

Quality and Identity in Contemporary Music

The theme of identity politics in relation to the arts has recently resurfaced after U.S. author and journalist Lionel Shriver gave a speech at the Brisbane Writers Festival. Shriver argued that fiction writers should “not let concerns about ‘cultural appropriation’ constrain [their] creation of characters from different backgrounds than [their] own.”¹ In a much smaller setting—that of the contemporary music community in Chicago—Tamas Vilaghy recently wrote a review of Ensemble Dal Niente’s season opener show for *Cacophony Magazine*, where he pointed out that “composers (...) do not gain artistic legitimacy by presenting only themselves in their work, but lose it. To put it another way, composition-as-memoir essentializes the categories it seeks to dismantle, and a curatorial approach focused on the representation of minorities reinforces this process, unconsciously or not.”² Regardless of the particularities of these positions, both pieces raise important themes related to aesthetics, art curation, identity, and politics. I am going to provide some thoughts about a few of the many intersections that emerge from the overlap of these topics.

Some of us involved in the field of contemporary music³ discuss issues related to identity that undeniably need to be addressed, but we also seem to be afraid of delving into the exceedingly intricate and equally crucial discussion regarding artistic quality. My contention is that today’s contemporary music community prioritizes the discussion about identity over that of quality. In my view, this phenomenon not only impoverishes discourse, but also paralyzes the possibility of treating art as an agent of change. I will argue that both conversations are necessary and inexorably coupled.

Identity is a complex matter. It operates in multiple speeds and it travels towards multiple directions. It never is static. For this reason, I prefer the plural form of the word identity, since it better manifests this diversity of behaviors. Identities are not pure or naturally existing entities: they are products of dialectical conflicts. They exist in the realm of difference, or as *negative* products of external circumstances. They emerge from a need to ratify some type of distinction between a given structure that is unwilling or unable to systematically embody a particular

¹ Lionel Shriver, “Will the Left Survive the Millennials?,” *New York Times*, September 23, 2016, accessed October 1, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/23/opinion/will-the-left-survive-the-millennials.html>.

² Tamas Vilaghy, “Ensemble Dal Niente Season Opener 9.18,” *Cacophony Magazine*, accessed October 1, 2016, <http://www.cacophonymag.com/dal-niente-season-opener>.

³ For my understanding of the term “contemporary music,” see: Joan Arnau Pàmies, “New Music is not (Necessarily) Contemporary Music,” *NewMusicBox*, accessed October 1, 2016, <http://www.newmusicbox.org/articles/new-music-is-not-necessarily-contemporary-music/>.

component of its being. This component, which for one, several, or many reasons is then understood as a separate section from the totality, requires a set of concrete margins in order to understand itself as a newer structure and thus as a subject. This is the moment when identities surface. Identities are thus constructions based on certain properties, including class, ethnicity, and gender.

Nationalisms are examples of identities. There is nothing *essentially* different between citizens who live in Strasbourg, in Alsace, and citizens from Karlsruhe. Both groups of citizens are humans. These two towns are fifty miles apart, yet they belong to separate nation-states—France and Germany respectively. Yet, the French speak French, while the German do not. But there are also French who speak German and Germans who speak French. Nation-states exist as a result of historical circumstances, but more importantly, they have geographical borders for specific reasons—their respective state sovereignties were determined due to specific political actions. For example, the outcome of the Franco-Prussian War led to Alsace’s annexation to Bismarck’s German empire in 1871. But almost fifty years later, Alsace was returned to France under the Treaty of Versailles. From a biological understanding, nothing substantial changed in the physiology of those individuals who once were German and later became French—there was no *essential* alteration. Historically, Alsace is a territory that has been under German jurisdiction in order to separate itself from France’s jurisdiction and vice versa. In addition, there is a historical Alsatian separatist movement that demands independence from France. And this is only the beginning: today, both nation-states (and Alsace as well) belong to the European Union, a supranational form of sovereignty. Being French, German, or having any other nationality is the result of explainable historical events. If things between France and Germany had evolved differently, Alsatians today could have been German.

