The Elephant In The Concert Hall; Searching for the Postmodern in Music Criticism
from 1965 to the Present

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Abstract

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The Elephant In The Concert Hall; Searching for the Postmodern in Music Criticism from 1965 to the Present

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The aim of this study is to identify specific characteristics of postmodern thought in the writing of music critics from 1965 to the present. In the first chapter definitions of both postmodernism and music criticism are posited that are used throughout the study.

In the main body, quotes from critics of all kinds are presented and analyzed for evidence of three main postmodern concepts, the loss of a Grand Narrative Paradigm, technology and commodification issues, and changes in our teleological perceptions. A brief exploration of Rock music criticism and the Internet “customer review” are also included.

Two basic conclusions are reached. One states that postmodernism is more a set of coping tools for our mediated culture than a true philosophy and the other is that by largely ignoring or denying the fact of postmodern thought, art music critics have helped speed the erosion of their status and audience.
This thesis is dedicated with love to my wife, Carla for her never-ending reserve of hope and optimism when it seemed this thesis would never be finished.
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Introduction

A laugh for the newsprint nightmare
A world that never was
Where the questions are all “why?”
And the answers are all “because” 1

In his article “The Nature and Origins of Musical Postmodernism,” composer and theorist Jonathan D. Kramer lists 16 points that can be used to identify postmodernism in music. According to Kramer, postmodern music:

(1) is not simply a repudiation of modernism or its continuation, but has aspects of both a break and an extension;
(2) is, on some level and in some way, ironic;
(3) does not respect boundaries between sonorities and procedures of the past and of the present;
(4) challenges barriers between 'high' and 'low' styles;
(5) shows disdain for the often unquestioned value of structural unity;
(6) questions the mutual exclusivity of elitist and populist values;
(7) avoids totalizing forms (e.g., does not want entire pieces to be tonal or serial or cast in a prescribed formal mold);
(8) considers music not as autonomous but as relevant to cultural, social, and political contexts;
(9) includes quotations of or references to music of many traditions and cultures;
(10) considers technology not only as a way to preserve and transmit music but also as deeply implicated in the production and essence of music;
(11) embraces contradictions;
(12) distrusts binary oppositions;
(13) includes fragmentations and discontinuities;
(14) encompasses pluralism and eclecticism;
(15) presents multiple meanings and multiple temporalities;
(16) locates meaning and even structure in listeners, more than in scores, performances, or composers. 2

In the following thesis, Kramer’s 16 points are adapted to create an analytical tool we can use to determine the influences of postmodern thought on music criticism from

the mid 1960s to the present. Kramer intended these 16 points to be applied to the music itself, but he asserts that postmodernism in music represents more of an attitude toward music rather than an identifiable composition style. In this thesis, I will argue that if the concepts contained in these 16 points do describe postmodern music, then we should see evidence in the writing of music critics, composers, musicologists, and theorists. Critics may be unaware of the idea of postmodernism in art music, or reject it as a viable point of reference, but the evidence of it as a pervasive component of modern culture should still be present.

Authors such as Lawrence Kramer, Susan McClary, and Rose Rosengard Subotnik form the vanguard of what has been dubbed the ‘new musicology,’ and have explored a number of postmodern concepts. These authors have looked into gender issues, deconstructionist philosophy, and hermeneutics to name a few, but these are not the core postmodern ideas that affect music listeners of all kinds. Using Kramer’s list as a starting point, I examine postmodernism in music criticism of all types, even when it is not the primary focus of the writer. In the end, the point of this thesis is not to prove postmodernism correct or incorrect, but rather to illustrate how its central tenets have influenced the practice of music criticism since the 1960s.

Neither music criticism nor postmodernism have universally accepted definitions. In Chapter 1 a definition of music criticism is proposed which will include three different critical groupings: criticism from journalistic sources including daily newspapers, magazines; musicological criticism; and critical writing by composers. This definition makes possible a more comprehensive picture of musical life and thought about classical and rock music. By drawing divergent ideas from all three of these sources,
philosophical concepts can be highlighted, revealing the ‘dissonance’ in the thinking about music that characterizes postmodern criticism.

Postmodernism is a difficult term to define than music criticism. In place of an all-encompassing definition, I define three widely accepted aspects of postmodernism that have specific application to music criticism. These three concepts will include 9 of Kramer’s 16 points. Group 1 will focus on the Loss of a Grand Narrative paradigm and will include Kramer’s points #4, #6, and #12. Group 2 will investigate the postmodern concept of technology and commodification and will look at Kramer’s points #8, #10, and #16. Group 3 will cover postmodern changes in teleological perception and will include #3, #9, and #15 from Kramer’s list.

These three meta-concepts form the basis of the analysis of music criticism from the past five decades employed in this thesis. Chapters 2, 3, and 4, look at specific examples of music criticism, analyzing each with respect to specific principles outlined above; Group 1 in Chapter 2, Group 2 in Chapter 3, and Group 3 in Chapter 4.

Each chapter begins with an overview of the postmodern concepts involved and how they can be specifically related to music criticism. These three chapters will be subdivided chronologically by decade (1960s through 2000s) and use examples of the three main types of criticism discussed in Chapter 1. The purpose of this organization is to give the clearest possible picture of how all three branches of music criticism have viewed these major postmodern concepts and to show the progressive acceptance or rejection of these postmodern concepts in the criticism of the past several decades.

The chapters proceed with a quote from a critic followed by an analysis of how this particular quote either supports or rejects the postmodern concept of one of the three
major groupings. Since these examples were not necessarily intended to illustrate these principles there will be instances where more than one group is referred to within a single passage. In these cases I acknowledge the areas that fall outside the main point in question.

These quotes were written about specific performances and recordings, or in response to other articles on the condition and perception of music in their own specific times. If a quote takes a positive or negative view about a musical concept (serialism, etc.), we must be careful to look past the specifics and see the larger point of how it relates to the postmodern concept being discussed in this thesis.

Rock music criticism and the now ubiquitous, online ‘Customer Review’ are discussed in Chapter 5. This is not an exhaustive investigation of postmodernism in popular music, but it is important to this thesis in cases where art music and popular music criticism have overlapped. The damaged state of critical authority in postmodern times has imperiled even the seemingly impervious rock critic for many of the same reasons that classical music criticism has declined. Looking at the situation of the rock critic will lend insight into the situation of the classical music critic.

The conclusion includes a summary of the changing views identified the previous 4 chapters. In addition the role of music criticism, and the consequences of how it has been undertaken in the postmodern era are explored.
Chapter 1: Definitions

What is Music Criticism?

And I feel like picking a fight, With anybody who claims they're right
All the preacher men, the politicians, All the critics and the things they write

This might appear to be an easy question to answer, but the term music criticism has a number of definitions. According to Webster, the English word critic originated ca. 1588 and comes from the Greek Kritikos (or from the Latin Criticus), meaning “able to discern or judge.” The ability to discern or judge was based upon two separate functions: “[t]hings taken in, or apprehended through the senses were, to the Greeks, aistheta, (from which we derive the word aesthetics) which was considered to be in direct opposition to noeta, which were things thought, or apprehended through logical contemplation.”

Music criticism refers to our ability to evaluate, or to the act of evaluating music both through our ‘felt’ reactions to it and through our thought processes. In fact, critical judgments about music are made almost continuously by everyone who listens to or participates in the making of music. When playing and composing music, critical decisions are necessary as well. Performers make choices about interpretation (tempo, rubato, dynamics, expressions, and more), and these critical choices often become the subject of outside professional criticisms of their performances. Every decision a composer makes during the creation of a musical work is a form of criticism. Oscar

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Thompson went so far as to state that, “...there are two really distinguishable kinds of criticism: That which is printed and that which is said.”

And, although these kinds of criticism will not be the main focus of this thesis, critical intuition is significant in how we relate to more formal types of criticism.

Fred Everett Maus, defines music criticism as “…a genre of professional writing, typically created for prompt publication, evaluating aspects of music and musical life.”

Bojan Bujic states:

[Music criticism is] the intellectual activity of formulating judgments on the value and degree of excellence of individual works of music, or whole groups or genres. In this sense it is a branch of musical aesthetics. With the concurrent expansion of interest in music and information media over the past century, the term has come to acquire the conventional meaning of journalistic reporting on musical performances.

Maus’s and Bujic’s definitions differ on exactly what qualifies as music criticism. Maus’s perspective is that of the critic for a newspaper or magazine engaged in the activity of reviewing performances or recordings—what Bertold Brecht derisively called “copywriting for the entertainment industry.” Bujic’s definition is broader and includes such areas as music history, aesthetics, sociology and philosophy.

The last sentence of Bujic’s definition is significant. There is a fairly substantial school of thought led by eminent musicologists, among them Joseph Kerman and Robert

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Morgan, who believe that music historians and musicologists are the only true critics, and that the daily critics of the popular press should be referred to as reviewers, or at best, music journalists. Kerman lays out the basis for his complaint in his 1980 essay, “How We Got Into Analysis and How To Get Out” saying:

As a matter of general usage, the term ‘criticism’ is applied to music in an anomalous and shallow way […] When people say ‘music criticism,’ they almost invariably mean daily or weekly journalistic writing which is prohibited from the extended, detailed and complex mulling over of the matter at hand.⁸

These sentiments were echoed later by Morgan, who says of his own use of the term:

I am not referring, of course, to journalistic criticism.[…] I use it rather in the wider and more generally accepted sense of informed commentary on the arts that encompasses description, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation. Indeed, in criticism properly understood, these all depend on one another and are, finally, inseparable.⁹

Still others split the distinction in even finer terms. Robert Lindstrom, critic in the 1970s for The Oregonian puts it this way:

While readers tend to interchange the terms reviewer and critic, I don’t. A reviewer goes to a performance, decides whether or not he enjoyed it and then tries to tell you whether or not you would enjoy it. He is a sort of consumer advocate who urges you to go or not on the basis of his personal taste. A critic, on the other hand, tries to go beyond personal taste to encompass a wider perspective which might include stylistic tradition, the expressive potential of the work and the current state-of-the-art in performance.¹⁰

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¹⁰ Robert Lindstrom, “‘Critic,’ ‘Reviewer’ Titles Not Interchangeable,” in Twenty Articles on The Art Of Criticism, ed. Maxine Cushing Gray (Seattle: Northwest Arts, 1984), 44.
For the purpose of this thesis, a music critic will be defined as ‘one who writes thoughtfully and with insight about music for the purpose of guiding the formation of value judgments.’ This definition is useful because it is one that allows, but does not require, Morgan’s emphasis on analysis; it encourages the formulation of value judgments, but unlike Bujic’s, does not require ranking of the “degree of excellence” of the musical object (or concept) in question; and, unlike Kerman’s, it allows the daily critic to have a voice, but does not exclude musicology as Maus’s does. This broader definition allows input from a wide range of historians, essayists, musicologists, theorists, daily critics, and even composers, all under the heading ‘music criticism;’ all fulfilling roles outlined in the positions given by these four sources without the exclusions also outlined in those positions. This definition supports the goal of this thesis; that all viewpoints may be considered in exploring the issue of postmodernism in music criticism.

In the first part of our definition we have critics of all kinds guiding their readers in the formation of value judgments on music and on musical concepts and ideas. This places the critic in a position of authority. Critics address a readership which may or may not have equal knowledge of the subject. In order for their work to influence public perception and opinion of the music about which they write, critics must have some level of authority, a position that raises their verdict above the level of other peers.

This critical authority is the second half of the equation. Guiding readers in the formation of value judgments is how criticism works. The attribution of critical authority is why it works. The reader must cede this authority to the critic, at least to some extent. The cultural historian Jaques Barzun explains the need for critical authority this way:
Aesthetic appreciation is something more than spontaneous liking; a good eye for accurate representation is not enough; one must be able to judge and talk about style, technique, and originality. This demand gives rise to a new public character: the critic. [...] He and his kind are not theorists but connoisseurs and ultimately experts.  

The idea of critical authority is an old one indeed. In his 1757 treatise *Standard of Taste*, Scottish philosopher David Hume states, “that the taste of all individuals is not upon equal footing, and that some men in general, … will be acknowledged by universal sentiments to have a preference above others.”  

Musicologist Alan Walker puts it this way: “[t]he practice of criticism boils down to one thing: making value judgments. The theory of criticism, therefore, boils down to one thing also: explaining them.”  

But to whom is the critic explaining his judgments? Fred Maus states that the critic must be “a member of some community to which the music ‘belongs’ […] Membership in a musical community is a criterion of the validity of critical thought about the music of that community.”  

This concept of community, with a critic whose background and beliefs identify him as a part of the group for which he is writing, is rapidly becoming an anomaly, especially in the realm of daily criticism. This is an extremely important factor in postmodern critical authority. A critic who is expected to cover all aspects and genres of music (and often film, theater, dance, and art as well) will find it difficult to maintain his ‘membership’ in all these varying communities.

Robert Radano said this about the situation of music in postmodern times:

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Forces in postmodern culture – in particular mass media – have encouraged a leveling of oppositions between high and low artistic categories. This condition has, in turn, produced a greater equalization of institutional cultural authority, and as a consequence, a weakening of the traditional aesthetic standards through which we evaluate works of art.\(^\text{15}\)

This change, where critical authority is concerned, makes the application of the value judgment one of the most difficult aspects of music criticism in the postmodern era, and makes the advice of Harold Bloom all the more apt when he says, “[p]ragmatically, aesthetic value can be recognized or experienced, but it can never be conveyed […] To quarrel on its behalf is always a blunder.”\(^\text{16}\)

Wearing the varied hats which they must, critics can be specialists, experts, teachers, even to one degree or another salespeople, and how they accomplish these varied tasks, along with how they maintain their critical authority in the era of postmodernism, will be addressed in the forthcoming chapters.

**What Is Postmodernism?**

And One Peculiar Point I See, As One Of Many Ones Of Me.  
As Truth Is Gathered, I Rearrange,  
Inside Out, Outside In, Inside Out, Outside In, Perpetual Change.\(^\text{17}\)

Postmodernism defies definition almost by definition. Or, as Michael Featherstone points out, “the ‘Modern-Day Dictionary of Received Ideas confirms, this word has no meaning. Use it as often as possible.”\(^\text{18}\)  

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by its most respected proponents (Jean-François Lyotard, Frederic Jameson, Jean Baudrillard) does not yield a singular, straightforward definition in spite of chapters with titles such as “Theories of the Postmodern” (Lyotard 1984), and “Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?” (Jameson 1998). But without a definition of postmodernism, how will we be able to set about “Searching for the Postmodern in Music Criticism” as the title of this thesis suggests?

For postmodernism, the broader, more inclusive type of definition proposed for music criticism will not satisfy the same needs. Postmodernism is already such a broad term that using it at its widest scope would render it meaningless. For this thesis we will look at three of the guiding principles of postmodern thought. Evidence of these three principles can be easily identified in the critical writing in subsequent chapters.

The first of these three principles is referred to as the loss of a totalizing grand narrative paradigm, or metanarrative paradigm. This is the defining postmodern idea posited by Jean-François Lyotard in The Postmodern Condition. Most other areas of postmodern thought arise as ancillary or corollary postulates relating directly to this core concept. According to Lyotard, narrative knowledge is a form of story-telling (mythologies, religions, etc.). These ‘stories’ both explain and legitimate the existing power structures of society. “Grand narratives,” or “meta-narratives,” are terms coined by Lyotard and used by many others to describe these narrative histories. Grand narratives made connections between events and fostered the development of social systems. Grand narratives are powerful tools we use to make sense of our history. In The Origins of Postmodernity, Perry Anderson explains it this way:
The first of these, derived from the French Revolution, told a tale of humanity as the heroic agent of its own liberation through the advance of knowledge; the second, descending from German Idealism, a tale of spirit as the progressive unfolding of truth. Such were the great justifying myths of modernity.\\n
The grand narrative paradigm of the previous 300 years was the principles of what postmodernism calls the ‘enlightenment project’ which guided societal, political, scientific, and economic thought on a single, unified trajectory of progress and innovation from about 1700 (the beginning of The Enlightenment) to the end of the period loosely referred to as modernism. Establishing an end date for this period is a practical impossibility, but for the purpose of this thesis a date of 1967 can be used as a beginning point for the articulation of postmodern thought in music criticism. The release of The Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* LP in June of that year created a flurry of reviews and commentary debating the acceptance of rock music within the definition of art-music. This event and date can be looked at as a kind of watershed moment for the acceptance of many postmodern ideas.

