

Making Marx in the Music:

A HyperHistory of New Music and Politics

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“There is no such thing as Art for Art’s sake, art that stands above classes, art that is detached from or independent of politics.” — Mao Tse-tung

Natalie Maines of the Dixie Chicks and I have something in common: we’re both ashamed to share our home state with George W. Bush. But she’s gotten a lot more attention for having said so. After she dissed the President to a concert audience in London, she and the other Chicks received obscene phone calls, threatening drive-bys, bomb threats, and had their songs blacklisted off of hundreds of radio stations, many of them owned by the right wing-connected Clear Channel Corporation. Meanwhile, John Mellencamp revved up an old 1903 protest song called “To Washington,” refitted it with new 2003 lyrics, and released it provocatively just as the troops were headed for Baghdad:

A new man in the White House
With a familiar name
Said he had some fresh ideas
But it’s worse now since he came
From Texas to Washington
He wants to fight with many
And he says it’s not for oil
He sent out the National Guard
To police the world
From Baghdad to Washington

For that, hundreds of radio listeners called in and said things like, “I don’t know who I hate worse, Osama bin Laden or John Mellencamp.”

No one can doubt that music has a big role to play in the world of political protest. The controversial musicians we read about in the papers, though, are mostly from the pop and folk genres. It’s not only that those musicians are more visible, though that’s certainly true as well. Classical music and jazz seem to have a more long-term, measured, even sublimated approach to political protest, slower to react and more deeply embedded in the structure of the music itself. When John Mellencamp writes a political song, he can use the same old chords

and instruments he always uses; political classical composers often feel that the political intention entails a special style and strategy. When Billy Bragg is infuriated by an item in the paper, he can fire off a song that day:

Voices on the radio
Tell us that we’re going to war
Those brave men and women in uniform
They want to know what they’re fighting for
The generals want to hear the end game
The allies won’t approve the plan
But the oil men in the White House
They just don’t give a damn’
Cause it’s all about the price of oil.

— “The Price of Oil” by Billy Bragg

The classical and jazz worlds, however, generally have a longer turnaround time.

Some composers see themselves playing to such a small audience that they see no point in writing political music, and often they compensate with more conventional types of political activism; Conlon Nancarrow, for instance, didn’t believe in music’s ability to portray anything extramusical, let alone political, but was nevertheless a sufficiently committed Communist to fight in the Spanish Civil War. Others feel, more obliquely and with little opportunity to gather concrete evidence, that through the nature of their music they can encourage perceptions that bring about greater awareness in the general population.

Most problematic of all, perhaps, is classical music’s traditional relationship to established power and wealth. Rock guitarists and performance artists can challenge the status quo without subsidy, but the composer who gets performed by orchestra or chamber ensemble usually does so by the grace of either government grants or wealthy patrons or both. You can write a symphony subtitled “Death to the Corporate Ruling Class” if you want, but think twice about showing up for the orchestra trustee board meeting at which the commission is announced.

Consequently, political controversies involving classi-

cal music have been few and far between, and not always attributable to radical intentions on the part of the composers. The few highly visible cases are easy to enumerate. In 1953, Aaron Copland's *A Lincoln Portrait* — and how can you get any more innocently American than Copland's narrated tone poem with Lincoln's words laced by folk song quotations like "Springfield Mountain" and "Camptown Races" — was abruptly canceled from performance at President Eisenhower's inaugural concert, because an Illinois congressman, Fred E. Busbey, had protested Copland's Communist connections of the 1930s. Copland had never actually been a Party member, but had written a prize-winning song for the Communist Composers' Collective, given musical lectures for Communist organizations, and appeared at the 1949 World Peace Conference to meet Shostakovich. Within months, Senator Joseph McCarthy called Copland to appear before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, a fate that also eventually befell fellow composers Elie Siegmeister, Wallingford Riegger, David Diamond, and the German émigré Hanns Eisler, who was subsequently deported.

A similar situation recurred in 1973, when Vincent Persichetti's *A Lincoln Address*, also based on words of the Great Emancipator, was to be premiered as part of Richard Nixon's inauguration. Lincoln, however, had denounced "the mighty scourge of war," which threatened to look like a reflection on Nixon's pet venture, the Vietnam War. Persichetti was asked to make changes. He declined. The performance did not take place. Apparently the words of Abraham Lincoln are too inflammatory for today's politicians. More recently, John Adams and Alice Goodman had the choruses of their opera *The Death of Klinghoffer* canceled by the Boston Symphony in the wake of 9-11 for their arguably pro-Arab (or in Adams' view, even-handed) stance. The words of that opera, such as—

"My father's house was razed
In nineteen forty-eight
When the Israelis
Passed over our street"

— were to some listeners, it has been charged, "not a simple statement of fact, but rather provocation." Nevertheless, despite these isolated headline-grabbers, by and large — aside from the perennial attacks on Wagner's anti-Semitism that constitute a cottage industry — the world rarely takes classical music seriously enough to protest it.

As Marx and Engels wrote in the *Communist Manifesto*, the bourgeois epoch has simplified the structure of the world's class antagonisms into two camps: bourgeoisie and proletariat. (In recent years, the selection

of former CEOs like Bush and Cheney has eroded even the slim, traditional distinction between politicians and the corporate class.) Virtually by definition, "political music" is understood as music that supports the interests of the working classes, and exposes the corporate/governing class as thieves and oppressors. As Christian Wolff — one of the central composers in this area — has pointed out, almost all composers called political are leftist: there have been virtually no composers whose music was explicitly associated with conservative causes, notwithstanding a number of patriotic symphonies and tone poems penned during World War II. In Marxist terms, composers who write for the delectation of the rich and for their fellow professionals are giving aid and comfort to the bourgeoisie, and are by definition counter-revolutionary, no matter what their conscious personal politics. Most non-pop music of the past century that we think of as political has come from a Marxist, communist, or socialist viewpoint — the composers who come to mind are Hanns Eisler, Marc Blitzstein, Frederic Rzewski, Cornelius Cardew, Christian Wolff, Luigi Nono. Even for composers who write from a feminist or gay or pro-Native American or Save the Whales viewpoint, Marxist conditions for political music tend to be assumed: simplicity, relation to some musical vernacular, non-elitist performance situations.

For many people, music can only be political when it has a text, and for certain composers, the style is immaterial as long as the text makes its point. The latter group, however, seem to be a minority; most political composers feel that music should be understandable not only by musical connoisseurs, but by the working classes whose interest it represents, whereas writing music for new-music specialists and the upper class is regarded as being of little value or point. Therefore, political music tends to be widely accessible, non-abstract, familiar in its basic idiom, tending towards simplicity rather than complexity. There are exceptions; Nono wrote political music in a serialist and rather forbidding idiom, and Wallingford Riegger was a curiously complacent 12-tone Communist. Leftist composers of the Depression Era believed in using folk tunes to represent, and reach out to, "The People." Analogously, some more recent composers have believed in starting from a pop or rock idiom, as being the "folk" music to which today's mass audiences are attuned.

