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Terminal Prestige: The Case of Avant-Garde Music Composition

Susan McClary

Good evening. Welcome to Difficult Listening Hour.
The spot on your dial for that relentless and
impenetrable sound of Difficult Music
[Music . . . Music . . . Music . . .]
So sit bolt upright in that straight-backed chair,
button that top button,
and get set for some difficult music:
Ooola.

—Laurie Anderson, “Difficult Listening Hour”¹

When composer/performance artist Laurie Anderson performs “Difficult Listening Hour” as part of her extended work, *United States*, she satirizes several aspects of the present-day music scene. Perhaps the first thing that strikes one is the sound of her voice. As she

1. Laurie Anderson, “Difficult Music,” *United States*, part II. Recorded live at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, February 7-10, 1983. Available from Warner Bros Records Inc., 1984. The texts are also published in book form (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1984).

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speaks into a vocoder, the pitch of her voice is thrown down into a much lower range so that she no longer sounds like a woman at all. Rather, she evokes the insinuating delivery typical of announcers on classical music stations—the low, velvety, patriarchal voice that soothes and seduces while congratulating the listener on his or her status as a connoisseur of elite music. Ordinarily such “cultured” voices serve to render affirmative and nonthreatening their presentations of high art: kick off your shoes, sit back, and relax to (say) *Death and Transfiguration*. By contrast, Anderson instructs us (with that familiar congenial/sinister voice) to deny ourselves all the usual trappings of physical comfort as she braces us for that most alienating of musical experiences: the encounter with the avant-garde, with *Difficult Music*.

Lest we miss the lethal accuracy of Anderson’s satire of the avant-garde, I would like to turn first to a strikingly parallel formulation from Roger Sessions’s essay, “How a ‘Difficult’ Composer Gets That Way” (1950): “I have sometimes been told that my music is ‘difficult’ for the listener. There are those who consider this as praise, those who consider it a reproach. For my part I cannot regard it as, in itself, either the one or the other. But so far as it is so, it is the way the music comes, the way it has to come.”² Sessions (presumably the agent who composes these pieces) is strangely absent from this explanation: it is *the music itself* that can’t help it, that demands the kind of complexity that listeners by and large find incomprehensible. While Sessions professes not to care whether the assessment of “difficult” is intended as praise or reproach, the title and tone of the essay make it quite clear that he wears “difficult” as a badge of honor.

Better still, this is Arnold Schoenberg’s “How One Becomes Lonely” (1937):

But as soon as the war was over, there came another wave which procured for me a popularity unsurpassed since. My works were played everywhere and acclaimed in such a manner that I started to doubt the value of my music. This may seem like a joke, but, of course, there is some truth in it. If previously my music had been difficult to understand on account of the peculiarities of my ideas

2. Roger Sessions, “How a ‘Difficult’ Composer Gets That Way,” in *Roger Sessions on Music: Collected Essays*, ed. Edward T. Cone (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 169.

and the way in which I expressed them, how could it happen that now, all of a sudden, everybody could follow my ideas and like them? Either the music or the audience was worthless.³

One of the accusations directed at me maintained that I composed only for my private satisfaction. And this was to become true, but in a different manner from that which was meant. While composing for me had been a pleasure, now it became a duty. I knew I had to fulfil a task: I had to express what was necessary to be expressed and I knew I had the duty of developing my ideas for the sake of progress in music, whether I liked it or not; but I also had to realize that the great majority of the public did not like it.⁴

Here again we find that a piece is worthless if it is not so “difficult” as to be incomprehensible, and that acceptance on the part of the audience indicates failure. Note, too, that what is described in the first of these paragraphs as Schoenberg’s own oppositional idiosyncracies (“the peculiarities of my ideas”) becomes in the second “the duty of developing my ideas for the sake of progress in music, whether I liked it or not”: once again, it is the music itself that demands such sacrifices by community and artist alike.

Finally, here is Milton Babbitt in his “The Composer as Specialist,” infamously—though probably appropriately—retitled by the editors of *High Fidelity Magazine* as “Who Cares if You Listen?” (1958):

I dare suggest that the composer would do himself and his music an immediate and eventual service by total, resolute, and voluntary withdrawal from this public world to one of private performance and electronic media, with its very real possibility of complete elimination of the public and social aspects of musical composition. By so doing, the separation between the domains would be defined beyond any possibility of confusion of categories, and the composer would be free to pursue a private life of professional achievement, as opposed to a public life of unprofessional compromise and exhibitionism.⁵

3. Arnold Schoenberg, “How One Becomes Lonely,” in *Style and Idea*, ed. Leonard Stein, trans. Leo Black (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 51.

4. *Ibid.*, 53.

5. Milton Babbitt, “Who Cares if You Listen?,” *High Fidelity Magazine* 8, no. 2 (February 1958): 126.

I

Music functions and is valued variously in different human societies: it may participate in ritual, facilitate the physical motions of dance or labor, serve as entertainment, provide pleasure, stand as a manifestation of ideal beauty or order, and so on. Within many societies, there exists a hierarchy among musical discourses that attributes greater prestige to some of these functions than to others.

Perhaps only with the twentieth-century avant-garde, however, has there been a music that has sought to secure prestige precisely by claiming to renounce all possible social functions and values, just as Wagner's Alberich renounced human love in exchange for the Rheingold. Schoenberg was relieved and gratified when audiences again turned against him:⁶ it had not been his fault that they had thought temporarily that they liked him—they really had not understood him in the first place. The prestige value of this music, in other words, is inversely correlated with public response and comprehension.

