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# CAN THERE BE “MUSIC FOR PEACE”?

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What if the only thing those who offer “music for peace” really do is present a performance just like thousands of others—except for a few platitudes in the name of peace and a self-congratulatory reception at the end? Artworks cannot *just* “demonstrate” for peace, they must resist subversive ideologies centered in commodification and power. If music merely makes a plea for “reconciliation,” what is reconciled is just that particular piece of music with *exactly* the ideology justifying the radically commodified culture of the music’s emergence. This outcome can be mitigated if music can subvert ideology, an undertaking requiring considerable subtlety and aesthetic insight.

How it is that music might be actively and fruitfully engaged in the pursuit of peace?<sup>1</sup>

This question, as important as it might be, assumes a far more difficult and vexing question: *Can* music be used in the interests of peace? Many feel that the attempt to use music to promote peace is a productive activity. They have organized concerts and lecture/performances by the dozens in that effort. What would it mean if all they have really done is offered a concert or broadcast or recital just like thousands of others—except for the addition of a few platitudes in the name of peace and a self-congratulatory reception at the end? The answer to these very difficult questions must take into consideration several developments that have problematized the

relationship of music and the other arts to the world. Most of these developments took place in the twentieth century. But the question of how music or any other art can connect to worldly phenomena is a very old one.

Let's open with a couple of quotes:

W. H. Auden wrote, “I know that all the verse I wrote, all the positions I took in the thirties, did not save a single Jew...the political history of the world would have been the same if not a poem had been written, nor a picture painted, nor a bar of music composed.”

Arthur Danto, the pre-eminent American philosopher of art asks: “Did jazz in any sense cause, or only emblemize, the moral transformations of the Jazz Age? Did the Beatles cause, or only prefigure, the political perturbations of the sixties...?”<sup>2</sup>

These testaments argue that art is useless as a force for real change. If we accept them as true, then why do some continue to insist that music

(or other arts) could have such power? These people would answer: “Because of a lingering doubt—a doubt that has led to profound reassessments of the power of art and music as engines of socio/political criticism—even change.”

This doubt, this question as to the importance and power of art has been argued for thousands of years.

Arthur Danto points out that the philosophical disenfranchisement of art has been a systematic and consistent theme of the Western philosophical tradition since Plato's *Republic*.

Danto shows that Plato's move is an effort to disenfranchise art as a viable alternative to philosophy in the “struggle for domination over the minds of men.”<sup>3</sup> Plato wants to have true knowledge, *and* to disenfranchise any other activity that may be seen to compete in that search for the truth. The reason for this struggle is that, for Plato, true knowledge is *rational*. It leads to *knowledge* of the good, the moral, the just. Plato wanted to attain, with certainty, knowledge about how humans should live. Art and music, because they are “sensuous,” “intuitive,” and “non-rational” cannot take part in that certainty, and may even inhibit attempts to reach it.

Danto goes on to argue that various philosophies of art have, through the centuries, effectively carried out Plato’s original effort by marginalizing art—often by arguing that art is not really connected to the causal order of the world. He enumerates well-known features of several of these views, in which art is described variously as ‘disinterested pleasure,’ ‘purposeless,’ operating at an “aesthetic distance.”<sup>4</sup>

Ultimately then, despite the urgency of Plato’s arguments, it seems art has no power in the world; the “Philosophy of Art” effectively neutralized art as a source of knowledge and of change. But if art, if music, has no effect on the world, why is it that religions, states, political parties, special interest groups, and commercial enterprises of every kind have all sought, at one level or another, to control and prescribe (and even *proscribe*) the activities of composers and artists?

The very fact that such efforts exist in profusion undermines the argument that art has no power.

We see, then, that we are dealing with the same problem today that has been chaffing at people fascinated by art since Plato’s time. But though the questions are similar, our world is radically different from Plato’s. The relationship of music to the world has become far more complex.

One of the most useful points of entry into this problem comes out of the work of Theodor Adorno. Adorno was a member of the “Frankfurt School,” a group of critical thinkers who saw the cataclysms of the first half of the twentieth century as the result of what was, supposedly, our *best* thinking. “Enlightenment thinking” becomes for them the attempt to “rationalize” the world—an ironically irrational belief that it was possible to reduce everything to rational discourse or formulae. Further, Adorno and others thought it was art that most powerfully proclaimed the *failure* of that “rationalizing” enterprise through its imperviousness to total reduction to rational categories.

