

## **Relational Aesthetics and the Western Canon of Increasingly Historical Works**

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The construction of a musical canon of works is not consigned to history: the academic and popular view of the music of the twentieth century most often tends towards a canonical explanation. I will examine the construction of such canons, and their relation to a concept of musical material, and compare them with readings of constructions of the present in the musical works of Johannes Kreidler and David Helbich. This analysis will draw on semiotic and poststructuralist readings of the music in question, the relational aesthetic approach of Nicholas Bourriaud, and the Marxist criticism of Terry Eagleton. This will show that the construction of musical canons, particularly with recourse to music written after 1950, is predicated upon a writing of history which originates in the nineteenth century and is reliant on a modernist approach which Kreidler and Helbich both demonstrate to be untenable in their work. In particular this gives rise to a reading of the musical present which is not subject to the criticism of postmodern pluralism and offers an approach to the discussion of music in the present which is not reliant on linear development in the music of the past.

This investigation is concerned with the theme of narrative storytelling. After all, all canons are stories which can be used to try to understand a series of events. But this is not all that canons are: canons also contain implicit assumptions about that which they describe and, significantly, about that which they leave out. Most importantly, they are never neutral. When reading canons there are also similarities to be drawn between what might be seen at first as very different stories: for example those which explain musical development and those which describe the function of society. My analytical method in this article draws on elements of Nicholas Bourriaud's relational aesthetics<sup>1</sup>. Bourriaud's work considers that existing aesthetic theory is not sufficiently adequate to deal with contemporary artworks. Instead he finds that 'human exchange is aesthetic in and of itself.'<sup>2</sup> More broadly, this means that in his construction aesthetic theory should come from artworks rather than simply be applied to them. Thus, his work supports the notion that artwork are themselves examples of discourse, and it can be said that claims which are made by artworks, and as a result of the analysis of their discourses, are relational aesthetic claims. Eagleton writes that 'every discourse is [...] inscribed in ideological relations, and will be internally moulded by their pressure,'<sup>3</sup> and that, 'ideology is a matter of "discourse" rather than of "language."<sup>4</sup> In considering canons themselves as discourses, and works of music as examples of such discourses, it is possible to examine the ideologies that are at work.

Despite much criticism of the idea of a canon of great, historical works, the construction of a musical canon of works is not consigned to history. Such a construction continues right up to today; this can be evidenced by concert programming of contemporary music which prefers certain pieces and composers. Repertoire itself is influenced by canon formation and its

performative nature since those works which are available and acceptable to perform are often selected as a result of their link with or perceived relationship to a musical canon. The idea that development in repertoire extends the possibilities of an instrument is linked to the modernist construction of the progress of material, outlined below, as documented by twentieth century canons. It is not possible that this has come about by accident. William Weber has outlined the intellectual origins of the musical canon in the eighteenth century, against which I can find no valuable argument, and in the twentieth century the formation of canon can be said to be no different to that argued for by Weber.<sup>5</sup> Most importantly, Weber describes this as a 'performed' canon; the performative nature of this canon ensures its continuation from the eighteenth, into the nineteenth century, and beyond.<sup>6</sup> This is important since it situates the 'writing' of the canon not as something done by scholars or critics but as a function of the way that music is disseminated. Thus the critique of a canon of great works, and of the existence of musical masters, might be said to equate only to lip service for those who accept the unchanging nature of this dissemination. A real acceptance of these ideas would surely dispute the authority of today's composers and the idea of genius or inspired works, which is maintained in some discourses about music. In fact, the perpetuation of lines of thinking, such as that 'Beethoven must have *earned* his place in history for a reason,' itself attaches a further significance to the number of repeated performances, and reinforces the false notion that musical 'quality' is the driving factor in the progress of works and writing of canon today. The historical roots of such thinking about art or society are criticised by Eagleton who notes that, 'before "interpretation" in its modern hermeneutical sense was brought to birth [in the nineteenth century], a whole apparatus of power in the field of culture was already firmly in place and had been for about a century.'<sup>7</sup> Subsequently the acceptance of the discourse of the western canon is evidence of an historical forgetfulness of the formation of the power structures which made its creation possible.