This strange posture was not invented in the twentieth century, of course. It is but the *reductio ad absurdum* of the nineteenth-century notion that music ought to be an autonomous activity, insulated from the contamination of the outside social world.⁷ The motivation for this position can be traced in part to the breakdown of the aristocratic patronage system and to the problems the composer faced as a free-lance artist, reluctantly dependent on the bourgeois audience. Within the context of industrial capitalism, two mutually exclusive economies of music developed: that which is measured by popular or commercial success and that which aims for the prestige conferred by official arbiters of taste. Pierre Boulez, for instance, in defending the integrity of avant-garde music against the option of pluralism, states: "The economy is there to remind us, in case we get lost in this bland utopia: there are musics which bring in money and exist for commercial profit; there are musics that cost something whose very concept has nothing to do

6. Schoenberg, "How One Becomes Lonely," 51-53.

7. See Janet Wolff, "The Ideology of Autonomous Art," foreword to *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance and Reception*, ed. Richard Leppert and Susan McClary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 1-12. See also the introduction by Leppert and McClary in the same volume, xi-xix.

with profit. No liberalism will erase this distinction.”⁸

The terms for this double economy are already recognizable in Robert Schumann’s criticism in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, with his castigations of what he perceived as the vulgar virtuosity of Philistine Goliaths such as Liszt and his championing (through his imaginary group of aesthetic underdogs, the “League of David”) of the cerebral, organic constructs of composers such as Brahms.⁹ If Schumann helped set the groundwork for the Great German Canon that is still the mainstay of the bourgeois concert audience, he also articulated a position that would ultimately lead to the self-alienation of the composer from that same audience.

Schumann’s writing is to some extent motivated by the social idealism that marks much of European culture in the first half of the nineteenth century—by a desire to wean the indiscriminate middle-class audience from empty, manipulative display and to instill in it what he regarded as the liberatory, dialectical habits of thought articulated in the complex music of serious composers. Adorno’s interpretation of Schoenberg argues compellingly that his private-language games likewise are motivated by the impulse of social critique, even if Schoenberg’s solutions end up reinscribing the very contradictions he sought to transcend.¹⁰

But idealism thwarted easily turns into contempt. In this century (especially following World War II), the “serious” composer has felt beleaguered both by the reified, infinitely repeated classical music repertory and also by the mass media that have provided the previously disenfranchised with modes of “writing” and distribution—namely recording, radio, and television. Thus even though Schoenberg, Boulez, and Babbitt differ enormously from each other in terms of socio-historical context and music style, they at least share the siege mentality that has given rise to the extreme position we have been tracing: they all regard the audience as an irrelevant annoyance whose approval signals artistic failure.

8. Michel Foucault and Pierre Boulez, “Contemporary Music and the Public,” trans. John Rahn, *Perspectives of New Music* 23 (Fall and Winter 1985): 8.

9. Robert Schumann, *Gesammelte Schriften über Musik und Musiker*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Breitkopf and Härtel, 1883). Several collections of these essays exist in English translation.

10. Theodor W. Adorno, “Schoenberg,” in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), 147-72.

But no musical repertory can truly be autonomous from social values and networks. If it can be demonstrated that these composers disdain commercial and popular success or even political effect (for instance, contributing to the utopian enlightenment of the masses), this does not mean that they are entirely indifferent to socially conferred reward nor that they can truly exist as artists independent of any social framework.

Quite the contrary—the avant-garde composer requires a discursive community for support every bit as much as does any musician, but the constitution of this community and its values are those of the ivory tower. Babbitt, for instance, writes:

But how, it may be asked, will [the withdrawal from the audience] secure the means of survival for the composer and his music? One answer is that after all such a private life is what the university provides the scholar and the scientist. It is only proper that the university, which—significantly—has provided so many contemporary composers with their professional training and general education, should provide a home for the “complex,” “difficult,” and “problematical” in music.¹¹

Granting to music the position accorded other arts and sciences promises the sole substantial means of survival for the music I have been describing. Admittedly, if this music is not supported, the whistling repertory of the man in the street will be little affected, the concert-going activity of the conspicuous consumer of musical culture will be little disturbed. But music will cease to evolve, and, in that important sense, will cease to live.¹²

By aligning his music with the intellectual elite—with what he identifies as the autonomous “private life” of scholarship and science (this at the height of the Cold War!)—Babbitt appeals to a separate economy that confers prestige, but that also (it must be added) confers financial support in the form of foundation grants and university professorships.¹³

The rhetoric of survival—the survival not merely of serial or electronic music, but of music *tout court*—runs through virtually all of these

11. Babbitt, “Who Cares,” 126.

12. *Ibid.*, 127.

13. See Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

documents. We are back to the Fall of Rome with the barbarians at the gates; we are encouraged to perceive the serious composer as an endangered species and to provide public subsidies underwriting music that most proudly announces itself as incomprehensible. Babbitt's rhetoric has achieved its goal: most university music departments support resident composers (though many, including the composers in my own department, find the "Who Cares if You Listen" attitude objectionable); and the small amount of money earmarked by foundations for music commissions is reserved for the kind of "serious" music that Babbitt and his colleagues advocate.

In many ways, however, the academic prestige market is even less stable than the commercial market. Within the commercial market, it is at least clear that (for whatever reasons) a certain number of concert tickets or recordings have been sold. A popular artist may go from adulation to obscurity overnight, but some measure of that short-term fame will have been evident. By contrast, the claim that one's music is valuable precisely because of its autonomy from social function is itself precariously dependent on particular social definitions of prestige.

Those definitions have been shifting for about the last twenty years. Perhaps Philip Glass signalled best the beginning of the end of that era when he described his contact with the Boulez scene in Paris as "a wasteland, dominated by these maniacs, these creeps, who were trying to make everyone write this crazy creepy music."¹⁴ For a while, avant-garde music's glory lay in the illusion that it had transcended social context altogether—that it was too difficult for the uninitiated to comprehend. But proud declarations of uselessness can be—and are now beginning to be—seen as *admissions* of uselessness. The obvious question becomes: "Who cares if you compose?"

Babbitt's claim that music will cease to exist if academic music is not publicly subsidized rests on an extraordinary assumption: that there really is no other music. Boulez's argument acknowledges the existence of other artifacts parading as music, though he summarily dismisses them as commercial. But just who are the barbarians in this picture? What is the whistling repertory of Babbitt's man in the street?

