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Political Music and the Politics of Music

I. OVERTURE

On September 24th, 1947, a composer with "an international reputation" became the first Hollywood artist to be called before the Committee on Un-American Activities [HUAC]. The charge against him was that his music had aided the Communist infiltration of the motion-picture industry.[1] A significant part of his defense consisted in his claim that he was only a musician and thus not responsible for any part of a Communist conspiracy. What is peculiar is that he almost got away with this unlikely defense, unlikely because he had spent much of his life developing a political music consistent with the ideals of Communism. In the end, the Committee caught him out on technical grounds: it found a history of inaccurate statements in his visa applications. The composer was deported. It was the second exile of his life: the first had been from Germany ten years earlier.[2]

The composer's name was Hanns Eisler. Born to a Jewish philosopher and a Christian "worker" in 1898, he was educated in Vienna. Moving to Berlin, he studied composition with Arnold Schoenberg. For many years he collaborated with Bertolt Brecht. Involved in avant-garde groups as well as political music organizations, he composed revolutionary music—songs, theater pieces, and choral works—in addition to what on the surface looks like a more traditional repertoire of chamber works. He also wrote scores for numerous films and documentaries made in Europe and America (e.g., for Brecht's "Hangmen Also Die," Steinbeck's "Forgotten Village," Sartre's "The Witches of Salem," and Odets's "None But the Lonely Heart"). After being deported from the United States he made his home in East Germany. For that country he composed a national anthem. He died in 1962.

Eisler wrote abundantly on music and politics. He endorsed two political causes: the emancipation of the proletariat and the fight against fascism. Music, he wrote, should not turn a "deaf ear" to the conflicts of the times. Following the Marxist line that revolution involves the radical transformation of the old into the new, Eisler aspired to develop a political musical language out of what, in his view, had become a thoroughly apolitical one.

Though he adopted Schoenberg's atonalism as his model, he adapted it. Schoenberg's compositions, he believed, were encouraging modern music to become ever more inaccessible, overspecialized, and elitist. "Modern composers are of the opinion," Eisler bemoaned, that "'absolute music' ... music without words, cannot express anything definite at all, and certainly nothing about 'the urgent issues of our day.'" They think "[t]he purpose of music is only to be found in music itself. Music for music's sake."[3] But they are wrong. "A music which loses its sense of community loses itself: music is composed for the people by the people."[4]

Eisler's idea was to abolish the reigning bourgeois and fetishistic view of music, and to replace it with a view of music as inseparable from politics. "The crisis in music has been caused by the general crisis in society," he wrote in 1935: "In music it appears concretely in the technique of composing."[5] Eisler thus moved to create a social art through formal innovation. This involved putting traditional formal techniques to work for new musical functions, a process which would result in internal changes in musical language—in the creation of new purely instrumental and text-based forms. Revolutionary music, he asserted, is the music of

The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 52:1 Winter 1994

critical argument. New forms can be used simultaneously to negate one set of ideals and affirm another. They can be used dialectically to represent the contradictions of society. "The history of music will be written by Marxists," Eisler proclaimed, and "[w]hoever does not understand that, is a blockhead."[6]

Eisler rejected the traditional format of the concert. Performers should no longer merely interpret music; they should be revolutionized. Listeners should no longer sit as passive audiences; they should participate in the performances. Eisler censured the view that music be used like a narcotic, offered to audiences to arouse "effects." Instead, music should transform the consciousness of an active community of people. The bourgeois musical concert was to be transformed into a political meeting.[7]

Eisler experimented with new media and technology, believing the latter could penetrate every level of society in a way the traditional concert could not. Adopting film techniques of montage, fragment, and commentary, synthesizing popular and classical forms, Eisler sought to produce a mass-music, a "useful" or "applied" music, a popular music of wide appeal.

Influenced, finally, by fin-de-siècle criticisms of decadence, Eisler maintained that his development of a truly political music required the purification of musical language for, otherwise, truth would be in danger of succumbing to ideology.[8] Truthful and sincere communication is the essential function of music. Truthful music hides neither behind ornament and complexity, nor behind a denial of the political. In precision and conciseness resides the most effective political force.

Given these well-known facts about Eisler's life, one would think that the HUAC would have had no problem at all in establishing that Eisler was a communist, or at least a revolutionary, or at the very least a composer interested in politics. But it did. Faced with the accusation by Eisler's paranoid sister Ruth Fischer that Eisler was "a communist in a philosophical sense," the Committee found themselves unknowingly confronting the possibility that Eisler's music might itself be only communistic "in a philosophical sense."

The Committee had begun its interrogation by trying to pin Eisler down to "active" or "real" membership in various communist organizations, but Eisler had simply denied any such active membership. "I was not active in political groups," he contended: "I was not a member in any real sense. ... [M]y relations to the Communist Party was [*sic*] such a loose thing."[9] The Committee then turned to the political character of his music, especially to his music with words. Having had one's songs and choral works performed at openly revolutionary meetings surely sustained a concrete alliance between music and revolutionary politics. This time, Eisler responded by disclaiming responsibility for how and where his music had been performed. "I made no objection if somebody want[ed] to play my music," he recalled.

Unswayed but now annoyed, the Committee asked Eisler whether he was responsible for the content of his political songs, songs which had undeniably subversive titles—"Red Front," "Red Wedding," and "Abortion is Illegal"—and equally subversive lyrics. Eisler answered that he was responsible only for the music. He could not be blamed for the words; they weren't his words. Had he read and agreed with the words when composing the music?, the Committee asked sardonically. Eisler seemed to elide the question by stressing that the words were being used in a poetic, artistic, and philosophical, but not in a real context. "This is poetry and not reality," he said. The Committee, unsurprisingly, was not convinced.

Eisler's general strategy seemed to be single-minded: he was trying to retreat into the domain of the purely aesthetic, and when he could, the purely musical. "My life is wholly devoted to music," he was contending. "I am not an organizer. I am a composer. ... I stick to my music, I don't know about politics." Of all people, Eisler seemed to be trying to convince the Committee that being a musician meant that one was necessarily uninvolved in politics. And despite the fact that Eisler had spent his entire life openly committed to the development of a truly political music, the Committee found that they could not easily prove Eisler's responses untrue, even though they clearly didn't believe them. What was the difficulty? In a nutshell, the Committee found it hard to establish a sufficiently demonstrable link between Eisler's music and his politics.

