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Enjoyment and Contemporary Music: A Philosophical Op-Ed

In the course of attending several incarnations of the International Computer Music Conference, I began considering a number of ideas relating to music composition and aesthetics. My attendance of the 2009 ICMC spurred me to finally make a decisive effort to develop and address some personal reflections on these issues. This entire article should be prefaced with the acknowledgement that what follows is almost wholly derived from my own opinions and impressions; I may be deducing what I believe are objective facts from my own subjective impressions, surely rendering at least some of my assumptions incorrect. This is in fact quite likely the case, at least in part. Regardless of erroneous assumptions, however, I do believe that the issues addressed continually deserve careful consideration from contemporary composers and the music community as a whole.

The International Computer Music Conferences that I have attended are in many ways two conferences, one focusing on scholarly research that allows for new methods to create music and the other focusing on the music itself. The vast majority of research, presented here in the form of papers, posters, and demonstrations, generally deals with new technological advances involved in developing systems for the creation or analysis of electro-acoustic music. This research is immensely valuable, helping to promote countless creative endeavors and enabling both musical and technological advancements, even outside the field of music. However, over the years, I have found myself somewhat lamenting the paucity of more philosophical papers that

attempt to bridge the gap between the technology and the music by discussing the aesthetics of contemporary electro-acoustic music and why, as composers, researchers, and/or programmers, we direct our energies to this field in the first place. At the 2009 ICMC, apart from Paul Lansky's keynote speech, and a few papers under the "History/Education" and "Aesthetics" categories that related tangentially to these topics, almost all of the research that I came across dealt primarily with technical issues.

I have at minimum a general familiarity with most of the advanced software and programming strategies used in the contemporary creation of electronic music, but consider myself first and foremost a composer, and my concerns lie largely with the aesthetic qualities of music; for me, the technology involved is always a means to a compositional end. On attending my first ICMC in 2006, with a tape piece programmed, I was already familiar with a great deal of historical electronic music, and had a good idea of what to expect sonically. The pieces were, for the most part, thoroughly contemporary, eschewing or radicalizing elements of "traditional" academic music such as pitch, tempo, rhythm, dynamics, and so forth: stylistic decisions I certainly had experience with and was interested in myself, to varying degrees. What I had not expected was how much emphasis many of the pieces seemed, to me, to place on the concepts and processes used in creating the music as ends in themselves, over the resulting music. This generally came in two basic forms that sometimes overlapped. The first form involved what I perceived as a dependence on the technological processes used to create the music; a hypothetical example would be research into a particular kind of synthesis, perhaps resulting in a piece with a focus on individual microevents that might themselves be interesting examples produced by that type of synthesis, but that failed to cohere into a compelling compositional whole. The second involved a dependence on compositional processes or concepts; this could

take the form, for example, of a focus on algorithmic composition, in such a way that it seemed that the algorithmic processes themselves were valued over the final musical result. To me, it seemed that with such value being placed on the methods and complexity involved in the programs' creation, a corresponding lack of emphasis was placed on the compositional output, and that the pieces were thus intellectually appreciable but had little visceral emotional appeal. While these are clearly not new issues of contemporary music, I believe that they are still extremely relevant, and merit both public and private examination.

I would like to take a moment to distinguish between two kinds of appreciation of music: the intellectual and the affective. The former requires some degree of understanding of the various elements comprising a piece of music, however minimal, and the latter merely an instinctual emotional reaction to a piece. Appreciating the compositional processes behind a piece would fall into the intellectual category, while finding a piece simply enjoyable to listen to (or not) would fall into the affective. Familiarity and analysis can often aid both of these, and an intellectual understanding of a piece can perhaps enhance affective enjoyment by, for example, shedding light on previously obscured compositional complexities that may have distracted from the listening experience. Intellectual appreciation of a piece is arguably more readily achievable, or at least describable; I can detail to another person the reasons why this unexpected chord change or rhythmic figure is unusual and interesting based on our cultural and my individual expectations, how the compositional algorithm cleverly manipulates data from seismic changes in the earth to control changes in timbre and pitch, and so forth. Affective appreciation, conversely, being entirely subjective and individualized, is immeasurably more difficult to justify and expound on; attempting to do so often yields descriptions of intellectual attributes that don't accurately convey the emotional effects experienced and the reasons why we as particular

humans simply like or dislike particular things. It could be broadly and glibly generalized that “academic” music focuses more on intellectual appreciation while “popular” music focuses on affective appreciation. It is the ever-elusive union of the two that is, to my own mind, the most difficult to imbue a piece with and to elicit from the listener, but absolutely the most compelling when accomplished successfully.

