Composition and Consciousness
The Precarious Negotiation between the Aesthetic and the Worldly

Wieland Hoban

Introductory Note

In this text, I have decided to step away from the academic approach I would normally use in an essay in favour of what is intended to be a more personal inquiry into matters of compositional production today. In keeping with the original meaning of the word "essay," I present an *attempt* to formulate thoughts touching on matters that go beyond mere intellectual legitimation and seek to uncover past motivations and future perspectives. This encompasses both the ways in which composers and their listeners evade critique through self-inflation and the ways in which our wider cultural situation today makes new demands on that same sense of self-critique. What appears to be an abrupt change of focus in the last section of the text, which contains thoughts on how to deal with the respective imperatives of worldly awareness and artistic integrity, is in fact a continuation of the same investigation of the pitfalls of compositional thinking--simply with a different degree of magnification.

For economic, structural and cultural reasons, the composition of autonomous[1] "art music" today is a more academic activity than it has been since the Renaissance. Rather than explaining technical aspects of composition or referring either to abstract philosophical concepts or naïve interpretations of political responsibility, as composers often do, I hope to offer the reader a few stimuli for reflection that mirror composition as an activity that is personal, yet also in the world; by necessity self-centred, but in some way answerable to others. This by no means entails a dismissal of more objective analysis; examinations of specific works do not generally profit from a reliance on the creator's own musings, which very often distract from the real questions they raise. It is simply an attempt to reflect on what motivates and influences the compositional processes, and to move towards a deeper understanding of the same through a critique of assumptions and easy solutions.

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What is the meaning of composition? Not its technical meaning, or even its specific aesthetic meaning; rather its existential and ethical meaning, its implications. When we place notes or sounds on paper, or in a computer, or in a performance space, what is their location? Where are they in relation to the world around them? It is certainly possible for an artist to disregard such questions and concentrate merely on the art "itself"--or the phantom thereof--rather than attempting to understand or examine these matters in his work. This, however, inevitably places him at a remove from the world. Hardly a novelty

[1] The principle of autonomy is referred to here not in the more specific sense of freedom from or rejection of traditional expressive categories or referentiality, but simply to distinguish music that is not written to celebrate an occasion or reinforce dramatic effects in cinema in theatre. In other words, the opposite of *Gebrauchsmusik*.

among artists--but a missed opportunity. A missed opportunity to make art live through a reflection upon itself and what goes on around it. The art of a complete solipsist (if there is such a thing), as impressive or even overwhelming as it might be, is likely to lack the deeper sense of humanity that can be found in the work of one not concerned purely with one's own own creativity or attitudes, or disposed to an unquestioning application of one's craft. The problem with ascribing qualities such as solipsism or humanity to music in the first place lies in their subjectivity, of course. Some listeners might find the laments of Bartók's Sixth String Quartet richer in human warmth, sensitivity and reflection than the grander emotionality of Mahler's Ninth Symphony; but what can we point to as objective criteria? Can such claims be proved or disproved--or simply accepted or dismissed? When both the composer's reliance on expressive categories and the listener's dependence on conventionalised emotional responses are major factors in the artistic process, it is incredibly difficult to speak of "intrinsic" qualities. This is particularly clear in the case of contemporary music, where the absence of such signification systems mostly leads to a break in the communication chain and the isolation of composers.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that a conscious appeal to any real or imagined listener might change this. As soon as art panders, as soon as it seeks the approval of its recipients, it loses the quality that makes it unique. One of the most fundamental aesthetic experiences is the encounter with something that one could not only not have produced, but in fact not even have imagined oneself. If, however, the work one experiences seems an accommodating fulfilment of one's personal wishes, one is no longer confronted with anything beyond one's own comprehension, and art can only make a lasting impact upon those who encounter it by presenting them with something that is, in a sense, beyond their comprehension. This should not be misunderstood; it is not a matter of baffling the viewer, or listener, of dazzling the audience with methods and ideas they cannot follow. Those are superficial aspects that have nothing to do with the comprehension meant here, which relates more to the sense of understanding as appropriation: if something is genuinely unique, if we perceive it truly as another, then we cannot subsume or reify it, we cannot appropriate it as belonging to the realm of our own imagination, for, no matter how close we may grow to it, it will always remain *itself*, born of *its* own imagination.