Why was Eisler's strategy effective in this

regard? How could he even have thought the Committee would take seriously his response that he was *only* or *merely* a musician? What background of assumptions was he importing into these troubled hearings that prompted him to use phrases such as "This is only music, and nothing else." or "I am not a hero. I am a composer." or "I see everything from the musical point of view." so centrally in his defense? It was in trying to answer these questions that I was led to write the following paper.

II. THE PROBLEM

In what relation does music stand to society? Is all or any music politically committed and, if so, how?[10] Though these questions have arisen in regard to other types of music—both classical and popular—it is within the domain of Western art music that they have arisen in their most challenging and long-standing form. Of all types of art and music, theorists have found it most difficult to describe how classical music, especially music without words, could have meaning beyond or outside itself given that it is, in the accepted view, non-referential, non-discursive, non-representational, and non-conceptual.

Were I to treat my questions regarding music's relation to society at the most abstract level, I would have to consider some of the logical problems involved in delimiting the boundaries of the musical domain, boundaries which are used in the literature to demarcate the musical from the so-called extra-musical domain. But I have already addressed these particular problems elsewhere.[11] In this paper, I shall confine myself to exploring the difficult issues which stem from trying to answer this question: In determining the meaning and nature of musical works, to what extent, or according to what principles of selection, should we take extra-musical factors into account?

Contrary to the "purist" or "formalist" tradition, in which theorists (musicological and philosophical) have tried to account for everything significant or essential in music by appealing to purely musical factors, many recent theorists, especially those of postmodern or poststructuralist persuasions, have begun to emphasize heavily the influence of the extra-musical. Their claim is that something essential is lost in our musical understanding when we ignore the extra-musical conditioning of music. That which is lost is most often understood to be the political or social character of music. To understand music in all its dimensions, theorists thus argue, it no longer suffices to analyze the form and content of musical works in isolation; we must investigate as well the institutional context in which the composition, performance, and reception, the production, exchange, and distribution of works take place—the context in which the works assume their full meanings. In fact, theorists say, it is *only* by describing this context, that one can actually show how musical works that have no audible, apparent, or explicit political or social content can still be seen to have a political or social character.

Behind the current tendency to socialize or politicize music lies a strong impulse: to pull music down from its romantic pedestal—to deromanticize it—to treat music of Western high culture as we do any other kind of music or any other kind of cultural artifact. This leveling down has been inspired by at least three different forces. The first is the democratic trend towards pluralism and tolerance, in which attention is given to differences rather than to universal samenesses. The second comes from recent ethnomusicology and cultural studies. Their combined effect has been to persuade classical music theorists that if non-Western and popular forms of music can safely wear their social and political natures on their sleeves, perhaps Western high art music can do this too. The third force derives from what is now just called "theory"—from European-influenced and post-Marxist processes of deconstruction and archaeology. These processes have focused on unmasking the ideological forces that have been concealed, as the story goes, behind Western high culture's posturing that its claims are disinterested, objective, moral, and true.

Against the first impulse, however, a quite different but equally strong impulse has arisen—to find for music a form of protection *from* the political *once* music has been deromanticized. Unmasking the politics of music has generated a desire to protect music from being reduced merely to what Adorno once called "social cement." The desire here is to pre-empt the reductionist view that music is always and only in service as a form of ideological expression,

a "prostituted" endorsement of reigning "interests." The desire to find a "dispensation" or "safe-haven" for music has almost inspired some theorists to retreat back into the purely musical, into the "sanctity" of the aesthetic. (The religious metaphors are not accidental.)[12]

This impulse has been felt all the more urgently within the recent resurgence of censorship and the consequent challenge to free expression in the Western, "free" world.[13] In this regard, the desire expressed within the musical world to delimit the political is not so different from that currently identifiable in the academy at large. In the present climate we want to determine how the academy of "free floating intellectuals" can acknowledge their political responsibility, yet resist falling prey to the censorious verdicts of the thought-police, or be controlled by what Trotsky so aptly called the "mediocrities, laureates, and toadies."

Between the desire to reduce music to politics, on the one hand, and to preserve the purity of music, on the other, lies a delicate middle position. This position asks us to reconcile two seemingly opposed desires: the demand that we be true to the *political* in music while also remaining true to the *musical* in music. It is the purpose of this paper to seek an adequate description of this middle position. Though I shall say little more about this (because it will show itself fairly evidently), I understand my purpose to be historically and philosophically related to the desire to describe the relationship in which individuals stand *as* individuals *to* society. Both accounts depend upon one's working out a satisfactory conception of autonomy.[14]

The concept of "autonomy" with which I am concerned has its origins in the Greek city-state: "*autos*" translates as self, "*nomos*" as law. According to Gerald Dworkin, "a [Greek] city had *autonomia* when its citizens made their own laws, as opposed to being under the control of some conquering power."[15] Autonomy connotes freedom, independence, self-sufficiency, and self-determination. In modern political philosophy, the concept of autonomy comes to be employed with respect more often to individual persons than to cities as a whole. A central question is how free individuals can, and under what conditions they should, subject themselves to the laws of their society without that subjection compromising their freedom of thought and action.

In the literature on aesthetics and the arts, two different solutions to the problem of autonomy have been offered. The first I shall call the *crude* (i.e., the vulgar, naive, or pre-reflective) solution; the second the *critical* (i.e., the reflective) solution. Briefly, the crude solution suggests a neat formula: a given musical work is either autonomous or it is political, but it cannot be both. The critical solution suggests a different formula: only a work which is autonomous is truly political. Set against the crude solution, the critical one looks contradictory. How can an autonomous work be truly political if autonomy is defined as non-political? To say that truly political works are non-political, and that what we normally call political works—programmatic works, national anthems, protest songs, military marches, etc.—are not truly political appears to be utterly incoherent. As one would expect, the apparent contradiction dissolves when the phrases "truly autonomous" and "truly political" are elucidated in a non-standard way.

For the rest of this paper, I shall describe the crude and critical solutions respectively. Having taken the two solutions as far as they go in the literature, I then proceed to develop the critical one so as to give it a more acceptable form. I argue, however, that though the critical solution can be made to look quite acceptable, it fails ultimately to describe adequately the basic relation that holds between the musical and extra-musical. In the light of this criticism I draw a rather unexpected conclusion.