Catalonia, a region located in the northeast of Spain, has a rather similar history. In the twelfth century, Catalonia and the region of Aragon were unified under the Crown of Aragon after the marriage of Queen Petronilla and Ramon Berenguer IV, Count of Barcelona. Over the next centuries, the confederation became an important power due to a series of conquests across the Mediterranean. In 1469, the Crowns of Aragon and Castile were unified after a dynastic marriage between Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabella of Castile. This was a crucial event that eventually lead to the dawn of the Kingdom of Spain. In 1716, after the War of the Spanish Succession, the Crown of Aragon was abolished by Philip V of Spain. The Nueva Planta decrees, signed by the monarch, put an end to all Catalan institutions and thus centralized sovereignty in the hands of the Kingdom of Spain. Catalans thus became Spanish because of that history. Since then, Catalonia has gone through a history of emancipatory struggles that have taken manifold forms.

In recent times, the region has made international headlines due to a democratically-elected parliamentary majority that is currently designing the structures of a new Catalan State independent from Spain.

I was born and raised in Catalonia and I fully support the separatist political project, for which I have been personally involved in a number of ways. I *identify* as Catalan, not Spanish. This makes me a member of a minority (Catalans only represent 16% of the total population in Spain) that feels ill-treated by Spanish institutions, mainly for economic and linguistic reasons.

However, I am in advantageous situations when compared to other Catalans. In Catalonia, being a woman increases the chances of receiving lower wages than men do—I will never have this problem. Individuals who were born in Catalonia but whose parents migrated from elsewhere are more likely to become targets of racist attacks and xenophobia than white Catalans are—I know I will never be attacked on these grounds. On the other hand, both sides of my family are working class. My grandfather on my father's side fought against the fascists in the Spanish Civil War's bloody battle of Ebro. His wife Victoria, who raised two children entirely on her own after her husband had left her, worked as a maid for wealthy Catalan families. On the other side of the family, my grandmother worked as a manufacturer in one of Reus'—my hometown—textile factories until she had her first daughter. Her husband worked as a truck driver for a number of years and eventually became a firefighter. My father died in 2001, when I was twelve. My mother is healthy. Both of them are teachers: my father taught high school and my mother is the principal of a public school in Reus. My parents were the first members of my entire family who could be thought of as middle-class. My identity, like all identities, is thus complex and multifaceted: I have felt and continue to feel oppressed by the Spanish State, but that does not make me a fully oppressed human. After all, I am a white man whose life is significantly easier than the lives of many other people.

I am using these historical and personal developments in order to exemplify how identities emerge as the consequence of political situations. In the United States, popular movements like Black Lives Matter materialize in response to centuries of systemic racism against black citizens. Throughout history, black identities originated as reactions to dominant groups of people who had power through both legislation and brute force to perpetuate a socioeconomic paradigm based on the preservation of privileges, resources, and wealth in the hands of families and corporations that originally migrated from Europe. This was a form of European supremacy, or the construction of a new nation run by European peoples but built on the free labor provided by African slaves. Those new European migrants brutally extracted labor power from African bodies in order to erect the new nation, which in turn stemmed from a negative position towards

older European nations: that is, the birth of the “white protestant nation,” as historian Allan Lichtman would express.⁴ (*White*) *America is not Europe*. Today, black identities are primarily a means to unify black U.S. citizens against the political project of *that* nation. On the other hand, the white protestant nation was a means to unify European immigrants in opposition to Europeans who remained in the old continent. The formation of identities is a direct reaction to the actions of other identities that are *unwilling or unable to systematically embody a particular component of their being*. Identities thus emerge from *negative dialectics*, to use an Adornian term.⁵