It would undoubtedly come as a surprise to that whistling barbarian

14. Quoted in John Rockwell, "Philip Glass," in *All American Music: Composition in the Late Twentieth Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), 111.

that music is an endangered species, the last remnants of which are being carefully protected in university laboratories. Because to anyone who has not been trained in terms of the modernist partyline, it is quite obvious that the twentieth century has witnessed an unparalleled explosion in musical creativity. But whereas the music of the canon is the repository of aristocratic and, later, hegemonic middle-class values, this unruly explosion in the twentieth century is the coming to voice of American blacks and latinos, of the rural and working classes, of women, and (in the case of those we might call postmodern) of those whose training in those creepy institutions did not quite take.

For all the rhetoric of survival and attempts at eliminating other forms of musical productivity by simply refusing to acknowledge them, these arguments have had very little influence on the musical world or ultimately, I would predict, on music history. The music produced under those hothouse conditions has been heard by few and has had next to no social impact. It is the last hurrah of a historical bloc that lost its hegemonic grip on culture at the turn of the century.

As the end has become increasingly evident, supporters have occasionally called upon the avant-garde to recast its rhetoric of difficulty-for-the-sake-of-difficulty. In a sympathetic open letter in *The Village Voice* in 1984, Gregory Sandow invited Babbitt to explain what his music is about *in human terms*.¹⁵ A couple of years before, Sandow had criticized Paul Griffiths's *Modern Music* for continuing the tradition of writing about Babbitt's music exclusively in terms of the quasi-mathematical models Babbitt himself had formulated.¹⁶ Sandow even sketched out why he liked Babbitt's music *as music*: as works of art that resonate with the human condition in the mid-twentieth century, that could (if explained and presented differently) even come to influence the listener's perception of the world and the self.

But in his recent article "The Unlikely Survival of Serious Music," Babbitt argues quite adamantly that he still prefers to hold the hard line.¹⁷ He continues to exalt difficulty, to denigrate the alternatives as

15. Gregory Sandow, "An Open Letter to Milton Babbitt," *The Village Voice*, 5 June 1984, 81-82.

16. Gregory Sandow, "A Fine Madness," *The Village Voice*, 16 March 1982, 73.

17. Milton Babbitt, "The Unlikely Survival of Serious Music," in *Milton Babbitt: Words about Music*, ed. Stephen Dembski and Joseph N. Straus (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 163-83.

“public circuses of music, the citadels of show biz,” to characterize his own position at Princeton as “our little humble house,” and to define thus the kind of understanding he expects the listener to have of his music:

not that kind of understanding which reduces the rich manifestations, the rich ramifications, of musical relationships to some mundane banalities, not some sort of many-one mapping of all those wonderfully rich ramifications of musical relations to some sort of representation of the world out there . . . but understanding of music and understanding of a great many other things by a fairly obvious process.

I’m not going to try to summarize, and I’ve certainly not offered you anything more than what is a description of one aspect of this crisis in music, with no solution being offered because I know of no solutions. I think therefore you can understand why those of us who dare to presume to attempt to make music as much as it can be rather than as little as one can get away with—music’s being under the current egalitarian dispensation—and who’ve entered the university as our last hope, our only hope, and ergo our best hope, hope only that we’re not about to be abandoned.¹⁸

It seems necessary at this point to confront the inevitable charge of “anti-intellectualism,” for the avant-garde has consistently protected its endeavors by hurling this invective at its would-be critics. To deal with the human (i.e., expressive, social, political, etc.) dimension of this music need not qualify as retreating into anti-intellectualism, as Babbitt repeatedly suggests. On the contrary, the orthodox, self-contained analyses that appear in *Perspectives of New Music* (the official Princeton-based journal of the musical avant-garde) require little more than a specialist’s grasp of combinatorial techniques; by contrast, explication of this music as historical human artifact would involve not only knowledge of serial principles, but also grounding in critical theory and extensive knowledge of twentieth-century political and cultural history.

We would gain from such discussions of avant-garde music a greater sense of human connectedness—the repertory can be heard as articulating poignantly some of the contradictions human subjects are experiencing at this moment in social and musical history. But at the same time, we would lose the mystique of difficulty, which might well be replaced by the acknowledgement of human vulnerability. What if underneath

18. *Ibid.*, 182-83.

all that thorny puzzle-playing and those displays of total control there lurked the fear and confusion (clearly recognizable in all the defensive quotations already cited) that mark most other forms of contemporary culture? In other words, one could, as Sandow does, explain on many levels how this music is meaningful in other than quasi-mathematical terms. But the point is that such an agenda would violate the criteria of prestige the avant-garde has defined for itself. Better to go down with the ship than to admit to meaning. We have here, in other words, a case of terminal prestige.

By retreating from the public ear, avant-garde music has in some important sense silenced itself. Only to the tiny, dwindling community that shares modernist definitions of the economy of prestige does the phenomenon make the slightest bit of sense: thus the urgency with which Babbitt throws himself on the mercy of “the mightiest of fortresses against the overwhelming, outnumbering forces, both within and without the university, of anti-intellectualism, cultural populism, and passing fashion.”¹⁹ For if the patronage of the university fails,

to consign us to the great world out there, however seriously or however viciously, is to consign us to oblivion. Out there in that world outside the university, our music and our words are bound to fall on unheeding or, at least, uncomprehending ears. Don't forget, out there we're an academic, and there's no more sturdy vestige of anti-intellectualism than the fact that the very term academic is conceived to be an immediate, automatic, and ultimate term of derogation.²⁰

In the face of this pathetic scenario, only a Simon Legree would press for eviction. Why not extend refuge? What does it matter, after all, if a few people in universities continue to write music intended only for themselves and a few colleagues?

II

The presence of this group of artists in universities has had several perhaps unexpected but nevertheless serious consequences besides the

19. *Ibid.*, 163.

