

## Outside of Outsider Music:

How do we define the limits of what is “outside”?

28 November 2006, rev. 26 May 2007

Trying to come up with a definition of outsider music is at the same time obviously simple and frustratingly complicated. A cursory listen to some of the stalwarts of the tradition—the Shaggs, Shooby Taylor, Wesley Willis, to name a few—immediately gives an intuitive sensation of otherness. However, these artists, due to their extreme aesthetic choices, are only the most straight-forward of examples. Once we move further afield and away from the obviously bizarre, definitions of outsider music run into complicated aesthetic and philosophical questions. What qualities does an artist need to possess (or lack) in order to be an outsider? How extreme does an artist’s aesthetic choices need to be in order to be considered an outsider? Is there any significant difference between outsider artists that are aware of their position and those that are not? What constitutes awareness of one’s outsidership? Can all musical genres admit outsider musicians? Does outsidership in one genre necessarily translate into outsidership in all genres? I could continue for several pages.

To begin to answer these questions, we need a solid definition of outsider music. This is problematic, however, because outsidership is an abstract quality. Its definition must rely on some subjective judgement of what is inside and outside, much as does the definition of “good” music. Yet to have any kind of meaningful discussion, it seems that we would need to agree on what the term “outsider music” means. Clearly there is something to discuss or else these artists, like the vast majority of people in the world who have ever made music, would never have left obscurity—after all, most music-making is not met with a critique like “this is outsider

music,” but rather with complete indifference.

We might propose that a definition of outsider music should be based on commonly-held aesthetic values, since this would allow us to discuss the majority of outsider musicians. But this approach avoids the problem and serves only to create an arbitrary musical canon (as if there weren't enough already). We still would not know what we were discussing, besides of course from the artificial framework we would have created in the process of discussing. To get at the real issue, we need to move beyond aesthetic value judgements altogether.

What I propose is that ultimately there is really no such thing as outsider music. What we label as such tells us more about our own aesthetics than it does about the music we are describing, and we would be better served by specific descriptors that address particular musical communities. Only then we can begin to discuss these musicians in meaningful ways. However, because there is something unique about this repertoire in general—something that has led people to invent a label like “outsider music”—I think it is worth starting with an analysis of a few possible limiting criteria, in order to identify some of the issues.

One of the few easily agreed-upon criteria (or at least I hope so) for identifying outsider music is that it is somehow odd or unusual. This is a purposefully broad definition that gives us a body of potential outsiders to draw upon uncritically for the purpose of evaluating more specific delimiters.

Irwin Chusid provides such a set of delimiters in the introduction to his book on outsider music, *Songs in the Key of Z*. A detailed examination of his work is a useful starting place because we can compare the criteria he sets forth with the musicians he discusses in subsequent chapters. We can then look at some of the gray areas that arise through the application of his delimiters. The following list is a summary of the key points he presents in the introduction:<sup>1</sup>

1. Outsider musicians must lack self-awareness of their outsidersness; in other words, they must not be consciously trying to be outsiders.
2. Poorly performed music does not in-and-of-itself constitute outsider music; there must be some transcendental quality to the music that withstands repeated lis-

---

<sup>1</sup>Chusid, *Key of Z*, ix–xxi.

tening.

3. Outsider musicians must be sincere in what they do; there cannot be a sarcastic element to their aesthetic choices, as this would imply self-awareness.
4. Outsiders need to be unpopular, although some do achieve success and recognition in specific circles, or produce successful work that is not “outside.”

Only the second of Chusid’s criteria is non-problematic. If there were no interest in outsider music other than a sort of freak show aspect, it would not likely have garnered as much attention as it has. And while poor performances definitely play a large part in a lot of outsider music, not all outsiders are bad musicians—in fact, most of the outsiders to be discussed in this paper are highly proficient musicians. Furthermore, not all bad musicians are outsiders (numerous Top-40 singers, for example, come to mind). However, eliminating poor performance as a requirement of outsidership still does not bring us any closer to a useful definition; it simply tells us what outsider music is not.

