Music and the Modes of Production

When the wage and therefore livelihood of one group—the workers—subtracts from the profits and therefore livelihood of another—the owners—a struggle between these two classes ensues, as owners seek to degrade the wages of their workers whose labor they rely upon, and workers attempt to resist this degradation by any means available. This great inefficiency of human labor, where our reliance on one another for our subsistence appears instead as an obstacle to be overcome, is the root of class-struggle and the motor of historical change under this system of subsistence; for as either side resists the encroachments of the other, developments will be made that alter the structure of society.

Now what, if anything, does this have to do with music? Our problem seems doubly confounding, for not only does there seem to be a long road that separates music from the mode of production, but the very idea of music, when placed under the slightest historical pressure, seems so diffuse a concept that it begins to crack, overfull with meaning to the point that it loses any coherence: if it’s defined as organized sound, then how do we differentiate singing from speech? If it’s a combination of rhythm, melody, and harmony, then where does silence fit in? If it’s a scientific object expressing hertz and frequencies, then what about the human subject? Music is then a concept no longer adequate to our task, as our commitment to historical analysis provokes us to ask, “what music do you have in mind?”

This dilemma presents us with at least three options: one is to bury our heads in the sand, employing some aesthetic tradition that has long since lost its social validity, and go on using the term “music” as if its historical and geographical implications did not exist; another is to ditch our aspirations for universalism, opting for a kind of positivist pluralism, a form of enlightened cosmopolitanism that arrives on the scene to proclaim that music has never existed, just particular “musics;” the third is to set aside the conceptual burden we have inherited by proposing a general concept called “sound,” maintaining the desire for a cohesive field by depicting the various audiovisual practices that comprise our world, while bringing social considerations of various group dynamics to methods of music analysis.
But since we find ourselves concerned with how our modes of production shape our musical syntax and structure, and what our musical syntax and structure can tell us about our class-dynamics, then the dissolution of a definable object is not so much an impediment, as it is a clue: for only through some social function or practice should music appear either too subjective to be grasped or too ideal so as to obfuscate the collective relations which comprise it. From our perspective, then, it is less significant whether this or that idea of music-musics-sound is true or politically satisfying, and more interesting to see what makes such an idea possible and desirable.

As a brief illustration, we can examine the once-prevalent conviction that music is autonomous from the world: that it refers to nothing outside itself, and should be judged apart from politics, history, and religion. This aesthetic ideology has long since been decried as a bourgeois fantasy, one meant to obscure art’s relation to the world and the struggle between classes. But what makes this ideology of autonomy desirable, and what are the conditions that produced its possibility?

Musical Autonomy and the Relations of Production

Today every town has its theatre where plays are performed daily, while for the Hellenes the stage came alive only at great festivals; today printing spreads every new play through-out Germany, while among the ancients only a few could read the written tragedy. Hence, drama can no longer serve as the centre for great assemblies, a different art must help, and only music can do that; for it alone admits of the participation of a great multitude and even gains considerably thereby in power of expression; it is the only art where enjoyment coincides with live performance and where the range of effect is as wide as that of ancient drama. And well may the German celebrate and foster music, in which he is king above all nations, for just as he alone succeeded in bringing the highest and holiest, the innermost secret of the human heart, to light out of its hidden depth and in expressing it in sound, so it is given to him alone to respond fully to the power of music, to understand the language of instruments and song through and through. But here music is not the main thing. What is then? The music festival. Just as the centre cannot form a circle without a periphery, so music is nothing without the gay, convivial life which forms the periphery to this musical centre.

—Friedrich Engels (1842)

Just as Engel’s conception of music—the secrets of the human heart accompanied by the gay, convivial life of live performance—could not be conceived without the Rhenish holiday festival that he’s here describing, the notion of musical autonomy can only exist divorced from such social occasions. For if music is to be autonomous, it cannot be subordinate to “extra-musical” affairs, such as a dance party, military march, or bugle call, where the rhythms and sounds are used to keep us in step or signal alarm. Nor can its purpose be to accompany a language-based event, such as a theatrical production or a religious or civil ceremony, where music is the soundtrack that supports a social narrative or ritual.

An autonomous music needs a public that arrives for music and nothing else, just
as the musician must likewise play for no other reason than to provide this music. When music is then produced for no other reason than its own consumption—an art for the sake of art—then the conditions for musical autonomy are in place. The shift in the relations of musical production away from a form of social accompaniment and into commodity production, will not only alter the function of music, but also its structure, for artists will now be free to play “themselves” for an audience who came to hear them play, as their music is turned into a craft of the artist’s expression—an aesthetic form to be experimented with and exhausted in accordance with the range of a musician’s technique.