III. THE CRUDE SOLUTION

The crude solution is situated at the difficult intersection between theories about aesthetic and political ideals and concrete realities. Thus, within the solution, an "iron curtain" has gradually been drawn forcing theorists to affiliate their theoretical options with unrefined political camps, with the left or right, with communism or capitalism, with liberalism or conservatism. As a general (Western) public, we've learned to see the production of pure art and aesthetics as coming out of the Western world, and the production of tendentious or propaganda art ("if we can even call it art!" the Western world will say) as coming out of the

former Soviet system.[16] Crude Westerners suggest that only the social and political conditions of their free society encourage the production of pure art. Crude East-bloc theorists, by contrast, teach that the production of free art is only possible in a communist society. In this society, individuals, including artists, are not alienated as they are in capitalist society, and they choose in freedom to serve the society as "musical citizens." Remember, these views are the crude ones.

At their root lies a quite specific and consistent reading—perhaps even a misunderstanding—of the concept of autonomy. This reading has been responsible for allowing Western theorists to conclude that classical music is autonomous music and thus, by definition, apolitical, and East-bloc theorists to conclude that music should be political and therefore not autonomous. The reading, however, originates in, and resonates with, what turns out to be one of humanity's deepest religious and philosophical impulses—to transcend the ordinary world of human imperfection.

Moving momentarily away from crude conceptions, consider how this impulse motivated the rise of romanticism around 1800, and the concept of aesthetic autonomy that romanticism articulated as a way to separate out the fine arts from other human productions. Then recall the view, held from that time on, that romanticism could serve as a secular surrogate to Christianity and as an extension of the transcendent life of philosophical contemplation. The creation, performance, and reception of the fine arts, activities reconceived around 1800, could meet needs formerly met in religion and still met in philosophy. German writings from Herder to Schopenhauer amply demonstrate the continuities of religion, philosophy, and aesthetics.

Thus, within romanticism, we are asked to distinguish what is universal and necessary from what is particularized, contingent, and arbitrary; what is elite and specialized from that which is common, popular, and vulgar. Other contrasts are best represented in two lists.

Transcendent	*Ordinary*
truth, knowledge	belief, opinion
civilized, cultured	base, animalistic
thought	behavior, feelings
contemplation	participation
controlled	instinctual, uncontrolled
the ivory tower	the real world
separation, distance independence	involvement
beyond	within
abstract	concrete
dignity	compromise
self-expression, individuality	conformity
pure, clean, "germ free"	"dirty hands"
useless, functionless	useful, functional
non-practical	practical
disinterested, non-conceptual	interested, empirical
high	low
art	craft
music for music's sake	music for the people[17]

The differentiation between the transcendent and ordinary worlds has reinforced the crude solution by solidifying the difference between Western and East-bloc perspectives. According to the Western perspective, art music falls on the side of transcendence, that of "popular" or "folk" music—as well as the entire domain of politics—on the side of the ordinary. The Western view instructs us that art music (like religion and philosophy) should stay quarantined from the ordinary world, and thus from politics. Inadvertently perhaps, the poet Heine offers us a rationale for this crude view. "The world," he tells us, "is a great cowshed which is not so easy to clear out as the Augean stable because, while it is being swept, the oxen stay inside and continually pile up more dung."[18] For us, if not for Heine, the general idea is that we should keep something as dirty as politics out of the musical world and keep something as clean as music out of the political world. On the ordinary side, we must, so to speak, keep our hands in the dung; on the transcendent side, we must elevate ourselves as far as possible above the dung. (The dung metaphor stops here.) Thus, rather than seeing the two worlds, or more specifically the worlds of music and politics, as connected by an "and" clause, crude theorists use a strong "versus" clause to render music in opposition to society and politics—to see music as standing not only *against* the world, but also as not being *of* the world.

The placing of art-music within the transcendent world has been fully supported by the

complex institution of the concert hall and by the ascendancy and valorization of purely instrumental music—the most purely musical music of all musics. It has also been supported by what has generally been considered a legitimate desire to resist involvement with the political. The worse the ordinary world, the more beautiful music has asserted the right to maintain its separation from it. Operating hand-in-hand with this desire has been an assumption that activities undertaken in a free Western society can move beyond political concerns to attend to their essential concerns. Everything is or has to be political only in an unfree society.[19]

The crude East-bloc perspective, by contrast, transfigures the Western one. Thus, with the distinction between the two domains acknowledged, the entire domain of transcendence is rejected on the grounds of its being bourgeois and alienated. The argument has sophisticated premises but a crude conclusion. Marxists have argued that too strong a separation of the worlds of transcendence and the ordinary has negative consequences both for the domain of art and for "the real world." "The effort to set art free from life," Trotsky once wrote, "to declare it a craft self-sufficient unto itself, devitalizes and kills art."[20] And to cut off the domain of truth from the real world leaves the world in the potentially evil hands of ideology without recourse to its "own interior laws," or "internal evolution."[21] Too great a stress on separability at the expense of involvement is a symptom, Trotsky believed, of a general cultural decline. Marxists argue that it is a deeply ideological and not a truthful position to say that autonomous music is not political.[22]

In the early years of this century, having developed increasingly modernist and abstract forms, much modern classical music was criticized for having produced a set of formal musical languages that were cut off from the real world and of no appeal to general audiences. This music had become too autonomous and formalistic. It had become elite and specialized, too concerned with purely technical or musical innovations. Even if it still claimed to have transcendent meaning, of what real value, Marxists asked, was it in the world if so few people could understand it?

From claims regarding the absence of ordinary meaning and value, Marxists quickly moved to claims linking absence of meaning to political subversiveness. Rejecting the crude Western claim that music had transcendent but not ordinary meaning, theorists began to suspect music of being secretly subversive in its purist and apolitical intent. A proclaimed lack of worldly meaning was a sure sign of a degenerate music.