In any event, I have personally found many of the pieces presented at each of the ICMCs I have attended difficult to enjoy on an emotional, affective level due to what appears to me to be, at least partly, a detrimental apparent focus on process over end result. Certainly during a week-long conference with several daily concerts, one's musical senses do undergo a gradual dulling through overexposure to media, resulting in a difficulty in really listening to new pieces; additionally, a first listen is hardly enough on which to base a lasting judgement. Nevertheless, it does seem to me that despite the myriad varied compositional processes involved in their creation, many pieces programmed at these venues often grow to sound like the same structureless mass consisting of a similar vocabulary of skittering clicks, shimmering bell tones, and low rumbles.

To be clear on several points: firstly, I'm a huge fan of clicks, bells, rumbles, and all manner of varied sounds, from dulcet harmonious tones to horrific shrieks that would grate terribly on many ears, just not how they were enacted in many instances here; secondly, that these criticisms are not applicable to every piece programmed during the ICMCs I have attended; during almost every concert, at least one work would stand out as successfully synthesizing interesting procedural components with compelling music, sometimes in startling and imaginative ways. Additionally, I do not wish to discuss aesthetic preferences of music here. There absolutely is no accounting for taste, and I am not so much concerned with what exact

sonic material an individual prefers or creates, but more their motivations behind making it as such. This nagging feeling persists that perhaps the ICMC and contemporary musicians as a whole philosophically value process and concept detrimentally heavily; it still remains difficult to qualify, but I'd attribute my specific suspicions in this case to factors such as the often disproportional program note space composers allocate to the technical aspects of their piece's creation vs. the affective aspects (which sadly, upon reflection, my own pieces' notes also suffer somewhat from, perhaps in an attempt to “play to the audience”), the aforementioned lack of philosophical papers on topics such as musical aesthetics and contemporary appreciation, and the large number of attendees who were solely programmer/researchers and not musicians.

To further clarify, I am wholeheartedly in favor of technological advances in music and the programmer/researchers who create them; these tools are infinitely valuable to me and thousands of composers, and rightly deserve conferences fully exploring their progress and application. What seems to me to be a more problematic situation is that in which a programmer/researcher is also a composer, but focuses much more heavily on the former function than the latter in producing their musical works.

Nor is this issue confined to ICMC, but I believe has been and remains an aspect of contemporary music as a whole, when we composers now have more compositional tools than ever at our disposal, so many traditional systems of rules have been tossed out the window, and it is exceptionally easy to create music with little actual compositional involvement on our part. Looking back throughout music history, we can find myriad pieces in which the concept or compositional processes threaten to wholly overwhelm the sonic output, from John Cage's *4'33"*, an empty slate of a duration whose sonic substance consists of any randomly occurring sounds, to George Maciunas's *Piano Piece #13 for Nam June Paik*, in which performers hammer nails

through a piano's keyboard until the instrument is unusable for its original function. To reiterate, the issue here is not whether these compositions are enjoyable to me as the listener, as that is entirely subjective and particular to my own tastes; the central question is whether the composers of the pieces are attaching as much import to the actual output they create as its conceptual and procedural underpinnings, with the end goal of their own affective enjoyment.

Interestingly, in the majority of the contemporary texts I've been reading while researching musical philosophies and aesthetics, while intellectual analysis of music abounds, rarely is there any mention of a preference toward affective enjoyment of the music discussed. In his unfortunately and unintentionally retitled 1958 article, "Who Cares If You Listen?", even fifty years after its writing still interesting and relevant, Milton Babbitt seems to go out of his way to express a borderline contempt for taking any account of affective musical appreciation, at least in regards to that of his untrained "lay listener" (Babbitt). Never once does he discuss whether trained contemporary composers ought to viscerally enjoy the music they create. As I reread the article, I wonder about the tusked grey mass looming in the corner of our collective contemporary music studio: is it generally assumed by contemporary academic musicians to be axiomatic that composers should viscerally enjoy listening to their creations? Or is the issue not considered worth considering?

