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Marcin Rychter
Institute of Philosophy
University of Warsaw
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5893-201X>

Postmodern Music and its Future

Abstract:

The essay presents an attempt at characterizing contemporary music's culture by identifying a dialectical tension between "modern" and "postmodern" currents in it. After initial considerations on the manifold usages of the term "postmodernism," five composers' approaches will be analyzed: John Cage, Philip Glass (and other minimalists), Bernhard Lang, Mauricio Kagel and Johannes Kreidler. However different they may be from one another, all these composers are being interpreted as undermining, in various ways, the practice and theoretical background of modernist avant-garde music.

Keywords:

philosophy of music, philosophy of culture, postmodernism, avant-garde music, contemporary music

The contemporary culture of music presents a tricky ground for artists, critics and philosophers altogether. One of the reasons for this predicament is the collapse of the Western tradition of "classical" music that happened at the beginning of the twentieth century.¹ A fairly strict and unified canon of European music that had slowly developed from the times of Antiquity to the end of the nineteenth century, suddenly has lost its normative power over musical practice and theory. The dodecaphonic and serial music of Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern

1) I have discussed this crucial change in a previously published paper, which may be considered as an introduction to this one. See Marcin Rychter, "How Music Turned into Philosophy and What Implications Does this Have?" *Kronos. Philosophical Journal* 2 (2013): 158–166, http://kronos.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Kronos_Philosophical_Journal_vol-II.pdf.

abolished the laws of functional harmony that had remained unchallenged for hundreds of years, whereas the pioneers of both “concrete music” and electronic music introduced radically new musical material that previously would have been considered “unmusical.” All of this has led to a present situation in which virtually everything may be considered music and where no prevailing musical style or canon can be discerned. Thus, the philosophical question: “What is music?” must be faced by every composer, because no custom or canon gives them a valid answer anymore. This fundamental event of collapse or loosening of tradition, however, had already happened one hundred years ago. Does the historical distance that we have obtained since then allow us somehow to organize the various styles and works that add up to the chaos that we now refer to as “contemporary music”? Can we in any way arrange it in a comprehensive manner or are we left with just a mass of amorphous and generally rather inconsistent data? Can we trace any strong dialectical tensions in the “artistic” music of the last century? In this paper I will try to point to one such tension that might be recognized in “contemporary” music of the last century, by trying to juxtapose its “modern” and “postmodern” strands. Can we discern “postmodern” music in the whole variety of contemporary music styles and genres? What is postmodern music opposed to? What ideas and causes are the postmodern composers sympathetic to? What techniques do they use? I will attempt to take on these questions in what follows.

These considerations should begin with a brief look at the term “postmodernism” itself, which is ambiguous and vague enough to easily lead to confusion. Not only is the meaning of this category problematic, also its denotation may prove unclear. These problems become especially evident when we compare the notion of “postmodernism” to other general terms, such as “impressionism,” “structuralism,” or “globalization.” The first on this list is just a name for a style in art which can be defined either by enumerating its characteristic features or by pointing at some examples of works that belong to this style. “Structuralism,” on the other hand, is a term belonging to a different order, because it relates to a certain way of analyzing and explaining cultural phenomena. It is, therefore, a name for a kind of a theoretical discourse having its own principles, methods, its forerunners, its prominent figures, and critics. Of yet another kind is the term “globalization,” being a name (or rather a diagnosis) of a condition of the world in a certain historical time. This historical condition arises from a number of different processes and factors of economic, technological, political, cultural and social nature.

One problem with “postmodernism” is precisely that this word is being used in all three of the above-mentioned contexts: to designate a certain style in art, as well as a particular theoretical method of interpreting culture, or a general diagnosis of the condition of the world within a certain time frame. When Lyotard claims, in the opening of his famous book, that “the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age,” and adds that “this transition has been under way since at least the end of the 1950s,”² he formulates a global diagnosis as to the condition of current science, technology, culture, economy and civilization. According to his insight, the “metanarrations” typical for the Enlightenment and modernity (such as progress, democracy, or emancipation) have lost their power as a source for legitimization of discourses and social practices.

Of a different character is the statement made by Roland Barthes in his important essay “The Death of the Author,” who does not use the term “postmodernism” but is considered as its key predecessor or representative. He writes: “We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture.”³ Barthes, unlike

2) Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 3, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1772278>.

3) Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 146.