Having rejected the crude Western desire to quarantine music from the ordinary world, East-bloc theorists were left with a choice. They could either rethink the relation between music and society entirely—this is what sophisticated theorists did; or they could offer exactly the opposite view to the Western one—this is what crude theorists did. Thus, crude East-bloc theorists took the critique of bourgeois autonomy, and concluded from it that, despite its claims, no music is in fact autonomous. All music, they said, should be placed completely within the ordinary domain and should serve the state. In this view, music had its links to transcendent values completely severed and its links to ideology concretely reinforced. (Of course, Marxists weren't the only group to be thinking about music in this way, but they were one such group.)

Behind this crude conclusion seemed to lie an age-old anxiety. Ever since Plato produced his forceful argument in the *Republic,* we have witnessed numerous expressions of a deep-seated desire on the part of governing bodies to regulate those parts of human behavior and those human activities whose effects are so great but which we so thoroughly fail to comprehend. The control of music has long been pervasive, ranging from determinations of acceptable modes or scales to regulation of composition, reception, and criticism. In modern times, despite its purely instrumental form and its apparent absence of ordinary meaning, critics have continued to fear music's ordinary effects. They have thus denied music its autonomy.

To the present day, this crude and complex discourse demarcating the Western and East-bloc perspectives has been sustained by Cold War anxieties and internal, national paranoias. Generally, it seems, when theory becomes linked to *realpolitik,* sophisticated positions that break down false dichotomies are silenced in public discourse. That does not mean that their expres-

sion ceases—on the contrary, their theorists just write "between the lines" or "underground." Only in our general understanding, for the supposed sake of "domestic defense," do they get ignored. With the iron curtain now down, perhaps we can re-educate our general understanding.

IV. THE CRITICAL SOLUTION

The critical solution cuts straight across crude, iron curtain dichotomies. Though it also originates in Plato's *Republic*—suggesting the problems at stake are universal rather than historical—it must be stressed that, like the crude solution, the critical one has also been shaped profoundly by the last two centuries of political and aesthetic thought. Thus, it emanates out of romantic aesthetics, Hegelianism, Marxism, and critical theory, phenomenological existentialism, as well as the liberal tradition of political philosophy. All these traditions, despite their major differences, have tried to articulate satisfactory conceptions of autonomy.

Like the crude solution, the critical one accepts that romantic aesthetics emerged amidst the development of bourgeois and capitalist society, the connection crystallizing and thus coming most clearly into view around 1800. And it, too, acknowledges that, within this process, a separation crystallized between the aesthetic and the political. But, unlike the crude, the critical solution stresses that, though aesthetics is separable from politics, the ideals regulating each should be neither reduced one to the other, nor formed in isolation from one another. The separation recognizes functional and categorial differences but avoids mutual isolation or exclusion.

As is well known, there were widespread increases in classifications and distinctions around 1800—in academic disciplines, public institutions, and in human capacities and practices. But never was it intended that these things be differentiated so sharply that we would lose our sense of the totality. Not even Modernism, the once proclaimed age of fragmentation and disunity, lost its sense of the whole. Thus, within both Western liberal and sophisticated Marxist theories, the view has continually been sanctioned that music and politics, art and morality, the transcendent and the ordinary, are each and all inextricably connected. Kant urged such connections in his understanding of the "bridging" relation between his three *Critiques,* as well as in his specific reminder that the Kingdom of Ends must be brought about in our midst—in the practical realm of human action.

> The moral law as the formal rational condition of the use of our freedom obliges us by itself alone, without depending on any purpose as material condition; but it nevertheless determines for us ... a final purpose towards which it obliges us to strive; and this purpose is the *highest good in the world* [*mögliche Gut in der Welt*] possible through freedom.[23]

Thus, when the critical solution separates out the aesthetic from the political, it does so only as the first step. The second is to demonstrate that this separation is necessary for art to fulfill its function, to serve in its aesthetic freedom the cause also of political freedom. In its original articulations around 1800, the doctrine of art for art's sake and the subsidiary "formalist" doctrine of music for music's sake rested on two claims: [1] that the fine arts had at last been released from their hitherto servile and ritualistic, courtly and religious, roles; and [2] that, now in their freedom and newly emancipated state, the fine arts could help bring about political freedom in the world. When Sartre reminded us in this century that it would be impossible to write a great novel in support of fascism, he was reiterating a view held a century earlier. Though beauty is an end in itself, it nonetheless still serves as a "symbol" or "analogue" of morality and of the political good. Contrary to crude interpretations, there is no contradiction in holding both claims. The claim to autonomy thus has a history separating aesthetics from politics and morality, but also a history that reconnects aesthetics back to politics and morality once separated.

The critical solution works with two distinct conceptions of the political and accords more importance to the second. The first focuses on the external and contingent relation that holds between particular musical works and concrete political messages. The crude solution works with this conception only. The second conception focuses on an internal, essential, and abstract relation that holds between the musical

and the political. This relation establishes that autonomous music is necessarily political.

The critical solution not only admits the possibility, but also makes it a basic requirement, that music should fall under both descriptions of the transcendent and the ordinary. Music is connected to society by an "and" as well as a "versus." The solution recognizes in fact that musical autonomy is double-sided, two-directional, Janus-faced, dialogical, or dialectical: that music can be purely musical *and* politically committed without contradiction—"formally perfect" and "heroically struggling" as we often identify the dualism in a Beethoven symphony.

To claim that music is politically committed must not, then, amount to denying music its freedom. Quite the opposite: music's involvement in the world is regarded as indispensable to its own freedom. Adorno captures the dialectic when he writes: "[p]recisely that which is not social in [art] should become its social aspect." Benjamin captures it similarly when he writes, in this case of literature, that "a literary work can only be politically correct if it is also literarily correct."[24] A "vice versa" is needed here, because a literary work can only be literarily correct if it is also politically correct.

The critical solution works with a relational or a "relative" conception of autonomy.[25] Music functions in relation to that which it is not, to something against which it constantly asserts its independence. That something is the dictate or the social conditions of the status quo; it is the social conditions in which music is produced. Music responds to its conditions of production by resisting them. Music's freedom is essentially a form of resistance, a constant assertion of difference, a negation of that which it constantly posits as "Other." Whether or not music actually achieves this distance is irrelevant. What is important here is that music's freedom must always be a "freedom from." Were it free in the sense of its being isolated, or having no connection to the ordinary world, it would cease to have value. Again, from the critical perspective, music's meaning and freedom *is possible* only *in* the world.

