

The 21st Century Composer

Innovations be damned — it's a boring century.
- Feldman

The 20th century just won't go away. Composers today seem to pathologically insist on answering questions that have already been answered. There's a bit of a broken-record quality to it all. Morton Feldman noted that "When Schoenberg, for instance, formulated his principle of composition with the twelve tones, he predicted this would extend the Germanic tradition of music for another hundred years." Well now, here we are a century later, and Schoenberg's project has been expounded upon much more than he might have ever imagined, beaten to death, perhaps. But what conclusions have been drawn from such a project? Where does this leave us today?

As an experiment, I recently prompted AI to write a 1500 word essay on the composer in the 21st century, asking it to discuss new possibilities, limitations, and in general defining the contemporary quality of its character in relation to tradition. I wanted to know what the collective conscience thought about how the composer today differs from the Classical composer, the Romantic, the Modern, and the Postmodern. The result was a cliché definition of the 21st century composer as someone who is defined by collaboration, new technology, and social media platforms, not limited by Romantic expression etc. Needless to say, this was an inadequate clarification of the character of the composer in our era, in part because it relied on the type of marketing clichés and meaningless buzzwords like 'collaboration' and 'technology', but more so because it had nothing to say about *music*. There was no discussion of musical form, nothing about the contemporary composer's relation to harmony, melody, rhythm, timbre, and so forth. In this sense, the AI essay was an appropriate statistical regurgitation of how humanity thinks of art today — on vague, non-artistic, almost exclusively commercial terms. On the other hand, it displays the need for artists to clarify such tasks, and to conceive aesthetic experience beyond the inadequate framework that already exists.

Of course, part of the problem is that AI can write a coherent essay without even questioning *why* such an essay might be written in the first place. Any writer or artist knows that the *necessity* of an artwork or essay conditions its meaning to a very large extent. If something doesn't seem to *need* to be made, it will probably be very uninteresting and superfluous; whereas there is always something of necessity to a good artwork, as if it *had to be made*. This is relevant to the questionable, potentially superfluous character of the composer today. Another way of framing this would be asking — What aesthetic *needs* would a composer fulfill today? Or, *why* even ask this question to begin with, in a time where the composer character is potentially an epigone? AI (collective consciousness) *could* have introduced the essay with something like — The composer is an obsolete character and hardly warrants a lengthy essay — and would have accurately portrayed something very real about how people in the 21st century might perceive the character of the composer at a time where they may indeed be an inessential historical vestige. In framing it this way, the *crisis* of the composer might also be an access point into clarifying its meaning ~ crisis is always also a moment of possibility. For the composer is in part a somewhat dead character, an epigone in an era when all the variations of tonal music associated with it is relegated to Classical, antiquated experience. Today, tonality often appeals to a purely antiquarian sensibility that has given up on possibilities in the present — although much of it is proficient and functional enough for passing muster, it nevertheless sounds flat, limpid, unchallenging. While there is certainly always going to be antiquarianism in our time, and living composers who may meet this need, for example composing in a

classical or romantic idiom, this is *not* what we're after. Of what necessity is a composer *today*? In what way does a composer represent aesthetic possibilities *in the present*? Who is the composer of the 21st century, and what are the subjective qualities of their corresponding listeners?

If one of modernism's great insights was that certain idioms could no longer be pursued because they were inadequate in the present, contemporary music would have to take this "canon of prohibitions" into account. One also cannot simply ignore the truthful challenges and augmentations to the character of the composer wrought by avant-garde electronic composers like Stockhausen. Where it is conveniently ignored, the ensuing work might indeed have to be understood as neoclassical, and unworthy of the title of 21st Century Composition. Adorno noted that tonality had by the late 19th century become tired, spinning its wheels; how much more so we'd presume today. The intentions of many 21st century composers to reconstruct tonality — as if it could even be done without vulgarizing & distorting it¹ — seem insufficient to meet the aesthetic needs of subjectivity in our era. 21st century tonality is a kind of mannerism with amnesia, no less than is its antipode, experimental music. It is also very likely that the resurgence of tonality has a contemporary authoritarian aspect to it: only when tonality has been totally disintegrated into postmodern chaos does it appeal to a consciousness longing for *order* amidst such disorder. In other words, the desire to follow strict rules is a phenomenon of our authoritarian consciousness.

