

# The Dilemma of Modern Music

## — Between chaos and comprehension —

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### 概要

西洋音楽は昔から社会的な背景を元に発展してきた。芸術のトレンド、音楽の技術と科学の進歩によって変化して来た音楽は、独自の言語力を持ち始め一般民衆でも理解出来る表現方法として進化し続けてきた。音楽の歴史上で、最も過激的な表現だと言われているロマン主義（Romanticism）は、その後も発展を遂げ続け印象派（Impressionism）や表現主義（Expressionism）に著しい影響を及ぼしたとも言われている。しかし、何故芸術もしくは音楽は、ニーチェの哲学と共に二十世紀に入って劇的に逸脱し、一般民衆を結束させようとしたはずが、却って切り離してしまったのか。知性や芸術音楽として知られる二十世紀音楽は、実際に言語力を維持する事が可能だったのか。コミュニケーション能力が乏しい音楽は、現在の人々にどのように捉えられているのか、それとも現代人の理解力が追いつかないのかもしれない。今のポピュラー音楽は、単なる音だけの表現力に偏重しがちであり、その代替として歌詞やファッションに頼りながら表現力を得て、民衆から感動を呼べる一つ的手段としている。ところがこの現象が、芸術音楽や哲学音楽の進歩を妨げる大きな原因の一つであると考えられる。二十世紀音楽は、果たしてリバイバル、あるいはサバイバルが可能であるか

### 1. Introduction

In this article, I will discuss a problem that is still plaguing the science of music in the West and elsewhere. The problem is that traditional music, what we call classical music was composed and played in a social context. Its purpose was to unite people while they enjoyed the arts. This was of course not just a Western trend but in fact universal. This type of music aimed therefore to communicate pleasure and values from the composer through the host, be that a king or a nobleman, or a rich amateur, to his guest or guests. In this format, music fulfilled a social purpose, which put strings around the hands of many composers; they could not compose whatever they felt like, lest their music turned incomprehensible and hence incommunicable. Such music would not likely find appropriate sponsors among the rich and wealthy and would most probably be forgotten.

Yet, with the advent of contemporary “Atonal” style, music has lost most of its traditional communicability and has lost a wide audience. It does find sponsors among experts and intellectuals, but remains to this day without universal appeal. In what follows, I will discuss the changes between classical and contemporary

music, taking into account the changes in musical communication as a social and yet also an artistic phenomenon. To start my discussion and to contrast pre-modern with contemporary music, I need to remind the reader of some of the basics in the science of music.

## 2. Modern Day Listener

Needless to say, technology of sound and music has significantly influenced the world we live in, playing a vital role in human society. We experience sounds from the moment we become aware of our environment; from early childhood on, our days unfold against a background of sound. In our daily lives, sound and music have become practically impossible to avoid. Even if one hates music, there is no way to avoid it except if one is deaf or shuts oneself off the outside world. Traffic noise intermingles with the sound of music and songs we hear on the radio or Television. It is as if the sound of music puts some order into the noise pollution that surrounds us today.

However, and this is for those who love music, a rapid change took place in the way we compose and listen to music as an art. Modern technology has made access to music media convenient, as a large variety of music is readily accessible to the listener at any time anywhere. An attraction to most, music has become something so familiar it surrounds us in our most intimate moments without the attention and focus it had once required. We have become numb to the sensation we once glorified as the voice of the gods and heroes. It is as if any messages hidden in the masterpieces we hear exist only for the sake of personal entertainment.

Recorded performances ranging from those by local musicians to those from famous composers are accessible to us at their finest quality on many different formats. The mass distribution over the Internet of MP3 and CD's has given the consumer a wider diversity of music placed at his/her disposal. Performers and composers have welcomed this new technology for promotional purposes in the hopes of reaching a wider audience than was possible in the concert halls one or two hundred years ago. It also allows many more musicians than before to make a living, thanks to the effective commercialization of music. Many artists, the famous and the unknown alike, now sell or even share their music directly to and with the consumer. This has proven to be an invaluable resource for the listeners demanding the quality experience of a personal orchestra in the privacy of their own home. Music technology and distribution influenced the progression of music significantly. But this is not new; new technology and improvements were responsible for many trends throughout history and has influenced the style of music we hear today.

