

The Beautiful and the Political

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*Competing and polarised positions related to the possible political nature of material in contemporary music are exemplified by the work of postmodern composers and of post-war modernist composers. Whilst the former argue for the political nature of their compositions by the inclusion of contemporary issues and imagery, the latter argue for the political nature of their manipulation of otherwise politically neutral musical material. This opposition can be understood as a dialectic between content and form, and is expressed by Adorno as the opposition between representational and 'committed' work. This paper examines one example of each type of work—Luigi Nono's *Il Canto Sospeso* (1955-56) and Johannes Kreidler's *Audioguide*—and their relationship to a conception of the 'beautiful' in music. These expressions of the 'political' offer a framework through which the musically beautiful can be interrogated in the opposition of committed and autonomous artworks, and understood as an experience of alienation. Eco's exploration of *Entfremdung* and Kristeva's concept of abjection can both be employed to argue that the 'political' dimension of autonomous works offers the potential for a radical experience of beauty as a transcendence derived from present conditions, whilst committed works negate beauty as a condition of re-presenting the present.*

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The subject of beauty is not often discussed in relationship to the question of politics in music; the topic does not often come up in questions of aesthetics in late twentieth and early twenty-first century music at all. Perhaps this is because concerns of the material and the political seem to negate or take precedence over the concept of the musically beautiful, or because a modernist approach to composition conceives of material in the abstract, yielding the formalist view that the perception of beauty arises from the perception of the *poietic* process. However the concept of beauty does have something to add to the discussion of politics in recent music, and in particular to the understanding of the possible links between compositional aesthetics and the political.

The most commonly invoked sense of the word 'beauty' is a popular construction of the term that has its roots in nineteenth century aesthetics. This links beauty with potentially separate ideas of transcendence or of the sublime, of aesthetic experience, and in many more informal conceptions with the tonal narratives of nineteenth century music. In this understanding, 'transcendence' is the key concept, and the link of transcendence with tonality possibly

prevents the understanding of atonal works as beautiful. The ‘journey of transcendence’—from worldly to otherworldly experience—is closely allied with the tonal journey. However, the history of aesthetics is supposed to chart the re-thinking of beauty, in line with the art and understanding of the present. There are many, competing, and non-transcendental narratives of beauty to be found in the aesthetic philosophy of the past. These reflect the social and artistic circumstances of the time, for example the use of religious references in the works of Tinctoris and Zarlino, the appeal to reason in Plato, the appeal to scientific proportions in the Enlightenment, and the linking of beauty with virtue in the work of Ficino. A single theory does not encompass beauty or aesthetic experience throughout the history of music, and the theories of the past would address contemporary art equally as badly as does a transcendent theory of beauty. In addition, such theories of beauty also speak to the transient nature of the description of beauty and the aesthetic experience throughout history. Both the marginalisation of music aesthetics within philosophy and music, and the capitalist reliance of the musical institutions on the reproducibility of tonal music, play a role in the problem of the lack of deviation from the tonal conception of beauty in musical discourse today.

Exceptions can, of course, be found, and one of these is Lachenmann’s (1980) treatise on beauty. Lachenmann describes exactly this problem of the mis-identification of beauty, and the use of the beauty-narrative as a cover for nostalgia and conservatism, in the following statement:

Today the call for beauty is more suspect than ever—whether the concept is a pluralism embracing all conceivable types of hedonism, or else a reactionary hangover after false hopes and promises, or just academicism of whatever sort. Its proponents betray themselves over and over again as they cry out for ‘nature’, for tonality, for something positive, ‘constructive’, for ‘comprehensibility at last’ and respond with loyal quotations from Bruckner, Mahler and Ravel. It is high time the concept of beauty be rescued from the speculations of corrupt spirits, and the cheap pretensions of avant-garde hedonists, sonority-chefs, exotic-meditationists and nostalgia-merchants. Once integrated into an overall theory of aesthetics and composition, the concept is no longer suitable for the prophets of popularity, the apostles of nature and tonality, and the fetishists of academicism and tradition. The mission of art lies neither in fleeing from, nor in flirting with, the contradictions which mould the consciousness of our society, but in coming to grips with them and dialectically mastering them. (1980, p.22)