However, as Wolff has written, the conditions through which popular music develops are themselves corrupt and exploitative. Those who take pop music as a stylistic basis may already be, by implication, playing into the hands of the corporate world — unless, somehow, they engage to subvert it. Swerve toward popular music and

you may be letting corporations dictate your personal expression; swerve too far away, even in the direction of simplicity and accessibility, and you run the danger, as Wolff says, of seeming merely “eccentric.” As he further spells out the paradox, parsing German social thinker Theodor W. Adorno: if music “lets go of (its) autonomy, it sells out to the established (social) order, whereas, if it tries to stay strictly within its autonomous confines, it becomes equally co-optable, living a harmless life in its appointed niche.” The road from classical composition to the working classes is riddled with pitfalls and chasms.

One of the largest fissures, plaguing politically conscious composers for the last eight or nine decades, is that musical progressivism and political progressivism do not go hand in hand, and often are felt to be diametrically opposed. For music to be abstract, complex, difficult to understand — so the argument runs — supports the power structure of the bourgeoisie, since it provides a harmless distraction from the real conflicts of class oppression. This belief has resulted in the seeming paradox of some of the most advanced and forward-looking musicians — most famously Hanns Eisler in 1926 and Cornelius Cardew in 1971 — turning their backs on the continuation of what seemed at the time an inevitable musico-historical trajectory.

Thanks to such paradoxes, unanswerable questions run through the background of the present survey:

1. Can music (without text) express political truths?
2. Does “concert hall” music with political texts achieve any useful end?
3. Can political music made by composers in the classical tradition, no matter how simplified or accessible, do anything besides preach to the converted?
4. Do composers have a social responsibility to attract or address certain audiences?
5. Does who you get your money from affect your art? Should it?
6. Is politics the business of only pop music, while experimental music is already too much of an elitist pastime?
7. Given that the music the working classes are familiar with is exploitatively limited and controlled by commercial and sometimes even right wing corporations, to what extent can the more musically aware composer build on that foundation to reach a wider audience? Is pop music the only possible basis for communication, a contaminated anathema, both, or neither?

There can be no attempt in a survey such as this to definitively answer most of these questions; nor, how-

ever, will they be, as they so often are, pessimistically dismissed. For some, answers will forever depend on the consciences of individual composers; others may be clarified as time goes by and our experience of music in differing contexts accumulates. It may be worth keeping them in mind as we discuss individual cases, because I have so often heard composer discussion groups run circles around these questions and get nowhere. If we are to eventually arrive at more compelling answers, the base level of our collective questioning needs to be raised.

The present HyperHistory divides into not historical periods, for the most part, but into strategies for politicizing music. These strategies fall into two clearly differentiated areas: political music with words, and political music without words. Across those two categories does run a rough historical divide: before the 1960s, one’s political views sometimes determined what kind of music one should write, but in the 1960s there was born the relatively new idea of making music a political statement in itself. Of course, this divide does not apply to opera, which has famously been making political statements for most of its history. Hatred of tyranny is implicit in Beethoven’s *Fidelio*, and an entire economic critique of European society in Wagner’s *Ring*, albeit one perhaps interrupted and unfulfilled — to accept for a moment Shaw’s view of the case. Interestingly, what seems lacking in today’s operas is political statement, even despite the current trend of historical operas drawn from recent politics. As exceptions one could point to Anthony Braxton’s little-heralded 1996 opera *Shala Fears for the Poor*, which painted a bitter satire of corporate America — and Conrad Cummings’ Vietnam opera, *Tonkin*.

In the case of texted political music, there has been a new approach in the last 30 years that scorns the earlier convention of “setting text to music,” speaking or intoning it instead. One political composer closely connected with text, Luigi Nono, can be considered separately as an exception to all rules. The case of non-texted political music diffracts into a rainbow of related concepts, ranging from the denotative technique of direct quotation, to the culturally conditioned but commonsensical reading of music as Social Realism, to the more rarefied approach to musical structure as political analogy. Independently of all this, we should consider the extreme case of Cornelius Cardew, a composer who not only most sharply defined the role of political music by turning his back on the avant-garde, but who also was the clearest and most passionate writer about what was politically wrong with new music.

Certainly this survey will be far from complete — by its very nature, political music is typically likely to be, if not censored outright, at least unsupported by the ex-

isting power structures, and frequently lost to history, or at least difficult to obtain documentation on. I only hope that I can give a well-rounded list of the various ways in which composers have found to give their music political impact, and bring out the most often-encountered advantages and problems of each. As a movement, political music flourished most during the 1930s and 1970s, the periods of greatest Marxist sympathy in the West, the first spurred by sympathy for Russia, the second by that for China, and both ending in disillusion; the influence of the latter period, though, has convinced a number of younger composers, myself included, to write the occasional politically motivated work. And as the world continues to change in more ominous directions, it becomes harder and harder for the thinking artist to keep silent — as the Dixie Chicks have realized to their everlasting credit.

Cornelius Cardew

No other 20th-century composer so vividly inhabited the overlap of music and politics as England's Cornelius Cardew (1936–1981). Though killed 22 years ago, he had a tremendous impact on many colleagues in contemporary music, and his influence still determines much of how new music is seen in the context of the world political situation.

From 1958–60, the young Cardew worked as an assistant to Karlheinz Stockhausen in preparation of the latter's score *Carré*, and in so doing met and fell under the spell of John Cage. Cardew's *magna opera* to this day are two large, Cage-influenced indeterminate scores from the 1960s, *Treatise* (inspired by Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*) and *The Great Learning*, based on the teachings of Confucius. Another claim to fame is that Cardew was a founding member of both the Scratch Orchestra — a wrangling, obstreperous collective of the 1970s that gave concerts devoted to conceptual art, improvisation, and scores of experimental and even bizarre notation — and also the smaller, tighter improvisation group AMM, formed with Eddie Prevost, Lou Gare, and Keith Rowe.

Yet despite this stellar avant-garde resume, Cardew's life took a disconcerting left turn. In 1971 he began to study Marxism and, along with some of his Scratch Orchestra comrades, to apply its teachings to his musical activities. He was greatly impressed by English Marxist Christopher Caudwell's essay *The Concept of Freedom*:

But art is in any case not a relation to a thing, it is a relation between men, between artist and audience, and the art work is only like a machine which they must both grasp as part of the process. The commercialisation of art may revolt the sincere artist, but the tragedy is that he revolts

against it still within the limitations of bourgeois culture. He attempts to forget the market completely and concentrate on his relation to the art work, which now becomes further hypostatized as an entity-in-itself. Because the art work is now completely an end-in-itself, and even the market is forgotten, the art process becomes an extremely individualistic relation. The social values inherent in the art form, such as syntax, tradition, rules, technique, form, accepted tonal scale, now seem to have little value, for the art work more and more exists for the individual alone.

