless present an outline of the avant-garde's Cold War roots here. This will prove useful in setting the stage for the shift in values that we see now in the community.

First of all, I want to address the idea of uniqueness. This is a difficult concept when it comes to the arts because it has been used *de rigueur* as a marketing buzzword for almost every piece of music ever sold. In certain senses, a large part of the music in the world is unique, because it differs from other kinds or pieces of music. This difference might be as extreme as disparate tuning systems, concepts of meter, social function, and instrumentation (Cambodian court music versus European art music, for example); or it might be as superficial as the differing permutations of similar materials (two piano sonatas by Mozart). However, this is not a useful definition. The uniqueness that nearly all music possesses is in reality a kind of sameness; it is a characteristic of music *in general* which I would prefer to call variegation. Clearly, avant-garde composers would hope to possess something more than simple variegation, because variegation does not imply any particular value. For our purposes therefore, true musical uniqueness requires the following three characteristics:

1. The distinction must draw attention to itself; if it did not, it would not have been recognized as unique.
2. The distinction must be in a separate category from other distinctions, in order to avoid the problem of simple variegation.
3. The distinction must create inherent value that cannot be found elsewhere. A lack of inherent value would remove the reason for drawing attention to the distinction, and if this value were to be found elsewhere, it would place the distinction in a category with other distinctions, creating simple variegation.

For example, the possession of cultural highness is a valid type of musical uniqueness. Being the official music of an established power hierarchy is an attention-drawing characteristic

by the very nature of the fact that such a position implies greater access to resources and political influence. The possession of cultural highness also places a music in a separate category, as there is one music that is high, and many others that are not. Cultural highness also creates inherent value, because the favoured music of the establishment necessarily incurs specific political benefits that cannot be found elsewhere. This example also makes it clear why the avant-garde would want to rely on cultural highness for as long as possible: it is a tremendously powerful validator.

The politics and cultural climate of the Cold War made it easier for the Western avant-garde to monopolize on cultural highness. By 1950, the avant-garde had managed to co-opt the political status of high art music, if not its economic status. As discussed above, the alignment of the avant-garde with high art music was not immediate and never complete; yet, perhaps as a reaction against totalitarianism in Europe, postwar composers suddenly found themselves in positions of influence.

For example, Schoenberg's retirement from UCLA in 1944 left him in relative poverty, with only a \$38/month pension to survive on. The untimely deaths of certain of his colleagues left him with few musical opportunities, and in 1945 his application for a Guggenheim fellowship was rejected.<sup>6</sup> In order to support his family, Schoenberg reverted to private teaching. Yet in 1949, only four years later, Schoenberg was so well respected that the city of Los Angeles threw a celebration in honour of his seventy-fifth birthday, including several full programs of his music. Albert Goldberg of the *Los Angeles Times* wrote: "There is a large and willing public for [Schoenberg's] music in our town. . . . There were more people on hand and more enthusiasm over what they heard than the most sanguine prophet would have dared to predict."<sup>7</sup>

Part of the reason for this change may have been that the alignment of the avant-garde with the legitimized high-art music tradition made it an ideal political tool for the West. In the "Age of Anxiety," the flourishing of a difficult avant-garde music helped to underscore the "freedom" of the West—a freedom to write music so complex that it was beyond the grasp

---

<sup>6</sup>Crawford, "Schoenberg in Los Angeles," 30.

<sup>7</sup>Albert Goldberg, Concert Review, quoted in *ibid.*, 31.

of most people (or at least the desire to attempt to grasp it). Clearly, this is a metaphorical explanation, but it does help to explain the generation of avant-garde composers funded through tenured university positions in America. It is also supported by contemporaneous writing; German musicologist Theodor Adorno, for instance: “It is not a matter of modernistic mentality but of objective freedom: it demands that the new not be *ab ovo* dismissed”;<sup>8</sup> or Stravinsky: “We hear much about Russian virtuoso violinists, pianists, orchestras. The point is, of what are they virtuosi? Instruments are nothing in themselves; the literature they play creates them.”<sup>9</sup> In postwar West Germany, this process was even more transparently political: the US army hired American composer Eliot Carter as a consultant on the use of high art (including the avant-garde) for re-education and “denazification.”<sup>10</sup> This led, through American military involvement, to the German system of radio taxation, which created huge budgets for the commissioning and broadcast of avant-garde music.<sup>11</sup>

Another reason for the change in reception that the avant-garde received mid-last century may have to do with what David Brooks calls middlebrow culture. This was the general attitude among the middle class that high art was something worth trying to understand; culturing oneself through the tastes of the artistic elite was thought to be inherently valuable:

The newsweeklies would have six-page spreads on things like Abstract Expressionism. There was a long piece in 1956 in *Time*, for example, about the Kitchen Sink School of British painters, as well as analyses of painters who are not exactly household names, like Charles Burchfield and Stanton Macdonald-Wright.<sup>12</sup>

Coupled with the rhetoric of the Cold War, it is easy to see how this attitude toward cultural self-betterment could be extended to avant-garde art: the avant-garde was becoming the cultural embodiment of the Western ideals of freedom and progress, ideals that were highly important to the culture of the time and therefore worth promoting. In fact, the middlebrow was so pervasive that the avant-garde did not see the danger of attacking the purportedly “diluting” effects it had on high art.<sup>13</sup> Cultural highness was taken for granted; the only issue at hand was the pollution

---

<sup>8</sup>Adorno, *Sociology of Music*, 179.

<sup>9</sup>Stravinsky and Craft, *Conversations*, 114.

<sup>10</sup>Beal, “The Army, the Airwaves, and the Avant-Garde,” 474.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 480–487.

<sup>12</sup>Brooks, “Joe Strauss.”

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

of high culture through its imperfect adoption by the middle class.

The literature amply testifies to the way that cultural highness was taken for granted by the avant-garde. For instance, parallel to the middlebrow issue is an extreme disregard for non-art music. A good example comes from Adorno, writing on popular music: “If the concept of decay. . . is justified anywhere it is in popular music. There it is tangible and precisely determinable.”<sup>14</sup> Jazz gets only a slightly more favourable representation: “Jazz does not reflect whichever reactive forms of the epoch may have entered into it, nor does it lend them a free voice. What it does is duplicate them in humble agreement.”<sup>15</sup> Stravinsky also has an unflattering opinion of jazz, despite the fact that he had admitted to using it as an inspiration in some of his music:

[Jazz improvisation] is a kind of masturbation that never arrives anywhere (of course) but which supplies the “artificial” genesis the art requires. The point of interest is instrumental virtuosity, instrumental personality, not melody, not harmony, and certainly not rhythm.<sup>16</sup>

From our twenty-first-century perspective, these attitudes seem unreasonably elitist. Yet Adorno, Stravinsky, and most of their generation had little reason to show any regard for “low” kinds of music: cultural highness was an assumed validator for the avant-garde they were associated with.