Lyotard, is not diagnosing the global condition of culture and civilization. Instead, he proposes a certain new way of reading the texts of culture, a reading that ceases to search for a “deep” meaning, for the truth, or for “the Author (or its hypostases: society, history, psyche, liberty),”⁴ and which gives the priority to the reader. Also, Derrida’s deconstruction is first and foremost a method of critical reading of philosophical texts which is focused on undermining or reversing the hidden hierarchies embedded in these texts. The postmodern way of reading may be applied to any text of culture, also to the older ones, dating from before the postmodern turn itself. For example, the musicologist Lawrence Kramer applies this method to classical European music of the nineteenth century which leads him to “deconstruct,” undermine and ultimately reverse the hierarchy prevailing among the critics and musicologists (such as Carl Dahlhaus), who posit Beethoven (as a “tragic” composer and the creator of “pure,” autonomous music) above Rossini (considered the author of “functional” or light music).⁵

Yet another usage of the category of “postmodernism” is the idea of “postmodern art.” Dutch literary theorist Douwe Fokkema defines postmodern literature as follows:

Whereas the Modernist aimed at providing a valid, authentic, though strictly personal view of the world in which he lived, the Postmodernist appears to have abandoned the attempt towards a representation of the world that is justified by the convictions and sensibility of an individual... The Postmodernist may have his private views, but sees no justification for preferring them to views held by others.⁶

Postmodern prose is reluctant to or even openly rejects the personal narrational instance which often leads to loosening the modernist discipline: “the Postmodernist may end his story at any arbitrary moment... [and] aims at destroying the idea of connectivity by inserting texts that emphasize discontinuity, such as a questionnaire or other unrelated fragments.”⁷ Architect Charles Jencks, considered one of the main theorists of postmodernism, points to another important feature of postmodern art which he dubs “double coding”. According to him, postmodern architecture is: “one-half Modern and one-half something else (usually traditional building).” As such, this architecture, “attempts to communicate with the public and a concerned minority, usually other architects.”⁸ A similar, ironical “double coding” of this sort can be found also in visual works of art that are considered postmodern – for example those by Jeff Koons or Damien Hirst, in which simplicity, kitsch, and pop-cultural references are met by a perfect artistic technique that can appeal to the experts. In addition, in postmodern literature, the references to high modernist classics are usually mixed with stylizations of popular genres such as, for example, the detective novel in Thomas Pynchon’s *Crying of Lot 49*, or a pornographic novel in Donald Barthelme’s *Snow White*.

Separating the different denotations of the term “postmodernism” – that is: a philosophical assessment of the current condition of culture, a certain method of interpreting the texts of culture, and a style in art and

4) Ibid., 147.

5) Cp. Lawrence Kramer, *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1996), 33–66.

6) Douwe Fokkema, *Literary History, Modernism, and Postmodernism* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1984), 41.

7) Ibid., 43–44.

8) Charles Jencks, “Postmodern and Late Modern: The Essential Definitions,” *Chicago Review* 35, no. 4 (1988): 33, <https://doi.org/10.2307/25305377>.

literature – helps us to clear, at least to some extent, the muddy subject matter that we deal with here. Let us now try to consider the connotation or the meaning of the term “postmodernism.” Two questions seem to be of particular importance here: (a) what is the “modernism” from which postmodernism wants to distance itself?; and (b) what is the nature of that distance or “being post-”? The statements quoted above, although they may reflect the views of many different authors, point quite distinctly at the negative context of postmodernism. It involves the metaphysical and historiosophical “grand narratives”, including the idea of progress (Lyotard),⁹ the belief in a “superior” or “deep” meaning of a text of culture (Barthes), asymmetrical oppositions embedded in the texts of culture (Derrida), stressing the role of a personality and consistency in the work of art (Barthes and Fokkema), or the strict division into “high” and “low” culture (Jencks). Whereas the postmodernists are usually unanimous as to what they want to distance themselves from, they often differ from each other regarding the nature of this abandoning or renouncing of the legacy of modernity.

More radical thinkers, such as Lyotard or Derrida, propose a complete abandoning of all “grand narratives” altogether, and they preach “the end of metaphysics” or “the end of history.” Others, such as Zygmunt Bauman, Richard Rorty or Gianni Vattimo, propose more conciliatory solutions and try to bridge the gap between modernism and postmodernism. The development of postmodern thought was shaped by its critics coming from either the progressive or the conservative camp. Jürgen Habermas accused postmodernists of neoconservatism, reprimanding them for giving up the ideas of rationality, progress, and emancipation, and claimed that their social critique is an illusory one, that it is a form of Hegel’s indeterminate negation, whereas the project of modernity is still valid and unfinished.¹⁰ The conservative critics accused postmodernism of nihilism, destroying values and giving up artistic mastery for the sake of concepts, abandoning the ethical dimension of art and giving into shallow aestheticization.¹¹

After these preliminary considerations, we may proceed to the topic of postmodernism in music. My concern here is only postmodernism conceived as a musical style of the late twentieth century or as a set of compositional techniques. I am not interested here in the question of postmodernism as a critical strategy that can be used to interpret any kind of music. A feature often considered as typical of postmodern music is the usage of musical quotations or the imitation of different musical styles.¹² Judging by this criterion, we should consider as postmodern works by Alfred Schnittke who readily drew from different musical styles, as well as many pieces by Luciano Berio, or even the neoclassical music of Igor Stravinsky whose *Pulcinella* consists almost entirely of the music written by the early baroque composer Giovanni Battista Pergolesi. It seems however, that this condition for treating a musical work as postmodern is not a sufficient one to distinguish postmodern music. The Polish philosopher of music, Zofia Lissa, rightly observes that musical quotations have been used throughout the whole history of Western music.¹³ Consequently, we are not able to define musical postmodernism as based just on that indicator.