Recognizing himself in this isolated and self-defeating portrayal of the avant-garde artist, Cardew committed a startling apostasy. He turned away from improvisation and indeterminacy and began writing tonal piano pieces based on folk tunes, as well as utilitarian revolutionary songs. Even more shockingly, in 1974 he published a savage little book called *Stockhausen Serves Imperialism and Other Articles*, in which he attacked his former idols and accused them of complicity with bourgeois forces of oppression. Cardew followed theory with action, and in addition to participating in frequent political activism, chaired a national conference on racism and fascism and in 1979 founded England's Marxist-Leninist Party.

From 1971 on, Cardew took as his bible Mao Tse-tung's *Talks at the Yen-an Forum on Literature and Art of 1942*. Mao, announcing that artists and writers should be supporting the good of the working class against the oppressive bourgeoisie, challenged artists to go among the masses and learn their viewpoint, their problems, desires, attitudes. He admitted two sets of criteria for judging art, the political and the aesthetic — both important, but the political always primary. The artist's task, he said, is twofold: to popularize and to raise standards. The first priority is to give the masses "works of literature and art which meet their urgent needs and which are easy to absorb," and only afterward to raise their standards so that they can appreciate "[w]orks of a higher quality," which, "being more polished, are more difficult to produce and in general do not circulate so easily and quickly among the masses at present." In contrast to the stereotype of Marxist art, Mao castigated as worthless art that is politically correct but lacks artistic quality: "we oppose both the tendency to produce works of art with a wrong political viewpoint and the tendency towards the 'poster and slogan style' which is correct in political viewpoint but lacking in artistic power." In addition, Mao stressed the importance of criticism, not only self-criticism, but collective criticism by those well steeped in Marxist thought — a concept Cardew took very much to heart, and one partly responsible for his incendiary little book.

The Scratch Orchestra became Cardew's and pianist John Tilbury's workshop for putting such Marxist ideas into practice. As Cardew recounts it in *Stockhausen*

Serves Imperialism, the Scratch Orchestra never raised much of a public following, and many of their concerts were abject failures. Under Cardew's and Tilbury's Maoist prodding, as a solution the orchestra members began to interact more with the audience, taking Mao's advice about learning from the masses. The group had originally adopted a policy of "no criticism," but now turned to self-criticism and finally collective criticism, examining each performance with a fine-tooth comb and allowing all members to speak their minds.

Stockhausen Serves Imperialism was the somewhat arrogant, but earnest and inevitable outcome of Cardew's exposure to the Maoist idea of criticism: that all comrades need dispassionate but firm correction. Here he documented his own apostasy from the avant-garde, and severely castigated Cage and Stockhausen, as the two emergent leaders of the world avant-garde, for writing music that played into bourgeois interests by ignoring, and distracting people from, the truth of the oppression of the world's masses by corporations, dishonest governments, and the bourgeoisie. This little book, which seemed so crazily counter to the prevailing Cage and Stockhausen worship when my friends and I first read it in 1975, has retained its staying power, and is now widely sought-after as a collector's item, having been long out of print.

Following Caudwell, Cardew begins by attacking the notion that a composer is a "free producer," that his music is his to do with as he sees fit. "[A] composition," he argues, "is not an end-product, not in itself a useful commodity. The end-product of an artist's work, the 'useful commodity' in the production of which he plays a role, is ideological influence. . . . The production of ideological influence is highly socialized, involving (in the case of music), performers, critics, impresarios, agents, managers, etc., and above all (and this is the artist's real 'means of production') an audience. . . . [U]nder the bourgeois dictatorship, it is clearly impossible to bring work with a decidedly socialist or revolutionary content to bear on a mass audience. Access to this audience (the artist's real means of production) is controlled by the state." He goes on to say that the industrial working class is the strongest and most revolutionary class, the only one that merits serious attention. "Obviously Cage, Stockhausen and the rest have no currency in the working class, so criticism of their work is relatively unimportant." But for those of us under the spell of the avant-garde that once enthralled him, he does it anyway (as further detailed in the page on *Music as Political Metaphor*).

As brutally honest with himself as with others, Cardew shows himself no quarter either, and in the course of the book (like Tolstoy's very similarly motivated mea culpa

in *What is Art?*), disowns much of his early music. The subsequent music he would write consisted mostly of political songs like "Smash the Social Contract" and "Soon There Will Be a High Tide of Revolution"; small piano pieces based on political folksongs, like "Father Murphy" and "The Croppy Boy"; and more extensive themes and variations making reference to early English keyboard music, like *BooLavogue* and the *Thaelmann Variations*. In these works Cardew abandoned any pretense of originality, a quality he discounted as bourgeois. As John Tilbury put it shortly after his death in 1981, "What Cardew renounced over the last ten years was the market mentality, a corollary of which in the West has been an obsession with 'originality' — the often unconscious need to produce something 'new' at all costs. In this sense he abandoned originality, but never his individuality, which he consciously placed in the service of the socialist collective." In the program notes to the first set of this piano music, Cardew wrote, "I have discontinued composing music in an avant-garde idiom for a number of reasons: the exclusiveness of the avant-garde, its fragmentation, its indifference to the real situation in the world today, its individualistic outlook and not least its class character (the other characteristics are virtually products of this)."

It is easy to argue that his songs and piano works didn't make Cardew any greater a composer than he had been in writing *Treatise* and *The Great Learning*; Cardew would probably have agreed, and dismissed the comment as trivial, even counter-revolutionary. He had become a more relevant composer, and had quit living in what he came to see as a fantasy world. For the remainder of his brief life Cardew performed and sang at May Day and anti-fascist, anti-racist demonstrations, agitated for the liberation of Ireland, and went to prison on more than one occasion. "I'm convinced," he wrote, "that when a group of people get together and sing the Internationale this is a more complex, more subtle, stronger and more musical experience than the whole of the avant-garde put together. This is not pseudo-scientific fantasy but represents real people in the real world engaged in the most important struggle of all the class struggle." As Marx had said about philosophy, "It is not enough to understand the world, the point is to change it" — Cardew added: "It is not enough to decorate the world, the point is to influence it."

In light of Cardew's role in England's Marxist-Leninist party, it is believed that his death — a hit-and-run on December 13, 1981 — was probably a political assassination.

Political Music with Conventionally Set Text: Songs, Musicals, Operas

The most direct and understandable way to politicize music, of course, is to employ a text with political impact. This has been going on at least since the medieval manuscript *Le roman de Fauvel* castigated the corruption of the ruling clergy in 12th-century France, and to attempt a complete history since that time would be vastly unwieldy.