To be sure, there are more contemporary composers operating in a post-tonal style. But note the word *style* here, and avert your ears! For post-tonal, atonal music was not at all meant to be a *style*. No! All this isn't to suggest that tonal *or* atonal music is closed and has no meaningful bearing on the present. Indeed, the postmodern disavowal of traditional forms of art was itself reactionary and would also have to be taken into account by 21st century composers as a deeply inadequate position that led to nothing very remarkable culturally, notwithstanding a few alienated geniuses not very representative of their moment (e.g. La Monte Young). There is a yawning gap in artistic quality spanning the last half century or more, wherein music "experiments" have led to no convincing conclusions, having imagined no ambitious hypotheses which to sincerely test. For example, experimental music's reactionary stance to beauty has led to a dogmatic commitment to ugliness that fails to grip the masses or even its own artists. Tonality has reemerged because the postmodern ethos has been declining, and artists who can see through its many vapid conceptual and formal holes now demand something more sincerely conceived, asking if its anti-aesthetic is — was — merely a wrong turn. And when the scales fall from their eyes, there is Beethoven, as perfect as ever, staring them in the face with an implacable form that no one has yet lived up to, let alone overcome. Such composers are likely to think, "How preposterous to presume that we're somehow beyond such artistic genius! If only we could understand it". Stravinsky famously said that Beethoven's Great Fugue would always be contemporary, and this sensibility reflects something very true — *all* of Beethoven is still contemporary and perhaps more resonant today than ever, for still enigmatic reasons. The clichés of technology, sociability and all the other buzzwords surrounding artistic 'progress' for the last half century might safely be discarded as what is truly irrelevant, to such a disposition. But such composers will also inevitably confront an inner conservative reactionary element in the process which can lead to a resigned antiquarianism. Adorno's critique of Stravinsky's Neoclassicism also cannot simply be forgotten when convenient. Will composers in the 21st century be defined by antiquarianism? Or will they have more of a *critical* orientation to history, and if so in what way? One hopes that the composer in this century will be defined as little by monumentalizing a past riddled with limitations as it is by submitting to contemporary cliché mores like 'embracing technology' or 'collaborating.'

¹ Not even Schenker's attempt is entirely convincing

Historical consciousness is pivotal – the composer in the 21st century might ask, What remains unfulfilled about a certain artwork or form in the past? Not so much what was lacking, but rather what was so profound that it demands an active engagement at the creative level. Consider the example of Johann Joseph Fux, who wrote his counterpoint study under the influence of Palestrina, a dead composer who was considered obsolete in Fux's time — and yet this practical historical study inspired the entirely new music of Mozart and Beethoven. Perhaps the germ of tonality can inspire something beyond itself, can flourish out of itself. The end of postmodernism means artists — when free from the conservative reactionary return to tonality etc. — can now penetrate into the heart of an historical artwork and instead of monumentalizing it, resisting it, or simply being derivative, critically work through the formal ideas it introduced into the world but which still remain enigmatic. In this way composers in the 21st century may be able to clarify latent meanings in the historical works that inspire them in otherwise mysterious ways. Composers today inevitably have to confront the aversion to historical consciousness that is especially pernicious in today's music consciousness. For example, why is it admirable for a writer to command an understanding of Shakespeare, whereas a composer who refers to Beethoven with the same regard for aesthetic education is perceived as traditional? As Nietzsche said, "We are lucky that Mozart still speaks to us." Where are the Ezra Pounds of music, those artists who critically sift through historical works and cultivate productive aesthetic judgment from out of it, immanently unfolding its form in the present?

One of the problems of contemporary historical consciousness is its flattening — history is perceived as useful or not *in toto*, which disregards the *specific* and concrete manifestations of art in its own time, which also stood *against* its time. The great composers are not part of history conceived simply as the 'past' insofar as they stuck out then — didn't fit with their time — just as much as they do now in their idiosyncratic artworks. They point beyond themselves. The orientation one has to such artworks today could be referential — one *consults* great historical works as an exemplary form to reference, but not look upon it as a formula to reproduce. Making art with its referential character for other artists in mind would also be a step towards a newer avant-garde as well. Historical works, and works worthy of them in the present, can serve as something like an eternal advisor, offering advice when called upon. But who would call upon what, and to what end? Who among us can truly pronounce what is dead in history? Artists always find openings and unanswered artistic problems in the most unexpected of historical places. In this way historical works have some of their inchoate words expressed through contemporary artists. Indeed, modernism can be understood not as a rejection of what came before, but rather the ultimate perfection of its implications. E.g. atonality was tonality brought to its most acute completion — the Bach -> Schoenberg example. And yet the problem is actually hearing a deficiency in bourgeois tonal music. There is nothing obviously lacking in Beethoven. The claims of postmodern and many contemporary attitudes that posture as if we've somehow improved upon Beethoven, and are beyond such music is really just delusional and in denial of its own poverty. One would have to *sincerely* consult Beethoven first — ie not as a reactionary with a chip on their shoulder — to even possibly glean some sort of incomplete direction. And listening is currently far too impoverished for that, even amongst contemporary musicians who pay lipservice to *listening*.