Unfortunately, Chusid’s other criteria have some serious flaws. Let us start with the first one, the complex issue of self-awareness. Chusid makes a few assumptions in this regard. First of all, he assumes that there is a way to judge whether or not an artist is aware of the fact that what s/he does is not “normal.” Right away we are faced with a subjective judgement of aesthetics. We have only to look at the interaction of musical cultures throughout history to see that there are vastly varying standards of musical-aesthetic normalcy. But within one culture, let us assume that we can decide on certain musical elements that are normal within a certain genre, and that a particular musician in that genre should generally have a grasp, whether explicitly or intuitively, of the norms. This is not unreasonable, but we must still find a way of determining whether or not the musician is aware of making aesthetic choices vis-à-vis those norms.

Asking the musician about intentionality can give us a clue, but there is a problem here too. Clearly, if a musician expresses a certain aesthetic intent and the musical result matches that intent, we can be reasonably assured that the musician in question has a certain degree

of self-awareness. However, if the musical result fails to achieve its stated goal, we cannot reciprocally be sure that the musician necessarily lacks self-awareness—s/he may simply have expressed his/her intention poorly. Furthermore, what of the case when a musician does not or cannot express his/her intentions at all? This is a scenario that encompasses many outsiders, and it greatly impedes our ability to judge self-awareness. In order to actually measure self-awareness without knowledge of intentionality, we would need to find some aesthetic choice made by the musician in question that could be taken as absolutely unthinkable to an artist that understands its implications. Unfortunately, this is next to impossible for all but the most extreme outsiders.

To take an example, if we say that the Shaggs are not self-aware because they cannot play in time, we make two assumptions. First of all, that playing out of time is an unconscious decision on their part and that they are not aware of the musical result, and secondly, that no “normal” musician in that genre would consider playing as out of time as the Shaggs do. Both of these assumptions prove difficult to support. The second assumption is the most straightforward: proving that no normal musician would consider playing in a particular manner is virtually impossible by nature of the fact that there are so many musicians with widely varying aesthetics in the popular idiom. Especially considering how influential the Shaggs have been—take, for instance, the album of Shaggs covers,<sup>2</sup> or Frank Zappa’s well-known admiration for the group<sup>3</sup>—it is hard to argue that their performance practice has no resonances in the genre.

Returning to the first assumption, textual evidence provided by Chusid himself seems to suggest that the Shaggs *did* in fact know that what they were doing was unusual. The following quotation is from the liner notes to their album *Philosophy of the World*, and is attributed to the band’s father, Austin Wiggin:

The Shaggs are real, pure, unaffected by outside influences. Their music is different, it is theirs alone. . . . Of all contemporary acts in the world today, perhaps only the Shaggs do what others would like to do, and that is perform only what they believe in, what they feel, not what others think the Shaggs should feel.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup>*Better than the Beatles.*

<sup>3</sup>Hamelman, “But Is It Garbage?”, 204.

<sup>4</sup>Chusid, *Key of Z*, 6.

This quotation shows a high level of intentionality (and is fairly accurate, moreover) and hints at self-awareness. It alludes precisely to the genre-specific conventions that should, in order to support the self-awareness delimiter, be violated unknowingly. The Shaggs would not have been able to “perform only what they believe in, . . . [and] not what others think,” without the knowledge that others might think that they should be doing something else. To be clear, I do not mean to imply that they are necessarily aware of specifically *what* other musicians are doing, or of what those musicians might think they should be doing. That is in any case unimportant. However, this passage does tell us that the Shaggs are aware of the fact that what they do is not the same as what the vast majority of other musicians do, and that they do so intentionally. Furthermore, they do it consistently: when major-label executive Harry Palmer went up to Fremont, New Hampshire, to see the Shaggs at their weekly community hall gig, he noted that, “They sounded exactly like the record.”<sup>5</sup>

Another problem with Chusid’s rationale is that he assumes that self-awareness is a yes-or-no issue: either one is aware or one is not. I tend to think the issue is slightly more complex than this. Clearly, the Shaggs do possess some level of self-awareness, although we cannot be sure exactly to what extent. They might only have a very basic degree of self-awareness, insufficient to realize that what they do is not just a little bit different but *vastly* different from what other musicians in the genre do. A more nuanced reading of the self-awareness definition might therefore state that the outsider musician’s lack of self-awareness is proportionately greater than the degree by which his/her music is outside of the conventions of the genre. At this level of specificity, however, making a judgement becomes exponentially more complicated, since there are two subjective qualities to be quantified: a lack of self-awareness and a degree of divergence from convention. Unfortunately, this increase in specificity fails to add any new support for the delimiter; it simply highlights the fundamental weakness in the initial concept.

