

Another comment on form and content in music

29 July 1998

To the WSWWS Editor,

I'd like to add some thoughts to the discussion that has emerged on form and content in music. While the discussion began with an article on the place of bebop in the history of jazz, in the latest letter (by Alex Steiner, July 23) any reference to bebop or music has all but disappeared. We seem to be drifting into a discussion of form and content as abstract philosophical concepts that seems far removed from the actual experience of art. I'm not sure how helpful this is. Steiner is certainly right to warn about the danger of adopting the kind of 'fragmented' approach to reality that is prevalent in the bourgeois social sciences, where every aspect of social life is treated as a completely independent entity. But just as problematic is a reductionism that erases any distinctions between such fields as politics, economics, aesthetics or philosophy. The Stalinists were notorious practitioners of the latter approach and it is the hallmark of many of the schools of 'academic Marxism.' And nowhere has this approach done more damage than in the study of art.

Genuine Marxists view art as a relatively autonomous field, a standpoint that encompasses both its form and its content, both its aesthetic and its social nature. This isn't an either/or proposition, and debates about whether content is more important than form or vice versa are really dead-ends: inevitably, the advocates on either side distort or ignore crucial aspects of artistic experience. That these issues should come up in relation to music isn't surprising since it is the most abstract of all the arts and therefore the one where the artificiality of separating form from content is most evident. AF, whose letter (July 14) Steiner was responding to, pushes the contrast between music and the other arts to the point where there is no continuum between them: music has no content in any conventional sense and it 'says absolutely nothing about anyone's biography, or physiognomy, or any ensemble of social relations.' Steiner finds this position problematic, which it is, and offers the view that the content of music is 'the social relations of production that underlie all forms of human activity.' Though this sounds materialist, it is such a broad and vague statement as to be virtually devoid of content itself: to say

that music has the same content as 'all forms of human activity' tells us as little about the actual nature of music as saying that music has no content whatsoever. Essentially, these positions reproduce the sterile counterposing of form and content.

A number of things need to be said. To begin with, it is misguided to separate music out of the continuum of the arts on the basis of its abstractness. Aside from the fact that some music does have content in the conventional sense of the term, that it can even be used to 'tell a story,' the more important point is that abstraction is not unique to music, but characteristic in varying degrees of other art forms, notably painting, sculpture and architecture. The conventional view is to contrast representational art with abstract art--the one 'mirrors' reality whereas the other is some 'pure' aesthetic activity. The truth is quite different: even 'photo-realist' art has abstract elements in it and even 'pure' abstraction is conditioned by experience. (For an insightful discussion of these issues, see the Marxist critic Meyer Schapiro's essay, 'Nature of Abstract Art'.)

The idea that all music, no matter how abstract, is conditioned by experience is crucial. This is just where AF goes wrong in stating that 'music has no semantic reference, no vocabulary, no tense, no perspective, no person.' If nothing else, there most certainly is a 'person' in music, because if there weren't, it wouldn't be music at all, but only noise. (In passing, it is worth pointing out that one of the chief features of post-modernism has been its attempts to deny or devalue the 'person' in art.) Schapiro's reflections on abstract art are worth citing here: 'The humanity of art lies in the artist and not simply in what he represents, although this object may be the congenial occasion for the fullest play of his art. It is the painter's constructive activity, his power of impressing a work with feeling and the qualities of thought that gives humanity to art; and this humanity may be realized with an unlimited range of themes or elements of form.' Abstract painting, such as the canvases of the abstract expressionist school, 'calls up more intensely than ever before the painter at work, his touch, his vitality and mood, the drama of decision in the ongoing process of art. Here the

subjective becomes tangible.' ('On the Humanity of Abstract Painting' in *Modern Art*, pp. 228-9). I think the 'subjective becomes tangible' is as valid a description of a bebop improvisation or a Bartok string quartet as it is of a painting by Rothko or Pollock. And perhaps one of the most moving expressions of this 'tangible subjectivity' of music was the spray-painting of the slogan 'Bird Lives' on the streets of New York when Charlie Parker died.

Thus, we can say that the 'content' of these art forms is the subjectivity--the humanity, the creativity--of the artist. Or, as the reviewer in the original article on bebop put it, music concretizes 'fundamental human emotions.' But we should be careful here not to understand this simplistically by looking for a one-to-one correspondence between, say, a saxophone riff and a sad mood or a violin strain and a heart-tug. Indeed, such correspondences, when they are intended on the part of the musician, are usually a sign of superficiality, of music that tries to manipulate the feelings of an audience rather than to engage and change them.

If we take a work like a Bach fugue, it has no such direct emotional appeal; indeed, it is about nothing else except the music. This doesn't mean that it has no content or that it has no subject. Rather, what it means is that the artist has invested his feelings in the process of artistic creation. In such works, as art historian Arnold Hauser has written: "The answers to the problems of life which have to be solved, the appeal, and the message to mankind are contained in the formal structure of the work. For the structure does not merely represent the solution of technical problems, of problems connected with the organization of the given material, but also conveys its mastery over opaque and misleading experiences, unarticulated and confused feelings. In an important work of art, existence is rid of its confusion and its provisional nature; its disconnected and dispersed fragments merge into a clearly structured, sensible pattern; if inner contradictions do not always modulate to satisfying harmonies, the contradictions and conflicts which fill the work are not suppressed and silenced but shown for what they are, and the crisis which underlies them comes to a head.' This is far more than a technical triumph: 'it bears witness to the power and the will to withstand the dangers of uprooting and disintegration which threaten life.' And so what a listener gets from such a work is the inspiration 'to measure up to its demands,' that is, that 'he take his life and himself seriously, that he come to an understanding with himself to order the circumstances of his life, to clean up all that is ambiguous and murky both in himself and in his environment,' just as the artist has done with his music. An aesthetic achievement is thereby also a moral achievement. As Hauser says: 'Every real work of art, *as a formal structure*, represents a refutation of *l'art pour l'art* theory.

The moral appeal and the humanistic message which art conveys do not consist of special recommendations and express prohibitions but of calls to adopt a serious, calm, and reasonable attitude to the world, to life, and to everything which living together with other people implies.' (*The Sociology of Art*, pp. 323-4, emphasis added). 'You must change your life' is the real content, the real message, of all genuine art.

Part of the confusion over this question of the form and content of music seems to me to stem from the fact that we are trying to understand an art form that is deeply bound up with the subjective experience of both artist and listener, that expresses 'fundamental human emotions,' but we are doing so without any concrete understanding of what emotions are or what subjectivity is. Thus, when AF calls for a new kind of musical analysis that can articulate 'the essentially humanizing nature of musical experience,' I certainly agree that this is a worthwhile project, but one of the essential things we would need to realize it is a materialist conception of subjectivity, i.e., a materialist psychology.

One further point. The history of bebop raises an extremely important issue which so far hasn't received any attention in this discussion--the gulf that separates 'high' or serious art from 'low' or popular art within bourgeois culture. A socialist culture is inconceivable without a perspective for overcoming this gulf and creating the conditions for the emergence of art forms that are both serious *and* popular. The lessons we try to draw from bebop, and indeed from the cultural experience of this entire century, should be guided by that consideration.

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See Also:

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

[22 July 1998]

On form and content in music

[14 July 1998]

A contribution to discussion on jazz history

[3 June 1998]



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