As a final example, we can also find cultural highness implicit in the scientism that characterized a good deal of academic composing mid-last century. The following, by American composer Milton Babbitt, is representative:

I dare suggest that the composer would do himself and his music an immediate and eventual service by total, resolute, and voluntary withdrawal from this public world to one of private performance and electronic media, with its very real possibility of complete elimination of the public and social aspects of musical composition.<sup>17</sup>

Babbitt is arguing that the development of music should be treated in the same way as the development of mathematics or the sciences, and that lay criticism and the reactions of the

---

<sup>14</sup>Adorno, *Sociology of Music*, 22.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 33.

<sup>16</sup>Stravinsky and Craft, *Conversations*, 116.

<sup>17</sup>Babbitt, “Who Cares if You Listen?”, 40.

public should have little or no bearing on the work of avant-garde composers. Music then becomes just like any other area of scholarly research: innovation and progress are more important than enjoyment or understanding by non-specialists. Because of assumed cultural highness, the cultural value of the music is taken as intrinsic and the subsequent necessity for the development and progression of the avant-garde makes both elitism justifiable and the audience largely inconsequential.

Unfortunately for avant-garde composers, their reliance on cultural highness and attacks against middlebrow and low musical cultures had a severe deleterious effect on the community over the long run. While composers were busy rationalizing their increased isolationism and irrelevance to culture at large, the interest in middlebrow culture was waning across the Western world. Throughout the 1960s and most of the 1970s, we see increases in arts funding in the United States and Canada,<sup>18</sup> the period when middlebrow culture and the Cold War were at their height. Active support by these two countries that traditionally have taken a hands-off approach to cultural funding is indicative of the general attitude at the time.

But into the 1980s and 1990s, the general belief in cultural highness was disappearing. The exact reasons for this shift are too complex to be considered here, but no doubt the end of the Cold War and changes in immigration patterns played a role. In this period in Germany, the primary source of immigrants became Turkey; in France, it was North Africa. In Canada and the United States, increasing numbers of Middle-Eastern, Latin American, and Asian immigrants changed the traditional European/African/Hispanic proportions in the population. This diversity, among other factors, probably played a role in people's changing perspectives. In addition, the unification of Germany and the fall of the Soviet Union called into question the traditional us-versus-them narrative of cultural highness. Suddenly former enemies were colleagues, if not friends and relatives—the Western world was forced to confront the humanness of its other for the first time in almost fifty years.

Whatever the exact causes, a report on the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), delivered to the United States Congress in the fall of 1990, testifies to this change in cultural

---

<sup>18</sup>See Schuster, "Public and Private Funding," and Hankins, "Toward a National Theatre," for specific figures.

context. The preface to the report references both the exigencies of the Cold War and the subsequent shift in cultural attitudes: “When the National Endowment for the Arts was established twenty-five years ago, its authors saw a special problem in ensuring artistic freedom for institutions and individuals receiving NEA funding.”<sup>19</sup> We see here another reference to the Cold War “freedom” mentality, yet two paragraphs later the report has this to say: “On certain social and cultural issues, the nation has become more polarized; such tensions continue to play an important role in our politics. Relations among various cultural, ethnic, racial and religious groups continue to pose serious challenges to American institutions.”<sup>20</sup> Regardless of the exact nature of these “serious challenges,” this statement shows that there was a perception of changing values in the general culture of the United States; otherwise, Congress would not have commissioned a report on the NEA.

The authors of the report recommend certain additions to the preamble of the NEA charter that give us particular insights into the nature of the “social and cultural issues” referenced above:

(1) that the arts and the humanities belong to all the people of the United States;

...

(9) that the arts and the humanities reflect the high place accorded by the American people to the nation’s rich cultural heritage and to the fostering of mutual respect for the diverse beliefs and values of all persons and groups.<sup>21</sup>

The authors of the report claim that these items are necessary to “restate what the founders of the NEA may have taken for granted,”<sup>22</sup> but my reading is somewhat different. Given the middlebrow cultural climate of the 1960s and 70s and the political exigencies of the Cold War, there was no reason to advance the claim that the arts belong to “all people,” nor was there the necessity to show respect for diverse beliefs and values—the statements I have quoted above by Adorno, Stravinsky, and Babbitt make this attitude evidently clear. Instead, the trend identified by the authors of the NEA report is the increasing inadequacy of cultural highness to justify the actions of artists.

---

<sup>19</sup>“Report to Congress,” 13.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 51.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 50.

With the end of the Cold War, the avant-garde could no longer rely on political influence or assumed cultural highness to provide unique cultural value for its music. And predictably, without these valuers, the active support of avant-garde music became “a role which universities seem less and less able or willing to assume,” in the words of Milton Babbitt.<sup>23</sup> Nor was it only the universities that were changing, it was culture in general. Even if the War on Terror renews an interest in arts funding by Western governments, as suggested by Canadian author Margaret Atwood,<sup>24</sup> this interest will no longer privilege the avant-garde because the avant-garde no longer holds cultural highness. All kinds of music can now be cultural ambassadors for the West, and therefore all can compete for cultural funding. In some cases cultural funding even privileges “low” music; for example, the Foundation Assisting Canadian Talent on Recordings (FACTOR, founded in 1982), which is a granting organization for the production of commercial recordings. Only a small portion of these are of classical music, let alone of the avant-garde variety.

### **Alternative Uniqueness: Enrichment Through Understanding**

The effect of the nearly simultaneous disappearance of both the political influence and cultural highness of the avant-garde has left composers with the need to find alternative arguments for unique cultural value in their music. Of course, composers have always done this anyway; although we cannot ignore the political nature of Cold War avant-garde composition, it would be overly cynical to assume that these composers were driven primarily by political motives. Nevertheless, in recent years, there has been a renewed effort to refine non-political arguments, perhaps with the realization that cultural highness has disappeared. The following is a typical Cold War example, from a time when the avant-garde still had a strong political valuer. It is taken from a pre-concert talk by historian Jacques Barzun at the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center in 1961:

I suggest, to begin with, that we are not here to like or approve but to understand.  
And the first step to understanding a new art is to try to imagine why the maker

---

<sup>23</sup>Babbitt, *Words about Music*, 163, quoted in Brody, “Music for the Masses,” 167.