Though this transformation in the musical relations of production would set the stage for an idea of musical autonomy, it would also create a hurdle for its articulation: for with the turn toward art as an expressive form, music is now free to depict anything and everything, as whatever preoccupies the life of the artist’s imagination becomes an occasion for performance—from grocery shopping to a history of systemic exploitation. This new range of things to say will eventually lead to new techniques to say them with, as the loss of the social occasion occasions a breakdown in the traditional means used to accompany them. Any criteria we develop for delimiting an intelligible framework for “the work of art” becomes therefore difficult to maintain, since the lack of a common subject and the diversity in musical texture will lead us to say that the boundary called art is simply a fiction. In this vacuum, the cultural critic will then emerge to adjudicate the legitimacy of one form of music over the other, as this arbiter of social taste directs us toward a proper ethic of consumption, educating the listener on how to differentiate the good versus the bad kind of sound; the musical versus the noisy object or event.

And so if this exercise has given us some intimation as to how the fantasy of musical autonomy could have been produced through a change in our relations of production, the question still remains as to who consumes it and why?

The Alienations of Capital and the Allure of Autonomy

In a system where workers have nothing to sell but their power to labor; where they have lost control over the products of their work because they have been stripped of the raw materials and instruments of their production; where they find themselves competing against one another for their subsistence and are therefore alienated from each other; life can become a vacuous absurdity.

For not only is a worker’s time wastefully expended securing their food and shelter, fighting for a livable wage to ensure their daily reproduction until they’ve become too great an impediment to the accumulation of capital and are therefore extinguished, either relegated to unemployment or otherwise left to die; but their employer’s time is similarly squandered, used to manipulate his work-force in order to craft a balance between overwork and worker appeasement, in order to maintain a class-position that he thought would guarantee his means to a greater life, but which transforms, in this endless competition, into an end in itself, as the more capital he generates, the greater capital he requires to secure it.

Life, in this situation, consists of tasks without meaning—a perpetual present and monotonous existence that entails either our daily reproduction so as to reproduce
our day; or the accumulation of capital for the purpose of capital accumulation. As a consequence, both workers and owners become divided against themselves as each class has lost the ability to direct the social utility of their time and labor, enslaved as they are to a system that is driven by its subjects as much as it seems to operate as a structure without them.

It's perhaps little wonder then that the musician will come to bear the social fantasy of unalienated labor (i.e. “the good life”)—the spectacle of being apart and autonomous from the world of capital—as their work appears self-directed, since they often control the raw materials and instruments of their production. The autonomy of music then provides us not only with an experience of “free” expression that the waged laborer neither has the means nor available time and labor to learn and perform; but the shared space of listening also offers the worker an imagined community, removed from the alienating relationships of competitive production from which they are seeking refuge.

In this regard, the musician becomes the surrogate voice of their social group, a representative of a generation deprived of their ability to direct the outcome of their labor and therefore their lives, existing as they are under the pressures of the waged relationship.

In briefly illustrating the general movement we make from an investigation of an aesthetic ideology, to an account of its accompanying musical syntax and structure, and its relation to changes in the forces and relations of capitalist production and consumption, I hope to have shown that the disappearance and reappearance of our ideas of music is less a problem to be solved by some greater insight into truth and justice, than a productive symptom in understanding how our music relates to the collective organization of our reproduction. Perhaps, then, we have given some preliminary answer to the question we began with: what, if anything, does this have to do with music?

Our opening article—“The Final Crisis of Bourgeois Music”—written in the 1930’s by Kurt Blaukopf, and translated for us by Murray Dineen, argues that the historical dynamics of bourgeois music must be understood by tracing the shift from Feudalism to Imperialism. Beginning with Feudalism, Blaukopf opts for a theory of correspondence, where the economic structure of society corresponds to its cultural forms of production. For example, polyphony—the expression of a melodic idea from different perspectives—corresponds to feudal ways of life, where communities are relatively unrelated but geographically proximate. Blaukopf asserts that as the structure of feudal life began to shift toward more capitalist forms of organization—the city over the country; the state over the lord; and industrial manufacture over agricultural production—musical syntax similarly changed. The number of melodic lines mirrored the growth and interconnectedness of society until an organizing unity was developed with the creation of the tempered scale, producing the homophonic textures of bourgeois music. Homophony can then be understood not just as the evolution of polyphony, but also as its opposite: the expression of a single
perspective, driven and torn by the ideas of musical consonance and dissonance. This transformation would create a crisis in bourgeois music, for homophony—the stacking of sound on top of sound—would eventually transform into sonority, as extended harmonic techniques erode the sense of contrast and tension as all sounds are flattened into noise. Yet if homophony sold the fantasy of harmony in a world split between the bourgeois and the proletariat; then sonority seems to provide us with nothing at all. For Imperialism—the stage of global capitalism wherein no escape seems possible—presents a problem for bourgeois music: either preserve the spurious status of art's autonomy by continuing to create a form of escapism in a world where the fantasy of escape can no longer be sold; or embrace your social function as a commodity producer, creating beautiful commodities for mass consumption, but then dispense with the distinction known as art.  

