Chapter 5
Verbal Discourse as Aesthetic Arbitrator in Contemporary Music

Ian Pace

Countless words are both written and spoken concerning contemporary music; this chapter examines how such discourse might affect the nature of musical production. It is not in any sense a comprehensive empirical study of particular discursive conventions, as such a thing would require at least a whole book in order to be even remotely thorough. Rather, it first argues for the central role of discourse about music, then elaborates upon various examples of how this process can operate. This model may not seem so unfamiliar from the perspective of Anglo-American musicology (where Foucauldian ideas are fashionable, though these are not my starting point),[1] but is certainly remote, in my experience, from the wider field of contemporary musical composition, performance and administration. But first, I will myself inhabit a certain discursive convention and open with an anecdote.

An American composer friend told me about a lecture he attended in Freiburg, given by a visiting Canadian woman composer (it will probably be for the best if the individuals remain anonymous for the purposes of this chapter). The Canadian woman spoke about her music to a group of students and professors, and was very keen to point out that she 'composed by pure instinct alone'. This type of rhetoric often meets with a positive reception in some North-American academic institutions, for a variety of possible reasons. On one hand, 'instinct' may be perceived as a valuable counterweight to European modernist traditions involving systemization and the like, as well as to other types of formalization and chance procedures employed in the production of some compositional work emanating from America and Canada, as for example in the very different music of John Cage or Milton Babbitt. But perhaps more importantly, the use of the term 'instinct' resonates well with many contemporary feminist ideals, at least in the English-speaking world, of the value of supposed 'feminine instinct' as

[1] The classic texts on this subject are Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge & the Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), and *Power-Knowledge: Selected Interviews and other Writings 1972–77*, trans. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980). Due to certain reservations to do with extreme relativist tendencies, over-emphasis on hegemonic ideologies, and a general lack of self-reflexivity, I have not engaged with these or other texts of Foucault in this chapter, though the model of discourse I propose shares some structural similarities with his work.

opposed to 'masculine rationality' or something of that kind. As such, many a composer in North America (or Britain) might well feel confident of ensuring a positive reception when making such claims about their compositional methods. But here the situation was different. During the lecture, one middle-aged German musicologist got up to make a comment in response to this. He said something like 'what you say about instinct, that would be impossible for us here in Germany. Because, you see, we trusted instinct in the past, *and look where that got us*!'

This anecdote can often raise a little mirth when related (not least because it accords with some xenophobic stereotypes about German intellectuals and musicologists!); nonetheless I believe it does reveal some more serious issues relating to discourse about music. Both the Canadian composer and the German musicologist inhabited different discursive worlds which interpreted and valorized the term and concept of 'instinct' (and the corollary of irrationalism) in terms of particular historical, political and ideological meanings. The discourse which the Canadian composer employed (I presume, on the basis of having encountered this sort of discourse frequently in North America) valued instinct and irrationality as somehow pure, authentic, natural and 'feminine'; perhaps betokening some better future world in which these values dominate. For the German musicologist, however, there were terrible memories of what became of a society perceived to have appealed to the instinctive, the irrational and the atavistic. As such, these values were to him irrevocably tainted and could hardly be promulgated as positive aesthetic virtues. Perhaps *both* of the individuals concerned would have seen their outlooks as allied with some types of vaguely left-of-centre 'progressive' ideologies, and both might have judged other music in terms of related perceptions. One does not have to simply 'take sides' between these two perspectives (personally I find both positions to be somewhat dogmatic) in order to see how strongly aesthetic and ideological values can be encoded in the very discursive practices such individuals inhabit and exploit.

The Discourse of Music

It's common to think of the process of writing words about music essentially as an activity of secondary importance, compared to the real business of composing and performing it. Such sentiments make sense at least in terms of which activities provide most lasting value in the sense of continuing to be partaken of by a range of individuals (though not always – it may be the case that, for example, more people have read analyses of the compositional processes in Boulez's *Structures 1a*, which are detailed in a great many histories of post-1945 music in various languages, than have actually heard this rarely performed work). However, I believe we should consider a different type of structural model in terms of the interconnectedness of such spheres of activity.

Discourse about music is, by the terms of the above model, an *a posteriori* activity which comes into being only after the music has been written and played.

In the earliest days of musical creation, this model may just possibly have had some validity, but in my opinion discourse can no longer be viewed in quite the same way today. For elaborate discourses have become well established in various different musical cultures to such an extent as to attain a type of autonomous life of their own. This phenomenon might not in itself be of any great consequence (except, for example, to those who wish to treat certain highly theoretical analysis as a separate esoteric discipline existing almost independently of music itself), were it not for the fact that such discourses can actually have a profound effect on the worlds of composition and performance themselves.

So I propose the following alternative model for relating discourse to the infrastructure of music-making. A form of discourse goes on continually, in both verbal and written forms, amongst all those individuals involved in the administrative and promotional side of the music business. These would include concert promoters, radio producers, record company executives, publishers, agents, those involved in marketing public relations, critics, musicologists and of course composers and performers themselves. Such people speak and write to others from one or more of the above fields continually about their thoughts on particular composers and compositions, performers and performances, and more generally on music and musical aesthetics (whether or not they describe the latter in such terms). From here onwards I will refer to this simply as 'the discourse' (which of course comprises a range of sub-discourses, sometimes of markedly different natures; 'the discourse' here is simply an umbrella term for all of these). It is important to note that the spoken forms this discourse can take are as important as the written ones[2] – indeed, as musicological work increasingly makes use of written documents of all types, the possibility that many things are deliberately not written down in knowledge of the fact that they may later be discovered and employed for highly critical purposes should not be overlooked.[3]

Alternatively, those involved in the musical infrastructure might simply share certain tacit assumptions, so each knows reasonably well what certain others' opinions are likely to be on such matters, obviating the necessity for such opinions

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[2] For this reason, I am drawing as much upon personal experience, as a performer, of the international contemporary music circuit, as upon written documents. This obviously leaves open various questions of scholarly verifiability, but to have to exclude such things on such grounds (themselves discursive conventions) would in my opinion make this model woefully inadequate. On a much more significant level, parallel issues are a very serious concern for those seeking to reconstruct the histories of pre-literate societies. See John Tosh, 'History by Word of Mouth', in *The Pursuit of History*, rev. 3rd edn (Harlow: Longman, 2002), pp. 295–322, for more on this. Tosh is a scholar of African history for whom such issues are obviously very immediate.

