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Classical Music: a Norm of “Common” Culture Embedded in Cultural Consumption and Cultural Diversity

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The Power and Value of Classical Music

The power of music has been widely recognised and this is reflected in the field of social theory from Plato to Adorno, who portrays music as an influence on character, social structure and action (DeNora, 2000). For Adorno, »music was linked to cognitive habits, modes of consciousness and historical development« (Adorno, 1976: 53). Music, Adorno believed, had the capacity to foster critical consciousness. By preserving dissonance instead of offering musical resolution and progression, music had the power to challenge cognitive, perceptual and emotional habits, habits as a matter of reflex, and the relation of power and administration in ways that made those relations seem natural and real (DeNora, 2000).

Music is also often used by the ruling elite to perpetuate certain ideologies aimed at political socialisation. Music is also a form of cultural resistance. In the postmodern period, music has occupied a special position in capitalist society because the creation of musical commodities is a site

Abstract – Résumé

Classical music as a special form of culture has been widely defined within an ideological and social sphere in people's everyday life. Classical music can be defended in terms of the attempt to build a 'culture in common'. The word 'common' means something shared, but it also has the further meaning of something low, vulgar and unrefined. This paper offers a theoretical analysis of classical music as a norm of »common« culture and debate on whether classical music has always been treated as a kind of cultural form belonging to a certain social group that has the relevant educational background, and that also has access to the classical music field, by exploring cultural consumption and cultural diversity in the context of classical music.

Keywords: Classical music • cultural consumption • cultural diversity

of struggle (Bloomfield, 199: 80). A review of the existing literature on popular culture and popular music makes it clear that musical political economy is often divided into specific categories, namely, »the role of the record companies, independent labels, marketing and publishing (Cvetkovski, 2004; Wale, 1972; Stratton, 1983); the making and cultivation of popular stars (Frith, 1996; Longhurst, 1995); technological inroads into music recording and production techniques (Negus, 1993; Frith 1992); counter-culture, political subversion and the general politics of musicians (punk movements, rock concert benefits and political defiance) (Mabey, 1969; Frith, 1986; Jones, 2000); and independent musical identities in emerging scenes such as techno dance music and raves (the drug culture and dance parties)« (Cvetkovski, 2004). What is generally missing from the debate is a thorough analysis of the impact technological advancement has had on the popular commodification process, essentially, the political economy of the industry as a whole (Cvetkovski, 2004).

Cvetkovski (2004) also states, »according to Frith that popular music is the term used to explain music commodification as a process that is driven by the need to maximise profit and reward commercial enterprise and the production process is precise and formulaic; however, the possibility of commercially exploiting music products successfully is extremely low because 'hit making' is primarily based on cultural gambles«.

Hesmondhalgh (2005) points out that the music business appears to be an ordinary consumer industry, yet it is a strange industry on the borderline between the most sophisticated marketing and the most unpredictable of cottage industries. However, by identifying, controlling and organising the key players in the industry, the major attempt to organise music as a product is becoming more effective in a bid to minimise unpredictability.

Firstly, in comparison with popular music, in economic terms, classical music is not perceived in such a variety of ways. The dominant meaning of classical music as an art form does not account for the fact that classical music is an economic product (Johnson, 2002). Although the commodification of music always results from the market system of democratic capitalism, sound technology and the recording industry have made classical music widely available to the average listener. However, why does classical music still appear ill equipped to defend its values in debates on public funding and policy support? In many cases, the classical traditions have grown complacent and their supporters often make the argument that certain kinds of music are so important they should be supported at the public expense, even though, in general, they are enjoyed by a small and often wealthy minority.

Secondly, Johnson argues (2002), in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, classical music was accessible only to the elite, and even today, through a lack of support for music in public education, an understanding of classical music is

accessible only to those who have the economic means and intellectual interest to procure music lessons. In other words, classical music accounts only for a special social group. That is why classical music has such a strong social value.

However, classical music can be defended in terms of the attempt to build a 'culture in common'. The word 'common' means something shared, but it also has the further meaning of something low, vulgar and unrefined. The word 'culture' is always assumed to refer to a shared set of meanings, beliefs and values between people, which somewhere coheres into an integrated whole (Featherstone, 2002). For Raymond Williams (1967), a culture has a common meaning, being the product of a whole people and society, and offers an individual meaning, the product of people's social experience (Williams, 1967). Williams (1967) illustrates that the danger in imagining a situation in which all people mean the same thing and value the same thing is to have an equal possession of cultural property.