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LISTENING

In fact, the whole late 20th century emphasis on *listening* is also a compensation for its deficiency. Adorno depicted in aesthetic and psychological detail the regressions in listening that rapidly onset with the industrialization of culture. Of course, Adorno regarded this regression dialectically — the regression indicated a need for reset, a clearing of the slate that hypothetically demanded new forms of listening. The positive sentimentality about 'listening', and 'deep listening' is by contrast conservative, and it's very

nebulous what that actually means. It has been laden with a kind of hippie pathos that comes off more as a posture, an imitation of listening than a theory or practice. In this aesthetic persuasion one also encounters a rather pathological attitude towards art history that seems to say, "They didn't use to listen, but now we listen better". As if Beethoven wasn't the most critical listener of all time? As if Chopin didn't place the critical practice of an intense listening concentration at the heart of his well-developed pedagogy? As if Nietzsche didn't invent the concept of the "third ear"? As if bourgeois, western music wasn't about listening at the deepest of levels? The assumption that composers, musicians, and listeners pre-60's were inadequate listeners is profoundly ignorant and pure ideology. The development of the western scale is only one of many examples of 'deep listening' in history — the refined auditory perception required in hearing overtones in a string, and finding nature's concealed organization of the harmonic series took many centuries of *listeners* building one off of the other, refining the listening faculty, to actually hear something hidden from obvious perception. The thousands of listeners who died on the dissection table of sound would find it laughable that passively listening to crickets is somehow 'deeper' than the painstaking analytical listening required to hear into the heart of nature, and to actually *change* it for the better, to make it available for artistic engagement. Moreover, such listening actually had a telos which gave it palpable structure — in developing workable scales, we now have a universal foundation for music, as problematic as it may still be. (But problems are also opportunities.) On the other hand, listening to crickets has no clear goal other than vague spiritual edification and clichés of 'activism'. The lack of mediating object of inquiry, an *aesthetic goal* — e.g. trying to reproduce a synthesis of nature available for *art* — is one aspect of Deep Listening that keeps it vague and uninteresting. Another aspect is the contemporary, very reactionary preoccupation with attention, whereas we are able to have meaningful experiences in a distracted state (Benjamin), and indeed our contemporary consciousness is built on distracted experience in a way that many are not ready to acknowledge. At worst, it is metaphysical clap-trap. But the question remains, why listen at all? Was Beethoven's music any worse as he grew deaf? No. What do we actually mean by "listening"?

Beethoven was a listener insofar as he had *reason* to listen. To compose is not just to listen, but also to judge what's being heard, and to respond with making sound ... and relistening and remaking sound iteratively, as an art form. An art based solely on listening misses the compelling art of composition, which is also a subjective process of listening to, shaping, guiding, and forming time. It is an active way of forming time — even where time is intentionally dissolved — and is closer to the union with the cosmos than passive listening in part because the cosmos is nothing if not creative itself. If music is "collaborative", it is as a harmonious collaboration with time and the cosmos; the social significance of new music — its communal aspect — will not be reducible to a vapid mass of individuals subordinating music to their subcultures, but instead will actually develop community around the nascent forms of music, which in turn gives community real meaning and palpable structure. (Ask not what music can do for you, but what you can do for music!). There is a reason why the only successful example of community — churches and religious organizations — needed to rely upon music to cohere disparate individuals, even if unconsciously. Listening points beyond itself towards meaningful productive activity, individual and collective. The 21st century composer will actually have to compose and have a relationship to time that was de-emphasized in much postmodern music. And the composer today, it seems, does find a renewed pleasure in crudely manipulating and organizing sound characters in various thoughtful ways, where *critical listening* is necessary. Indeed, a Glenn Gould would not have existed without the recording medium to aid his critical listening, any more than a pop musician who replays takes or sections over and over again to assess what they've done. Deep listening is not the exclusive practice of a sectarian underground. A thousand times No! "To be a great composer, one must have enormous knowledge, which, as you have taught me, demands not only listening to the work of others, but still more listening to one's own." So said Chopin to a teacher.