The dissolution of the grand narrative either causes the problem of postmodernism or allows the freedom of postmodernism, depending upon one’s own personal predilection. As Andreas Huyssen puts it, “No matter how troubling it may be, the landscape of the postmodern surrounds us. It simultaneously delimits and opens our horizons. It is our problem and our hope.” Without this single guiding paradigm “the multiplication of value systems has produced a major crisis of legitimation.” The loss

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of a clear yes-no, right-wrong framework for our life-world leaves all answers as ‘maybe,’ and this sets out the basic conditions for Kramer’s points:

(4) challenges barriers between 'high' and 'low' styles;
(5) shows disdain for the often unquestioned value of structural unity;
(6) questions the mutual exclusivity of elitist and populist values;
(7) avoids totalizing forms (e.g., does not want entire pieces to be tonal or serial or cast in a prescribed formal mold); […]
(11) embraces contradictions;
(12) distrusts binary oppositions;  

The second area of postmodern thought identified in Kramer’s 16 essay is that of “commodification,” which is a Marxist term for things being assigned economic value which they (according to Marxist theory) did not previously possess. The change in value is accomplished by producing and presenting the item for sale, as opposed to personal use.

The shift from being an idea-driven society to being one driven by commercial gain and commodity cuts straight to the heart of our relationship with art. As Jean Baudrillard writes, "Our society thinks itself and speaks itself as a consumer society. As much as it consumes anything, it consumes itself as consumer society, as idea. Advertising is the triumphal paean to that idea." The postmodern acceptance of commercial aims and goals as a natural part of the formerly idealized concept of art creates havoc. When we grant these commodity concepts entry into the philosophy of art and music, we must then contend with all the difficult baggage this acknowledgment brings with it. As sociologists Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen state, “[c]onsumption is a  

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social relationship, the dominant relationship in our society – one that makes it harder and harder for people to hold together, to create community.”  

According to this line of thought, even time becomes commodified just as surely as any physical object. With commodified time, all aspects of being are subject to an exchange value. Because of this we must take audiences and their reactions, into critical consideration. Their perceptions of the meanings of music, and the technological means of delivering this art and music to the commodity market become equal in importance and value to the art object itself. The commodification of music is most visible in recorded music products such as records and CDs, but the interests of commerce affect nearly every aspect of music listening and production.

According to Baudrillard, in the postmodern age, we have lost all sense of use-value: "It is all capital.”

These concepts will frame the discussion of Kramer’s points: #2, 8, 10, and 16.

(2) is, on some level and in some way, ironic; […]
(8) considers music not as autonomous but as relevant to cultural, social, and political contexts; […]
(10) considers technology not only as a way to preserve and transmit music but also as deeply implicated in the production and essence of music; […]
(16) locates meaning and even structure in listeners, more than in scores, performances, or composers.

Another of the common foundational postmodern principles is a change in the perception of time, which has led to the aforementioned mistrust of narrative historicity, a

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primary teleological view where era follows era and progress is mapped out in neat blocks of time. A teleology is a philosophical concept that states that final causes exist in nature, meaning that nature inherently tends toward definite ends. It is a doctrine of design and purpose. The earlier, common view of music as an evolutionary form progressing towards a state of perfection is highly teleological.

In keeping with the postmodern lack of belief in the grand narrative, the narrative ‘story’ of history becomes suspect and with it, the general concept of time as it applies to history and teleology. In postmodern thought, historical time periods (Baroque, Classical, Romantic, and so on) are done away with. All are considered concurrent with the present.

This stands in stark contrast to the Enlightenment view where there is a “strong teleological component […] implying that history is progressively moving toward some ultimate state.”27 But the concept of progress requires some baseline against which it can be measured. Without this baseline (the grand narrative) we have no compass bearings to guide our path. In postmodernism, “history becomes a construct rather than an attempt to present an objective accounting of the facts, events, and meanings of the past.”28 With each construct seen as a separate entity, and with no grand narrative to unite and give them larger meaning, the compass becomes a superfluous tool; unnecessary and useless.

With no clear paradigm and a non-progressive view of our history, past and present commingle without clear delineation or context or, as the warning on the rear-

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28 Ibid., 269.
view mirror says: *Warning! Objects may be closer than they appear,* in this case, objects from the past. Without our grand narrative, there is no past and there is no future; there is only ‘now’. Lives are governed by routine rather than tradition, and our sense of time is controlled by outside sources (media) rather than our own innate biological rhythms. This change in perspective on time and historicity forms the basis for Kramer’s s points:

- (3) does not respect boundaries between sonorities and procedures of the past and of the present; […]
- (9) includes quotations of or references to music of many traditions and cultures; […]
- (13) includes fragmentations and discontinuities;
- (14) encompasses pluralism and eclecticism;
- (15) presents multiple meanings and multiple temporalities;\textsuperscript{29}

The only one of Kramer’s 16 points untouched by these three guiding principles of postmodernism is point #1 which states that postmodern music “is not simply a repudiation of modernism or its continuation, but has aspects of both a break and an extension.”\textsuperscript{30} In this first point, Kramer has simply acknowledged a fundamental split within the postmodern philosophical community and welcomed both sides into his specific view.

What then are the defining features of the present postmodern age? The most widely accepted characterization of the postmodern condition is that offered by Lyotard. It is the “incredulity toward metanarratives […] The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language […] Where, after the metanarratives, can


\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 16.
legitimacy reside?31What does this mean? It means that the loss of credibility of
grand narratives is essentially a loss of belief in progress; and thus leaves a life of
perpetual change.

Using Jonathan Kramer’s Points

From this perspective we can now turn our attention to the music criticism of the
past few decades and hold it against the metric of Jonathan Kramer’s essay. Since
Kramer’s points all relate back to these three main postmodern concepts, I have separated
them into three basic groups. Kramer’s points frequently overlap and so these three
meta-ideas — the loss of paradigm, technology and commodification, and changes in
teleological perception — will serve as the primary guidelines for this investigation. We
can outline Kramer’s points in three broad groups:

• Group 1: Loss of Grand Narrative Paradigm
  Kramer #4, Kramer #6, Kramer #12

• Group 2: Commodification
  Kramer #8, Kramer #10, Kramer #16

• Group 3: Changes in teleological perception
  Kramer #3, Kramer #9, Kramer #15

We can place Kramer’s points in these three broad groups and focus on the larger ideas
rather than seeing them as finite, individualistic points. The specificity of his
differentiation between, for example, ‘high and low styles’ and the ‘exclusivity of elitism
and populism’ need not be separated for this thesis since both derive from the loss of a
grand narrative.

and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.
For the purpose of this thesis, I am not trying to identify ‘postmodern critics,’ only to find broad trends of postmodern thought in the criticism of the past few decades, whether from critics in favor, against, or indifferent to postmodernism as a philosophy. The mere mention of philosophy can be off-putting and use of the word conjures up epithets such as ‘navel-gazing.’ There are very few souls among us who would consider themselves philosophers, yet philosophy works on us and through us nevertheless.

I have chosen these specific points from Kramer’s list because they represent some of the most pervasive postmodern concepts in our society. We may never study postmodernism. We may not know its name or associated jargon, but in a chicken/egg sort of symbiosis, we either unconsciously act out its principles or perhaps more accurately, its principles can be used to describe our actions. For better or worse, aspects of postmodern philosophy act as kind of zeitgeist affecting many aspects of our lives, and music criticism is no exception.
Chapter 2: Group 1, Loss Of Grand Narrative Paradigm

There's safety in numbers when you learn to divide
How can we be in If there is no outside
You may look like we do, talk like we do
But you know how it is You’re not one of us

The most fundamental aspect of postmodernism is the concept of the Grand

Narrative paradigm. The Grand Paradigm, according to postmodernism, has been the
driving force of what we generally think of as progress. Progress, especially scientific
progress, is based upon absolutes. Answers to questions and moral issues are either right
or wrong, black or white, yes or no, etc. This set of absolutes is where we get our
concepts of high and low or elitist and populist, in culture, art, and music, which
represent the binary oppositions Kramer speaks of in his essay. Since the basic
postmodern position is that these absolutes no longer exist, or are at least no longer
functional, a great many ideas we have taken for granted become suspect. In the case of
music, postmodernism questions the idea of certain styles of music automatically being
considered to possess a higher level of artistry than others. Carl Dahlhaus puts it this
way,

Absolute music’s claim to be “conceptless beauty” existing “purposely without
purpose” for its own sake instead of supporting actions or illustrating texts, can
only be justified in that the listener withdraws into a state of contemplation
unaware of self or world, in which the music appears as an “isolated world for
itself.” The legitimation of absolute music lies in esthetic contemplation and its
meaning for the” education of humanity,” and conversely esthetic immersion is
legitimized by the expressiveness of absolute music that elevates itself above
words.  


1989), 79-80.
This idea of a bright line between classical music and all other forms of music is considered by postmodern thinking to have been a product of Grand Paradigm ordered thinking. For most of the preceding 400 years or so of the Western Classical tradition, a fairly well adhered to class system had been employed. There was popular (folk) music and art, and there was the higher form of classical or art-music. The erosion of this boundary stands at the heart of postmodern thought about music, art and culture. It is the calling into question of these basic absolutes that has led to the questioning of the ages old divide between high and low concepts of art in music.

Increased exposure and social and political factors brought many new musical styles into play, but it is the most basic postmodern tenet – the loss of the grand paradigm – that has allowed these new styles to become ‘art,’ and to function at the same level that was formerly reserved for classical music. Under postmodernism, “[t]he notion that the best music would be appreciated by the greatest number of people upended the traditional, elite assumptions about good taste, which dictated that the finest cultural expression would speak only to the most refined audiences.”

The erosion of the boundaries between the two has been detrimental to art music in a commercial sense. In the postmodern world, the market share of classical music recordings has “dropped from around twenty-five percent of total [US] sales in the 1950s

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3 Robert Cantwell, *When We Were Good; The Folk Revival* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1996). The AFM strikes of 1944 & 1948 and the BMI/ASCAP lawsuit of 1950 created situations where radio turned more and more to “low” art forms of music to avoid legal issues with the musician’s union and ASCAP, thus exposing more people to these other musical styles. References to these events are scattered throughout the text of this book.

to five percent in the 1970s,” ⁵ and by 1994, was “down to no more than five percent of
the world market which was still growing at a rate of sixteen percent each year.”⁶
Government funding has also been reduced; in fact many members of congress have
vowed to eliminate funding for the National Endowment for the Arts and the Corporation
for Public Broadcasting.

This stems from the relatively new ideal that all entertainment is a matter of
choice. Art is entertainment and entertainment is art. Agree or disagree as you will, this
is now the most commonly held belief. There can be no concept of high or low art in
music when all forms of music are simply choices to be made by consumers. All music
is considered a product or commodity (Group 2) and it would be improper for
government to support one without providing equal support to all.

In Baltimore, the American Visionary Art Museum⁷ has as on exhibit “The
World’s Largest Bra Ball.” The exhibit is exactly what it says it is; an immense ball of
brassieres (18,085 to be exact) roughly five feet in diameter and weighing 1,800 pounds.
It’s status as an object d’art is part and parcel of the postmodern disbelief in the barrier
between high and low art and culture, between classic and kitsch. Anything we do can
be art and all art is equal in status and cultural importance. This particular work of art,
therefore, stands on equal footing with works by Monet or Goya. The application of

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⁶ International Federation of Phonograph Industries quoted in Norman Lebrecht, *Who Killed Classical

"Visionary art as defined for the purposes of the American Visionary Art Museum refers to art produced by self-taught individuals, usually without formal training, whose works arise from an innate personal vision that revels foremost in the creative act itself."
‘high’ terms to ‘low’ objects is pure postmodernism in action. It could literally be said that it is part of the 21st century air we breathe.

This non-musical example is meant not only to illustrate the postmodern idea of removing the barrier between high and low art and culture, but also to demonstrate the pervasiveness of this concept in the present time. This mode of thought surrounds us every day and we are nearly unaware of it, so it would be no great surprise if it had proceeded practically unnoticed by musicians and musicologists, but this is not the case. The ideas of Group 1 have been under discussion (both pro and con) since the mid 1960s.

The 1960s

With these ideas in mind we can begin our survey of music criticism looking for evidence of the concepts of Group 1. First, a quote from venerated New York Times critic Harold Schonberg in 1968.

> the contemporary symphonic repertoire is being filled out by excerpts from Broadway musical comedy and even film scores. This too is unhealthy. We are in a peculiar age. The public continues to reject new the new music, and in particular the new music of the serial school, Britten and Shostakovich above all, hold their own, but nobody seems to be coming up to replace them.⁸

What will be of interest is Schonberg’s disapproval of film music and Broadway scores as parts of the contemporary concert repertoire. Why this is “unhealthy” is not explained, but the inference is that these forms of music do not measure up to the standard of high art maintained by Britten and Shostakovich. This shows that Schonberg sees a high/low divide in music. Even though he feels strongly about the avant-garde’s failure with concert audiences, his negative view of film or Broadway music as part of

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the concert repertoire indicates his belief in the binary opposition between high and low forms of music; between art and entertainment.

This 1968 quote from critic, horn soloist, and conductor Joseph Eger shows the opposite perspective to that of Harold Schonberg.

We can reach this audience with musical events that are bold and adventurous innovations geared to the contemporary scene. For example, the timeworn formalities of dress, time, place, price scales, and presentation could be changed. Tickets could be made available in supermarkets, churches, banks, - everywhere people gather at prices they can afford. Even the word “concert” could be banned in favor of the less stilted “show” or “entertainment” … Where many musicians miss the boat is in the rather strange notion that audiences were created for the benefit of musicians instead of the reverse. We are in the midst of a vast hunger and we have never been in a better position to feed the undernourished.

This quote hits all 3 of the main points in Group 1. High/low, populist/elitist points are represented in the use of the words “show or entertainment” and in advocating the abandonment of formal concert dress. We don’t know if he meant performers, audience or both in this case. The penultimate sentence clearly identifies Eger’s willingness to do away with the binary opposition between art and entertainment designations. In addition, this passage also includes aspects of Group 2 by acknowledging the strong social aspect of concert going for the audiences. We cannot be sure from this quote, if Eger thinks this is a good thing or merely a composer’s/musician’s survival technique. Given his history of unusual performances (a concert of John Lennon and Yoko Ono’s music and conducting unusual ensembles like the Symphony for United Nations) he is likely quite serious.

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Austrian by birth, but located in London from 1938 until his death in 1985, Hans Keller was a musicologist and critic of forceful views and unshakeable prejudices. This article was written for the London Times in 1969.

A new work is written about. Nobody really knows whether it is good or bad or whether, for that matter, it is a work. At no previous stage in the history of our art could this question arise – whether or not a work was a work. Now that it has arisen, however, it has brought in its train a new type of writer about music. We might describe him, *sine ira et studio*, as the conscientious hypocrite. He is, that is to say, unswervingly, fearlessly, hypocritical. Just as a conscientious objector will not fight even a war against Hitler, so a conscientious hypocrite will not even describe something as bad which, to the naked nose, stinks to high heaven.  

This quote speaks clearly and almost exclusively to the existence of binary opposites. Keller believes that the critics he refers to will not, can not make the distinction between the two most basic binary opposites in our language; ‘good’ and ‘bad.’ Keller disapproves, but not in a way in that allows us to guess at his opinions about the high/low art concept of Group 1, though his sarcastic questioning statement about whether a “work is a work” might provide a clue.

This quote from Milton Babbitt sizes up part of the early onset of the postmodern issues facing composers and listeners at the height of serialism in the mid 1960s.

I would rather be known as an academic composer as opposed to a commercial composer. This is why we have taken refuge in the university. The milieu of the professional world, of the performer, the orchestra manager, the artist’s representative is inappropriate to me. There is no communication between us. We are in the university because it is the only place we can function.

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It isn’t difficult to know Babbit’s position on the Group 1 issues. His love of show tunes never impeded his belief in the art-music he created, and this fact alone informs the entire quote. All three parts of Group 1 are present, high/low boundaries, elitist tendencies, and binary opposition. The quote shows his awareness of opposing postmodern viewpoints, but he clearly rejects them.

It is interesting to note that Babbitt, along with about 70 others, went on to form the “American Society of University Composers” (now the Society of Composers Inc.), who claimed the university atmosphere was the only appropriate place for serious composers to develop their craft and who continue, through conferences and composition contests, to promote this Group 1 agenda.

**The 1970s**

The quote comes from Theodore Adorno’s 1949 book *The Philosophy of Modern Music*, which Robert Craft was reviewing in this essay from 1973.