The question is not just how music and art function, but how they stand in relation to underlying contradictions in society: whether they confront

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them, overcome them, leave them as they are or hide them.<sup>5</sup> In order for it to be possible for us to come to grips with music and art’s profound, but mute insights, we must somehow become able to articulate the inarticulable. The insights that music and the arts present to us are not delivered with the (apparent) transparency of discourse, but rather by means of sensuous, abstract elements, elements that defy direct articulation in language. For Adorno, therefore, philosophy paradoxically becomes the handmaiden of the arts—endeavoring, not to tell art or music what it ought or ought not be, but to try to help decipher what they, in their inarticulate “wisdom” have to offer us.

Thus, artworks cannot *just* ardently “demonstrate” for peace, but must also resist the subversive force of contemporary ideologies centered in commodification, control, and power. This can only be done through

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the negation of social phenomena infected by these ideologies (as all, to one degree or another, are). And, a significant part of this must be done by music which emerges out of that milieu, out of, that is, the immediacy of the particular, contemporary, rearticulation of those ideologies. The problem is, if an artwork merely makes a plea for “reconciliation,” what would be reconciled is just that

particular piece of art or music with *exactly* the ideology constructed by the radically commodified culture out of which it emerges. This difficulty is avoided when certain contemporaneous works of art strive to negate the forces of ideology—and, ideology endlessly works to cover its tracks by, first, appropriating efforts at reconciliation, next, by rearticulating them in terms of its own premises, and finally, by using them for the furtherance of its own projects. As Frank Lentricchia has pointed out, “Early capitalism produces alienation—late capitalism appropriates it.”<sup>6</sup>

Further, the “truth” or “truth content” of artworks cannot be, as has been intimated, communicated directly in any way whatsoever. Artworks are products of their own socio/cultural contexts, contexts which are themselves the product of their historical location. Thus artworks have internalized, not

only artists’ internalizations and intentions related to that context, but also the very historical conditions out of which these artworks have arisen. The combination of an artist’s intentions and those historical conditions, working against the resistance of the materials with which he or she manipulates, produces the spirit which arises out of the artwork itself.

Clearly, some “artworks” are fully committed to the world of production and consumption. One need look no further than any Thomas Kinkaid gallery in the local shopping mall to see commercialism of this kind carried out to its most cynical extreme. What he does in the name of art is nothing more than the reproduction of virtual carbon copies for the sake of making money. It is the crassest form of commercialism. Because he names it “art,” many naïve individuals come to believe—must believe because of the outrageous prices they are paying—that they are actually purchasing art, instead of expensive wall paper. The “artist of light” is not a purveyor of “beauty,” but a merchant of darkness.

There are two problems for anyone who wishes to employ art as socio/cultural criticism or as a means of engendering positive social consequences. First, any such *use* can be seen as a denigration of art *as* art. The second problem would be how to avoid getting caught up in, and tainted by, the very system one is criticizing. The following is one example of complications that accompany attempts at social criticism through art. The example used below may itself be questioned as actually being a valid example of art. This is therefore a representative of *both* problems just mentioned.

Rap music<sup>7</sup> has a message and that message gets delivered, but there are problems along the way. What happens, for example, when rappers make a lot of money? They have cars, expensive homes, they travel, have expensive clothes—in important ways they are no longer part of the marginalized group they used to represent. Some rappers are still largely subject

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to distributors and producers. They could lose their money and benefits if they didn't “play ball” with those who enable access to the masses.

But now, due to technological advances in recording and the availability of the web, rappers have the potential to produce their own CDs and develop their own distribution networks. However, that doesn't alleviate the problem—it only compounds it—because the singer or group *becomes* the very thing they are criticizing. They become enfranchised in the very system they attack. They still may do social criticism, but there is strong pressure to do social criticism that *sells*, that is, they may be tempted to (radically, as is often the case) emphasize, de-emphasize or misrepresent certain social facts or issues in order to increase sales.

But when it comes to criticism of commercialism, we're all implicated; we're all both beneficiaries *and* victims of it. In fact, as we have just seen in the case of the rapper, one has to take part in the system in some manner

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even to launch a criticism of it. So our problem remains yet unanswered. How to criticize without capitulating to the very system one is criticizing. Using popular music is particularly dangerous, in that audiences might confuse ironic usage as being actually

affirmative. Kurt Weill's music, for example, used the popular idioms ironically, but the product was so engaging that its irony was lost on many.