We should consider whether or not self-awareness is a useful measure of outsidership in the first place. There are many unusual musicians that seem to be highly self-aware—at least as far as we can judge—and had they been less willing to share their thoughts with the world, they

---

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 8.

might have been considered outsiders. A good example is Karlheinz Stockhausen, even though he falls squarely within the mainstream of the European avant-garde tradition. Composers around the world study Stockhausen's music, he is highly paid for what he does, writes prolifically about his music, and has been accepted unreservedly into the twentieth-century classical canon. There are few other musicians for which we have more evidence of self-awareness. Yet he also has some very unusual personality traits that directly influence his music.

It is true that there was little to attract our attention in the 1950s and 60s while he was involved with the integral serialist movement and first made a name for himself on the international composition scene. However, by the mid-1970s, Stockhausen was claiming that he had been born on the star Sirius, and perhaps more germane to our discussion, he was writing music based on his celestial experiences—complete with spacesuit costumes for the performers and rotating UFO speakers. This puts him on equal footing with several outsiders, most notably fellow space traveller Lucia Pamela. Perhaps it is only because he was accepted into his musical community before these traits came to the forefront that we do not consider him an outsider.

*Can you say how you know about Sirius?*

It would lead to misunderstanding and false interpretation. It is an inner revelation that has come several times to me, that I have been educated on Sirius, that I come from Sirius, but usually people laugh at this and don't understand it, so it doesn't really make much sense to talk about it. It is alright to talk about such things privately, to one who is willing to understand and has similar visions, but it doesn't make sense to talk about it in public.<sup>6</sup>

Stockhausen is aware that it is weird to say that one was born and educated on Sirius. This does not stop him, however, from writing an ode to his celestial home. The final section of Stockhausen's *Sirius*, for soprano, bass, trumpet, bass clarinet, and electronics, is particularly enlightening. This roughly seven-minute movement, called "The Annunciation," is in three parts. The first consists of the bass reciting a text about Sirius in a highly-affected voice while the others wander melodically in the background, all of this underlaid by a slowly-rising electronic drone. In the second section, the soprano and bass get stuck on single notes, which they repeat over

---

<sup>6</sup>Stockhausen, *Cosmic Music*, 18.

and over again, accompanied by a drone in the trumpet and electronics. The third section is a series of rising electronic sounds with accompanying light show that whirl around the audience, apparently to give the impression of a spaceship taking off from the earth.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, none of these sections display the kinds of interweaving of musical parameters we would expect from a 1970s modernist; they are all distinct, through-composed, and use unrelated materials. About the work, Stockhausen has this to say:

For the inhabitants of SIRIUS, music is the highest form of all vibrations. For this reason, music is there the most highly developed. Every musical composition on SIRIUS is linked to the rhythms of the star constellations, seasons of the year and times of the day, the elements, and the existential differences of the living beings.

The music which I have composed and named SIRIUS transfers some of these principles of musical form and structure to our planet.<sup>8</sup>

Nor is he being facetious: Stockhausen published a 50-page “Kompositions-Kurs” on Sirius in 2000. After 25 years of reflection on the piece, he still felt strongly enough about it to produce a detailed document on its conception and creation, complete with a constellation map and zodiac-sign tone-row charts (scorpio equals pitch-class C).

Stockhausen’s aesthetic choices, both musical and theatrical, clearly demonstrate some outsider-like eccentricities.<sup>9</sup> Yet Stockhausen is one of the most obviously self-aware musicians in his tradition. If we use self-awareness as a reason to reject him, then we must admit that outsider music is defined less by the actions of its practitioners than by how they see themselves as musicians. And as discussed above, it is difficult in the majority of cases to prove how they do in fact see themselves. This, to my mind, is less than ideal. Even in the event that we can prove self-awareness, we are left not with a musical category but with an anthropological one: musicians with poor self-awareness, regardless of the music. To make matters worse, this category provides no particular reason to assume causation between self-awareness and the

---

<sup>7</sup>Nordin, “Sirius.”