Limiting ourselves to composers from the world of relatively contemporary music, Charles Ives got an early start writing, in 1896 while still a Yale undergrad, a bumptious and entirely conventional presidential campaign song for William McKinley, “William Will” (words by Danbury newspaperwoman Susan Benedict Hill):

Give us no depreciation
With a silver variation;
Juggle not the workman’s pence!
For it rouses all his choler
When he finds his well-earned dollar
Has been whittled down to only fifty cents!

Ives was rewarded by having the song played by the Marine Band at McKinley’s inauguration, the most visible exposure he received until near the end of his life. After college his political sentiments took a leftward and more populist turn, leaving him eventually a Wilsonian Democrat. Accordingly, he poured more heartfelt sentiments into one of his last songs, a lament over the country’s cynical election of Warren G. Harding, titled variously either “Nov. 4, 1920” or “An Election”:

Too many readers go by the headlines,
Party men will muddle up the facts,
So a good many citizens voted the way grandpa
always did. . .
Then the timid smiled and looked relieved,
“We’ve got enough to eat, to hell with ideals!”

Words as relevant today as they were 83 years ago. Somewhat more idealistic — crazily so, some have thought — was his advocacy for a “People’s World Nation” in his late song “They Are There.” Ives’s own sung rendition was touchingly preserved on a primitive lacquer-coated disc (which was issued on a CRI CD).

When the political climate changed at the beginning of the Depression, making the avant-garde seem too self-absorbed for the national crisis, Ruth Crawford wrote a 1931 round, or canon, on the following Communist-inspired text:

Joy to the world!
To live and see the day
When Rockefeller Senior
shall up to me and say,

“Comrade! Comrade!
Can you spare a dime?”

It’s not a very good round — there are lots of random-seeming whole-step clashes — and it marked the beginning of a two-decade retirement from composing, as Crawford became a collector and arranger of Appalachian folk songs.

In pre-War Europe, the genre of political music took its impetus from one prolific, Protean figure — Arnold Schoenberg’s rebellious student Hanns Eisler (1898–1962, born in Leipzig). Starting off writing 12-tone music (to which he returned late in life, and his music never really ceased to resemble Schoenberg’s in texture), Eisler fell into a quarrel with his teacher in 1926 after joining the German Communist Party, over the elitist direction of contemporary music. Eisler began working with worker’s choruses and agitprop theater, writing, like Hindemith, a simplified *Gebrauchsmusik*. In 1930 Eisler joined up with the Marxist playwright Bertolt Brecht (who had already worked with Kurt Weill), and began turning out trenchant pieces of political music theater. Their music theater debut *Die Massnahme (The Measures Taken)* of 1931 was unflinching in its economic realism:

Rice can be had down the river
People in the remoter provinces
Need their rice!
If we can keep that rice off the market,
Rice is bound to get dearer.
Then the men who pull the barges
Must go short of rice;
Then I shall get my rice for even less. [pause]
[Unaccompanied]
By the way, what is rice? [pause]
[With music]
Don’t ask me what rice is.
Don’t ask me my advice
I’ve no idea what rice is.
All I have learned is its price!

Subsequent verses deal with cotton and “a man” in similarly cold terms.

Eisler’s songs with Brecht’s lyrics often attacked with sarcasm and irony the treatment of soldiers and the poor by governments, touching as well on the money-driven superficiality of Hollywood and even abortion, in “Abortion Is Illegal”:

You’re going to be a lovely little mother,
You’re going to make a hunk of cannon fodder,
It’s what your belly’s for,
And that’s no news to you
and what else can you do?
And now do not squall:
You’re having the baby,
that’s all!

Though simple in style, Eisler's music was rarely simplistic. He had no problem making populist songs from unrhyming blank verse or prose, rendered poetic by carefully detailed accompaniments. His "Solidarity Song" with Brecht's lyrics — "Whose tomorrow is tomorrow, and whose earth is the earth?" — was an overnight hit, and after World War II he ended up writing East Germany's (predictably staid) national anthem.

Declared a "decadent" upon Hitler's ascension in 1933, Eisler began a peripatetic émigré existence, ending up in Hollywood in 1942, where he wrote film scores. After the War, in 1947, he was questioned by the McCarthy committee and deported despite protests by Charlie Chaplin, Thomas Mann, Albert Einstein, Henri Matisse, Jean Cocteau, and Aaron Copland. Back in Vienna he devoted himself to a *Deutsche Symphonie*, his magnum opus, based on anti-fascist texts. A versatile artist and superb craftsman whose music has been unfairly neglected because of its perceived utilitarian motivations, Eisler is too complex a figure to do justice to here; the interested reader is recommended to start with the excellent Hanns Eisler Web site, (<http://www.eislermusic.com>) which offers numerous sound files of his work.

In American culture, as well, the larger musical protest of the Depression Era occurred in musical theater, which turned political to a greater degree than usual. The Gershwin brothers spoofed war in *Strike Up The Band* (1930); presidential elections in *Of Thee I Sing* (1931, in which the president of the United States chooses a First Lady via beauty contest); and political revolution in *Let 'Em Eat Cake* (1933). Irving Berlin satirized police corruption in *Face the Music* (1932), while President Roosevelt was the central character in Rodgers and Hart's *I'd Rather Be Right* (1937). With somewhat more staying power, Kurt Weill gave a voice to the oppressed poor in *Die Dreigroschenoper* (1928), although the piece didn't become popular in America until the 1950s (with lyrics translated by Marc Blitzstein) as *The Three-Penny Opera*.

The show that caused the most trouble, however, making its production a political event in itself, was undoubtedly Marc Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock*, a 1937 pro-union social satire set in fictional Steeltown, USA. The play unforgettably portrays a judge, a doctor, a newspaper editor, a minister, a college president, and even a pair of artists as prostitutes fawning over the rich capitalist Mister Mister, all of them morally inferior to the literal prostitute who is the victimized heroine of the story. Blitzstein had been brought up in privilege but defected to the leftist cause (to the point of writing lines like "There's something so damn low about the rich"), and wrote an ending in which union agitator Tom

Foreman defies all of Steeltown's richest and most respected citizens thanks to the last-minute consolidation of thousands of the town's laborers into a closed shop of unions. *The Cradle Will Rock* was a project of the Works Progress Administration Theater Project, and yet was considered so dangerous that the WPA went to extreme lengths to delay and prevent the premiere. The story of how producers Orson Welles and John Houseman eventually staged an informal premiere despite insurmountable odds, with the actors singing from the audience because they had been forbidden to go onstage, was recently popularized in a fairly accurate movie by Tim Robbins (though one that fails to match the nobility of its subject matter), called *Cradle Will Rock* — distinguished in title from the musical by omission of the definite article.