9) “I will use the term *modern* to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth.” Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, xxiii, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1772278>.

10) See Jürgen Habermas, “Modernity: An Unfinished Project,” trans. Nicolas Walker, in *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity: Critical Essays on The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, eds. Maurizio Passerin d’Entreves and Seyla Benhabib (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 38–58.

11) An example of a critical strategy of this kind can be found in the book of a Polish musicologist, Krzysztof Lipka. See Krzysztof Lipka, *Entropia kultury. Sztuka w ponowoczesnej pułapce* (Warszawa: Uniwersytet Muzyczny im. F. Chopina, 2013).

12) “[Luciano Berio’s] *Sinfonia* is often called the first postmodern work because the most salient features of the piece are its references to preexisting musical sources rather than the resultant harmony or texture.” Alfred W. Cramer, ed., *Musicians and Composers of the 20th Century* (Pasadena, CA: Salem Press, 2009), 112.

13) See Zofia Lissa, *Szkice z estetyki muzycznej* (Kraków: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Muzyczne, 1965), 269–315.

A more promising strategy would be to define postmodern music by contrasting it to avant-garde music from the first half of the twentieth century (and its later continuations). The latter – which includes styles and techniques such as dodecaphony, serialism, postserialism, sonoristic music, electroacoustic music or *musique concrète* and others – may be rightly seen as a modernist take on art. Modernist music strictly opposes the classical musical canon in that it rejects both functional harmony (along with consonant intervals) and the regular rhythmic patterns that dominated pre-modern music. Interestingly enough, the modernist avant-garde generally accepts the idea of the autonomy of music which was previously accepted by many classical composers and theorists. According to this idea, music constitutes a realm governed by its own objective, that is, purely formal laws that are essentially independent not only of the influences of other forms of artistic expression, such as poetry or painting, but also of any other external sway, such as emotions, culture, economy, politics, or history. This idea of autonomy, obviously influenced by Kant's freedom of aesthetic judgment, was formulated in the famous book by Eduard Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful* (1854). According to Hanslick, the "beauty of a piece of music is specifically musical, i.e., is inherent in the tonal relationships without reference to an extraneous, extramusical context."¹⁴ An interesting consequence of this idea is the constant need for creating new music. Unlike literature or the visual arts, that may reach for new content in order to gain the effect of novelty, music needs to provide ever newer formal innovations:

There is no art which wears out so many forms so quickly as music. Modulations, cadences, intervallic and harmonic progressions all in this manner go stale in fifty, nay, thirty years, so that the gifted composer can no longer make use of them and will be forever making his way to the discovery of new, purely musical directions.¹⁵

Actually, this rule, taken for granted by most of the composers of the late nineteenth century, might be considered one of the reasons for the collapse of the canon of classical music – as it has simply worn out and become unable to provide substantially new formal possibilities anymore. But the idea of autonomy and the idea of progress, from which it is inseparable, were taken up by the avant-garde composers who had seemingly unlimited possibilities for creating novelty. Avant-garde or modernist music has always focused on inventing new kinds of musical material (including all kinds of "non-musical" sounds, such as noises or environmental sounds) and on new ways of organizing this material. A successful avant-garde strategy needs somehow to "beat" the works of its predecessors by bringing up something new and previously unheard. This gesture reflects – as Adorno observes in his *Philosophy of Modern Music* – the enlightened or modern project of developing and criticizing what is stagnant and outdated. Avant-garde composers often (not always) sympathize with the idea of autonomic music, music as *l'art pour art*, which does not have any external purpose and focuses on purely musical qualities, namely sounds and the ways of arranging them. Progress consists in continuously differentiating the material itself as well as bringing up new formal structures. This involves constantly extending the perception of listeners who need to adjust to previously unheard sounds and compositional techniques. A good example of an avant-garde composer of that kind would be Karlheinz Stockhausen whose complicated, quasi-mathematical procedures are so refined that – according to the composer himself – mankind will be able to appreciate them fully no sooner than in ten-thousand years when it reaches a higher stage of development. Another example is Pierre Schaeffer, the inventor of so called *musique concrète* in which the only sound material consists of sounds prerecorded in various (mostly urban) environments. However, the material used is, from a traditional point

14) Eduard Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful*, trans. Geoffrey Payzant (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1986), xxiii.

15) *Ibid.*, 35.

of view, “non-musical” (no musical instruments being used whatsoever), in spite of which Schaeffer supplements his works with titles such as “etude,” “concerto,” “variations” or “symphony.” Also, he stresses that his music should be listened to in an “acousmatic” way, which means a reduced or pure way, focusing on the sound itself without considering the sound source. According to him, listening to music is meant as an exercise in extending auditory aesthetic (i.e., sensual) perception, exploring unknown realms of experience, as opposed to just paying attention to real, worldly sound sources.