Honesty and Exhibition

In relation to the character of the artist, art can be the most personal expression--or the least. Because it presents an alternative to reality, even if it refers explicitly to the material world, artists can show themselves in a different light, on each individual's own terms. Or, to put it slightly differently: the artist can present a type of perception corresponding to his or her personal vision. Though this may be more speculative or questioning than an explicitly personal expression, it is certainly subject to the same influences, albeit probably in a more mediated form. It can be a mask to don in order to fulfil those fantasies that are incompatible with real-world constraints, to escape from the things that make humans ridiculous, wretched or simply uninteresting. This does not even require any concrete imitation of life--the mere fact of being able to dictate to one hundred or more performers what they will do during a specific space of time, to give a particularly explicit example, gives the composer a power he or she would rarely have in

other situations. But it can be equally true on a smaller scale; the implementation of strict serial or algorithmic processes can produce results of a perfection and symmetry that real life can only aspire to, and that perhaps allows the artist who admires them to forget the messiness of the ordinary for a time. But while the masks the artist uses in order to display greatness in this alternative world may be effective enough to convince the recipient of the truth of the pose, closer inspection and longer engagement will usually reveal what is show and what is authentic. Like "humanity," this latter notion is problematic because it invokes something that is clearly supposed to be positive and endearing, but may be impossible to define. I would argue, however, that it is not merely a fiction; we shall return to these questions.

While issues of representation and publicity are more directly involved in the visual arts, and to a lesser extent in literature, music must rely on vaguer affective associations to achieve comparable results. To avoid misunderstandings, I should emphasise that I consider very little music purely authentic or purely show, and that identifying an artistic pose does not disqualify the work that contains it, but simply opens the possibility of a deeper understanding in terms of what it might be, rather than how it wishes to be perceived. The question is: how much is the artist willing to reveal about his or her inner self? Or indeed: is there any wish--or necessity--to reveal something in this subjective fashion at all? There is no shortage of art that attempts to invoke objectivity, whether as an unquestioned representation of nature or life--as in the early works of Xenakis or Grisey, the visual art of *Neue Sachlichkeit* or the early films in the *Dogma* movement--or with an emphasis on the artificiality of its medium, manifest in the perceptual games found in the novels of Alain Robbe-Grillet and other practitioners of the *nouveau roman*, the video works of Bill Viola, the plays of Brecht or the music of Mauricio Kagel. In the cases of Robbe-Grillet or Robert Pinget, and to an extent some of Samuel Beckett's prose, a neutral and apparently objective narrative style is presented and gradually undermined by the inevitable distortions that result from human agency, whether inadvertently or deliberately, for example through the use of an unreliable narrator in Robbe-Grillet's novel *The Voyeur*.[2] Such approaches form a contrast to the more overt subjectivity of a great deal of music until the middle of the 20th century, which--with such notable exceptions as Stravinsky or Varèse--still relied heavily on the expressive legacy of late Romanticism. If the aim is a more subjective one, is an artist content to follow his or her expressive instincts, whatever conventions they might rely on, or does he or she rather seek to bolster them with artificial emphasis? Are composers content to let the music speak for itself, or do they feel a need to announce it? Aggrandisement shares something with objectivity, namely an intention to avoid showing one's intimate self; distance, formality and ephemerality are perhaps even more effective, as they are less transparent.

In practice, of course, this separation of qualities is rather more complex than such a schematic categorisation would suggest. If we consider Bruckner, for example, a man whose symphonies often project expansiveness, timelessness, monolithic grandeur and universal significance, yet who was, by various accounts, a provincial buffoon who would be reduced to grovelling by the mere presence of aristocracy, who inserted or removed cymbal crashes according to the whims of the nobles and patrons with whom he was so desperate to curry favour, it would be easy to present the music as the escapist self-aggrandisement of a man who was anything but grand in daily life, a compensation

[2] Alain Robbe-Grillet, *The Voyeur*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1958).

for lack of character and constant fawning through aspirations to cosmic importance. This, however, would disregard the quality of the music--and indeed the fact that Bruckner is being debated at all means there is more in the music than only that. Is it perhaps possible for someone whom the real world denies understanding or an elevated status, who fails to achieve some kind of success in everyday life--whether professional or personal--to realise his or her potential in the music in a way that is not simply a pose, but rather reveals that whole realm of intensity and uniqueness within that is incompatible with the composer's material or social situation, yet is more than the fool's paradise of escapism or the self-assurance of the solipsist?