Criticism like Weill's not only attempts to turn the tables on society, but ironically relies on the decadent quality of the music itself to do it. The very vehicle that enabled the criticisms Weill leveled at social injustice—his ironic use of popular idioms in the music he composed—was often a reflexive indictment of the artistic *fruits* of those injustices. The composer denies himself the positive solution and permits social flaws to manifest themselves by means of a flawed musical presence which defines itself as wholly false—ironic, false, sarcastic. The music of Weill undermines its previous function and reveals, surrealistically, its own—and society's—falsity.<sup>8</sup>

Let us take a moment to consider more carefully two closely related issues alluded to thus far: the inexorable tendency of time to overwhelm the critical content of any art or music, and the inexorable tendency of socio/cultural forces to draw marginal critiques toward the center.

The first is the question of the appropriateness of music and art of the *past* in the articulation of problems of the *present*. Most of us would argue that the music and art of the past speaks to us with unparalleled richness, elegance, and power. But Adorno’s arguments make clear that the intensity of the critique of the culture out of which particular works of music and art emerge, fades as that culture metamorphosizes itself away from the point of that emergence. That is, as time passes, the context that energized a particular music’s (or art’s) critique, falls away, and the works are assimilated. Clearly, the rage of abstract art against “representation-ism” (and the rage of viewers against that art) has lost its force when you see, say, Jackson Pollack works hanging in lawyers’ offices. Similarly, no matter how powerful Beethoven’s most dramatic music is, it simply lacks the “language” to articulate the horrors of 9/11 or Hiroshima. As painful as the radical dissonance of “modern” music is (for example, in Krzysztof Penderecki’s *Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima*), there is no question that it articulates those terrors more forcefully than the music of Beethoven ever could. This is because the musical and artistic “languages, or form/contents” of Penderecki’s music are themselves products of the same historical forces that brought about the nuclear age.<sup>9</sup> Yet, the music of the past still has great power to move us. We must, however, maintain awareness of its limitations with regard to contemporary insight. We must not be lulled into complacency by music that is tonally organized, that is linear, directional, and maintains a teleological trajectory toward the *resolution* of conflict. We must recognize that the satisfying full cadence has now itself become ideology.

Second, as our example of rap clearly shows, the center draws marginal critiques toward it, rearticulates them into the language of the center and, thus eviscerated, sets those critiques “free.”

The problems and entanglements surrounding the use of music in the interests of peace are therefore considerable. Such problems will not be solved by naïve employment of the wrong music in the wrong place at the wrong time. The words of Umberto Eco are strikingly appropriate here, because they offer insight into the possibility of the use of all genres of music, including the classical, without the overweening necessity for novelty demanded by radical modernism.

In this first quote Eco speaks of the nature of writing—of what it

means to write for commercial success or to write works of social and even spiritual value:

There is a difference between a writer who seeks to *produce a new reader*, and the writer who tries to fulfill the wishes of readers who are already to be found on the street. The latter will produce work constructed according to an effective, mass production formula—the artist carries out a kind of market analysis and adapts his work to its results. But the artist who wants to do something new cannot be a cataloguer of expressed demands, but rather a seer-philosopher—who senses the patterns that intersect the soul of his time.<sup>10</sup>

Eco’s idea of “producing a new reader” is different from the idea of a “music for the future.” We need composers and other artists who produce work for the present—for right

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now.<sup>11</sup> This means producing work that not only somehow encourages the continued pursuit of peace, but helps to create a musical space that can function as the womb for the rebirth of a new humanity out of the humanity that *now* exists—not that *will* exist in some ideal future. But, as we have seen, this is a much more difficult problem than it seems at first. Sheer novelty and/or dissonance have proven complicated because of their distance from the lived experience of most of those the composer

is trying to reach. And, simply playing the “old songs” (genres, tonalities, forms, themes) again cannot be—has not been—enough. But there may be a way to “say it again.”

But how? Well, we’ve just talked about Kurt Weill—who picks up the “used” materials of culture: the folk, popular, vernacular sources—the already said—words and musical forms and idioms that resonate clearly out of his own milieu—the very marrow of popular culture. How can this



result in originality? We’ve provided a few theoretical insights, but let’s use a concrete example, one offered by Eco. He shows how the use of the vernacular can lead us to important truths.