And it is not only that the perceptive faculty has been so dulled by the omnipresent hit tune that the concentration necessary for responsible listening has become permeated by traces of recollection of this musical rubbish, and thereby impossible.12

Craft’s purpose for including this quote in his essay was not to comment on the specific point Adorno was making. He is demonstrating the obfuscation inherent in Adorno’s language, but nevertheless, these words from Adorno clearly point out the Group 1 bias that he always demonstrated. One might expect that Craft, a strong proponent of the composers of the Second Viennese School would be in complete agreement. Adorno, after all, is one of the prime exponents of the ‘music as a disinterested art object’ school.

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of thought that was epitomized by Schoenberg, et. al. But when we can compare it to
Craft’s own observations in the preface of the book that, “it is possible and desirable to
love and enjoy a variety of music of disparate tendencies,”13 we begin to see the other,
postmodern, side of the coin. Craft is aware that his view is not the accepted view of the
times, but stresses that we should, “endeavor to widen, not narrow, the field of choice,”14
placing him on the opposite side of the high/low divide issue from Adorno.

The following quote by Sir Arthur Bliss is taken from a written transcript of a talk
given in the early 1970s on the state of art music in Britain.

I mentioned earlier the huge total of 5,000 composers listed in this country. Of
course only a small number of these can be called serious composers… The
continuous spray of music on Radio 1 is the result, and it in many cases, though
not always, just like a sky sign spelling out the letters MONEY.15

Bliss’ concept here has less to do with the high/low debate than it does with the
idea of populist and elitist ideas. His message is clear, populism is dangerous to art. He
makes clear his evident disgust with the pursuit of money over art as if the two were
completely incompatible. Populist art cannot be serious.

This set of beliefs comes from a much deeper place than simple personal preference for
one style of music over another. The danger to art comes from a deep-seated belief that
art music is inherently superior to popular (read commercial, money-making) music.

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14 Ibid., 5.

Music theorist Heinrich Schenker puts it this way:

To assemble and entertain 50,000 people – this can only be accomplished only by bullfights, cockfights, massacres, pogroms: in short, a brutal ranting and raving, a demented and chaotic outcry. Art is incapable of uniting such large numbers.\(^{16}\)

Schenker is echoing what Bliss did not say quite as directly; that art and mass entertainment are two separate categories. This is a very direct exploration of the binary opposition of populist and elitist music. Schenker’s feelings on the matter become clear when we look at the types of events he sees as entertainment.

There are also some Group 2 and Group 3 ideas in these quotes. Bliss introduces the (to him) distasteful idea of money into the equation indicating a grudging understanding of music as a commodity. Schenker, on the other hand, speaks of the social functions of mass entertainment. Variations of his description of “brutal ranting and raving” and “chaotic outcry” have been used by critics in varying forms to describe rock concerts with some regularity.

**The 1980s**

Quotes exhibiting Group 1 postmodern concepts from critics can range from the sublimely thoughtful and thought-provoking to being just plaint blunt. Mexican conductor and critic Jorge Velazco in this 1983 quote is tending more to the blunt side.

Sometimes it just comes right out and bites you!

Today it (radio) continues to be a medium of overriding importance in the dissemination of music, but it’s addressed to a specialist public, whether for art music or for rubbish.\(^{17}\)


Velazco gives it to us straight: art music or rubbish. One sentence, *alles klar*.

Why are we even having this debate? There can be no question that this is an issue of high vs. low. In other instances, such as this quote from critic Gérard Condé, we see the same issues raised, some of the same derisive language used, along with the addition of a healthy dose of sarcasm.

Ten years from now we may see a wholesale return to tonality, long since pronounced dead, and hence a convergence of language between serious music and *the other kind* (italics mine). Like it or not, everything is pointing in that direction, and less commercial composers should seriously set about recapturing a broader public, to avoid seeing their conquests reclaimed by ‘easy-listening’ confectioners. To be surprising is no longer enough – audiences aren’t turned on by making an effort. For composers, seducing their listeners is a matter of artistic life or death.  

This is another example of getting all three aspects of Group 1 together in a single quote. In his use of the phrase “serious music and the other kind,” Condé sets his stance very clearly. He is also obviously aware of trends in composition that were commercially favoring more accessible music at the time, namely minimalism. He describes a scenario where serious music is under attack and he sarcastically advocates that composers should popularize their efforts as a means of survival. Again using derisive language, Condé tries to battle “easy listening confections.” Condé used a belief in binary oppositions in this writing to defend the status quo as he sees it; the superiority of art music.

Literary icon Susan Sontag articulates the cultural high/low divide in very clear terms. Since she is writing about the arts in general, music can be easily plugged into the scenario she outlines.

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One important consequence of the new sensibility (with its abandonment of the Matthew Arnold idea of culture) has already been alluded to – namely, that the distinction between “high” and “low” culture seems less and less meaningful … For it is important to understand that the affection which many younger artists and intellectuals feel for the popular arts is not a new philistinism (as has so often been charged) or a species of anti-intellectualism or some kind of abdication from culture … It reflects a new, more open way of looking at the world. It does not mean the renunciation of all standards … The point is that there are new standards of beauty, style and taste. The new sensibility is definitely pluralistic. 19

The Matthew Arnold Idea of culture refers to ideas articulated in Arnold’s book *Culture and Anarchy*. Arnold saw culture as something to strive for, an improvement of the person. It was something to be learned or acquired, rather than the prevailing anthropological view of culture as a total way of life. 20  Sontag’s basic assumption is not that the binary opposition of high and low styles is no longer valid, but rather that the criteria for judgment have changed rendering it less important than before. She states that one can still have the division of high and low by changing the standard of beauty. She also hints at ideas from Group 2 in her view of a new pluralistic sensibility.

Pulitzer Prize winning composer John Harbison is commenting on the experience of teaching a Music Appreciation class in this 1988 quote.

Now for three hours a week in class and for a few hours more outside they concentrated on the classical piece we studied. But I remember thinking what a small window of time these composers were offered when at the close of the class I saw the earphones go back on, and the faint steady splash of cymbals signaled their return to the normal milieu.

Those few hours of concentrated listening to Haydn are not enough for him to change the aural chemistry of the young listener, shaped by louder, more repetitive, more causally attended sounds many other hours on end. It is like


trying to balance a body chemistry conditioned by bags of potato chips with an occasional handful of sunflower seeds.\textsuperscript{21}

Harbison’s position on the high/low issue is based on the unquestioned superiority of classical music, which places him on the elitist side of the high/low debate. He sees the listening habits of his students as the problem in getting their attention and this is, indeed, one of the greatest challenges faced by any faculty teaching music survey courses. We can see his personal bias in the comparison of popular music to “bags of potato chips” and classical music to the healthy alternative of “sunflower seeds.” Unfortunately, holding this strongly to the opinion of one’s own superiority is probably not the best way to begin the process of opening minds and ears to new sounds.

The 1990s

Music critic, author, and philosophy professor Theodore Gracyk is one of a few authors who define a set of aesthetics for rock music separate from those used for classical music.

Individuals who might have been supporters of the classical repertoire are instead replacing their scratched Cream and Led Zeppelin albums with compact discs, while the next generation of listeners dances to the sounds of techno. That is to say, rock is a cultural rival to traditional high culture, replicating within itself a full hierarchy of tastes, from low-brow to high-brow.\textsuperscript{22}

This is an interesting take on the high/low divide; i.e. that it still exists on both sides of the line. This is true, of course. Rock music has its mega selling artists and its poorer selling ‘critic’s darlings’ who get far more attention from writers than from those who pay for the product. Classical music has a similar divide between the so-called


warhorse repertoire and the ‘new music’ clique. The larger issue for Gracyk is that with the elimination of populist or elitist barriers we can now get our ‘culture’ from either source and still believe that we each (the classical afficiando or the rock & roll addict) have gotten exactly the same thing. This is a really extraordinary example of the breakdown of the binary opposition of styles. The implications for classical music are dramatic. In this scenario, art music truly becomes just one entertainment choice among many and, in the reality of the marketplace, it has not fared well.

Award winning British musicologist Jim Samson is exploring the concept of art music’s aesthetic autonomy, the hallmark of the Adornian philosophy, and one often used to justify the high/low divide challenged by postmodernism.

One of the achievements of receptions histories has been to point up a central paradox concerning the ‘project’ of aesthetic autonomy. It was just when that project came nearest to completion, right on the cusp between classical and modern notions of art, that the domain of the aesthetic was most vulnerable to appropriation. In other words, the more art disengaged itself from the social world (and thus gained – as Adorno a saw it- critical acumen), the more easily it could be manipulated by that world, and the less effectively it could adopt a disinterested critical stance. It was indeed the inadequacy of its social critique as Peter Bürger has argued, that marked the failure of aesthetic autonomy.23

This is the core of the art vs. entertainment issue. In other words, Samson sees art and entertainment as components of the same structure with the high/low divide providing support for each view. All the complex theories in the world about the social functions and meanings of music or about the aesthetic autonomy of true art are rendered moot by the failure to first deal with the high vs. low culture aspect of postmodernism. It is the keystone of the debate that holds up (both literally and figuratively) the two

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seemingly opposing viewpoints. The two sides cannot begin to engage one another until the keystone is removed. The unfortunate truth is that the buying public has already settled the debate. For them, there is no high/low culture debate because there is no high/low culture-divide. Had the classical music industry (writers, composers, educators and performers alike) spent the past three or four decades learning to function in this reality rather than debating whether or not it was reality, classical music might be in a very different position than the one it currently finds itself in.

Samson goes on to argue in favor of a balanced approach combining the two seemingly opposing viewpoints. Just because the concept of autonomous music was a product of the socio-political climate from which it arose and served certain extra-musical purposes at the time (the need for order in a chaotic, dangerous world) does not necessarily preclude the existence of the concept from being true. Samson’s position is carefully neutral. He acknowledges the postmodern viewpoint, even to the extent of declaring the failure of the “project of aesthetic autonomy,” but he has given little clue of his personal viewpoint.

Joseph Kerman is often held up as the father of the ‘New Musicology’ and is one of the most often used sources to counter the Adornian concepts of art and music.

For that matter, was the individual work of art, the autonomous musical structure itself, still functioning like an organism? Had it ever? There has always been a current of opposition to the dominant strain of academic music criticism, analysis, which stands or falls on this very issue of organicism. But these questions were not forced until fairly recently – until the 1960s, when new music in the so-called non-teleological mode began to be taken seriously, and until the 1970s, when various currents of dissatisfaction with or re-evaluation of Schenkerian analysis finally began finding their way into print.24

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The autonomy of art is at the heart of the high/low debate. Under Adorno, autonomous art is high art, whether good or bad. Art must function above the fray, and the artist must create without thought or concern for how a work will be received. When we bring populism into play we arrive at the art vs. entertainment issue. Defending autonomous music puts one on the high side of the high/low divide but Kerman is questioning whether that side ever really existed.

Composers back to the Renaissance had commercial interests in their music. The existence of music publishers like Ottavaino Petrucci and Estienne Roger proves this. Biographical information on nearly every composer proves this. It wasn’t until the University became the primary patron of art music in the early years of the 20th century that concept of disinterested art became an aesthetic goal. Before that no one could afford it!

Looking further into the issue of art vs. entertainment in the 1990s we see composers wading into the debate. In this quote, Luciano Berio confronts the idea of composers wanting to be ‘popular.’

Commercial issues are for the marketplace. It is simple minded to compare the music that engages the intellect with commercial music. They are different dimensions. It has always been this way.25

The word choices of those determined to elevate the status of classical music are often interesting. “Music that engages the intellect” is a wonderful phrase and is one that many would agree describes much of the classical repertoire. But the value of the phrase

is made most obvious when compared to “commercial music.” By use of this
denigrating comparison, commercial music must be seen as music that does not engage
the intellect and, therefore, must be of considerably lesser value making this a classic
‘straw-man’ argument. These thoughts are echoed by composer Pierre Boulez.

The economy is there to remind us, in case we get lost in this bland utopia; there
are musics to bring in money and exist for commercial profit; there are musics
that cost something, whose very concept has nothing to do with profit. No
liberalism will ease this distinction.26

Boulez is laying out the case that no matter what we want to be true, or believe is
ture, that the high/low divide is still in effect and always will be. For Boulez, it cannot be
closed although in this quote, he does not explain why this is so.

**The 2000s**

Reviews like this one from British journalist Marc Brooks show the high/low
debate carries well into the first years of the 21st century.

In the epilogue Ross argues that 'the impulse to pit classical music against pop
culture no longer makes intellectual sense' and looks forward to a bright future in
which 'intelligent pop artists and extroverted composers [speak] more or less the
same language.' There is also room for those composers who choose political
engagement: music is the perfect medium since its ambiguity means it always
'[fails] to decide the eternal dispute.' It is strange how one person’s utopia is
another's dystopia. What Ross is describing here, for me, is the nightmare in
which music has been effectively neutralized as a critical art form. I agree that it
has become impossible to distinguish high from low art, but in a society which
houses such manifest divergence between rich and poor, and a world in which a
minority shamelessly exploit the poverty of the rest, that must mean that this art is
a sham. Further, the mere ambiguity that music is left with surely mirrors its
impotence in challenging a political system that successfully absorbs all dissent.
Human beings are endlessly creative and composers will no doubt continue to

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invent new and exciting soundscapes for consumption but, for now, the days in which music genuinely speaks to its audience are over.\textsuperscript{27}

Brooks’ need for the old hierarchy is very plain. For him, if art music does not function the way it always has, he can’t find his place in the order. Using non-musical markers for one’s social standing is indicative of the concepts in Group 2, but seeing the superiority of art music as his guiding marker places this quote in Group 1. When he worries about music being “neutralized as a critical art form,” he is bringing the ‘art as a disinterested object’ argument of Adorno into the discussion and is placing himself in the pre-postmodern camp on this particular issue.

Brooks accepts the current wisdom that the divide is no longer valid as a fact of the times, but clearly does not believe it to be truth. He goes so far as to use the words “for consumption” to describe the works of composers to acknowledge (a bit sarcastically) the commercial nature of music. He states that musicians will write exciting music, but denies that such music will “speak genuinely” to its audience. The problem with the Adorno school of thought lies in this sentence. According to this philosophy, music should never be required to speak to the audience. It (music) is not a ‘thing’ in the commercial sense. Audience reaction cannot be considered in the creative process. Music cannot be thought of as communicating, rather it must, as composer Julian Johnson states, “transcend its thinglike quality by being taken up as thought…rather than a merely physical, perceptual, or sensuous [object].”\textsuperscript{28} But

\textsuperscript{27} Marc Brooks reviewing “The Rest Is Noise” on musicalcriticism.com, Accessed February 11, 2014, \url{http://www.musicalcriticism.com/books/ross-1109.shtml}

communication lies in the very ideas (physical, perceptual) that we are told music must leave behind. Before it can be “taken up as thought,” it must first communicate.

Chris Washburne is an Assistant Professor in the Music Department at Columbia University. Maiken Derno holds a Post-Doctoral Fellowship in the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Copenhagen.

…rappers and rock ’n’ rollers are called “artists” just as readily as the journalists who cover them are billed as “critics”. ‘What isn’t art?’ is now a challenging, defining question for a culture that, for better or worse, has all but eliminated the distinctions between ‘high’ and ‘low’ art.29

The issues raised within this one quote from 2004 almost completely encapsulate the postmodern debate of Group 1. The authors raise the questions of who is, or can be called, an “artist,” and who can be called a “critic”? Both of these questions derive directly from the high/low divide and the loss of the grand narrative paradigm. Without the challenge to the barrier between high and low styles there would never be a concern over what the authors believe is a misuse of the terms critic and artist. They are proposing that a cultural decision has already been made allowing terms that have specific uses and limitations (artist, critic) to be used in inappropriate ways. The question “What isn’t art?” gives us a clue as to their perspective although they do not try to answer the question in the book. For them, simply raising the often vexing problem of defining art is enough on its own. Why this is a challenging question is not addressed explicitly. That the authors see it as problematic is made clear by their list of artists and the implied narrow definition of who is or is not a critic. The binary oppositions here, art/non-art are, according to the authors, being eliminated.

29 Christopher Washbourne and Maiken Derno, Bad Music; The Music We Love To Hate (New York: Routledge, 2004), 2.
The last two quotes in this chapter come from living composers who have written books in defense of the traditional canon and values of classical art music during the first years of the 21st century. Julian Johnson is a lecturer in music at Oxford University.

Modern music – perhaps even more than its visual counterpart – stridently denies the listener the chance to treat it merely as entertainment. It cannot be understood except on terms that art demands and entertainment does not and, in doing so, it frustrates and annoys those whose definition of music rests on principles derived from entertainment.\(^{30}\)

Johnson here is giving the Adornian ‘disinterested art’ argument. He places listeners who fail to understand art in this way in a category of lower status. He infers that they try to understand art incorrectly, i.e. through the lens of entertainment, rather than that of art. For Johnson, art does not entertain, or at least it need not do so.