A great number of twentieth and twenty-first century composers may be recognized as avant-garde in the above-mentioned sense. The musical avant-garde is extremely complex and diverse. However, it is precisely outside this realm that we should look for musical postmodernism. There is a substantially different approach that we should pay attention to. We may trace its origins to American experimental music of the last century. The most famous example of this other approach is obviously John Cage’s 4’33”, a piece divided into three parts where the performer is asked not to play, so that the audience hears only some random sounds coming from the environment (in case of the first performance of 4’33” it was an unexpected sound of rain on the roof of the concert hall). Cage reaches beyond avant-garde ideas which were focused on sound and perception, and he puts in question (and not only in this particular work) the ontological status of a musical work of art and its relation to the “world” and “real life.” In 4’33” this is done in a very radical way, by “deconstructing” the difference between “art” and “reality.” As Michael Nyman puts it, “Cage’s ideal of art attempts to remove the distinctions between life and art.”¹⁶ The avant-garde idea of inventing new music materials and a new order has been replaced with the idea of random material and no pre-established order. The idea of an aesthetically autonomous music detached from the concerns of the world gives way to the idea of the world, as such, being an object that we should apprehend with an aesthetic appreciation: everything we hear may be considered music. The avant-garde ambition of extending the scope of perception has been pushed to the limits here, or rather reduced to absurdity. Cage’s strategy may be dubbed “postavant-garde” or – as Frederic Jameson describes it – “postmodern.”¹⁷

Other authors, however, label a completely different musical style as postmodern, namely one called “minimal music.”¹⁸ This style emerged in the United States in the second half of the last century. Its exponents (Philip Glass, Steve Reich, among others) break two of the strong taboos of avant-garde music of the twentieth century, since they not only utilize tonal harmony, rejected by contemporary composers as obsolete or worn out, but also use repetitive rhythm patterns which would be regarded by many as simplistic and all-too-catchy for a “high modernist” art. Both of these features apparently could be interpreted as a return to the classical tradition of Western music, but in fact, minimal music is strongly opposed to that tradition and to the idea of music inherent in it. First, minimalists do not use the imitative techniques of melodic development that are crucial for “narrative” structures and for building dramatic tension in classical music. Actually, repetitive and static music by Philip Glass is devoid of any dramatic structure or narrative that would be so essential for classical music; it does not have any apparent point of culmination like the works of Haydn or Beethoven do. Secondly, the minimalists do not make any references to European classical music in their works; instead, they often draw on Eastern music and make use of ethnic instruments, such as sitars or gamelans. We may find postmodern “double coding” in the works of the minimalists, because on the one hand, they may be (and actually often are) appreciated by a broader audience thanks to their simple harmony and repetitive rhythm; but on the other hand, however, they might prove worthy for musical connoisseurs due to intriguing, subtle polyrhythmical

16) Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 58.

17) See Frederic Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983–1998* (London, New York: Verso, 1998), 1.

18) See Tim Woods, *Beginning Postmodernism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 191.

transformations that are happening continuously, sometimes almost imperceptibly. It has to be noted, however, that minimal music is often regarded by more radical critics and composers as commercial or mass-oriented. Putting these aesthetical, political, or ethical charges aside, one cannot but have the impression that minimal music, in its absolute indifference to the abundant repertoire of styles and techniques invented by European avant-garde music, hardly fits the European-modernist avant-garde which is often referred to as “contemporary music.” Unlike Schoenberg, Stockhausen, Nono, Lutosławski, or Grisey, minimalists were not willing to abandon tonal harmony and invent a completely new way of arranging sounds. Instead of excluding pleasantly consonant sounds, Glass or Nyman used them almost entirely, obviously much more than any “classical” composer. Might then their “postmodernism” consist of refusing altogether the modernist gesture of destroying tonal harmony? That, however, could be questioned. Ignoring the powerful gesture made by the twentieth century avant-garde, and remaining indifferent to the whole multiplicity of styles and techniques that emerged *due* to that gesture, is hardly a dialectical negation of modernism. Dialectical mediation here seems to be not powerful enough to justify the prefix “post-.” Since no traces of the modern event that destroyed tonal harmony appears in the music of many minimalists, their position might as well be described as “premodernist.”