<sup>8</sup>Stockhausen, CD Booklet, 3–5.

<sup>9</sup>Incidentally, he even has an indirect tie to the Shaggs. In *Towards a Cosmic Music*, he shows his admiration for Frank Zappa: “Naturally there are [pop] musicians who are different, like, for instance, the Mothers of Invention. The leader [Frank Zappa] is much more intelligent than most of the others are” (Stockhausen, *Cosmic Music*, 14). Frank Zappa, in turn, claims that the Shaggs are better than the Beatles (Hamelman, “But Is It Garbage?”, 204).

unusual aesthetic choices that they make. At best I think we can say that certain outsiders demonstrate a perceived lack of self-awareness that is a part of their appeal, but self-awareness itself is not a good universal measure of outsidership.

Moving on to Chusid's third criterion, sincerity, we can level some of the same criticisms that we did for self-awareness. However, to further complicate the issue, we lack any tests that we might use to make judgements in the way that intentionally was used for self-awareness. Our perceptions about the sincerity of an artist are nearly impossible to defend and often end up telling us more about our own aesthetic biases. It is entirely conceivable that some truly sincere artists might give us an unintentional impression of falseness while others who are truly disingenuous might pass our notice. The best proofs for sincerity are rare and unusual examples of conviction, like Stockhausen's publishing of a commentary on Sirius 25 years after its conception. For most outsiders—working in obscurity, often reclusive or difficult to contact; Jandek throughout most of his career, for example—sincerity is just a guess that we make based on our own assumptions. Either that or it is based on our prior knowledge of an outsider's mental disorder. Mental illness, however, is a category on its own and I will deal with it later.

Again, we might also ask the question of whether or not sincerity is important to outsidership. Having shown that self-awareness is problematic, there may be cases where a sarcastic disingenuous use of outsider aesthetics could produce a sincere musical result in another respect. Tom Waits's song "I'll Shoot the Moon," from the album *The Black Rider*, is a good example.

Sung slightly out of tune, with a wobbly vibrato and incessant vocal slides, Waits presents a confessional, love-sick, and most likely inebriated character with some bizarre personality traits. An excerpt from the text serves to set the tone:

I want to build a nest in your hair

I want to kiss you and never be there

I'll shoot the moon right out of the sky

For you baby

I'll shoot the moon, for you

The middle of the song (1'57") is interrupted by an overly-affected spoken interlude:

Ahhh... you know I love you, baby.

So why don't you call me?

You know my number:

392-7704.

Call any time... ahhh...

Throughout, Waits is accompanied by a gutless-sounding ensemble consisting of saxophone, trombone, harmonium, marimba, and double bass, among others. These instruments wander aimlessly and without conviction over a standard harmonic progression. The recording, through a metallic slightly-distant reverb, is made to sound like an empty bar or lounge.

Based on the variety of characters presented on the album and the fact that the music was commissioned for a theatre play, it seems safe to assume that Waits is employing these aesthetic choices sarcastically. However, his is not a pejorative sarcasm but a theatrical one, and "I'll Shoot The Moon" would not likely be successful without it. The embarrassingly confessional tone of the character, the lack of conviction from the ensemble, and the use of performance and recording techniques to set the scene all help to create the mood for the piece. If it were played more conventionally, it would lose its charm, as would most of the Shagg's songs for that matter. So while Waits's song employs outsider aesthetics sarcastically, it does so sincerely. Does that make Waits an outsider musician, or maybe just this an outsider song? I do not wish to propose an answer to that question just yet, but this case does weaken the foundations of using sincerity as an absolute measure of outsidership.

Self-awareness and sincerity aside, popularity at the least seems like a good measure of outsidership; it is a measurable criterion, and outsidership necessarily implies that some aspect of the music is different from what the majority is interested in. The problem with this delimiter, however, is that popular aesthetics are constantly changing. Even within a single genre, majority opinions on certain artists can and do change radically within short periods of time; for example, the differences in popular music tastes between successive generations. And

beyond that, there are instances of music that was initially unpopular but that subsequently gained an unprecedented acceptance at a later time.