Fredric Jameson's "A Note on the Sublime in Music" reaches a similar end point, suggesting that the shift from modernism to post-modernity can be understood by the substitution of the sublime—the movement upward toward some precipice that is then overcome—by the beautiful and the mundane: the world of shimmering commodities and everyday advertising. This change in the social texture of society can be seen and heard in different aspects of life, as in music, where Bruckner and Mahler stand in as exemplars of this transition. Bruckner, employing the temporality of the sonata form, takes us through a winding and torturous process that leads finally to some sacred precinct to which we're temporarily admitted. Whereas for Mahler, the process of development, exposition, and recapitulation necessary to create the sublime is replaced by the sudden and the abrupt, as no ending can be anticipated and therefore no sense of progression emerges. This is the dialectic, where the finite and mundane can, without a moment's notice, shift into the infinite, as every possible ending is explored; in this regard, Mahler marks the end of Romanticism and harmonic tension, as the dissolution of that distinction between the mundane and the sublime contains within it the breakdown between the work of art and the world of work. For if the ending of a musical work is no longer apparent, the bridge that separates the two worlds dissolves, as everyday sounds, such as silence and noise, can now be considered as aesthetic material that themselves contain the seeds of the otherworldly. And so musical minimalism and maximalism become varied expressions of the same phenomenon: the disintegrating seam between the work and the world, or the ubiquity of labor time.

For Murray Dineen, this disintegrating seam between work and world creates a crisis for the commodification of music: for how are the aesthetic boundaries of a musical work now to be constituted as an object for sale if silence itself has become one of the raw materials for musical composition? Since the coherence of a musical work requires certain conventions that mark the boundary between musical and non-musical sound, gestures of finality must be invented and learned for audiences and musicians alike. Labor's end is therefore just as important as labor's power in the creation of the commodity. In music, silence marks an end to labor—it is a redundant necessity: constitutive of our understanding of sound and yet opposed to it. In this regard, silence, like the end of labor, is "outside" the process of capital accumulation, since its end appears only after the labor-time necessary for the commodity's comple-
tion; but also “within it,” in the sense that there is no commodity without an end to the labor that went in to making it. Silence, Dineen argues, can then be understood as music’s transgression and its constitution. The utility of silence as a sonority that transgresses and exposes the limits or crisis of bourgeois music—as in Cage’s 4’33’’—is, we can say, modernism’s apogee.

Such an act of transgression, where the “arbitrariness” of the art/non-art distinction is exposed as the machinations of so many vested class-interests, can itself become an aesthetic experience, as the status of art is preserved by discrediting its autonomy. Taking Audioguide—a 7 hour piece of music theater by German composer Johannes Kreidler—and Urban Disease—an album length work by the Basque band Billy Bao—Seth Kim-Cohen shows us how the act of barring the aesthetic device has the effect of turning what appears as natural and immutable into an artificial act of human creation. But how do you expose the act of exposure? Or as Kim-Cohen puts it: what happens, when after the mouth has devoured everything it can, it is left with nothing but a mouth? Can it devour itself? Both Audioguide and Urban Disease bare their devices in different ways: Kriedler challenges the author function by creating false attributions; exposes the economics of art by making the production costs part of the performance; and challenges the norms of consumption by using Facebook comments from his previous performances as part of his current one. In this sense, our concern with the “autonomy of art” is shown to be the product of a series of nested devices; whereas Urban Disease bares its device through a recursivity that conflates the output of the sound with the input, and consumes the markers that allow us to locate its borders as a musical commodity.

Both works generate a problem that has found no shortage of answers, for if a work lacks internal coherence and a contextualized frame of reference, how are we supposed to listen to it? Kim-Cohen suggests “shallow listening” as a solution—a way of paying attention to the various devices that delimits an experience as a “work of art.” The problem of listening should then necessarily appear as its own solution, as the failure to grasp a work simply reaffirms that late modernist dictum that some listeners refuse to accept: there is no such thing as music; or, that the device itself is the new music we’ve been refusing to hear.