[3] Just as Brahms was highly circumspect in his letters, aware of their potential future publication (having seen publications appear of other composers' correspondence): see Eduard Hanslick, 'Memories and Letters', trans. Susan Gillespie, in Walter Frisch (ed.), *Brahms and his World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 163–84.

to be explicitly articulated. Whether such things are explicit or implicit (or, most likely, some combination of the two), the discourse and the value judgements contained within in essence determine who and what is to be commissioned, which works are to be performed, who is to perform them and so on (as these individuals, either individually or in groups, are in general entrusted with such decisions). In this sense, the very terms of the discourse itself that such people engage in are an absolutely vital arbitrating factor in the process of making actual composition and performance occur. The discourse does of course need to be articulated in some sort of linguistic form (which can even incorporate forms of body language communicated between individuals – frowns or grimaces at one another during a performance, for example) in order to have some meaning outside of the first person – this is the way in which it actually becomes a discourse per se.

In case one thinks, for understandable reasons, that this model seems simplistic, let me add a caveat. I am of course dealing here primarily with the most public forms of composition and performance. There is nothing to stop someone writing music, provided they have the time and financial security to make this possible. Performers can similarly find opportunities to put on self-promoted concerts. Both of these situations bring their own set of problems, however. It is rare that a composer has managed to develop and refine their craft in a meaningful sense without experience of public performance, working with instrumentalists and vocalists, being able to gauge the meaning and success of their works in a public arena and so on (and it is worth noting that such opportunities were on the whole little available to women composers in past eras). Also, the availability of decent venues to hire (with good-quality instruments, acoustics, etc.), is often restricted, both on the whim of those who are in charge of such venues, and more vitally for financial reasons. So, whilst a composer or performer might conceivably exist and develop in isolation from the major institutions, such activity is likely to create great difficulties, as well as being in general restricted to those of independent financial resources (leaving the time to undertake such activities without needing to keep down a full-time job). The latter point is one I will return to in a little while when considering the role of discourse in relation to state subsidy.

Otherwise, composers and performers need to satisfy the terms of the predominant discourse that exists at the time when they desire to embark upon their activities if they are to gain any type of career-related success. This situation is, I believe, inevitable and I do not wish to deplore it as such. However, if this model is valid, then the centrality of the discourse is clear, and it follows that its terms and assumptions need to continually be interrogated most rigorously.[4] Here I

[4] I am of course well aware of the extent to which musicological discourse has been extensively interrogated by many of those often described as belonging to the 'New Musicology'. Whilst on the whole finding a lot of this work to be unsatisfactory, for various reasons to do with wilful manipulation of frequently unrepresentative sources or very small snippets of those, as well as underlying assumptions arguably more essentialist and de-individualizing than that which they seek to replace, not to mention an almost entirely

am not especially concerned with musicological discourse: in my experience only a very small amount of any musicological work (let alone meta-musicological work), seems to be read by many in the wider musical world. Various reasons might be proffered for this, relating in various degrees to different types of work, such as self-serving use of jargon and needless intellectual name-dropping, dryness combined with a refusal to allow highly subjective engagements with musical work to be made explicit, so as to maintain an appearance of 'objectivity', a tendency to take for granted the reader's full knowledge of certain paradigms little known outside of academic circles, neglect of the role of performance, and so on, as well as simple anti-intellectual prejudices on the parts of musicians. Whichever of these one believes to be true, this stratification of music-making and musicology should be a cause for concern. For the purposes of this chapter, my focus is more upon the discourse that exists in the wider musical infrastructure (often quite informally) rather than that specifically within musicology itself.[5] I wish to muse upon just a selection of such assumptions as I have encountered within the discourse, so as to probe their limits.

Music, Reification and Language

> Music resembles a language. Expressions such as musical idiom, musical intonation, are not simply metaphors. But music is not identical with language. The resemblance points to something essential, but vague. Anyone who takes it literally will be seriously misled.
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> Music resembles language in the sense that it is a temporal sequence of articulated sounds which are more than just sounds. They say something, often something human. The better the music, the more forcefully they say it. The succession of sounds is like logic: it can be right or wrong. But what has been said cannot be detached from the music. Music creates no semiotic system.
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> Theodor Adorno, 'Music and Language: A Fragment'[6]

Perhaps one of the biggest dangers inherent within the discourse is an implicit demand that musicians adhere to reified conventions. This situation is of especial consequence to those of some type of modernist (using the term very loosely)

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uncritical attitude towards the role of commercial institutions in music-making, nonetheless the questions raised by these protagonists are extremely important and their interrogation vital. But see above for my reasons for not focusing particularly on musicological discourse in this chapter.

[5] For one recent meta-musicological study of such issues, see Giles Hooper, *The Discourse of Musicology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

[6] Theodor W. Adorno, 'Music and Language: A Fragment', in *Quasi una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1992), pp. 1–6: p. 1.

persuasion, concerned to extend, expand, modify or break with conventions, as it was to composers of the early romantic era as well (though arguably less so to contemporary neo-romantics and other postmodernists, for some of whom adherence to reified conventions or wholesale adoption of unmediated found materials are often no bad thing).[7] It is problematic to judge a piece favourably to the extent by which the listening experience resonates with pre-formed and pre-ordained categories of experience, which in compositional terms represents something rather akin to a contemporary equivalent of eighteenth-century *Affektenlehre* (a musical paradigm that it would seem various postmodernists and New Musicologists would like to see return, from a point of view which rejects post-Beethovenian individualism).[8] Such an aesthetic assumption can often imply by necessity a concomitant profound scepticism towards anything in a composition or performance which cannot be 'understood' in such a manner (i.e. anything which significantly transcends reified expressive categories either in its details or its totality). Yet it is precisely when music is able to achieve the latter ideal that it may seem to hold the greatest potential for producing experiences which exceed the commonplace, either in terms of existing music or life in general (of course this situation in itself produces its own potential pitfalls, such as that music might become idle novelty or ornament bereft of wider social or cultural significance[9]).