More to the point though, listening is really about *thinking* — listening is not simply taking in sensuous information and passively acknowledging it, but judging it, questioning if it rings true, if not then what needs to be changed, if so, where does it seem to lead, where does it want to go next, and so forth. Why does it make me feel this way? What is this emotion? Etc. This is why music from Beethoven to Autechre is compelling: it is not about 'sound' exclusively, but also a representation of the *thinking mind* which finds mediation in musical form. *When we talk about listening, we are really talking about a type of active thinking.* The extent to which composers are exemplary listeners means that they're also exemplary *thinkers*. Music is just as much a conceptual practice as it is sensual; and it's quality is — by far — more determined by its *conceptual play* than it's performance gestures. Adorno noted that Beethoven's greatness was mostly due to his extraordinary ability to constantly and freely invent *new musical characters* and musical categories, his conceptual innovation and "imagination of a second and higher order". Terry Riley also comes to mind here. Today, the composer has a plenitude of such "higher order", meta-compositional tools at their disposal, and this development is the true innovation of electronic music, which is instead usually reduced to exploring timbral novelties. Being able to quickly explore, test, and produce a plethora of temporal sound characters, often disposing of them in the process as Beethoven did, renders the composer exemplary of Nietzsche's ideal of philosophizing with a tuning fork. Apparently, when Alma Mahler read her husband's score for the Adagietto of his 5th, she wept ... at *reading* it — one can hear music without 'hearing' per se, without the sensorium. Consider the (fictionalized) Salieri who reads Mozart's score and is transported to reverie. We are able to listen with our mind's ear, freely reconstructing and connecting conceptual musical characters with our *apperceptive* faculty. Indeed, the conceptual aspect of music is in large part what renders it an *art*, and raises it above the craft of mere musicianship which the composer may or may not find useful in their process, depending on their art. To be sure, music should be made voluptuous and acoustically resplendent, but *what* is amplified in such an art is decisive.

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Of course the elephant in the room is the question of why a composer would need to exist at all in an era of popular music and every other genre, when so many people are songwriters, musicians, producers, and so forth. The abstract answer to this question is less interesting than the reality that there are music makers for whom any other name than 'Composer' seems to fit. Even though it might *not* really fit. Such an artist might not even like the designation, may find it anachronistic and a little insulting to their newness. Or perhaps they were led to it by necessity, not being able to fit anywhere else very convincingly. There are a great deal of music makers who write melodic songs, and are songwriters but in a more classical, more drawn out and prolonged sense of melody than most would associate with writing a 'song' today — to call oneself a songwriter would be misleading, but also maybe a little demeaning to their more dynamic sense of melodic form which does not pursue formulaic idioms. There are a lot music makers who are studio artists and spend a great deal of time sculpting and forming sound objects, and making it sound as pleasurable as possible through electronic manipulations, yet would not call themselves 'producers' — they are more explicitly exploring the medium's specific forms than a producer is able to in the market currently, however little may separate them. Moreover, like many artists they explore the *overlooked revolution of the recording medium*, the radical implications of which should be considered akin to the development of the printing press, but have somehow been neglected. Stockhausen — "I consider a record I make as important as the score." Stockhausen thought recordings would be more instructive to performers than written scores, which he considered nearly obsolete. It is what he called the new development of the *aural tradition*. "New possibilities are discovered and can develop so much faster, when someone works in a studio and produces the sounds himself, and

transforms them.... all of which make it possible to live with the sound to a far greater extent than has been the case for a long time in our musical tradition." The advantages of the recording medium for composition are so obvious that it's astounding that composers continue to resist it. Nevertheless, the recording medium continues to expand and appeal to music makers beyond those who resist it in the name of tradition.