20. *Ibid.*, 180.

presumably benign survival of the avant-garde. First, because the prestige of these composers (and, not coincidentally, their livelihood) is dependent on the transmission of their antisocial assumptions to subsequent generations of musicians, academic music study has gradually and subtly become restricted to the reproduction of this ideology. Most studies of twentieth-century music manage to ignore completely the existence of jazz or rock.²¹ In the last decade, the popular success of certain postmodern musicians (Philip Glass, Laurie Anderson, Steve Reich, Meredith Monk) has precipitated a vigorous response on the part of academic composers who are attempting to reassert their greater prestige. Ironically, the “avant-garde” no longer identifies with the new: institutionalized as it is in the universities, it has become the conservative stronghold of the current music scene, for it holds stringently to difficulty and inaccessibility as the principal signs of its integrity and moral superiority.

The power of the avant-garde lobby within higher education is such that both popular and postmodern musics are marked as the enemy, and there is still considerable effort exerted to keep them out of the regular curriculum. American popular music, when taught at all in music departments, is usually presented as part of “ethnomusicology”—the culture of the “primitive,” the ethnic “Other”: a clear indication of the economy of prestige at work. More often such popular music is left for American Studies or sociology departments to deal with on the grounds that it really isn’t music at all.

The treatment of newer forms of experimental music by the academy is perhaps even more puzzling at first glance. Neo-tonal composers such as David Del Tredici or George Rochberg have had to be extremely defensive about moving into terrain that most people in cultural circles would readily recognize as postmodern: the composition of music that draws upon images and gestures of past repertoires.²²

21. Very few studies have tried to present pictures of twentieth-century music that do not honor the high art division between “serious” and “popular” musics and that deal with many kinds of musics on an equal footing. See, for instance, Rockwell, *All American Music*, and Billy Bergman and Richard Horn, *Recombinant Do. Re. Mi: Frontiers of the Rock Era* (New York: Quill, 1985).

22. See Rockwell, “David Del Tredici: The Return of Tonality, the Orchestra Audience and the Danger of Success,” in *All American Music*, 71-83, and George Rochberg, *The Aesthetics of Survival* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984). For fuller treatments of the phenomenon of postmodernism in music, see Georgina Born, “Modern

When I gave a talk about Glass at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis after a local performance of his *The Photographer* a few years ago, I was chastised by colleagues for having broken rank. The fact that Glass has attracted a considerable following is regarded by some as *prima facie* evidence of his lack of seriousness: in Boulez's terms, one can attain money or prestige, but not both. (One wonders a bit here about Boulez's professional fees and his base of institutional support in contrast to those of a black, working-class musician dreaming of producing a Top 40 hit.) As is the case with popular music, postmodern composers are discussed (if at all) in programs devoted to cultural studies or in sociology.

Self-proclaimed "serious" musicians often make a great deal of the artificial demand for popular music created by means of advertisement and image manipulation. But an interesting irony here is that much of the university curriculum is devoted to a usually futile attempt at instilling a very artificial demand for academic music in young musicians. We shame students for their incorrigible tastes in popular music and browbeat them with abstract analytical devices in hopes that they will be influenced by, say, stochasticism and will maintain the illusion that this kind of abstract experimentation informs the future of music. For everything rests on *some* community continuing to think that this audienceless music is prestigious: otherwise, prestige simply evaporates. It begins to feel a bit like the make-believe worlds of *The Glass Menagerie* or *The Wizard of Oz*, in which enormous amounts of energy are poured into keeping a fantasy of denial alive.

Since students (despite all our efforts) have access to the outside world, most of them are aware of these other musics on some level—even if they have bought into the academic prestige racket. But the influence of the avant-garde on universities has been more extensive than simply its attempted blackout of the competition. Because avant-garde music's prestige relies on its having transcended social use or signification, its advocates have naturalized this position and have projected it back onto the whole of the European canon. It has become heretical to address the signifying practices of, say, Bach or Beethoven for at least two interrelated reasons: first, their present-day prestige in the modernist academy hinges on the abstract patterns of order in their music rather than

Music Culture: On Shock, Pop and Synthesis," *New Formations* 2 (1987): 51-77; and Susan McClary, "Music and Postmodernism," forthcoming in *Contemporary Music Review*.

on signification;²³ second, the argument that their music likewise is nothing but abstract constructs in turn helps legitimize the avant-garde. The more obviously socially grounded sources of meaning in the music are bracketed and declared irrelevant, if not causes for embarrassment.

In the introduction to *Beyond Orpheus* (which boasts a foreword by Milton Babbitt), David Epstein writes:

The fact that Schoenberg's approach to music had at its roots concepts from studies of tonal music from Bach through Brahms is of more than purely historical interest. It suggests that serial concepts themselves—as explicit viewpoints and procedures—may yield insights into similar viewpoints and concepts of earlier, tonal music.²⁴

He goes on to set the limits of his project, first to the classic-romantic tradition from Haydn through Brahms and then to the German-Viennese tradition (“the most seminal [sic] body of music that emerged during this broad period”²⁵). Finally, he says that his studies “are confined to absolute music”:

Our understanding of structure is still sufficiently unclear that it seems advisable to avoid the further complications of words and/or dramatic action—implicit or explicit—and their relations to structure, or their effects upon it.

A . . . final limitation: the matter of “expression” in music is beyond the confines of these studies. . . . The limitation here is a practical one alone; the question of what music “says” is vast and complex and demands separate study. . . . [Music’s] materials are the means as well as the medium of its communication. Indeed, in attacking this problem it is first of all essential clearly to perceive, to recognize, and to comprehend what it is we hear, free of external or misconstrued meanings.²⁶

23. For an account of traditional classical music as socially grounded discourse, see Susan McClary, “The Blasphemy of Talking Politics during Bach Year,” in Leppert and McClary, eds., *Music and Society*, 13-62. For a response to this position that argues in favor of autonomy, see Nicolas Temperley, “Tonality and the Bourgeoisie,” *Musical Times*, December 1987, 685-87.

24. David Epstein, *Beyond Orpheus: Studies in Musical Structure* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1979), 5.

25. *Ibid.*, 11.