Lachenmann’s complaint bears the traces of a modernist approach to music, but his call for the radical reinterpretation of beauty also bears many similarities with Umberto Eco’s description of alienation in *The Open Work* (Eco, 1989). Eco outlines three types of alienation: rejection, alienation from or *Verfremdung*, and alienation in/to or *Entfremdung*, of which the last is the most important. *Entfremdung* is alienation within a formal system, which involves dialectical tension between invention and manner, and between freedom and formal restrictions. Eco

claims that by obeying the formal conventions of tonality, the composer has let the system 'act on its own' (1989, p.139). Tonal works written in the present day are considered formally devoid of meaning which does not belong to an historical society. Composers, Eco says, revolted against the tonal system not merely because it made it impossible for them to say the things they wished to say, but 'because its structure mirrors or embodies a world view' (that does not or should not belong to contemporary society: 1989, p.139).

Indeed, Eco believes that formal conventions in tonal music, and states of mind, emotion or cognition, are so strong that they have become ingrained: 'the listener can no longer hear them without instinctively relating them to a particular moral, ideological, or social reality' (1989, p. 140). As a result, the atonal composer expresses '[their] refusal of a system of communication that guarantees [them] an audience if, and only if, [they are] willing to submit to an obsolete value system' (1989, p.140). Therefore, the rejection of the tonal system alienates the composer in/to an undesirable set of cultural values. Eco writes that the tonal system is able to communicate only 'in appearance' (1989, p.141). This is because 'language offers us a representation of the phenomenal world that has nothing to do with the one we encounter on a daily basis' (1989, p.141). Therefore, the artist who protests through form (in this case through rejection of tonality) transforms the tonal system by alienating themselves to it, and accepts a social world in crisis by forming a system that exists on disorder (within the previous system).

Thus, Eco is clear that alienation is the goal of the artist and of art, and this type of alienation is the beauty that Lachenmann describes. It also holds a lot in common with a description of aesthetic experience which, far from being a comfortable confirmation of tonal expectations, is rather a radical encounter with art. For Eco, and for Lachenmann, confirmation of (tonal) expectation *interrupts* this experience, since alienation is precluded by the re-enforcing of tonality's 'particular moral, ideological, or social reality'. Both Lachenmann and Eco support the idea that composition with particular materials can, in and of itself, be political, and that musical politics can be gleaned as a facet of aesthetic experience, and not solely in direct action arising from the experience of music.

Further support for this point of view can be found in Adorno's work. In the short essay 'Commitment' Adorno (2007) reflects on political aesthetics in literature. Adorno challenges the idea—which comes from Jean Paul Sartre—that committed art is the only type of art that can challenge power structures in society. Committed art, in Adorno's conception, has an overt political message, whilst autonomous art has no overt message and serves itself. This does not preclude autonomous art from being political, but creates the possibility for artworks that serve longer term political goals. Adorno's examples are the theatrical works of Brecht and

Beckett. Brecht's more abstract works are deemed to be most aesthetically successful, but Beckett's works more successful still since he is 'uncommitted'. In comparison, writes Adorno, committed works seem 'like pantomimes' (2007, p.191). Indeed, Adorno points out the role of performance in representing reality, as in epic theatre, rather than illuminating it, as in Beckett's work. But further than this, he writes that even the focus on autonomy is 'sociopolitical in nature' (2007, p.195).'

These competing positions in literature can also be found in music today, and a particular opposition between the work of post-war modernist composers, and postmodern composers can be identified. Competing and polarised positions, related to the possible political nature of material in contemporary music, are exemplified by the work of these two groupings. Whilst the former argue for the political nature of their composition by, for example, the inclusion of contemporary issues and imagery as materials in their works, the latter argue for the political nature of their manipulation of otherwise politically neutral musical material. These polarised positions are represented in facets of two musical examples that this article will briefly touch upon: *Il Canto Sospeso* (1955-56) by Italian composer Luigi Nono, as a representative example of post-war modernism, and Johannes Kreidler's seven-hour work *Audioguide* (2014), which was premiered at Darmstadt in 2014 as a representative example of the postmodern in music.¹ This opposition can be understood as a dialectic between content and form, that Adorno expresses by using 'Commitment' as the opposition between 'committed' and autonomous work. I'll briefly make references to the materials of these two works, but will give a greater focus to the possibilities for aesthetic experience and the perception of beauty in each, and the possible link of these with the conception of the political.