In regards to the ICMCs, after some time, I began to feel as if I were missing something: a piece of the puzzle that I lacked but that was being understood and agreed upon by the other concertgoers. After several days of inner doubt, I began initiating informal surveys of a variety of my fellow attendees, all composers and/or programmers themselves, asking whether they were enjoying the music. What surprised me, however, was the general response, "No, not really." This was by no means a blanket rule for all respondents, but often enough that it struck me; most

people replied that they only enjoyed perhaps one or two pieces programmed on any given concert. I took heart in some of my own criticisms, but I did begin to ponder: if so many of the formally trained, intellectually-oriented, academic attendees only enjoyed a small number of pieces throughout the week-long conference, was something wrong? If we weren't enjoying the music, what exactly is the purpose of our musical activities?

As a generalization, we were there because of music, which begs clarification via the loaded inquiry, what *is* “music”? This is clearly a much more involved question than can be handled fully in this essay, so our examination will of necessity be somewhat cursory. Edgard Varèse has defined music as “organized sound,” which seems like a very facile definition (Cox 5). However, the incorporation of chance and algorithmic elements into music seems to push it exactly in the opposite direction, and yet many would argue that pieces produced through these processes still qualify as music. How is one to consider Cage's *4'33*”, which asks the audience to stop and listen to whatever random ambient sounds happen to occur for its specified duration, and to consider these sounds as validly musical, in light of this definition? It could be argued that perhaps simply demarcating beginning and ending temporal points for a piece by definition imposes organization, even though the rest of the piece's elements consist of pure randomness. This may be so, but does not seem conclusive enough to let us simply accept “organized sound” as our definition without further exploration.

Could music perhaps be defined by its substance (i.e. what specific sounds constitute music) and/or its function for humans? Because the substance of music varies widely from culture to culture and among individuals, its subjectivity forces us to conclude that music can consist of potentially any sound, including silence. (To be more precise, since the labeling of a certain sonic substance as music is subjective, it of necessity requires an agent present to

experience it, meaning that the substance of music is really the mental image a being has of a particular sound. But as this distinction isn't strictly necessary for the present discussion, we will hereafter refer to music as the sound, not the mental image.) However, defining the substance of music as “any sound one calls music” effectively renders that part of the word's definition meaningless; to pinpoint what these sounds we call music have in common as defining characteristics, we need to examine their function. Thus far, we could define music as something like “a sound that at least one individual feels has a function.” Historically, music has functioned variously for many purposes, e.g. devotional, ceremonial, celebratory, as notification, as augmentation for other art or for advertisements, as facilitation for work or movement, and as entertainment. Certainly academic music is also used to teach students how to compose, but the claim that a valid purpose of music is to ultimately create more music seems to be circular and thus ineffective. For the ICMC and most contemporary academic music, it seems that we are forced to rule out all functions but that of entertainment. This may currently be for a very specialized, rather sparsely populated, educated audience whose standards are quite exacting, but nonetheless, I believe, who are exposing themselves to music seeking entertainment: something to think about, something that makes their lives richer than they previously were, something enjoyable.

It could be proposed, then, that mere intellectual enjoyment of music is enough of a justification to fulfill this entertainment function, and that affective enjoyment is unnecessary. To that, I would respond that we need to look further into the matter and separate the subject into music itself versus its properties, which are in fact two distinct things. This requires a twist of the metaphysical, but I believe it could be said that a musical piece's properties are what we are discussing when, as mentioned earlier, intellectual appreciation was delineated as depending on

some understanding of the various elements comprising a piece of music and the way they function together; e.g. when I describe my liking the way a certain chord resolves, I am describing an intellectual appreciation for a mental puzzle that the processes underpinning the music solve, but not the music itself. These distinctly qualifiable attributes, imbued in the piece by the compositional processes, abstracted and isolated from the music itself, are what we pore over and study in a purely rational manner, divorced from emotion; unfortunately, the only possible way we can effectively analyze a piece of music and discuss it with another being is via its qualifiable properties. By contrast, the music itself, as only a series of sound waves with no inherent meaning, is entirely abstract and as such is literally indescribable, and is really only appreciable in an affective manner.