Of all the arts, music is most able (or at least paradigmatically able) to serve fine art's political function. Why? Because it completely lacks representational or conceptual content. It is the art whose content is least likely to be confused with ideological "causes." Music is the art of pure sound and pure motion, and thereby of pure emotion and pure thought. The "thereby" needs explaining. In providing this explanation critical theorists have found themselves appealing in non-crude ways to principles of transcendence.

The explanation, again, has two parts: first, it explains in what sense music is separated from society; then it shows how music is reconnected back to society. Thus, music is able to contribute to the political world. Ideally, music's function is to help bring about a better world, by presenting the world as it is and by manifesting an alternative vision of the world. To fulfill this function, music must first manifest or depict the status quo, the situation as it is, and then resist the status quo, so that it can embody a vision beyond it. "Music is prophecy," Jacques Attali thus writes in his recent book *Noise*:

> Its styles and economic organization are ahead of the rest of society because it explores, much faster than material reality can, the entire range of possibilities in a given code. It makes audible the new world that will gradually become visible, that will impose itself and regulate the order of things; it is not only the image of things, but the transcending of the everyday, the herald of the future. ... Music ... is intuition, a path to knowledge. A path? No—a battle-field.[26]

That music has no referential content should make readers wonder how music has any chance at all of fulfilling what seems to be an entirely conceptual and representational mission. It was just this wondering that led Sartre to claim that only literature can be politically committed because the so-called "pure" arts cannot articulate political visions. But what Sartre came slowly to understand, and what composer Rene Leibowitz worked hard to explain to him, was that the way music articulates a vision of a better world is not through concrete representation at all. The articulation, instead, is abstract.[27]

Thus, the appeal to abstraction normally assumes a distinction between two sorts of commitment, one abstract, the other concrete.[28] Music can be composed "representationally" or "concretely" to support a particular and partisan cause, but it can also be used to embody, within its purely musical form, abstract politi-

cal ideals. "The identification in art with the proletariat requires more than simply writing for the proletariat," Eisler once told his audience. One has, rather, to develop from within art a truly revolutionary art. "The basic attitude," Brecht then added to Eisler's thought, "is revolutionary in the highest sense."[29] Their purpose was to show how precisely in its abstraction, music succeeds in being truly political, and, also, how precisely in its transcendence music succeeds in being truly ordinary. Thus, an abstract conception of the political is not devoided of concrete content or worldly implication; in its abstraction, it is not, in other words, devoided of all political content, for otherwise it would cease to have any meaning at all. Recall, transcendence works, in these views, within the ordinary, and not apart from it. Adorno attempts to describe the complex relation in these terms:

> Music is nonobjective and not unequivocally identifiable with any moments of the outside world. At the same time, being highly articulated and well-defined within itself, it is nonetheless commensurable, however indirectly, with the outside world of social reality. It is a language, but a language without concepts.[30]

That theorists generally find it extremely hard to describe the relation of musical form (or the internal logic of music's formed-content) to political ideals and social relations does not undermine their conviction that some such relation exists. Indeed, they try hard to describe it correctly. In this endeavor they travel across the entire range of metaphors. Thus, we hear of music (its logic or form) standing to society in a relation of expressing, mirroring, crystallizing, encoding, enmeshing, highlighting, enacting, confronting, intervening, transfiguring, signifying, symbolizing, transforming, prophesying, and foretelling—and this is by no means an exhaustive list.

Despite the difficulties of accurate description, the basic idea is that purely musical form stands in an antagonistic though internal relation to the social relations and dominant codes of society at large. "The chief task," Adorno writes, "is ... to discover how the entirety of a society, as a unity containing contradictions, appears in a work; in which respects the work remains true to its society, and in which it transcends that society."[31] Music's antagonistic relation to society—its ability, for example, to resist society's desire to produce perfect and complete aesthetic unities—allows music to unsettle the status quo, to make, in Hegelian terms, the familiar disturbingly unfamiliar. Such disturbances help motivate social change. "The greatness of works of art," Adorno writes further, "lies solely in their power to let those things be heard which ideology conceals."[32] And yet elsewhere he writes:

> Music will be better, the more deeply it is able to express—in the antinomies of its own formal language—the exigency of the social situation and to call for change through the coded language of suffering. It is not for music to stare in helpless horror at society. It fulfils [*sic*] its social function more precisely when it presents social problems through its own material and according to its own formal laws—problems which music contains within itself in the innermost cells of its technique.[33]

In the critical solution, the abstraction characterizing music is often described as manifesting itself in silence. "Without mentioning anything [it] can say everything," Ilya Ehrenburg once said of Shostakovich's Eighth Symphony.[34] In the same period, Schoenberg was expressing his own form of silence in the world: "We, who live in *music,*" he wrote, "have no place in politics and must regard it as foreign to our being. We are a-political, at best able to aspire to remain silently in the background."[35] Was Schoenberg expressing a crude or critical view about music's relation to the world? It is not entirely clear.[36] He could be expressing the crude view that musical interests should be kept completely separate from political interests; he could also be expressing the critical view that, by denying involvement with the political, musicians might be playing out in the music their most effective political role—in silence, in abstraction, in transcendence. As Adorno suggested, the less music blinks in the direction of society the more it represents it.[37]

In general, abstraction or transcendence has been seen to be achieved in the employment of creativity, imagination, and contemplation, in what nearly two centuries ago was referred to as the "free play of the faculties." It can be achieved through the mimetic capacity of the

fine arts to stand at a distance from reality, through the ability of those arts to interpret that reality.[38] Finally, and again in Kantian terms, it can be achieved by defending subjective freedom or agency (represented in the fine arts by creativity and formal discipline) against the objective law-governed necessity of nature.[39]

At the core of the critical solution lie two desires that must always go together: first, the desire to maintain the autonomous development of musical composition by *not* conceiving it as a mere consequence of social developments at large; second, the desire to find within that autonomous development the source of music's freedom to manifest the political. It helps to characterize the first form of freedom as "freedom from" and the second as "freedom to": "freedom from" is the condition by which music develops on its own purely musical terms; in "freedom to" music finds its freedom of expression—an abstract expression that has transcendent political force in the ordinary world. But lest one fear that these two concepts of freedom miss the essential tension and connection that exists between the purely musical and the truly political, and between the transcendent and ordinary worlds, I recommend adding the explicit requirement that "freedom from" plus "freedom to" must always amount to "freedom within."