A very different candidate for a postmodern composer could be Bernhard Lang from Austria with his series *D/W (Differenz / Wiederholung)* that might prove particularly promising for our purpose. There is very clearly a double coding here, because Lang mixes the means of expression typical for “popular” music (distorted guitar, heavy percussion, rap, djing, loops, jazz improvisations) with sounds, techniques, and solutions typical for the modernist avant-garde. Unlike minimalists, Lang does not appeal to listeners, with no consonant harmonies nor regular rhythms. However, on the other hand, he is not reluctant to entwine long tonal fragments into his compositions, of which many may sound like quotations from different musical languages. These quotations, however, are not brought in just to point at their source context, but instead, they also constitute the basic physical sound material of the piece, which is then being subjected to the composer’s manipulations of different sorts, which often is looping – but of a very unusual kind, because the length of particular loops actually changes in every repetition. The texture of Lang’s music is very dense, both in terms of sound and of structure. If he succeeded in creating his own sound or style, it would be a paradoxical one, where radically inconsistent elements of all sorts are brought together. Lang’s musical thinking enters a strong dialectical relation, both to the classical tradition and to its modernist overcoming. We are faced with a double negation here, and both of these negations, seem to be definite in this case. Classical music as a genre is being destroyed in a multiplicity of ways. First of all, Lang’s music makes an impression of being extremely aggressive and chaotic, at least for newcomers. It would have been immediately rejected not only by popular music consumers but even by most of the regular philharmonic-goers. On the other hand, Lang openly rejects the modernist ideal of building a unique but consistent world of sound, in terms of both material and structure. He also breaks the modernist taboo against using tonal harmony, consonances or repetitions, and regular rhythms. His attitude is more of a postmodern bricoleur, who patches together fragments that are within reach at the moment.

In Lang’s case, ironic double coding seems to be very distinct: the means of expression belonging to popular culture are being used in a context which is obviously not popular or commercial. Lang clearly puts in question the modernist opposition between “high” and “mass” or “popular” art. Moreover, he reintroduces the sound of the classic orchestra that has been forbidden by the avant-garde purists, but he puts it in a context mediated by sampling and loops. For example, his piece *D/W 8* features loops from his earlier work, *D/W 11.2*, which was recorded by the Bavarian Symphonic Orchestra and pressed on vinyl. In the latter piece, these records are being played (and intensely manipulated) by the DJs. In the melting pot of Lang’s music everything comes together: sounds of live instruments, digital samples of these, human voices, electronic sounds, and the sounds coming from vinyl records, environmental sounds, and all kinds of noises. The works belonging to the series

D/W (the series name obviously refers to Deleuze's book *Difference and Repetition*) are based on the principle of repetition that has been essentially forbidden by the avant-garde composers. This is, however, a completely different idea of repetition than the one we encountered in minimal music. Lang does not try to hypnotize a listener with monotonous, trance-inducing rhythms. The loops are repeated several times and then they suddenly give way to other loops and the repetitions themselves are completely different from the repetitions appearing in classical or popular music. This is because, strangely enough, the loops used by Lang are irregular in terms of their metrics. For example, the length of the loop that opens *D/W 8* equals to one 6/4 measure plus one-sixteenth note. Such an irregularity deprives this music of any steady pulse and makes a listener who expects that very uneasy. In this case, repetition is difference. Postmodern thinking might easily be recognized on every structural level of Lang's music; also, the idea of combining heterogeneous elements in a way that respects their heterogeneity is itself heterogeneous, as it is directed against both classical and modernist traditions, since it puts in question our musical perception itself. Lang does not search for new realms of musical perception, as the modernists do. Nor does he try to aestheticize the everyday, common experience (which Cage supposedly did). Instead, he puts in question the ideas of musicality and musical perception as such.

A similar approach can be recognized in the works of Mauricio Kagel. His composition *Playback Play* being, according to the composer himself, inspired by visiting an international exhibition on music technology, mixes radically different sound textures and stylistic conventions. In this variety we hear the tuning of the orchestra, its playing exercises, scales and passages, quotations from classical music, fragments resembling techno music, a long Roma romance, sounds of electric and acoustic guitars, electronic drum machines, synthesizers, environmental sounds and human voices – but also many fragments that utilize the compositional techniques of the modernist avant-garde. The patchwork structure of this work does not resemble, however, either the quotation-filled pieces by Stravinsky, or the “polystylistic” compositions of Alfred Schnittke. It is because both Stravinsky and Schnittke were still representatives (however late) of the European “classical” or “symphonic” tradition, whereas Kagel undermines the very medium of this tradition. In *Playback Play* Kagel makes use of advanced electronic sound editing technology which allows him to imitate different acoustic spaces and smoothly move from one to another. This effect creates the impression that a listener is constantly moving among different places and this is, of course, the antithesis of the situation of a traditional listener sitting still in the philharmonic hall. Some parts of Kagel's work sound as if they were coming from a small, monophonic radio, while other sections give the impression of a large concert hall. Sometimes we hear a cowbell ringing alarmingly close to our ears, then another instrument sounds as if it was played in a remote room. We hear the chatter and applause of the concert-hall audience, there are also surprising announcements read by a speaker in different languages. These theater-like effects are typical not only for this piece but for other works by Kagel, whose artistic strategy reaches beyond the modernist search for new music material and for new ways of organizing it. Unlike the modernist progressivist, Kagel is not trying to “beat” his predecessors by inventing previously unknown means of musical expression. Instead, he takes the game to a different level by employing post-modern, ironical distance toward his own artistic medium.