To call such a character a 'producer' is true to an extent, but brings to mind all kinds of images foreign to the sound-character creating interests of this particular music maker who may stray into very imaginary, but no less concrete sound worlds that demand a kind of listening intimacy akin to reading a book. There are composers for film whose music is hampered and suppressed by the culture industry — such composers will have to overcome the lapdog-like subordination to Hollywood and the deeper implication of becoming an ornamental accessory to visual culture and social ideology. There are experimental musicians who are more formally oriented than the vague timbral experiments that have defined that genre for the last half century can accommodate — the composer today will have to confront the overdeveloped yet incoherent array of timbral play over the last half century, and have mastered the implications of 'third ear' harmonies as much as tonality, becoming fluent in composition for sine waves as well as strings, developing a feeling for the type of aesthetic sensuousness that Adorno noticed when he said chords seem to have a tangible quality that the listener can almost feel on their tongue. Even so, it will not be enough to merely introduce into traditional tonal compositions the now cliché idioms of experimental music as a means to color it up & make it sound more up-to-date with current music trends that are also outdated — such antipodes will have to be more consciously addressed. Likewise the 21st Century Composer will draw upon the developments stemming from the incessant obsession with rhythm today, very much a compensation for tonality's deficient theorization of rhythm². The composer in our era will also have to confront the conflict-turned-impasse of the relationship between ultra-formalist mid-century avant-gardism and *musique informelle*, identified nearly a century ago but still unresolved. What do we call all these outliers for whom the forming of sounds in time is their medium, and who work it so well, but have not yet risen to the level of composer? They are not mere musicians either — though many of them may also be — for they are more autonomous in their ambitious organization of sound, and may have a historical rescue mission of some sort which drives their work into more imaginative and innovative territory than perfecting their manual dexterity, which may not even be necessary anymore *at all* for a composer. Make no mistake, the conservative reaction to new music production means is in full effect, with demagogues like Rick Beato propping up manual virtuosity as if it's the ultimate determination of the art of music. In fact, manual virtuosity has almost nothing to do with the art of music today, and displays widespread ignorance and a philistinism that is also obnoxiously know-it-all.

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AGAINST PERFORMANCE

For such a composer, playing an instrument might be a means to an end, but not the only means. Consider the Beethoven who refused to play piano because it was "manual labor". And when you look at our technical musicians today who treat music as a sport to mastered via athleticism, Beethoven was ahead of his time in identifying a nascent vapidness of formulaic musicianship. When Chopin played piano, he unceremoniously moved his hands and was free of the pretentious gesturing of much contemporary performance. He would have been unimpressed at the vulgarity of conservatory-grade music theatrics, what he lambasted as "a new genre of acrobatics", and certainly it's sublimation into the ridiculous

² Even Schoenberg & Schenker discussed insufficiencies in the theory of rhythm, while underlining its critical importance in tonality nonetheless

pretension of the conductor, which Adorno unveiled as a purely authoritarian phenomenon of Wagnerian theatrics. Music consciousness has still not caught up with Nietzsche's critique of music's increasing subordination to theatricality. Chopin also stated that "Concerts are never real music; you have to give up the idea of hearing in them the most beautiful things of art.", one of the first to understand that concerts are more cheap entertainment than art, like going to a sporting event more than an art exhibition, however valuable that may be for other reasons. Perhaps Chopin would have leaned in to the new intimacy of the recording medium. Likewise Morton Feldman —

I don't wish to press the point too strongly at this time, but I do feel the concert hall leads only to cross-purposes for the composer. I would not only welcome its demise, it would be my dream. I never fully understood the need for a "live" audience. My music, because of its extreme quietude, would be happiest with a dead one.

Or consider the modern composer Milton Babbitt on live music:

I can't believe that people really prefer to go to the concert hall under intellectually trying, socially trying, physically trying conditions, unable to repeat something they have missed, when they can sit home under the most comfortable and stimulating circumstances and hear it as they want to hear it. I can't imagine what would happen to literature today if one were obliged to congregate in an unpleasant hall and read novels projected on a screen.

And yet, to develop a *critical listener* in the era of the recording medium, those who would sit down at home and want to be *challenged instead of pacified* with Spotify muzak, is not an artistic problem at all, not something the composer can address formally — it is a problem of ideology around music, and the restrictions that a conservative culture places on art.

The lay assumption that one has to be a musical *performer* — an *entertainer* — to be a great musical artist is utter dogma and truly barbaric. In truth, the special impact that music has on us is primarily in private, in our introspective contemplation, from our alienated reflections, and in the most *unceremonial* of places — for instance on our commutes to work, in our decompression time, in "man caves", while cleaning, just sitting in our living rooms or laying in bed, etc. It is where we dream freely in other possibilities, not as escape from reality but as an acceptance of reality itself being dreamlike. The confined structures of social performance — "the mass ornament" — does not emphasize the kind of reverie we feel in the private intimacy of our dreams, the natural habitat of the spirit of music. The avant-garde's deemphasis on musical performance especially in electronic music, which recognized that music no longer need be constricted by superfluous nonmusical ergonomics like piano fingering or purely biomechanical faculty, *should* prove to have been a great precondition for the advancement of musical form in our era — which is nothing if not nonsensuous mimicry, intellectual through-and-through. Yet the anti-intellectualism of our music culture has not yet caught up. The contemporary "tabletop" electronic music performance, no less than its natural studio habitat, points beyond the need for superfluous bodily gesturing and towards an art based on listening and musical imagination; yet the DIY electronic music industry gets it backwards when it supposes that its lazily aestheticized knob-twiddling is more performative and less abstract *mind play* of directing and connecting autonomous musical patterns and concepts. Likewise, the rise of ambient music "concerts" is contrary to the real significance of ambient music that emphasized music experiences converging with personal dream experience. They have not yet intellectually caught up to the true significance of their art, their own activity remains a mystery to them. And yet it's obvious to all that the intellectual aspect is the core of the art, which is merely papered over and occluded by dogmas of "the body", performance, gesture. Utter dogma.