I believe that an argument can be made that in the twentieth century the formation and perpetuation of canon is essentially capitalist. This is to do with cultural as well as financial capital and can be seen, for example, in the repeated programming of 'big name' composers whose names will sell seats, but also in the idea that a knowledge or appreciation of the work of some composers is necessary to make a claim for the appreciation of music itself.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, while academically one might be critical of the notion of canon, many still believe in its performative creation, attributing even an aspirational status to it. The validity of the canon is an easy myth to accept, and many who accept it even criticise the popular music business for its capitalist nature whilst promoting and aspiring to the musical canon.

Perhaps the notion that the century began with a progressive musical action, embodied in the figure of Schoenberg, and supported by the writing of Adorno, requires that writers make sense of this in the idea of teleological progression.<sup>9</sup> The idea that some composer must eventually have conceived of twelve-tone music, and although Schoenberg is this composer the historical necessity of this innovation means that it might equally have been anyone else, is a captivating idea, and also one which helps to create and sustain the myth of the inevitable progression of 'material.' The discourse around material in more recent contemporary music is more often than not attributed to Adorno. However, although Adorno identifies material as an historical category<sup>10</sup> this is

not always perpetuated in the discourse of twentieth century canon formation. According to Simon Jarvis, Adorno's vision of material 'requires all the cunning philosophical artifice if it is not to be deformed, turned into a parody of itself, from the outset.'<sup>11</sup> Marcus Zagorski writes that the misconception that material is a non-historical, neutral conception would result in the view that, 'material is something natural and elevates it [...] to the status of pure being, instead of recognising that [it is] historically [...] determined.'<sup>12</sup> Zagorski also notes that for Adorno material is, 'something which contains a record of the previous interaction between subject and tradition,' and that a mistake of, for example, serialist composers, is that in their music, 'particular materials – that is, compositional techniques – were seen to be more legitimate because of their correspondence to the perceived state of history.'<sup>13</sup>

I shall consider this definition of material as I continue. Jarvis later writes that, for Adorno, 'the material specificity of the minute particulars uncovered by historical and philological enquiry rather than the highest, most general, and hence emptiest concepts, should be the starting point for philosophical interpretation,'<sup>14</sup> and so I shall also attempt to consider the same in the examples which I highlight, making particular reference to the materials employed by Kreidler and Helbich and their relationship to the western canon. I will also take into account Bourriaud's statement that a problem with a modernist rather than relational approach to art, which often leads to misconceptions surrounding contemporary works (such as those produced by Kreidler and Helbich), is that, 'too often, people are happy drawing up an inventory of yesterday's concerns, the better to lament the fact of not getting any answers.'<sup>15</sup>

As a final piece of theoretical evidence I will consider Lydia Goehr's description of the work-concept. In this she finds that the work-concept includes both 'the specific and the ideological.'<sup>16</sup> She writes that the ways in which music is spoken and written about, '[do] not motivate one to conclude that the work-concept is near to being neutral or ideologically free; quite the reverse.'<sup>17</sup> Finally, she explains how the work-concept is mistaken for being neutral, writing that, 'the 'pre-critical' description of musical works appears pre-critical only because it is so familiar [...]. But critically, the description has its roots in a peculiarly romantic conception of composition, performance, notation, and reception; a conception that was formed alongside the emergence of music as an autonomous form of art.'<sup>18</sup> This description could apply equally to the material which makes up musical works as the works themselves; an historical ideology with respect to material is reflected in an historical ideology with respect to the work as a whole. Goehr seems to agree with Weber that a conception of modernity and innovation which is claimed to reside in twentieth century canons is one which has its roots in much earlier ideology. This ideology, which originates in the nineteenth century, claims that all art must be progressive, and that all material must be involved in its progression towards a single, utilitarian, goal. Included in this myth, then, is the idea that someone might compose something by historical accident. This state of affairs is almost attributed to Schoenberg: the narrative of the canonisation of the twentieth century says that someone must have taken up the progression of material to arrive at twelve-tone composition; if not Schoenberg it equally might have been anyone else. This part of the narrative encapsulates something that composers, artists, and indeed anyone might like to believe about themselves; on closer inspection it can be said that this is the

capitalist myth of the twentieth century: the possibility for success at any, however unexpected, juncture; the phenomenon often referred to as 'the American Dream'.