John Winsor keeps a busy schedule of performances and recordings of his works while maintaining a full-time position with a major software company.

Literary music is taken seriously in academia because it is structurally superior to popular music. Analysis of mainstream literary masterpieces yields evidence of remarkable structural integrity, clarity of purpose, thorough and logical development, subtlety, ingenuity and profound depth. Analysis of most popular music reveals that it is riddled with clichés and much weaker in direction and development than most literary music.\(^{31}\)

Winsor’s position on the high/low divide is that it definitely exists and he places classical music at the top. The text on the book’s cover, “An award-winning composer refutes postmodern cultural relativism by proving that some musical works are


objectively better than others,“32 provides an indication of Winsor’s tendency for building up classical music by tearing down the competition. Winsor acknowledges postmodern thought but rejects it.

Winsor falls prey to the same problems that plagued Julian Johnson. Neither of these authors have proposed specific definitions to separate their cause from that of popular music. This is the great failing, from the postmodern perspective, of the writing of many authors trying to shore up the position of classical music in the postmodern era. The logic they have used to make their points can, under postmodern thought, be applied equally to pop music. By not explaining why postmodern thought is wrong, they help make the case for their perceived opponents. They are completely convinced that the high/low divide should and does exist, and believe they have proved this to be true. But without dealing with the persistent issue of how postmodernism removes the divide, their case remains ambiguous, and their logical arguments unconvincing.

John A. Fisher, professor emeritus in philosophy at the University of Colorado, Boulder has identified 4 principles of thought that are used both for and against the concepts of Group 1.

1. **Massification.** In order to appeal to a mass audience, the mass work must gravitate “toward the lowest level of taste, sensitivity, and intelligence.” This is not compatible with distinctive expression (unique expression flowing from a personal vision), yet distinctive expression is what art should aim at.

2. **Passivity.** Genuine art is art that requires active spectatorship. But mass or popular art, in order to generate broad appeal and accessibility, abets passive perception. It is easy and safe.

3. **Formulaic.** A common complaint is that popular or mass art is highly formulaic, whereas real art is original in its conception and in its goals.

4. **(lack of) Autonomy.** Adorno held that a central function of art is to provide a critical perspective on society; its goal should be liberation from the social, economic and political realities. To that end, it needs to be free from

32 Ibid., front cover.
commercial pressures. But to be popular, arts such as pop music and jazz have to sacrifice their autonomy. They must mix structural predictability with a dash of what Adorno called ‘pseudo-individualization’, in the form of passages of improvisation.\textsuperscript{33}

These four concepts define the Group 1 divide and they are the concepts most frequently questioned by postmodern thought. All four of these concepts have been present to one extent or another in the quotes from critics we have seen throughout this chapter. The autonomy issue is a major point since postmodernism places a much greater emphasis on the relevance of art to its cultural and social contexts (Group 2) which flies directly in the face of the autonomy issue. The more postmodern view as Fisher states it is that “works in themselves are neither high nor low; instead high or low depends on how the artworks are regarded or treated, and that the distinction “is artificial and construed to serve a political function.”\textsuperscript{34}


\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 532.
Chapter 3: Group 2, Technology And Commodification

Look yonder comin’, mercy me, Three wise men in a SUV
Corporate logo on the side, Air-conditioned quiet ride 1

Postmodern thought, according to Kramer, sees music as relevant to cultural, social, and political contexts. This is the near direct opposite of the prevailing views of art from the turn of the century to the 1960s. The idea put forth most forcefully by the composer/philosopher Theodore Adorno, that music is an autonomous object, and one that “develops according to its own laws” and “refers to nothing outside itself,” 2 still has extremely deep roots in art music, and formed the basis of much of the opposition to postmodernism in Group 1. The Adornian proposition is that absolute music has no specific meaning beyond the relationship of the notes to one another and music cannot be judged on other criteria. Adorno says:

Since the middle of the 19th century, great music has broken away from social functionality of any kind. The logic of its development now stands in conflict with the manipulated and simultaneously self-content needs of the bourgeois public. 3

From this position totally rational criticism, i.e. analysis, is the only possible approach, but the loss of the Grand Paradigm calls this into question. The Group 1 issues are seen in a different context when technology and commodification enter the picture. In a commodified, postmodern world technology has made music a commodity with an


‘exchange value.’ Being a commodity forces music to reflect social/cultural concepts.

It cannot be autonomous.

Jonathan Kramer’s 10th point shows us that the use of technology can also be embedded in the creative process itself. Before recording, performance was the culmination of the creative process but today a great deal of music is created and presented to its own best advantage in the form of recordings. In the art music world, electronic music is perhaps the most visible example of this, but many composers in the postmodern era create music with the goal of seeing it recorded and released commercially. With this goal in mind, composers are not immune from tailoring the music they create to the ideal medium in which they hope to see it; i.e. commercial recordings. The goal of live performance then, is to reproduce as closely as possible the sound of the recording. This is a sixty year-old scenario dating from the advent of high fidelity stereo equipment and the long playing record in 1948.

No living composers ever knew a time before recordings. Recordings and music technology are a totally integrated part of our thinking and response to all music, live performance or otherwise. We cannot help but be influenced by this change. Australian journalist and critic Frank Kermode said, “[y]ou can’t now turn the tide back in that respect, either: you can’t produce a generation of people who have not watched television when otherwise they might be reading.” 4 This applies equally well to producing a generation untouched by recordings.

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What is less obvious is how these changes in creation and consumption have combined to change the meaning of what we hear. The concept of musical meaning does not apply only to program music or vocal music where a specific text is present, but also to the so-called absolute music. Musical meaning, in this broader sense, can be described as an articulatable emotional or intelligible intellectual response to the music being heard. Meaning is more than a simple emotional response to a piece of music. Meaning also encompasses a feeling of cultural belonging, a feeling of home, of comfort with the music. Exposure and commercialization certainly play a part in this process but culture is another less tangible factor that helps us understand music. Acousmatic music (music which one hears without seeing an originating cause, such as radio or CDs) is the most prevalent form of music today and alters the meaning of music by taking it out of its original context.

The 1960s

In this quote, author, composer and music critic Eric Salzman is relating the technology of records (1969) to the sociology of the art music experience.

[Records] represented the vital part of living music culture, not yet entirely anesthetized, sliced up, and preserved in so many labeled pickle jars. They have helped to bring into being a new audience, and opened this audience up to kinds of music and musical experiences that were previously only esoteric byways in the province of a few scholars and experimenters. They have helped make music a relevant part of contemporary life and opened a dialogue between the musician and the listener. In making the whole of human musical expression and aural experience a relevant part of contemporary life, they have given music a past, multiple presents, and, perhaps, even a future.  

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Salzman sees recording as a change from the status quo, but a positive one. He sees recorded music as something far more than a simple rendering of a live performance and is treating the recording as a thing unto itself. He makes no mention of live performance in this passage. He is clearly viewing recorded music as an aesthetic object separate from live performance. Making the argument that recorded music opens the listener to many new experiences and horizons, Salzman also alludes to a Group 3 connection that brings the past into the present, but technology is what makes this possible.

Musicologist Joseph Kerman has long been a major proponent of music as a social function as well as an aesthetic/artistic one.

For the arts occupy a special, important area in what we loosely call our heritage. Like a scientist, the artist deals with experience and tells about it. But Unlike the scientist, he is not primarily concerned with observation or speculation; in the work of art, he expresses his reaction to the experience; articulating and conveying to others his sense of what it feels like to be alive.6

Kerman’s assertion is that music communicates, that the composer has something to express and wants an audience to experience it as well. Involving the listener in the musical process, giving him a function, even a responsibility, makes music the two-way street implied by the social aspect of Group 2. In addition to outlining the social aspect of music, Kerman gives us insight into a new way of thinking about musical meaning. The composer conveys his experience through his music, but there can be no guarantee that the listener will have the very same experience, or that his reaction to the experience will match that of the composer. In this scenario, Kerman is suggesting the listener may perceive a completely different meaning from the piece.

Composer Benjamin Britten was responding to having won the first Aspen Award from the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies.

The contemporary composer is unesteemed and unwanted primarily because he is not writing about anything. This is probably not his fault but, rather, the fault of contemporary society, which has not provided him with anything much that is insistently stirring as subject matter. Certainly the Common Market, present-day nationalism, the breakup of empire, and the crusade for civil liberties are not enough. The Russians have managed – up to now, at least, to squeeze some emotional inspiration out of the dreams of the worker’ paradise, and have been rewarded with a Shostakovich. What remains for us? Well, love and death are not extinct, if only the modern composer would pay more attention to them, and the glory of God is still felt by a sizeable part of the population. Maybe the modern composer should get out of his ivory tower – even at the risk of being vulgar and understandable – and look around him.⁷

On the surface, this is a clear case of a composer advocating a more direct musical style at the height of serialism in the mid 1960s. As such, it makes a strong case for inclusion in Group 1, but that wasn’t Britten’s point. Britten sees music as highly relevant to people and social situations. His personal preference for one style of music over another is less important than his belief that music should communicate to its audience in a language they can comprehend. This highlights the social aspect and fits the postmodern mold of Group 2.

The 1970s

This quote from Philip Glass is in reference to a question about the numerical/syllabic vocalizations from Einstein On The Beach.

Glass, however had no intention to provide a specific illusion-oriented vocabulary for the voices. This can be shown from the structure of the vocal parts and from a comment by Glass: “One builds different meanings into it; one tends to put

constructions of meaning on things that aren’t really there. That’s more or less normal. We do that all the time.8

Glass is clearly stating that his intent was to allow listeners to create their own meanings. Glass believes that composers and listeners always do this and that intended ‘meanings’ are often missed or mis-interpreted. Meaning comes from more than just text. Sometimes it is universal and sometimes individual. Glass’s intentions as a composer are his own and he keeps his interpretations of his efforts quietly to himself, but his vision of meaning as fluid and changing is very much in the postmodern mold.

German philosopher Ernst Bloch is, exploring the concepts of musical expression and by extension, musical meaning.

Just what do I seek when I hear something? I am seeking, when I listen, to grow richer and greater in content. But I shall receive nothing if I join in by merely sitting back and relaxing. I shall only receive it by fetching it myself, going further, in terms of content, beyond passive enjoyment. The artist himself will not touch us, will say nothing, if the means are all that interest him in the course of the work. For even in the medium of art, one can be a prophet and preacher.9

Bloch makes it clear that gaining meaning from a piece of music is not just part of the listener’s passive experience, but that it is his responsibility in a social/musical environment to go and “fetch it” on his own. Bloch also states that a composer with no intention of imparting meaning will communicate nothing to his listener. Whether this is a jab at the modernist composers dominating European music at the time of this writing is not made clear in the text. He is certainly advocating that music abides in a scenario that encompasses the postmodern aspects of Group 2.

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As a pioneer in electroacoustic music composer John Cage had some interesting comments on technology.

A third cause for the blurring of the distinctions between composers, performers, and listeners: the interpretation of cultures formerly separated. There is no longer an essential difference between some serious music and some popular music—or, you may say, a bridge exists between them: their common use of the same sound systems, the same microphones, amplifiers, and loudspeakers. In the cases of much popular and some oriental musics, the distinctions between composers and performers were never very clear. Notation, as Busoni said it did, did not stand between musician and music. People simply came together and made music.  

Cage is exploring ways that technology both unites and separates listeners and performers. In popular music, both groups use the same equipment (amplifiers and speakers) to perform and to listen and Cage asserts that the division between them is lessened rather than increased by the mediating technology. While most people will not feel like performers when listening to music, he does make an interesting case for musical meaning being the listener’s responsibility. In Cage’s view, the music and its meaning do not exist in the score, but in the performer and in the listener.

Composer Ross Lee Finney, in this 1972 quote, is speaking about two groups of composers, those that sought recognition through the media (minimalists) and those who sought recognition through the university system (serialists).

I suspect that the split in goals was an inevitable result of the vast increase in means available to the composers for the production of sound, and the awareness of the immediate past, through recordings, of music that had previously rarely been performed. Also distances had shrunk. Not only was it possible to hear a tape of a new work performed just the month before in Paris, but the young composer also had a tape of his last piece, and arrived too quickly, perhaps, at the idea of how he wanted his music to sound. The older composer could choose his way based on what he already was, but the young composer had to find himself in the storm of new possibilities. He had somehow to adapt to the musical

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10 John Cage, *Empty Words; Writings ‘73–’78* (London: Marion Boyars, 1980), 182.
environment, and it was much easier to adapt to it if he could limit his view to one extreme or another. ¹¹

Finney provides us with a much more ambivalent view of the commodity culture side of the art music world. He is not convinced that composers choosing a more material path for success is the best thing, but he believes those individuals saw it as a necessity. Finney says that embracing media (rather than embracing academia as their older counterparts had) has helped them financially, but not always artistically. He see the shrinking musical world as a result of technology. He also credits technology with creating a sociological divide between young and old composers with the younger embracing technology in order to survive the pluralistic environment. Aside from the age-related commentary he is acknowledging without condemning or endorsing these aspects of Group 2. He touches on aspects of Group 3 with recordings bringing the recent past into the present alongside the obvious technological references that place this quote in Group 2.

The 1980s

This excerpt comes from article on Philip Glass by John Rockwell, classical music critic and pop music critic for the New York Times.

The advent of amplification was a further step in that direction – except that now the actual number of musicians could shrink, thus ideally combining the close, subtle interaction of chamber music with the volume of a full orchestra.

Amplification, generally augmented to a point where non-rock listeners become literally uncomfortable, is part of the connection between Glass and rock. Another is the very nature and configuration of his ensemble, or ‘band.’ ¹²


Technology in music is not only limited to records, CDs, etc., and Rockwell is making the case that the technology Glass uses is a major part of the production and essence of the music which is a core Group 2 concept. Rockwell gives some insight as to how this may work by commenting on the size of the ensemble and how amplification aids that aspect of performance of the Glass ‘band.’ These are excellent examples of how the means of sound production become part of the essence of the sounds we hear. Rockwell talks about the volume of the Glass Band performance making non-rock listeners uncomfortable. There are very definite social implications in this statement. Rockwell intimates that age and cultural background may affect one’s enjoyment of Glass’s music, at least in live performance.

Another social aspect of this quote is a bit more subtle. Glass’s use of the word band rather than the more traditional art music term ensemble sets his music and performance apart from conventional art music. This, together with the electronic instrumentation and concert volume levels, is intended to appeal to a different group of listeners and shows a strong postmodern bias.

Musicologist Alan Durant is a lecturer at the University of Strathclyde. This quote places music in a much wider sociological and historical framework. Perhaps critical among these contemporary difficulties has been a new uncertainty, as regards the contemporary relations of music, surrounding notions of the primacy of an original artistic expression to be consumed. Reverence, above all, for the intentions of a composer, and in consequence for interpretation of works commensurate with such intentions, has come to seem incompatible with ways in which properties and associations of pieces of music change, not only according to familiarity and taste, but according to institutionalized aspects of the occasion for listening. Such variety in interpretation becomes especially clear
concerning contemporary forms of musical distribution outside the concert-hall (such as by broadcasting or circulation of records). Where significantly new contexts for, and combinations in, listening are established. Mechanical reproductions of music challenge long-standing assumptions of abstract ‘disengaged’ expression – assumptions on which many present valuations of ‘classical’ music depend. In doing so, they force on educationally and institutionally protected imaginary constructions of an audience and a culture a pressure of music’s changing conditions.  

When the context in which we listen (consume) music changes as radically as it has done over the past five decades, we are bound to encounter problems within the businesses and philosophies that are set up to deliver music. Brahms wrote for the concert hall, but that is not typically where we listen to Brahms. We listen at home, in the car, or while jogging. Brahms could never have envisioned this. Can the music be ‘heard’ properly while chopping onions, or do these listening activities create a new proper response? Postmodernism believes the latter is true. No composer can foresee the myriad new contexts that listeners might create, yet art music critics who insist upon the aesthetic purity of the disengaged state for art (the Adornian viewpoint) take a position almost 180 degrees from that which is possible to achieve in our lives today.

The iconic composer Steve Reich is one in whose music Jonathan Kramer would surely find postmodern tendencies.

All the music that we know and love, for whatever reason – and certainly Bach, Stravinsky and Bartok are at the top of this list – is clearly, ‘hearably’ from a certain time and place. Since the roots of the Second Viennese School were obviously where and when they were, for an American in the 1950s, ‘60s, or ‘70s to take this over lock, stock, and barrel is a little artificial. The sounds that surrounded Americans from 1950 through 1980 – jazz and rock and roll – cannot be ignored. They can be refined, filtered, rejected, or accepted in part, but they

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can’t be ignored, or you’re an ostrich; you’re ill-informed. To ape another
culture of another time has to have a certain sterility as a result.  

