Presentation to Music Theory 405 Seminar

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The University has some contract with the Defense Department. Some money has petered down to the departments, and it even got to music. Now should I still touch it?

Well, if you want to be consistent Herbert, you should leave the School of Music because you are working — you are being supported by the defense department.

Now what do I do?

Not know it? — simply say, "No that's not the case," "Oh you are distorting," "You're playing with words," "C'mon, don't say that to me, I'm a tenured professor — I really did my best," "I always compose music only," "I talk to young people and I'm nice to them," "So what do *I* have to do with the defense department — is it *my* fault? I didn't ask them."

It's bullshit — you understand that I hope. That is a sarcasm, but it was quoted. These conversations do indeed take place. It's a shame.

I can readily tell you that it *is* a state of contradiction in which one is in if one is a radical thinker, that it is not always fun (but most of the time it is) and that it does not iron out the contradiction if I *know* it — it does not put it away — it sits there and is my subject. So I milk it and I present it and I want it to become contagious.

There is no reason to be afraid of contradictions. The only thing you have to be afraid of is: if somebody tells you of a contradiction and then says "Now now now — it's a mere conflict." There you should become immediately very afraid. You can always live with the knowledge of a contradiction. But the moment you think it is a conflict (a conflict is something that can be ironed out within a system and its laws — it's only some accident, something went wrong within the system which can be improved immediately) — conflicts *can* be settled.

Contradictions can *not* be settled in the system in which they're contradictions.

If you were to carry out the contradictions, the system would disappear. But if you become familiar with contradictions (not informed but *familiar* —it becomes a comfortable feeling: "This is a free country — look at all the contradictions we can live with." Right? — that's familiarity) then of course it's perfect: it survives you. It sends you to Vietnam or other places ... we're just waiting for the next one, and *you'll* be dealt with. Never mind, we can afford it, you know. This system can afford your loss like that [*snaps finger*]. You're totally superfluous. That's *not* tolerable. *That* is not tolerable. Please, all become composers. Okay?

Do not take liberties that you do not have. It is the hallmark of the liberal that he *always* takes those liberties he doesn't have, and feels very righteous about it.

Good. Let's go to the particular subject now — how the person in music influences and manipulates politics. For this let's clean up our terminology very quickly.

There are two concepts of music when we speak about it. And I tell that to you (I'm not asking you, I'm *telling* you): No matter what you think you do (or *we* do or *I* do, anyone of us) we always speak of at least these two different concepts of music: [*Writes on board: OUTPUT*]

That's the first.

In this concept (*by* this concept, *with* this concept) we are talking about music as something which pleases ... pleases more, maybe less, and turns into a commodity that can be exchanged on the market. It becomes something with which you

can make an income. You can buy it, sell it, own it — you can give it as a present, you can talk about it as if it is something that has been under the law of supply and demand, or any such structure.

Second concept: I formulate [*Writes on board: INPUT*] and that again is a scale.

If I leave a gap somewhere or you get lost, lift a hand I will respond. If something's not clear. My language may also not always be equally reliable. Give me a chance, please ...

Question: How are those 2 scales related?

They are related in the following fashion: the input — and somewhere here in this area it flips — it is an input, it goes here and then becomes an output. Now, this is *not* a scale of time, it's a scale of attitude. That is, there are people who see music as an æsthetic object: to behold, to like, to dislike, to be present and absent from, to want or not to want. There are people who have that too, but they already find some utilitarian use for it. This becomes stronger and stronger, and at the end they actually declare music *this* — which not only *you* like but but which *other* people like enough so that you can make a business with it.

The input/output is the *composer's* concept of music — in contradistinction to *this*, which is the consumer's. Observe I did not say *listener's* — I say *consumer's*. The *composer's* image (there are many; there is only one consumer but there are many composers) the composer's concept is — he either is an *input* to that scale or he is an *output* of that scale.