Johannes Brahms is a perfect example. During his lifetime and for the succeeding two decades, he was generally described as a mediocre and musically-sterile composer. However, some of the same critics who denounced him at the turn of the twentieth century, such as Felix Weingartner for example, became his staunchest supporters in the 1920s and 30s. Michael von der Linn argues that this had to do with the political exigencies of the time—the need to counter the so-called “degenerate” music of Arnold Schoenberg and other modern composers within the framework of growing National-Socialist sentiments in Germany and Austria.<sup>10</sup> Whether or not this accurately describes the situation is immaterial, but it is important to note that the majority opinion on Brahms’s music changed radically and permanently. We live in a very different political and cultural environment than did Schoenberg or Weingartner, yet Brahms has been adopted into the classical canon—his acceptance did not die away with the fall of the Third Reich.

Examples of this phenomenon can be found among certain outsiders as well, although perhaps not to the same extent. Robert Graettinger, described in detail by Chusid, is one of these. His music experienced varying degrees of popularity both during his lifetime and afterwards. When Stan Kenton was looking to make jazz into a kind of American classical music, Graettinger’s atonal big band compositions received some positive reactions from that community. However, he received a fair amount of criticism as well, and the negative gradually outweighed the positive throughout the course of his short lifetime. A good example of the kind of critique he received is a review of *City of Glass* by Barry Ulanov, quoted by Chusid:

As music it seems to me to fall somewhere between Schoenberg and Schillinger, but most of all to fall, nowhere suggesting the understanding of atonal or 12-tone composing traditions... a muddled modern work ill-defined in purpose and not much closer to a work of art than science fiction.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup>Linn, “Themes of Nostalgia and Critique.”

<sup>11</sup>Chusid, *Key of Z*, 170.

The rejection that Graettinger increasingly experienced throughout his career might be attributable to the tension that arose between the classical and jazz communities as artists like Stan Kenton tried to bridge the two traditions. The Ulanov quotation could definitely be read in this way. Even Kenton eventually gave up on the jazz-as-classical-music idea and returned to a more conventional big band repertoire, so it is no surprise that support for Graettinger's work evaporated as well. Within this context, it makes sense that critics and audiences in the years following Graettinger's death regarded his work and similar third-stream experiments as having been pretentious failures.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, Graettinger has started to gain an appreciation recently, perhaps because aesthetic barriers between the jazz and classical communities have deteriorated considerably since the 1950s. Chusid quotes a contemporary Dutch big band leader, Gert-Jan Blom, on Graettinger:

Graettinger's music is something of a "sound-barrier"—you have to break through at high velocity. But once you've done that, you're in a completely new sonic landscape, governed by strange laws and aesthetics. It requires some adjusting for old-fashioned auricles but, boy!—is it rewarding.<sup>13</sup>

A good example of this new "sonic landscape" is Graettinger's *Some Saxophones*. It is clearly atonal, but also clearly removed from the Second Viennese tradition. There is neither the expressionistic angst of Schoenberg's music or the condensed abstraction of Webern's. The rhythmic figures are from jazz, with characteristic runs at the ends of phrases and swung eighth-notes throughout. Within the mostly dissonant contrapuntal texture, Graettinger even manages to work in moments of consonant harmonies and a golden-section formal structure.

Compared to the integral serialism of the 1950s avant-garde, Graettinger's aesthetic choices are not very outside. He was most likely rejected because his aesthetic leanings sat between the jazz and classical communities, drawing on elements of both. However, because the divide between classical and jazz music is not as strong as it used to be, it is not surprising that Graettinger's music is being rediscovered. In the 1950s, it would have been unusual for a

---

<sup>12</sup>Lewis, "Robert F. Graettinger."

<sup>13</sup>Chusid, *Key of Z*, 176.

musician to be active both as a jazz improviser and symphony musician. Nowadays, that is a much more frequent scenario. Institutionally as well, many university music departments now include jazz programmes as well as classical ones. So why shouldn't Graettinger be brought back "inside," since there is now an accepted canon for him to belong to?