Nonetheless, it must be remembered that nobody will test cultural property in the same way in all societies and people will have different perceptions of »the culture«, just as each individual will have his or her own desires, no matter how complete the society might be. Therefore, Williams suggests that the only solution for this is to keep clear all the channels and institutions of communication. In this sense, Williams (1958) suggests that a culture will be better described by the phrase »a culture in common«. Thus, my main argument is that classical music as one of the unique cultural forms can be defended in terms of the attempt to build a culture in common (as discussed earlier). However, Featherstone (2002) argues that a common culture existed in the past, but now is in the process of being destroyed by a mass consumer culture, so a way must be found to revitalise the cultural tradition. Alternatively, common culture can be created in terms of the education project of cultural elite who will ultimately achieve the elimination of the cultural residues.

Classical Music: a Culture in Common?

Classical music has been always treated as a kind of cultural form belonging only to the social group that has the relevant educational background, and that has access to the classical music field. Williams (1989) explains,

It would also mean changing the educational system from its dominant patterns of sorting people from so early an age into »educated« people and others, or in other words, transmitters and receivers, to a view of the processes of determining meaning and values as involving contribution and reception by everyone.« (Williams, 1989:36)

To convert classical music into a 'culture in common' would not be simply to make it accessible to everyone. Instead, such a process would involve the educa-

tion system giving all citizens the opportunity to learn an instrument, listen to different types of music and, of course, visit a concert hall. However, the form in which people would become more involved in classical music would change. Not only would the lines of education be transformed, but the institution and meaning of classical music would become an 'ordinary' aspect of culture.

Secondly, classical music can be defended in terms of seeking to promote cultural diversity. Why do cultural goods exist as different styles? In other words, why is culture different? Why is culture related to other cultures? Couldry (2000) in his rethinking of culture coherence based on the theory of cultural complexity, argues that contemporary complex societies systematically build a non-sharing culture into their cultures. So, working with cultural complexity, in other words, promoting cultural diversity, has become a new challenge not only for the stakeholder and policy-makers, but for the educators and intellectuals as well.

It is important to remember that cultural goods convey different ideologies and a variety of symbolic lifestyles in our everyday life, and are an intrinsic part of the cultural identity of the diverse community that produces them. Subsidies for museums, ballet, classical music and other cultural products and services are widespread and accepted in all free market economies. However, were we simply to leave cultural products to the mercy of the market, then any idea of cultural diversity would soon be forgotten? Kenny and Stevenson (1998) argue that too much academic criticism has been focused on rejecting the 'instrumentality' lurking behind cultural policy, or celebrating the pleasure of consumer practice. Bourdieu's ideology of culture is often treated as a sociology of cultural consumption, for instance, cultural form-museums that, being cheap or cost-free in economic terms, are in theory equally open to all groups and classes. Yet, Bourdieu (1986) argues, the classical classification system is rooted in the class system. Bourdieu offers us a 'three-zone' model of cultural tastes: 'legitimate' taste, 'middle-brow' taste and 'popular' taste. Those tastes correspond to educational level and social class; in short, it is the beginning of a model of class life-styles (Jenkins, 1992). However, culture should be free for all individuals, no matter what kind of educational and social class background they have. Therefore, it is important to consider how voices from a minority might be organised to make sure they are heard and supported in cultural terms. How can such groups be empowered so that they are not subject to the exclusions that state policy and the market logically produce (Kenny and Stevenson, 1998)? The answer is that cultural goods need public and political support and the relevant stakeholders have to ensure that cultural liberty and cultural diversity will meet people's choices. Multicultural policies have often been seen as a way of protecting cultural liberty and expanding people's choices in the ways they live and identify themselves, and not penalizing them for these choices.

Therefore, many theorists argue that cultural diversity could promote an ideology of cultural liberty and enrich people's lives; it is an outcome of the freedoms

people have and the choices they make. It also implies an opportunity to assess different options in making these choices. Thus, classical music, a unique cultural form, should be used as a social tool to promote cultural diversity and to help maintain cultural complexity. Further, an effective music policy should also be devised to help expand people's cultural choice. In other words, classical music should be presented to people whose normal experience is outside classical music, no matter what their educational background, income, occupation and social status.

Thirdly, classical music is a skilled form of practice. Musical talent has often been related to the term »respect« sociologically. So, what does respect mean? In sociological terms, there are many synonyms indicating different aspects of »respect«. These include »status«, »prestige«, »recognition« and »honour«. For instance, for Sennett (2003), the social vocabulary of respect might be made to come to life by returning to music. He also claims that welfare clients are urged to »earn« self-respect, which often means becoming materially self-sufficient, but, as Sennett asserts, this kind of self-respect cannot be »earned« in the same way people earn money; this is particularly relevant for individuals who have grown up in the welfare system, but have the opportunity to escape from it by virtue of their musical talent.

Quite often, this self-respect could be gained through musical talent, stage experience, and appreciation from others. For instance, classical music training requires learners to concentrate on practising for a significant amount of time, which improves their self-esteem. The concert-performing experience may help the music practitioners gain social status or help them increase their levels of self-respect.