One problem here is that the individual's connection to society is more complex than simply either being a member or being isolated, and the dichotomy of inside and outside is therefore usually a gross simplification.[3] It is very difficult to address such questions without taking into account the entire cult of genius around artists, and thus composers, connected to such ideas of inner greatness and immunity to the mundane standards of earthly reality. Though one might suppose this way of thinking to have died after the 19th century, it remains present at a less explicit level, especially in Britain and America; this can be observed in many newspaper reviews of concerts, which often rely on a stylisation of the composer's persona or show a yearning for the music to offer a pleasant change from reality. Often enough, the degree to which the artist is said to have suffered, to have been maladjusted or tragically misunderstood directly influences the sense of a genius transcending everyday life. Artists: a species of their own, not to be held accountable in the same ways as "normal" people. This is due not only to the pose of the artists themselves, however, but also to the audiences and exegetes who wish to romanticise and idealise the characteristics of figures they admire; escapism is evident not only among the artists who seek a more exalted plane of existence, but also among the listeners who value art as a safe haven from the horror or banality of everyday life. The combination of these factors makes it difficult to discuss the question of artistic personality in a way that rigorously criticises pretence, yet does not eradicate the individual figure in favour of exclusively focusing on the works and their empirical content. Jettisoning biographical baggage may initially clean the slate, but at some point the analyst will most likely discover elements of those same characteristics in the artistic material. As helpful as the possibility of separating the composer from his or her music might seem, of listening to a piece without knowing that its creator beat his wife, collected stuffed animals or was a closet homosexual, the ultimate reality is that one is dealing in each case with *one* person--not with two, the persona and the person.[4] And that person is one who--in all but the most extreme cases--exists in a society, whether on its margins or at its centre. What makes someone laughable or off-putting in everyday life is as likely to surface in their music, however it may conceal itself, as those aspects that make them admirable or congenial. There is one mitigating factor, however: though in part a *product* of his or her respective society, the artist is not necessarily in the imagined *presence* of society in the act of creation; in the traditional, solitary work process, the artist is undisturbed by any

[3] An exception to this rule could be mental illness or disability (for example autism) of a kind that impairs, even eliminates the individual's perception of anything outside of him or herself.

[4] Certainly it is possible for one person to divide themselves into two roles and lead some form of double life; in a literal sense, however, one is still ultimately dealing with a single human being.

physical spectators. This means that those character traits which are concealed or distorted in company may be apparent in a more unmitigated form in the works.

Accountability and Evasion

What are the stakes for the creative artist? What are the risks? For a composer, the placing of an individual note rarely amounts to an act of great daring, as it is usually through the larger constellation of points and movements that the music's content comes to be recognised as such. In very sparse textures, a single note can take on rather greater significance, so exposed that a passage's success or failure, its authenticity or pretence, may depend on it; this applies to much of Luigi Nono's music, for example. In the majority of cases, however, especially in dense or opulent textures, the composer is unlikely to be held accountable for every detail. Whether one is dealing with works reliant on larger-scale effects, such as Ligeti's *Atmosphères* or *Metastaseis* by Xenakis, or on figural polyphony, such as Ferneyhough's *Carceri d'Invenzione I* or *Répons* by Boulez, it is rarely the smallest detail within a field that will determine its ultimate effect. But what does that mean—"accountable?" Accountable to whom? There are several possibilities: 1) to oneself: this is the most fundamental artistic standard; 2) to the listener: this is perhaps natural, but also dangerous; 3) to colleagues, experts and academic standards: this encourages discipline, but can jeopardise the entire project.