And that can be easily understood. Imagine you want to compose a piece of music. And you do not even know what that means. But you all know English, and any one of you — and I could prove it — can repeat after me, the sentence, "I sure want to compose a piece of music." You don't even have to know what it means. And I think there are 1,360 sentences that all of you can say without the slightest notion of what it means. Me too. The question to the composer is whether she wants to be an *input* to this scale — which really describes our economic system — or whether she wants to be an *output* of that scale, which really describes our economic system.

Now I quickly have to explain the words *input* and *output*.

I define "input" as that which produces a *change* in a system which the system itself could not have generated. An input produces a change in a system which the system *alone* could not have generated.

An "output" is the generation of an *echo* of the system. There are nice words for it: "reflection upon it," "critical appraisal," "evaluation," "exposure" — and you know well that all these words belong to the wherewithal of political action.

So the output is the conformist political action which always reaffirms that system in which it emerged; the input is always critical, disturbing, and never heard of — in that system to which it is directed.

So the term "new music" is a tautology — you either have *music* or *no music*; you do not have *new* music. If music is a work of composers then it is an input. If it is *not* the work of composers — what is it then? It is a commodity. And that has *nothing* to do with your gut feelings which you have in the presence of some organized acoustics.

I fall for that just as much as you do. I've been a night club pianist for far too many years to be superior to it or look upon it superciliously. I love to listen to Beethoven, Mozart, Haydn — long since dead composers. I have all the weaknesses of a consumer, all the strengths of a consumer, the consciousness of a consumer — all that. I can listen. I have acquired certain skills that anyone of you could also acquire either by work or by sheer dint of time. (You can't help it — to learn a few things in your life ... believe me.)

But the moment I want to be a composer, I cannot any longer rely on that accumulated identity with the system that made me. I cannot *rely* upon that; I didn't say I can shove it away, can get rid of it. But I will be in a conflict situation — the least is a *conflict* situation. If it becomes political, I'm in contradiction.

Any questions till here? Any doubts in my sanity? No. Probably there are — anyone audacious enough to suggest? I'm basically a friendly person until I bite. I would be interested — if something comes up or I become completely unintelligible, give me sign. Yes, will you help?

So, in order to have that clear, I will put the word "music" in quotation marks. So, that means it's a word. And it is a word of which we all believe that

at least in daily discourse we refer to something we all know — "Oh you know what I mean", right? — and then in some continuation of this discourse, after twenty minutes, suddenly we find ourselves "You know, we're not talking about the same thing anymore" or we might say, "Ehhh! Difficult to talk with you — we don't talk the same language." All cop-outs.

The profession of a composer is as important as it refers to her political consciousness in her society. Neither more nor less. *That* is the importance of a composer. The history of music does *not* give importance to a composer; the history of music is the importance that composers *had*. And the contemporary composer may in vain try to be as good as Brahms or Mahler or César Franck— she may try to be as good as anyone you can name — it will always be in vain. She will only then be as good as anyone, if her activity is an *input*. If her activity is an input, then she produced a change in a system which the system could not, by itself, generate — *that* is political action.

So, I would like to draw your attention to it (in the presence of faculty even) that it is a pity that usage has allowed you to become students in a course of *political science*. It's a misuse of the English language because the *science* here need not necessarily be *political* at all. What it originally wanted to be is a scientific investigation of politics. At least an introduction to how does one consistently, soberly, rationally — and maybe accurately — investigate how politics function. So it is *not* political science; it is science of politics. Or scientific politics. Just as it is — if we were to call our school *the musical school*, you would hear it, how wrong that would be. There is no *musical* school, but there's a school of music.

There *are* the politics of science, there *is* the science of politics. And to hear such things — to have ears for the English language, and its use and misuse it makes of you — is already part of music. To *hear* is part of music. As long as you don't hear what one says, you also won't hear what one plays. And if you don't hear what one plays you do *not* listen to music, you listen to sound.

So — how does this happen?