Further, Sennett (2003) argues that people born with unequal abilities ought not to be treated with contempt. Dignity and respect should belong not only to those who have the chance to inherit it or who are born into an elite; dignity should also belong to those who work hard to achieve it. Therefore, the questions in relation to these issues would be how to use essential music policy to help construct a good relationship between respect and inequality, and whether classical musical talent could be used as a tool to assist those who live at the bottom of the social order and those who might achieve self-respect but whose possession of it is fragile.

Yet, if we take classical music as an example, the social value of practising classical musical instrument can be seen from Sennett's above thoughts that craftsmanship (Sennett, 2008) is engaging with the process of developing craft skills, through focusing on practising such skill, than the craftsmen can become knowledgeable public persons and good citizens. This is generally done by promoting a sense of esteem and of a wider sense of the skilled competencies involved in the production of a cultural form with a long historical tradition. The value of classical music then comes not only out what it offers to the individual but also to the wider community in terms of opportunities for aesthetic experience, complex affective meanings, the sense of having mastered a difficult prac-

tice and of working closely with others. It is my argument and judgement that classical music is particularly well placed to be able to facilitate these features.

Classical Music and Class Distinction

Bourdieu (1986) states that cultural capital is distributed in such a way that social groups have different capacities to vest cultural value in symbolic goods. Therefore, culture is about the process of identification and differentiation. Thus, according to the above debate, our identity is made up by our consumption of goods, and our class difference is constructed through consumption. Similarly, Baudrillard (1998) argues that we become what we buy: if we take this line further, for instance, if our consumption of goods has been classified as 'high arts' or 'high culture', so our class will be different to that of those who prefer consuming 'low arts' products. The question here is what kind of social element determines our cultural choice. Whereas the ideology regards taste in legitimate culture as a gift of nature, scientific observation shows that cultural needs are the product of upbringing and education: surveys have established that all cultural practices (museum visits, concert-going, reading and so on), and preferences in literature, painting or music, are closely linked to educational levels (measured by qualifications or length of schooling) and secondarily to social origin. The relative formal education (the effectiveness and duration of which are dependent on social origin) varies according to the extent to which the different cultural practices are recognised and taught by the educational system. The problem here is the simplistic notion of »culture« involved. If cultures consisted merely of »attitudes«, then it would be a simple matter to change them, but clearly they do not. The public always tries to develop cultural styles and attitudes in terms of their material existence; culture is rooted in people's life experiences and developed from how they experience the world both as individuals and as part of a wider social and cultural system of beliefs.

There is no doubt that classical music has served as a tool of class distinction, but can this kind of ideology provide all the evidence for our cultural choice? Its claim to be different, which is derived entirely from this function, exemplifies a theory that never confronts musical works themselves. Similarly, Bourdieu's position is also based on a vision of humanity that art rejects; he argues that taste is based on an aversion to the »facile,« by which he means the immediate, the bodily, and the simple (Johnson, 2002). His logic is persuasive, for example, in his demonstration of how class distinctions are reinforced by the criteria for the selection and presentation of food that have nothing to do with its nutritional value. However, I would argue here, purely from an artistic point of view, that classical music provides a sense of transcending those origins to become an aspiration. Furthermore, classical music also helps us reflect on our own experi-

ence of exceeding the immediacy of the bodily experience; it is more complex than an argument just about the relationship between class divination and culture choice.

Consumption of Classical Music

How does the producers' view of consumption connect to the theories of mass culture analysts? Sociologically, the approach of consumption has always been associated with the patterns of inequality and social differentiation with the consumer reproducing their class position (Bourdieu, 1984). Therefore, if we want to take this view further, we have to break with the traditional division between production and consumption and focus on the practice.

The message of the cultural industry can be seen, as a way of making individuals achieve their happiness through commodity consumption. However, cultural products have followed the rules of market mechanism; the demand resulting not only from individuals but also from mass consumers' needs for a diverse cultural market is becoming increasingly serious. The consumption of culture for consumers has nothing to do with public subsidy; it is tied to the performance of market-oriented cultural industries and mass-popular consumption (Garnham, 1990). For instance, during 1980s, the combination of cultural populism and free market economics appeared in British society, when successive Thatcher governments transformed UK from a European social democracy to a free-market economy (Hoggart, 1995).

Featherstone (1991) argues that a post-modern culture is about the flattening of hierarchies, such as the collapse of the distinction between high arts and mass/popular culture; he also states that the blurring of boundaries between classical music and popular music is not only to do with formal interactions, but is also related to the mode of consumption. However, it seems there is a lack of analysis of any critical examination of the relationship between classical music and post-modern consumption. As Finnegan (1989) argues, classical music activities have not been analysed properly through the terminology of 'consumption' either in the narrow sense of consuming or its extra meaning, like the strategic support by the state, and so on. Furthermore, she also states there is another use of the model of consumption, namely, as appreciation and resistance, such as when the consumer is pictured as the liberated single individual choosing from among the goods on offer whereby the musicians and their associates are essentially engaged in a kind of struggle to somehow 'resist' or 'appropriate' something generated by larger forces and institutions, which are in a sense external to them. There is indeed a need to explore those issues, to analyse classical music properly through the terminology of consumption, strategic support by the state, the local political structure, market forces, and so on.