Different attempts have been made to deal with the criterion of accountability. One of the most fundamental was the serial method in the 1950s. Its originator, Arnold Schönberg, had not aspired to any such universal accountability, to the possibility of pointing to any given note and justifying its position on the page according to numerical structures;[5] it had been a way to pick up the pieces after the atonal revolution and find structure within chaos, after which one could "compose as before"--in other words, using one's subjective artistic judgement. The notion of relying both on objective structures and subjective applications or interpretations of these was no novelty, to be sure; the techniques of Renaissance polyphony or the Classical formal language were also rules, postulates that needed to be accepted before composition could begin. And the relevant criteria in Schönberg's twelve-tone works, aside from the fact of the row and its forms, are in many cases the traditional forms that provide the framework. In his third and fourth string quartets, for example, he seeks to create sonata forms, themes with variations, scherzi and finales using pitch material organised neither tonally nor according to the atonal, but freely and carefully judged harmonies manifest in the works prior to his implementation of the dodecaphonic method. The success of his approach is debatable, but it makes it clear that Schönberg, like any other artist, needed some form of technical crutch; with this in place, he could follow his usual intuition, albeit within the constraints imposed by that crutch. In other words, he did not take the method to its limits, exploring its capacity and potential, but essentially used it to fulfil what he saw as a requirement of his time and left it at that. The further development and overt thematicisation of his method became the project of subsequent generations of composers.

It is interesting that Schönberg himself, whose pre-dodecaphonic music (for example the *Five Orchestral Pieces* op. 16) was of a radicality shocking for its time, and whose establishment of a new compositional method made music history, returned after his

[5] Though he was certainly a strict advocate of "clarity" as a compositional ideal.

discovery to what is essentially a conservative approach, that is to say a reliance on the traditional foundations of the Austro-German canon. The harmonic substance may be atonal, but a comparison between the rhythms and forms in his dodecaphonic works and those of his "free" atonal pieces reveals that the earlier works were atonal not only in their harmony, but actually in their entire compositional approach; one could perhaps speak of atonal rhythms and atonal developmental structures, often coupled with the use of miniature forms, as in the *Five Orchestral Pieces* or *Pierrot Lunaire*. On the one hand, then, Schönberg enabled musical developments that went well beyond his own lifetime, but essentially contented himself with his one discovery--as if his debt to musical innovation had now been paid, and he could do what came most naturally to him.[6] The generation that built on his discoveries, that of Boulez, Nono and Stockhausen, or indeed his own pupil John Cage, did something rather different: they retained the impulse of discovery and radicality and continued (perhaps with the exception of Boulez) to reformulate and reinvent their artistic approaches. Perhaps it was simply too much to ask that a single composer should both lay the seed for the future and develop its fruits himself.

Though Schönberg was clearly content with this approach, his case raises a further question: how often do composers shy away from the implications of their own work, how often do they evade the conclusions demanded by the music itself? And how do they do so? One of the most common ways is surely that of conserving an approach; rather than drawing on older traditions, a composer can easily lapse into recycling methods or situations from one piece to another instead of making each piece a unique statement (which is perhaps impossible). There are many examples of such reuse, from Bruckner to Varèse or Messiaen, but I shall mention two contemporary ones here, both showing this tendency in terms of formal structure: firstly, Helmut Lachenmann has often relied on what could be termed a dynamic arch. Such works as *Mouvement (– vor der Erstarrung)* (1982/84) for ensemble or the second string quartet *Reigen seliger Geister* (1989) are characterised by a process of increase and decrease, beginning with very quiet unpitched sounds (bowing muted strings or on the tailpiece, blowing without tone), building up to richer, intense textures with *moto perpetuo* elements--manifest as natural harmonic *glissandi* in the quartet--and finally fading into near-silence once again.[7] Secondly, several pieces by Brian Ferneyhough show one of two tendencies, and not infrequently both together: a gradual reduction of density and dynamic level, often coupled with paler instrumental colours, and a move towards lower registers on the part of wind instruments, generally through the use of larger members of the respective instrumental families. This is evident in the *Second String Quartet* (1979-80), *Carceri d'Invenzione III* (1986) for wind and percussion, *Mnemosyne* (1986) for bass flute and pre-recorded tape, *La Chûte d'Icare* (1988) for clarinet and ensemble and *Incipits* (1996) for viola and ensemble. The "fading out" occurs in a very natural and straightforward fashion in all cases, while the

[6] Referring to his Theme and Variations op. 43 in a letter to his pupil Josef Rufer, Schönberg wrote the following: "It is not one of my principal works… It is one of those works that one writes in order to enjoy one's own virtuosity…" (Cited in Malcolm MacDonald, *Schoenberg* [London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1976], p. 127.)