<sup>24</sup>Atwood, “Pay the Piano Player.”

wants it the way it is. That is interesting in itself, even if we ultimately disown the product. . . [M]ake the assumption, first, that the old style—whatever it is—has exhausted its possibilities. . . . I do not suggest that you should be convinced that your favorite music is obsolete. I invite you to *assume* that it may be.<sup>25</sup>

Within this quotation is the assumption of an aesthetic teleology, that music is progressing forward. This makes possible obsolescence, which is predicated on this idea of progress. Obsolescence also presumes a single unified culture, as listeners from diverse musical backgrounds could not be expected to receive the same benefits from music; even in the 1960s this was well established, as evinced by Babbitt’s specialist attitude toward composition quoted above. Given this framework, it is not surprising that there is no consideration of non-European traditions—“whatever it is” is defined later in the same passage as Bach, Mozart, Haydn, Lully, Handel, Berlioz, and Wagner. Clearly there is some room for refinement.

More recent examples demonstrate greater cultural sensitivity, especially in the assumption that other (non-European) forms of music can have cultural value. However, the argument is still weighted toward a progress-oriented teleology. For example, Toronto-based pianist Gregory Oh, writing on his MySpace blog in defense of modern composers, says:

[Cultural enrichment through understanding] can apply to many forms of music, but especially new music, because the many different languages that composers are using today are not the same languages that composers used even twenty years ago.<sup>26</sup>

The use of the word “especially” is particularly informative in this passage, as it makes it clear that Oh is claiming a greater degree of cultural value for avant-garde music, although his “different languages” rationale would apply equally well to most forms of non-historical music. The continued use of the term “new music” for the avant-garde is also interesting—as if there were only one musical tradition, the European high-art tradition—although the standardization that this term has received makes Oh’s usage entirely understandable. I do not think his intent is to be exclusive or elitist; “new music” is simply a frequently-employed genre label.

An interesting addition to the understanding-is-valuable argument is Oh’s rationale for examining kinds of music that do not appeal to us:

---

<sup>25</sup>Barzun, “Introductory Remarks,” 368.

<sup>26</sup>Oh, “In Praise of Newer Music.”

A colleague of mine once used the argument that new music has never touched him emotionally, whereas there are works in the standard repertoire that can move him to tears. This argument never made sense to me personally, because I've cried watching *Grey's Anatomy* and reruns of *Friends*, and a whole lot of manipulative Hollywood movies.<sup>27</sup>

Both Oh and Barzun present a fundamentally reasonable argument for listening to avant-garde music, namely that through trying to understand something new, we may learn something that is of value to us (understanding-value). Oh also makes the point that emotional reactions can be deceiving (though who is to say that the experience of the emotional reaction does not have value in itself?), and sometimes those things that require more effort are more worthwhile in the long run. However, this line of reasoning is unable address the core issue of providing unique cultural value for the avant-garde. At its best, it actually does the opposite: the understanding-value argument provides cultural value for *all* kinds of music—in a context where cultural highness is not admissible, a listener can obtain value from trying to understand any piece of music from any tradition. There is no evidence to suggest that understanding-value is limited to the avant-garde, or even that it is best experienced through the avant-garde. Thus, the understanding-value argument fails to provide unique cultural value; it can only provide variegation.

In fact, it may be more difficult to gain understanding-value through the avant-garde, because it relies on a kind of listening experience that is increasingly uncommon: the concert-hall performance. Although recordings of avant-garde music are readily available, the vast majority of composers continue to write music, whether for acoustic or electronic instruments, that is ideally experienced in the concert hall. There is therefore an assumption of a culture of concert-going in the creation of avant-garde recordings (though I must acknowledge the many notable exceptions to this general trend). Many of these recordings are either live recordings of concert performances, or are created with the express goal of simulating a “natural” concert sound as closely as possible. This means that most avant-garde recordings are intended as second-bests to the concert experience; or for those recordings that are not, the onus is on the listener to listen in

---

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

a high-fidelity sonic environment: quiet, acoustically-tuned spaces, shielded from outside noise; and on expensive stereo equipment with a balanced frequency spectrum and large dynamic range. These are study guides—they exist to help the initiated gain a deeper understanding of the repertoire, and the initiated have the necessary experience to filter out any distractions that might exist because of imperfect listening environments. But such recordings are poor tools for introducing new listeners to the experience of avant-garde music; they require too much training to be practical, and therefore new listeners are unlikely to hear let alone understand what is most valuable in the music.

Contrarily, in popular music the recording has become the ideal experience, and popular musicians often try to imitate their recordings as closely as possible in concert.<sup>28</sup> Ever since the advent of commercial broadcasting in the United States, popular musicians have been adapting themselves and their music to recording technology, to the experience of listening via loud-speaker. Does it not then stand to reason that there is greater potential for understanding-value in a genre that is meant to be experienced in a way that is more commonly accessible to the listeners of a culture? To be fair, the greater effort required to understand through an avant-garde recording, or to seek out and attend avant-garde concerts, may provide certain listeners with a greater understanding-value pay-out, but without cultural highness this is not guaranteed to be the case, it is just one of the possibilities.

### **The Disappearance of the Possibility of Uniqueness**

The inability of today's avant-garde, divorced from political and economic influence, to create unique and intrinsic cultural value is one of the greatest challenges to the community's values. Nevertheless, between the dissolution of cultural highness in the 1990s and the early twenty-first century, composers could still claim the *possibility* of unique cultural value (although they could not demonstrate it definitively) through several advantages that I will describe below. Since the

---

<sup>28</sup>As an aside, it seems possible that the predilection for live concert videos on YouTube may change this trend. As listeners grow more accustomed to seeing videos of concert performances that were never meant to be broadcast, they may gain a greater appreciation for the concert mode of listening and begin to demand it. Alternatively, YouTube videos themselves may simply become a separate kind of listening experience.

development of internet music technology in the twenty-first century, however, these advantages have been removed, not only for the avant-garde, but for all forms of music. The possibility of creating unique cultural value has been wrestled from the hands of the musician and placed solely in those of the listener.