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[7] In one of the clearest expositions of defining attributes of postmodernist music, Jonathan Kramer argues that 'Postmodernists are more content to let the music they refer to or quote simply be what it is, offered with neither distortion nor musical commentary' (Kramer, 'The Nature and Origins of Musical Postmodernism', in Judy Lochhead and Joseph Auner (eds), *Postmodern Music/Postmodern Thought*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 13–26: p. 15). In the earlier exposition of postmodernism of Hermann Danuser (one of the first coherent pieces of writing on the subject), Danuser makes related though less well-developed points about postmodernism moving away from earlier models of subjectivity. See Danuser, *Die Musik des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Laaber: Laaber-Verlag, 1984), p. 397.

[8] For a reasonable account of how early romanticism in particular constituted a break with such a doctrine, and the association with the ascendancy of bourgeois over aristocratic power, see Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, trans. J. Bradford Robinson (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 1–53. A related conception of romanticism also underlies much of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), especially the chapter 'The Idea: Religion within the Limits of Art', pp. 59–78. An opposition to this conception of romanticism most notably informs the later volumes of Richard Taruskin's *Oxford History of Western Music*, 6 vols (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[9] As Adorno pointed out in the context of expressionism: 'As long as art preserves its distance from the immediacy of life, it is not able to step beyond the shadow of its autonomy and its immanence of form. Expressionism, in itself hostile to the concept of the work, is able to do this even less precisely because of this hostility. Precisely in its renunciation of communication, the movement insists upon its autonomy, guaranteed only

Such forms of experience by their very nature can be difficult to identify and appreciate upon initial listening, precisely because of their less reified nature, and as such may well generate highly equivocal responses within the terms of the discourse. Quite simply, unequivocal praise is a less likely outcome from music whose very unfamiliarity is likely to engender highly subjective and equivocal responses.

Furthermore, those perpetuating and extending the discourse, especially promoters, need to be able to describe such music in a manner that will be understandable and attractive to those who haven't yet heard it. Such descriptions are surely least likely to become esoterically incomprehensible if the music somehow resonates with pre-existing concepts that can thus be described verbally. That music which aims to abstract itself from such categories resists linguistic reduction, in exactly the same way that *the music itself resists appropriation into language* or into any type of semiotic system, as mentioned in the Adorno quote above. For musical composition and performance to operate in a manner akin to language can, for these reasons, entail the greatest dangers of reification, whether the linguistic analogy operates on the level of vocabulary, grammar or rhetoric. I refer here less to the specific use of structural models from literature for compositional purposes as to the very fact of using the past history and traditions of music as a 'language', to be plundered for sonorities, textures, harmonies, rhythms, structures, processes, whose effect is already well established. Such catalogues of effects can often be presented with only minimal mediation, so as to create the type of 'pseudo-individualization' that Adorno criticized (in rather too blanket a manner) in popular music.[10] It is through the very act of mediation that this can be transcended, yet mediation itself is much more difficult to capture in snappy language and easily understood metaphors.

Of course language itself need not only work with reified categories, as the whole history of literature amply demonstrates; literary writing about music need not, and often does not, do so either. Nonetheless, a highly creative and dialectical use of language is surely not something to be found frequently in casual spoken parlance or informal communications (a detailed empirical study of the use of language in criticism and promotion, which would involve the study of techniques derived from wider marketing, is beyond the scope of this chapter).[11] The discourse

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by consistency within works of art. It is this unavoidable contradiction which makes it impossible to continue steadfastly according to the principles of Expressionism.' (Theodor Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, trans. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster (London: Sheed and Ward, 1987), p. 49.)

[10] Adorno used this term in his English-language essay 'On Popular Music', in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 437–69: pp. 445–6.

[11] See Gordon Downie, 'Cultural Production as Self-Surveillance: Making the Right Impression', *Perspectives of New Music*, 46/1 (winter 2008), pp. 194–224 for one attempt at doing this.

of marketing and promotion requires maximum immediacy and comprehensibility and minimal ambiguity. As such, both critical and promotional discourse work best with music that best satisfies the reified categories that such discourses themselves inhabit. An example would be the following:

> Her music shows an amazing variety of sound patterns which lead the listener into a labyrinth of constant metamorphosis * Deconstructs language and other everyday sounds in order to find new, musical contexts for familiar acoustical elements.[12]

For all the superficial veneer of artiness and intellectual respectability provided by the word 'deconstructs', this description is easily understood (as, I would argue, is the music), simply amounting to saying that the music has many different sounds, it is often changing, and it presents familiar sounds in unfamiliar ways. What these 'new, musical contexts' might be, or more to the point, why they amount to anything more than mere novelty is not at all explained, nor, if they did indeed amount to something genuinely original and meaningful, do I believe that it would be easy to portray this in an immediate form.

By its very nature, genuinely unfamiliar music is difficult if not impossible to contain by accessible, non-obscure metaphors (if it were not, than it would not be unfamiliar), yet such words are required not only for critics attempting to communicate works to ordinary readers, but perhaps more significantly for the purposes of successful marketing and promotion (which often draw upon reviews). It is for this reason, I believe, that those involved in such fields generally shy away from an engagement with the most distinctive and unique qualities of a work of music (or from works especially characterized by intricacy or complexity), in favour either of broad generalities through florid clichés, or by displacing attention towards the image of the composer, the prestige that comes from their biography and achievements, and other extra-musical factors (a parallel situation applies with respect to performers and performance attributes).