A survey of histories of the twentieth century would reveal that author- and document- centred narratives, along with those which do not critique their own limitations, are pervasive. Since the focus of this article is on music which can be said to fall within the description of contemporary music, or perhaps more contentiously 'Neue Musik,' then my criticisms reside within the construction of the history of this music. Quite clearly, then, there is a link between the history of the twentieth century and musical modernism, and therefore unsurprisingly there is a link to be found between the writing of the history of the twentieth century and modernist ideology. This link, as well as preferring works which are themselves modernist, also is evidence that many twentieth century canons perpetuate the belief that the creation of an historical canon is also the story of music in the twentieth century.<sup>19</sup> Therefore a belief in the existence of this meta-story of the twentieth century, and acceptance of the white, male, European, narrative hidden within the notion of musical or artistic progress, is necessary for the construction of canons. This is well documented in 'New Musicology.' Also implicit in such narratives are the ideas that, as Weber observes, this canon must be demonstrated by repeat performances,<sup>20</sup> and that it must be considered real in order to be financially viable; the latter point is important in order to sell scholarship and books as well as music. These stories also underpin the idea that some music must be *learned*, and the structuralist fallacy that there is depth in any music; particularly that in increasingly accurate performances of canonic pieces one might come closer to an understanding of their progressive and mystical nature. Despite the often accepted relatively low commercial value of contemporary classical music, such a myth keeps the capitalist cogs turning.

Music which writes itself into such a canon, and written documentation of canons (such as historical constructions of music in the twentieth century), can be said to be constructing the past. Music and literature which actively disengage with canon and the assumptions made within its creation can be said to be documenting the present. Two examples of resisting canonisation can be found in the music of Johannes Kreidler and David Helbich. These works consider the increasingly historical nature of material, as I have discussed above, and approach material by actively disengaging with its supposed meanings and signifieds. Quotation, and its logical extensions, is not given any real historical relevance, significance, or meaning in their works. The music of Kreidler and Helbich is successful in transcending the narratives of canonisation because it does not conform to an image which appears to be commercially viable with respect to them: that is, it resists what might be described by Rancière as the 'aesthetic regime' of the twentieth century, something Rancière clarifies as being a, 'sensible mode of being specific to artistic products.'<sup>21</sup> It also avoids its presentation either as scholarship, or as a vehicle for the presentation of scholarly ideals about music in the twentieth century. Since it exists without such a gaze towards the narratives of the past, and embodies a refusal to engage with the musical material which makes up such narratives on its own term, it can be said that this music constructs the present rather than the past in its use of material.

Johannes Kreidler's music constructs the present in a number of ways. The first of these is the use of media. As demonstrated in the book *Musik, Ästhetik, Digitalisierung*<sup>22</sup> this can be used as a very shallow refutation of this music. However, technology in Kreidler's music is not used to inject a feeling of the 'new' in terms of sound or material but to access audiences and issues which are alien to the concert hall. These concerns fall outside the interests of musical modernism, which often makes claims to socialism or to belonging to those outside the annals of power, but which is situated firmly within the concert hall.

For example, the piece *Fremdarbeit* (2009) makes use of advances in technology to extend the sonic possibilities of the work. This is not, however, an innovation in the creation of the sonic properties of the work. Kreidler outsources the composition of the 'music' using the possibilities of the internet, making contact and commercial exchange with the composers enlisted to write the score. The very nature of material is at issue here: for Kreidler the process of composition has taken place in the commercial exchange, within the presentation of the whole project and the possibility of discussion which arises from it; the traditional modernist conception of material encompasses only that which Kreidler has purchased, and this causes many of the objections to the work.