At any time a person who grows up with some interest for music finds himself in such an environment that has its music. He (so to speak) is born into a present state of all musics that are already composed and that can be *heard*, either by accident or by intent. These "heard" musical events that usually are offered to you either under circumstances of major celebration (like a concert or other rituals) or in the way of commodities (like records) or in the way of subversive whisperings (like Muzak and advertisement). It comes to you through all possible channels by now, and if we speak about technology we usually think of its nuisance value.

Muzak, at the moment, has become as bad as smoking; you cannot close your ears to it, just like others can't close their noses to it. So any campaign against smoking in public places ought to be accompanied by a campaign against Muzak in public places — otherwise you are not politically active.

[*You are referring of course, to — [Unintelligible question]*]

Yeah, everyone. Everywhere where I *have* to hear when I want silence, is an illegal, unconstitutional situation. It does interfere with my rights.

The fact that a person tells me, "Please don't smoke when I'm in the room" is correct, since I *have* the liberty to yes smoke or not smoke. He does *not* have the liberty to smell it or not smell it. He can't close his nose. Therefore, the one who has *less* alternatives should be listened to; not the one who has more alternatives. The one who has less alternatives is the one limited in his freedom. Since we want to *increase* the individual freedom, everything we do must inspect on the two sides of a decision-taking — where are *less* alternatives? Freedom is the number of alternatives — very simple — let's not philosophize about it at all. It's a waste of time, it's only good for further income of academic institutions.

Freedom is proportionate to the number of alternatives that you have at any stage of your life — seven alternatives is more freedom than six. So simple. Smoking is a simple example. When I smoke I can also *not* smoke; if he is in my presence and doesn't like it (or she) — can't do anything about it, you have have no way of deciding to smell it or not to smell it — it's a biological fact. Therefore the liberty of the receiver is *less* than mine. In order to share, I have to balance out the numbers of alternatives. Same goes for Muzak. The person who runs

the pipe can turn it on or off. *I* cannot turn those on or off. Therefore I have *less* liberties than he has — he has to use *his* liberties in order to give *me* one more.

In the musical world in which we grow up, we sometimes think (and most of you probably *always* think) that you know what you like. Unfortunately this is true … only with a slightly different emphasis. You *know* what you like, and you never like something that you *don't* know. It would also be somewhat hard to demonstrate. If any one of you would like to tell me, "Well I'm somebody who likes — ."

[*Interruption in tape*]

— that right now, right now, you cannot possibly like something of which you have no knowledge whatsoever.

The composer is exactly in that situation. The composer is at the moment writing a piece of music he hasn't written yet, of which he actually thinks that *nobody* has written it yet. Therefore he cannot even like it yet. So if you have an idea that the composer is a person who writes the music he likes — it's not true. If he does then he is an output. If an output is only a reflection on what is known, then he is not a composer. He may run under the description and our social categorization of professions as a composer, but that's misfortune. The composer who is an output of a society is not composing music. What he composes is a new configuration of old stuff. That can be very amusing and can be done with enormous skill — it can be all the good things in life with one exception: it's not a composition.

So the word "composer" is the connection between music and politics. That is what I am driving to. I want to make it clear to you and I ask you and invite you and implore you and crave your understanding *please* from today on make an attempt and play with my thoughts — playfully, with a sense of humor. But do play.

Could it be that indeed music itself cannot really change a political situation? But a person who thinks in that way — that she wants to be an input, and be it even only through music — is a person who is politically active. It need not be politically active agreeing with you; she may not join you, she may not be one you would like to join, but as a basic conceptualization I would like you to know, if the composer *is* an input, if she is not just a re-arranger of old stuff, if she is an *input*, if she generates a change in a system (be it only music) which the system itself could not have produced, neither with the help of nature nor by accident, but only with her presence, then this is the minimal political action that we can call by that name: political action.