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Music is still a young art, much more recent an invention than painting or literature, for example. We should learn a thing from them, not expecting our music artists to perform their art for pony-show entertainment any more than we expect to watch a writer write, or a painter paint, which would be absurd philistinism and the pinnacle of idiocy. Do we judge a book by whether or not the author wrote it with their hands? No. Nor is music reducible to sound any more than painting is reducible to vision. While playing an instrument can be an indispensable means of education, like copying a master's painting to comprehend its form, it need not be reified as the *only* means. In fact, it can be a real hindrance in many ways, occluding the forest through the trees. There is a marked difference between musicianship and art: "Since music has never had a Rembrandt, we have remained nothing more than musicians. The painter achieves mastery by allowing what he is doing to be itself. In a way, he must step aside in order to be in control. The composer is just learning to do this." (Feldman) And if the pathos of instrumental technique education and music theory (e.g. Youtube "analysis" tutorials) indicates anything, it's that music makers today have an abstract, highly mediated, and academic orientation to art. To be clear, music analysis today is barbaric; study of the past has been barbarized and become melancholic. And yes, an academicism even and perhaps especially in pop music, which calculates its chord progressions and cannot fathom the deeper forms of the classics which it pillages. The academicism inherent in contemporary analytical listening, always tied to the producer who wants to *use* history, may point to the possibility of critical practice. Or maybe not. Even so, the 21st Century Composer would have to unify serious and light music, not merely propping up a solemn, morbidly cerebral pseudo-avant-gardism, but advance the achievements of music like Beethoven's that successfully integrated playfulness and intelligence, amongst a great deal of other musical emotions. Yet the *discovery of new feelings* is the artistic responsibility of the composer in our era. What good is it to trot out cliché feelings in a historical moment that is arguably far more complicated than others? Our culture suffers from addressing the new world with old feelings inadequate to the task. The composer in the 21st century ought to be an explorer of new emotional vistas. New harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic forms are required. And for such new forms, artists need to *think through history more critically*. The new music avant-garde will not be an oddball self-marginalized vacuum of obscurantist esoterica and neo-romantic pathos, but rather fulfill the universal aspirations of classical music, which Schoenberg noted shared a sensibility with popular folk music. Sound artists will actually have to master and thus transcend traditional music, and not just pretend they do, as is current practice. And these new avant garde sensibilities will have to appeal to those best, most musically sensitive qualities, not the worst, most bombastic qualities of pop, experimental, and classical music. The composer in our century will find ways of appealing to the side of listeners who appreciate the evocative beauty of the Moonlight Sonata, developing a universal aesthetic sensitivity, but who can also make listeners tap their feet, whose forms are irresistibly pleasurable in one way or another, and not something which is listened to merely because other people do or because institutions tell them to, out of social obligation and weak herd mentality. They will have to appeal to those who find beauty in dissonance, and can immerse in new material forms of acoustic resplendence, willing to become smaller than the music, not shrink it to be an accessory to their petty lives. In sum, the composer today will have to synthesize a great multitude of sound characters and history from which they've been able to *learn*, developing a particular genius for *apperception* and a scientific intuition for beauty. It's an open question if there's a subject today who can take up such an ambitious task.