Interestingly enough, he is reluctant to be labelled a “postmodernist”: “I laughed when I heard the term ‘postmodern,’ because I was trying thirty years ago to find what happens to harmony that is not serial harmony. I think the variety and richness of possible musical approaches to musical language are infinite. So why try to make the mainstream?”¹⁹ This remark gets to the bottom of the matter of postmodernism as such. If, as Lyotard claims, postmodernism is about mistrust of “grand narratives” and undermining them, how

19) As quoted in Paul Griffith, *The Substance of Things Heard: Writings About Music* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2005), 111.

can postmodernism avoid being such a narrative (or “mainstream”) itself? This problem may be understood as a variation of an ancient paradox of radical skepticism: skeptics (or, in this case, postmodernists) cannot impose their own view as a universal truth, because they already claimed that such a truth did not exist. This has been expressed in a more technical fashion by Hilary Putnam, who called it “a self-refuting supposition”: “consider the thesis that all general statements are false. This is a general statement. So if it is true, then it must be false.”²⁰ Antifoundationalist postmodern thinkers are usually aware of their vulnerability to that charge and they try to escape it: one such strategy is the “weak thought” of Gianni Vattimo and another via Richard Rorty’s “liberal ironism.”

Anyway, let us go back to Kagel. Is his charge against the category of postmodernism satisfactory? Kagel is undoubtedly right in his claim that it is futile to coin a general “umbrella term” for all musical styles that reject serial harmony. However, it seems that the category of postmodernism might be useful to describe the changes that have happened in contemporary music, defined as we have developed it here. Our account is meant to cover not just the non-serial avant-garde but all the strategies that go beyond the avant-garde (modernist) thinking as such and which reject the idea of pure or absolute music, music that is completely abstract and not related to the world. The works of Kagel, who approaches music in an ironic way and mixes it with the elements of theater or radio drama, or even film, is a good example of postmodernism conceived that way. Interestingly enough, Kagel, while rejecting the category of postmodernism, is at the same time supporting the postmodern assessment that the world is ambiguous: “I am interested in ambiguity. Though not because I am a fan of ambiguity, but because it is an essential feature of the external world.”²¹ It may be noted that this remark actually follows the traditional Pythagorean claim (which was later adopted and transformed by various philosophers of music) that music itself mimics or reflects the nature or essence of reality. Kagel seems to be torn between the classical (and modern) idea of absolute or pure music and postmodern musical practice. Commenting on his own work *Abduktion in der Konzertsaal* which contains, as most of his works do, theatrical elements (some musicians are apparently missing and the conductor expresses concern for them, suspecting they have been abducted); Kagel defends himself for using these “nonmusical” means of expression saying that his intention was to “try to create absolute music that is at the same time dramatic, that has a relationship with theater atmosphere: not events but atmosphere.”²² There is an apparent tension between the postmodern artistic practice of Kagel and modern (or even premodern) language of his own description of his art. This tension may be somehow explained by the institutional entanglement of Kagel as a renowned composer. His works are being played by the most eminent ensembles that specialize in contemporary music. They are being commissioned by the most prestigious institutions, such as Carnegie Hall, the Cologne Philharmonic or Amsterdam’s Concertgebouw. These respectable and prestigious institutions still hold to the modernist idea of “absolute,” pure art and to the strict division into “high” and “popular” cultures of music, and they are not friendly to any postmodern overcoming of such divisions. This is itself an interesting topic which requires some more attention.

The fact that the post-avantgarde and postmodern musical works quite rarely find their way to contemporary concert halls and are much less recognized than postmodern visual art or postmodern literature, is due to the institutional framework of contemporary music. As the German philosopher Harry Lehmann rightly notes, “it is widely known that the institutional framework (*Institutionalisierung*) of New Music is not just a set of

20) Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 7, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511625398>.

21) As quoted in Paul Craenen, *Composing Under the Skin: The Music-Making Body at the Composer’s Desk* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2014), 69, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt13x0ms5>.

22) See Griffith, *The Substance of Things Heard*, 109.