We have been conditioned to accept from the media what we hear from an early age, and rarely challenge the need for solitary listening. The "fast-food culture", as I would call it, has made our eating culture into a condensed version of a mediocre three course meal packaged, priced, and sold conveniently and modestly to reach a larger number of people. The same can be said about music. A simple short-story version of the historical masterpieces is what we call popular music and is a format with which most listeners can easily identify. With the help of lyrics and simple melodies, we are capable, within a very short span of time, of

retrieving its message. Therefore, to have any type of impact on or induce a reaction from the modern-day non-solitary listener, music must have certain ingredients. Most importantly, it must contain a simple message even a child can understand. I believe the melody must be so simple it can be easily memorized. The lyrics must express an emotion familiar to us. And, overall, in order to communicate with the new generation of listeners the music must be able to appeal culturally and emotionally. I personally feel that modern music makes those ingredients too obvious and too strongly and deliberately available through its many visual and lyrical aids, so much so that it loses its artistic quality.

Among the variety of sounds we hear, how can we personally determine the value of what we are choosing to hear? Though people listen to the sound of music in many different ways, most of us hear it as a background to another activity, not focusing on the music itself. Perhaps to alleviate my boredom, even as a trained musician, I catch myself doing the same, regardless of whether we perceive the music to be pleasant or not. Whether by will or psychological avoidance mechanisms, we are able to shut out unwelcome sounds that do not interest us. I also see people capable of directing attention within a cacophony to the things they find significant. This “selective hearing”, I believe, is how the modern listener approaches music. For example, when we are watching a film, there might be an important statement or event to which we all pay attention. The importance of this statement is usually reinforced through the way and intensity with which it is accompanied by some background music. Now, imagine the same scenario without the music and see if the impact or the emotion is the same. Of course it is not; it may even be totally insignificant, unemotional and incommunicable. It is here more than anywhere else that we discover the power of music. Music makes dead things come alive, music helps us bring things near and personal that is otherwise far distant from us temporally and physically. This is the influence of music. Regardless of whether it is a masterpiece or a mediocre juxtaposition of sound, music has the power to add subjective emotion to something far removed from the listener. The difference between, say, a masterpiece and a common song is the universal power to make many listeners relate to the event or message by appealing to their emotion. This is how a message can be transmitted effectively from a fictitious event to the listener. But this understanding of music also entails the manipulation of human emotions by the composer and / or the player, and, of course, something that all art is subject to the possibility that we misunderstand the original intention of the composer or even of the player because we are no longer living in the same age and or culture in which the music was created. We listen to it through our own culture and environment, which conditioned the way we understand it.

With our selective listening, therefore, do we truly understand the intention of the composer of our favorite music? Or, do we need to read about it in books or magazines in order to understand the content of the song? Since music can either be enriched with content, or a simple sales gimmick, I feel we, as listeners, are solely responsible for judging and reacting to the music, no matter its original intention. Yet, one thing we owe any artistic creation, regardless of the way it tries to appeal to us, is to focus on the music.

### 3. Grammar in Music

Language and music have evolved together. Throughout time, language was a part of music. Music helped language to convey messages, values and, hence, the truth. Music legitimized language. Religions especially availed themselves of this combination, reinforcing their messages with music. This eventually created a common culture, reaching a wide public. The blending of many voices carrying a spiritual message in a large space such as a church or cathedral was undeniably an uplifting experience as well as hearing the virtuosity of singers to a favorite drama. The same can be said of this combination used in politics. Like sermons, famous political speeches had, and to a certain extent still have, a musical quality and rhythm, such as one can hear in Martin Luther King's speech at Washington: "I have a dream ...". Religion and government could not deny the power of such lyrics, hence the need for both religious and political leaders to use this powerful method of communication, hence also the trend among these leaders to manipulate this communicative method to their own ends. As this trend being controlled by these institutions, we discover the potential of music and language combination to manipulate popular emotion.

Yet, this combination has also proven to be an effective artistic device, giving the artist the means to get his/her message across. Sometimes a composer would compose the music to a work of literature, or a writer basing his work from the lyrics of a composer whether or not they knew each other personally or lived in the same age and culture. Language can be used to enhance the music message of a composer, or the composer may enhance the message he or she believed to be inherent in the language. Of course, any misunderstanding is possible between the two, either by enhancing the message or alternating it as the artist sees fit or even destroying it as, is often the case in musical or literary parodies. Whatever a composer or writer may create, it always comes with the potential for addition, alteration, that is, for further second- or third-hand creativity. Within this multifaceted framework, composers still created masterpieces. In this way, language and music have been fertile allies since prehistoric times.