For avant-garde composers to reasonably entertain the possibility of unique cultural value without recourse to cultural highness, there would need to be something objectively unique about either the physical acoustical elements of their music and/or its organization, or the context in which the music is experienced; in other words, the community's effect on making the experience uniquely valuable. Both of these were possibilities in the past, but are no longer so.

The first possibility was largely plausible until the early twentieth century, before electricity was used in music. A Mahler-style symphony orchestra circa 1900 had the ability to create a range of frequencies and loudness through its 100-plus musicians that was unequaled by any other form of music at the time. The piccolo could play higher and the double-bass lower than any folk or popular instruments in Europe, and with respect to loudness, even the gamelan ensembles of Southeast Asia or the drums of West Africa would have trouble competing with full symphonic brass and percussion sections. However, high art music no longer holds this monopoly on acoustics. Music technology has allowed both high and low music to adopt the entire audible range of sound (and beyond) into their vocabularies, and rock concerts are frequently much louder than symphonic ones.

Nor are dissonant sonorities, complex rhythms, or other difficult organizational principles limited to the avant-garde anymore; so-called noise bands and electronica DJs have adopted these materials as well. In fact, this adoption of what were previously avant-garde-only materials has caused new exposure for certain artists. As American composer Barry Schrader writes: "I have found the terms 'classical,' 'popular,' 'jazz,' 'electronica,' 'new wave,' 'industrial,' 'experimental,' 'contemporary,' 'computer music,' 'acousmatic,' and more applied to my works."<sup>29</sup> Organizational paradigms of the avant-garde have been assimilated into general musical culture, which perhaps explains why it is so difficult to shock contemporary audiences with purely musi-

---

<sup>29</sup>Schrader, "15 Questions."

cal devices. The possibility of a purely acoustical explanation for the cultural uniqueness of the avant-garde no longer exists.

The second argument for possible uniqueness, based on the context of the musical experience, was possible until much more recently. As discussed above, before the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of cultural highness, avant-garde music could claim a context-based uniqueness in that it was the official music of the establishment. This was true both in terms of the power the avant-garde held and the resources it commanded from cultural and university budgets. It is unfortunate for the avant-garde that both its political and cultural-highness valuers disappeared at approximately the same time, but the result has been that the context of the avant-garde musical experience is not necessarily any more privileged than that of any other musical experience. Budgets for the avant-garde have shrunk, and at the same time, commercial concert productions have gotten more sophisticated. This places the avant-garde in the same context-based category as several other kinds of music, and, as I have previously argued, categorization necessarily transforms uniqueness into variegation. In fact, the context of the avant-garde musical experience now has many things in common with those of other genres. The modern-day indie rock and jazz scenes are a good example. With the avant-garde, they share an emphasis on critical listening, appreciation by a specialized dedicated community, the lack of financial incentives to make music, a generally limited set of instruments, and so on.

These arguments aside, there is one other potential source of unique cultural value that should be considered. Without political, economic, acoustical, or context-based uniqueness, a community of musical creators could still claim (though certainly not prove) unique cultural value through greater access to, and hence greater potential for the understanding of, cultural resources. Until very recently, the avant-garde could claim such a privilege through the recordings, scores, and scholarly resources of academia. As academics, or at least as musicians with strong ties to academia, avant-garde composers could and did study a wider range of music than the average listener. Most Western listeners in the 1990s would have had to extend significant efforts to learn about kinds of music that they were not exposed to, and this gave the composer a simple advantage in terms of the quantity of readily-available resources. Note that this does

not guarantee unique cultural value, it only makes it possible. Access to the greatest quantity of cultural resources fulfills the requirements for musical uniqueness in the same way that the size of the orchestra circa 1900 did, albeit more abstractly.

With the flourishing of online music distribution, however, composers no longer have such exclusive access to cultural resources. The libraries have not disappeared, but they have been complemented by a new repository of information that is even larger: the internet. This makes “methods for accessing a large number of cultural resources” into a category with two items: libraries and the internet. It therefore ceases to function as a possible source of unique cultural value. A simple Google search for musical examples from virtually any tradition comes up with audio examples.<sup>30</sup> Online communities such as Last.fm<sup>31</sup> collect metadata on the listening habits of their members and offer suggestions for new material, creating the possibility for endless personalized exploration and variegation. To be sure, any curious listener would still need to do significant research to develop a nuanced understanding of an unfamiliar musical culture, but a nuanced understanding is beside the point. It is the quantity of information, and not the quality, accuracy, or authenticity of this information, that is relevant. Even in the case of developing a superficial appreciation for an unfamiliar genre, the online experience fragments the musical background of twenty-first-century listeners and creates the potential for an extremely varied and rich set of musical interpretations. The collected plurality of the world’s musical communities, made accessible to all via the internet, has democratized access to cultural uniqueness. Anybody with the desire to have a unique cultural experience can build one through the combination of as many kinds of listening as s/he chooses, and can do so from the comfort of his or her own home. Unique cultural value becomes impossible for genres in the twenty-first century because cultural value is now entirely situated in the experiences of the individual listener.

Clearly, this does not mean that all listeners will have unique cultural experiences; tools such as Last.fm or music-blog search engine The Hype Machine<sup>32</sup> do not create cultural value,

---

<sup>30</sup>I recently tried this with Peruvian music and Japanese folk music as a proof of concept [12 February 2007].

<sup>31</sup>“Last.fm,” <http://www.last.fm>.

<sup>32</sup>“The Hype Machine,” <http://hypem.com>.

they only facilitate access to it. Most experiences will remain superficial and banal, but easy access to such a wide range of cultural resources is likely to increase the diversity of musical experiences in general, raising the bar for cultural uniqueness beyond the scope of anything that the avant-garde or any other individual form of music could do on its own. This is perhaps also the reason that there have been no culture-changing superstars in popular music since Nirvana; perhaps musical culture has just become too fragmented and pluralistic to be dominated by any single point of view. In any case, the avant-garde used to have a uniquely large pool of information to draw upon, and now anyone with a computer and an internet connection has a much larger pool of information at his or her disposal.