Now, this way of describing the situation might raise various objections on the grounds of over-emphasis upon thinking and verbalization about music, rather than what can simply be gleaned from the listening experience. If all involved in the business of music could realistically have the chance to listen to every possible piece or performance of new music that comes their way, this would be a fair point, but that situation is impossible. Rather, it is on the basis of encountering some recommendation from another (or perhaps several others) that such people are more likely to take the time to listen to a recording or go to a performance. The discourse, its immediacy, and the amenability of the musical works or performances in question to being rendered in these terms are of vital importance in this respect.

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[12] From Boosey and Hawkes's 'snapshot' of Olga Neuwirth, at www.boosey.com/pages/cr/composer/composer_main.asp?composerid=5292 (accessed 10 May 2007), 'punctuation' in the original.

Wider education about music for all, including critical perspectives on existing discourses around music, is one way that this culture of both the soundbite and music which can be rendered in such a manner might be circumvented.

Compositional Technique and the 'Well-Written Piece'

The dangers of reification are equally palpable in certain formulations of the notion of compositional 'technique' and the concomitant privileging of the 'well-written piece'. Now, it would be hard to deny the importance of aspects of compositional craft such as knowledge and understanding of the nature of instruments and voices and their practical use, a feeling for likely balances when combining sonorities (as for example when some degree of transparent layering of textures is desired in an orchestral piece), the intelligent use of notation so as not to imply to the performer results that are undesired, and other such things that are vital aspects of compositional education. Nonetheless, when the quality of being 'well-written' is employed almost fetishistically as a bottom line for judging new compositions (a situation with which many of those who have frequented first performances will be familiar), this can and does create severe limitations on composers' freedom of manoeuvre. Those exploring new types of sonorous combinations, new approaches to instrumental and vocal balance, new dramatic processes, new relationships between individuated material and large-scale structure are almost sure to produce results which have the potential at least at first to unsettle and disorient a listener, requiring as they do some conscious and creative participation on the part of one faced with such unfamiliar experiences. I would suggest it is often *extremely* difficult to perceive, in such pieces, which aspects stem from genuine attempts to offer new modes of perception, and which from lack of compositional fluency. In an orchestral piece, for example, some instruments may not be able to be heard distinctly within a rich texture, yet that texture would be different were they not playing. But can one really be sure if the latter is the case upon first listening? Or might it be easier simply to put it down to 'bad orchestration'? Those barraged by new scores from which to select only a few, as many involved in new music are (not to mention those on selection panels who need to whittle a pile of scores down to a very few in a short space of time), are forced to make decisions as to which scores to accept and which to reject, often reducing the list from the outset on the basis of what is 'well-written'.

Many of Christian Wolff's compositions fall into this category. I have performed and listened to a wide variety of Wolff's music over a period of some time, but still do not feel absolutely confident that I know exactly what is going on in some of the stranger works, for example the piano pieces *Bread and Roses* and *Hay un mujer desperacida*, or the chamber works *Bowery Preludes* or *Eisler Ensemble Pieces*. After the initial novelty of their frankly bizarre nature has worn off, they continue to produce some type of impression which I find somehow resonates, in a fractured, para-indeterminate and sometimes surrealistic way (but that in itself is a highly superficial description). However, I would find it very difficult to

describe in what sense they might be 'well-written', especially in a structural sense (I can only grasp at a few scattered correspondences between material in terms of motive, texture or configuration), or indeed what the concept of the 'well-written' could entail in this context.

To take another example, that of Helmut Lachenmann's piano piece *Serynade*, I was struck by the comment of one publisher who was present at a performance of this work, who questioned whether the piece 'hangs together', implying quite clearly that this is an objective requirement for such a piece. Now *Serynade* to my ears exhibits a very clear overall sense of ongoing momentum, dramatic pacing and proportion to the extent that it in no sense sounds like a series of disconnected fragments. This should not be taken to imply that there cannot be value in highly fragmentary music as well, nor that tight drama between contrasting elements is an essential prerequisite either (the broad expansiveness of a Bruckner symphony, or of one of the more static late works of Morton Feldman, e.g. *For Samuel Beckett,* can show the converse in that respect). But what *Serynade* is not, I believe, is a fundamentally 'organic' conception, in the sense of something that germinates from a common root and as such aspires to the status of natural growth; for this reason I would take issue with one critic's bemoaning of the lack of 'long, breathed lines' (such as might be more 'natural' or 'organic'), in another pianist's performance of the same work.[13] What the publisher seemed to expect from a piece that 'hangs together' is some degree of overall organic continuity within which inner contrasts serve essentially as local variations within a relatively unbroken line. That is a perfectly reasonable aesthetic choice, certainly, but not how I would view such a work by Lachenmann, nor much earlier music, whether many Haydn string quartets with sharp contrasts between individuated material, the montage-like assemblage at the beginning of the last movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony and various other late works, or some of the fragmentary moments and intrusions of unexpected material in Schumann's *Carnaval*.

In this music, compositional decisions seem to have been predicated upon both thoughtful and spontaneous responses to what seem particular demands at particular moments in a way that can be shockingly immediate rather than especially *auratic*. Of course line and lines most definitely exist, but often in fractured forms. This is not at all the same thing as a work that really does not 'hang together' through lack of any sort of total coherent musical argument, but I suspect that in this case the criticism was made on the basis that the work doesn't necessarily impress on the basis of its being perceivable as a self-contained auratic aesthetic object (such as might facilitate its status as a commodity), an aesthetic judgement which is implied in the seemingly objective category of the 'well-written'.