With the approach of World War II, musicals depoliticized. In the world of American opera one will find little such politicization to begin with. Although mid-century operas such as Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* (1935), Copland's *The Tender Land* (1953), and Floyd's *Susannah* (1955) dealt regularly with the poor, the composers seemed wary of offending their audiences' (or patrons') sensibilities by any pointed references to social injustice. An exception might be claimed for the Virgil Thomson/Gertrude Stein *The Mother of Us All* (1947), whose non-sequitur-packed libretto conceals a feminist critique of ruling-class psychology, all the more persuasive because it reaches you subliminally from beneath layers of seeming nonsense. Another exception was Robert Ward's *The Crucible* (1961), which transferred Arthur Miller's eponymous play about the Salem witch trials — a patent allegory about the McCarthy communist witch hunts of the '50s — to the operatic stage.

In other times and more totalitarian regimes, opera has been used as a vehicle for veiled political opinions that could not be expressed openly. Most famously, the Da Ponte *Le nozze di Figaro* was based on a play by Beaumarchais that had been banned from performance in Vienna even under the comparatively enlightened reign of Joseph II, and which infuriated Louis XVI with its open criticism of privileges claimed by the aristocracy. "Aristocracy, richness, rank, prestige," Beaumarchais's Figaro enumerates in words that had to be suppressed by Da Ponte: "all these things make one so proud! But what have you done to deserve so many privileges? You have given yourself the trouble of coming into the world, nothing else." Even so, the Republican spirit (as in anti-aristocratic, not modern right wing) of Mozart's work tapped bravely into growing resentment against the ruling classes.

The use of opera to communicate secret meanings

past the censors to a sympathetic audience is not a phenomenon one can easily point to in contemporary America or Europe. But I remember, some 13 years ago, the Indonesian composer I Wayan Sadra describing just such conditions under which his theatrical works were performed in Jakarta, sometimes with police and armed military surrounding the auditorium in case some forbidden political reference was made onstage. Under the military dictatorships of the world, music theater still performs the clandestine function it did for Mozart and Da Ponte. In America, one could argue that while free speech is unrestrained, an opera that offends the classes of people who patronize and pay for opera would simply never get near being produced.

Whether more than a handful of such operas exist, I can't say.

Braxton's *Shala Fears for the Poor*, four hours in length and quite ambitious, was performed in New York with a pickup orchestra and under modest conditions, with little press fanfare. Conrad Cummings' *Tonkin* which portrayed a conscientious American captain confused by his own country's shifting allegiances and his own fondness for the Vietnamese people who saved his life, fared somewhat better. Aside from these, we have, in Harry Partch's brief swan song *The Dreamer that Remains* (1972), a charming protest against the proliferation of "No Loitering" signs. None of them have changed the world, but they'll have to do.

The Political Avant-Garde

In recent decades the American avant-garde has nurtured a new range of approaches more closely fusing text and music, often speaking the words or intoning them in some way, rather than "setting them to music" in the traditional manner. There are several reasons for this:

1. To open up the possibility of amateur vocal performance and thus increase the range (and range of social class) of possible performers;
2. To heighten the drama of the text beyond the conventions of a traditional musical setting, making the meaning of the words more difficult to ignore;
3. To more intrinsically draw the music's structure from the text, either as a way of further amplifying the words or in lieu of more traditional structuring devices;
4. To get away from the familiar sound of European *bel canto* singing, which can be a liability for reaching a wider audience that may dislike classical music or distrust its class associations.

The attention-getting opening salvo in this movement

was a 1972 pair of minimalist process pieces by Frederic Rzewski, *Coming Together* and *Attica*. The former, in an angrily energetic D minor, uses as text a kind of angry-ecstatic letter by Sam Melville, a political prisoner and leader of the uprising at Attica prison:

I think the combination of age and a greater coming together is responsible for the speed of the passing time. It's six months now, and I can tell you truthfully, few periods of my life have passed more quickly . . . In the indifferent brutality, the incessant noise, the experimental chemistry of food, the ravings of lost hysterical men, I can act with clarity and meaning. . .

The text for calmer, major-key *Attica* is the response of prisoner Richard X. Clark, a participant in the Attica prison uprising, when asked how it felt to leave Attica behind him: he replied, "Attica is in front of me." As a way of opening up the possibility of performance by a wide array of groups (and Rzewski sometimes even performed them solo), the instrumentation is free — a long melody line is to be played, with some instruments sustaining selected pitches. Both the text and melody are subjected to minimalist additive process: "Attica. . . Attica is. . . Attica is in. . . Attica is in front. . .", etc. Driving and seething with conviction, yet also pretty, *Coming Together* and *Attica* suddenly brought a political conscience into minimalism, even though Rzewski quickly abandoned the minimalist idiom (see Political Music via Quotation).

Also in 1972, Christian Wolff entered on the same track with *Accompaniments*, with texts by a Chinese veterinarian and a midwife in the Yenan province of north-west China, describing in quotidian detail the progress of Mao's revolution:

The old way of giving birth to children was unhygienic. Dangerous both for mother and child. To begin with it was necessary to spread a great deal of information. But now . . . the women understand why hygiene is important . . . The old bad habits are deep-rooted, but we're fighting them all the time, and things are getting better every year that goes by . . . To study and apply Mao Tse-tung Thought is a good method. . .

Wolff wrote the piece for Rzewski, directing that the piano chords be spoken along with the syllables of the text — combining professionalism and amateurism, since Rzewski is an excellent pianist but had no particular experience as a speaker. Later, with the revelations of how brutal Mao's revolution had been, Wolff admitted that the politics of *Accompaniments* had been discredited, and that he should withdraw the work. This is a danger of political music: it can be rendered invalid by subsequent events over which the composer has no control.

The most persuasive political-music figure of the

1980s was undoubtedly Diamanda Galás, whose amazingly powerful three-and-a-half-octave voice and frightening theatrical presence made her a rare crossover figure from the avant-garde. (I'm going to leave Laurie Anderson out of the discussion because, while she increasingly interspersed her musical performances with political commentary, her songs can rarely be called political in themselves.) Even before she was energized by the AIDS epidemic, Galás took on issues of power and tyranny. In her *Tragouthia apo to Aima Exoun Fonos* (*Song from the Blood of Those Murdered*, 1981) and *Panoptikon* (1982–3) she adopted and expanded on vocal techniques from the European tradition of Berio, Xenakis, and Dieter Schnebel — babbling, screeching, wailing, shouting, while Richard Zvonar's electronics allowed her to layer her voice over a background of slowly transforming noises. In *Panoptikon* she used two microphones with high and low pitch shifters (a Laurie Anderson technique) to turn herself into both interrogator and prisoner.

