Music and Political Ideals

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FRIENDS, colleagues, students, teachers, lovers of music and of the things that music stands for. I’ve been asked to speak this afternoon on the theme of music and political ideals. Let me first of all say that I don’t feel especially qualified to deal with this topic. I am not an expert in political questions. I try to keep myself informed and to arrive at reasoned judgments. I try to support the things that I believe in, and to withdraw my support from the things that I don’t believe in.

I am concerned as many people are about where the world is going. But I wield no influence, have no special knowledge, and am no more involved in political activities than are most people who find themselves obliged in the course of their daily lives, for one reason or another, to devote a certain amount of energy and thought to the formation and expression of coherent positions concerning issues which affect them as individuals, as members of national and international communities, and as carriers of genes for whose transmission to succeeding generations of the human species they are responsible.

It is unlikely that any one of us in this room will ever be called upon to play a deciding role in shaping the political destiny of the larger community to which we belong. By this I mean to say, merely, that the statistical probability that a great statesman of the future may be sitting here among us is very small. Does this mean that we should not concern ourselves with politics?

Politics are a field in which great questions are decided by the concerted movements of large numbers of people. This is as true of tightly organized societies in which a large share of power is held by a small ruling elite, as it is of democracies in which a special value is put on individual freedom. In both cases, power is drawn in the end, from the people. If people choose to ignore this fact, whether consciously and spontaneously, or because they are manipulated into doing so, if they choose to turn their minds away from politics, they give up their right to share in the political life of the community. They in fact abandon their duty to contribute to the collective organization of that community’s future.

No matter what specialized productive role a person may play within the community, that person has a responsibility to relate his or her work consciously to an overall political context. To act in such a way, that one’s work acquires not only economic significance, but political significance as well. This objective of bringing together one’s economic existence and one’s political life may have particular significance if one has chosen to live and work as an artist.

Artists occupy a special place within society’s division of labor. Highly skilled craftsmen as a rule, they are at the same time basically unproductive. Although they may produce objects which are bought and sold, their mode of production is usually highly labor intensive, and inefficient. Their significance as producers of wealth is trivial within the larger frame of production and distribution of goods. Most artists are hard put to create enough wealth to satisfy their own basic needs, let alone a surplus, which will be of potential use to the rest of society. There are of course exceptions to this
rule: artists who have struck it rich; who have exploited, or rather who have allowed themselves to be exploited by the media. But in these cases, what is usually being produced and paid for is not so much art as an image of the artist as a person, as the bearer of a lifestyle which may seem enviable to large numbers of the public. Whereas many of these people are human wrecks, pitiful shadows of what they once were potentially as artists.

What artists produce then, is generally of no particular economic significance to society as a whole, the significance of their work lies outside the framework which most human labor takes place. The transformation of nature, the application of energy to material in a form designed to result in the satisfaction of immediate human needs. It even lies further from the realm of utility than other more abstract forms of intellectual activity such as mathematics and science, which even in their most ethereal form are presumed to have some ultimate bearing on the productive process. The experiments of a dancer or a sculptor are not expected to have consequences in the field of genetic engineering or of laser optics. There are of course, exceptions to this rule also.

A good example might be, the proliferation of synthesizers and other electronic instruments in today’s pop music, a development which probably would not have been possible were it not for the early experiments of electronic music composers and avant-garde groups in the 1950s and ’60s.

The position of artists is a different one. The artist who lives by his or her work is a privileged being, even though he or she may be poor. Artists as a rule enjoy a certain freedom from the constrictions of the work place and the market place, even though they may have to struggle to obtain a means of subsistence. Their work is inherently pleasurable, even though it may involve a good deal of drudgery. Their choice of vocation is dictated by a creative refusal to submit to the repressive demands of the reality principle. In accordance with which, most people in resignation exchange large parts of their lives for money, giving themselves up daily to long hours of hated labor.

Artists are in fact able to turn into some kind of reality even if only in a partial and imperfect way the age old dream of what life would be like in a non-repressive society based on an economy of abundance in which people would be free both from need and from domination and able to pursue their inborn creative impulses without having to alienate their labor in the service of an external authority.

In this sense, works of art whatever their particular subject matter, function collectively as a symbol of this kind of non-alienated creative work of which humans have dreamed for thousands of years, and continue to dream today as they toil. It is this powerful dream which has never lost it’s intensity and urgency, and which throughout history, when the proper conditions were present, has periodically exploded in spectacular outpourings of creative energy, involving masses of people which explains the continuing need for art and artists. Their work provides a model for the creative negation of an oppressive reality. Before such a model exists, it is hard to imagine the need for it within the context of the reality which it negates. Once it has been called into being, as Marx pointed out, the need for it is undeniable.

You might think that all this is leading up to the trivial statement so often heard these days, that all art is revolutionary. This kind of argument, which could be suggested by, for example, a superficial reading of Herbert Marcuse typically comes up in discussions of this kind. It might be correct to say that art is potentially revolutionary. The real relation of artists to the world around them tends to be more ambiguous. What Leon Blau said in reference to religion, that the supposed tendency of art towards it is that of a parabolic curve towards its asymptote, applies to politics also.