In the light of the popularity delimiter, we might consider Graettinger to have been an outsider in his time, but less so today. Popularity in this case ends up being a measure of where individual listeners or cultural groups set the boundaries of inside and outside. However, this is a scenario that I flagged as problematic at the beginning of this paper: calling Graettinger an outsider simply serves to create an arbitrary canon. Unfortunately, this seems to be what Chusid is doing, whether intentionally or not. Had Graettinger not been discussed in *Songs in the Key of Z*, I doubt that I would have labeled him as an outsider. Besides from his reclusiveness and personality quirks, his aesthetic development falls closely to my own musical background: a musician with a jazz background working his way into the classical community. This is not an uncommon perspective nowadays.

So we have to wonder whether the popularity delimiter has not already been misappropriated in Graettinger's case. Should he be considered an outsider from now on, simply because Chusid called him one? In order for popularity to work as a delimiter, we have to be willing to constantly and ruthlessly revise our list of outsiders, removing some and adding others according to a strict code of unpopularity. And this in turn raises difficult questions. Now that Jandek is performing and touring regularly, can he still be considered an outsider? Is it sufficient for an outsider to have once been outside to remain in the canon indefinitely? If so, then what about the reciprocal cases like Stockhausen's, discussed above? Using popularity as a measure of outsidership creates more questions than it answers.

At this point we have reached an impasse and need to leave Chusid's delimiters behind. Defining outsider music in anything but the broadest terms has proven to be frustrating and largely fruitless. What this exercise suggests, however, is that perhaps we should be focusing our attention elsewhere. To start with, we might take a hint from the visual arts and try dividing the outsider category into various groups that are based on easily-measured causal criteria.

One of the most obvious categories might be musicians with some form of mental disability. Without attempting to perform any psychoanalysis, I would venture to say that many of the more extreme outsiders could fall into this camp. Daniel Johnston is a manic depressant; Wesley Willis suffered from schizophrenia. By looking at these musicians under this more specific light, we can begin to examine the ways that mental illness affects—or doesn't affect—their aesthetic choices. To my mind, this would be more fruitful than simply taking the stance that they are outsiders without asking ourselves why.

Another advantage to the use of cause-based categories is that it allows us to look at outsiders separately from outsiders. We can consider successful mainstream musicians with certain oddities (Stockhausen), or one-off outsider experiments with varying degrees of apparent sincerity (Waits, perhaps), and not have to worry about making them fit neatly into a larger community. We can also keep outsiders like the Shaggs or Moondog, even though their music has made significant strides toward insiders over time—perhaps they should be called historical outsiders, or simply musical pioneers. We also avoid the problems that come up when genres collide, as in Graettinger's case, who can be considered to have outsider tendencies for his time and within his particular idiom, but perhaps not at other times or in other idioms. In other words, getting rid of the term “outsider musician” allows us to explore a lot more music in greater depth.

The remainder of this discussion will look at two musicians who fall into the gray area just outside of outsiders, composer Richard Ayres and singer-songwriter Parker Paul. In Ayres's case, the bulk of the evidence points to a high level of self-awareness and sincerity, as well as to a strong sense of humour and sarcasm. In Paul's case, it is more difficult to ascertain whether or not he is being sincere—he may be an actual outsider in the self-aware sense of the term, or he may be making aesthetic choices sarcastically. Thankfully, I have abdicated myself of any responsibility to decide!

Let us start with Ayres, who claims to have been inspired at least in part by non-musical outsiders. According to the programme notes, his composition “*piece-with-running-from-left-to-right-and-back-again*” is dedicated to the Art Brut painter Alfred Wallis. The piece was inspired

by the composer's experience of sitting in the cheap seats at the opera and being able to see backstage. The ensemble performs generally non-memorable music, but every time the dynamics become quiet, a large group of people run across the back of the stage between two stage doors on either side of the musicians. The result is comical if somewhat predictable, and demonstrates Ayres's penchant for playfulness.

Ayres's *No. 24 "NONcerto" for Alto Trombone* is a similar example. In the excerpt presented on his website,<sup>14</sup> various instruments frantically play repeated triadic or major-seventh gestures at different simultaneous tempos. This is accompanied by a choir singing "Dah dah dah" and "Ee-yo" on another set of triads. All of these gestures are designed to make maximum use of the tonal clichés associated with them and often employ highly ungraceful phrasing for expressive effect. Sporadically, the muted alto trombone interjects a few notes of unrelated material. The resulting texture is both serene and mischievous in a vaudevillian sort of way.