Il Canto Sospeso is perhaps one of the most well-known examples of *engagierte musik* (socially committed music). Its basic materials and inspirations can perhaps be divided into two categories: those which might be thought of as musically autonomous, and those which might come under the category of 'committed'. The music contains many elements and permutations of serial organisation—and other structured methods of organisation which are not necessarily serial—and can be thought of as a cantata for voices and large ensemble. Luigi Nono has also explicitly stated the influences of Maderna, Varèse and Scriabin on the sound-world of the music (Nono, 1987 in Nielinger, 2006, p.116). These aspects of the work—a highly structured and regulated *poietic* process, the necessity of concert-hall presentation, the difficulty of the instrumental and vocal parts, which require performance by highly specialised individuals—fit well with the definition of autonomous music, in Adorno's terms. However, the title of the

¹ Kreidler has endorsed the term 'new conceptualism' within a public debate around this post-modern approach to music. Within this debate, 'neo-conceptualism' has been suggested by critics of this compositional approach who compare it unfavourably with developments in visual arts in the 1970s.

piece comes from a poem in English by Ethel Rosberg. Nono's title translates as 'the suspended song' which in the original English appears as 'the song unsung'; the texts used in the work contain fragments of letters written by ten freedom fighters facing execution from six countries (including the USSR, Poland, Greece, Italy, Germany and Bulgaria), and there can also be said to be a direct influence of Schoenberg's *A Survivor from Warsaw* (1947). On the level of text, then, there is an element of commitment.

Recent analyses of the work have sought to bring out the multi-faceted use of compositional technique in the piece. Carola Nielinger (2006) and Kathryn Bailey (1992) both address the *poietics* of the music in some considerable detail, and both point out that musicological assumptions about the use of serialism in the work, mostly derived from Reginald Smith-Brindle's analysis of serialist technique in only one of its movements, have neglected the depth of technical variation in the music (Bailey, 1992, p.280). Both Nielinger and Bailey draw special attention to the final instrumental section of the work: its 8th movement. In these analyses, both musicologists give special focus to operations in pitch, dynamics, instrumentation and texture, and what Nielinger calls the 'structural use of density' (2006, p.117), but also point out the levels on which the work evades analysis. Nielinger's assessment uses Nono's sketch material to compare the resultant score to the initial plans for the work, and Bailey, who did not have access to the sketches when completing her analysis, expresses even more puzzlement at the work's construction. She writes, 'I have come to the conclusion that while I can explain the organisation of several parameters of this work there are still many important decisions for which I can offer no explanation' (1992, p.280), and later that the 8th movement has 'proven to be resistant' to her efforts (1992, p.320). Her lack of reference to the sketches perhaps brings her analytical conclusions closer to those of listeners who are, for the most part, in the same position.

The level at which this work appears to evade analysis is perhaps the most interesting to my discussion. Both Nielinger and Bailey are interested in *poiesis* but do little to address the *esthesis* level of the work. In fact, Bailey begins her analysis by drawing attention to the impossibility of the *esthesis* process to engage with the many levels of parametric operations in works of integral or multiple serialism (1992, p.279). This *esthesis* process is perhaps the literal 'song unsung' in this work: the ability of the music to express the inexpressible is what cannot be discovered by formalist analysis. Nono's analysts are surprised not to find in the score what was, perhaps, never resident there in the first place. Despite the idea that the selection of particular materials could be legitimately described as political, this work can be described as more than the sum of its materials. Of course aesthetic experience *is* an *esthesis* process, occurring between the listener and the work, and this radical experience of incomprehension, even in the face of an overwhelming amount of analytical data fits, the definition of *entfremdung: Il Canto*

Sospeso is political not only in its materials but in the listener's relationship to them, and in this respect it is also beautiful.

