

A reply to a letter "On form and content in music"

23 July 1998

To the WSWS Editor,

I found the letter by AF on the role of form and content in music quite interesting. I think the issue of redefining aesthetics is a critical component of an overall project of reclaiming what is human from the fetishized form that art and art criticism take on in modern capitalist society. In its own terms, however, art, including music, cannot overcome the alienated social relationships that are the hallmarks of this society. This does not mean of course that art is incapable of articulating humanity's universal aspirations and feelings. As the original review eloquently put it, the allure of music 'lies in its ability to concretize the most fundamental human emotions.'

The point I wish to add is that the apparent domination of form in music at the expense of content is itself an expression of the content that is contained in the form. That content is indeed the social relations of production that underlie all forms of human activity. The detailed investigation of how the content is expressed in the form is the work of the musical historian and critic. However, if we forget this relationship, then we run the danger of seeing reality as an aggregate of fragmented pieces, each of which then becomes the object of study of its own discipline. We thereby will replicate the bourgeois idea of 'social sciences' in which there are separate disciplines for the study of politics, economics, aesthetics, ethics, philosophy, etc. It is as if man or woman is not simply man or woman, but political man, artistic woman, etc. This manner of viewing society reproduces intellectually the division of labor that is characteristic of the capitalist mode of production.

Forgotten is that the social organism is a unified and contradictory nature whose evolution is expressed through manifold forms, mirroring the manifold needs and capacities of mankind. The real challenge is to reintegrate the political man/woman with the artistic man/woman in theory and in practice.

In light of these considerations, I certainly wish to

declare my solidarity with the project of creating 'a new kind of music analysis, theory and criticism which articulates the essentially humanizing nature of musical experience.' The evolution of such a discussion would quickly reveal that what begins as a discussion on musical aesthetics will soon range into all the fundamental issues of politics and philosophy.

As a contribution to this discussion, I think it is necessary to become more precise in the discussion of form and content. To talk of 'the tremendous emphasis of form over content' in the realm of classical music, such that a piece of music 'says absolutely nothing about anyone's biography, or physiognomy, or any ensemble of social relations which novels might narrate or paintings image' is misleading. From my previous comments it should be clear why I think this manner of expressing the relationship of form and content is a concession to the formalist school of artistic criticism.

An allusion was made in AF's letter to Hegel's view of the relationship of form and content. Let us examine what Hegel says on this matter.

'If we consider a book, for instance, it certainly makes no difference, as far as its content is concerned, whether it be handwritten or printed, whether it be bound in paper or in leather. But this does not in any way imply that, apart from the external and indifferent form, the content of the book itself is formless. Certainly, there are books enough which may without injustice be said to be formless even with respect to their content; but, as it bears upon content here, this formlessness is synonymous with deformity, which should be understood not as the absence of form altogether, but as the lack of the right form. This right form is so far from being indifferent with respect to content, however, that on the contrary, it is the content itself' (*Encyclopedia Logic*, Paragraph 133, Addition., Hackett Publishing Co., 1991).

What Hegel is saying is that the indifference of form to content and content to form is merely a first impression.

Further reflection shows that form must have a content and every content must take on a form. Further reflection still shows that the bare relationship of a form with a content is itself still inadequate. A content must have this form, i.e., not simply any form, but the form which is adequate for this content. He goes on to show, in the example of a work of art, that far from banishing content, form becomes content.

'A work of art that lacks the right form cannot rightly be called a work of art, just for that reason. It is not a true work of art. It is a bad excuse for an artist as such to say that the content of his works is certainly good (or even excellent) but that they lack the right form. The only genuine works of art are precisely the ones whose content and form show themselves to be completely identical. We can say of the *Iliad* that its content is the Trojan War or, more precisely, the wrath of Achilles; in saying this we have said everything, but also only very little, for what makes the *Iliad* into the *Iliad* is the poetic form into which that content is moulded. Similarly the content of *Romeo and Juliet* is the ruin of two lovers brought about by strife between their families; but by itself this is not yet Shakespeare's immortal tragedy' (Ibid, Paragraph 133, Addition).

In attempting to enunciate a truly human aesthetics, we must be careful to navigate between the Scylla and Charybdis of formalist criticism on the one hand and a reductive mechanical materialism on the other. Hegel set out to do just that in his *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*. Indeed in this work the great philosopher of idealism emphasizes the material content of Art: 'The universal and absolute need out of which art, on its formal side, arises has its source in the fact that man is a thinking consciousness.... The things of nature are only immediate and single, but man as mind [Spirit--A.S.] reduplicates himself, inasmuch as prima facie, he is like the things of nature, but in the second place just as really is for himself, perceives himself has ideas of himself, thinks himself, and only thus is active self-realizedness. This consciousness of himself man obtains in a twofold way: in the first place theoretically, in as far as he has inwardly to bring himself into his own consciousness, with all that moves in the human breast, all that stirs and works therein, and, generally, to observe and form an idea of himself, to fix before himself what thought ascertains to be his real being, and, in what is summoned out of his inner self as in what is received from without, to recognize only himself. Secondly, man is realized for himself by practical activity, inasmuch as he has the impulse, in the medium which is

directly given to him, and externally presented before him, to produce himself, and therein at the same time to recognize himself. This purpose he achieves by the modification of external things upon which he impresses the seal of his inner being, and then finds repeated in them his own characteristics' (Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, pp. 35-36, Penguin Books).

Compare the preceding selection with Marx:

'In creating a world of objects by his practical activity, in his work upon inorganic nature, man proves himself a conscious species being, i.e., as a being that treats the species as its own essential being, or that treats itself as a species being. Admittedly animals also produce. They build themselves nests, dwellings, like the bees, beavers, ants, etc. But an animal only produces what it immediately needs for itself or its young. It produces one-sidedly, whilst man produces universally. It produces only under the dominion of immediate physical need, whilst man produces even when he is free from physical need and only truly produces in freedom therefrom' (Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, p. 113, International Publishers).

As we can see, both Hegel and Marx insisted that man's modes of expression, of which art is one of the highest, are rooted in man's nature as a being who transforms the world around him. At the same time, the highest forms of self-expression transcend the immediate necessity imposed by nature and society. The manner and form of these modes of self-expression is the object of our discussion. It is a dialectic that is at work in musical creation.

I hope this contribution will generate further reflection on the nature of art and its relation to society.

Comradely yours,

Alex Steiner

See Also:

On form and content in music

[14 July 1998]

What bebop meant to jazz history

[22 May 1998]

The Aesthetic Component of Socialism - A lecture by David Walsh

[9 January 1998]



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