The second facet of Kreidler's music's construction of the present is his use of quotation. He maintains a relationship with the musical canon which is irreverent, but also supplements this with a relationship with popular music, non-mainstream historical musics, and indeed anything which is accessible to him at the time of his compositions. His opinions of such popular musics, which he describes as, 'anonymous common pop music [...] easy to understand as the kind of music that is produced like fast food,'<sup>23</sup> and also arguably therefore his opinion of repeated performances of classical music, prevent him from taking copyright law seriously and means that his music becomes about the nature of creativity, and does not accept the myth that the musical work and the composer are or should be inherently creative. This attitude reaches its extreme in the piece *Product Placements* (2008), which presents 70200 'quotations' of both aural and visual stimuli in 33 seconds. This, combined with Kreidler's assertion that the delivery of the consequent 70200 forms to the *GEMA* is 'music theatre',<sup>24</sup> sends a clear message about his beliefs about copyright and succeeds in describing copyright itself as performative.

Finally, Kreidler's music engages with the experience of the audience as part of the work via its inclusion of press conferences, documentary, and other modes in which the audience are directly engaged as *part* of the work. This tackles the notion of the composers' desire for engagement with audiences by presenting them with multiple means of possible engagement, and by legitimising all responses to the work by particularly inviting those which do not agree with the composers' position to take part in discussions which he describes as parts of the musical works.

Similarly, the music of David Helbich addresses the same set of problems, albeit in slightly different ways. The first of these is through social situations: for Helbich, music becomes a non-concert hall activity as a result of his deliberate choice of performance locations such as train stations, shopping centres, and galleries, and the myth that the concert hall can only be engaged

with from within is shattered when the discourse becomes about experience. As part of this, Helbich's music draws on his audiences' real experiences. The piece *Hallo 5* (2002) for air guitar appeals to a cultural consciousness that could not have existed for composers before the 1950s and thus resists being written into the musical modernist project by way of the time of its creation. And yet the legitimacy of such a material is no less so than that of the serialist row: they can be found to be equals in their seriousness as in their arbitrariness. This is an important point: the lack of seriousness is something which can be said to exclude Helbich from musical modernism. It is, in fact, on this very point that Helmut Lachenmann denounces Hans Werner Henze.<sup>25</sup>

The major difference between the works of David Helbich and Johannes Kreidler is that Helbich's music does not explicitly quote from the classical musical past. This is considered by some to be a postmodern necessity. Instead, Helbich shakes off all allusions to the classical tradition in this respect and borrows from popular culture. A piece such as *Shootout* (2009) is understandable to a non new musically educated audience—something which has negative consequences within the discourse of canon formation since the nature of canon means that the audience must understand *why* the canon is important as well as accept it for it to be considered a real narrative. Such works which negate its need at all undermine such a concern.

Discourse is a very important element in assessing what is constructed here. Kreidler and Helbich do not engage with a notion of progress which originates in the nineteenth century. It is possible to say that what Arthur Danto describes as 'the end of art' has been reached in their music.<sup>26</sup> This failure to engage with the dominant discourse is what puts Kreidler and Helbich in line for criticism, or the familiar line 'it's been done, now let's return to the modernist project.' The Adornian definition of material, which is essentially historical, means that only in a rejection of material do Kreidler and Helbich deny history. Kreidler, for example, denies the status of classical composers through his purchase of music and Helbich rejects the guitar in both pieces I have given examples from. In effect, Kreidler and Helbich write themselves out of history by refusing to engage with the narrative of the canon (which is accepted as history in many discourses) and are therefore outside of the realm of engagement with modernism. They also write themselves out of an inherent capitalist narrative which makes this music 'worthless' (again within the terms of the dominant discourse). This means that they can accrue financial and cultural capital in ways that modernism has not deemed ok; further evidence that, as described by Eagleton, 'there is [...] no longer an obvious way of moving from social practices to culture, or, as the philosophers say, from facts to values.'<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, this leads to the conclusion that these works agree with Bourriaud's statement that, 'it is not modernity that is dead, but its idealistic and teleological vision.'<sup>28</sup> What remains is the possibility of producing artworks which are singularities whilst resisting teleological and essentialising approaches to these artworks.