A long time ago, but not too long ago, the composer Maryanne Amacher theorized that music in the future would be made with a plethora of creative sequencing machines that freely write melodic and harmonic phrases in a kind of cybernetic collaboration with the composer. At the time it sounded fantastical, but science fiction never really is, is it? These meta-compositional processes are pretty much what we have available today, to everyone, democratically. The computer, along with its hardware ancestors, makes it

easy to form complex melodic, harmonic, & timbral sequences in real time, amplified without the aid of musicians, transmitted spontaneously and immediately. Does this re-explanation of electronic music sound pedantic? It must be reiterated how profound an invention this is. To be sure, it is exactly this progress — won so hard over centuries — that the new luddites (e.g. Beato) recoil from in disgust, hoping to make of music a mere arts and crafts culture. This conservative reaction is far greater in number than the progressive musicians who'd lean into new possibilities in our present. Yet the proof is in the work itself. Just as the heart wants what the heart wants, the ear wants what the ear wants, despite what ideology whispers into it. The recoiling from electronic music is equal to its inevitability. Imagine the deaf Beethoven being able to churn out highly complex phrases in an elaborate motivic environment with *extreme precision* on the fly, amplified and vibrating with immediacy, in a kind of *textually lyrical* medium. And this also goes back to Chopin, who marveled at the musical singing automaton experiments in England in his time, even hoping that these "androids" might replace singing divas, "who cost a lot and cause a lot of trouble". Bach would have loved shredding midi on his laptop, switching between tuning systems on a whim. There was always something overlooked in the aspect of *reading* and *writing* music, it's textual element, it's meta-level abstract symbolic processes have not been considered deeply enough. This more lyrical aspect of composing musical patterns and sound characters on the fly is exactly what is available to the music maker today. Perhaps writing with machines pales in comparison to a virtuoso like Beethoven, who many assume channeled divine music. But historic evidence suggests otherwise — that Beethoven composed meticulously and thoughtfully, more intellectual *work* and understanding of the logic of tonality than divine genius³. In other words, he was not the performative, conjuring romantic we generally ascribe to musicians even, and perhaps especially today. Bernstein's quote that Beethoven "had a telephone line to God" is quite dumb. He should have known better. And this is the point — the 21st century Composer should be the *intellectual creator* that Beethoven introduced into the world, the "brain owner" as Schoenberg noted, yet which remains mostly unformed. Where it is formed — and it is formed in a great many places, often outside of 'classical' culture — it is formed unconsciously, almost by accident. Perhaps we can say music composition is more in exile than dead. Nevertheless, the best music of our time finds pleasure in the spontaneous forming of time by the intelligent play of the aesthetic faculty. As ever! It need not be made by someone who is called a 'composer', but the composer's refined understanding of music history may confront this intellectual free play most self-consciously. And self-consciousness is a phenomenon of our era that is imprinted on *all* forms of music, no matter the artist's intentions.

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TECHNOLOGY

Returning to the original platitudes surrounding technology, there is an intrinsic relationship between music and technology that has nothing whatsoever to do with the 21st century. The ear itself is a very fine technological medium that translates complex acoustic phenomena to abstract figures for the mind to synthesize. Of course, technology has opened up possibilities for musical form — and we can also say the inverse, that the historical development of composition necessitated — even authorized — technology as we now know it to a large extent. Probably though there's an intrinsic connection between music and technology — *techne* — because the ear is a medium like technology in itself — a biomechanical 'machine' that modulates & transposes vibrations, reducing physical vibrations to figures for the brain to process and ultimately apperceive in the imagination. But the means is not the end, and the medium is actually not the message, which is to ultimately be interpreted spontaneously in various ways, and which

³ See Adorno's emphasis on Beethoven refuting accusations of genius by stating he simply knew how to place a diminished 7th chord

remain in part psychological or broadly speaking, subjective. The Art of Music listening is more than perception of vibratory phenomena, it is almost like a metaphor for the many processes through which the ear interprets streams of auditory vibrations itself, which can be a very abstract and mediating creative process. And for the art of music in terms of its production, it is appropriate for music — in imitating this process — to be very *fine*, selective about the tones used, arranged, & so forth, because the ear itself is a very *fine instrument*, waiting to be played in its own special ways. Yet it's still an *imperfect* instrument, more coarse than might be assumed (especially in the upper registers), so composers may continue to *refine the third ear*, not merely pander to our physiology as it exists. The continuous augmentation of the listening faculty. Truly anything is possible with music technology today, to such an extent that the means of music production appear to have outstripped the imagination of those who use it. The 21st Century Composer will not simply accept technology into their creative lives, they will have to *command* it. What good is a toolbox if one doesn't know how to use the tools (or even misuse them creatively)?