In contrast, Johannes Kreidler's *Audioguide* (2013-14) more readily gives up its poetics, despite its length. The work was primarily composed 'in public': anyone who follows Kreidler on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube or his website would have been able to view the images, sounds and ideas that he uploaded regularly during the compositional process. The piece has been created for four actors, six musicians, videos, sound, and 'guests'. The seven hour performance includes many quotations, including from Kreidler's own works, a tirade against the reproduction of 'dusty' old artforms from past times—including by composers such as Helmut Lachenmann, Mathias Spahlinger and Klaus Huber—that finds support from Hegel, the destruction of a large number of violins on stage (a penchant of Kreidler's perhaps, or a reference to his destruction of a 'cello and a violin in a his *Protestaktion* work), and a meta-analysis of the piece itself, given on stage by the composer towards the end.

Audioguide enacts, or performs, many of the ideas that have become associated with postmodernism in art and music in its eclecticism, irony, anti-historicism, and irreverence. Some aspects of the piece might be seen to be autonomous: the durational aspect of its somewhat extreme length is perhaps a political statement in itself,² and there are some periods of instrumental music without accompaniment. But there can be little doubt about the 'committed' status of the work. This is borne out in the readily recognisable nature of many of the images, videos, and quotations used. Unlike in Nono's work, this is an intervention of the composer in the *esthetic* process. For Eco, the potential for unlimited semiosis is present in both modernist and postmodern artworks, but in *Audioguide* this is stunted by Kreidler's popular culture signifiers: they are, by their nature, immediately accessible, unlike Nono's subtle manipulations of musical parameters, but this also limits their potential for future meaning. This is perhaps most explicit in sections of the work such as that which uses imagery of the attack on the World Trade Centre on the 11th September 2001. Here, Kreidler links western music with violence, just as authors such as Susan McClary (1991) and Kofi Agawu (2009) have done. However, unlike McClary's and Agawu's assessment of music in its sociocultural context, this music removes both the musical and social contexts from the audience's consideration. Notation and imagery stand in a synecdochic relationship with both music and 'the political', evoking both but potentially commenting on neither.

² One might note the duration of the longest work previously premiered at Darmstadt, Morton Feldman's *String Quartet No. 2* (1983) of around 5.5 hours in duration, the six-hour concert presented at the close of the Darmstadt Summer Course in 2012 and much commented upon for its duration, and the fact that *Audioguide* is a full hour longer than even this; a fact that cannot have escaped the composer.

The issue of unlimited semiosis is one which can also be raised with respect to the *esthesis* process in the case of this music. Whilst this process of listener associations cannot be completely delineated—something held up as a central idea within a postmodern conception of art—the obviousness of intended meaning in the choice of some signifiers also cannot be relied upon. As well as invoking both the abstract ideas of music and politics, Kreidler clearly also intends to invoke Stockhausen’s oft-quoted statement that these terrorist attacks were ‘the greatest work of art possible in the cosmos’ and that they achieved ‘something in one act’ that ‘we couldn’t even dream of in music’ (e.g. Tommasini, 2001).³ However, British listeners may also be reminded of the same idea evoked in Chris Morris’s 2005 creation *Nathan Barley*.⁴ Morris’s satire takes in Stockhausen, Banksy and a superficial postmodernism found in hipster culture, but Kreidler’s work also invites this (quite probably) unwanted association. The issue here is not one of the intent of the composer, but of the potential for the understanding and experience of the work. Just as the ‘beauty’ of *Il Canto Sospeso* arguably exists outside of its musical parameters, so a potentially disruptive political message can be identified outside of *Audioguide*, in possible inter-objective comparison materials.

These have been two very short and very specific examples, but their central point is that the comparison of the political aesthetics of these composers can be most usefully situated in the *esthetics* rather than the *poietics* of the music. Recent anti-aesthetic thought has recognised ‘aesthetics’ itself within the 20th Century to perpetuate an institutionalised concept of beauty rather than one arising from artworks, and Kreidler’s work does attempt to reject any institutionalised aesthetics in both its content and its presentation. Jacques Rancière, makes explicit the way in which aesthetic definitions arise from social, and not from artistic perceptual-, truth-, or beauty-related concerns, calling this ‘the aesthetic regime of the arts’, when he writes,

[A]rt is no longer identified as a specific difference within ways of doing or through criteria of inclusion and evaluation, allowing one to judge artistic conceptions and applications, but as a mode of sensible being specific to its products (2009a, p.65).