neutral circumstances but, on the contrary, it is something that influences and puts pressure on artistic practice.” In support of this claim Lehmann quotes a statement by a composer, Peter Ablinger: “Only lately have I realized that the dependence of music upon institutions – orchestras, ensembles, academy, education, instrumental tradition, concert hall and musicology – is not only responsible for the overwhelmingly historical character of many musical ventures but that it also becomes a corrupting trap for the most recent music, or at least it creates an atmosphere of pre-judgment contrary to every musical action that tries to do without these institutions.”²³ This situation is partly due to the fact that having any piece of contemporary music successfully complete a public performance is an accomplishment in itself, and is much more difficult and costly than in the case of any other arts. Almost everybody who has enough talent and determination may become a writer. Professional education is not crucial here (eminent writers are rarely graduates of creative writing courses), and writing a novel or a collection of poems does not require any financial effort; it is only time-consuming. Also publishing a book is not very costly nowadays. A visual artist often needs some professional training and needs to spend more for the materials. Also some exhibition space is required. This expenditure is still very low compared to what is needed for a professional recording, or for staging a contemporary musical work. A composer needs to be fluent in sophisticated contemporary composing techniques that require a lot of education. Performing a contemporary musical piece requires hiring a team of highly skilled professionals (both musicians and sound engineers). Also, a lot of costly equipment is needed: instruments, microphones, speakers, amplifiers, computers, software and other electronic devices (in case of electroacoustic music), not to mention a concert hall or a sound-editing studio. At the same time, contemporary music is detached from a mass audience and the “cultural industry,” so the composers are unable to make any commercial profit. Therefore, the contemporary culture of music is highly dependent on a whole network of institutions, including: professional schools of music (including universities), concert halls, music festivals, public radio stations, publishing houses that publish sheet music, record companies, ministries of culture, foundations promoting art and others. Consequently, these institutions influence the shape of contemporary music. Also, music ensembles that specialize in contemporary music are essential here. Avant-garde musical compositions often require employing unconventional (so called “extended”) techniques of playing, and they are usually extremely difficult. So the final aesthetic effect often benefits more from the skills of the performing musicians than from the musical score itself. For this reason, the best ensembles that focus on performing contemporary music have achieved a very high status in the hierarchy of institutions related to modern music. Relations among the ensemble, the composer, and the patron (an institution sponsoring the musical piece) are now different than in the classical or the early modern era. It is the ensemble’s director who decides what pieces the group will play, and the most prestigious ensembles are even able to commission new works from composers. Usually they want these works to be very difficult to perform, all the better to prove their mastery as renowned musicians. It seems that most of the actors in contemporary music’s institutional network are interested in preserving the avant-garde-modernist paradigm, which includes the idea of progress (inventing new material and new forms), relying on traditional media (records, radio, festivals, and philharmonics) and music’s self-description, based on the classical idea of autonomous, pure music.

The need for formal and material progress, stemming from Hanslick’s aesthetics of absolute music, justifies high expenditures on highly trained musicians and the need for professional education. Philharmonics, festivals and radio stations put contemporary music in the position formerly held by classical music, even though contemporary music defines itself in opposition to the latter, and even though its circle of listeners is much smaller. Stressing the autonomy of music, in turn, deprives it of a direct relation to reality and, therefore

23) Harry Lehmann, *Die digitale Revolution der Musik. Eine Musikphilosophie* (Mainz: Schott Music GmbH & Company, 2012), 11–12. My own translation.

also deprives it of political significance, which makes it uncontroversial and safe for the patrons who distribute public money. A composer, as dependent on the funds distributed by festivals, philharmonics, governments and foundations is the weakest part of that institutional network. And the institutions in charge are usually reluctant to promote post-avant-garde art which undermines their own position. By putting in question the very “mediality” of music and its social placement, and including them in free artistic play, the postmodern take on music owns a subversive attitude that may prove unfavorable for the decisive actors in the network of the contemporary music “industry.” Hanslick’s idea of the autonomy of music is thereby undermined by post-modern composers, along with the subsequent requirement of endless formal progress and refinement. And this is, in fact, the idea that justifies the existence of a highly professionalized and very well paid network of people, their equipment, and their institutions all taken together as a unit creating and supporting virtuoso performers, ingenious sound engineers, educated critics, and all the extremely well trained professionals who contribute to contemporary modernist musical practice.

It seems, however, that the postmodern strategy of de-absolutizing and remediating, as well as changing music’s institutional framework, is being supported by the possibilities brought on by the new media themselves, namely computers and the internet. These new possibilities involve the composing process, music production, performing, education, reaching out to the audience, marketing, sales, and new forms of music criticism. Interestingly enough, digital media allow for new forms of access to acoustic instruments. At the beginning of the twenty-first century sampling techniques reached the level at which digitally sampled sounds are indistinguishable from the ones played on live instruments. Digital (and online) databases containing samples of various instruments, along with software for playing them, allow for something that might be referred to as virtual access to acoustic instruments. Such virtual orchestras, that sound basically as good as real ones but are significantly cheaper, have been used in film music production for quite a long time already. Recently, there have been also sample databases containing various “extended” techniques of playing that are used in avant-garde music.²⁴ New digital sound technology abolishes the difference between acoustic and electronic music. More importantly, it changes the situation of the contemporary composer making him or her much less dependent on the institutional network. Digital sound databases – of which many are accessible free of charge and created by online communities – allow for accomplishing composers’ ideas without engaging costly ensembles and using philharmonic halls. Instrumental samples can also be digitally manipulated in infinitely imaginable ways which allows for creating “impossible” instruments such as, for example, a piano mixed with a harpsichord or a flute with an altered harmonic spectrum. These samples may of course be easily mixed with any kind of electronic sounds so that the difference between the acoustic and electronic sound sources seem to become obsolete due to the new digital medium.

The internet is also a new and powerful medium for linking together people interested in certain composers’ work or certain musical styles. Also, it is a big open forum for publishing any kind of music-related discourse, be it reviews, critical analyses or theoretical essays. Of course, music itself is also being published and sold online. All this reinforces composer independence from the official institutional network and provides them with new ways of approaching listeners. These phenomena are all quite recent, and it is not easy to determine the impact they will have on the culture of music, but one can expect that the digitalization of music will change it in many substantial ways. One important feature of the new digital medium is the way it encompasses together all the previously separated media (writing, photography, sound, and film). This feature is obviously at odds with the idea of autonomous music. There have been trends in contemporary music that make use of the possibilities offered by the digital medium, while displaying features of the postmodern approach. One such example is the “music conceptualism” pursued by a German composer, Johannes Kreidler.