Of course, the surest way to avoid the much-feared charge that one's music is not 'well-written' is to rely essentially upon well-tried and tested sounds and processes, with a degree of surface individualization rather than any mediation

[13] Tom Service, review of Marino Formenti, Usher Hall, Edinburgh Festival, *The Guardian*, 28 August 2004.

with the basic reified assumptions imposed upon the composer by the dominant discourse. And I hear these types of results with extreme frequency at concerts of contemporary music. This is one way in which I believe compositional activity is actually affected in advance by the discourse that precedes it, a discourse which necessitates a degree of standardization. In a ruthlessly competitive environment, where the reactions to some first performances may make or break a composer's career, composers may indeed consciously engineer the music they write, in full knowledge of the demands of the discourse, in order to earn the best epithets and thus help their future success (this could equally be argued to result from cynical careerism or simply force of circumstances). This is not really a provable or falsifiable statement, of course, simply an observation based on spending much time in the company of young composers in various Western countries (without ruling out the possibility that these may be an unrepresentative cross-section) and encountering their attitudes and actions.

Discourse on Performance

A similar situation can occur with performance of modernist music. For much of the discourse in the English-speaking world, and increasingly elsewhere as well, terms such as 'modern', 'experimental' and the like are frequently used in pejorative ways, referring to attributes of either composition or performance that betoken the bad old days of dogmatic high serialism (which, when one bears in mind how few pieces actually satisfy the conditions of total serialism, is clearly a straw-man argument). An example of this would be a review by Tim Page of Marilyn Nonken's performance of the Ives *Concord Sonata*,[14] in which he praises how Nonken 'stressed the sonata's lyricism, continuity and organic structure. For once it held together as a coherent work of art instead of a scattershot glossary of yesterday's experimental techniques' or an earlier review by Anne Midgette, in which the same pianist is said to have played a work of Michael Finnissy 'so smoothly that even when the music fragmented it remained essentially lyrical, and never, to use an adjective too often applied to contemporary music, "spiky"'.[15]

In general, the qualities often indicated by the epithet 'modern' might include dry or thin sounds, angularity or 'spikiness' of line as the result of the employment of various forms of discontinuity, non-parallel use of different musical parameters (so that for example the dynamic envelope of a line might not necessarily mirror its trajectory in terms of pitch or rhythm), unashamed use of dissonance

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[14] Review by Tim Page of Marilyn Nonken, *The Washington Post*, 25 December 2005.

[15] Review by Ann Midgette of Nonken in *The New York Times*, 12 October 2004. Both this and the previous review cited on www.ensemble21.com/nonken/mn.reviews.html (accessed 26 May 2006). I offer these examples not as a comment on Ms Nonken's playing (not having been present at either concert), but simply as examples of a style of critical discourse.

without requiring ultimate resolution, and so on. Now to characterize the modern era primarily in terms of the predominance of such attributes would be a gross oversimplification, as equally would an attempt to deny that such elements are indeed present in a fair number of works, including some pre-twentieth-century music as well.[16] But when one encounters, as is so common, a performance praised for making a new work 'sound like a real piece of music', this frequently indicates an eschewal of all the above attributes in favour of continuity, organicity, richness of tone, maximum projection of tonal and other hierarchies that might be extracted from the work in question and so on. These other attributes are indeed equally important in a wide range of contemporary and other music; nonetheless, such discourse frequently presents a clear sense of aesthetic rights and wrongs, in times when the more visionary ideals of modernism have become deeply unfashionable. Many performers are well aware of this and as such, I believe, knowingly perform contemporary works of whatever type in such a manner as to correspond to the prevailing fashion as provided by the discourse, so as to garner praise and recognition. In so doing, they often act in such a way as to deindividualize many of the works in question, playing up all the ways in which such works resonate with a particular construction of 'tradition', and playing down all those aspects that make the works distinctive and unique.

The 'Entertaining' and the 'Aristocratic' in English-speaking Discourse, and Implications for Subsidy

The problems entailed in the type of music mentioned before as aspiring to the condition of reified language, are of course of little worry to those who espouse a view of music as 'entertainment'. This is a difficult term to define adequately; here I use it to refer to music designed to enthral, excite, titillate and so on in

[16] An initial denial of this possibility, followed by a later tracing of how indeed it is the case, undermines the coherence of the various writings on performance of Richard Taruskin, as collected in *Text and Act* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). Taruskin sets up a variety of dualisms through the course of the book, most prominently setting 'modernism' against 'tradition' in the early essays, but later (and in his subsequent work) tracing the extent to which some of the attributes he associates with modernism actually can be found in large measure before the twentieth century. The critic Eduard Hanslick is at one point posited as a figure whose ideas constituted an early form of modernistic thinking at odds with the romantic tradition; later (including in Taruskin's *Oxford History of Western Music*), he is reconceptualized as a central figure within such a romantic tradition in Germany. By Volume Five of the *Oxford History*, Taruskin describes, in the context of a discussion of the work of Cage, a 'latent continuity between the Romantic impulse and the impulses that drove modernism, even (or especially) its most intransigent, avant-garde wing' (p. 67). This is hard to square with the well-known thesis of much of *Text and Act* that historically informed performance constitutes a modernistic rather than historical approach, at least in the context of such performances of nineteenth-century music.

as direct and visceral a manner as possible, rather than that aiming to provoke thought, illuminate, challenge. In the category of 'entertainment' I would include more than simply the obvious candidates (such as boppy minimalism, cross-over work and the like); a large amount of music (though not all) explicitly identified as 'postmodern' would also satisfy this definition. The discourse in Britain frequently privileges those aspects of a work seen as most entertaining, and creates criteria of value on this basis. Let me give a few quotes from some reviews, sourced reasonably arbitrarily:

On Thomas Adès's Piano Quintet: 'a work that bubbled over with his typically ear-catching compositional virtuosity' (a description that manages to titillate and mystify simultaneously!); 'the final climax was a shattering moment, as the music hurtled towards its emphatic final bars'.[17]