26. *Ibid.*

He then proceeds to explicate Beethoven's *Eroica* as the efficient genetic unfolding of two pitch cells: a triad and a chromatic cluster. Epstein claims to leave open the possibility of dealing with "expression" for other studies. However, if one has really accepted his structuralist account as, in fact, what we are able "to perceive, to recognize and to comprehend, free of external or misconstrued meanings," then one would be rather hard pressed to come up with anything in the realm of meaning other than the implicit one that meaning inheres in such efficient genetic unfolding of two pitch cells.

Now this tends to be the way many music theorists—the individuals responsible for teaching students how music operates—are currently being trained, especially in the most prestigious departments on the east coast which also house the most prestigious composers. Any music that is worth bothering with (i.e., that is sufficiently prestigious to warrant attention) *was always already difficult music*. Only the ignorant—Babbitt's whistling man on the street—could have responded to music as though it had anything to do with desire, with experience of the body, with social meaning. I recently spoke with a prominent music theorist who thought I was very bizarre to suggest that Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* might be erotic.

These strange priorities also infect anyone who tries to play the prestige game with other musics. Recently jazz has been introduced into elite musicological and music theory circles, but it is permitted a place in the limelight only if its social context is scraped off and its artifacts are demonstrated to be every bit as complex and difficult to hear as serial music.²⁷

27. See, for instance, Wynton Marsalis, "What Jazz Is—And Isn't," *New York Times*, 31 July 1988. Marsalis advocates rule-bound, difficult-music accounts of jazz in an attempt at elevating it to the status of high art. To be sure, the old mystified stories Marsalis argues against, in which jazz artists spring full-blown as the unmediated products of their miserable social conditions, are detestable; and, indeed, jazz must be acknowledged as the most significant musical genre to emerge in the first half of this century. But such revisions in jazz reception cannot afford to erase the oppressive social conditions that shaped the discursive practices of jazz, within and in spite of which its extraordinary practitioners worked to develop their complex art. One of the better attempts at dealing structurally with jazz is Lewis Porter, "John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*: Jazz Improvisation as Composition," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 38 (Fall 1985): 593-621. While Porter concentrates on formal matters in this article, he also states in his introduction: "Furthermore, Coltrane required more than abstract interest from his music. He used it to express profound spiritual moods. While retaining the goal of intellectual involvement, he sought to communicate nobility, dignity, peace, or even violent outrage" (593).

In his bid to be granted prestige by serious music circles, Anthony Braxton, for instance, has written program notes every bit as abstruse as those of any electronic composer, and, as Ronald Radano has demonstrated recently, Braxton has paid the price of being held as somewhat suspect by both avant-garde and jazz communities.²⁸ As long as Philip Glass was straddling the fence between the academy and the audience, he wrote program notes that explained in excruciating, abstract detail how his compositional constructs operated.²⁹ However, now that he has attracted an audience and has become comfortable about composing for people, his writing is extremely accessible and deals precisely with those matters Epstein fastidiously bracketed: the relationships among music, words, movement, and drama.³⁰

III

Thus far I have presented my argument as though the only “enemies” against which the avant-garde has pitted itself were popular culture, postmodernism, and—in general—socially grounded signification. But a position has begun to emerge recently among cultural critics and historians that recognizes High Modernism as having been also strongly motivated as a repudiation of femininity. In “Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism’s Other,” Andreas Huyssen traces the retreat of “serious artists” from the contaminating qualities regarded as “feminine” (e.g., expression, pleasure, community) to that refuge of masculine prestige which is modernism.³¹

This repudiation can, of course, be understood as targeting not actual women, but rather what is feared to be the “feminine” dimension of the male artist—or even the practice of art itself, which is often classified as an “effeminate” activity: it is perhaps more obviously a product of homophobia and anxiety over masculine identity than of misogyny

28. See Ronald Radano, “Braxton’s Reputation,” *Musical Quarterly* 72, no. 4 (1986): 503-22.

29. See Glass’s formal “Notes on *Einstein on the Beach*,” included with the recording (CBS Records, 1976).

30. Philip Glass, *Music by Philip Glass* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1987).

31. Andreas Huyssen, “Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism’s Other,” in *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*, ed. Tania Modleski (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 189-207.

per se. However, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* reveals the ways in which masculine anxiety, homophobia, and misogyny form a tight system of pathological interdependencies in Western culture.³²

Thus, not surprisingly, the retreat to the boy's club of modernism was not simply a matter of sloughing off soft, sentimental, "feminine" qualities for the sake of more difficult, "hard-core" criteria. Littering the path of this retreat are countless mutilated representations of women—the self-conscious defacements of what had previously been upheld in art and society as "the beautiful"—which have been protected from critical scrutiny by modernist appeals to autonomy, objectivity, abstraction, artistic liberation from bourgeois constraints, stylistic innovation, and progress. The debate raging at the moment over Picasso—the visual artist of modernism's early avant-garde—is finally forcing the issue of the misogyny that marks the content of much of his art:³³ the content which has often made me flinch from his paintings as though they were images of criminal atrocities, but which I (as a "cultured" individual) could protest only at the risk of exposing my Philistine ignorance or "feminine self-interest." Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert are presently analyzing these issues with respect to modernist literature,³⁴ and Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies* documents (perhaps far more thoroughly and enthusiastically than one would wish) the links between German modernist culture and its backlash against the masses, Jews, and female contamination—all of which turn out to blur

32. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

33. This controversy has become very public with the publication of Arianna Stassinopoulos Huffington's sensationalist *Picasso: Creator and Destroyer* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988). Huffington concentrates too heavily on Picasso's personality in accounting for his imagery, thus making this dimension of his art seem exclusively a product of his own psychopathology. However, similar readings of modernist art—which emphasize discursive conventions rather than individual idiosyncrasy—had already been available. See, for instance, Carol Duncan, "Virility and Domination in Early Twentieth-Century Vanguard Painting," in *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1982), 293-314. See also Leo Steinberg, "The Philosophical Brothel" (1972), reprinted in *October* 44 (Spring 1988): 7-74, for a pioneering discussion of the sexual politics articulated in Picasso's paintings, especially *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, and of how formalist criticism serves to mask such issues.

34. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, "Tradition and the Female Talent," in *The Poetics of Gender*, ed. Nancy K. Miller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 183-207.

into a single threatening “red tide.”³⁵

Feminism has been very late in making an appearance in music criticism, and this is largely owing to the success composers, musicologists, and theorists have had in maintaining the illusion that music is an entirely autonomous realm. But the gender politics which assign prestige to “masculinity” mark the emergence of modernism in music as much as in the other arts. Witness, for instance, Charles Ives’s pathetic insistence on his own exaggerated masculinity and his homophobic renunciations of predecessors and contemporaries (including friends and colleagues);³⁶ Adorno’s hysteria over the “castrating” effect of mass culture;³⁷ the on-going resistance to admitting women into the field of composition; formalist attitudes of revulsion in the face of expression (i.e., effeminate romantic excess); and, of course, the celebration of the unyielding, “hard-core” procedures of academic music apparent in virtually all the quotations above.

35. Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), vol. 1, *Women, Floods, Bodies, History*, trans. Stephen Conway.

36. This obsession is manifest in almost every document Ives wrote. For instance: “Well, I’ll say two things here: 1) That nice professor of music is a musical lily-pad [one of Ives’s several derogatory terms for insufficiently masculine men]. He never took a chance at himself, or took one coming or going. 2) His opinion is based on something he’d probably never heard, seen, or experienced. He knows little of how these things sounded when they came ‘blam’ off a real man’s chest. It was the *way* this music was sung that made them big or little—and I had the chance of hearing them big. . . a man’s experience of men!” (*Charles Ives’ Memos*, ed. John Kirkpatrick [New York: W.W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1972], 131). For a psychoanalytic discussion of this and other aspects of Ives’s character, see Maynard Solomon, “Charles Ives: Some Questions of Veracity,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 40 (Fall 1987): 466-69. Solomon writes: “he [Ives] is both drawn to music and repelled by it. ‘As a boy [I was] partially ashamed of music,’ he recalled—‘an entirely wrong attitude but it was strong—most boys in American country towns, I think felt the same. . . . And there may be something in it. Hasn’t music always been too much an emasculated art?’ To ward off such feelings, Ives would eradicate the traces of the ‘soft-bodied’ and the ‘decadent’ in his own work, perhaps employing the techniques of modernism to conceal the atmospheric, lyrical, yielding strata which often underlie his first ideas” (467).

37. “The aim of jazz is the mechanical reproduction of a regressive moment, a castration symbolism. ‘Give up your masculinity, let yourself be castrated,’ the eunuchlike sound of the jazz band both mocks and proclaims, ‘and you will be rewarded, accepted into a fraternity which shares the mystery of impotence with you, a mystery revealed at the moment of the initiation rite’” (Adorno, “Perennial Fashion-Jazz,” *Prisms*, 129). Robert Walser has written extensively about Adorno’s castration tropes in his writings on jazz in “Retooling with Adorno: Bach’s Ontology and the Critique of Jazz” (unpublished paper, 1988).

It is symptomatic of the modernist attitude that the most widely used undergraduate textbook on twentieth-century music, Joseph Machlis's *Introduction to Contemporary Music*, is heavily illustrated with famous modernist paintings of female nudes (giving the book a deceptively interdisciplinary and "liberal" appearance) with captions that exclusively address formal considerations. The reader is offered these images for delectation, yet at the same time is bullied into regarding them not as the bodies of women, but rather as innovative ways of construing line, color, and form.³⁸

Much of the avant-garde musical repertory similarly both flaunts and conceals its misogynist content. On the one hand, modern music claims autonomy—demands that one focus on the combinatoriality that gave rise to the technical choices in the compositional process. But, on the other hand, the violations of musical continuity and of traditional bourgeois expectations that characterize modern music are coupled (far more often than can be purely coincidental) with texts that feature the slashing of women. In other words, the most prestigious games in town (both the battle for artistic license—which regards the violation of social taboos as evidence of the artist's liberation—and also the battle for stylistic innovation) tend to be played out over female bodies. In piece after piece, some of the most extraordinarily vicious subject matter is trotted out unproblematically in the interest of artistic freedom and progressive experimentation with sound: see, for instance, Hindemith's *Murderer*, *Hope of Women*, Berg's *Lulu*, or Morton Subotnick's "The Last Dream of the Beast" from *The Double Life of Amphibians* (in which a beast dies during his "final love moment" with a blind, armless woman). The masculine prestige of modernism both protects and encourages such content.

To be sure, one wants to avoid reducing the accomplishments and complexity of modernist culture to simple expressions of misogyny. There are ways of interpreting the literary and musical content of

38. For instance, the caption for a reproduction of Modigliani's *Nude, 1917* (painting of a sleeping woman in full frontal nudity) appears as follows: "The economy and purity of style which characterizes Webern's music may also be found in the elegant simplicity of Modigliani's work. A supreme draftsman, his elongated figures are linear yet sculptural in the impression of roundness and volume which they convey" (Joseph Machlis, *Introduction to Contemporary Music*, 2nd ed. [New York: W.W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1979], 272). See also the captions for Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, 84, and Gauguin's *The Spirit of the Dead Watching*, 17.

many modernist pieces that would argue for the artists's sensitivity with respect to the female victims represented. To take what may be an especially sympathetic instance, Babbitt's *Philomel* (its Ovid-inspired text by poet John Hollander was commissioned by the composer) can be read quite straightforwardly as an *anti-rape* statement, in which the victim is transformed into the nightingale to sing about both her suffering and her transcendence.³⁹ The violent distortions and ruptures of the singer's voice in the piece bear witness to Philomel's rape and to the fact that her tongue has been ripped out. The shattered fragmentation of her human voice (which is reassembled serially into "a million Philomels"), her change from material being into music ("I am becoming my own song," "As if a new self/Could be founded on sound"), and her forging of triumph from violence ("Suffering is redeemed in song") all serve to acknowledge the horror of the crime and yet the possibility of survival. They also resonate strongly with many of the modernist problematics (the anxiety over decentered identity; the reconstitution of subjectivity through complex recombinant procedures; the retreat from the material world into pure, autonomous sound) discussed throughout this paper. Anyone who has seen Bethany Beardslee perform this piece live—who has watched her as her own shredded, electronically transformed voice is thrown back at her from loud speakers—can attest to the great theatrical and emotional power of *Philomel*.