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EDUCATION

Education is a dominant trait of the composer today. And using tools does not exist in abstract isolation apart from practice — even in the time of tonality, the laws of tonality were subject to the imagination of the composer, who often broke the rules, and who could use tools instead of being *used by them*. Schoenberg observed that the great rise of 'technical' music actually implied quite the opposite — when a composer is obsessed with technique, they don't have technique, technique *has them!* The great diaspora of technical music education, as well as instrumental dexterity and proficiency, misses this point that what is decisive about music experience is not technical expertise or a mastery of different styles to be mixed as one chooses, but rather the *idea* that gives music articulate form. What is the motive, the *motivating idea*? When one listens to much 'new music', it is common to feel the lack of idea, which is easily glossed over with flashy production or instrumental gimmickry of one kind or another. Indeed, most listeners have standards which squarely concern the level of production, judging it by its gloss alone. The composer in our era will have to be someone who is not subjectively bowdlerized by technology any more than technique. The obsession with technique put forth by e.g. Youtube tutorials misses the point of art — which contextualizes and transforms technique *in practice* — and is academicism in the public sphere. The 21st Century Composer may for instance sharpen its skills in modulation from such tutorials while at the same time understanding that as Adorno stated, "the great composers never went in much for modulation". In other words, a synthesis of historical consciousness and present possibility of practices. The composer in our era will have to reflect the fact that all of culture in our era is suspicious, always consumed with many grains of salt, and find in this judgmental tendency a means for sincere artistic production. The 21st Century Composer will be a synthesis of creator and critic, the type of 'critical artist' that has been theorized and idealized for decades, yet only produced in caricature in reality. After all, to be confronted with possibilities — to be able to spot them first of all, and secondly to *make decisions* about them, is an integral aspect of creation.

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DECISIONS, DECISIONS!

And this brings me to my final point — that faced with the great plenitude of materials, techniques, and history, the artist today will primarily be defined by what they *want*. Decision weighs heavily on contemporary music consciousness. Gone are the days when music had a clear telos — e.g. that tonality inevitably led to atonality, which led to electronic music etc. One of the biggest problems of today's

autonomous music is not clearly having a problem. It is not as simple as it once was in easily finding technical improvements to be made to tonality, or deciding to resist it for the sake of 'new music' and so forth. Today, anything goes, and this is supposed to be a liberating thing for contemporary music, even though it can also be construed as a paralyzing phenomenon. Greater freedom. Yet "freedom for what, freedom from what?", are decisive questions that are rarely asked. We ought to also consider what we do *not want*, for there is a great deal of inessential fluff that we can unburden ourselves of. "Being that music is our life, in that it has given us a life — did we make things *clear*? That is, do we love Music, and not the systems, the rituals, the symbols — the worldly, greedy gymnastics we substitute for it? That is, do we give everything — a total commitment to our own uniqueness?" (Feldman)

For Schoenberg, calls for "New music" were pathological even a century ago, far less qualitatively substantial than original *ideas*; how much more so now in a time of genre-bending and mixing that lacks autonomous musical ideas and even recoils from the idea of an intellectual music, even as music becomes more intellectual regardless of the conservative resistance. When there is no standard or norm, there is nothing at all to advance, and so the frontiers of music are homogeneously developed, or perhaps not developed at all. When anything goes, that also means anything can be dispensed with, and so a major issue confronting 21st century music is that of *decision*, which is inseparable from *critique*. When all materials are available — as they have been for over a century — and technical constraints are lifted with the expansion of knowledge, the question becomes not what *can* one do, or what is one *supposed* to do, but what does one *want to do*. To the serious musical artist, the availability of options may flatten out into an impasse, a mere rearranging of what already exists that falls below the threshold of autonomous musical imagination. And very often, artists today have interests that are low hanging fruit, beneath their capability. Nor is musical *taste* as common as one would expect, and it's not something that can really be taught, though it can be developed. No amount of technical music education will create a subject with taste. Crippled subjectivity remains a dominant problem in music as elsewhere in society. Of what use is a composer without ideas or taste? Criticism — internal or external — will have something to offer here in terms of clarifying ideas and conceptual goals, in providing taste where there is none. In part a critic — as all artists are — the 21st century composer will not be easily charmed and *used* by music trends, but will regard them with a cold, disenchanted spirit that will master them only insofar as they are judged in the process of their own practice for higher, more ambitious artistic purposes. The important composers today inevitably confront this problem of musical subjectivity and raise it to a level of acuity, in various ways, but mostly in their relentless passion for inventing new forms, dispensing with them, and immediately reinventing anew again — in short, the desperate attempt to break through cultural norms. It is likely that this problem will not be solved by the artist so much as articulated. And it will likely be a rearticulation of 19th century music problems. Perhaps this is the critical role of the artist today: to allow us to refeel art history instead of pathologically repeating it.

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One can no longer compose like Beethoven, but one must *think* as he composed.
- Adorno