Suppose a man loves a woman who, like him, knows the popular icons of her time very well. He knows he cannot say “I love you madly.” Because he knows that she knows (and that she knows that he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland, the well-known Romance novelist. Yet there is a solution. He can say, “As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly.” At this point, having avoided false innocence—having said clearly that

it is no longer possible to speak innocently—he will nevertheless have said what he wanted to say to the woman: that he loves her, but he loves her in an age of lost innocence. If the woman goes along with this, she will have received a declaration of love all the same. Both will have accepted the challenge of the past, of the already said—which cannot be eliminated; both will consciously and with pleasure play the game of irony. Both will have succeeded, once again, in speaking of love.<sup>12</sup>

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Eco’s idea has beauty, symmetry and speaks to a “present.” It brings us to a connection that can only emerge out of human love; that must be at the core of any attempt to promote peace. But even this is not enough. It cannot be a music that, through its sweet sounds “soothes the troubled brow” (and perhaps assuages the troubled conscience); it must be music that evokes both the *present* horror and the hope of humanity. It must reveal to us the real possibility of human relationships able to stand “above identity and above contradiction...a togetherness of diversity.”<sup>13</sup>

Karl Marx once made a statement about philosophy and the world. I paraphrase as follows: “Philosophers have tried to explain the world, but the point is to change it.” Robert Rauschenberg, best known as a “pop art” painter, has rebutted this statement with the following: “It’s not about

changing the world, but living in it.” The point here is that railing against the prevailing socio/cultural situation, or developing massive theoretical analyses designed to provide the foundational wherewithal to buttress attempts at radical change, cannot be the most viable, most efficacious means of encouraging change. The reason for this is the usual tendency for socio/cultural milieu of the moment to view those radical statements and actions as being from the “outside.” Rather, Rauschenberg points to the idea of living *in* the world, being part of its fabric—and being committed to its betterment, rather than to its rearticulation into ever more labyrinthine hierarchies of control and domination—as the most useful means of social change.

For this purpose we can employ both the great music of the past, which has enriched the present of current listeners, and the music of the present, which emerges from the soil, the *soul* of our own time. But the preceding discussion makes it abundantly clear that this is a much more complicated matter than merely offering concerts brimming with good will. Art and music (*pace* Plato and other philosophers who think differently), have, potentially, powerful effects upon the world. But all forms of cultural criticism are, as we have seen, constantly in danger of being co-opted by the enormous power our economic and social systems exert. More than that, music that is perceived as being the most innocent, uncomplicated and uncontroversial is, by dint of that very perception, incapable of raising more than a vague sense of personal tranquility.

The arts and music, both as integral parts of these systems and as phenomena exhibiting, in certain cases, a degree of autonomy, must also evolve. Developing a sophisticated grasp of at least some of these transformations enables us to engage music of the past and of the present in a dialectic that encourages both socio/cultural criticism and a certain sense of solidarity as, together, we face unending change. As recent years have demonstrated, much of that change is profoundly disturbing. We need, therefore, to think hard about what we program and how those performances, recordings, and videos are produced and, most importantly, how their relationship to our burgeoning consumer culture is articulated and realized. And this means, ultimately, truly learning how to live in this very world—a world that shows little mercy and less regard for innocence and naïveté.

Music *can*, indeed, be a force for positive change—an “instrument”

of peace. But if we are to be successful in this effort, we must have a fairly sophisticated understanding of some of the most insidious mediating forces that can hinder our efforts. Most important, we must realize that these forces are far more dangerous than being mere hindrances. They work subversively to infect the very messages we hope to present, turning them into parodic negations of themselves. Marcello’s last line in *La Bohème* is best suited to be the last word of this humble contribution to such an important effort: *Coraggio!*

## NOTES

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1. A more extended version of this discussion was delivered at a conference on the idea of “Music for Peace” at Towson University in Baltimore, Maryland.

2. Arthur C. Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1986. This and the above quote are in *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (hereafter PDA) pp. 2-3.

3. PDA, p. 6

4. PDA, pp. 9-16

5. Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor Adorno*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1978, p. 110.

6. Frank Lentricchia, *Criticism and Social Change*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, p.

7. This phrase, of course, may be seen by some as a contradiction in terms.

8. Theodor Adorno, “On the Social Situation of Music.” *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert, Berkeley: U. of California Press, 2002, pp. 408-410.

9. This is crudely put. The arguments that support this statement are book length—not appropriate to this particular venue.

10. Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose* trans. William Weaver, New York: Harvest Books, 1983, p. 523, emphasis mine.

11. This idea comes from composer Thomas Hennig, in a symposium on Stockhausen entitled: “Stockhausen: A Response, Music in a Time of Tragedy.” This symposium was conceived, organized, produced and moderated by the author of this paper, Thomas Hennig, and Dr. Eva Mengelkoch on May 8, 2002, at Towson University in Baltimore, Maryland, U.S.A.

12. Eco, *The Name of the Rose* 530-531.

13. Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Aston, New York: Continuum, 1973, p. 150.

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