Music, for Reich, must be composed out of the circumstances of the times we live in. Music that we know and love from other times and places is wonderful, but for a composer it may not be a socially relevant starting point for his own work. Reich clearly believes in the social, cultural relevance of music.

There is an issue of musical meaning implied in this statement as well. Our cultural differences from other composers may prevent us from fully comprehending the music we hear. We, by virtue of our time and place in history, are creating new meanings for the music of other times and cultures. Reich goes on to include references to musical pluralism (Group 3) in using and reflecting the music around us (rock and jazz) as an agent of creation for the future. What would an American composer who did what Bartok did with Hungarian folk songs sound like using the music that is around him today? Would we accept it as art music or not? Might that be what minimalism really is?

Although born just two months and less than 30 miles apart, the views of Steve Reich and fellow composer John Harbison could scarcely be more different.

Earphones are yet another device that isolates us from each other. The grand coming-together occasions of the past are faded – the political rally, the camp meeting, the parade, the circus have been co-opted by television. Our collective events are the football game and the rock concert. These are loud, assaultive events obviously entertaining and viscerally involving. But the last surviving arena in which we speculate and reflect together is the classical concert, and it depends on a desire to follow intricate and expressive sounds over long time spans, sometimes at very low levels of audibility, and to do so most crucially in a group, a group that shares the experience. 

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Harbison is making an interesting assumption. The technological aspect places the quote in Group 2 and the isolation factor of headphone/earbud usage is worthy of a thesis all by itself. The other issue is a social one, but is more tenuous. Harbison tries to make a case for specific qualities of the art music audience and draws a negative comparison to entertainment spectacles like rock concerts and football games, but he is making assumptions about the classical music audience that were not likely to be true even in the 1980s when this was written.

From the postmodern viewpoint, he creates a problem with the final clause, “a group that shares the experience.” The rock concert audience also shares the experience of their concert. It is a noisier, different kind of experience, but one shared by mutual cooperation and consent all the same. The audience can “speculate and reflect” although it will speculate and reflect in a different way and about different things in these other environments. Nothing in human nature prevents this.

Why then, should Harbison single out the classical concert for this special status? He is taking the ‘art’ part of his argument and making it ‘social’ in a kind of reverse postmodernism. What he is really trying to say is that he believes the classical music audience to be superior by virtue of having better taste in music and being willing to sit quietly through the performance, something Mozart’s audience would never have done. These are the traits Harbison values in his audience. Classical music is superior because it attracts, for Harbison, a superior audience.
The 1990s

Tim Page is a Pulitzer Prize-winning music critic for the New York Times and Washington Post. Page is a staunch defender of the so-called ‘warhorse repertoire’ but also frequently mentions certain rock artists he enjoys in his column. This occurs mostly in his general essays on music rather than in reviews of concerts or recordings.

In one excerpt he laments the prospect of facing life without The Beach Boys’ 1966 album Pet Sounds. Why he mentions these things is not clear. It may be Page’s way of reassuring his readers that he is ‘one of them’ and not a pretentious classical music snob, or it may just be who he is. Page’s apparent love of rock music could be looked at as showing a strong postmodern attitude on the high/low culture issue, but a closer reading says this is not the case.

Page is giving us a picture of someone who sees the division very clearly in high/low terms. Page says, “As a passionate adherent of that much derided canon of Western Art Music, I believe that most classical music is more substantial, and more likely to endure than most popular music.” While this is clearly a Group 1 idea, it offers a more nuanced glimpse of the social aspects of Group 2. Page does not take the time to explain why he believes in this superiority but he assigns the two styles of music very different social functions. Rock is a social/personal music used for specific times and events in life as illustrated by the following quote,

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17 Ibid., p. 320.
I remember ruining a hippie party back in the ‘60s by turning off whatever coy ode to pot or living off the land was on the turntable and insisting that we hear some magnificent noise by a group called The Velvet Underground.\textsuperscript{18}

Page sees a division in music according to social function and he uses rock music as his social music. The art music side is the higher, almost ceremonial form for Page. He sees it as universal and autonomous in the Adornian sense, and a cut above the rest in purpose and in function as he made clear in the earlier quote.

Page’s awareness of postmodernism is implicit in these quotes. He doesn’t acknowledge it by name, but his careful acknowledgment of rock’s value to his readers tells us that Page is aware of postmodern concepts. He appreciates rock music, just not quite as much as the classical music he typically writes about. This is an anti-postmodern position couched in a kind of ‘sheep’s clothing.’ It is probably not done with the intention of fooling anyone, it is just good salesmanship. Page knows his customer and frames his commentary in terms that will help his cause; the promotion of classical music.

Marcia Citron is a professor of musicology at Rice University in Houston, Texas. She is a leading musicologist specializing in issues regarding women and gender, opera and film.

But music is indeed socially contingent and participates in the dynamics of culture. Which music is deemed canonic says a great deal about the image a society has about itself. In the West the privileged position of art music of the European tradition is telling. It suggests a desire to hold fast to a venerated past. For the United States, especially, the association furnishes a means of affirming self-worth. We like to think of ourselves as a nation descended from Europe – this despite or even because of our shifting demographics. Art Music like other European products provided a useful way of expressing that identity. Its elitist

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 341-342.
cachet helps to demarcate social strata in a country relatively free of ingrained class divisions. 19

This is a different picture of the Group 2 social/cultural dynamic. In this example, we see how music is used to place (rank) us within society and by our cultural choice of ‘canonical’ musics, place us within the larger scheme of world cultures. This social ranking is predicated on the belief in high art (Group 1). Without that belief, we cannot have the social ranking system.

Music is still used to assign rank within social groups, but with postmodernism having eliminated the high/low division we are now free to use all music for the same purpose. Country music, classic rock, jazz, etc. will all provide differing, yet identifiable groups to participate in. Each genre has its own ranking from mainstream mundane to critical elite. In that respect, the high/low divide is not gone at all, it still functions in much the same way it always has but on a more limited scale. The postmodern change is simply that we no longer need classical music to rise to the top of our chosen social group.

Cultural critic Michael Chanan is looking at the social functions of music with an eye to reconciling tradition and postmodernism.

Probably the main force of Adorno’s typology of listeners, however, is the realization that each of us harbours different types of listening within ourselves. As we move through the modern acousmatic musical lifeworld, we experience continual shifts in our listening identity; our listening becomes distracted and decentered (and often traced by resentment). And since the heterodox diet of music’s to which we are constantly exposed belongs to every style, idiom, dialect, age and genre, uprooted and disconnected from their original lifeworld, deprived of their aura, our old responses have become confused and largely dysfunctional.

When ubiquitous mechanical reproduction pushes music into the realms of noise pollution, it seems that musical values become relative – a condition which is nowadays often considered one of the defining characteristics of postmodernism, and which sow the seeds of great confusion. But perhaps the crucial problem is not relativism at all but, rather, rampant heterophony – not whether one thing can be judged against another but, rather, being able to hear them at all. 20

The “rampant heterophony” Chanan mentions here is an off shoot of commodification and commercial exploitation of the recorded music product. Chanan makes two points which dramatically affect how we perceive music and how this contrasts with the way music functioned before postmodernism. By definition, acousmatic music deprives listeners of participation in the performance. Disagreement, enthusiasm, boredom; all these can be easily witnessed when one attends live concerts. Performers can note these audience reactions and take action to change their audience’s experience. This is an aspect of musical communication and participation not possible in the acousmatic listening experience. Our world no longer functions the way it once did and the function of music, and recorded music in particular, tells us the change has taken place.

Chanan states that listeners, abdicated the old role to critics, or as the German philosopher Jurgen Habermas stated we are “placed under tutelage,” 21 and for decades this was quite true. The latest postmodern twist, the internet ‘Customer Review,’ invites a kind of participation and is changing that aspect of our relationship with criticism, but it held true for nearly sixty years.


21 Ibid., 288.
The heterophony of our musical world makes judgment impossible. This idea goes back to Group 1. Without our grand paradigm judgment is rendered moot. It isn’t so much that we cannot judge, but that the reason for judging in the first place is gone. If the Grand Paradigm were still in place, a substantial portion of the music we experience could be eliminated from our personal listening world. Art music might rise again to the top.

Karlheinz Stockhausen, composer and electronic music pioneer is one of the architects of musical modernism in the mid/late 20th century.

Let no one suppose that the composer may be better able to interpret the musical vibrations transmitted through him, than a commentator who immerses himself, body and soul, in this music. All the commentaries that have ever been, and those yet to be written, all the thoughts and dreams and impressions and visions and actions that my music arouses in its hearers, all these, no less, add up to the meaning of this music – something that must always remain largely a mystery, never totally to be comprehended by a single individual. The resonance is different in every person, for each stands on a different rung of the ladder of spiritual self-enhancement. 22

Stockhausen is giving the postmodern viewpoint that meaning is located in the listener. Meaning, for Stockhausen, is anything and everything anyone feels or interprets all taken together. Stockhausen even goes so far as to declare that composers are no better qualified to discern meaning than listeners. As one of the architects of the Darmstadt school, one might assume his allegiance to the Adornian school of thought. The careful planning and serial techniques do not lead logically to this conclusion regarding musical meaning. Stockhausen was deeply involved in electronic music so, according to Kramer, postmodernism would inevitably be present in his music, though his outspoken views on serialism projects the opposite viewpoint. It would be easier to

believe that Stockhausen had very definite meanings in mind and would also be very quick to point out failure in understanding his output. Postmodernism shows up in unlikely places.

**The 2000s**

Mei-Ann Chen is music director of the Chicago Sinfonietta and the Memphis Symphony Orchestra.

Classical music has come to a place in history that we have to think of new ways of making it interesting to other people. Sometimes, it is combining a little bit of a twist or thinking completely outside the box. They are playing the flute, the cello and the bass, and yet they are creating this new genre and these new possibilities.  

Following this formula, one could not help but create postmodern music, but the issue here is a social one. Chen is suggesting that composers and performers should try to connect with their audiences on new and different levels. This postmodern approach recognizes the need to compete for audience members with other media. In the pre-postmodern mode of thinking, classical music was the reigning monarch of the musical arts and needed only make its presence known to draw an audience. Chen’s recognition that this is no longer the case is an important first step for art music to survive and thrive in the postmodern world. Thinking “completely outside the box” could imply much more than a change of musical style. The sociological aspects of music listening, concert protocol, and means of delivering the music (technology) could all be part of her vision. This quote is a very good summing up of the whole Group 2 concept.

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Gerald Phillips holds degrees in Music Education, Voice, Television Production and Philosophy. He currently teaches vocal performance and philosophy at Towson University in Baltimore.

The commodification of nearly all aspects of life (pushed to new heights by technology), has in a sense, limited the potential (artistic) and freedom (creativity) of our present and is constantly heading in directions that favor commercial gain and passive entertainment rather than free, creative work. The reproduction of the same has proliferated to unimaginable levels and still seems to be accelerating… Certain forms of art and music historically bastions of autonomous creativity and individual achievement, have been swallowed up in the frenzy.²⁴

The commercial valuation of music is a common complaint in many accounts of music in the 21st century. Almost everything Phillips says here is true. Our lives are heavily, almost intolerably commodified. This creates problems when trying to make distinctions between things like art and entertainment. Phillips suggests technology helped create these two binary opposites so we can see it as a Group 2 issue.

The “bastions of autonomous creativity” that have been used for decades to separate art from entertainment are in reality a modern construct. Did audiences attend performances of “The Barber Of Seville” hoping to hear music composed in a vacuum? Certainly not. “The Barber” was politics, it was entertainment, it was social commentary AND it was art. The vacuum came into existence at the same time the aristocratic patronage system collapsed. There were a few rough years of populist composers (much of the Romantic Era) making a living by pleasing the general public but when university patronage came into being the vacuum took its place in the philosophy of music. With a little revisionist thinking we came to believe it had always been there. In this case, the

“bastion of autonomous creativity” Phillips refers to is in actuality the university patronage system of the past 100 years. It was never a way of separating good artists from bad ones, rather, it was a way for composers to obtain a secure income and not be beholden to a particular listening public.

There is more freedom and the proliferation of commercial music is indeed extreme, but the ground rules have not changed. One must still make a living with one’s skills. For some this is an academic living, for others a commercial one. To blame the proliferation of commercial reproductions for the declining sales of art music makes no sense at all. If we want it to sell, we must make it a commercial product. To state that it is not and never was a commercial product (Adornian thinking) and then complain about a lack of sales is ludicrous.

Composer Julian Johnson looks at the social function of music from a distinctly non-postmodern point of view in this quote.

Classical music’s claims exceed the social functions to which it has been too often reduced. But they are realized only when the music is treated not as a sign for something else (social status, wealth, education) but as the sole object of one’s interest. The capacity of classical music – what it might do for us – is paradoxically realized only by a concentration on the musical object rather than on ourselves. All the talk of self-expression and identity, of social signs and positions, obscures a definitive moment on which art depends: that of encounter. Ascribing to music the capacity for self-expression is often a sleight-of-hand for the listener’s self-projection. But self-projection runs counter to art’s definitive value, the encounter in the artwork of something other than oneself, the experience of something beyond one’s experience and habitual ordering of the world.25

Johnson is stating that music is a disinterested, autonomous ‘other’ which is not rooted and relevant to cultural, social, and political contexts; the exact opposite of the

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postmodern position. He is clearly aware of this trend and is rejecting it as a basis for musical understanding, holding fast to the philosophy of Adorno. It is interesting that Johnson does not try to deny those social and cultural functions of music. He simply states that music that fulfills only those functions cannot be art. The art and meaning for Johnson are in the score, not in the listener. What Johnson fails to address is the possibility that one might have the same experience of “encounter” in the music of Bob Dylan or Richard Thompson or that one might make such music “the sole object of one’s interest” and in so doing have the encounter Johnson believes constitutes the sole province of art. This omission presumably strengthens Johnson’s point that art exists only in classical music, but in reality it is a “self-projection” of Johnson’s belief in the superiority of classical music.

Looking at the issues of Group 2 individually can be confusing. Ties between musical meaning and the sociological aspects of music are not always apparent. It is when tied together by the commercial product of recorded music that we see the connections and the contradictions in our changing perception of music over the past five decades. Has the freedom to listen how and when we choose created a demand for a new kind of art or eliminated the possibility of art altogether? We cannot return to the 19th century lifeworld of much of the music we enjoy.

Sound recording is and has been, for virtually all Americans, a fundamental aspect of musical life. It represents our common views on what music is thought to be, molding taste, perception, and appreciation. One might even argue that the history of music in the 20th century is as much a history of sound reproduction as it is of musical works themselves.26

This quote from Ronald Radano, professor of musicology and ethnomusicology at University of Wisconsin, illustrates the situation that we are all presented with. New times will require a new way of thinking about the philosophy of classical music. Some of the authors quoted in this chapter are already working on this task. One of the central concepts in this new approach is to embrace, rather than condemn the technology that delivers music in the acousmatic 21st century world.

According to author Luigi Cazzato, “[w]hat postmodernism seems to do is accept…the reality of commodification: ultimately, if in the capitalist society a work of art is a commodity then, there is no way out of it: aesthetic autonomy is just an illusion.”27 The technological world is upon us and we can either try to swim with the current or be swept away by it.

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27 Luigi Cazzato, “From Elitist Modernism to Populist Postmodernism,” in Just Postmodernism, ed. Steven Earnshaw (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997), 204.
Chapter 4: Group 3, Change In Teleological Perception

Does anybody really know what time it is?
Does anybody really care about time?\(^1\)

Postmodernism cannot be an historical epoch because, by it’s own definitions, it eliminates epochs or replaces them with a continuum. Because of our culture of mediation and commodification all epochs can exist simultaneously. The technology issues of Group 2 exacerbate this time-related confusion. The works of every historical period are forever with us in the present via recordings. They compete for our attention and dollars with the works that are currently being produced. The subject matter of some new art is also ‘old’ as in historical dramas, and music using quotations and samples from works of the past.

The issues of Group 3 are all related to how we view the function of time under postmodernism, but there is also a strong tie to Group 1. Without our grand paradigm, our perception of time as linear and progressive is called into question. If absolutes do not exist, then Robert Lamm’s question, “Does anybody really know what time it is?”\(^2\) becomes a valid one. This is an extreme example of a postmodern concept from the pen of a pop songwriter, but it shows the prevalence of this line of reasoning as far back as 1970. We can safely assume that a concert will begin at 8:00, but what we hear might create some serious teleological confusion.