Making this requirement explicit affords me the opportunity to take the critical solution a step further than theorists have traditionally taken it. In fact, I want now to move away from the almost entirely modernist terms in which I have thus far described the critical solution to see if any postmodernist updates (if that is what they are) are illuminating. I move in this direction not, however, to find discontinuities between modernism and postmodernism, but, if I can, continuities. I shall simply begin by asking what light my requirement throws on music's relation to society or, in a slightly different light, on musical meaning and value.

One advantage of the "freedom within" requirement is that it tells us how music, or art more generally, can have value and meaning beyond its immediate context of production. (Why is Beethoven's music still meaningful to us today?) One of the dangers of politicizing music is crude relativism: relativizing musical significance to specific cultural and historical locations. My requirement avoids this relativism not because it moves us into absolutism or universalism but because it moves us to a position of difference. Music only needs to be different from that which is to have value or meaning beyond the status quo, to have a value or meaning that may encourage social change. Of course, difference can never be an end in itself. So the critical solution has to say more. What it usually says is that music must also strive to be truthful in its difference if it is to guarantee that the social change it promotes will be the sort of change we should want—whoever the "we" is. In aesthetics, there is, apparently, a "will to truth."[40]

Indeed, the critical solution assumes that the production of great art is contingent upon the imperfections of humankind. Like legal or moral systems, the production of art is necessary because humanity is imperfect—and art production can help make the world better. It assumes that just as legal and moral systems strive towards truthful regulation of our world, so art strives also. Whether art, like moral or legal systems, would still be necessary in a perfect world now becomes a difficult question whose answer clearly depends upon what one puts forward as a perfect world.

This question prompts another: is great art more likely to be produced in a less or in a more perfect world? In the critical solution, one must think deeply about the relation between the freedom of art and that of society to determine whether and to what extent the condition of a society determines that of its artistic production. One can no longer simply assume that the best art is actually produced within the context of a free society—again, whatever the best art is and whatever a free society is.

As I said, this entire understanding of the role of art depends upon one's vision of a truthful world. In the tradition, truth has been linked to perfectibility, which, in turn, has been linked to a Utopian vision. But truth does not have to be so linked. Recall the argument presented by Isaiah Berlin in his seminal essay "Two Concepts of Liberty."[41] His argument, I believe, cuts straight across one modernism/postmodernism divide. It recognizes basic values but accommodates difference.

Berlin argues that the very idea of a perfect society is linked to the Utopian Enlightenment

tradition that has now, in his view, exhausted itself. In its place, he offers a theory of pluralism that accommodates difference without relativism. He conceives of a society which is marked by a wide divergence of values and conceptions of the good, so wide a divergence that the values cannot all be endorsed at the same time. Some values have to take priority over others; some have to be chosen even if that means denying others. Berlin asks us to acknowledge that, since we cannot have a perfect society whose values are all in harmony with one another, we must learn to be content with pluralism, a pluralism that tells us there are genuine alternatives regarding the good. Such pluralism, in Berlin's view, is quite healthy, for it leaves us with a robust and permanent uncertainty about whether we have ever chosen "absolutely the right set" of values. This uncertainty, in turn, persuades us always to be open to new discussion of our values, to constant reconsideration of our most basic beliefs and standards.

The critical solution can usefully draw on Berlin's non-Utopian pluralism. The resistant stand which music takes against the status quo never reaches a final resolution or reconciliation. The conflict remains constant insofar as music might challenge the status quo at any point. The health of the conflict varies. Music is most threatened when it has to fight against a society that, in its own unfreedom, denies music its freedom. Music is most healthy when society allows both for differences within it and the constant discussion, in part through the production of music, of its values. The latter is a society that allows domains of freedom to exist within it, and allows music to occupy one of those domains in music's essential state as at once separate but connected to society. This is the essence of the conception of musical autonomy as "freedom within." Of course, it still remains a question whether a healthy rather than an unhealthy antagonism between music and society produces the best music.

What about "the best music"? The first thing to say about the best music is that, though many if not most critical theorists can more or less easily be identified with liberalism or leftism, it is possible for the critical solution to accommodate "conservative music" or musicians who would like to "conserve" rather than to overthrow or revolutionize a political or a musical tradition. Conservatism also requires that musicians take a stand, that they have a critical distance from the status quo or the tradition within which they live. For the notion of critical distance more importantly suggests understanding and reflection than it does rejection and rebellion.

Secondly, as an utterly ironic twist to my entire paper, it could also be that the best music, or the most effective political music, comes not from the domain of classical music at all, but from popular music instead. This conclusion would follow from recent postmodernist thinking which, as I intimated earlier, takes popular culture as manifesting, much more explicitly than classical music culture, theories of difference and pluralism.[42] Though this position finds a lot of support nowadays, postmodernists know that they would not be the first to turn the traditional classical/popular divide on its head. Some modernists also tried to undermine the divide—notably Eisler and Brecht. And, as is well known, their influence on American popular music was by no means negligible.

Were one to move in a postmodernist direction, would the entire question of autonomy and how we locate the political in music have to be revamped? I do not think so, despite appearances to the contrary. It is true that within postmodernist considerations of popular culture the traditional distinction between ideology and truth has been challenged, a distinction that helped modernists describe the way classical music could achieve distance from the status quo. It is also true that postmodernists want to show that the political is situated in a dynamic web of relations—and in the forms of representation through which those relations are mediated—all of which connect music to words, to singers, to musicians, to settings, to audiences, to industries, and so on. Any description—either of classical or of popular music—should attend to what Susan McClary likes to call the "socially-circumscribed discourses" in which all types of music find their full meanings. Of course, the attempt to describe the content of music within a socially-circumscribed discourse only further encourages the perception that musical expression has been reduced to ideological expression.

But, as I see it, these sorts of positions certainly do not force postmodernists to hold crude

views. Their content-in-context or content-in-discourse arguments, and their stress on media and representation, can be made consistent with the critical solution regarding the truly political nature of autonomous music. Calling music autonomous, for example, is not the same as calling it purely instrumental. For autonomy captures any music's relation to society; it does not, as has often been thought, just describe classical music's formal or "purely musical" content. Popular musics also have "forms," "styles," and "logics." Furthermore, the artistic engagement with media and forms of representation can be thought of (à la Benjamin) as helping to re-produce or transfigure those media and forms, and thus, indirectly, society itself.