*No.35 for Two Pianos, Euphonium, and Timpani*—again, available in partial form on Ayres's website—continues the trend. The excerpted passage opens with clichéd out-of-time triadic gestures in both pianos, but this time these gestures are suddenly interrupted by the euphonium, which rises slowly from an extremely low to an extremely high register, as if leading up to a soloistic phrase. As the euphonium ascends, the pianos play a stereotypically Count Basie-style jazz riff. Once the euphonium reaches the top of the upward run, the pianos take over, bringing back the original triadic material energetically, supported by the timpani. The euphonium, instead of playing the expected soloistic line, drops to the bottom of the range and plays a series of rambling out-of-time repeated note. Finally all of the instruments join in a cacophonously disjointed climax before moving on to the next section.

Clearly, Ayres does not fit into the mainstream aesthetic of the avant-garde. He has little interest in more typical developmental forms and revels in recycling materials that are generally considered taboo by his community. Luckily for us, he also discusses his work quite eloquently, demonstrating a good deal of aesthetic self-awareness. What follows are a couple of excerpts from an interview with Ayres by Christopher Fox, published in *The Musical Times*:

---

<sup>14</sup><http://www.richardayres.com>

I think the developmental process that I have been undergoing could be described as a gradual forgetting of art—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 medium for a creative concept,” towards music as music.<sup>15</sup>

It feels as if I have shaken off several rather heavy chains—chains that I'd picked up along the way—chains that were given to me by my particular cultural environment. Suddenly, previously sacred truths and aspirations seemed completely ridiculous—thou shalt be original, thou shalt never repeat yourself, thou shalt not use consonant harmony, thou shalt, thou shalt... So many unconscious, unseen presumptions—insane.<sup>16</sup>

These excerpts also give us insights into Ayres's rebelliousness: his decision to write the music that he does comes from a dissatisfaction with what he was taught. Rebelliousness is nothing that is necessarily “outside,” however—there is a long history of rebellion in the arts in general and in the avant-garde in particular. Nevertheless, I find Ayres's particular brand of rebellion extremely interesting. The lop-sided aspect of his phrasing, instrumentation, and formal development seem to draw their inspiration from certain kinds of outsider music, and as Fox writes, “Similar sorts of obsessive behaviour in everyday human life can be symptomatic of mental disorder.”<sup>17</sup>

There is some kind of link, at least in spirit, to the outsider tradition in Ayres's music; however, not to the same extent that we see in a composer like Stockhausen. Harry Partch might be a better analogue. The way Partch burnt his scores and started over is similar to Ayres's aesthetic “shaking off of chains.” Of course, Ayres did not spend the Great Depression riding the rails in California; he lives comfortably in the Netherlands. And Ayres has also achieved a much greater degree of success at a much younger age than Partch did. So perhaps what Ayres does is not really that outside—but it is not that outside of the outsider tradition either, and that is what I find interesting about it.

Singer-songwriter Parker Paul, on the other hand, is a different case. Very little infor-

---

<sup>15</sup>Fox, “Life is Beautiful,” 43.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 49.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 42.

mation is available about Paul, and nothing that could help us to guess about his intentionality, self-awareness, or sincerity. As of the time of this writing, his official website<sup>18</sup> contains no biographical information, and his Myspace site contains only a short blurb on the artists that he has been compared to.<sup>19</sup> The liner notes to his CDs contain only the lyrics.

Paul's "Pain Pain Pain Pain Pain" is representative of his work. It is a stream-of-consciousness ode to pain as an abstract idea, which ranges from sore joints to a metaphysical discussion of St. Francis. The following is an excerpt from the text:

Pain is annoying, pain is boring.  
 Pain takes you off your game,  
 Makes you mistrust your joints and angles.

Pain makes you talk to strangers at the park.  
 But it makes you less pleasant at parties.  
 In fact it masks your good qualities.