As Mario Vaneechoutte pointed out, sentences, grammar, and punctuation exists in most music we hear today. Music in this respect differs little from the structure of language. Based on his observations of song before speech in children by use of melody, he discusses the relationship that music has to language and language to music -- what makes speaking distinct from song. Studies look at how the brain reacts to stimulations brought on by language and music. We see there are many similarities, but unlike language, music is ultimately an abstract art form unique to us, existing as aesthetic sensations based on our mental musical content. Aniruddh Patel's research, for example, explains that words in sentences that can take on grammatical functions such as subject, direct and indirect object, are said to have no parallels in music. I cannot agree with this. Though not as direct and sophisticated as literature, there is a message that appeals either directly or indirectly like in language. Musical communication functions like language especially in its potential for varied interpretation. Complex and vague communication is typical of both artistic language and the property of music.

If known, the intention of the composer must be respected to some degree, but the message the composer conveys to each individual is simply determined by the comprehension level and skill, if not the listener's generation and culture. How can the common listener understand the complexities of emotion, the basics of music theory and the fundamentals of compositions without knowing what is being expressed in the music? How are we to distinguish a sad section of a song from a joyful one? Though ultimately we all have our own individual understanding of how the song communicates to us, the combination of chords, the progression and its relationship to the melody qualify as complex grammar.

Acoustically, music and speech are similar but functionally they are not. The phonemes of speech, vowels and consonants, can be compared to musical variables such as frequency, intensity, and duration. Musical tones are, like phonemes in language, building blocks of meaning, though in language the meaning may be more intellectual whereas in music, more emotional. Of course, a country's constitution, like the US Constitution, may be song, as it often is in the Rotunda of the US Congress, but its values could not be conveyed nor legalized only through music. Language is often based on thought and mental calculations, something music cannot be. But there are also many similarities between language and music. They both convey values and cultural identity. Russian, German, and Italian, as well as Spanish music, express a cultural idiosyncrasy; there is something typically Russian in, say, Borodin, Mussorgsky, and Rimsky-Korsakoff, and the same can be said about Manuel de Faya for Spain and Spanish music. Nonetheless, German and Russian composers were equally able to bring forth the Spanish character and ambience. Hence, there is also music and literature that are unbound to national identity and are more universal. And that is the case particularly in contemporary music.

Some aspects of language have to be learned. Gestures and facial expressions are in both music and language and are signs that must be acquired and or learned. Grammar, too, must be learned before it can be used in effective communication. The same is true for music. One must study music in order to understand what it tries to communicate.

The will to develop proper listening skills and expanding the musical vocabulary is the only remedy we have for achieving a deep understanding of what we hear. The study of music allows us to dissect the music, to see the construction and to analyze what it is we are actually affected by, and only then will we be independent in deciding for ourselves what we can or cannot identify with. We can better understand the message of the composer and know his intentions behind the composition. Since the common listener does not fully understand the language and grammar used in music and composition when first exposed to a song, I would say the message of the composer is not sufficiently communicated nor understood.

Of course, misinterpretation of that message, whatever it may have been, can in and of itself, be pleasurable as we get out of the music what we want, in terms of our own culture. Hence, a Russian listening to French music may have different emotions compared to the French listeners, let alone the Japanese or Chinese ones. However that may apply in certain works, the study of music, trying to know what the composer wanted to express, is another type of listening from which many of us derive equal satisfaction and pleasure. The repetition of listening, like re-reading a line of poetry can definitely help the listener understand and better

appreciate difficult, unfamiliar music. The sounds and patterns eventually become familiar, enhancing the quality of the music. For the non-professional, studying music through repetitive listening is perhaps the only way to fully appreciate music literature. To find similarities in the language of music from various cultures and eras justifies the language structure in music. Just think of how much more one appreciates music realizing the ways composers use certain sounds to express a common emotion.

For the modern listener to ignore the similarities of emotional expression of these composers is perhaps why aesthetic perception of music is dependent on lyrical and visual reference. We are not only exposed to music and poetry as one, which tell us the emotion behind the melody and the chord progression, but music videos and film scenarios give us a visual confirmation as well. Composers have experimented with this for centuries, and successfully reached a larger audience, even those with untrained ears. The composers did not refuse these technological innovations and blended it with their own work. The tools which most composers use today come from these innovations, creating new ways to express.