This emphasises the notion that cultural conditions are as important in the definition of art and beauty as the artworks themselves. But Rancière also outlines the problem of experience, which indicates that there may yet be a salvageable aesthetic experience, separate from the aesthetic regime of the arts, when he writes:

³ And reported widely in the popular press.

⁴ In particular the images contained within the enclosed book with Morris (2005) *Nathan Barley, Fucking with your head yeah?* pp9-10; pp45-46; pp55-56.

at the most general level [...] there is meaning in what seems not to have any meaning, something enigmatic about what seems self-evident, a spark of thought in what appears to be an anodyne detail. These figures are not the *materials* upon which analytic interpretation proves its ability to interpret cultural formation. They are *testimony* to the existence of a particular tension between thought and non-thought, a particular way that thought is present within the sensible materiality, meaning within the insignificant, and an involuntary element within conscious thought (2009b, p.3).

A frequent criticism of political responses in music—particularly those of musical modernism—is that if political success can be seen in the subsequent effects of the work then few works have had any discernible effect at all. In light of this, the political successes of the ‘Nutmcracker Group’ in the Netherlands might be contrasted with the lasting musical, but not political legacy of the work of Cornelius Cardew.⁵ There might be a tension between the highly organised nature of the musical materials in Nono’s work and its political aims; Adorno (2002, p.196) associated integral serialism with totalitarian regimes and possibly would not agree with my application of his thought to endorse this music, but there is also a tension between the highly political agenda of Kreidler’s work and the observation that nature of his materials is perhaps insufficient to support this agenda through *poesis* and signification alone: many criticisms of this work focus on the way that Kreidler’s presentation of himself as composer-as-author obscures engagement with the materials of the work in many of his projects, and this is perhaps supported by his insertion of himself into *Audioguide* in his attempt to explain it.

In order to reconcile these points, I return to the musically beautiful. The ‘beauty’ conceived of, at the opening of this discussion, as a radical facet of aesthetic experience, contrasted with a confirmation of tonal expectations, can be augmented with Julia Kristeva’s (1992) concept of abjection. For Kristeva, the abject is an experience between the subject and the object (1992, p. 1).

It ‘disturbs identity, system, order’, it ‘does not respect border, positions, rules’, and is ‘the in-between, the ambiguous, composite’ (1992, p.4). Aesthetic experience can be thought of as an abject experience. The ways that I have described it so far are indeed between the subject and the object, and do not require the recognition of an accepted symbolic order. The tension between learned behaviour and the real experience of the encounter with art is expressed by Kristeva: ‘I abject *myself* with the same motion through which “I” claim to establish

⁵ The ‘notenkraker’ group was a group of Dutch composers who protested the lack of contemporary music programming in the Netherlands. Their name translates literally as ‘nut cracker’ but also has the sense of musical notes (noten) and of squatting (kraken; colloquial). The Notenkrakersactie somewhat realised their aims which they had drawn attention to through disrupting orchestral and other performances at the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam. Their work is comparable with the concept of *Protestaktionkunst*.

myself (1992, p.3). So, the aesthetic experience - this experience of beauty, is one of alienation, abjection.

This abjection is expressed by Nono's analysts who find his work impenetrable, even as they appear to penetrate it. Nono's rejection of a transparent compositional process is a rejection of the beautiful as the immediately comprehensible: he has composed an experience of alienation that has the *esthesis* effect of communicating a political message which perhaps cannot be otherwise meaningfully inscribed in music. Conversely, Kreidler's rejection of autonomy is also an anti-aesthetic rejection of beauty: he favours comprehensibility. Returning to Adorno, Kreidler's work fulfills the 'performance' of the political that Adorno finds in committed work, and there are many reasons to imagine this as a 'pantomime' when compared with Nono. In contrast, Nono's work is the enactment of the longer-term political goals found in Adorno's 'autonomous' work. But the search for the musically beautiful perhaps makes this contrast the most stark: if the radical, alienating and abject elements of experience can be found in the *esthesis* dimension of the work, then criteria for politically successful aesthetics might also be identified on these terms.

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