[7] One finds comparable arch forms in many of Giacinto Scelsi's works, which often begin with a quiet single pitch, fan out into a wider pitch field and trace certain progressions in more agitated textures before returning to a state of repose on the central pitch. His Fourth String Quartet (1964) is a particularly clear example of such a form.

downward move takes on a variety of guises. In *Carceri d'Invenzione III*, piccolo and flute in C disappear, leaving a lone alto flute accompanied by very delicate *tremoli* in the bass drum, tambourine and sleigh bells, which conclude the piece after the flute has stopped. Furthermore, the whole *Carceri d'Invenzione* cycle consists of seven parts, of which the first is a piccolo solo, *Superscriptio* (1981), the third a flute concerto, *Carceri d'Invenzione II* (1985), and the seventh a piece for bass flute and tape, *Mnemoysne* (1986). The cycle thus enacts this movement over its entire course, and its last piece ends by fading out on a single note. Towards the end of *La Chûte d'Icare*, the flute and oboe switch to bass flute and English horn (though the piccolo returns following that), and similarly, in *Incipits*, the flute and clarinet end playing bass flute and bass clarinet, their quiet textures augmented by the hissing of a rain tube.

Why should these strategies be considered evasive? What reason is there to attack artists for retaining certain ideas and retracing familiar paths from different angles? In principle, there is nothing questionable about it. And yet: when the process becomes predictable, the listener may well ask: does the composer realise that he or she is repeating him-/herself? If so, why do it? And if not, that undermines the composer's self-critical credibility. This would be a rather severe reaction, admittedly; it is almost impossible for artists to avoid repeating themselves entirely, and a series of similar approaches in different works may well create a cumulative depth of exploration that could not have been achieved in a single piece. Should one reproach any artist who follows one or more particular preoccupations over several works? No; it is rather the manner of the repetition that is decisive. While it is perhaps ultimately a matter of subjective judgement to decide at what point re-examination becomes recycling, there are certainly clues. In the cases of Lachenmann and Ferneyhough, one can clearly say that these mechanisms, or strategies, appeared in conjunction with stylistic consolidation. Lachenmann had established his vocabulary of unpitched instrumental sounds, most extensively on stringed instruments, in such radical pieces as the cello solo *Pression* (1969-70) or his first string quartet *Gran Torso* (1972), where he developed the variety of new playing techniques yet further. At the start of the 1980s, having explored that sound-world in considerable depth, he carefully began to give pitch a more prominent role once again. Rather than overturning his world of noises in favour of a return to what had preceded it, he built on what he had developed during the previous decade and expanded it through complex combinations of pitched and unpitched elements. Naturally enough, the characteristic arch form has a concentration of pitched textures at its peak; the thinner "noises" lead up to it like specks of light gradually uniting to form a glowing sphere and subsequently depict its fading. This can work as long as pitch is the exception; when this becomes a formula, however, that is no longer the case. Though *Reigen seliger Geister* stands out from other 1980s Lachenmann pieces for the particular intimacy and subtlety of its discourse, it is clear that by the time he composed it, pitch had taken on a regular role as one end of his sonic spectrum, but by no means an exception in his musical language. Thus it had lost its purpose, and he ultimately had no choice but to end his evasion of a more definite use of pitch. His third string quartet *Grido* (2001) finally showed both a new approach to integrating pitch and noises and a different formal strategy.