Perception of sound and music is not confined to only professionals. I do believe education in the musical performing arts, technology and composition can help enrich the understanding and appreciation of a musical work's structure thus enhancing the experience one is to have when confronted with the creation. But, since the sensations we encounter are based primarily on our mental musical content, who is to say we are not to feel something special when listening to a familiar melody. I, too, at times, feel the necessity to thoughtlessly be drawn in by a popular song, to be captured in the moment of the music, rather than heartlessly look at it under a microscope. This is a natural effect we all have and is part of human nature. But the musical content of today's music has become so simple, there are many like me who feel isolated in the direction modern music is going. We are living in an increasingly complex society and cultural environment but no longer seek in music an expression of that complexity. Complex music, which could help us to understand the complexities of contemporary civilization, has somehow disappeared from the mainstream. It does exist in short segments behind a scene in a movie or even in a planetarium. I ask myself, does the content of this kind of music, we might call intellectual music, drive away the common listener, or has the strive for a deeper sensation sought in the presence of an uplifting art been diminished?

It is important to realize what art and music are, and how they affect us. Does art need a practical usage or application, or can we just accept it as a non-utilitarian expression? In determining the quality of art, do we require art to only entertain us, or can we simply see it for the intended purpose for which it was created? Does it need to serve a purpose? We all have expectations when listening to music or even attending a fine-art gallery. Are we all entitled to determine what is acceptable as genuine art as we see fit?

In order to reply to these questions, I feel we must identify what innovations took place during the last century to enable us to break free from tradition and incorporate free-thinking in to the realm of music and art so that we may realize the direction in which we are heading. We may take, say, church music as an example. It had a definite purpose. It functioned within a culture that determined its perimeters. It was not an art for art's sake. It was not unlimited individual creativity. But now, such a definition has vanished in favor of individual

creativity without specific purpose. As the purpose of music confined the creativity of composers in history, when did music become a perfect tool of self-expression?

It seems as if religion and government, and with the restrictions with which they enforced many artists to create, have also selected music's critics, determining what music is or should be. Aristocratic patronage was a necessity for the composer until the emergence of the democratic society where the new upper middle-class began to fill the concert halls. This allowed composers to consider more common scenarios in human daily life in their music rather than to express the glorifications of a nation's history or the privileges of the aristocracy. I feel centuries of religious and political suppression were responsible for the birth of this new art and music. The revolt against classical art and music, which catered to nobility and aristocrats, contributed to this diverse artistic trend, exploring new ideas of expression and lyricism.

#### 4. The Intellectual Music

Contemporary music derived not only from advanced structural and theoretical considerations, or the reconstruction of music theory by the use of dissonance, but from new ideas in science, philosophy and politics. This required technology to construct new tools for the sake of artistic advancement in creativity. The innovations in science and the industrial revolution, in particular, led to technical improvements and more responsive instruments needed for large concert halls, which eventually replaced the chambers of the aristocracy. The invention and improvements of wind and brass instruments allowed composers to write complex melodies for horns and trumpets, while the pianoforte acquired a cast-iron frame to withhold the tension of a wider spectrum of sound and overall increase in dynamics.

With what we see in the technology of musical instruments and its impact on music, even traditionalists are unable to remain unaffected by this flow of human progression. With the computer slowly replacing the pencil and staff paper amongst composers, a new way of thinking has evolved. Throughout history, we have witnessed changes in platforms in which music is presented as well as the reinvention, the restructuring of the musical content. From the time we have discovered a method of archiving music by means of writing, however traditional and sacred, we have in fact been able to preserve musical history for posterity, like written literature. This has also contributed to the placing of music on the same evolutionary level as literature in the sense that present artists have readily available a large body of historical work they are free to reinvent and rework. This also means, of course, that modern composers are working under the enormous weight of past masterpieces.

In the early 20th century, however, composers in the European classical tradition began searching for new ways to create other than to merely rely on their predecessors' ordered system of chords and intervals known as tonality. Many modern composers used modal organization, and others began to use alternate scales, sometimes within a tonal context provided by jazz. There was an increasing tendency to avoid any particular chord or pitch as being central. This kind of music was described as atonal. Some composers seeking to extend this direction began to search for ways to compose again in a systematic method, but not using traditional

harmony.