Postmodernists can also studiously avoid reducing descriptions of the truly political character of autonomous music merely to ideological descriptions of ideological contexts. They can do this, for example, by developing a theory of "truth within" that runs along much the same lines as the theory of "freedom within." To illustrate the point quickly, consider the words of popular music theorist Simon Frith: "Transcendence," he writes "is as much a part of the popular music aesthetic as it is of the serious music aesthetic; but ... in pop, transcendence marks not music's freedom from social forces but its patterning by them." "Of course," he adds, "the same is true of serious music."[43] Had Frith only written that "transcendence marks music's patterning *within* social forces and not *by* them," he would have suggested that music can resist the ideology of the status quo while remaining situated within social forces—thus giving a less ambiguous meaning to his own commitment to transcendence; he would also have captured quite perfectly music's relation to society as being a transfigurative relation of freedom within.

V. CODA

Now I could easily stop here and conclude that the critical solution and its "freedom within" requirement adequately captures the most basic political function of music. I could also point out how my framing of the problem of autonomy within an old modernist debate naturally ended up suggesting some postmodernist themes. But to conclude in this way I would have to ignore what remains the central problem in the critical solution, namely, that the internal relation that connects the purely political function of music to autonomous musical form cannot adequately be described. In confronting this problem I find myself offering an unexpected ending to my paper.

Skeptics who remain utterly dubious that any relation exists between musical form and politics at all, might find themselves sympathetic to Eisler's general response, that music is only music. Of course, Eisler did not believe this: he devoted his life to composing political music. Perhaps, in the Hearings, Eisler did tend towards the view that music is not political, but it's hard to tell. His responses could have expressed either a crude or a critical view of music. Perhaps he wavered between the two. The Committee, however, focused on the crude view and that's why it couldn't establish the relation between Eisler's music and politics. They were looking, mistakenly, for a concrete relation and though there were clearly examples of such a relation, Eisler found it easy to deny or undermine them. His music was, as perhaps only he knew, political "in a philosophical sense."

Back now to the skeptic's feeling that music is only music. The feeling is confused. To deny music any function other than a purely musical function is one thing; quite another is to draw this conclusion from the fact that the relation between music and the extra-musical cannot adequately be described. Persons who claim that "this is only music" are often being disingenuous or defensive. Music's meaning and value might come solely from within itself as a product of its purely musical form and content, but it has meaning only for human beings who live in a human world. To assert utter separability from the ordinary world without involvement in it is just as dangerous as asserting that music must be reduced to involvement without any form of separation. Both deprive music of its meaning.

The fact, however, that musicians have so consistently been able to get away with the extreme separability response still tells us something important about music, namely, that the description of music's relation to the extra-musical always falls short of being convincing. This failure might be due to a variety of rea-

sons, say, to the prominence in the Western world of visual and spatial description at the expense of adequate auditory description. Perhaps, however, the failure is less contingent than this: perhaps it is metaphysical.

I am reminded here of one of Wittgenstein's arguments. "Logic," he wrote in the *Tractatus,* "is not a body of doctrine, but a mirror-image of the world (6.13)."[44] Our access to logic's relation to the world comes not via description, for that would situate the relation within the world, but, rather, through an intuitive or revelatory experience (6.233). Whatever the experience is, it is *not* cognitive (5.552/6.41). Logic's relation to the world cannot be spoken about, Wittgenstein argued, it can only be shown. Perhaps, I now want to suggest, something like this view is true also of music's relation to the world.

"The sense of the world must be outside the world," Wittgenstein continues (6.41). From this he goes on to say that, in a legitimate philosophical sense, the *Tractatus* is an unreadable text for, with its metaphysical claims, it attempts to say things which can only be shown. Perhaps music or any text about music, which attempts to say things which can only be shown is also unreadable. Attali, for example, seems to want to say both these things. First, he describes music as an "instrument of understanding," and the world as not "for beholding," but "for hearing." The world, he writes, is "not legible, but audible." Second, he writes that his intention is "not only to theorize *about* music, but to theorize *through* music."[45]

For Wittgenstein, however, the point of writing unreadable philosophical texts is to help us climb up the ladder of understanding. When and if we reach the top, we can throw the ladder away. In regard to music I do not think we are yet at the top of the ladder. For first we have to understand that if what is truly political in music is an essentially unsayable relation that internally connects music to subjectivity, then all concrete concerns about where we actually locate the political character of music within a socially circumscribed discourse are theoretically irrelevant even if materially interesting.

So my conclusion. The critical solution is far preferable to the crude one, and its associated doctrine of "freedom within" has all the features I desired it to have. The critical solution also suggests many elements of the Tractarian metaphysics. But since, at a crucial point, it ignores the consequences of that metaphysics and tries to say what cannot be said, it leaves us, as philosophers are often left, able to say much more about the problem than we can say about the solution—although clearly we can say something even if it is not the crucial thing. Usually when we discover that our problems beg for less talk rather than more, and at a certain point, no talk at all, the best thing we can do is just stop talking.[46]

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1. "Hearings regarding Hanns Eisler," Hearings before the Committee on Un-American Activities, House of Representatives, Eightieth Congress, Public Law 601, United States Government Printing Office (Washington, 1967). Material on Eisler has been gleaned from the Hearings, from Albrecht Betz's excellent book, *Hanns Eisler* (Cambridge University Press, 1982) and from Eisler's writings collected in *A Rebel in Music,* ed. M. Grabs (New York: International Publishers, 1978).

2. For background behind the Committee's decisions, see Betz, *Hanns Eisler,* pp. 194–207.

3. *A Rebel in Music,* p. 108.

4. Ibid., p. 197.

5. Ibid., p. 107. Cf. Benjamin's discussion of technique in his "The Author as Producer," repr. and trans. in A. Arato and E. Gebhardt eds., *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader* (New York: Continuum, 1982), pp. 255 ff.

6. *A Rebel in Music,* p. 197.