Where Kim-Cohen shows us how music works to expose its device, Alana Wolf takes us through David Byrne’s “Playing the World” and the “Human Harp Project” as two instances through which the conventions of common social spaces are disrupted by unconventional musical installations. David Byrne’s “Playing the Building” attempts to empower the consumer by distributing the author function through the use of unconventional instruments that are open for anyone to play: industrial pipes ring throughout an abandoned manufacturing plant as each aspect of the social space is configured as an instrument, therefore turning the consumer into a producer as traditional social roles are reversed. Whereas in the “Human Harp Project”, though authorship is not distributed, the means by which the performance was created—a computer program and unique instrument that turns bridge coils into harp strings—is sourced openly and therefore easily accessed, allowing anyone to alter the program and materials to suit their acoustic needs. Both works can then be said to reconfigure
how industrial spaces operate as a common suspension bridge is turned into a giant harp while an abandoned factory is engineered into an organ that anyone can play. However, alongside the critiques Wolf offers, “Playing the Building” and the “Human Harp” can also be expressions of an aestheticized politics, where abandoned industrial plants and suspension bridges are read as utopian spaces of free musical expression instead of symptoms of capitalism’s inefficiency and exploitation. Nonetheless, Wolf demonstrates that the role of art is not a political tool to replace social infrastructure, but a perceptual one to alter our social relations in the spaces we inhabit.

Matt Dineen’s “Stories of Music and Work” illustrates the manner in which mood and music interact to turn an environment of work and consumerism into potentially its opposite: a space of leisure and enjoyment. For those working, however, the monotony and repetition of the music in the workplace—essentially what we could call the industrialization of leisure activity—can often lead to the reverse effect: disgruntled and unproductive employees. A pertinent reminder of that perennial problem capitalism must always confront: how do you keep workers working, extracting the greatest productivity for the least amount of pay? Dineen’s stories allow us to speculate that as capitalism becomes less effective, art and work spaces become indistinguishable, as owners get ever more desperate to keep their workers from revolting by recreating the conditions of their employees’ leisure in the space of employment. This policing occurs, not only inside one’s place of work, but also outside, on the way to it.

The street, as a contested space of social relations, is the focus of Joe Varghese’s paper “Performing the City: Pedestrian Acts and Home to Harlem.” The social density of the street means that it must both be either policed for the purpose of capital accumulation, or left alone to accommodate different ways of living. Taking Claude McKay’s Home to Harlem, Varghese explores how the sounds of Harlem in the 1930’s create a place of movement without justification, as characters don’t just walk, but stroll, strut, loiter, swing, slide, roll, heave, and shuffle—such that habitation as private property is reclaimed for public space. But the Harlem wayfarer, unlike the flâneur who visually consumes the city by being apart from it, represents a form of dwelling within a space otherwise sequestered for commercial exchange by a population deemed incapable of it, and therefore appearing invisible within it. In this regard, the stylized walks of 1930’s Harlem can be read as a way of “walking outside” in a manner analogous to the improvisation of harmonic sequences found in jazz, while embodying the contradictions of the blues.

Jay Hammond’s analysis of Tamar Korn’s rendition of “Up a Lazy River” follows up by taking us into the politics of jazz aesthetics, as Korn’s mimicry of the clarinet forces us to confront the gender assignment of the human voice. Juxtaposing Luce Irigary and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Hammond illustrates how the voice, typically gendered as a naturally feminine aspect in distinction to the non-linguistic and abstract mathematics of instrumental music that are gendered masculine, is complicated in the practices of traditional jazz. For Korn’s ability to mutate between the timbre of an instrument and that of her voice makes the division difficult to maintain. However, this to-and-fro does not occur without leaving some residue; for what’s
left over in the blurring of the distinctions between voice and instrument is a form of communication without language that is common to both, enabling their reversibility; a gestural language common to traditional jazz. Korn’s performance then illustrates that not only is the gender assignment of the voice and instrument an arbitrary one, but that the assignment of gendered performance in jazz ensembles is a manifestation of masculinist politics of bebop, where a singer is portrayed as a commercial and therefore “unserious” addition to a usually male ensemble.