Since the past is now also the present, musicians must compete with all of history for performance opportunities. The availability of recordings and of internet-based video


\(^2\) Ibid.
uploads also allows listeners to stay home. Concert attendance is more ‘optional’ than ever before. Statistics from The American Federation of Musicians bears this out. It is estimated that some 20,000 music jobs were lost during the 1930s and 1940s when recorded music on radio became the norm.

Another Group 3 issue is the mixing together of musical materials from all eras of the past and present, all styles high and low, in current musical compositions. Under the grand paradigm this would not have been possible to the extent that we see we see today. Musical progress was linear and moved ever forward. Era replaced era, new concepts in form and harmony replaced the old. Beethoven’s Missa Solemnis (1824) will never be mistaken for Palestrina, but Arvo Pärt’s Missa Sillabica (1977) just might. This is because progress under the grand paradigm was also forward/linear in nature; a teleology. We looked back only to correct error, forward progress was inevitable.

This concept also implies that the quality of music also continually improves. As composer John Winsor says, “[t]he fact remains that Bach was better at choosing notes than Josquin, and Tchaikovsky was better at orchestration than Bach.” 4 Winsor attributes this qualitative difference strictly to the musical/historical times in which these composers lived and worked. Teleological forward progress guarantees a superior outcome.

With the grand paradigm removed, and no single dominant style emerging since serialism, composers are faced with a daunting array of choices. The result has been

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called pastiche or collage. Tonal and atonal music combine within single pieces, forms and procedures of the past are used out of context, in some cases direct quotes from historical works are used to form the basis of new works echoing techniques commonly used in the Renaissance.

Collage does not call the past/present aspect of time into question, so much as it rejects the idea of forward-linear progress and thereby exhibits multiple temporalities. This brings the Adorninan mode of thought into disrepute and informs a great deal of the writing about music of the past fifty years. It is strongly related to Group 1 since it also questions the validity of a high/low art bias.

The postmodern view… takes the collapse of rational frames – that is, grand narratives, or paradigms – as a sign that the future holds only constant change without rational progressive, teleological directionality. 5

The 1960s

David Hamilton was Music Editor of The Nation, and was a Contributing Editor to Opus, Opera Quarterly and High Fidelity magazine. In this 1968 article he addresses some of the new trends in music.

The future of music hardly seems to lie in the grand amalgamation of everything into one universal style now advocated in certain quarters, but rather in the encouragement of valid tendencies at all levels. Whatever the history of the arts has taught us (and one may well wonder, looking around us), it suggests that immediate success is no necessary criterion of enduring quality. 6

Hamilton is acknowledging the loss of the Grand Paradigm, calling it a “grand amalgamation of styles,” that had been the identifying hallmark of all stylistic eras of the


past. His statement does not specifically address the pluralism of styles and
techniques. Instead, he talks about “encouraging valid tendencies at all levels,” which
gives an intimation of the pluralism that was just beginning to explode at the time. He
tempersthe positive spin by noting that success does not equal quality, but he does not
give his opinion of any of the various new trends. Perhaps Hamilton is one of Hans
Keller’s ‘conscientious hypocrites’ mentioned in Chapter 2.

Harold Shonberg was an American music critic for The New York Times. He was
the first music critic to win the Pulitzer Prize for Criticism.

Everything doctrinaire is going out of the window, and that is a healthy sign. The
younger composers are no longer strict serialists (thank goodness), or strict
Dadaists, or Third Streamers or whatnot. All techniques are being synthesized.
The Beatles had something to do with it, and John Cage, and the Columbia-
Princeton Electronic Music Studio, and the jazz boys, and some of the movie
composers, and some television commercials, and Viet Nam, and the
psychedelics. Young composers today enthusiastically use everything within
reach. 7

The breakdown of time is mostly a philosophical concept, but the presence of the
past in our media culture is not. Shonberg does not see the old doctrines (styles) being
abandoned in favor of a new paradigm. Instead all styles are being used together in the
pastiche or collage techniques. This is made clear in the sentence, “[a]ll techniques are
being synthesized.” There are Group 1 and Group 2 issues present in this quote as well.
Group 1 can be inferred from the use of ‘low art’ music and its influence on young
composers of the time. Group 2 is present in the cultural issues Shonberg notes as
influences.

7 Quoted in Les Roka, “Making Order Out Of Chaos: Music Criticism In U.S. Newspapers in the 1960s,”
PhD. Diss., Ohio University, 2002, 96.
What is perhaps most surprising in this quote is Shonberg’s apparently favorable view of these trends. Shonberg was noted for traditionalism during his tenure with the New York Times and although never a fan of modernism, it is surprising to see this level of acceptance for these new postmodern trends.

Leonard Meyer was a composer, author, and philosopher. He contributed major works in the fields of aesthetic theory in music, and compositional analysis.

One crucial characteristic of the present situation, however, does seem clear and certain: there is not now, and probably will not be, a single cohesive audience for serious art, music, and literature […] Rather, there are and will continue to be a number of different audiences corresponding roughly to broad areas of the spectrum of coexisting styles. Just as some artists, writers, and composers will be stylistically polylingual – changing styles for whatever reason – so one individual may belong to several audiences within the same art.8

Leonard Meyer is discussing musical pluralism from the perspective of the audience. This takes Kramer’s view of musical postmodernism to yet another level. Meyer is giving us a picture of pluralism and collage as an audience phenomenon as well as that of composers and musicians and he suggests that stylistic plurality on the part of the composer might reach a pluralistically fragmented audience as well.

Meyer envisions the separation of styles as less restrictive, and perhaps less inhibiting for classical music in the future. There are some strong Group 2 concepts in this quote where the social functions and constructs of music are concerned. Meyer’s vision of a fragmented audience of many tastes, while almost exactly what we now have, was not the case in 1967. Art was art and pop was pop and the idea of merging the two was not widespread.

Japanese composer Toru Takemitsu was not a nationalist composer in the 19th century sense. While distinctly Japanese in style, he did not use the folk idioms of Japanese music.

I wish to free sounds from the trite rules of music, rules that are in turn stifled by formulas and calculations. I want to give sounds the freedom to breathe. … I must develop a practical method. One way might be through an ethnological approach. There may be folk music with strength and beauty, but I cannot be completely honest in this kind of music. I want a more active relationship to the present. (Folk music in a ‘contemporary style’ is nothing but a deception.)

Because the writer of popular tunes looks at his world with too much detachment, it falls to the composer to deal with the real thoughts and emotions of his time. 9

Written in 1962, this is the oldest (chronologically) quote in this thesis, but it brings up issues about the use of pastiche and nationalism (Group 2 and Group 3) that no other quote has done. Takemitsu states that the composer must be honest with himself and with his audience in his use of materials from other styles or cultures. Takemitsu wanted to free his sounds from the traditions and conventions of Western art music. This was a common desire among composers in the West and has taken many forms in the ensuing decades. For Takemitsu this path of ‘borrowing’ from history and from other cultures was not a viable path.

Steve Reich, in the quote used in Group 2, raised similar points about the cultural appropriateness of using music from other cultures, but had no qualms about incorporating music he felt connected to from his U.S. culture. Philip Glass was fascinated (from the influence of The Beatles) with the additive structures of Indian music and made use of them in ways that led Pierre Boulez to comment that Glass would

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“dive into it like tourists setting off to visit a landscape that is about to vanish.”  

Both Boulez and Takemitsu acknowledged the practice of pluralism in classical music and rejected it as a viable adaptation for their own musical languages, Takemitsu calling it a “deception” and Boulez “one of the most odious forms of affectation.”

The 1970s

David Cairns was chief music critic of the Sunday Times from 1983 to 1992, and previously was music critic and arts editor of The Spectator.

The history of a masterpiece is in any case not a static thing. The great works of the past are continually part of the present; we have them, and we contribute to them our own responses. Perhaps it is against the spirit of the times and the irresistible movement of contemporary culture to want to go on believing in the concept of the work of art – its existence (which no one can argue away), its greatness, its necessity, the genius and discipline required to create it; but, despite all that is said and done to prove that Art is dead, I see no reason why it should not go on being added to.

Cairns’s vision of past and present comingling is very postmodern for the 1970s. The multiple musical temporalities encountered in the present are a direct result of the recorded music product (Group 2). With the availability of recordings, we can easily go days, weeks, even months without ever listening to music written in our own time period. When the present has to compete with the past in order to be validated, we risk damaging the future, but when we insist that recorded music fit into the Adornian mode of thinking it cannot compete in a modern marketplace.

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11 Ibid., 416.

Cairns also raises Group 1 issues when discussing the viability of the concepts
of masterpiece and art in general. He acknowledges the postmodern positions, but does
not accept them as the only possible outcome.

Originally written in 1974, this quote by German Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch
gives us another look at musical temporality.

In Music, however, we have, with impunity, been growing ever younger. And it
is not skill and maturity but academicism that has disappeared in the process. So
from this point of view, too, the customary glorification of the past in all musical
matters is sure to be confounded. … [M]usic is permeated – not only in the self-
evident technical skill, but also in the strength of personal expression – by a
single stream of equal-ranking figures. This stream remains unaffected by any
rise and fall. It rendered Bach and, in quite a different, more surprising way,
Wagner anachronistic, and made it possible in any contemporary music the same
high degree of imagination, otherwise traceable only in the past.\(^{13}\)

Bloch is describing the conflict we feel in our over-mediated culture about
competition with the ever-present past. Bloch sees the issue in a slightly different way
than others do. In the previous quote, David Cairns, discussed the perceived greatness of
art and how the mediated present might change that perception. For Bloch, the
onslaught of the present has always rendered the past irrelevant. When he sees Bach and
Wagner as anachronistic, he is not depriving them of greatness, only of a position in time.
The possibility of greatness in the present, for Bloch, need not be judged by the standards
of the past. In 1974 it was less clear just how far mediation might continue to expand.
The same kinds of things are now happening in other musical styles (Classic Rock) and
in the glorification of outdated technologies (electric guitars from the 1950s in rock
music). It shows how broad the issue is, and how difficult it is to cope with the pace of
change.

University Press, 1985), 11-12.
Elliott Carter was an American composer who was twice awarded the Pulitzer Prize in music. Carter’s experiments with musical time are well known but this quote takes a different approach to the subject than one might expect.

These works, … depend on a special dimension of time, that of “multiple perspective,” in which various contrasting characters are presented simultaneously – as was occasionally done in opera, for example, in the ballroom scene from Don Giovanni, or in the finale of Aida. Double and sometimes manifold character simultaneities, of course, present, as our human experience often does, certain emotionally charged events as seen in the context of others, producing often a kind of irony, which I am particularly interested in.  

His point is remarkable because even though written in 1976, in this short paragraph Carter has so succinctly summed up Jonathan Kramer’s thesis that one wonders if this excerpt might have given Kramer the impetus for his 16 points. Carter is writing about what we might call historical juxtapositioning. The indication of multiple temporalities is very evident in this quote. Figures from the past coming to life as in Carter’s examples from Mozart’s opera allow new and different interpretations and perceptions of those historical materials. Carter created tension and irony purely through the manipulation of our perceptions of musical time so that past, present and future coexist.

Sir Arthur Bliss was an English composer and conductor.

Composition today is in a strange state, with multifarious styles colliding each with each, with some favouring this ‘ism’ and others that ‘ology’. The stage seems set for some kind of do-as-you-please, free-for-all combat. It is necessary for every new generation to protest and rebel – we have in our time all done it –

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but it is no use protesting and rebelling when everything is permitted. You cannot rebel, with satisfaction, against anarchy.  

Like Ernst Bloch, Bliss sees changes happening but does not see the root cause. Bliss recognizes the coming era of plurality not as an end to itself, but rather as a competition to create the next major paradigm. This observation was made in the mid 1970s, well before the full discourse on postmodernism began to come to light. Lyotard’s book, *The Postmodern Condition*, published in 1979, was the beginning of widespread dissemination of these ideas. For Bliss, the root cause of the multiplicity of styles in late 20th century art music indicated a form of youthful rebellion. This, coming on the heels of the turbulent 1960s, made sense. Bliss also sees the futility of that rebellion in the climate of plurality. What he did not see was that it was the beginning of the end of a 300-year paradigm. It is no small wonder that the dissemination of these ideas has been filled with conflict and misunderstanding. Our reactions to mediated culture have been as varied as the culture itself.

**The 1980s**

Evan Eisenberg's writing on nature, culture, and technology have appeared in *The Atlantic, The New Republic, the New York Times, Natural History, Discover, New York,* and other periodicals.

Records … shattered the public architecture of time. They have replaced it with a kind of modular interior design. The individual supplies himself with sculpted blocks of time. Each block is infinitely repeatable. Each is different from, but formally interchangeable with, every other.

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Musical time and the time of music are two very different concepts that postmodern thought has taken up and Eisenberg explores both at the same time. Eisenberg sees music of the past from the traditional historical perspective; that it is not the music of our own time. The teleological confusion arises with the ability to ‘time-travel.’ The “sculpted blocks of time” Eisenberg describes are different styles, different eras, of music that we now have nearly unrestricted access to. This ability to move from style to style and era to era presents the multiple temporalities that Kramer identifies as postmodern. Pluralism and collage are more directly encountered later in the book where Eisenberg refers to music “scavenged from cultures present and past.”17

Alfred Schnittke was a Soviet composer who developed a polystylistic technique. Contemporary reality will make it necessary to experience all the musics one has heard since childhood, including rock and jazz and classical and all other forms, combining them into a synthesis. This has not happened in my generation … The synthesis must arise as a natural longing, or though necessity.18

Schnittke wants us to take everything we’ve ever heard, and everything we know and use it to make something new. History has consistently shown composers building upon one another’s ideas for the past three centuries, but what is more unusual in this quote is the suggestion to include ideas from all past and current musical styles in this new synthesis. While not a radical idea in the Renaissance, the ensuing centuries of relative isolation for classical music have separated it from its more common popular

17 Ibid., 17.

counterparts and this, Schnittke contends, should end. This postmodern concept has been identified in descriptions of musical pluralism and collage.

The “natural longing” he mentions was just beginning at the time of this writing and Schnittke’s own music does not show this synthesis in an obvious way. It was really the minimalists who embodied that longing. Even with minimalism it is not as clear as one might hope. Glass and Reich each had their own ensembles to pay, and the need for financial security cannot be removed from the circumstances that gave us minimal music as we now know it. Did they hit on a formula that both provided artistic satisfaction, aesthetic pleasure, and a paying audience by accident, by design, or by trial and error? Was it borne out of a personal drive to follow Schnittke’s “longing” or from a drive to succeed commercially? These are the difficult questions of the postmodern state of music.

John Zorn is an American composer, arranger, producer, saxophonist and multi-instrumentalist with hundreds of album credits as performer, composer, and producer across a variety of genres.

I grew up in New York City as a media freak, watching movies and TV and buying hundreds of records. There’s a lot of jazz in me, but there’s also a lot of rock, a lot of classical, a lot of ethnic music, a lot of blues, and lot of movie soundtracks. I’m a mixture of all those things… We should take advantage of all the great music and musicians in this world without fear of musical barriers, which sometimes are even stronger than racial or religious ones. That’s the strength of pop music today. It’s universal.  

This statement illustrates the concepts of pluralism and collage extremely well. Zorn blends two ideas of postmodernism (eclecticism and experimentalism) into a seamless whole that encompasses jazz, rock, hardcore punk, classical, extreme metal,

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klezmer, film, cartoon, popular, and improvised music, all of which Zorn refers to with the label ‘avant-garde/experimental.’ Once again, it is the loss of the grand narrative for art and music that allows a musician like Zorn to find a place in the world of art-music so we see Group 1 issues driving this composer’s pluralistic musical mix. In previous decades the Adornian version of what art is, and who an artist must be to create art would never allow a musician like Zorn into the fold.

The 1990s


By then waves of pointillism, total serialization, timbre structures, and chance procedure had broken. Drenched composers were building as best they could amid the debris on music’s beach.

Who could have forseen that ricky-tick minimalism, soupy neo-romanticism, and holy monotony would be the next waves?

This is yet another view of how composers might cope with the pluralism presented to them. Porter acknowledges the existence of this postmodern trend but he also recognizes the loss of the grand paradigm when he mentions composers building works “amid the debris on music’s beach.” In Porter’s view, composers were not experimenting, not trying new ideas, they were lost and overwhelmed by the plurality of styles which now included all styles of the past as well as the present. They simply had too many choices. With this crisis of choice, the successful trends Porter mentions (minimalism in general, and a thinly veiled jab at Arvo Pärt and John Tavener labeled as “holy monotony”) are seen as ‘low-art music’ (Group 1) that rose to the top as a result of

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the loss of a clear paradigm that would have otherwise excluded them. For critics accustomed to music working within a relatively secure set of definitions, the concept of pluralism or collage brought about by the lack of a clear paradigm for the future was extremely unfamiliar ground.

