On the gulf between "high" and "low" in music

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To the *WSWS* Editor:

I'd like to take up, at least in a preliminary fashion, the issue raised by Frank Brenner in the last paragraph of his comment on form and content in music: the gulf between serious ('high') and popular ('low') art within bourgeois culture.

While Brenner's criticisms of Alex Steiner's letter are I think correct, there is also a basic agreement between them which should not be lost sight of. First, as Brenner states, 'It is misguided to separate music out of the continuum of the arts on the basis of its abstractness'; and second, it is false and misleading to simply counterpose form and content in music or in any other art form. To put it in philosophical terms, they are opposites which are united. Steiner is correct to refer to the 'apparent' domination of form in music at the expense of content, with an emphasis on apparent. All music, no matter how abstract or 'difficult,' has a content which is conditioned by the experience of the composer.

Brenner also insists that it is not sufficient to speak of 'general laws.' To put it another way, it is necessary to study, not only Marx and Hegel, but also, among others, Meyer Schapiro and Arnold Hauser, the two prominent art historians whom he quotes. Though by no means always drawing the same conclusions, these men were both deeply influenced by Marxism and sought to understand the history of painting in materialist fashion.

Brenner also points to the difficulty of defining content in music. What is 'serious,' or 'classical music'? It is generally agreed that classical is something of a misnomer, used for lack of any better term and not adequately defining an art form which has developed over many hundreds of years, passing through its various medieval, Renaissance, Baroque, Classical, Romantic and twentieth century periods. Classical is meant to suggest music that, to put it somewhat tritely, has stood the test of time. At the same time, this definition lends itself to an attitude which sees the 'classics' as an unchanging and embalmed art form, which is antithetical to musical creativity.

What makes music 'serious'? It clearly is bound up with the development of the formal side of composition. It is characterized by complex musical forms and their development, but also by the ability of the composer to express profound emotions and to communicate to an audience through these forms. The development of the form, in the hands of a gifted composer, not only does not detract from the content, but heightens its appreciation. About the greatest music we can say what Hegel said, as quoted by Steiner in his letter, about the *Iliad* or *Romeo and Juliet*: they are works of art 'whose content and form show themselves to be completely identical.' Beethoven's Ninth Symphony is not the theme of 'Ode to Joy' scratched out with one hand on the piano. It is a momentous musical and emotional experience which is inseparably bound up with all four movements of this work and their development, requiring the contributions of over 200 musicians. Similarly, a Haydn string quartet communicates its power through its synthesis of form and content, the ability of the composer to bring together four string players in a musical development which is both complex, elegant and moving all at the same time. Or the six Bartok quartets referred to by AF in his letter on form and content in music which opened this discussion. Here is music separated from Haydn by nearly 150 years, using the same form but infused with a very different content, a content which in turn changes the form, and which produces music no less moving than that of Haydn, although perhaps less 'elegant.'

Popular music also has a form, of course, but it is far less developed and complex, and it therefore leaves less room for the development of the content. To put it in simpler terms, and without denigrating the contributions of popular musical forms, serious music strives for a conscious unity of form and content, and seeks simultaneously to move both the heart and the head of the listener.

This brings us to the question of 'high' and 'low' once again. I have not had the time to research this issue, and I invite other readers to contribute, including suggested reading. There are certain things that should be fairly clear, however.

The gulf between serious and popular music has of course existed since the development of music as a specific art form. At the same time, this gulf has clearly grown in the twentieth century. It wouldn't be correct to say that the masses appreciated Mozart and Beethoven. The composers of the Baroque and classical periods worked for the church or for aristocratic patrons. This began to change in the days of the preeminent classical composers, Haydn and Mozart. The shift towards a middle class audience was bound up with the Enlightenment and the bourgeois revolution, the subsequent industrialization and urbanization of society beginning in the nineteenth century. Classical music began to develop a very wide appeal to the middle classes and, later, to educated sections of the working class. As a young journalist in Brooklyn Walt Whitman reviewed the productions of the latest Italian bel canto operas. The operas of Giuseppe Verdi had an immense appeal throughout his long life which spanned most of the last century, especially in his native Italy.

Even though the ability to listen to music was obviously hindered by the absence of modern technology, knowledge and appreciation of music was considered a necessary part of a broad education, especially from the latter half of the nineteenth century. This is one of the aspects which has changed in recent generations, as musical knowledge becomes the preserve of a smaller and smaller minority.

There is also the issue of the cross-fertilization of serious and popular music. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards various 'national' schools emerged as part of the growth of nationalism in Europe. Whatever the political uses to which these were put, there is

no doubt that serious composers were able to incorporate material from folk and popular music into their work. Bela Bartok was among those most dedicated to this work. He spent years gathering Hungarian folk songs and themes which he studied and assimilated, subsequently incorporating them in his work, not through formal copying but rather in their essential style.