Though somewhat younger than Lachenmann, Ferneyhough had reached a similar level of stylistic security by the early 1980s--and had likewise moved from extreme,

highly ruptured works to music of greater fluency and more ambiguous expression. Pieces such as *Transit* (1972-74) for voices and chamber orchestra, *Time and Motion Study II* (1973/76) for cello and electronics or *Unity Capsule* (1973/76) for solo flute had not only contained a variety of extended playing techniques and fractured sounds, but had also been characterised by an uncompromising approach to form. This is perhaps clearest in *Time and Motion Study II*, at whose end the cello is locked within a narrow pitch range on the bottom notes of the detuned bottom string, alternately playing jagged iterations and grating, monotonous sustained pitches before breaking off abruptly. Clearly the policy of extremes evident in these works and others of the 1970s needed to be modified at some point to avoid stasis; it is interesting to observe, however, that by the time of *La Chûte d'Icare*--if not earlier--the more mediated strategy with its fadings and gradual transpositions had become sufficiently formulaic to dominate other aspects of the music, and its return in a similar *concertante* setting in *Incipits* made this all the more clear. The quality of evasiveness is perhaps clearer here than in Lachenmann's case, as Ferneyhough's music--especially in the works of the 1980s--is generally one of fluency and constant development. It is therefore constantly moving towards and away from provisional climaxes, seldom remaining in one state for long, and always retains an elusive character. Perhaps it is obvious that such music needs to fade rather than conclude, as the notion of a clear ending or beginning is questioned through the constant state of flux to begin with. There are many ways to approach the matter of inconclusive endings, however, and the fact that Ferneyhough relied so heavily on a particular approach makes it seem all too comfortable a solution, an elusion that is in keeping with the music's eloquent inconstancy and, in the worst case, amounts to an avoidance of finality as a stylistic feature rather than a specific structural or expressive necessity. It was in 1995, with the composition of his *String Trio*, that Ferneyhough managed to move beyond this, working once again with more fragmented forms and less mediated extremes while avoiding any exploitation of climactic melodrama. Though the piece ends quietly, its final moments are more like lonely whispers than a "tasteful ending." It is not the sound quality itself that indicates the level of commitment to a work's specific needs, but rather the context.

Autonomy and Awareness

The phenomenon known as globalisation has come to affect most aspects of life. On a practical level, this is manifest in the availability of food from many countries--not least as a way of defying seasonal restrictions--or products largely manufactured in distant corners of the globe (for a car to bear the label "made in Germany," only the final assembly actually needs to have taken place there; many of the parts come from Korea and China). On an aesthetic level, the combination of abundant commercial recordings, television, radio and Internet allows us to acquaint ourselves with art from distant cultures without laborious research; just as the advent of the aeroplane effectively reduced distances, enabling passengers to travel within hours to locations they would previously have required days or weeks to reach by boat, these different forms of transmission and access have seemingly reduced the distances between works of art from different continents. Those interested in learning about Indian music in the 1960s needed to devote time to studies or even travel to India, whereas today there are innumerable

electronic resources offering knowledge and sound free of charge. Bartók and Kodály had to travel to obscure corners of the Slavic world to collect the folk songs that interested them, but we can now download sound files of such recordings, however obscure and remote from commerce they may be.

Far from leading to a greater understanding of other cultures, however, this increase in availability has created a superficial coexistence of "others" where a modest degree of familiarity is easily gained, but a deeper engagement seems very laborious in comparison and is reserved for exceptional cases. This should not be condemned; choices have always been made, preferences have always been followed, and there is nothing reprehensible in having a degree of awareness of other areas than one's own immediate interests. The danger lies rather in misunderstanding the situation; if this superficial acquaintance is mistaken for substantial knowledge, the cultural material concerned is devalued and one drifts into a world of aesthetic delusion. For composers interested in other musical traditions, the temptation to draw on exotic influences becomes greater--they can now hear so much more Spanish music, to name but one example, than ever informed the mock-Spanish works of Debussy and Ravel. The illusion of immediacy or universality leads all too easily to a supermarket of influences in which an ingredient from Indonesia is procured as easily as one from Romania, and both can be adapted to suit the Central European palate. While the postmodern cultural discourse, whether in the fields of musicology or post-colonial studies, has placed great emphasis on acknowledging and accepting different manifestations of the "other," the current situation is one in which different cultures risk being "de-othered" because availability can be mistaken for similarity; when the enormous divergences between fundamental approaches to communication in different traditions are overlooked, true communication is even less likely to occur.