Yet Babbitt's writings discourage one from attempting to unpack his composition along these lines. Indeed, he warns us not to get hung up trying to map the events of pieces onto the "mundane banalities" of real life, for it is in this objective, unsentimental attitude that prestige resides. But if content is really not at issue, why such horrendous subject matter? Many of my female students have trouble listening passively to *Philomel* as yet another instance of serial and electronic manipulation: they have difficulty achieving the kind of objective intellectual attitude that would permit them to focus on considerations of sterile compositional technique. For to most women, rape and mutilation are not mundane banalities that can conveniently be bracketed for the sake of art: especially an art that attaches prestige to the celebration of such violations.

39. Babbitt, *Philomel* (1964), recorded by Bethany Beardslee on AR, in collaboration with Deutsche Grammophon.

IV

I am not arguing that composers should cease to be housed in the university. But I am no longer willing to be party to the transmission of the “prestige” ideology—especially when that means abdicating responsibility for problematic content or silencing the kind of music criticism that aims to understand music in its social context. I am especially concerned that we cease blocking the teaching of popular and postmodern music, for these are the musics (for better or for worse) most influential in shaping lives, subjectivities, values, and behaviors at the present moment. The avant-garde must be studied as well, to be sure, though not exclusively in accordance with the autonomous terms it has tried to enforce. All music—even that of the most austere avant-garde composer—is inevitably tied to the social conditions within which it is produced, transmitted, preserved, or forgotten. Among the conditions that need to be explored by the historian striving to make sense of the mid-century avant-garde are the formation of the university-as-discursive-community and also the economy of prestige upon which this music has depended for survival.

As we have seen, “survival” is a key word that appears over and over again in these documents—and even in compositions such as *Philomel*. Recent titles of essays concerning new music continue to announce this doomsday orientation: see, for instance, Rochberg’s *The Aesthetics of Survival* or John Struble’s article in a recent *Minnesota Composers Forum Newsletter*, “Survival Strategies for the End of the Millenium,” a critique that resonates with Sandow’s and my own.⁴⁰ As Babbitt (once again) puts it:

But I am not prepared to admit that anything less than, anything other than, sheer *survival* is at stake, and that such *survival* seems unlikely when the conditions necessary for that *survival* are so seriously threatened. These conditions are the corporal *survival* of the composer in his [sic] role as a composer, then the *survival* of his [sic] creations in some kind of a communicable, permanent, and readable form, and finally, perhaps above all, the *survival* of the university in a role which universities seem less and less able or willing to assume [my emphasis].⁴¹

40. Rochberg, *Aesthetics of Survival*, and John Warthen Struble, “Survival Strategies for the End of the Millenium,” *Minnesota Composers Forum Newsletter* (April 1988): 5-7.

41. Babbitt, “The Unlikely Survival,” 163.

Threatened with extinction, the serious composers who have confined their interests to their own careers and to the perpetuation of a music they themselves refuse to justify continue to hurl invectives at the “rubbish” of popular culture.

But the avant-garde holds no monopoly on survival rhetoric. In that popular rubbish, one can also find survival as a central theme—though not the survival of the avant-garde for the avant-garde’s sake. As I was writing this paper, I found that whenever I typed the word “survival,” I began humming a tune that was very popular in 1987: “System of Survival” by Earth, Wind and Fire.⁴² Moreover, this strange, oblique intrusion from the dreaded popular realm was far from annoying: the fortuitous presence of this song in my own cultural memory had the effect of undercutting the gravity of all those doomsday arguments, since each appearance of the “S-word” triggered not the intended gloom but rather the infectious rhythms of Earth, Wind and Fire. Finally, it proved impossible to remain too morose over predictions that “music will cease to evolve . . . will cease to live” in the face of such an irrepressible counterexample. Thus, while the connection between Babbitt’s appeals and this *particular* popular song is admittedly rather tenuous, I wish to close by examining “System of Survival” and the ways in which it presents quite a different *raison-d’être* for music—a different economy of prestige—than that articulated by the avant-garde.

To begin, let us address forthrightly the issue of money: yes, the recording is commercial. I bought it at a store, as did some hundred-thousands of others. Yes, it aimed to be, and succeeded in being, a popular hit: for those traditionally excluded from the marketplace, the achievement of a commercial hit accrues extraordinary prestige (though valuing commercial success is not the same, as Boulez suggests, as producing music solely for profit—only someone in very comfortable conditions could thus disparage economic gain). Without question, the song is multiply-mediated through musical discursive practices, electronic technology, marketing decisions, and the recording industry’s distribution patterns: no more than any other piece of music is it the pure representation of authentic experience. However, its message—namely, that music can provide sustenance to those who somehow

42. Skylark, “System of Survival,” on Earth, Wind and Fire: *Touch the World*, produced by Maurice White for Kalimba Productions (CBS, Inc., 1987).

continue living in the face of institutional contempt and neglect, that the joyful engagement of one's body in dance can be the oppositional moment in lives almost overwhelmed by poverty and racism, that the survival of a people and its values can occur through the medium of music—is extremely eloquent up against the “*musique, c'est moi*” harangues of our last descendents of musical absolutism.

To be sure, its many levels of complex mediation are rendered as transparent as possible to facilitate communication—if one is familiar with the discursive norms of fusion, one can respond strongly to it on first hearing without a special seminar in advanced analytical methods. But this is not to say that “System of Survival” is simplistic or conventional in its construction, for musical excellence and imagination are demanded as much within this economy of prestige as within the modernist academy.