### **The Effects of Old Values in New Times: Repetition**

At this point, I wish to clarify that the inability of the avant-garde to claim unique cultural value does not prevent it from claiming any cultural value whatsoever, nor from being uniquely relevant to particular listeners. I am only claiming that the responsibility for unique cultural value has been shifted to the listener, and that this shift has made the cultural-value belief an inadequate model for avant-garde composers. Individual types or pieces of music still have the potential to create cultural value through variegation; there is just no way to quantify this value or its uniqueness, which will vary from listener to listener. Nevertheless, this situation does require the avant-garde to change its behaviour in certain respects, as the uncritical imposition of readings developed during the period of cultural highness can actually make music *less* valuable in certain cases.

A good example of this phenomenon can be seen through the traditional negative attitude toward repetitive music in the avant-garde. Susan McClary contextualizes the origins of this attitude in Schoenberg's desire to avoid the encroaching totalitarianism of the Nazis: repetition lulls listeners into passive acceptance of musical ideas, and "when audiences give up the admittedly difficult task of critical thinking, then the path is paved for demagogues like Hitler or Stalin."<sup>33</sup> Postwar German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen builds upon this attitude, re-

---

<sup>33</sup>McClary, "Structures of Time," 292.

jecting repetitive music because he sees it as “militaristic.”<sup>34</sup> For Stockhausen, repetition is an unwelcome reminder of the military music he experienced as a Hitler Youth, and therefore he understandably equates repetition with the destruction of cultural value. This is evident in a review Stockhausen was asked to make of several electronica artists’ music in 1995:

I don’t appreciate at all this permanent repetitive language. It is like someone who is stuttering all the time, and can’t get words out of his mouth. I think musicians should have very concise figures and not rely on this fashionable psychology. I don’t like psychology whatsoever: using music like a drug is stupid. . . as soon as it becomes just a means for ambiance, as we say, environment, or for being used for certain purposes, then music becomes a whore. . .<sup>35</sup>

Aphex Twin’s (Richard James) reaction to these comments in the same review is eloquent in its insight and brevity: “Do you reckon he can dance?”<sup>36</sup> Stockhausen does not consider that the electronica music he is reviewing might adopt a different culture’s valuation of repetition, a valuation that is far-removed from European totalitarianism. Given electronica’s roots in popular American dance music, specifically techno and disco, it is reasonable to assume that Aphex Twin’s valuation comes from the African-American tradition. In this tradition, repetition has a vastly different meaning:

In black culture, repetition means that the thing *circulates* (exactly in the manner of any flow, including capital flows) there in an equilibrium. . . . In black culture, the thing (the ritual, the dance, the beat) is “there for you to pick it up when you come back to get it.”<sup>37</sup>

Whereas such a circulation in Schoenberg’s or Stockhausen’s view would represent either a regression (not moving forward culturally) or a progressive building of tension (being lulled into totalitarianism), African-based repetition represents the aesthetic beauty of balance. The lack of linear accumulation, the “circulation,” allows repetition to be appreciated in a non-developmental way. This type of repetition functions as a familiar reference point, from which deviations from the pattern can be proposed in order to create musical value.

---

<sup>34</sup>Stockhausen, *Cosmic Music*, 13.

<sup>35</sup>Stockhausen et al., “Technocrats,” 382.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 383.

<sup>37</sup>Snead, “Repetition,” 67.

I am not trying to argue that Stockhausen should compose repetitive music, nor do I think his interpretation of repetition is invalid. Replacing a European interpretation with an African one would simply create a new hierarchy, and Stockhausen's reading of repetition did lead him to develop his own variegated (I can no longer say unique) kind of music. Furthermore, Stockhausen is highly regarded as a composer both within and outside of the avant-garde community—it was for this reason, after all, that he was asked to write the review in question in the first place. Unfortunately however, his reactions to Aphex Twin et al.'s music demonstrate more about his own limitations as a listener than they do about the music itself. Stockhausen is a highly intelligent musician with a long history of problematizing musical culture. His refusal to even entertain the possibility that a parallel interpretation of repetition could now be valid is therefore puzzling.

Furthermore, if we reject the idea of cultural highness, then the willingness to entertain parallel interpretations becomes central to the issue of creating cultural value. With no standards to rely upon, awareness is one of the few tools available to us for bringing cultural value into our music; and inversely, imposition of an aesthetic reading reduces our ability to appreciate new forms of cultural value. This is especially true when traditionally distinct cultural groups interact. A good example is DJ Spooky (Paul D. Miller), an African-American musician with an interest in the avant-garde; he talks specifically about the difficulties he has had in reconciling the two interpretations of repetition discussed above.<sup>38</sup> But what if we consider listeners that are most familiar with the African-American tradition and that have no interest in such a reconciliation? They are unlikely by themselves to find a path into the cultural value of Stockhausen's music, and that is fine—why should all people appreciate all music? However, the efforts of composers like DJ Spooky have the potential to create such a path, through what would have been considered “dilution” in the middlebrow model. Without cultural highness, dilution (making less potent) is not possible, but variegation and transformation are, and these are paths different listeners may explore in different ways. DJ Spooky therefore does no disservice to the cultural value of the avant-garde through his informed hybridizations.

---

<sup>38</sup>Miller, “Erasures,” 352.

Inversely, comments such as those above by Stockhausen have the potential to destroy cultural value, because cultural value is no longer situated in the music: it is situated in the listeners whose values he is attacking. Coupled with cultural highness, such comments might have motivated listeners to challenge their cultural “deficiencies” through the middlebrow model, creating value for Stockhausen’s music. Without cultural highness, however, these same attitudes are more likely to repel listeners and justify the complete dismissal of his point of view. Therefore, behaviour that arguably could have created value for the avant-garde during the period of cultural highness now has the opposite effect, while behaviour that was previously viewed as destructive may in fact turn out to be highly beneficial.

To be clear, I am not advocating an uncritical musical eclecticism, I am advocating greater tolerance. Clearly, Stockhausen’s music still possesses cultural value, but not in the same way as when he composed it—no piece of music remains culturally static; this is why musical canons are constantly being revised. However, in a context without cultural highness, the refusal to consider alternative value systems puts us in danger of undermining our own creative efforts. Composers today are faced with the necessity to *assume* that other readings and interpretations may hold as much or more value than their own, and they must periodically examine these readings. They might still write the same music regardless, but without cultural highness, this music will have a different kind of cultural value.