So among *all* the musicians, anyone who goes under the word *music* — it is the composer who is most likely to be directly connected with politics, whether she likes it or not. The better a composer she is, the more her political responsibility — again whether she knows it or not, whether she likes it or not — she does not have that liberty.

This is my beginning: I said *all* of you, to the extent that you are daily composers in some medium (be it just the order of your breakfast, be it the scheduling of your day, be it some smidgens of thought that come to you because yesterday you failed in a discussion — it doesn't matter) — to the extent that you are thinking people that do not only copy what is delivered anyway: you are politically active.

OK, any questions to that? Any objections? Nothing.

Good, then let me continue. I want to make one parenthesis. I could also have talked about (I will not, but I *could* have — this is always the problem with a lacking follow-up of such statements) about the role of certain songs in the political history of society. What did the *Marseillaise*[1] do? Why are certain marches adopted by left wing developments? Other marches adopted by right wing developments? — and what all this nomenclature might mean. Was the waltz, indeed, a revolutionary dance? I could make a case for that statement — it need not even be true but I could make it very convincing. I say it need not be true, of course, I think it *is* true …

You look at me very skeptically. Have you ever danced a waltz? [*No*] Have you ever *not* danced a waltz? [*Yes*]

Imagine this afternoon at 5 o'clock someone would take you in his arms, and, with music in the

[1] *La Marseillaise*: Rallying song of the French Revolution.

background, swing around in circles. And you have never done that before — as a matter of fact, you always even took a somewhat prim look at such an image, and you belong to the aristocracy, in which the nearest you ever approached the [opposite] sex in public was with your finger tips — this and this and this — and turned her around — but you never took her in your arms, nor did she you. What would you say if *suddenly* [*Slap!*] this happens — and there are suddenly, in some place, 500 couples doing that in front of the noses of an indignant aristocracy. Then you would understand that this thumbnail sketch I show you — it was in fact a prolonged process: it took various forms, and whole palaces were closed and shut down, and censorship was exerted before the waltz was accepted. These are things that remain unknown because musicology does not deign to deal with the relationship between music and politics. It seems to them to be a stain on their profession. Politics. They're victims of it every day, they gripe with their salary, they are joining unions, they are publishing — they don't get salary for their publishing, they have to publish in order to even stay employed — *all* this, is not politics. They're so dumb. [*Laughter*]

What I try to do, I try to tell you some slightly complex thought matter, but show you immediately that it does relate *directly* to our daily life. You cannot any longer — after you heard me say what I said and have understood even part of it — you can no longer listen to any piece of music without investigating: Was that once an input? Was that once new music?

How does one do that? Hmm? How do you trace listening to a piece of music — somebody tells you, "You *must* hear this Brahms symphony!" OK, so I must — so you go and you sit there and you listen to this poor Brahms symphony. And let's assume for a moment that everything's fine, it was played as it was written, and they know how to play and the conductor doesn't only dance around — and you sit there in some row and you would like to be elsewhere and anyway it's too long. [*laughter*] But — it has some pretty tunes, it's funny how this serious beastly stuff can sometimes contain something charming, but then what are they doing in the other, the rest of the times — they noodle and doodle doodle doodle. What is it? Now this is very boring, I admit that.

And you sit there like victims, and you *are* victims. And that is a high degree of political consciousness. That is, in the presence of what you do not appreciate, you are always victims. Political victims. It only looks better in the United States than elsewhere, but it is appearances only. It may be wiped away in three days with one bill in the legislature.