In a time characterised by a disclosure of things previously concealed, any artist must deal with the awareness that is thus forced on him or her. There is no need to participate in cultural tourism, of course, and distance from urban centres makes a rejection of such trends all the easier; but the clock cannot be turned back, any more than the serial revolution of the 1950s can be undone. Even the most superficial encounter with Arabic calligraphy or Japanese music can, if it has a profound effect, lead one to question the very validity of one's artistic activities. The notion of autonomy now takes on a rather different complexion to the meaning it had in Adorno's day; he was concerned with a resistance to simple effects and populist accessibility, but only had to take the factors of his Central European cultural heritage into account. Now, composers have to deal with the temptation both to pander to the conventions of their own field and to the desire for exotic thrills, whether those exotic elements are taken from different countries or simply from the popular culture of their own. Because autonomous composition is largely academic in its cultural location and reception, composers can still retreat to the safety of their own field and its traditions if they choose; it is at their own peril, however, that they ignore what goes on outside it. While it is naïve or disingenuous to rely on exotic references for effect, being faced with an artistic approach that is in some way very different to one's own should make one realise that other traditions achieve results that one's own cannot--and vice versa. There is no need for borrowing; the mere experience of different temporality in an Indian raga or percussive vocal intensity in an Inuit courtship song can show a composer what possibilities he or she may have missed until then. Far

from animating the composer to appropriate foreign material, it can show one just how much could still be developed within one's own musical language. If autonomy and awareness can be combined, artists can find ways to expand their compositional resources without pandering in any way to expectations of greater accessibility or amenability to consumption.

These are some ways in which to take into account the abundance of cultural material facing us today. But this does not mean that aesthetic standards must automatically be gauged within a multi-cultural context, and that this is the only one that poses risks; expectations and illusions abound wherever art is created, and there is no shortage of similar problems within the Western cultural tradition itself. As a reminder of this, let us close by casting a glance at a quotation from an article by the critic Alex Ross published in the *New Yorker* on the 24th of April 2003:

> One of the abiding myths of musical modernism is that the great masters were rejected by audiences of their time. The history behind these claims is specious--Bach won respect wherever he worked; Mozart thrived as much as he struggled; Beethoven became a living god--and the logic is inane: from the fact that great music was rejected it does not follow that rejected music is great. Certainly, a piece such as Beethoven's Quartet Opus 130, with its dissonant fugal finale, caused difficulties for its early listeners. "Incomprehensible, like Chinese," a critic said. The telling thing, however, is what Beethoven did in response to the criticism. He did not say, "Silence, retarded masses! This work displays the inherent tendency of the material and cannot be altered! Perhaps you will understand it in a hundred years; perhaps never. It is your problem." No, he took note of what a few aristocratic dilettantes had to say and wrote a new, lighter-toned finale to replace the Great Fugue. Beethoven, the god at the center of the musical pantheon, compromised.
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> Was this the tragedy of an unemancipated genius, as Schoenberg claimed? Or was it of a piece with the composer's greatness? As Lewis Lockwood notes, in a recent biography, Beethoven lavished care on his new finale, using it to create a quite different trajectory for the work. It was the last thing he ever wrote. Even though he was almost completely deaf, and had only a few months to live, Beethoven was listening to his audience.[8]

This passage is by no means atypical of today's "high" cultural world, in which authors such as Susan McClary can work as respected academics while suggesting that to submit to the demands of popular culture is more honest and democratic than the pursuit of the elitist obscurantism that goes by the name of "modernism."[9] Ross equates accessibility with charity, evidently failing to recognise that a composer such as Beethoven remains unique and compelling not because of the delectation he provided for his audiences, but because his vision went far beyond that, and sometimes took him into unpopular territory. Fortunately for those who came after him, Beethoven preserved the *Grosse Fuge*, which can now be recognised as one of the most radical and original artistic statements in the European tradition. If Ross and others of a similar mindset were to remain unchallenged, and artists were too engrossed in their own subjectivity and imaginary worlds to

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[8] Alex Ross, "Ghost Sonata: Adorno and German music." The text can be viewed at http://www.therestisnoise.com/2004/05/theodor_adorno.html.

[9] Susan McClary, "Terminal Prestige: The Case of Avant-Garde Musical Composition," in *Cultural Critique*, No. 12 (Spring 1989), pp. 57-81.

recognise the pitfalls of their recipients' expectations, the days of such musical adventures would be over. Let us ensure that they are not.