On Richard Barrett's *No (Resistance and Vision Part 1)*: 'its passing detail is often arrestingly novel. The way he runs a high violin C sharp like a tinnitus buzz through the whole of the first section; the way the amplified harps emerge from behind the arrays of dense string tuttis; the positively theatrical trombone solos; the concerted bow-bouncing of the violins towards the end; and a wealth of microtonal, glissando-ing invention – these are felicities that could not be gainsaid in this strongly projected, articulate reading by Tadaaki Otaka.'[18]

On works by Helmut Lachenmann: *Nun*: 'The music was volatile, and the orchestra spewed out a torrential lava-flow of sounds, from the screeches of the strings to the shrill cries of the voices and the percussive thwacks of the two pianos. Listening to the piece was like climbing a vertiginous ridge, something unfamiliar and dangerous'; *Grido*: 'a sensual exploration of strange and dazzling sounds'; various piano works: 'a thrilling display of pianistic possibility'.[19]

On Sophia Gubaidulina's *The Light of the End*: 'an extraordinary listen: immediate, intense, and carrying'.[20]

On Marc-André Dalbavie's Piano Concerto: 'Dalbavie has the knack of hiding his compositional complexity beneath seductive, exquisitely chiselled musical surfaces'.[21]

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[17] Matthew Rye, 'Bridging the Age Gap', *The Daily Telegraph*, 25 June 2002.

[18] Paul Driver, review of BBC Symphony Orchestra under Tadaaki Otaka, *The Sunday Times*, 20 February 2005.

[19] Tom Service, review of Bamberg Symphony Orchestra under Jonathan Nott, Usher Hall, Edinburgh Festival, *The Guardian*, 26 August 2003; review of Arditti Quartet, Queen Elizabeth Hall, *The Guardian*, 26 April 2003; review of Marino Formenti, Usher Hall, Edinburgh Festival, *The Guardian*, 28 August 2004.

[20] George Hall, review of London Philharmonic Orchestra under Kurt Masur, BBC Proms, *The Guardian*, 22 August 2005.

[21] Andrew Clements, review of BBC Symphony Orchestra under Jukka-Pekka Saraste, BBC Proms, *The Guardian*, 18 August 2005.

On Bent Sorenson's *The Little Mermaid*: 'a translucent, aqueous sonic environment'.[22]

Now all of these examples are taken from the British press, which inhabits a very particular type of discourse; even then not all reviews are of this type (though experience has suggested to me that this style of criticism is very much the norm, certainly in the English-speaking world). To me, these reviews do not always identify the more vital aspects of the works in question; rather, they tend to indulge in rather over-generalized and somewhat hackneyed visual metaphor[23] or alternatively communicate a form of adolescent excitement in an un-self-reflexive manner. Almost all of the above quotes privilege the music by the extent to which it is perceived to entertain the listener in one way or another. None of them assign value to the more *ambiguous* elements of the pieces (including the description of Lachenmann as 'unfamiliar and dangerous'), those very moments which require a greater degree of subjective participation from the listener and as such a more active approach to the listening experience. Rather they would seem to valorize most highly those aspects of the music which apparently communicate themselves to the listener in as direct and unambiguous a manner as possible (and as such can often be reduced to visual metaphors), requiring minimal mediation between ear and mind. An insistence on the primacy of such aspects is indeed one of the principles upon which any entertainment operates; such discourse again devalues (and arguably thus acts to postpone or negate the possibility of wider acceptance of) music aiming at different things, in particular which pursues more autonomous, even aloof aesthetic ends somewhat independently of its potential entertainment appeal.[24] Is it not conceivable that composers sometimes write the way they do with such potential critical reaction in mind?

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[22] George Hall, review of Danish National Symphony Orchestra under Thomas Dausgaard, BBC Proms, *The Independent*, 21 August 2005.

[23] Which is not to say that illuminating poetic metaphor is necessarily a bad thing – to assert that it was would invalidate a great deal of nineteenth-century criticism, not to mention some of the writings of Adorno.

[24] Ideals of artistic autonomy or 'absolute music' are also totally dismissed by many associated with the New Musicology in terms that often suggest little more than commonplace anti-intellectualism. Susan McClary says that 'Literature and visual art are almost always concerned (at least in part) with the organization of sexuality, the construction of gender, the arousal and channelling of desire. So is music, except that music may perform these functions even more effectively than other media' (Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 53), a definition which could hardly encompass *Guernica* or *The Gulag Archipelago* (nor, in my opinion, any number of Bach cantatas or *Das wohltemperirte Clavier*, or the Ruth Crawford Seeger String Quartet, for example). Ideals of other purposes for music are regularly dismissed throughout her writings (even in popular music, dealing in a curt fashion with 'an ideology of noncommercial authenticity' in the work of Eric Clapton and others in order to permeate 'their self-images as rebels against capitalism'; McClary, *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 60). Richard Taruskin

The power of pro-'entertainment' rhetoric begets a false dichotomy which seems to exist within English-language discourse about contemporary music, between 'entertainment' music on one hand, and self-consciously 'musical' work to be appreciated in a purely analytical or technical sense, on the other. Implicit in this dichotomy is the belief that music has only two broad options: *either* it can serve up something clearly identifiable and possibly cathartic to an average audience *or* it is to be appreciated primarily through apprehension of its technical workings or its allusions, on the basis of highly specialized knowledge. The latter type of music becomes the exclusive preserve of the connoisseur, and as such succeeds in becoming what I would call 'aristocratic' art. To make such a fetish is a classic form of mystification, what the writer John Berger, drawing on the ideas of Walter Benjamin and others, identified as a strategy to remove art 'from the plane of lived experience' into the realm of 'disinterested "art appreciation"'.[25] The elevation of such work also elevates the social and cultural standing of the specialist, whose responses to such work may be as a consequence viewed as being of greater value to those of others, thus consolidating his or her allure and social standing.