Despite being against a modernist conception of twentieth century music history, the reading of the music presented is not subject to the criticisms of postmodern pluralism simply because it does not take this approach to the music. A classic example of an argument as to the nature of postmodern pluralism can be found in Alfred H Barr's 1935 diagram which accompanied the 1936 exhibition 'Cubism and Abstract Art' at the Museum of Modern Art.

Barr's diagram observes a number of different strands of contemporary art which are concurrent and feed off of and into each other, but are displayed alongside a timeline of their development from 1890-1935.<sup>29</sup> Although considering a number of concurrent lines of progress, this does not consider engagement with socio- and extra-aesthetic concerns.

A relational aesthetic approach to this music considers it first in the context of its engagement with its potential audience and of their engagement with it. Such a relational approach is poststructuralist and is able to engage with all pieces on the same terms. It does not embrace this music as a result of difference but as a result of its comparative inclusiveness on behalf of listeners and the autonomy it affords material by not anchoring it to a single understanding steeped in historicism. In contrast to a postmodern approach, the result of this investigation is not to identify concurrent streams of musical progress alongside those canonised in modernist narratives but to argue that construction of the present is something which exists wholly outside of such narratives. The signification present in the examples that I have discussed, and in other musics and accounts which construct the present, relates directly to signs which are to do with the present. Past development is not necessary for engagement with these works although it can contribute to their ongoing reception. Also interestingly for the composers that I have mentioned, not engaging with the capitalist system in terms of music causes the criticism of their work as being capitalist in general. It seems that inherent within the discourse of modernism and those narratives which construct the canon is support for capitalist behaviour which perpetuates the dominant artistic discourse but not for that which threatens to achieve cultural or financial success outside of this discourse.

The consideration of autonomy is important when considering the interaction of art with extramusical concerns. Often such a relationship between music and these concerns is considered in one of two ways: either music has its own, autonomous meaning (is aesthetically autonomous) and is able to comment on extramusical stimuli through the autonomous creation of meaning, or music has no autonomous meaning and can make political or social comments due to being inherently social or political, however cannot be considered in a way which doesn't interact with society or politics (there is no artistic autonomy). A third, less extreme case, in which artistic but not aesthetic autonomy is possible, can be assigned to the music I have considered. Aesthetic autonomy in the case of artworks would be negated by works I have described in this article, and is untenable by the Adornian definition of material I have given. Artistic autonomy is not negated by either of these definitions, however. Therefore it can be said that Kreidler and Helbich are free to construct the present due to the meaning relations present in the materials which they use; the identification of these meaning relations as being in part to do with signifieds outside of the canon of the twentieth century is what leads to their success in constructing the present. Since they relate to signifieds outside of the canonic discourse then they also relate to signifieds which do not carry cultural or financial capital within that discourse, leaving these works arguably autonomous of the capitalist system of canonisation of western music.

In conclusion, it is possible to say that the music of Kreidler and Helbich which I have presented resists canonisation. It makes the case that no linear or

historical progress is possible, and therefore not only resists its own canonisation but undermines and critiques the canonisation of other works. This is not out of reasons of inclusiveness, or postmodern pluralism, but is because this music takes the social present rather than the musical historical past as its starting point: without the explicit desire to be part of history as constructed by the myths of modernism, history itself is removed from the discourse.