“System” begins with a montage of snippets from recent political news broadcasts, which provides the political backdrop up against which the song articulates its exuberant opposition. The song itself is marked by the intricate communality of performer participation characteristic of Afro-based music, a communality that stands in stark contrast to the alienated composerly control of Schoenberg or Babbitt. The virtuosity of the singers—especially the highly controlled, apparently effortless falsetto of Phillip Bailey—might qualify as “extended vocal technique” if presented in the context of experimental music. Survival itself is enacted musically in this song through the pungent dissonances that refuse to resolve, the continual resistance to harmonic closure (which would spell rhythmic death), and the effusive sax solo which dramatizes the noise of defiance. Moreover, the bassline enters only after a considerable length of time—the group sings of survival, even in the absence of the secure harmonic foundation that ordinarily grounds such music, yet the rhythm track is constantly present to inform the dance and to guarantee continuity.

As is the case with most Afro-American music, the rhythm itself constitutes the most compelling yet most complex component of the song. I would argue that the skill required to achieve and maintain a groove with the degree of vitality characteristic of “System of Survival” is far greater than that which goes into the production of the self-denying, “difficult” rhythms derived by externally generated means. One need only observe professional classical performers attempting to capture

anything approaching “swing” (forget about funk!) to appreciate how *truly* difficult this apparently immediate music is.

Of course, “System of Survival” also requires tremendous technological sophistication for its execution. A recent volume of *Roland Users Group* (a trade magazine for musicians who use electronic gear in music production) presents a daunting “difficult music” description of the electronic devices and computer hook-ups necessary for duplicating Earth, Wind and Fire’s studio compositions in live performance. The following is actually one of the simpler passages in the article, but it is included here as an example because it pertains to the song under discussion:

For the song “System of Survival,” McKnight [the keyboard technician and programmer] had to take the opening dialogue (“The biggest unanswered question is, Where is the money?”), a cash register sound, the vocoder encoded “System of Survival” and the words “Everybody Get Up” and sample them into the S-550 so that Phillip Bailey could play the various parts from different pads on his Roland Octapad (PAD-8). For their older material, McKnight had to recreate the analog sounds that were in vogue when the original albums came out. “The JX-10 is perfect for those types of analog sounds,” Mike says. “One of the things I do is take the ROM presets from the JX-10, copy them to one of the blank slots and just go nuts.”⁴³

The exhaustive discussions of the mechanical details of execution in this article strongly resemble many program notes for “serious music.” For anyone who continues to demand complex, jargon-laden analyses for the appreciation of music, such an article might serve to confer [modernist] prestige on the group: if you want difficulty, you’ve got it. At the very least, one can no longer pretend that their music is “natural” or “primitive,” given their sophisticated control of state-of-the-art electronics, which shames much of the homemade sounding electronic music produced through university laboratories. However, no one in Earth, Wind and Fire or in popular music criticism would mistake such technical descriptions for the content of the pieces. The electronic nuts-and-bolts dimension of the music is highlighted in this

43. Tony Thomas, “The Sound of Earth Wind & Fire,” *Roland Users Group* 6, no. 2 (1988): 49.

trade journal partly for the sake of other professionals (who indeed are interested in how certain effects were achieved) and partly for the sake of advertising Roland equipment. But this mechanical display is not the intended reception of the song—this is not what it means, and this is not the principal way it strives to acquire prestige.

The kind of intelligence that shines through this song is of quite a different order: it is an intelligence that accepts the experiences of the body—dance, sexuality, feelings of depression and elation—as integral parts of human knowledge that accrue value precisely as they are shared and confirmed publicly. “System of Survival” is, in other words, a song that gives no credence whatsoever to the mind/body split or to the defensive autonomy that infects so much of Western music, especially that of the avant-garde which fetishizes intellectual work for its own sake. At the same time, it is an extremely *smart* piece: musically, socially, politically. It draws upon and celebrates forms of sedimented cultural memory that have miraculously survived a history of extraordinary oppression and that threaten to persist indefinitely—even if not acknowledged within the academy.⁴⁴

Adorno and others (including the composers cited above) have regarded modernism and mass culture as inseparable opponents in the same cultural world and have consequently bestowed prestige upon the avant-garde as a defense against the degradation of mass culture. But at this moment in the history of the dichotomy, the terms of the debate have shifted so much as to make earlier definitions and moral positions no longer credible. This is in part owing to the avant-garde’s deliberate self-reification from the inside—most explicitly displayed by the “who cares if you listen” attitude. But it is probably the case that the avant-garde was always fighting a losing battle. If one reflects on the demographic shifts of this century, the emergence of energetic, previously disenfranchised voices to displace a moribund, elite status quo is not at all surprising. Nor, I think, is it cause for lamentation. Debates over culture now tend to concentrate on the various models articulated and distributed through the popular media. Some of these models are worthy of celebration, others seem highly problematic with

44. The concept of sedimented cultural memory in popular music is being most eloquently developed by George Lipsitz. See, for instance, his “Cruising around the Historical Bloc—Postmodernism and Popular Music in East Los Angeles,” *Cultural Critique* 5 (Winter 1986-1987): 157-78.

respect to images of violence and misogyny—though none more so than much of what the avant-garde has consistently dished up. In any case, the avant-garde is scarcely even a factor in cultural discussions now, except in a few sealed rooms in the academy.

This is not to suggest that there are no longer standards or that anything goes. Rather, there are now many alternate sites of prestige-formation—all with their own stringent criteria—that correspond to communities hitherto excluded from the musical elite’s crumbling economy of prestige.⁴⁵ In describing “System of Survival” above, I discussed some of the qualities that have made Earth, Wind and Fire an extremely influential group during the last fifteen years. The fact that this song reaches a wide audience, that it speaks in a comprehensible language of exuberant hope in the face of hardship is regarded not as evidence of selling out, but as a mark of success in an economy of prestige that rewards communication and political effectiveness. Earth, Wind and Fire cares if you listen.

Everybody get up
Do your dance
Stay alive. . . .

—Earth, Wind & Fire, “System of Survival”

45. For an excellent discussion of “popular culture” as a site of class struggle, see Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘The Popular,’” *People’s History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 227-39.