Charles Boone is an American composer of contemporary classical music, living in San Francisco. In this essay, Boone looks at the perceived power of the modernist school of composers in the late 20th century.

After the revitalizing processes of the sixties occurred, in which one thing became as good as another, the idea that for composers there exists not just one current – i.e. modernism – but a plethora of currents from which to draw has been recognized clearly.21

The expression, “one thing became as good as another,” leaves no doubt that Boone is less than approving of the trend of pluralism in classical music. This particular phrase could be a Group 1 issue, but the overall context of this quote is the acknowledged presence of multiple currents for composers to draw from, the issue of stylistic and cultural pluralism. Although acknowledging pluralism, it is clear that Boone wishes for a single current from which all art music should flow. The single stream, grand paradigm model certainly had advantages for critics. Points of comparison and evaluation for new works were known and accepted, and likewise provided a stable framework for rebellion and innovation, something which is conspicuously missing from the postmodern model.

Robert Cantwell is Adjunct Professor of American Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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Even as the nature of recording itself thrusts the performance away and into the past, opening in its absence an imaginary field in which all its sounds are immediately and urgently present. \(^{22}\)

In this statement, Cantwell expands on previous commentary on the past/present aspect of postmodernism. Cantwell states that the recording itself pushes the performance into the past. This is, of course, an accurate statement. By the time we hear a recording, the performance is over and done with but what Cantwell is alluding to is the psychological time factor. When we listen to recordings, all music is temporally the same age because we hear the sounds in the present, and not when they were recorded, or performed, or written out by composers. The sounds we hear in the present are the present. The rest is academic knowledge and though it may change what we know about what we hear, it cannot change what we hear.

Russian composer Sofia Gubaidulina has been known for her unusual instrumental combinations as well as for her professional difficulties as a modernist composer in the Soviet system in the 1970s.

Art poses the objective of creating a time that I would call the continual present. In the dimension of temporality as we usually experience it, the present is always elusive, suspended between a past that is no longer and a future that is not yet. From the perspective of art the present acquires a superior force of concentration on objects and concepts – it escapes from temporality. To be realized, however, this process of transfiguration requires the sacrifice of temporality – a sacrifice that, as T.S. Eliot has explained very well, becomes an act of expiation. \(^{23}\)

Gubaidulina is less concerned with the placement of a product (a musical composition) in historical time and issues of pluralism than previous examples.

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Gubaidulina is exploring how music functions in real time. She is suggesting that music, in effect, suspends time, stops time for the individual listener. This concept is not limited to recorded music. It works just the same in live performance. For Gubaidulina, the mental concentration on the music being heard is the primary factor. This is not a present/past postmodern issue, it is purely one of the perception of time as it is currently passing. We can all relate to the phenomenon of losing track of time while listening to music. The concert begins at 8:00 and ends at 9:30, but for the listener those 90 minutes do not exist in the usual way. This takes the usual concept of music unfolding over time, which is often one of the bedrock components of a definition of music, and turns it completely upside down. Very postmodern indeed. Gubaidulina’s focus in this quote is on classical music and it is difficult to imagine these same concepts being applied to products such as Muzak, so there may be just a hint of the high/low art issue of Group 1 in this idea.

**The 2000s**

Geoffrey O’Brien is an American poet, editor, book and film critic, translator, and cultural historian.

The generations have become coeval; whether you reach for the ‘20s or the ‘50s or the ‘70s may indicate no more than your taste in hats or song titles or cover designs. Last week you were in Zaire 1980, the week before in Paris 1952. Now on a whim it’s Kentucky’s turn; it is only a matter of determining where to set the dial of the time machine.  

O’Brien is making a point that illustrates all three parts of Group 3. For O’Brien musical pluralism is an equal part of the package alongside the time-related elements.

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This quote, like those from Evan Eisenberg (pg. 76) and Robert Cantwell (pg. 81) primarily focuses on the teleological aspect of postmodernism from the perspective of the listener, rather than from an academic (musicology) view or a creative (composition) point of view. The change of focus in more recent decades is significant. When pluralism was in the process of becoming the norm, critics focused more on how musicians might deal with it. Once pluralism became the accepted wisdom there was little need to continue to comment on it. It is only natural that another way of looking at the issue of time should arise.

It is interesting that three of the clearest examples of this teleological thought process have come from ‘non-classical’ music writers. O’Brien is a poet, Eisenberg focuses on nature and culture, and Cantwell on American studies. It may be that these writers have more distance than others who are more closely tied to the study of, or the creation of music.

Alex Ross is an American music critic. He has been on the staff of The New Yorker magazine since 1996.

Those who cherish the ‘classical musics’ share a fear that the behemoth of mass-marketed pop will wipe out the wisdom of the centuries. To be “classical”, in this sense is to protect tradition from the ravages of passing time, to perpetuate the musical past. 25

Ross’s awareness of Group 3 issues is expressed, not from the listener’s perspective, but from the point of view of composers, concert programmers, and performing musicians. Ross is voicing the worry that classical music, much of it 300

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25 Alex Ross; The Rest Is Noise; Listening To The Twentieth Century (New York, NY, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2007), 566.
years old, will not survive the present in a healthy state as a result of the effects of teleological distortions and commercial pressure from other music (Group 2).

For the composer and conductor the reality of past and present occurring simultaneously places the music of the present in constant competition with that of the past, but for each in a slightly different way. Music directors who program the classics have to compete with highly edited recorded versions which may induce an audience to stay at home. The composer sees the program of classics as a threat to his new compositions. Each competes with the other for attention and resources. The ‘enemies’ change, but the distortion of time created by technology is the same.

Kyle Gann is a professor of music, critic, and composer. As a critic for The Village Voice he has been a supporter of progressive music including such Downtown movements as postminimalism and totalism.

When you grow up surrounded completely by music in one style, becoming a child prodigy isn’t so unusual – a sensitive kid can quickly master a clear, finite set of rules. The ubiquity of classical, modern, jazz, pop, and other musics offers a paralyzing panoply of choices.²⁶

Gann is acknowledging the difficulties an artist (composer or performer) can encounter in the pluralistic present. He is making the point that pluralism, far from making the composition of music easier by allowing all styles and influences, has made it more difficult, or at least more confusing. This echoes what Stravinsky has said about his own creative process, that too much freedom can be a problem and that,

my freedom will be so much the greater and more meaningful the more narrowly I limit my field of action and the more I surround myself with obstacles.

Whatever diminishes constraints diminishes strength. The more constraints one imposes, the more one frees one's self of the chains that shackle the spirit.  

Gann’s comments seem to indicate that this limiting of one’s resources, at least at the outset of a composition, is more necessary than ever.

English composer, ethnomusicologist and self-styled explorer, David Fanshawe’s work is situated at the crossroads of traditional and modern music. His best-known composition is the 1972 choral work *African Sanctus* which combines pre-recorded tribal singing from Uganda with traditional instrumentation and choir.

I suppose I’m a kind of early sampler, you know, I was sampling the world. It seems to me that all music is related, all human beings regardless of color, race, creed or nationality. We are all inter-related musically, we have a soul and that soul is the universality of music. That’s how it appears to me and this is why I feel that I can make a comment as a composer, join in, comment on, and retain the essence, hopefully, the beauty of pure music, pure sound.

Fanshawe is considering the materials of creation, rather than the time-related conundrums of recorded music. He is discussing not only the specific process he used in the creation of the African Sanctus, but also why he feels that this is a valid music-making method. His comments about the universality of music and his use of not only, “quotations or references of music of many traditions,” but actual recordings of music moves this issue into new and uncharted postmodern territory. Although this will inevitably bring with it non-artistic baggage in the form of copyright issues and accusations of cultural imperialism, this type of sampled work is likely to be a major part of the future of art music. Works like this that use sampled sounds (Group 2) from non-

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28 David Fanshawe speaking in “Recorded Sound,” *Howard Goodall’s Big Bangs*, dir. by David Jeffcock & Justin Kershaw, (2008; West Long Branch NJ, Kultur Video) DVD.

art-music styles (Group 1 and Group 3) bring the debate over all three of the groupings in this thesis together in one package. The postmodern techniques and processes for working with previously existing materials and sampling will be interesting to watch.

The ways our perceptions of time have changed in the postmodern era are very subtle and mostly go unnoticed in our day-to-day lives. We continue to use clocks in the traditional manner, and come and go according to schedules as always. What we have seen in these quotes, however, is a very definite change in our interactions with musical time on several levels. In almost every case, the primary reason for this shift is not one of philosophy. Composers, performers and listeners, did not wake up and say, “today I will adopt a postmodern view of time.” The invention and incredible proliferation of recorded music is the primary factor. As a result of this invention, musicians and listeners have become familiar with an incredibly broad body of music. The old methods of understanding simply cannot hold it all. Due solely to its availability, music dating back hundreds of years and encompassing hundreds of styles has made its way into the output of current composers. Even though no other outcome was possible or logical, the classical music establishment has clung to concepts and ideas about music that ignore this basic fact. The pluralism we have seen discussed and the time-related issues are evidence of this new sensibility. British composer and television music presenter Howard Goodall speculates that,

[m]usic historians of the future might describe this moment as the “age of convergence.” Classical music is like a cleverly mutating DNA gene, transforming itself and cross-fertilizing with other forms right in front of our eyes. What we’re witnessing is the meltdown of previously rigid musical compartments
and styles, a process we owe principally to Edison’s ‘Big Bang,’ the invention of recorded music.\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{30} Howard Goodall, \textit{Howard Goodall’s Big Bangs}, directed by David Jeffcock and Justin Kershaw, (2008; West Long Branch NJ, Kultur Video) DVD.
Chapter 5: Rock Criticism And The Customer Review

Rock Criticism

They talk about you in the press
They got you figured out I guess
Though you never heard of the guy they mention  

One of the most vexing postmodern issues for some music critics over the past 40 years has been the postmodern elevation of rock music to the status of equal partner in art with classical music. In the extreme version of this scenario The Beatles become musical equals to Beethoven. This change is an example of all three postmodern groupings working simultaneously. The Group 1 implications are obvious, but what is the role of the critic in the process? What other postmodern attitudes do we see?

From the late 1960s onward there was a campaign to make rock music into high art where, as singer-songwriter Judy Collins put it, “we will have pop song cycles like classical lieder, but we will create our own words, music, and orchestrations, because we are a generation of whole people.”  

This view was reinforced by Newsweek critic Jack Kroll who compared The Beatles album “Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band” to the song cycle “Façade” by English composer William Walton, saying, “Like Façade, Sgt. Pepper is a rollicking, probing language and sound vaudeville which grafts skin from all three brows – high, middle, and low – into a pulsating collage about mid-century madness.”

Artists consciously sought ways to take rock music beyond its orientation on teens and dancing. Postmodernism in music criticism helped effect this change by altering the language of rock criticism. Critics like Richard Goldstein, Richard Meltzer, Robert Christgau, and John Rockwell adopted the style and of classical music criticism when discussing rock music recordings.

The best work to emerge from this genre either approached the febrile intensity of new jazz, as in Robert Fripp’s King Crimson, or attempted a marriage of large-scale thematic form, as in The Who’s Tommy – a “rock opera” that, like Einstein on the Beach, was performed at the Metropolitan Opera House in concert with the group itself.4

Writing like the above example from John Rockwell was instrumental in helping rock music achieve a kind of equal artistic status with its classical counterpart. From the late 1960s onward, rock criticism became almost a popular culture mirror to the criticism and philosophies of classical music. As Ulf Linberg states,

The discursive strategies of the 1960s rock clergy contained the claims (1) that rock was ”subversive,” (2) that it was produced by autonomous authorial subjects, (3) that it allowed for canon formation, and (4) that it was in possession of its own means of artistic expression. 5

Looking at this quote the philosophical similarities to many of the quotes analyzed in this thesis are striking. It is no wonder that this strategy was effective during the postmodern period. For those, unexposed to the philosophical underpinnings of classical music, the inference is more than enough to be convincing.

This was a drastic change from the Teen Beat style of the 1950s and early 1960s. Previously, classical music had held its top status for all ages of consumer. Seventeen

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5 Ulf Lindberg et al., Rock Criticism From The Beginning; Amusers, Bruisers, and Cool-Headed Cruisers, (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2005) 42.
Magazine had a monthly classical music column until 1957 with yearly lists of ‘must-have’ string quartets, symphonies, operas, etc. The column continued to appear sporadically until 1967 when it vanished from their pages forever.6

In the late 1960s, rock critics tried to look deeper into music that supposedly had no depth and a new style of music criticism was born. This new style left the teen-focused press behind and blazed a new trail attracting adult readers and slowly siphoning listeners away from classical music. Readers now convinced that they could get art from Led Zeppelin found they had little use for Elliott Carter.

Influences from Group 2 are present when we look at the technological product that made this all possible, the long-playing record album. When LPs became rock music’s main currency in the late 1960s many artists began using the format to create a kind of non-commercial (yet highly commercialized) artistic statement. This quote from a 1967 issue of Time Magazine sums it up, “[The Beatles] are leading an evolution in which the best of current post-rock sounds are becoming something that pop music has never been before: an art form.”7 This was a bold statement and ran contrary to popular opinion. The idea that popular music might be considered a serious art form indicates a broken ‘barrier’ between high and low art (Group 1) accomplished through technology (Group 2). The very things that should have been classical music’s saving grace, the LP record and the academic style of criticism, were turned into its Achilles Heel by the new generation of rock critics. By largely ignoring this development and ceding the status of

7 Ibid., 230.
art to rock music, classical music lost the special status as the highest representation of 
art in music it had held since the Renaissance without ever realizing it was gone.

Another issue with the current state of modern classical criticism is that the 
objects of their literary efforts are often performances of older works rather than new 
works. Critics who write reviews of recordings fare little better in this regard as the vast 
majority of classical music recordings are also 100 year-old compositions. This is a 
natural occurrence of our times with the aging repertoire, but it takes away one of the 
most important roles of the critic; that of evaluating new music and presenting those 
views to an interested public.

This is another area where rock music criticism has taken the lead by placing 
greater value and importance on new music. Elvis Presley is part of the pop music 
‘canon,’ but does not receive equal time compared to new music releases in the music 
press. This keeps rock alive and perpetually interesting to new generations. If the 
majority of rock recordings and performances were ‘oldies,’ the audience would be much 
smaller than it currently is.

Postmodernism’s tendency to look at music as a purely social construct (its social 
function influencing or determining its content) looks stronger when the relative 
commercial misfortunes of art music are seen in a cultural context. The concepts and 
definitions of art have changed. Classical music criticism ignored these changes and has 
become marginalized. Rock music criticism embraced the change and continues to 
flourish.
The “Customer Review”

How am I lookin’ I don’t want the truth
What am I doin’ I ain't in my youth
I'm past my prime Or was that just a pose
It a wonderful lie And I still get by on those

The Customer Review is quite probably the most postmodern item of criticism we see today. Analyzing these reviews is not necessary. The simple fact of their existence is postmodern enough, but it is a classic postmodern irony that listeners who hold the ‘old’ (non-postmodern) viewpoints of Group 1 are perfectly happy to use the ultra-postmodern Customer Review to air their views.

The Customer Review encompasses all three of the groupings discussed in this thesis. Group 1 is represented by the very existence of the Customer Review itself. Under the Grand Paradigm we would still need critics (professional listeners) to guide us in forming our value judgments about the music we encounter in the incredibly cluttered consumer marketplace. With the supremacy of critical judgment challenged and refuted by postmodernism we have no need for critics. Now, more than ever before, ‘everyone is a critic.’ We can share our opinions with credibility equal to the critics of yesteryear because opinion is all we have. Without the Grand Paradigm, absolute truth is no longer valid so all thought becomes subjective. If no one can be right, then no one can be wrong.

Group 2 is also present in the Customer Review. Both the technology used to deliver music and the technology that makes the Customer Review so ubiquitous are implicated in Group 2 ideas. Without the internet, this form of criticism could not exist. In a print media format the ‘customers’ would be subject to editing and space

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considerations. Not all entries would be published, not all points of view considered
equal by editors. Postmodern criticism could not see its full flowering without the
internet. This forum also promotes a niche market concept of social groupings.
Consumers do not need to find individuals of similar musical taste to interact with. They
can go online and enter into any chosen ‘community.’ Rather than reaching a broad
audience and influencing new listeners, the Customer Review serves only those already
initiated into the group.