## References:

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- <sup>1</sup> Bourriaud, N. (1996) *Relational Aesthetics*. Dijon: les presses du réel.
- <sup>2</sup> Bourriaud, N. (2005) *Postproduction; Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprogrammes the World*. Berlin: Lukas and Sternberg (pp32-33).
- <sup>3</sup> Eagleton, T. (1991) *Ideology: An Introduction*. London: Verso (pp. 195-196).
- <sup>4</sup> *ibid.* (p. 223).
- <sup>5</sup> Weber, W. (1994) The Intellectual Origins of the Musical Canon in Eighteenth Century England. *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol. 47, n. 3, (pp. 488-520).
- <sup>6</sup> Weber, (pp. 489-490).
- <sup>7</sup> Eagleton, T. (1989) The Ideology of the Aesthetic. In P. Hernadi (Ed.) *The Rhetoric of Interpretation and the Interpretation of Rhetoric*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press (pp. 75-86; p. 75).
- <sup>8</sup> A recent example of this is of the Brian Ferneyhough Symposium (February 23, 2011) London: Institute of Musical Research which was programmed alongside the 'Total Immersion' series of concerts at the Barbican on 26.02.2011. This symposium, overseen by the composer, linked scholarship with an opportunity to sell concert tickets, and was predicated upon the idea that a better understanding and appreciation of the music of Brian Ferneyhough was something which many people might be lacking, and thus they might find their own cultural capital lacking as a result.
- <sup>9</sup> Adorno T. (1983) Arnold Schoenberg 1874-1951. In *Prisms* Massachusetts: MIT Press (pp. 147-172). Adorno paints Schoenberg's creative acts as being less than self-aware, writing, 'the truth is that Schoenberg was a naïve artist, above all in the hapless intellectualizations with which he sought to justify his work.' (p. 150).
- <sup>10</sup> cf. Adorno, T. (2002) *Philosophy of Modern Music*. A. G. Mitchell and W. V. Blomster (Trans). London: Continuum (pp117-118); Paddison, M. (1995) *Adorno's Aesthetics of Music*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (p149); Hamilton, A. (2007) *Aesthetics & Music*. London: Continuum (p170).
- <sup>11</sup> Jarvis, S. (2004) Adorno, Marx, Materialism. In T. Huhn (Ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (pp. 79-100; p80).
- <sup>12</sup> Zagorski, M. (2004) "Nach dem Weltuntergang": Adorno's Engagement with Postwar Music. In *The Journal of Musicology*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (pp. 680-701; p683).
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* (p690).
- <sup>14</sup> Jarvis (2004) (p84).
- <sup>15</sup> Bourriaud. (1996) (p7).
- <sup>16</sup> Goehr, L. (2007) *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An essay in the Philosophy of Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (p111).
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* (p. 1112).
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* (p113).
- <sup>19</sup> <sup>19</sup> Good examples of this discourse can be found in the following texts which represent both scholarly and journalistic approaches to the twentieth century: Taruskin. R. (2005) *The Oxford History of Western Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press and Taruskin, R and P. Weiss (Eds.) (2008) *Music in the Western World: A History in Documents*. 2nd edition. Florence, Kentucky: Cengage Learning. Griffiths, P. (2011) *Modern Music and After*. 3rd Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Ross, A. (2007) *The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- <sup>19</sup> Weber (p. 493).
- <sup>20</sup> Weber (p. 490).
- <sup>21</sup> Rancière, J. (2007) *The Politics of Aesthetics*. London: Continuum (p22).
- <sup>22</sup> Lehmann, H, J. Kreidler and C. Mahnkopf. (2010) *Musik—Ästhetik—Digitalisierung: Eine Kontroverse*. Hofheim: Wolke Verlag.
- <sup>23</sup> Kreidler, J. October 01, 2008. Communication with the Author.
- <sup>24</sup> Kreidler, J. Johannes Kreidler GEMA-Aktion product placements doku. mirko124: *YouTube.com*, February 27, 2009. Online. Accessed September 06, 2011. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EAptRZlwziA>.
- <sup>25</sup> Lachenmann, H., and J. Stadelamn. (1997) Open Letter to Hans Werner Henze. In *Perspectives of New Music*, Vol. 35, n. 2 (pp. 189-200; pp. 193-194).
- <sup>26</sup> cf. Danto, A. (1984) The End of Art. In B. Lang (Ed.) *The Death of Art*. New York: Haven Publishers (pp. 5-35).
- <sup>27</sup> Eagleton (1989) (p. 80).
- <sup>28</sup> Bourriaud. (1996) (p.13).

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<sup>29</sup> Robbins, D. (1988) *Abbreviated History of Cubism*. In *Art Journal*, Vol, 47 (p278) notes that perhaps as a result of this diagram and the accompanying exhibition, 'a genuine historical concept of cubism emerges,' quoted in Gordon Kantor, S. (2002) *Alfred H Barr Jr. and the Intellectual Origins of the Museum of Modern Art*. Massachusetts: MIT Press (p. 315).