24) Cf. Lehman, *Die digitale Revolution der Musik*, 53n.

In his conceptual works Kreidler (who also writes “regular” instrumental contemporary music) openly rejects not only the idea of autonomous music but also the modern Baumgartian idea of aesthetics altogether (i.e., one based upon the claim that art affects the audience by stimulating “aesthetic experience” of a sensual nature). The essential “content” of conceptual music lies not in auditory experience of any kind but in the purely intellectual and contextual anecdotes. Let us consider several examples of this strategy. Kreidler’s piece (2008) lasts only 33 seconds but it consists of 70,200 extremely short samples taken from other people’s music. In terms of its aesthetic (auditory) qualities or its structure, this work is not groundbreaking or even interesting. It does not expand upon the auditory realm of perception, nor does it employ any new techniques of musical composition. Its full meaning may be unveiled only in an extra-musical context. The composer, who wanted to conform to current German law, has registered his piece in the state agency protecting copyright laws. The standard procedure of doing so involves filling out a separate paper form for each musical quotation used in the work. In the case of *product placement* none of the quoted works was recognizable, because the samples used were way too short to be identified. But Kreidler had to turn in to the copyright agency 70,200 paper forms and this laborious action was documented on video and posted on YouTube. The whole work might be considered as an ingenious demonstration of how current laws are inapplicable to the new media or how the digital culture requires new institutional frameworks.

Another provocative concept by Kreidler involved recording “compressed” versions of several famous works (such as Beethoven’s *Moonlight Sonata*). “Compression” consisted here in supplementing each bar with a single chord. In the more radical examples, compression rate was much higher: for example, Kreidler time-compressed all the works by The Beatles into a sound file lasting only one-tenth of a second. This might be interpreted as an ironic take on data-compression techniques being used in digital media, where big chunks of data are compressed into smaller ones while the essential information remains unchanged (mp3 music format is an example of such a compression). We may also read this as a reflection on how the attentive aesthetic mode of listening gets degraded due to the unlimited online access to music that we have. Instead of paying full attention to the work we are listening to, we often just “browse” the bulk of available music, constantly searching for something new.

Yet another piece by Kreidler, *Fremdarbeit*, commissioned by the Berlin music festival *Klangwerkstatt*, was carried out in a most unusual way. Kreidler hired a programmer from India and a composer from China, paying them a small fraction of the money he received from the festival for composing a piece that would imitate his earlier instrumental compositions. The piece was then presented at the festival and received big applause which, however, turned into a scandal when, after the performance, Kreidler had disclosed the origins of the work. In this case the concept aims at both the exploitation of workers from non-Western countries and at the hidden ethnocentrism, or rather: eurocentrism – of the institutional networks related to contemporary music: a Indian-Chinese team was able to create music which was acclaimed at the European festival, however these people themselves would have never been invited to contribute to this festival. Kreidler often makes use of the multi-media potential of the Internet and combines music with films and images. In his *Chart Music* he used simple, free software to generate melodies and accompaniment from the data extracted from the charts that measured the stocks of Lehmann Brothers Bank and General Motors, crashing at the time of the crisis of the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Kreidler’s conceptual works may prove a good example of a gesture, within the culture of music, that will not only come after the modernist avant-garde in terms of historical succession, but also oppose it dialectically. Kreidler’s aesthetics (postaesthetics?) is a conscious negation of modernism, its dialectical overcoming, and therefore it is essentially postmodern. Kreidler actively negates all the dogmas of modernist aesthetics. Strict differentiation into “raw” music material and a “refined” formal or structural aspect, is being deconstructed

by often using prerecorded music of other composers as material. This strategy, along with Kreidler's other provocations, undermines also the modernist ideal of an original, unique, unprecedented avant-garde work. Kreidler's works also openly and clearly reject the idea of the autonomy of music, so they abandon the modernist, aesthetic "rat-race," the need for constant formal progress and innovation as envisioned by Hanslick back in the nineteenth century (and adopted later by the modernist avant-garde). Instead, Kreidler is constantly activating non-musical contexts, mostly ones that are politically or socially engaged, constantly making ironic and critical statements about different aspects of social, cultural, economic, and political reality. Relying heavily on new, easily available media, such as YouTube, on simple computer hardware, and on open or very inexpensive software, he not only undermines the modernist high/low culture division but also the traditional, established media of music culture, as well as its prevalent institutional framework and its costly financial demands. His strategy highlights the free possibilities of an extensive, manifold, and ingenious use of new, easily accessible digital media. As such his strategy points to new perspectives for the artists of the future for whom the unified digital medium will be, probably, the most important domain of activity, and for whom the modernist practice and self-understanding will be, if it is anything at all, only a remote point of reference.

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