It is reasonable to believe that identities are instead positive affirmations of the cultural traits of certain communities, that identities are an essential part of who we are and not mere reactive constructs. Some may argue that LGBTQ individuals behave sexually in manifold ways not as a means to confront heteronormativity, but simply because that is how they essentially are. This is a fair point, but I believe it fails to see the bigger picture. The LGBTQ movement (and its many forms of identity) would not have had any reason to occur if societies had historically been respectful and aware of the vast variety of human sexual behaviors. For example, if being gay had been considered to simply be another facet of sexual behavior without the accompaniment of a negative moral judgment, homosexuality would certainly exist, but it would not have become a particularly interesting or unique feature to emphasize. Having two hands is normal for humans: no one makes a big deal out of having two hands (no one develops a form of identity based on the fact that they have two hands, except for the mere recognition that having two hands is representative of being human). And that is because it is perceived as something entirely ordinary. In a parallel, nondiscriminatory world, being gay would have been ordinary (and, more importantly, unproblematic) and no one would have made a big deal out of it. In a parallel universe of profound respect for diversity, men could have shown love for other men without any serious consequences that might have threatened their physical integrity. Or women might have acted and dressed in a way that resembled how men are allegedly supposed to act and dress without receiving a different treatment from society’s views of those other individuals who also have vaginas but dress *like women*. Perhaps a speculative, non-patriarchal, non-heteronormative society would have had an entirely divergent understanding of gender and sex from ours, which we cannot even imagine today. In any case, in our world LGBTQ *is* a legitimate set of identities that fundamentally express a historical political demand: the end of heteronormativity.

⁴ Allan Lichtman, *White Protestant Nation: The Rise of the American Conservative Movement* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2008).

⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1973).

Identities are simultaneously progressive and regressive. They behave in contradiction. The Soviet Revolution accomplished the exceedingly important project of unifying individuals under the umbrella of the working class, but it also failed to provide a more sophisticated analysis of the multifacetedness of worker ontology. There are female workers, male workers, gay workers, white workers, black workers, etcetera. All of these categories, which are dynamic and conditioned by historical circumstances, require their own rigorous examinations. Workers may be oppressed in manifold ways, but female workers tend to suffer greater oppression than their male counterparts if they live under a patriarchy. In the U.S., the racist society has a strong tendency to abuse black workers more intensely than white workers. In fact, being black (working class or not) simply translates into having greater chances of getting shot by the police; being white decreases one's chances of experiencing police brutality significantly. An intersectional analysis across multiple forms of oppression is thus required.

The most excruciatingly difficult aspect of associating oneself with a sense of identity is the ability to maintain the community's formal cohesion without falling into essentialistic views that may threaten the necessary self-critique of the fundamental underpinnings that form that very cohesion. Foremost, any identity seeks the possibility of differentiation. Identities thrive on difference. Identities require other identities in order to understand themselves as separate, varying identities. Nonetheless, that should not be taken as an argument against the latent possibilities lying within identities. For example, the blues would most likely not exist without the previous existence of some sense of blackness paired with slavery and poverty. Similarly, the classical style would probably have not been formed the way it was without some notion of a Germanic identity built on the Enlightenment, which in turn materialized in response to a need to self-identify as an agent against superstition, barbarism, and (a myopic view of) the entirety of the non-European world.

Many influential authors have argued that Europe created its own identity in opposition to the allegedly uncivilized, colonized countries; that during colonialism Europe saw itself as the highest form of civilization in contrast to the purportedly primitive societies elsewhere. That may be true, but there are also many Europes, which certainly contradict each other. Wakefield had an imperialist agenda, but Marx severely criticized him for that particular reason.⁶ Nietzsche was not the most complacent philosopher about Europe, to put it mildly. "Europe" was never the enemy of the colonized. Instead, some communities of people with substantial economic resources who happened to be geographically located in Europe were the enemies of the

⁶ Karl Marx, "The Modern Theory of Colonization," in *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (Mineola, New York: Dover, 2011), 838–849.

colonized. Likewise, today it does not make much sense to blame the entirety of the United States for the political decisions of specific individuals in positions of power who have historically promoted an agenda of imperialism, resource extraction, and capital accumulation. Regardless, the process of negative dialectics and differentiation remains.