The result was, and still is, that in this 20th century music movement, the non-expert cannot easily differentiate masterpieces from ordinary works. Arnold Schoenberg and Igor Stravinsky left us genius work, exploring new harmonic systems and experimenting with extreme registers of instruments. Twelve-tone technique, which is a method devised by the self-taught Schoenberg, was a chromatic approach to composition rather than the traditional diatonic system to which we as listeners have been and still are so accustomed. Though difficult to comprehend, we can still identify patterns and the creativity infused in his compositions. Schoenberg himself described the system as a "Method of composing with twelve tones, which are related only with one another" . Like serialism, it uses sets to describe musical elements and allows the manipulation of those sets. Serialism is most specifically defined as the structural principle according to which a recurring series of ordered elements which are used in order or manipulated in particular ways, give a piece its unity. The inventor of this Twelve Tone Theory has stated: "I am the slave of an internal power stronger than my education," . Later he said: "I am but the loudspeaker of an idea. The idea is an electric current — in the air. It may come from Jupiter — from the cosmos — that is not proven." At the premier performance of his first compositions, there was a fistfight amongst the audience. Most of his early concerts were vacated during the middle of the performance, and claims that this kind of music causes neurosis plagued it for a long time.

Though atonal ultimately became an important movement in the history of contemporary music, some say it isolated the public and the common listener and most of us are debating whether it can be considered methodical or arbitrary. The many composers of this era were ridiculed with derision and disapproval, and considered too provocative. Many traditionalists claimed that it was not music whereas the innovators believed it to be the start of a new direction which they felt was in tune with contemporary philosophy and literature, like that of Franz Kafka and the painter Edvard Munch. Some considered it to be not music at all, but a performing art, while others hailed it as the avant-garde of the 20th century. Though once considered the music of the future, non-experts continue to be puzzled. Was the avant-garde so far ahead of its time that listeners of today can't even comprehend it almost 100 years later?

Some traditionalists gave this music some credit, attributed to the possibility of it being rediscovered by some future generation. In their opinion, works by these composers are like wine to be opened later. Despite the fact that this music failed to effectively communicate with the public at the time of its composition, in the past decade more than a few composers successfully incorporated some of the methods in their own highly successful works. Composers like Aaron Copeland (Billy the Kid) drew much from this music. As so did Stockhausen with his use of electronic music, hence the importance many contemporary critics place in this movement in the belief that it will shape future music. This may indeed be true given the fact that today, for many composers, the search for immediate communication with the audience is despicable, populist and a surrender to cheap taste. How do I, personally, feel about this trend? What is my position? Well, since they call themselves members of "the Free Music Movement" I expect the tickets to be free of charge. That is, I am not going to spend any money attending their concerts or purchasing their recordings. I realize though that this



attitude would isolate many great works from the public and is extremely selfish and arrogant. As a musician myself, I feel the need to always be open to new trends in my field although I may not be overly attracted to all that happens within it. Yes, there are great works in the avant-garde though I simply cannot comprehend some of the compositions. I honestly cannot tell the difference between some of the songs and a child thoughtlessly banging on the piano. But then, are there not great paintings done by simply throwing paint at the canvas, or using an electric sprayer? Though I am a fan of Dadaism, much of it fails to capture my expectation and imagination of a stimulating art. Simplicity and abstraction they might say, but what use do I have as a listener to something that needs a verbal explanation to be understood? What innovative minds welcomed the atonal and how long did it take for the traditionalists to accept it as music? How are we to differentiate the true innovators from fraud? Of course, how much ever the advancement of music may require all listeners to understand complex melodies and music theory so they may analyze everything they hear, we need to differentiate between art and gimmick so that we may give respect to those who deserve it. Surrealism and Expressionism still had a plot; it gave me a mental picture to paint when exposed to it. Most solitary listeners do not need to read about the connection between Debussy and Monet. It is obvious. But now, these obvious links are mostly lost. Individualism has taken over and the question is how much it takes for this music to communicate with the non-expert. The dilemma is how much an introspective, isolated composer's music comes across. Yes it comes across, but it may take a genius of the caliber of Marcel Proust. Atonal music is still waiting for such a genius.

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