It might be objected that despite all this, we're quite happy with our intellectual enjoyment of the processes behind our musical pieces; process is extremely conceptually important, as it allows us a framework within which to work, technological methods can give us new ideas and choices to pick and choose from, and so forth; why bother with the populous, affective side of things? It seems that a logical response to this would be, in that case, why not just describe the processes in a paper and stop there? Why produce a musical piece whose process overwhelms the musical results, when detailed technical papers, as potential intellectual enjoyment distilled, can almost always elucidate the import and enactment of the processes much better than abstract musical examples? A paper can provide all same information needed to appreciate the qualifiable properties of a musical piece. I submit that the reason why composers still create a musical product, in this case, is that there is still an internal desire within them for any general musical output to be emotionally fulfilling, even if it is not prioritized or explicitly acknowledged in all cases.

Even regarding aleatoric and algorithmic music, which seem to be largely process-oriented, intentionally removing degrees of human influence from composition as aesthetic decisions, I believe the ultimate purpose implicit in the task of creation is still enjoyment. Though the intention of each aleatoric or algorithmic piece is surely different, returning to *4'33"* will perhaps provide some insight. Its seemingly arbitrary duration and sonic substance lead the listener to conclude that the piece could effectively start and stop at any time and take place anywhere, which, coupled with the idea of its being labeled "music," further suggests that all of the sounds one hears throughout one's entire life could be considered music. While this is unusual in shifting the burden of imparted meaning largely to the listener, with the composer acting mainly to impose some sort of framework for the non-human processes to occur, it leads to the audience becoming more aware of sound as a whole, and the fact that any sound can be viscerally compelling and musical. Were it asked of Cage, "Why is this desirable or important?" I believe that he would indeed say that it ultimately makes one's entire life more enjoyable, and that he created *4'33"* with the goal of his own enjoyment.

Now, though at least some of these conceptual, process-oriented, aleatoric, and algorithmic compositions seem to have been created with the purpose of affective enjoyment, even if only partly and implicitly, it is still debatable as to whether they succeed in this respect for the composer. As with any attempts at producing any kind of art, this is clearly a risk, and not all creations end as they were envisioned. In regards to pieces programmed at the ICMC, it is also highly possible that the composers of the pieces actually were focusing on the output and enjoyed it themselves, and that I simply did not appreciate it viscerally, and thus incorrectly attributed to the pieces a lack of compositional intent, as has too often been the unfortunate case in musical history.

I would like to return to a few points from "Who Cares If You Listen?". In discussing why contemporary composers shouldn't be concerned if the average "lay-listener" doesn't understand or enjoy their music, Babbitt relates advanced academic studies of music to advanced academic studies of physics, and states that since we would never expect a layman to understand or enjoy the latter, we should expect the same situation with the former. As he points out, the two fields differ in that research in physics can yield more tangibly practical applications, to which I would add that applications of physics all have the eventual goal of improving the lives of humans. Oddly, Babbitt seems unable to articulate a practical application for academic music beyond the circuitous suggestion that new pieces further compositional techniques and influence other music, instead arguing for music's continued academic support in the absence of immediate practical application, as is done with research in other fields. However, as I see it, music, even of the academic type, has the most practical application of all, the same eventual goal sought through practical applications of physics: that of improving our lives, in this case, via the enjoyment we receive by listening to it.

I would additionally like to point out that, though I am a non-physicist who certainly cannot parse the mathematics and concepts involved in modern complex physics, I find proposed higher-level explanations of physical phenomena exceptionally engaging; who can deny the awesome visceral appeal of a black hole, the elasticity of time, or fact that the universe is literally infinite? This seems to me potentially akin to the "lay-listener" in relation to contemporary music; s/he may not be able to articulate the technical or theoretical reasons why s/he likes or does not like a certain piece, but is it not desirable, all other things being equal, that contemporary pieces are, if possible, affectively enjoyed by the average person? (The astute observer will here propose that since I have not actually experienced a black hole in any

firsthand sense (and like all entities who wish to remain extant, could never do so), and have only come to know it by a description of its attributes, that my enjoyment is here intellectual, and thus not affective. This delves too far into the metaphysical for this essay to adequately address, but let me counter-propose that once the black hole's attributes have been processed inside my brain, I develop from them another distinct, independent object, namely the concept of a black hole, analogous to my internal representation of the sound of a piece of music, that is then affectively appreciated. The layers of potential reasoning from here on become more complex and beyond the scope of this paper, but suffice it to say that, in any case, I believe the original analogy escapes more or less intact.)