The 'aristocratic' conception raises profound questions, which inevitably emerge during attempts to formulate a coherent argument for the state subsidy of contemporary music and other art. If contemporary music can only ever be properly appreciated by the cognoscenti, then what possible justification could there be for its being funded by the population at large? Does this not become a case of redistribution of wealth from those of average income towards the interests of the wealthy – who tend to make up the majority of such cognoscenti in a society such as Britain where privileged aesthetic education is in general restricted to those who were taught at expensive public schools (a situation that also applies to a fair extent in the USA)?

It is perfectly natural and reasonable that ordinary taxpayers should question what overall benefit is served to society by their taxes being in part spent on subsidizing contemporary culture. Alas the ever-increasing paucity of any alternative discourse about the wider value of contemporary music, other than the

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spends a good deal of his *Oxford History* attacking notions of artistic autonomy, associating them with producers rather than consumers, while Philip Brett brings up a familiar bogeyman of Hanslick (as do McClary and others) when speaking of how 'abstraction, formalism, and organicism, given a further boost by Eduard Hanslick's aesthetics, proved the best way to rescue music from its own irrationality' (Brett, 'Musicality, Essentialism and the Closet', in Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood and Gary C. Thomas (eds), *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 9–26: p. 13), elsewhere assigning a gendered interpretation by speaking of the 'masculinist Hanslickian tradition' (Brett, 'Out-Manoeuvred', *The Musical Times*, 137/1846 (December 1996), p. 2). All of these writers markedly and relentlessly valorize the values of the entertainment industry above all else, thus aligning themselves with high free-market ideology as against more moderate social democratic views of culture.

[25] John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972), p. 13.

'aristocratic' one, gives added succour to those who would attack any but the most commercial music on grounds of 'elitism', and with this in mind will argue for the end or reduction of state subsidy for new music.[26]

But I believe there are alternative attitudes with which to supplement the discourse in order to provide ways out of this impasse. Here it is worth examining the implications of a certain much-used term, 'immediacy'. Arguably, musical immediacy can be a very important thing to strive for in a particular sense of the word. Most often it is taken to imply music's appealing to some 'lowest common denominator', with, as I suggested before, maximum avoidance of ambiguity or anything else that might invite or require a more active and personalized response (rather as Clement Greenberg defined kitsch).[27] I would offer an alternative definition of immediacy as *a refusal of wilful mystification*, in the sense of music's (or any art's) deliberately setting itself at a remove from the listener, distant from real concerns, perceptions, ideas and emotions as could potentially be understood by non-specialist-musicians. 'Aristocratic' music which requires apprehension of formal properties or meta-musical allusions would be an example of that which does not satisfy this type of immediacy. To be immediate in this sense does not imply any compromise with respect to *content* (which includes the ways in which content is made manifest by particular stylistic means – for example the use of *sotto voce* to convey a sense of distance); rather such immediacy stands in opposition to aloofness made into a mystifying fetish of its own. That which simply reflects culturally inherited aspects of 'good taste' in an unmediated manner, for no other reason than to demonstrate that very quality to those trained to recognize it, would be another example of the latter.

Music can be immediate, then, in the sense of responding to wider feelings, thoughts or issues that have some meaning other than simply in terms of other music,[28] whilst still engaging with these things in a subjective and mediating

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[26] In 2004, the British Culture Secretary Tessa Jowell wrote an essay which made a valiant attempt to articulate an argument for government sponsorship of culture, suggesting that in place of the 'high culture/low culture' divide, one might substitute that between 'simplicity and complexity, between entertainment on the one hand and cultural engagement on the other'. Whilst the essay is well intentioned and comes close to making a powerful case, Jowell comes too close to conflating 'cultural engagement' with simple 'complexity' of means, and advocating the 'aristocratic' view of art in a way that would present a red rag to a populist liberal bull such as McClary (as in her essay 'Terminal Prestige: The Case of Avant-Garde Music Composition', in *Cultural Critique*, 12, Discursive Strategies and the Economy of Prestige (spring, 1989), pp. 57–81). See www.culture.gov.uk/global/publications/archive_2004/Government_Value_of_Culture.htm?properties=archive_2004%2C%2Fglobal%2Fpublications%2Farchive_2004%2F%2C&month (accessed 26 May 2006).

[27] See Clement Greenberg, ' Avant-Garde and Kitsch', in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), pp. 3–21.

[28] I realize this position might seem rather dogmatic in its exclusion of 'meta-music'. But this is not to devalue highly referential music which exploits the properties rather than

manner (i.e. not simply reiterating known categories of experience). The possibility of culture's being able to do this, for artists' being given the freedom to pursue a subjective and hopefully illuminating engagement, providing perspectives which have not previously been attained, is in my opinion one of the strongest arguments for providing artists with such support. This type of conception ran deep, I believe, in the social-democratic cultures of artistic subsidy that existed in much of Western Europe in the latter half of the twentieth century, though perhaps somewhat less so in Britain. However, there currently seems to be something of a crisis of faith in these sorts of ideals, in many countries, and subsidy of contemporary music is consequently coming under question. This is a primary reason for all those who care about there being a future for challenging and searching art to attempt to articulate such a case all the more strongly, to enhance a discourse around subsidy.

This is of course my own particular take on such things, but one which I offer in the context of what seems a relative dearth of other forms of arguments. The conceptions of music as either entertainment or 'aristocratic' music outlined above are *both* profoundly anti-subjective in nature; both impose rigid expectations on musicians to fulfil pre-established norms in terms of reified notions of audience expectations. Subjective alternatives need not equate with solipsism and narcissism and the construction of solipsistic personal mythologies on the part of artists if the importance of *engagement* is kept alive (making subjectivity distinct from 'subjectivism' – as Adorno said (as part of a dialectic): 'subjectivism and reification correspond to each other').[29]

The Discourse of Marketing and the Cult of Personality

In an era where hype and PR are increasingly overwhelming, it is found to be much easier to 'sell' individuals than their artistic work, as mentioned earlier. And the discourse seems to reflect this trend, albeit perhaps subliminally. Cults of personality around composers and performers tend to propagate the notion that their work amounts to little more than a footnote to their biography. This phenomenon is especially pronounced in the literary world, to such an extent that biographies of writers sometimes outsell copies of the works themselves, or biographical information sometimes generates attention well exceeding that occasioned by the publication of a new fictional book.[30] When biographers try to relate almost every

simply the iconic status of the other music referenced. In such a music, the references are a means to an end rather than an end in themselves. This type of referentiality differs significantly from the type of 'linguistic' music I described earlier (in this case the referent being other works of music).