Then, in 1984, Galás began a trilogy based on Edgar Allen Poe's *Masque of the Red Death*, intending it as an allegory about AIDS. When her brother Philip — a well-known playwright and performance artist — died from the disease in 1986, she expanded the work to meet the growing crisis. She wrote her own text and dotted it with passages from the Bible and religious liturgy, creating in a dark rock and gospel context a direct assault on bigotry, and a counterattack against religion for its condemnation of homosexual AIDS victims. In section I, "The Divine Punishment," Galás croaks laws from Leviticus over a darkly repetitive background of groans and slow drumbeats:

And if any man's seed of copulation go out from him, he is unclean. Every garment, every skin whereon is the seed, is unclean. And the woman with whom this man shall lie will be unclean. And whosoever toucheth her will be unclean. This is the law of the plague: To teach when it is clean and when it is unclean.

A superb pianist as well as singer, Galás has often accompanied herself, and has been one of the most inventive avant-garde figures in appropriating rock, gospel, and even country and western styles for politically provocative large-scale songs. Part three of the *Masque*, "You Must Be Certain of the Devil," opens with a tortuously slow rendition of *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* that lasts six minutes and covers three octaves. Later, over a good old redneck beat, she sings her own words that many rednecks wouldn't want to hear:

In Kentucky Harry buys a round of beer
to celebrate the death of Billy Smith, the queer,
whose mother still must hide her face in fear.
Let's not chat about despair.

You who mix the words of torture, suicide,
and death with scotch and soda at the bar,
we're all real decent people, aren't we,
but there's no time left for talk.
Let's not chat about despair.

Galás is perhaps the only new-music composer whose impact has been visible and subversive enough to get her targeted by the Christian Right; Reel to Real Ministries has condemned her *Litanies of Satan* (1982) for its sacrilegious text —

To thee o Satan, glory be, and praise.
Grant that my soul, one day,
beneath the Tree
Of Knowledge
may rest near thee.

— which is, alas, not her own, but by the French poet Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867). How many of the rest of us can say we're truly doing all we can to piss off the Religious Right?

Many composers of my own generation have written the occasional political work, usually with text. Ben Neill, trumpet-playing composer of computerized ambient installations, collaborated with AIDS activist and visual artist David Wojnarowicz on *ITSOFOMO* (*In the Shadow of Forward Motion*), an evening-length multimedia work full of texts attacking mainstream culture's habit of blaming gay victims for the AIDS epidemic. (Wojnarowicz subsequently died of the disease.) Likewise, Bob Ostertag's *All the Rage* — a Kronos Quartet commission uses recorded samples, voice, and string quartet to create a unified effect from a heterogeneous group of political-music techniques. It partly takes over the rhythm-derived-from-text idea of Wolff's *Accompaniments*, having the string players follow the rhythm of the speaking voice in exact, unmeasured unison; but also uses recorded samples of a riot that occurred in California when Governor Pete Wilson vetoed a law meant to protect gays from discrimination. Meanwhile, the string quartet plays its own now-angry, now-sad commentary on the background sounds.

Dean Drummond's *Congressional Record* drew fire for using a National Endowment for the Arts grant to turn against the government itself. Drummond is the curator of the Harry Partch instruments, and his piece applied an eccentrically vernacular, Partchian vocal technique to four excerpts from the Congressional Record: a diatribe against the NEA and indecency by Senator Jesse Helms; the Senate bill attempting the abolish the NEA; a grimace-forcing account of President Clinton touching Monica Lewinsky's breasts from Kenneth Starr's Independent Counsel Report; and a speech introducing the Plumbing Improvement Act of 1999. It's kind of won-

derful to hear baritone Robert Osborne (on the Innova recording) apply Partch's sarcastically truculent tones to Jesse Helms' historic phrases:

Seven years ago I first reported to the senate some evidence that a war was then being waged against America's standards of decency by some self-proclaimed artists funded by the National Endowment for the Arts. Some of the know-it-all media have tried in vain to persuade the American people that such so-called art deserved the taxpayers' money allocated to the arrogant artists whose minds belong in the sewer. . . . Performing their live sex acts, filthy homosexual photographs, bodies of dead men and women, to produce stomach-churning photographs, from burning the American flag to flouting their own bodies and those of others. Such depravity knows no bounds.

Much less sardonic and seemingly innocuous are the political works of Conrad Cummings, who has recently returned to composing after a hiatus of several years and whose *Photo-Op* parodies conservative sentiments in such a deadpan, Handel-meets-Philip Glass style that you almost wonder if he's serious:

By keeping things exactly the way that they are
We'll find truth in the smallest things
That are just as good as the big ones that keep
This country great.

My own text works have been influenced by the Wolfian idea of allowing the speech-rhythm of the text to determine the rhythm of the music. This technique is particularly evident in my *Custer and Sitting Bull* (1995–99). I chose texts from speeches, writings, interviews, and military transcripts of Custer and Sitting Bull based on rhythm, but also for ambiguity and self-contradictoriness. Although immersed with the political-music ideas of Cardew, Rzewski, and Wolff during my impressionable years in the 1970s, and very convinced by them, I have been reluctant to follow the dogmatic course they seem to prescribe. I'm a musician — I've spent literally my entire life in music. I've never studied economics, never taken a political science course, though in academia and in New York I'm surrounded by educated and politically aware people, and I get my news from Salon.com, NPR, and the *Village Voice*. Despite my strong and variously well-founded political views, for me to impose a particular political viewpoint on my audience would feel, to me, like a different kind of elitism. I can sympathize with the conviction that music should have a political impact, but not with the unshakeable confidence that I know what's wrong with the world and what to do about it.

And so my occasional political-music strategies have been more ambiguous. In *Custer and Sitting Bull* I contrasted the white point of view with the Native American point of view — and also multiple white and Native

American points of view with each other. I took passages from Custer in which he seemed sympathetic to and knowledgeable about the Indian's plight —

If I were an Indian, I often think, I would greatly prefer to cast my lot among those of my people adhered to the free open plains rather than submit to the confined limits of a reservation, there to be the recipients of the blessed benefits of civilization, with its vices thrown in.

— and placed them alongside quotations in which he voiced a truculent bigotry that seemed forced and intended to play well to a right wing military audience:

My firm conviction based on analysis of the character traits of the Indian is that the Indian cannot be induced to adopt an unaccustomed mode of life by any teaching, argument, reasoning, or coaxing not followed closely by physical force!

And I ended Custer's plea with an ambivalently effective apology (taken from his defense at his 1867 court martial) for the historical white man, "Judge me not by what is known now, but in the light of what I knew when these events transpired." Similarly, I took statements from Sitting Bull in which he claimed to be chief of all the Indians, and other statements in which he denied having any special status. I wanted to present two warring enemies with some degree of complexity, and let each audience member come to his or her own conclusion about praise or blame. In particular, I wanted neither to exonerate Custer nor condemn him, but to vivify his best and worst motives by presenting them musically, repeating the phrases over and over so that their import couldn't be glossed over.