There are many other examples of this interpenetration between different musical forms. Maurice Ravel, Darius Milhaud, Francis Poulenc and other French composers were greatly influenced by the development of jazz.

While classical composers sought to learn from popular forms, the reverse was also the case. George Gershwin, having achieved fame through his Broadway shows, made a serious study of composition and sought with some success to integrate jazz and classical idioms. Gershwin sought recognition as a serious composer, and his admirers understood why he would want to do so. Other composers, like Kurt Weill, worked in both 'high' and 'low' forms.

This kind of 'cross-fertilization' is very different, indeed it is almost the opposite, from the so-called 'crossover' trend today. Classical performers act as though they were ashamed of their identification with serious music. Record companies attempt to market their operatic and classical performers like Luciano Pavarotti with advertising hype like the Three Tenors extravaganzas which usually has little to do with the creation of great music. These ventures usually have nothing to do with creativity or the development of music, but are rather based on cashing in on what is most popular and likely to make money.

No area of music or any other of the performing arts has withstood the onslaught of the crassest commercialism in the past several decades. In rock and roll and country music, originality has given way to blandness; the popular song standards known for their wit and sophistication have disappeared, replaced largely by the 'megamusicals'; and in the field of classical music the above mentioned 'crossover' phenomenon has also been accompanied by the effort to market classical performers as sex symbols, or to market in line with identity politics and 'multiculturalism.' (I recently saw a CD titled 'Music by women lesbian composers'!)

It is no longer enough that a specific form of music has an audience. It must be the biggest possible audience, providing maximum profitability to the corporate owners who know or care nothing about the product itself. Media ownership has become more and more concentrated. This has also led, as David Walsh pointed out in a recent article (*International Workers Bulletin*, 8 December 1997) to the closing of many classical radio stations, where a return on investment which is not as high as possible is deemed reason for removing this music from the airwaves. In other cases station managements have banned vocal or chamber music, because market research has allegedly revealed there is not enough interest in them, or pieces longer than 15 minutes, which interfere with the endless commercials. The public stations which broadcast classical music have joined this trend, in the pursuit of the largest possible audience.

The attack on the more serious elements of music in all of its forms is typically defended as 'giving the people what they want.' This argument is superficial and essentially fraudulent, since it completely ignores the fact that cultural taste is shaped by social conditions over a period of decades and generations.

There is both truth and falsehood in the statement that most people are indifferent or hostile to serious music, or that they respond to what the media provides in the form of popular music and other entertainment. There is a smaller audience for classical music, as there is for many other fields which require intellectual stimulation and study. The falsehood lies in ignoring the causes of this situation. The cultural interests of masses of people are no more the product of their own brains in isolation from the social environment than any other aspect of their personalities. Why is there less interest in 'high' art than previously? The argument that the tremendous cultural achievements of human civilization are automatically beyond the reach of the majority is ludicrous.

An enormous potential for appreciation, participation *and* creativity is being lost due to the working of the capitalist market, not only in the most direct form of the objective pressures within the system to close down classical radio stations and cut music and arts programs in the schools, but also because of the whole cultural and intellectual *zeitgeist* which characterizes late twentieth century society in the advanced capitalist countries, and the United States above all.

In this sense there is a connection between the course of history in the twentieth century and its consequences even in a field so apparently 'nonpolitical' as music. It is no accident that the twentieth century, which began with a vibrant socialist working class culture throughout Europe and then witnessed the long isolation, degeneration and eventual destruction of the Russian Revolution, is also the century in which the gulf between 'high' and 'low' art has grown so rapidly.

While it would be wrong to draw simple parallels between culture, politics and history, or between the different spheres of artistic creation, it is nevertheless true that any serious study of the history of music in this past century must take account of this background.

This is a period in which the glorification of wealth and its accumulation has reached a peak of sorts. Capitalism in its ascendancy was characterized by the way in which it brought culture to wider layers of the population. As Marx explained in the Communist Manifesto, the growth of capitalism gave 'a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country.' Today it is far different. The relentless development of the global market has also had the most negative consequences for creativity and culture.

I'd like to return to this subject in the near future, especially to the disputes in the classical music field on the issues of programming of new music vs. the older classics, as well as the long-standing polemic between the advocates of 'accessible' music and Serialism.

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See Also:

Another comment on form and content in music
[29 July 1998]
A reply to a letter 'On form and content in music'
[23 July 1998]
On form and content in music
[14 July 1998]