Art and politics are not the same thing. There are points where they converge, and points where they diverge. One cannot easily be put into the service of the other without weakening it, depriving it of some of its force as a vehicle of communication. The politics of the art world tends to be fairly ir-

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1 *asymptote*: a line that continually approaches a given curve but does not meet it at any finite distance.
relevant to politics in general. Whereas the kind of art which satisfies the political world is often pretty feeble as art. An effective combination of the two is non-the-less theoretically possible, perhaps because it is practically necessary; a condition that may exist only in certain moments of history. Let’s have a look at some of those moments, now with specific reference to the art of music.

It is a striking feature of the history of Western art music of the last 700 years or so, that it appears to proceed by a series of discreet leaps forward rather than as a smooth continuous process. An important discovery is made. A new technique is introduced which becomes the basis for a fairly stable period of standard practice which lasts for a hundred years or so, and then is upset by some further upheaval which in its turn ushers in a new modern style, and imposes a new set of aesthetic standards. Typically these periods of upheaval and innovation coincide with the process of stylistic fusion.

New instruments or new styles of playing or singing originated in some secular or popular tradition make their way into an otherwise self-contained universe of lofty art music. The orthodox musical expression of the then dominant class whether clergy or aristocracy, forcing that music to submit to structural change. Often in a radical or extravagant form at first, then gradually smoothing out the rough edges, mellowing into a new kind of lofty orthodoxy. Not surprisingly it is possible to point out certain correlations between periods of radical change in music making, and the social transformations that were taking place at roughly the same time.

Perhaps the first major innovation of Western music, after the development of a standard systematic notation, and still to this day most clearly distinguishes Western music from other parts of the world, was the art of counterpoint. The most astonishing example of florid and ornate counterpoint survived from the 14th century in which liturgical themes are combined with two or more folk songs in a mixture which must have sounded as radical in its day as certain of Charles Ives’ compositions still do in ours. Later in the 15th century, the art of polyphony achieved a level of sophistication that has never been rivaled since. One of the favorite themes for the composed polyphonic mass was an anti-war song from the 100 years war, *L’Homme Armé*. Masses by Josquin and others on this theme provide what are perhaps the first historical examples of high political music.

The homophonic Protestant choral based on peasant stomp dances and using popular secular melodies that everybody knew and could sing together is a musical form of protest against the florid polyphony of the church which came to be a hated symbol of clerical oppression. This kind of chordal harmony also constituted a musical image of a new modern sense of time. No longer static or cyclical, but advancing by decisive step in a systematic progress in which the old constantly gives way to the new. We still speak today of a harmonic progression.

Early opera, although it was boring in the elite environment of the Florentine aristocracy, at the same time expressed the cultural ambitions of a newly emerging class of venturesome merchants for whom the old church dictated aesthetic was intolerable confining. The two most important early operas, Jacopo Peri’s *Euridice* and Monteverdi’s *L’Orfeo* are both based on the same myth that could be taken as an allegory of the ascent of this class. The new secular music in the person of Orpheus has the power to change the order of hell and fails only because of its own hesitation and lack of confidence. The instrumental chamber music of the 18th century must be understood as the result of a struggle for emancipation from subservience to the liturgical text. The idea of an autonomous instrumental music is already by itself, a sign of a progress-

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3 Josquin des Prez [1450–1521]: widely considered to be the first master of the high Renaissance style of polyphonic vocal music.
4 Jacopo Peri [1561–1633]: Italian composer who wrote the first work to be called an opera today *Dafne* [1597] and the first opera to have survived to the present day *Euridice* [1600]
5 Claudio Monteverdi [1567–1643]: Italian composer, wrote one of the earliest operas *L’Orfeo* which is still regularly performed.
sive process of secularization. In the 19th century
chamber music becomes an independent industry.
An industry of intellectual entertainment designed
for, and expressing, the cultural aspirations of mid-
dle class rapidly rising to power.

Since the late 19th century new music in the
classical tradition occupies a somewhat ambiguous
ideological role. On the one hand, it stands in in-
creasing opposition to the dominant culture. On the
other hand, it depends if rather tenuously upon that
culture’s institutions. Throughout the 20th century,
but especially in recent years, new music has been
under increasing pressure to clarify its relation to
these institutions and to make an open declaration
to where it stands in regard to its role within so-
ciety. Is it just music? Is new music merely con-
cerned with abstract experimentation, number push-
ing and the organization of concerts in the secluded
halls of universities and circles reserved for an elite
audience of club members? Or does it have some
broader function in society? Can it communicate
meaningfully with ordinary people, and if so, can it
serve to heighten people’s consciousness in a way
that the industrial music (to which it is presumably
an alternative) does not?

Since the 1960s a number of composers in var-
ious countries have attempted to grapple with this
question. Not merely in the theoretical way, but
also practically by trying to find different creative
solutions to the problem in their own work, and oc-
casionally by extending their activity from purely
artistic work to intense involvement in more strictly
political forms of action. These composers do not
exactly constitute a group or a movement, but they
do have features that they share in common. Many
of them were politicized. This is where my written
text ends.