Though the type of contemporary music programmed at venues like the ICMC is intricate and requires more of the listener than perhaps most lay-folk could or are willing to give, I believe and hope that, very slowly, the aesthetics that the most successful of these works embody will seep into popular culture, such that at some undefined point down the road, lay-listeners will actually be comfortable exposing themselves to music that challenges them, that requires effort, and that is ultimately more rewarding for it. Unlike Babbitt, I do think that familiarity is enormously healthy and conducive to eventual acceptance, and later, enjoyment, and that over time, we can expand the public's palate. The leaps from Gregorian chants to Mozart to Stravinsky are large, but I think the musical evolutions made in the last century are much, much larger; how could anyone expect these new aesthetic sensibilities to have transferred *en masse* to popular culture? Consider the tritone, so reviled as to have been considered demonic, now being used in all sorts of popular music genres in ways that would not even dream of resolving, or complex jazz, which pushes all sorts of tonal boundaries, being played at dinner parties and restaurants across the globe; I think these sorts of examples point to the fact that the public's

palate actually can be expanded by art that initially comes across as “difficult.” I do not believe that it will be easy or soon, but I think the advent of the internet and the resulting explosion of available information and the cross-pollination of musical styles, accompanied by the steadily decreasing cost of powerful musical hardware and software available to the general population, will continue to push popular taste in favor of acceptance of more adventurous aesthetics. We see its effects in underground “noise” movements, the dissonant wall of wailing guitars made by bands like Sonic Youth, and the pervasive use of non-musical material as samples in extremely popular genres of music like hip hop and rock, all entirely outside the sphere of academia. So perhaps in a few hundred years, the average lay listener will be ready to embrace the more challenging aesthetics of some of today's contemporary academic music. Surely at that point, new issues will have made themselves apparent for the contemporary guard to take up, but broadening the cultural palate remains, to my mind, a noble goal, as it would indeed make many people's lives better.

All of this is simply to say that both the untrained listener and, I believe, we composers, as much as we may not confess to it, still do desire a visceral enjoyment of music, that it is eminently achievable with our complex and varied contemporary vocabulary, and that it is worth striving for when writing music, for our own sake. I think that as electro-acoustic composers, it is particularly incumbent on us to consider these questions of process versus our compositional intentions and desires, as music that makes use of computers and other processes that require little human input can be used to quickly generate so much music; it allows for process to become so integral to the composition of the piece that it is easy to lose site of other considerations.

As mentioned, it certainly is possible, even probable, that my perceptions of others'

reactions to the concert music were merely projections of my own predilections in the musical aesthetics of what I prefer to listen to and compose. Attempting to compose difficult music is a difficult task, and many musical experiments, my own included, still fall flat, even when keeping visceral enjoyment of the output at the forefront. To be fair, with such complex music that strives for so much, discovering one emotionally affecting piece per concert is actually a decent success rate. What I fear is that, for all of the advances made in musical theories and technologies that humans have made up to this point, we are being careless with how we use them, creating pieces we have not invested compositional effort in just because we can and have the technology to; “because we can” is not a particularly compelling artistic motivation. Regardless of my accuracy in assessing composers' compositional consideration, as a community of composers, we still need to be vigilant about considering these issues as valid, and investing as much time and effort creating compelling compositions that we personally enjoy as we spend devising the systems by which they are generated.

I do agree with Babbitt that as composers, we are not beholden to produce works for any audience to enjoy, be they trained academics or "lay listeners," enjoying viscerally or intellectually. However, I would posit that we are absolutely beholden at least to ourselves to try to create works that we enjoy. Reflecting on the ICMC and these issues has certainly made me realize that I personally need to focus more on this in my own music. After the 2009 conference had ended, I was fortunate enough to view an interesting concert at a café, hosted by a composer who had participated in the ICMC. The atmosphere was not superficially dissimilar from that of the ICMC's night concerts, and the music performed used almost the exact same performance tools, aesthetics, and sonic vocabulary as that of typical ICMC concerts. Yet the music was in many ways more free and enjoyable to listen to; the sonic result was clearly as important as the

processes that went into creating the music, and it was clear that the performers and audience were all emotionally invested in the entire process; it is this immensely visceral quality that I believe I would do best to strive for in my own music. I think the following quote from Masami Akita, of the Japanese “noise” group Merzbow, sums up the issue quite well: “Western Noise is often too conceptual and academic. Japanese Noise relishes the ecstasy [sic] of sound itself” (Cox 60). I cannot vouch for the veracity of his statement regarding “Japanese Noise,” but replace “noise” with music, and think the sentiments regarding Western music and a compositional direction to be striven for are quite apt.

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