Furthermore, by refusing to consider the alternative readings that present themselves to us, we are likely to miss out on cultural value altogether. The music-history textbooks testify to this fact: discussions of Stockhausen’s music tend to focus on his earlier works from the 1950s and 60s, the golden era of cultural highness. In fact, modernist music after 1980 rarely receives any consideration at all. Even more informative, Stockhausen himself seems not to consider his more recent music; the suggested listening he offers to the electronica artists discussed above consists of the following pieces: *Hymnen* (1969), *Gesang der Jünglinge* (1955/56), *Zyklus* (1959), and *Kontakte* (1958–60). With the exception of *Hymnen*, these are all from the start of his career, and nothing is within 25 years of the review. Electronica artist Daniel Pemberton even notes that although his music is labeled as “old-fashioned” by Stockhausen, the suggested “modern”

listening he receives was written before he was born.<sup>39</sup> Stockhausen has not stopped composing music, so why does he rely solely on his earlier works to provide examples? Perhaps it is the tacit admission that the lack of cultural highness demands a different model.

### **Conclusions: Changing Values, Changing Behaviour**

What I am suggesting is the necessity for a radical departure from the traditional values of the avant-garde, and in fact this demands that the idea of avant-gardeness itself be redefined. Values such as elitism, progress, hierarchy—even the simple preservation of cultural value—may need to be abandoned. However, as nothing can be taken as given, we can expect to see a wide range of reactions from composers, from no change to complete change. One possibility is that composers will just give up, and surely some have. Another possibility is that composers who achieved some level of success before the dissolution of cultural highness will continue as they did before, hanging onto the institutions that support them as long as possible. A last possibility, and more interesting from my perspective, is that composers will find new solutions to the challenges of twenty-first-century musical culture. I will therefore look at a very few examples of composers that have come up with interesting adaptations, eschewing of course any claims to predictive or prescriptive ability. With no standards for cultural value, anything other than description would be overly rash.

However, before I can proceed, I need to re-qualify the term avant-garde, as I am sure one or more of the composers to be discussed below would object to the label. Now that we have removed the idea of cultural highness and re-situated cultural value in the experiences of the listener, by avant-garde I wish only to denote a composer that has some kind of relationship to the twentieth-century avant-garde tradition. The composer may work within the aesthetic framework of the last century, or s/he may align himself or herself more strongly with other traditions. Regardless however, all of these composers have received training, whether formally or informally, in the institutions of the avant-garde: university music programs, conservatories, summer music courses, interactions with orchestras and avant-garde ensembles, participation

---

<sup>39</sup>Stockhausen et al., “Technocrats,” 384.

in avant-garde concerts or music festivals, and so forth. I do not want to imply any further judgment than this.

I also want to affirm that I do not agree with attitudes such as those of composer Barry Schrader, who claims that high art music and the avant-garde are dying.<sup>40</sup> Nor do I agree with composer/performer Ben Neill that pop music will simply envelop the entirety of art music creation.<sup>41</sup> I have not found any evidence to suggest either of these trends, and they furthermore run counter to the forces that dissolved cultural highness and created the increasingly pluralistic musical culture of the twenty-first century. We have never had easier or greater access to so much music from so many different times and cultural backgrounds at once: the explosion of interest in period-instrument Baroque performances, recordings of fourteenth-century vocal music from France, access to elitist Japanese court music unheard by non-royals until after World War II, live recreations of concerts given by Duke Ellington in the 1940s, the digital re-release of rare avant-garde recordings online;<sup>42</sup> these are just a few examples of the exponential growth of musical diversity that has taken place in the twenty-first century. The death of certain forms of music, or their absorption by other genres, would seem to contradict this diversifying trend.

Furthermore, by claiming the death of the avant-garde or its incorporation into pop music, we simply create a new musical hierarchy in which populist concerns trump everything. True, there is an economic hierarchy in music that favours mass-consumption music, but even that is fading. With increasing frequency, news articles point to the challenges facing the commercial music business. On 6 February 2007, Steve Jobs, CEO of Apple Inc., whose iTunes Music Store is arguably the most important distributor of digital music to appear in the first decade of the twenty-first century, published an online statement on the subject. In this statement, he calls on the major record companies to allow the release of music online without copy protection (euphemistically called DRM, digital rights management), because the current DRM system is both hurting business and having little effect on music piracy.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, the record companies

---

<sup>40</sup>Schrader, "15 Questions."

<sup>41</sup>Neill, "Breakthrough Beats," 390.

<sup>42</sup>"Avant Garde Project," <http://www.avantgardeproject.org>.

<sup>43</sup>Jobs, "Thoughts on Music."

are actually considering this option;<sup>44</sup> even two years ago this would have been unthinkable, but changes in musical culture and the growing fragmentation of the “mass” listening experience are making standardized mass-consumption music increasingly unprofitable.

With these disclaimers in place, one major change that I have observed among composers today is that they are willing to be influenced by a greater variety of musical and non-musical sources than previous composers were. This demonstrates the aesthetic tolerance that I called for in the previous section. By means of example, I interviewed four composers from different countries and musical backgrounds on their influences, and their responses follow:

- Richard Ayres (British [resides in the Netherlands], b.1965): “Guy Maddin, The Quay Brothers, Gilliam, Gondry, Yuri Norstein, Janacek, Mozart, Rameau, Purcell, Gerald Barry.”<sup>45</sup>
- Lisa Bielawa (American, b.1968): “My reading. My conversations with the many interesting, smart and beautiful people I know.”<sup>46</sup>
- Nicole Lizée (Canadian, b.1973): “I draw influences from a multitude of sources, many of them extra-musical. Two recent pieces have integrated the Atari 2600 video game console (first appearing in 1977) and Arcade games dating exclusively from the late 70s and very early 80s.”<sup>47</sup>
- Jacob Ter Veldhuis (Dutch, b.1951): “Rock, Minimalism (Reich etc.), Jazz, Trash, The Fringe, Paradise, Beethoven, Bartok, Bob Dylan.”<sup>48</sup>

Note that there is no overlap in their responses. Nor do I think these responses are untypical nowadays. Because composers no longer monopolize cultural highness, they are affected as much as anyone else by the fragmentation of musical culture. Naturally, one would therefore expect to see the range of influences composers draw upon expanding to all kinds of music and beyond, to video game sounds and subjective personal experiences. Without cultural highness, any experience, musical or otherwise, can be a valid source for cultural value.

These composers are also re-examining their relationship to the ideas of high and low art:

---

<sup>44</sup>Bruno, “Ailing Music Biz.”

<sup>45</sup>Ayres, email message.