Many of them were politicized or at least began
to relate their music with their political concerns in
the mid and late sixties. Not really so much as lead-
ers, or as original thinkers, but many of them of my
generation for instance — I’m now 45 — in 1968 I
was 30. We were a generation that came before the
students who demonstrated in 1968. We were a mid-
dle generation between the students and the people
who came before us; the people who were ten years
older than we were: Stockhausen’s generation. We
were a middle link between these two. I’ve often no-
ticed that the real generation gap in Western coun-
tries takes place somewhere around my age. It ex-
ists between people who were young adults at the
end of the Second World War, and people who were
children at that time.

For instance, Stockhausen was in the Hitler
youth, like many young Germans of his age. His
formation was certainly in part formed by having
grown up in Nazi Germany, and having been sub-
jected to the values of that culture. He can’t avoid
that. I’m ten years younger than he is, or nine years
younger. I was seven years old when the Second
World War ended. Of course, I have some memo-
ries of it, but basically I grew up after the War. Now
you have people born long after the war had ended.
There is a real gap of consciousness between these
two groups of people. The people of my generation
are sort of straddling that line.

Many of the composers I’m talking about are
roughly my age — 40 to 45 to 50. I will name some
of them. Christian Wolff in the United States, Cor-
nelius Cardew in England, Louis Andriessen in The
Netherlands, Erhard Grosskopf in West Germany,
Luca Lombardi in Italy, Yoshi Takahashi in Japan,
there are quite a number of these people who around
the same time in the late 60s began to write music
which was intimately concerned with political ques-
tions. Each composer found his or her own solution.
But they do have this common bond, and some of
them have discontinued an exclusive concern with
these questions. One of them is dead. Cornelius
Cardew died two years ago, he was killed by a hit
and run driver, who was perhaps the most actively
involved in politics of all of these individuals whom
I’ve named. I’m wandering a little bit away now
from the theme, and in fact I don’t want to keep you
too long because I think we should get into a discus-
sion.

Let me then suggest for discussion . . . perhaps
the first question that would be asked in a discus-
sion of this kind, which is “How is it possible to
relate music and politics?” How can the two things
be combined, especially in the case of say purely
instrumental music in which you do not have any

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text? How can you have an instrumental music that expresses political ideas? This is usually the first question that is asked. The reason there is some confusion on a question like this, I think is because of education.

We are educated to think of things like music and art as though they were processes that take place in an isolated environment, separated from everything else. We study the history of art and the history of music as though there were a history of art here, and a history of music here, and a political history here, and the various things had nothing to do with each other.

We study the history of music as though it starts with Gregorian chant and goes to Machaut, Monteverdi, Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Stravinsky, Schoenberg, etc. But rarely do we learn, when we study those things, what these people were really thinking about, aside from musical questions. We talk about them and listen to their work as though they only thought about music, and were not subject to the conditioning forces of the society in which they lived — as though that was something unimportant. Whereas, it is known in many cases that these composers were very often passionately concerned with social and political issues. Beethoven is certainly a case and point, or Chopin, or Wagner just to name a few, so it becomes a confusing question when we try to think how music, which we are accustomed to thinking of as a fundamentally abstract form of communication, how that can be a vehicle not only for feelings, but for ideas. I think that perhaps, in order to answer a question like that, one has to examine not only the imminent characteristics of a piece of music, one has to imagine the piece of music as consisting not only of notes or sounds, but as a process of communication involving groups of human beings — on a very basic level of course involving the collaborative activity of composers, performers, and audience — but also as a larger process of communication which involves a much larger and more general context.

For instance, if I were to play a piece of music for you right now in this room what we would be experiencing would be not simply a certain combination of, a certain sequence of vibrations in the atmosphere or for that matter a certain sequence of chords or whatever, but we would be experiencing a live, real, human situation which is determined by, for instance, the place where we are — the reasons why we are here, all of us, the things that we have in common. This is a social situation here. We have a group of students, some teachers, everybody here is mostly white, and there are relatively few black people in this audience. Probably people are coming from a certain social class and not from others. All of these things are significant to the fact that this piece of music is being heard by this group of people at this time. A piece of instrumental music can easily assume political qualities simply because of the objective factors present in the environment at the time of its performance.

A very good example perhaps, a simple example of a way in which music functions as a political symbol without a text being present is the case of certain well known songs. I don’t know how well you know the song The International, but certainly it is and has been an extremely well known song that has expressed a symbolic function within a political context. Most people do not know the words to this song, but there are probably three or four times as many people who do know, who recognize the tune, the chorus [singing]. This tune is the carrier of a symbolic message. When you hear this tune you think of a whole context, a whole social and historical context that that tune has meaning. It doesn’t matter so much that you don’t know the words. It’s the music itself in this case is the vehicle for the meaning. There are any number of similar examples.

At this point rather than draw a conclusion I would like now to ask you to submit some contributions to the discussion.