A less obvious postmodern change lies in how we attribute meaning to the music
we hear. The artificial social media constructs of Group 2 prevent the use of a universal
concept of musical meaning. The art for art’s sake argument of the modernist period no
longer functions. Art as a separated, disinterested object cannot happen in online
reviews. Without a critical metric, the meaning of a piece of music is whatever any given
listener decides it means. A sampling of user reviews confirms this. Phrases such as, “I
know this piece is supposed to be about,…” and, “What I get from this piece is…” are
common currency in user reviews of classical music found on sites like Amazon.com and
classicalmusic.com. In true postmodern fashion, the meaning resides in the listener.

Print media is struggling to maintain its place in people’s lives. To stay
financially solvent many smaller newspapers have drastically cut back in the area of arts
criticism and reporting. With the explosion of music-related web sites that allow users to
write their own reviews, the status of the professional music critic is greatly undermined.
If anyone can write a review and can possess the critical authority that was discussed in
Chapter 1, what need do we have for critics?
John Rockwell has stated, “[p]eople in this country are desperately unsure of their capacity for esthetic judgment. They are fearful of looking ridiculous if some “authority” proclaims them wrong.”9 The widespread popularity of the customer review lets us know this is no longer the case. Before postmodernism, there was recognition of the need for a professional opinion. As John Winsor puts it, “very few would accuse a heart surgeon of being elitist for knowing something they didn’t. They wouldn’t offer suggestions about how to perform a triple bypass (“Say, Doc, Why don’t you come in through the hip so the scar doesn’t show on my chest”).”10 With the advent of the customer review this is, in effect, exactly what we have done. What we once needed critics for, we now give ourselves the power to accomplish.

Much art music criticism has specialized itself into musicology. Musicology offers the critically minded academic a greater share of glamour (writing books will always trump a column in a local newspaper) along with opportunities to survive in the ‘publish or perish’ environment of the university system. The combination of the lack of opportunity in the popular press and the drift into deeper areas of musicology (aesthetics, philosophy, etc.) has, in effect, delegated the task of daily music criticism (reviewing recordings, performances, etc.) to the general public and to ask for this precious commodity to be returned is not possible.

The technological, commodified world we now live in has utterly changed the playing field for music criticism and the Customer Review is the shining example of that

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change. As Terry Eagleton says, “[i]f art no longer reflects, it is not because it seeks to change the world rather than mimic it, but because there is in truth, nothing there to be reflected, no reality which is not itself already image, spectacle, simulacrum, gratuitous fiction.”¹¹ Without a singular focal point of reference (the Grand Paradigm), one opinion really is as good as any other. “In a society where information now mattered more than production, there is no longer an artistic avant-garde, since there is no enemy to conquer, in the global electronic network.”¹²

Classical music criticism has remained steadfastly in the scientific mode (analysis) or the descriptive mode (fuelliton) and neither leaves room for exploration of the deeper issues at the core of postmodernism. Comparisons and frames of reference remain archaic and relevance to the wider reading public remains practically nil. In this vacuum, the Customer Review will continue to be the dominant form of music criticism.

¹¹ Terry Eagleton, “The Aesthetics of Postmodernism”, in Postmodernism; A Reader, ed. Patricia Waugh (London: Edward Arnold, 1992), 152

Conclusion

Now here comes Blind Luck he’s calling your name
He’s got a new set of rules to a brand new game
He’s gonna make an offer that you can’t refuse
He’s got a way of knowing who’s got something to lose

Looking at the information presented in this thesis, it becomes clear that drawing an iron-clad set of conclusions is all but impossible. Postmodernism has been described by author Herbert London as a “version of Kozinski’s “Being There” in which everyone takes a fool so seriously he cannot be described for what he is.” The very fact that we are dealing with the nebulous concept of postmodernism will prevent easy analysis.

Author Linda Nicholson explains it this way,

The underlying thread ... is that postmodernism must reject a description of itself as embodying a set of timeless ideals contrary to those of modernism; it must insist on being recognized as a set of viewpoints of a time, justifiable only within its own time.

From Nicholson’s perspective, postmodernism is not really a philosophy at all. Philosophies of the past have given followers a plan, a blueprint with which to structure their lives. The economic philosophies of Adam Smith and John Maynard Keynes are a case in point. These Enlightenment era philosophies are still in use, or are still part of the debate over economic policy today. Postmodernism is less a blueprint for the future than a basic description of how people have reacted to the commodification, massification, and the almost unbearable onslaught of information that comes our way every day.


Postmodernism does not provide a plan or a method used to move forward, it only tells us what we have already done and to a lesser extent, why. Seen from this perspective, postmodernism is largely unintentional, making music criticism the perfect place to see it in action.

With this idea in mind we can look at the progression of thought presented in this thesis. In the 1960s there was a fairly high level of acceptance of postmodern issues. These ideas were new and the ramifications may not have been seen clearly. It seems that critics of all categories were looking into them with a somewhat open mind.

By the mid 1970s, music critics were seeing the erosion of the classical music audience and one of the factors in this erosion was the change in the concept of art explored in Group 1. Musical modernism was peaking but still dominant in the top positions in major universities. This coincided with the recognition of postmodernism as a set of concepts and a recognized term which Francois Lyotard’s 1979 book, The *Postmodern Condition* had given a name. In music criticism, a backlash against some of the previous decade’s new ideas was building.

The 1980s brought about a very real hostility in the critical community toward many of the ideas in Jonathan Kramer’s 16 points. Minimalism was beginning to be a commercial success, and other postmodern ideas that challenged the status quo were being proposed. The guardians of the high/low divide were getting nervous.

The consistent decline in audiences that gave critics a case of nervous jitters continued through the 1990s. The critical mood was generally negative towards postmodern ideas in music. In spite of this attitude from critics, new technologies
continued to arrive, compounding the problem. By the end of the decade classical CD sales were slumping, concert attendance continued to dwindle, and the ‘graying’ of the audience was very noticeable. But it was also during the 1990s that some critics began to seriously explore the ideas of postmodern music outside the limited realm of minimalism. And yet, the concert experience continued to be marketed as a high brow, black tie affair.

The first decade of the 21st century has been more of a mixed bag where postmodernism is concerned. There are still two definite schools of thought on postmodern issues to be sure, but the balance seems to be swinging back in favor of the postmodern after two decades of hostility. Since the early 1990s, there has been an explosion of writing on the subjects explored in this thesis, so examples from this era are both clearer and more plentiful. It is less certain if there has been an equivalent explosion in reading and understanding. After all, much of what is written about postmodernism demonstrates that we don’t understand it very well. We’re still having virtually the same debates as were being conducted 40 years ago over the core postmodern tenets.

Critics shape public perception and frame public discourse and classical music critics failed to make their case for special status. In fact, it went down without so much as a whimper. There are a number of recently published books trying to correct this mistake but it is too late. These books make strong, if sometimes flawed, arguments to make the case for classical music’s special status, but the question in 2014 is who is reading them? Let’s look at some statistics for a few of the more prominent titles:

  Amazon ranking, #965,726
  (the only postmodern author and the best seller of the group)
The Amazon rankings are not complete and definitive sales figures, but they give a pretty clear picture of where the serious discourse on classical music stands in the eyes of the public. These rankings fall well below the levels of most textbooks (Calculus by Ron Larson. Amazon ranking #9,489) not to mention other books dealing with popular music (History of The Blues by Francis Davis. Amazon ranking #134,136).

My own book (Electric Guitar Construction) falls between Larry Kramer and Joshua Fineberg in it’s ranking (#1,043,481). My book sells between 100 and 200 copies per year. With numbers like this equivalent to the two best selling books pleading for art-music it is difficult to imagine that these books are going to shape the public discourse in any significant way. It is likely that university music libraries are the primary customers for these titles making it a classic case of ‘preaching to the choir.’

Clearly the power and effect of music criticism has not been front and center in the minds of those most directly affected by it, music students, musicians, and music educators for decades.

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Most paradigm shifts in music have come in part from the rebellion of youthful composers frustrated with the tools history had provided them. They did away with the old and brought in new ideas but postmodernism in music is not about rebellion. Postmodernism is about coping with the pace of change so assimilation becomes the dominant characteristic. The postmodern composer sees no need to tear down or to re-make the old system. Under postmodernism the systems based on teleological principles of linear progress become redundant and irrelevant. This continues to pose real difficulties for critics.

The expectation that a single, new paradigm would emerge to replace tonality…, was based in a crucial concern: an urgent, if yet still vague, sense that, without a way of going on, without a “grand narrative”, without an over-arching structure that somehow unifies and organizes the production of art through time, how could anyone determine quality? How could people know that artists and composers and their works were good, legitimate, artistic? \(^5\)

Much of the recent writing defending the status quo in music focuses on correcting this issue, trying to get us ‘back to normal’ as it were, but they fail to take the mediation of new technologies into proper account. The acceleration of the paradigm cycle may be due to the acceleration of the availability of the materials both for listening and study. How long would Haydn and Mozart’s Classicism have lasted if it could have spread and covered the known world in a matter of weeks, and with a general public ready and willing to render opinion there to receive it?

Author Michael Chanan looks at the problems we face by ignoring the way technology has changed the way we interact with music.

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In all this, the public discourse of music remains trapped in old and outmoded pre-technological habits of listening, in which different music’s were kept apart because they generally belonged to different kinds of space, both social and physical, and now remain so because they have become the product of an intense division of labour between musical specialisms. [...] Paradoxically, therefore, the same divisions are maintained and even refined by radio programming schedules and station specialization, even though this is no longer the way music is heard.  

Recorded music is partially responsible for many of the postmodern changes discussed in this thesis. Kramer’s statement that technology is deeply implicated in both the production and essence of music is what Michael Chanan is addressing in this quote. Records, CDs, and now digital storage of music are used to preserve and archive music but records became something much more enmeshed, going far beyond preservation or cost saving means for radio broadcasting. The record (music as a commercial, physical product) changed the most fundamental aspect in the world of music; how and when we listen.

In popular music, the recording is the ultimate goal of the process more than the performance itself. Enormous amounts of care, time, and resources are spent making recordings something highly unique in and of themselves, something where the technology becomes part of the essence of the music, and which sets them apart from live performance.

Art music does this as well, though it can be more subtle. Editing, microphones, and other studio effects create ‘better than live’ recorded products. The goal is admirable, the technology makes it possible, but the final result does not function in the same way as a concert. The technology is part of the essence of the music we hear. With

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these kinds of recording processes, Group 2 is in action every time we listen to a recording. Records really did change everything.

The process began with the invention of recording. The record did not only become the focus of the music industry; it also had the most profound effects on the whole musical lifeworld by disturbing the age-old dialogue of musical communication: by separating performance from audition, removing the performer from the presence of the listener, robbing the listener of participation in the act of performance, depriving the performer of the listener’s response; in a word by bringing about – together with radio – the disembodiment of music.⁷

One of the primary problems in modern music criticism is the failure to recognize that readers hold many of the core postmodern beliefs presented in this thesis. The Group 1 concept that all music is art music is one of the most prevalent. The point of comparison is no longer just the 500± years of the western classical tradition, it is now ALL other music, theater, video games, etc. Readers need to know why Schubert is better than Tom Petty. This is the new reality for the art-music critic.

Criticism that ignores or overlooks this Group 1 concept becomes irrelevant to the majority of its audience and ceases to perform one of its primary functions; that of helping the reader make value judgments. By not speaking directly into the postmodern thought-life of his reader, the critic gives up his moral and spiritual authority to ‘lead.’ He is left with analysis and description as his primary tools and while he may be highly skilled with them they remain hollow to his readers. Musicologist Hans Keller frames the argument this way,

Now, the fundamental question is that of the ethics of both criticism and analysis; by not asking it, we have, throughout the history of the respective disciplines,

⁷ Ibid., 274.
almost psychotically denied the possibility that they could do harm to the very art which they are intended to serve. \(^8\)

In spite of much greater awareness, the issues of Group 1 are far from settled.

One school of Postmodern thought postulates that we no longer (or never did) have the freedom to make unmediated or ‘uncaused’ choices. As absurd as this sounds where artistic endeavors are concerned, there is a lot of truth in it. The pressure of a commercial, technologically mediated life and the lack of a cogent teleology to order that life has led to the current schizophrenia. We have no paradigm for the present and none for the future, and since there isn’t one to replace, creatively, we have no direction. The freedom of all the past generations (the freedom to move forward) has been lost. Of course we can deny that this is the case by simply rejecting postmodernism, but this does not change the conditions on the ground.

How is this the fault of critics? Aren’t the postmodern ideas from all three groups in this thesis an unstoppable freight train of some sort of progress? The answer, in true postmodern fashion, is yes and no. The fact that things change is a given, how they change depends in part on the efforts of those in positions of influence at the time of the change.

Take the concept of musical progress commonly held at the end of the 1950s; i.e. that music’s trajectory from chant to serialism was inevitable and predictable all along its course. That music could only progress from chant to serialism was a given. The only question was how long it might take. We know now that serialism was not the end and has not even turned out to be a particularly hardy species for the eclectic styles of the

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\(^8\) Hans Keller, “Epilogue/Prologue: Criticism and Analysis”, *Music Analysis*, 1, No. 1, (Mar., 1982), 10
present day, but fifty years ago the prevailing philosophy from those in positions of influence provided no other options.

The time period covered by this thesis (roughly 1967 to 2010) can be seen in the same way. What looks, in retrospect like an inevitable process of change might have been altered if the persons in positions of influence (art-music critics) had taken up the challenge. An interesting and vigorous ‘war of words” along the lines of the Brahms/Wagner battle of the Romantic Era might have been in order, but was mostly left fallow.

A case in point is minimalism. This is an example of a moment where critics ‘made the case.’ With this music they were able to explain themselves in terms that non-conservatory trained music lovers could relate to. They showed clearly how this new aesthetic concept could be a part of their listening life and how it fit with their existing music choices. As a result minimalism became the first art music since the Romantic era to be financially self-sufficient.

The problem with this particular scenario is that it was not classical music critics who made the case for minimalism, it was rock music critics. The classical establishment, entrenched in the culmination of modernism in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, was openly hostile to minimalism and did not warm to it until it began to prove itself as a concert draw. Rock groups like Pink Floyd and Kraftwerk were already busy adding minimalist elements to their work in 1968-69, almost a decade before acceptance was seen in the elite classical music establishment.
If music critics had maintained the platform they once had, they may have made a difference. But by ignoring the dominance of postmodern thought in their readers, they abdicated their position. When we begin to see postmodern ideas from writers such as Alex Ross or Kyle Gann, the truth is that it is too little too late. Critics cannot write ‘for the group’ anymore because the group no longer exists or has been split by technology into dozens and dozens of micro groups. The milk was spilled long ago. Critic and educator, Greg Sandow sums it up this way,

I’m saying that our culture has changed, that classical music hasn’t kept up, that this is why there’s a classical music crisis, and that the only solution to the crisis is to set classical music free, and let it take its place in our current culture as a fully contemporary art. Which doesn’t mean we won’t be playing Beethoven, any more than we’ve stopped reading Tolstoy. 

If postmodernism is over and done with as some philosophers now suggest, what then? The party is over and we missed it. Maybe having utterly ignored the postmodern realities in classical music criticism isn’t so bad after all. We’ll catch the next big thing and promise to pay closer attention in the future. Unfortunately, certain aspects of postmodern thought will vastly outlive the larger agenda and one of those appears to be the overall ‘redefinition’ of art (and music) and this, as we have seen in these pages, critics have barely begun to address.

The final outcome of this thesis is to say that there is no specific thing called postmodernism in music and, quite possibly, nothing of a postmodern philosophy at all. What our culture currently describes as postmodern (loss of paradigm, changes in how we perceive time, technological mediation, etc.) is actually a large set of ‘coping tools.’

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They are ways that we have developed to cope with changing technology and the commercial, mediated nature of modern life. Christopher Norris offers the following explanation. “Theory can never do more than offer a post-hoc rationalization of beliefs that must always already be in place if its rhetoric is to carry conviction with us or other members of our interpretive community.” 10 These “rationalized beliefs” are already in place with the majority of the population. But they are sub-conscious beliefs, they function at the automatic level. What is lacking is a ‘front-brain’ awareness to make postmodernism a more concrete and definable thing.

Our world is not what it used to be. Technology has changed everything. This is nothing new, but what is new is the dramatic acceleration of the pace of change. As historian Ted Gioia puts it, “There is no High Road on the postmodern map, just a myriad of intersecting and diverging paths.” 11 It may be time for a re-make of Charlie Chaplin’s Modern Times.

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Appendix: Index of Additional Readings


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