Classical Music: an Ideology of Cultural Diversity

What is meant by an ideology of cultural diversity? Dhand (1991) states cultural diversity could mean a commitment to the maintenance of basic human rights and fundamental freedoms, providing a natural reinforcement of this ideology. It means to accept, tolerate, respect and appreciate diversity and it expresses a social goal. It also means the freedom of all individuals as well as groups to retain and develop their cultures.

Yet, culture often expresses people's creativity and identity. In all societies, the term 'diversity' can be founded in the local and regional experiences that profoundly enrich this term and ensure its renewal. According to the Coalition's (professional associations of the cultural milieu) mission statement, these kinds of characteristics and experiences find their expression through individuals' creativity and the dynamism of enterprises that make possible its production and dissemination both domestically and abroad (Coalitions Worldwide, 2003).

However, as the Coalition states, »the vitality of those cultural activities is intimately linked to a country's resources; the accelerated globalization of trade, given that it involves countries and enterprises of such vastly differing resources, can hinder the dissemination of culture and severely limit access to cultural diversity by all« (Coalitions Worldwide, 2003). The Coalition claims that cultural diversity is a fundamental human right and that countries should ensure its preservation and promotion. However, the questions that emerge here are why cultural goods exist as different styles and how one form of culture relates to other forms of culture. The importance of cultural diversity to the vitality of the arts and culture cannot be overstated. Cultural diversity, that is, the full engagement with the range of different cultures, communities and complex identities that make up a contemporary cosmopolitan image is imperative for everyone, for social, moral and business reasons.

Devlin and Ackill (2005: 9) again point out, »the repertoire and sounds of classical music activities have been central to the cultural tradition of Western Europe for more than three centuries«. And »despite this broadening of horizons, the world of the Western classical orchestra can present imposing barriers to those not directly involved, including many promoters in multi-art form venues« (Devlin and Ackill, 2005). The language used to describe a performance or programme, the complexities of the musical score, the range of instruments, and the formal concert experience itself can be daunting at best. Nevertheless, in the political sphere, classical music has been simply forgotten as a tool that could be used, as other forms of culture or the arts, to achieve the goal of youth education, social exclusion, urban and economic regeneration and so on. There are some broader cultural reasons for this; for instance, Devlin and Ackill (2005) argue, the traditional audience for classical music concerts tends to comprise mainly older, white people, and those audiences might not appear to have any kind of social problems.

This is a matter of concern to many in the classical music world who note that, whilst younger people do attend certain sorts of orchestral event, it is hard to attract young people to the majority of classical music concerts.

The issue can be viewed in terms of whether the young generation in the future will inherit the concert-going habits from their parents' generation, instead of restricting themselves to the mainstream of pop and rock music and the diversification of public taste. Despite these concerns, outreach education works, together with a range of relevant innovative work by classical music organisations or professional orchestras, are often supported by local authorities, and have shown that behind the potential barriers lies music that everyone can experience, enjoy, and find relevant to contemporary life. According to Devlin and Ackill (2005: 9), »such projects can also feed directly into strategies for engaging newcomers in the arts, for regeneration, for skills development, and for bringing out creativity in young people«.

To conclude, my argument has been formed as that a neoliberal culture which largely preserves classical music for elites thereby promotes the idea of classical music as a form of cultural distinction. The democratisation of classical music can only be advanced through educational strategies that seek to teach young people to be musicians as well as critical listeners. At present classical music then serves as a means of solidifying elite groups when it should be made 'ordinary' and accessible to everyone.

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Sažetak

Klasična glazba: norma 'opće' kulture ugrađena u kulturnu potrošnju i kulturnu raznolikost

Klasična glazba kao poseban oblik kulture široko je određen unutar ideologijske i društvene sfere u svakodnevnom životu ljudi. Klasičnu se glazbu može definirati u okvirima pokušaja izgradnje 'opće kulture'. Riječ 'opće' označuje nešto što je zajedničko, ali ima i daljnje značenje nečega što je nisko, prosto i neprofinjeno. U ovom se članku nudi teorijska analiza klasične glazbe kao norme 'opće' kulture i rasprava o tome da li se klasičnu glazbu oduvijek smatralo nekom vrsti kulturne forme što je pripadala određenoj društvenoj skupini s relevantnom obrazovnom pozadinom koja je je imala pristup području klasične glazbe. Istražuje se i kulturna potrošnja i kulturna raznolikost u kontekstu klasične glazbe.