<sup>46</sup>Bielawa, email message.

<sup>47</sup>Lizée, email message.

<sup>48</sup>Ter Veldhuis, email message.

- Ayres: “Personally speaking, there is no dichotomy, this is not a belief, I just don’t see it. . . seems pointless and destructive and self-limiting. . . it seems to help other people though, gives them a definition, a self image, a position in the world. . . comfort.”<sup>49</sup>
- Bielawa: “ I believe more in a dichotomy between commercial values and communal values than between popular music and art music, although there are certainly ways to view these two as related. I also believe that not every artwork of any medium can or should yield an equal number of meaningful encounters. It is equally meaningful and potentially important to reach 5 people’s minds and hearts as it is to reach 50,000.”<sup>50</sup>
- Lizée: “I grew up immersed in many music genres and styles so they are all intertwined in my own musical language. It’s something that’s natural to me and part of my aesthetic. If another composer believes that there should be a distinct separation between ‘high’ and ‘low’ art and truly believes this, then it is part of their aesthetic. But then we can get into the argument of what constitutes high and low art and who decides this.”<sup>51</sup>
- Ter Veldhuis: “Borders will disappear, it’s a heritage of the 19th century to have high art and low culture. Art should be able to entertain too, and entertainment can be of good quality. Art should not be arty-farty, for the elite, but in the midst of everyday life.”<sup>52</sup>

These are four different ways of dealing with the lack of cultural highness in the avant-garde. What I find interesting, however, is that all four composers place the onus for creating value on the listener. None of them are interested in the traditional idea of the composer-genius, of imparting cultural wisdom to listeners from some privileged artistic reservoir, but all of them are interested in the subjectivity of musical experience.

Such attitudes have also had limited measurable effects on the behaviour of composers. While it is difficult to argue how an individual composer might have composed given a different cultural or political context, there is some solid evidence. For example, it seems unlikely that Ayres’s method of composing is not in some sense affected by his attitudes toward high and low art quoted above, attitudes that were exceedingly rare among composers before the dissolution of cultural highness. Christopher Fox describes how the awarding of the prestigious *Gaudeamus*

---

<sup>49</sup>Ayres, email message.

<sup>50</sup>Bielawa, email message.

<sup>51</sup>Lizée, email message.

<sup>52</sup>Ter Veldhuis, email message.

prize to Ayres's work, *(A) Penny o' (FA)*, in 1994 caused a great deal of controversy, because of his unconventional musical language (by the standards of the avant-garde).<sup>53</sup> Much of Ayres's work features what might be described as musical clichés from theatre, classical, and pop music; humorous rambling lines that do not develop; and odd instrumental choices (*No.35 (Overture)* for two pianos, euphonium, and timpani, for example). Frequently, his music inspires laughter from the audience.

Yet Ayres does not see this usage as purely sarcastic, it is simply the way he writes music. Regarding his compositional goals, Ayres says, "I'm no longer interested in creating artistic-ness, but instead invest my energy in the uncovering of beauty in the sounds and forms—a move away from music 'as a medium for a creative concept,' towards music as music."<sup>54</sup> Sarcasm is a kind of artistic-ness. Doing away with it allows Ayres to follow a humorous orchestral pastiche of musical clichés with a pop-inspired lyrical ballad for trumpet and harp that is very serious in tone (*No.31 NONcerto for Trumpet: I. Burlesque (With Long Scale)* and *II. Elegy for Alfred Schnittke* respectively). Earlier cliché-based works, such as Mauricio Kagel's *Dressur* (1976), rely on sarcasm to validate the clichés; they are limited to making extra-musical social commentaries by the cultural highness of the time. In Ayres's music, this is no longer necessary. If there is no high or low art, then why not do away with art in music altogether?

Another behavioural adaption comes in the way composers treat recordings. Reactions to the study-guide nature of avant-garde recordings can take opposite forms, for instance. Ter Veldhuis has responded in certain of his pieces by creating music that is well suited to listening on recording. For example, his piece *HEARTBREAKERS* is for a small jazz ensemble and pre-recorded samples of speech taken from American talk shows. Against these repeated speech samples, the ensemble plays short excerpts of typical jazz figures—including several improvised solos—that are reorganized into a sophisticated twenty-two-minute collage. This allows Ter Veldhuis to create an interesting piece that nonetheless works well on recording because of the restricted dynamic range demanded by the musical materials.<sup>55</sup> A previous generation might

---

<sup>53</sup>Fox, "Life is Beautiful," 40.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., 43.

<sup>55</sup>For readers not familiar with recording techniques, restricted or compressed dynamics are what allow pop

have rejected this idea because a wide range of dynamics was a hallmark of “serious” high art music. But without cultural highness, why not? Ter Veldhuis’s piece sets up a possibility of cultural value that is absent in the vast majority of the twentieth-century avant-garde.

Bielawa, on the other hand, has decided to focus on creating experiences that cannot be adequately captured on recording:

It’s true I’ve been lazy about making recordings. . . . I attribute this “laziness” to the fact that the thing about participating in the music field as a composer that I love the most is the feeling that our labors go towards something that is ephemeral and therefore is/must be valued in terms other than those generated by supply and demand. People crave ephemeral experiences, whether they realize it or not, especially since so much experience these days is packaged and repeatable (or at least claims to be).<sup>56</sup>

This is not to say that she refuses to have her music recorded—in fact, she tells me that there are currently recording projects underway—but Bielawa has made a conscious decision not to focus on the recorded experience in her compositional process. This in turn influences the kinds of music she writes in a way that was untrue for past composers: Bielawa is not assuming a culture of concert-going, but she is demanding that listeners wanting to participate in her work be present at particular locations. These locations might be concert halls or not—some of her recent pieces are to be performed in transient public spaces—but the experience either way is built on awareness instead of assumptions. While past avant-garde composers took concert-going as a given and hence adopted the study-guide model uncritically, Bielawa acknowledges the rarity of the concert-going experience and uses this as a way of creating “ephemeral” cultural value. This is an opposite kind of behaviour, or at the very least a reworking of the previous concert model.

I could continue with many more examples, but in a fragmented musical context devoid of cultural highness, this is unnecessary—there are as many solutions and adaptations as there are composers. I would rather emphasize the extreme nature of the challenges facing avant-garde composers in twenty-first-century musical culture, and the extreme nature of the changes that

---

music to be listenable in a car, for instance, because the volume is uniformly louder and blocks out the sounds of the road. Many classical recordings, contrastingly, are not easy to listen to in a car, because of the large and unpredictable fluctuations in loudness.