[*Question: Are inputs ever immediate, or are they always over time?*]

Thank you. Yes, you're right. As input they're immediate. That is, during that time that nobody wants it, because it is inconsistent with what we all like and know. It is alien, it is disturbing, it looks like nonsense, chaos, anarchy and other nice words you may have heard. *This* is the time of input, because the hallmark of something that produces a change in the system that the system cannot itself produce must be that it sounds *false* to the system — is that understood? The system at that time must consider that a disease, something wrong, false, unintelligible, chaotic, disordered, wrong. This is the time of input. As *soon* as that famous time lag comes and the propaganda value of time and usage and familiarity takes over, it will become a tool of the outputters — that is where it turns from here to æsthetics, and slowly and slowly becomes a commodity — to that extent, there indeed is also a time process. But the time process is always decay, *always decay* — and I'm not necessarily quoting the bible. The bible, I think, quotes me. Don't laugh. Do laugh. Do what I tell you — come on!

Time is always decay of information. Information is the content of a message. If the *content* of a message disappears behind the sentence structure of a message, and you hear the *melody* only, it is no longer input, it becomes output. I would like to tell you that most grammatically correct English sentences today are doomed to being output. With other words, the correct English language speaks you, you do not speak it. Observe that "the language speaks you" is incorrect English. And so today you are in the presence of someone who is *not* spoken by the language.

You should use that and do it too. You understand? No? I would be really very curious — to what extent you do understand. To what extent.

Since this is really a political talk.

And the idea is to make you aware of your power to turn man-made manifestations into something from which you can read — read — what this system at the present time cannot do by itself. And *why*.

You must make up your mind whether you want to improve — *improve* — improve the system, because you love and like it to be better than it is — or whether you've got to throw it away because already it's so good, that if you don't like you've got to have another one. And you *will* have to make up your mind — even [though] the police don't allow it.

If the schools of music in the whole wide world always speak of masterworks — and you may have heard that term, the word "masterwork" is analog to "famous last words" — that is, *that* now is *the music*. And then comes another piece and somebody calls it a masterwork and then *that* is now *the music*. And the moment you call something a "masterwork" you put a lid on and you say *that's* the music.

This is the decay and from that moment on it becomes commodity.

What is the intent? The intent is to say that the perfection of music is increasing, and you are living in a system that knows good music, and we have masterworks, and we recognize these masterworks. And even though they were once a disturbance, we have managed to integrate them.

Now the integration of an input can happen in two ways: the one is absorption, and the other is crumbling.

A system that can survive its contradictions is perfect. A system that can survive its contradictions at the expense of its members is fascist. The perfect system of society, in which we live, thus, is perfect and fascist.

And it has found a marvelous way — with the support of everyone of you — to familiarize you with the state of living in contradiction, but *not* to *inform* you about the contradictions. It *familiarizes* you with the *state*: you feel comfortable and you have words: "Well it takes all kinds", and "Aren't we *all*?", instead of saying "*Aren't* we all?" And you have these kind of nice little tunes — they are like folk tunes: "Well, this is just *your* opinion", and then you start your own sentences with "Well, *my personal own* opinion is…" — and you never investigate that you cannot possible have any other, so why emphasize? Have you ever had your *impersonal somebody else's* opinion? But anyway what's the difference between an *own* opinion and a not-quite-so *own* opinion? It's *nonsense*. It's *bullshit*. It's empty language spoken to un-musical people who *can't* hear and thus are talked by the language.

And this language has been coined by your over-powering suppressors. These are the music critics, the managers, the fund distributors — the people who make use of an economic structure to turn even the critique of a system into a commodity. And make you familiar with it and subsume it under the general attitude of seeing a sports event. And if you look into the *Daily Illini*[2] music review and music criticism you will see that they "manhandled the Verdi *Requiem*" or "they got away with it," or "it never got to first base" or something of that kind. The headlines — they come from the sports page, and the sports page is slowly drowning the whole news media by way of language.

Now if you tolerate that you're welcome to it. But then you will *never* know, and be always victims of, the relationship between music and politics. It will, though, function nevertheless whether you know it or not — and that is the one thing you have to get: *ignoring a dynamic in society does not stop that dynamic*. To ignore it does not stop it.

You have only the liberty to know about it or not to know about it. You do *not* have the liberty to stop it. You can only guide it, and that by way of input. You've got to have one thought that nobody told you.