And in purely technical terms, I derived almost the entire electronic microtonal accompaniment from the rhythmicized speech as I heard it, so closely that I have often been asked whether my voice is triggering the electronics in live performance. But I wouldn't know how to achieve that; I'm barely smart enough to make MIDI work. My technique is to notate the speech rhythms as closely as possible, much like Steve Reich in *Different Trains* and *The Cave*, and his *Come Out* is perhaps as much a source for this idea as Wolff's Accompaniments.

Luigi Nono: Titles and Texts in a Modernist Context

Luigi Nono (1924–1990) spent his career as the political activist among the Darmstadt serialist composers. He joined the Italian Communist Party in 1952, and many of his works have titles and texts of political significance. The piece with which he first came to public attention was *Il Canto sospeso* (*The Suspended Song*, 1955–56), a setting of final letters from resistance fighters who died

during the Nazi invasions. (In 1992, following the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Berlin Philharmonic recorded and toured the piece as a political gesture, to counter the growing xenophobia of the German public.) Nono's *a floresta e jovem e cheia de vida* (*The Forest Young and Full of Life*, 1965–66) is an anti-Vietnam War protest, with a collage of texts from Vietnamese victims, American unionists, Fidel Castro, and various revolutionary workers. *Y entonces comprendio* (*And then he understood*, 1969–70) sets letters written by Che Guevara to Castro and the Tricontinental.

Como una ola de fuerza y luz (*Like a wave of power and light*, 1971–2) is a lament for the death of a Chilean revolutionary leader, Luciano Cruz. And on and on, though his works became less specifically political in the latter part of his career.

However, unlike Cardew and Rzewski, Nono became and remained a 12-tone composer (and even married Schoenberg's daughter). Like some other Continental composers who have followed in his footsteps, he believed in writing difficult, ambiguous, often opaque music to express his political points. A work like *Como una ola de fuerza y luz* inhabits basically the same sound-world as Boulez's *Pli Selon Pli* or Stockhausen's *Gruppen*: similar discontinuities, masses of sound, pointilism, and dense clusters. While Nono's use of 12-tone technique is generally more "lyrical" and melodically continuous than that of the other prominent Darmstadt serialists, he places little weight on the intelligibility of his texts; in *Il Canto sospeso*, for instance, the heart-wrenching words are split up among parts of the chorus in a way that denies semantic listening. Criticized for this, Nono countered (in the words of Joachim Noller) that "the meaning of the texts was transferred to other, musical, means of expression. Whereas in certain forms of political aesthetics, music is degraded, as it were, to a mere handmaid of the text, with the spoken language as the standard by which all communication is judged, Nono prefers to set greater store by the variety and autonomy of musical expression."

For me, and perhaps for many of us who discovered his music at an impressionable age, the question of the political impact of Nono's music may be permanently confused by program notes like that one, and like the following, for the Wergo recording of his *Ricorda cosa ti hanno fatto in Auschwitz*:

By reducing the name Auschwitz to its real dimension, namely that of the one human being delivered up at any one moment to the murder industry, . . . Nono makes implicit criticisms of bourgeois ideology, which simulates extreme horror, but at the same time keeps its distance, so as to avoid having to consider rendering any practical assistance in all future ages . . . Not only is the text integrated

into music, it is transformed by electronic means. Nono is not concerned with stipulating precisely what he is recalling to mind. Instead he has conceived his work, which is pure music free from any literary ambitions, as a catalyst serving solely the extremely difficult purpose of recalling Auschwitz to mind at all. The text . . . is preserved there as a signal, not as an obelisk. . . . Within the piece, . . . musical proportions are evolved which take the place of all that neither musical illustration nor literary discussion could adequately transmit, . . .

. . . and so on and so on, by Konrad Boehmer.

The would-be enthusiast quails before the onslaught of these vague sentences — and I could have quoted from almost any of Nono's recordings to similar effect. What do they mean? Is it Nono himself who "makes implicit criticisms of bourgeois ideology" in his conversation or writings, or does the music somehow do so? Can it all be boiled down to, "Nono tried to create a more generalized and visceral emotional impact than a verbal description of Auschwitz would"? If so, does that differentiate the piece from most music in general? Are the program notes necessary for the music? Do they draw on some insider knowledge of the score, or even from Nono's own musings? Or is Boehmer simply listening blind as you or I would, and, unable to decode this dense music in any detail, filling the page with poetry? Eventually he gets down to one concretely descriptive sentence that I can imagine writing in response to this music: "Thanks to electronic transformations [the human voice] is extended in places to become an anonymous chorus, which is overwhelmed at unexpected moments by a torrent of harsh electronic noises." That I get, and it seems relevant to Auschwitz. But then: "The music tells no story — what has to be remembered has entered into its structural functions."

Somebody please listen to *Ricorda cosa ti hanno fatto in Auschwitz* and tell me what its structural functions are?

Nono may or may not have been responsible for his liner notes, and who cares? The point is that his music is opaque, mysterious, lacking in surface logic, and therefore invites explanation. There is a problem in general with the reception of serialist music: its apologists took (and still do take) its opacity and complexity as an opportunity to write about it in portentously vague, almost tautological ways that assume *a priori* a profundity that a piece of music should be left to prove to the listener. With abstract music like Boulez's, or grandiose and mystical music like Stockhausen's, one can take such writing with a grain of salt. But in the case of political music, the case is too urgent. Nono, as a political composer, wants to change our ideas and behavior, and the purpose and direction of those changes demand clarity, or at the very least humility.

Next to perhaps Luc Ferrari, Nono wrote my favorite electronic music from post-war Europe. The electronic piece *Contrappunto dialettico alla mente (Dialectic Counterpoint for the Mind, 1968)*, in particular, is one of the loveliest and most sensuous electronic pieces of that otherwise squeakfarty era. But the soothing, somewhat disjointed way in which, at the end, a soprano croons the words of a pamphlet directed toward African-Americans by the Harlem Progressive Labor Club —

You cause too much trouble in your ghetto
Uncle Sam wants you to die in Vietnam
The “Whitey’s” plan is to let you die in Vietnam
Stay here and fight for your human dignity

— doesn’t seem calculated to change anyone’s mind, or spur anyone into action. Nono pays homage to his texts, but given his serialist context doesn’t particularly use them less abstractly than Palestrina uses “Credo in unum Deum.” Likewise, *Ricorda cosa ti hanno fatto in Auschwitz* is a strange and lovely piece, with occasional outbursts of violent sound, but more often languorously gliding echoes of reverberant female voices. What text there is is not audible as such, nor is it given in the liner notes. Call the piece *Night on the Moors*, or *The Ghost of Annabel Lee*, and its affective and political significance change entirely. It is, in fact, exactly in the same position as the 1960 string orchestra piece by Krzysztof Penderecki that he originally intended to title “8’37”, but that he changed at the last minute to *Threnody (for the Victims of Hiroshima)*. With that external alteration, the string glissandos changed from abstract lines to screams and falling bombs (even though only one bomb fell at Hiroshima). By changing a title, one becomes a political composer.