This turn toward the voice as an object of analysis is the purview of Bran Kane’s article, “The Voice: a Diagnosis,” as he outlines a heuristic approach to vocal analysis. Beginning with Jacques Derrida’s critique of the metaphysics of presence in Husserl’s theory of signs—where Derrida argues how the correlation between the voice and the subject has historically been used in western philosophy to assert the superiority of man over animal, therefore justifying colonialism as an inherent necessity in the social hierarchy—Kane asks: how is it that we can avoid reproducing this phonocentric ideology, when the humanities are themselves undergoing a vocal turn? He suggests that the voice (phoné) must be analyzed as a configuration of three elements—its sound (echos), its location (topos), and its proposition (logos). Yet, in an age of mechanical and electronic reproduction, the unity of echos, topos, and logos in the speaking body—the basis of phonocentrism—has been sundered by various techniques (technê), which allow these three elements of the voice to mutate into and at times dominate over the others. And so we must pay careful attention to the means by which this movement is achieved, being sensitive to the indeterminations of echos, topos, and logos.

Each of our contributors can be said to deal with the question of how politics and music interrelate—whether it’s distinguishing music as a perceptual tool meant to alter our imagination of social space; a method of analysis designed to avoid the pitfalls of a phonocentric past; understanding the role of silence as an extension of Capital’s contradictory desire to extinguish its labor force while relying on it; or, interpreting developments in our musical syntax as affected by the modes of our production, themselves inaugurated by political revolutions. This desire for politics may relay some information about where we are, and where we’re headed, for we can speculate that though an art for art’s sake ideology has all but disappeared, the social conditions that accompanied it have not.

What, then, emerges to fill this ideological gap? Perhaps this is where we can say that the aesthetic critic, who once argued for the good over the bad sound, the sublime over beautiful music, has been replaced by the political critic, whose business is to separate the radical wheat from the reactionary chaff, as the fantasy of unalienated labor is replaced by the desire for mass political action in an age of global crisis. Whether the politicization of music is a symptom of the commodification of politics, the individual’s desire to curate and consume the “right” radical position; or rather a sign of agitation, setting the stage for mass organization and global revolution, is the crossroad at which we find ourselves.
1 We could substitute our concept of choice here—e.g. musicking, aurality, acoulogy, noise, so on.

2 The ostensible goal of this last ideological position is two-fold: to democratize our listening habits from sediment criteria of taste and value so that anything can be considered music to our ears; and to dislocate a method of music analysis that has been preoccupied with an objective science of tonality, or a subjective history of individual genius.


4 This hegemony of this social relationship creates a new way of understanding music in the world, where the distinction between art music (i.e. music for consumption) and “background” music (i.e. music that accompanies other events) can now be invoked; usually to dismiss the latter as a social artifact while privileging the former as an object worthy of aesthetic judgement; or to separate the social event from the music that accompanies it, evaluating, for instance, church music as an aesthetic matter, separate from the service. This new epistemological frame will also result in histories that catalogue the transformation of musical forms—ranging from monophony, to polyphony, onto homophony—as though these formal innovations were solely the product of some individual, since the ahistorical unity of the musical object is maintained by the very idea of the individual’s “artistic expression,” rather than the autonomy of the art object.


6 PastorMac7. “FHES - Punching the Clock.” YouTube. YouTube, 01 Nov. 2011. Web. 28 Aug. 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kerUbOQTW0>. This episode of “Ralph Wolf & Sam Sheepdog” is a good illustration of the tedium caused by capitalism, where class-struggle becomes both a necessity and a waste of time in a system where no clear oppressor exists.

7 Hence the use of “Capital” as a noun or actor, as opposed to “Capitalist.”

8 Our analysis has taken for granted the political struggles that wrought the changes in our modes of production we’ve traced here, specifically the revolutions that accompanied the shift from feudalism to capitalism. A fuller analysis would place our movement within this history of class warfare.

9 It is only the appearance of an unalienated relationship because what capital cannot control at the moment of production, it will do at the moment of distribution by controlling art’s vibility through radio stations, booking agencies, festivals—i.e. employment.

10 For Blaukopf, these musical developments should not be understood as the progression and replacement of one musical texture by another, but as their sublation, by which we mean the preservation of their content but the replacement of their form or function. For the principle of harmonic tension does not eliminate melody altogether, but instead subordinates its function, making melody into a tool or byproduct of harmonic tension; similarly, the Klang or sonority, cannot be said to replace homophony, but turns it into another kind of noise, to be used along others in a broader catalogue of sound. Schoenberg’s serialism exemplifies this transition, from homophony to sonority, as he maintains the content of the twelve-tone system, while operating according to the principles of noise.