[29] Adorno, 'Music, Language and Composition', in *Essays on Music*, pp. 113–26: p. 114.

[30] As for example with the revelations in 2006 about the writer Günter Grass's youthful involvement with the Waffen-SS, which also led a few commentators to look more unfavourably upon his literary work dealing with the period in question.

aspect of an artist's work to some event in their life,[31] one might ask what the point is in reading the work at all, once one knows what the events in question are? A similar situation occurs when the works of a composer are hyped as a particular expression of that composer's 'inner world'. If this is an apt description of the works in question (leading to the 'subjectivism' in one of the earlier Adorno citations) then why should the 'inner world' of a composer, who spends much of their time at their desk, be any more significant than that of a manual labourer, a housewife, an aid worker, an army captain, or an immigrant living in conditions of poverty as a by-product of racial discrimination? All of these people have their own equally wide range of experience and perception of the world, from a perspective and form of consciousness that is at the very least equally relevant to the experiences of a wide number of others as those of the primarily upper-middle-class white male world of contemporary classical composers.

Cults of personality around musicians work by similar means to those by which royals and other aristocrats have used to consolidate their social position for centuries.[32] These require an innate faith in the idea that such individuals are 'not like us', that they have some superior wisdom, gifts and perceptions (and 'taste'[33]) that are simply unavailable to the rest of humanity. And this often requires a mythologizing of the artists' life and circumstances, artificially playing up the more extraordinary aspects. In the case of those born to privilege, in one sense they *are* indeed 'not like us' ('us' here being the less-privileged majority) as they have little experience of the sorts of issues involving employment, finance, finding a home, and so on that most other people do – but this could equally be argued to betoken the limitations of their perspective as the superiority of them.[34]

Such highly undemocratic views of the artist actually serve to undermine further the case for subsidy – for comparable mystical cults of personality are used to far

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[31] For one of countless examples of this style of biography, see Humphrey Carpenter, *Dennis Potter* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998).

[32] There are many examples of discourse of this type; one archetypal example is found in Luciano Martinis's biography of Giacinto Scelsi, published by the Fondazione Isabella Scelsi, to be found at www.scelsi.it/biografia/biografia.htm (accessed 29 April 2007). For an examination of constructions of Scelsi, especially in terms of class, see Eric Drott, 'Class, Ideology and *il caso Scelsi*', *The Musical Quarterly*, 89/1 (spring 2006), pp. 80–120. Another can be found in Alex Ross, 'Roll over Beethoven: Thomas Adès', *The New Yorker*, 2 November 1998.

[33] The role of artistic 'taste' as an index of social status is dealt with at length in Pierre Bourdieu's classic *Distinction: A Social Critique of Taste*, translated Richard Nice (London and New York: Routledge, 1986), especially the opening chapters 'The Aristocracy of Culture', 'The Titles of Cultural Nobility' and 'Cultural Pedigree', pp. 9–96.

[34] In case this chapter sounds at this point like something written for the didactic anarchist newspaper *Class War*, I should indicate that it is not my intention by any means to dismiss the work of those of privileged backgrounds (who make up a disproportionate percentage of composers), simply to set into wider perspective assumptions concerning the superiority of their outlook.

more powerful effect in the case of many popular musicians, for example, who are able to build highly successful careers without state subsidy. If some music or performances are supposedly valuable primarily because of the fascinating allure of their creators, what then makes these creators more worthy of subsidy than these latter celebrities who fascinate a great deal more people?

The adoption of discourses similar to those found in celebrity culture (albeit slightly less shamelessly at present), in order to 'sell' contemporary composers and performers, may ultimately have the reverse effect. For those musicians who benefit from this sort of discourse most of all are the Luciano Pavarottis, the Vanessa-Maes, the Nigel Kennedys, the Karl Jenkinses, all of whom present a highly standardized range of music sold on the basis of highly developed and exploited cults of personality. Those in contemporary music may achieve a small degree of public visibility as a result – this has occurred to an extent in the case of Thomas Adès, who is occasionally interviewed in lifestyle magazines – but does not this make it more difficult to obtain public consent for the state support of artists who may be less glamorous personalities or talented self-publicists, but nonetheless are producing vital and important *work*?

But as any student of mass consumerism knows, hype requires a relative standardization of the product on offer, so as to focus attention primarily on the ways in which it is packaged and sold. This is precisely the situation that afflicts contemporary music today, and those who play up cults of personalities around its creators are serving to further exacerbate this unfortunate situation. Here the discourse is found severely wanting.

Conclusion

These sections present just a few examples of ways in which the realm of discourse around music-making can affect and influence both the acts of composition and performance and also their very possibility. Aesthetic discourse exists whether we like it or not – it is a necessary element within the operation of any developed cultural infrastructure such as is required for the continued existence of artistic activity in a public realm. It is, I believe, therefore paramount that we continue to investigate and question the very premises and assumptions of all existing discourses, especially in times like that of the time of writing, when questions of state funding of new music are under increasing threat. The marketplace provides its own discourse as well, one whose values intrude ever-increasingly into the cultural arena that I think many involved in contemporary music would wish to preserve in some form. The implications of this should I hope be sufficient reason to stress the necessity of developing, expanding and refining discourses which allow for forms of cultural valorization that are based upon coherent and defendable alternatives to those of exchange value.