At least one. If you could have two or three, well, be my guests.

It has generated enormous riots in Stockholm at the UNESCO meeting when I told them that the perfection of a system is its critique.

[*Writes*] "If perfect, *and* I do *not* like it, then what?"

What can you do? If it's perfect, then you can't improve it. If you don't like it, you can lump it. Thus, the only way to significant change is the

[2] Student newspaper at the University of Illinois.

declaration of perfection and *not* the declaration of flaws.

That's news, and you will not hear that in many places, and I'm flattering myself that I fill my bill as a composer, properly, and now I'm old and I had my time for that — never mind, not all and not everything is sudden, spontaneous (some things are quite painfully arrived at) but once I get there, I will not budge so easily.

Your *whole* education is built on the opposite paradigm — paradigm: I mean things not questioned any more, things everyone takes for granted — your *whole* education is: avoid mistakes, find flaws. You are graded by the degree by which you improve. Therefore you do that to others.

And so you look around. If you dislike something, you think that is a flaw of that item you don't like. Never did it occur to you, never are you educated, nobody ever proposes to you [that] the next step is that you go into a huddle with yourself, and now you write a one page piece of prose declaring emphatically the helpless perfection of the thing you don't like. That it really would crumble immediately, if it would be to your liking. And that it cannot survive your liking, that as a matter of fact — if it would do that change that you want, then it would simply fall to pieces. Therefore it has to reject your liking. Its perfection is its goal, and its maintenance independent of whether you like it or not. That *you* are superfluous is *its* perfection. And you can emphatically describe that in a few sentences, period. And then at the bottom of the page you write, *And I don't like it!!!* Then you *are* somebody in the presence of that system with its perfection to which you then don't belong. You're a stain on its perfection and no longer a member of the system you dislike.

The composer writes music he doesn't like yet. The composer writes music he does *not* like yet: A) because he hasn't written it yet, so he doesn't know it yet, therefore cannot like it yet; B) because he will not read from his likings what he should write. He will consider his likings out of date. His likings are reflections on things done already. If he would copy the next piece, tracing his likings, he would be an output — he would simply tell another story about some configuration in that scale. So he always writes ugly music, he always writes disturbing music, he always writes unheard of music, unfamiliar music, alien music, crazy music, stupid music, chaotic music, anarchic, formless — "doesn't speak to anyone's heart ya know."

Well, that's as far as I want to go.

I just summarize. A composer is a person who wishes to bring about that which without him would not happen. That you can write down. He definitely is *opposed* to all the products of nature because all of them could happen without him. So nature as an argument — not as a report — belongs to the perfect fascist thought pattern. We have learned to look with awe and respect to nature because it can exist without us — we should look with disrespect.

So ecology out of charity for nature might mobilize more people than reasoning with the beauty and the terrific work that nature does. It doesn't do any. It's just an anthropomorphism and a cop-out. Not true. It has nothing to do with humans. Our way of looking at nature is *our* way of looking at nature and not nature's way. We have to thank *ourselves* that we created once long ago — long before you — the ability to enjoy discriminating variety as an input to our systems. And since then we love that fantastic variety which is never ending, where we always discover *new* differences, and we call that nature. That should be loved as a *human* enterprise — it is lovable, but not as an argument for *being* like it. So I say as an argument: no respect for nature — as a love affair — anyone.

The connection between any art and politics is the consciousness of she who knows that she must be an input or is a consumer. If she doesn't want to be a mere consumer she's got to be an input; if she wants to be an input then she's got to be an alien; if she wants to be an alien then she must not inquire into æsthetics and likings. I assure you that the last sentence about my personal experience with myself at the desk (or at the computer or in the electronic studio) while I am composing — I'd like to make it known to you: I like myself *doing* it very much. I like myself so much *doing* it that there is no liking left for the music that I want to write. So I don't even miss it.

Thank you, this is as far as I go.