I will now move into a brief exploration of quality in relation to music. Firstly, what quality is needs to be determined. Robert Johnson and Ludwig van Beethoven are exceptional cultural affirmations of humanity, but they are not because of their respective identities or who they were, but rather due to the *quality* of their work. Beethoven was not a “better musician” (however the reader wishes to understand this term) than Johnson because he was white; Johnson was not better than Beethoven because he was black.

Quality is the potential that music has to question its own principles. It is a disruptive force that interrogates the very categories that we employ in order to assess the nature of music. Going back to Beethoven, quality is expressed in the composer’s ability to interfere with formal expectations, for example in the context of sonata form. Quality may also be found in Maryanne Amacher’s third-ear works, through which she pushes us to listen to music according to the internal physical construction of the ear. Quality is thus an aesthetic state that allows us to temporarily situate ourselves *outside* common experience of the most immediate reality—it leads to *experiential anomalies*.

What brings me to confidently state the above is a moral commitment to human liberation. Liberation from all forms of violence. Music can and should contribute to this political project, for I believe that the top priority of human existence is the creation of a peaceful world wherein *we all* can vehemently thrive. By engaging with music capable of displacing us outside common experience, we gain greater insight into how we can potentially operate as agents of change—we become subjects. We accomplish something immensely valuable and gain perspective of our own position in history. Yet again another contradiction: we do not abandon history, but we certainly become aware of the impending trajectory of history that would take place if we were to remain its passive viewers. This is the role of art as *gesellschaftliche Produktivkraft* (socially productive force), to use Herbert Marcuse’s terminology.⁷

Some readers might have never had experiential anomalies listening to Beethoven or Amacher—I have. Instead, some readers might have had similar experiences listening to what I would

⁷ Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969).

believe to be banal music. This is entirely possible. And this is another pivotal topic to touch upon: quality is not inherent in specific musical materials and their formal organization, but at the very least emerges through the interaction between personal experience, musical knowledge, and musical substance (performance, sound, scores, etcetera). It occurs in the relation between music and listener.

There is plenty of music that is enjoyable. But that does not lead to quality. For example, I enjoy listening to U2. But U2 has never provided me with a transformative experience that led to greater personal subjectivity. That is why, for me, Amacher, Beethoven, and Johnson are more consequential. There are no reasons to believe that merely enjoyable music should not be created anymore. Forcing musicians to stop making any kind of music would be a form of fascism that I oppose. However, enjoyable music, for lack of a better term, should neither receive the attention and significance it currently does through a free market that falsely claims to represent democratic will. *There is life beyond humanity as consumerism.*

What is to be done? What should contemporary musicians do? What about institutions that support the creation of new music? What should they do? Who receives funding to create their artistic projects? Tackling these questions rigorously would require a much larger framework than what I am providing here. However, I have a few preliminary suggestions that I would like to share. Hopefully this can spark a much-needed discussion in the future.

Firstly, contemporary musicians should be free to make whatever music they would like to make, under only one condition: like any citizens of the world *with access to resources and privilege*, I believe experimental musicians have a moral obligation to make music that has the potential to act as a socially productive force and push us to explore new phenomenological territories. Music that has greater proclivity for the reiteration of familiar experiential patterns certainly has a place in society, but the immense support it currently receives through the industry is disproportionate. At the very least, contemporary musicians should be aware of this issue, which leads to the seemingly perpetual reproduction of self-similar works. Secondly, institutions should support projects from highly diverse pools of contemporary musicians. That means that there is a historical need to finance work made by women, people of color, and LGBTQ individuals. That does not mean that white heterosexual men should be removed from the picture: I am arguing that we all have to aim for diversity and equity. Thirdly, institutions need to define quality and musicians need to urge institutions to define quality according to their own societal analyses and convictions. Fourthly and finally, equity needs to be matched with quality. It is perfectly possible and indispensable to fund musical projects made by individuals and communities from

historically underrepresented collectives without sacrificing quality. That will require more effort on behalf of institutions in order to pinpoint those musicians who do not have the same visibility as privileged white men due to their situation of societal and systemic inferiority. It is the responsibility of institutions to pursue this strategy and of contemporary musicians to make everyone else aware of this historical necessity.

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