7. Ibid., p. 33.

8. Throughout this essay I will be thinking about ideology in terms of complexes of signifying practice and symbolic formations which serve: (i) to give out lives within a society a particular range of meanings; (ii) to legitimate the particular interests of a particular group or a range of groups; and (iii) to reinforce the power of a particular group (or range of groups) by legitimating their interests at the expense of the interests of any other group. (Cf. Terry Eagleton's *Ideology: An Introduction* [London: Verso, 1991], Ch. 1.)

9. Hearings, pp. 13 & 43. Note that Eisler's responses were not so dissimilar from those made by other musicians and artists called before the Committee. See, for example, Robin Denselow, *When the Music's Over: The Story of Political Pop* (London: Faber, 1986), Ch. 1.

10. Throughout this essay, "politics" and "the political" should be understood broadly; oftentimes, one could use the terms "social" and "moral" interchangeably with "political" without affecting the argument. All refer to so-called "extra-musical" dimensions of music.

➡ "Writing Music History," *History and Theory* 31 (1992): 182–99.

12. Cf. Adorno's mention of an aesthetic dispensation in

his essay "Commitment," repr. in *Aesthetics and Politics,* ed. F. Jameson (London: Verso Pubs., 1980), p. 183.

13. See my "Music has no Meaning to Speak of," in M. Krausz ed., *The Interpretation of Music: Philosophical Essays* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), pp. 177–90.

14. For a statement of this analogy and relation, see Adorno, "Lyric Poetry and Society," repr. in S. E. Bronner and D. M. Kellner eds., *Critical Theory and Society* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 157 ff. See also the excellent essays (especially the first four) of Rose Rosengard Subotnik collected together in her *Developing Variations: Style and Ideology in Western Music* (University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

15. See G. Dworkin, *The Theory and Practice of Autonomy* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 12.

16. Not irrelevantly, underground art produced in the unfree world has been understood as aspiring to the free conditions of the Western world.

17. These contrasts are often used nowadays to distinguish the modernist from the postmodernist aesthetic. Bakhtin also captures these differences when he contrasts poetic with dialogical language; see Ken Hirschkop, "The Classical and the Popular: Musical Form and Social Context," in C. Norris ed., *Music and the Politics of Culture* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1989), p. 287.

18. Quoted in Betz, *Hanns Eisler,* p. 246.

19. Cf. K. Hirschkop, in C. Norris ed., *Music and the Politics of Culture,* p. 289: "The bourgeois view of music separated *music,* cultivated sound, and its listeners ... from sounds which were insufficiently refined or vulgarly connected to everyday needs."

20. Trotsky, *Art and Revolution: Writings on Literature, Politics, and Culture* (New York: Pathfinder, 1970), p. 39.

21. Adapted from "Historical Objectivity and Artistic Truth," *Art and Revolution,* p. 93.

22. As Boris Schwartz has written more recently: "Music, *per se,* cannot be ideologically right or wrong—it must be judged on its own, purely musical terms ... a statement of ideology if ever there was one!" quoted in Malcolm Barry's "Ideology and Form: Shostakovich East and West," in C. Norris ed., *Music and the Politics of Culture,* p. 172.

23. *Critique of Judgment,* [AK. 450] Part II, Appendix, §87, Of the Moral Proof of the Being of God, trans. J. H. Bernard (London: Macmillan, 1931), p. 380. Recall here, also, Trotsky's statement that to remove art from life deprives art of the possibility of its being meaningful.

24. Adorno, "Lyric Poetry and Society," p. 160; Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," p. 256.

25. See Trotsky, *Art and Revolution,* p. 13.

26. *Noise: The Political Economy of Music,* trans. B. Massumi (University of Minnesota Press, 1985), pp. 11 and 18.

27. Sartre, *What is Literature? and Other Essays* (Harvard University Press, 1988), pp. 25 ff.; also Sartre, "The Artist and his Conscience," (a response to Leibowitz), in *Situations,* trans. B. Eisler (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Pubs., 1965), pp. 142–55. See also a discussion of this debate in Paul Robinson's "Sartre on Music," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 31:4 (1973): 451–57, and in Christina Howell's "Sartre and the Commitment of Pure Art," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 18:2 (1978): 172–82.

28. See Adorno, "Commitment," pp. 177–95.

29. *A Rebel in Music,* p. 17.

30. *Introduction to the Sociology of Music,* trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1988), p. 44.

31. "Lyric Poetry and Society," p. 156.

32. Ibid., p. 157.

33. "On the Social Situation of Music," quoted in Martin Jay, *Adorno* (Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 136.

34. Cf. Claire Polin's "Why Minimalism Now," in Norris ed., *Music and the Politics of Culture,* p. 231.

35. Quoted in Betz, *Hanns Eisler,* p. 44.

36. Eisler thought Schoenberg said these sorts of things just to make himself interesting. See Betz, loc. cit.

37. *Introduction to the Sociology of Music,* p. 211.

38. This is the feature of art Arthur Danto likes to stress. See, for example, his "Dangerous Art," in his *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective* (New York: Farrar, et al., 1992), p. 193.

39. Cf. Christina Howell's "Sartre and the Commitment of Pure Art," pp. 172–82.

40. Cf. Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Blackwell, 1990), pp. 350 ff.; also Martin Jay, *Adorno,* p. 159: "The need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition for all truth. ... If there is a positive moment in aesthetic truth, it is evident only in those works that strive for the utmost autonomy from the present society, defying immediate accessibility and popular impact."

41. *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford University Press, 1969/1990), pp. 118–72. Note that Berlin's two concepts of freedom are rather different from but not incompatible with mine.

42. See Angela McRobbie's "Postmodernism and Popular Culture," in Lisa Appignanesi ed., *Postmodernism: ICA Documents* (London: Free Association Books, 1989), pp. 165–80.

43. "Towards an Aesthetic of Popular Music," in R. Leppert and S. McClary eds., *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance, and Reception* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 144.

44. See *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus,* trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), pp. 58 ff.

45. *Noise,* pp. 3 and 18–20.

46. Many thanks to my seminar students of Fall 1992, to participants in the Center for the Humanities Fall Seminar "Making and Selling Culture," at Wesleyan University; to Brian Fay, Tom Huhn, James Kavanagh and Sanford Shieh for their extremely valuable comments on the text; to Steve Gerrard, Indira Karamcheti, Amélie Rorty, and Paul Schwaber for their help in conversations.