<sup>56</sup>Bielawa, email message.

are taking place in their musical values and behaviour. The cultural-value belief that framed the avant-garde musical practice throughout the past century is no longer applicable, and as a result musical avant-gardeness is being entirely redefined.

As a study of the specifics involved, this discussion can only serve as an introduction—issues of Cold War politics, middlebrow culture, cultural highness, and the effects of the internet on musical culture could themselves fill entire volumes. However, I have undertaken this endeavour because, although composers have had to adapt their values and behaviour in ways completely unforeseen just fifteen years ago, this adaptation is a topic rarely if ever discussed. Values once considered unquestionable by avant-garde composers are now openly being discarded, the relationship of composers to today's musical culture is being radically redefined, and yet most of the discourse on contemporary composition employs models developed decades ago. The ways that composers have responded to the challenges posed by twenty-first-century musical culture provide numerous insights into the new role of art music (high art music?) in our century. I hope that through this discussion, they may also serve to inspire new models for the examination of this interesting and vibrant repertoire.

## Bibliography

- Adorno, Theodor W. *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*. Trans. E. B. Ashton. New York: Seabury Press, 1976.
- Atwood, Margaret. "Just pay the piano player." *The Toronto Star*. 3 February 2007. <http://thestar.workopolis.com/servlet/Content/fasttrack/20070203/ATWOOD03?section=Arts>.
- "Avant Garde Project—20th Century Classical, Electroacoustic, Avant Garde Music Downloads." <http://www.avantgardeproject.org>. Accessed 20 February 2007.
- Ayres, Richard. Email message to the author. 28 January 2007.
- Babbitt, Milton. "Who Cares if You Listen?" *High Fidelity* 8, no. 2 (February 1958): 38–40.
- . *Words about Music*. Ed. Stephen Dembski and Joseph Straus, 163. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987. Quoted in Brody, Martin. "Music for the Masses: Milton Babbitt's Cold War Music Theory." *The Musical Quarterly* 77, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 161–192.
- Barzun, Jacques. "Introductory Remarks to a Program of Works Produced at the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center." In *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, ed. Christoph Fox and Daniel Warner, 367–369. New York: Continuum, 2006.
- Beal, Amy C. "The Army, the Airwaves, and the Avant-Garde: American Classical Music in Postwar West Germany." *American Music* 21, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 474–513.
- Bielawa, Lisa. Email messages to the author. 21 January and 8 February 2007.
- Brooks, David. "Joe Strauss to Joe Six-Pack." *The New York Times*. 19 June 2005. <http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=FB0F11F73D5F0C758DDDAF0894DD404482>.
- Bruno, Antony. "Ailing music biz set to relax digital restrictions." *Yahoo! News*. 2 January 2007. [http://news.yahoo.com/s/nm/20070102/wr\\_nm/digital.dc](http://news.yahoo.com/s/nm/20070102/wr_nm/digital.dc).
- Crawford, Dorothy Lamb. "Arnold Schoenberg in Los Angeles." *The Musical Quarterly* 86, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 6–48.
- Fox, Christopher. "Richard Ayres in Focus: Life Is Beautiful." *The Musical Times* 142, no. 1875 (Summer 2001): 39–52.
- Goldberg, Albert. Concert Review. *The Los Angeles Times*. 20 September 1949. Quoted in Crawford, Dorothy Lamb. "Arnold Schoenberg in Los Angeles." *The Musical Quarterly* 86, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 6–48.

- Goldberg, Jeff. "John Cage Interviewed." *Transatlantic Review* (May 1970), 55–66. Quoted in Crawford, Dorothy Lamb. "Arnold Schoenberg in Los Angeles." *The Musical Quarterly* 86, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 6–48.
- Hankins, Dilys. "Toward a National Theatre: The Canada Council, 1957–1982." *Journal of Arts Management and Law* 14, no. 4 (Winter 1985): 31–54.
- "The Hype Machine—discover, listen and buy music discussed on the best mp3 blogs." <http://hypem.com>. Accessed 12 February 2007.
- Jobs, Steve. "Thoughts on Music." 6 February 2007. <http://www.apple.com/hotnews/thoughtsonmusic>.
- "Last.fm—The Social Music Revolution." <http://www.last.fm>. Accessed 12 February 2007.
- Lizée, Nicole. Email message to the author. 16 February 2007.
- McClary, Susan. "Rap, Minimalism, and Structures of Time in Late Twentieth-Century Culture." In *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, ed. Christoph Fox and Daniel Warner, 289–298. New York: Continuum, 2006.
- Miller, Paul D. "Algorithms: Erasures and the Art of Memory." In *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, ed. Christoph Fox and Daniel Warner, 348–354. New York: Continuum, 2006.
- Neill, Ben. "Breakthrough Beats: Rhythm and the Aesthetics of Contemporary Electronic Music." In *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, ed. Christoph Fox and Daniel Warner, 386–391. New York: Continuum, 2006.
- Oh, Gregory. "In Praise of Newer Music." MySpace Blog. 15 January 2007. <http://blog.myspace.com/gregoryoh>.
- "A Report to Congress on the National Endowment for the Arts." *Journal of Arts Management and Law* 20, no. 3 (Fall 1990).
- Schrader, Barry. "15 Questions to Barry Schrader." 18 February 2007. <http://www.tokafi.com/15questions/15-questions-to-barry-schrader/view>.
- Schuster, J. Mark Davidson. "The Interrelationships Between Public and Private Funding of the Arts in the United States." *Journal of Arts Management and Law* 14, no. 4 (Winter 1985): 77–105.
- Snead, James A. "Repetition as a figure of black culture." In *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., 59–79. New York: Routledge, 1984.
- Stockhausen, Karlheinz. *Towards a Cosmic Music*. Trans. Tim Nevill. Shaftesbury: Element Books, 1989.

Stockhausen, Karlheinz et al. "Stockhausen vs. the 'Technocrats'." In *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, ed. Christoph Fox and Daniel Warner, 381–385. New York: Continuum, 2006.

Stravinsky, Igor and Robert Craft. *Conversations with Igor Stravinsky*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1958.

Ter Veldhuis, Jacob. Email message to the author. 8 February 2007.

Thompson, Emily. *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900–1933*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002.