The musical accompaniment consists of a tropical-flavoured dinner-band combo: guitar, bass, and drums, with Paul doubling on piano. Paul also sings strategically out of tune, especially on the chorus "Pain pain pain pain pain," at which point the chord he is playing in the right hand of the piano gets "stuck" on an incorrect harmony while the bass lines moves on, awkwardly oblivious. The result is appropriately painful to listen to, creating an ingeniously odd kind of word painting.

Standing on its own, this music is odd enough to qualify as genuinely unaware outsider music. Yet with no biographical information, the occasional clever lyric, and perfectly "wrong" musical devices, the question of comedic sarcasm lingers in the background. However, it is my opinion that this grayness, like in Ayres's case, contributes to the charm of the experience. Paul's music would not be any better or worse if it were an elaborately hidden sarcasm or a sincerely unaware aesthetic choice. By avoiding outsider music as a genre, we can simply appreciate it

---

<sup>18</sup><http://www.parker-paul.com>

<sup>19</sup><http://www.myspace.com/parkerpaul>

musically for what it does.

The purpose of this discussion has been to show some of the difficulties that arise from the “outsider music” label, and to explore some alternative ways of looking at this repertoire. Outsiderness can be a useful measure when looking at certain artists, but it is problematic to define and therefore to discuss. Neither self-awareness, sincerity, popularity, or any other of the host of standard musical measuring sticks proves adequate, perhaps precisely *because* this repertoire is inherently non-standard. Furthermore, by making outsider music into a genre of its own, we risk brushing many interesting and relevant facets of outsider artists under the carpet, while at the same time ignoring a large body of interesting music such as Richard Ayres or Parker Paul that falls on the fringes of the tradition. We would be better served—and better informed—by a more critical appreciation of outsiderness in all of its varying and unrelated flavours, and in all of its degrees of concentration or dilution.

## Bibliography

- Ayres, Richard, *No. 24 "NONcerto" for Alto Trombone*. London: Schott, 1995.
- . *No. 35 for Two Pianos, Euphonium, and Timpani*. London: Schott, 2000.
- . Programme Notes to "*piece-with-running-from-left-to-right-and-back-again*". Toronto: Continuum Ensemble Concert, 27 March 2003.
- . "Richard Ayres, Composer." <http://www.richardayres.com>. Accessed 26 May 2007.
- Better Than the Beatles: A Tribute to the Shaggs*. Animal World: 2816787, 2002.
- Chusid, Irwin. *Songs in the Key of Z: The Curious Universe of Outsider Music*. Chicago: Acapella, 2000.
- Fox, Christopher. "Richard Ayres in Focus: Life Is Beautiful." *The Musical Times* 142, no. 1875 (Summer 2001): 39–52.
- Graettinger, Robert. "Some Saxophones." *City of Glass: Stan Kenton Plays Bob Graettinger*. Blue Note Records: 32084, 1995.
- Hamelman, Steven. "But Is It Garbage? The Theme of Trash in Rock and Roll Criticism." *Popular Music and Society* 26 no. 2 (June 2003): 203–223.
- Lewis, Dave. "Robert F. Graettinger." <http://www.answers.com/topic/robert-f-graettinger>. Accessed 28 November 2006.
- Linn, Michael von der. "Themes of Nostalgia and Critique in Weimar-Era Brahms Reception." *Brahms Studies* 3 (2001): 231–248.
- Nordin, Ingvar Loco. "Karlheinz Stockhausen: Edition No. 26: Sirius." <http://home.swipnet.se/sonoloco7/stockhausen/26.html>. Accessed 28 November 2006.
- Paul, Parker. "Pain Pain Pain Pain Pain." *Wingfoot*. Jagjaguwar: JAG28, 2001.
- Stockhausen, Karlheinz. *Towards a Cosmic Music*. Trans. Tim Neville. Shaftesbury: Element Books, 1989.
- . CD booklet to *Stockhausen 26a–b: Sirius*. Kürten: Stockhausen-Verlag, 1992.
- . *Kompositions-Kurs über Sirius: Elektronische Musik und Trompete, Sopran, Baßklarinetten, Baß (1975–77)*. Kürten: Stockhausen-Verlag, 2000.
- Waits, Tom. "I'll Shoot The Moon." *The Black Rider*. Island: 314-518 559-2, 1993.