And perhaps there’s nothing wrong with that. It seems very Continental. In the 1980s, I found that Germans considered me a political composer because I used Native American melodies and drumbeats in my music, even though there was usually no deliberate protest or political point: the very fact of drawing attention to an oppressed people was enough for them. You give a piece a title that refers to an event, or rather a location linked to an event — Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Sabra and Chatilla, My Lai, there are no end of atrocities — and while listening to the piece, the cultured new-music audience thinks about the event, influenced by the atmosphere and twistings and turnings of the music. For Cardew, I suspect that would have meant doing precisely what Nono’s apologists fear: allowing the bourgeois to “simulate horror but keep their distance.” For many composers, that’s what political music amounts to. For those of us whose work is ghettoized in new-music festivals, perhaps that’s all it can be.

Political Music via Song Quotation

The 1930s saw the rise of a phenomenon called proletarian literature. According to George Orwell, this did not mean either literature written by or for the proletariat, but rather “a literature in which the viewpoint of the working class, which is supposed to be completely different from that of the richer classes, gets a hearing” (“The Proletarian Writer,” 1940). Even were a proletarian to achieve enough education to write novels, Orwell says, his writing would still have to be based on the conventions of bourgeois literature, since he would be unable to escape the literary conventions of the dominant bourgeois class.

Music does not exactly duplicate this situation, but one Marxist idea of politically relevant music is one in which the tunes of the working class “get a hearing.” In the 1930s, this mostly meant folk songs. When the leftist impulse returned in the 1970s, it mostly meant political songs, union organizing songs, explicitly revolutionary songs.

Of course, for Eastern European composers like Dvorak, Smetana, and Tchaikovsky, the quotation of folk songs from their native land, or at least reference to the modal and rhythmic qualities of such folk songs, had been in itself a statement of nationalist political leanings throughout the late 19th century. Dvorak’s *Slavonic Dances* were popular in Vienna for their exotic flavor, but he had to be careful about when and where he wanted his Slavic melodies heard as protest against the oppressions of the Austro-Hungarian regime. In America, Charles Ives made something of a mania of quotation — perhaps partly from a nationalist impulse, more often from nostalgia and an aesthetic of direct representation of sonic landscapes, without any apparent political intent in mind. Something similar could be said for Virgil Thomson. The earliest American composer to quote folk songs in his music from a specifically political impulse seems to have been Aaron Copland. As he wrote of his leftist leanings in the early 1930s:

I began to feel an increasing dissatisfaction with the relations of the music-loving public and the living composer ... It seemed to me that composers were in danger of working in a vacuum ... I felt it was worth the effort to see if I couldn’t say what I had to say in the simplest possible terms.

In 1932 he wrote his first work based on folk tunes, *El Salon Mexico*. Other ballets and tone poems — *Billy the Kid* (1938), *Rodeo* (1942), *A Lincoln Portrait* (1942), *Appalachian Spring* (1943–4) — followed, incorporating the songs of America’s vanishing rural culture: “Streets of Laredo,” “ ’Tis the Gift to Be Simple,” “Camptown Races.”

Other leftists used folk material as well, including

Roy Harris in his “Folk Song” Symphony and Elie Siegmeister (who made heroic Marxist efforts to reach out to working class audiences) in his *Ozark Suite*. Virgil Thomson’s *Symphony on a Hymn Tune* and his opera with Gertrude Stein *The Mother of Us All* are virtual collages of American tunes that used to be familiar to every schoolchild — arguably written so less because of Thomson’s political leanings than because of his Satiesque love of simplicity and homespun “Americanism.” Some modernist composers were horrified by the simplicity trend of the 1930s, and begged Copland to return to writing dissonant music. Ruth Crawford, unable to reconcile her Communist sympathies with her love of dissonant counterpoint, gave up composing and collected folk songs. As Arthur Berger later said of the era, “To be politically correct one had to write accessible music, music for the masses. This did not appeal to me, and the only compromise I could make with my politically leftist sympathies was to stop composing altogether for a few years.”

After World War II, the 12-tone based, so-called International Style dominated music in the 1950s, and the thirst for maximum complexity obscured the idea of identifiable quotation. The idea of simplifying music in order to reach the working masses returned in the 1970s with Cardew, Rzewski, and Wolff. The pattern that Cardew invented was the piano piece based on a political song, and the first instance was his *Thaelmann Variations*, based on a rallying song of the German Communist Party, and commemorating the 30th anniversary of the death of its leader Ernest Thaelmann, who had died in the Buchenwald concentration camp in 1944. Cardew also wrote a number of shorter piano works based on songs of political import, such as “Four Principles on Ireland,” and often when he would write a political song, he would also make a non-vocal piano arrangement of it, as is the case with “Soon (There Will Be a High Tide of Revolution).” *Boolavogue*, the ambitious two-piano work Cardew was working on when he was killed (he finished three movements out of four), was a sonata-form theme and variations on the eponymous Irish freedom fighting song of 1798. In searching for a recognizable vernacular to reach his mass audience, Cardew frequently turned to the ornate, pleasant, Baroque keyboard tradition of the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book as an indigenous English musical idiom to which his immediate listeners could connect.

In 1975, only a year after the *Thaelmann Variations*, Frederic Rzewski wrote easily the most ambitious work in this genre, a work so successful that it can be said to have entered the standard piano repertoire: *The People United Can Never Be Defeated*. A mammoth set of

36 variations on a Chilean revolutionary song by Sergio Ortega, *The People United* is a compositional *tour de force* comparable to Beethoven’s *Diabelli Variations* or Brahms’ *Handel Variations*. Its 36 variations are grouped into six sets, and the last one in each set sums up all the technical devices of the first five. Despite the austere elegance of the overall structure, the tune is frequently recognizable, and in Variation 13 the music pauses at a poignant moment to quote the Communist rallying song “Bandiera Rossa.”

The highly structured, yet stylistically heterogenous, idiom Rzewski created in *The People United* is one he calls “humanist realism,” describing it as:

A conscious employment of techniques which are designed to establish communication, rather than to alienate an audience. That does not necessarily mean an exclusion of what’s called avant-garde style, by any means. [But] . . . if one is seriously interested in communication, then I suppose that a rigorous, say, formalistic style such as the style of the formalist composers and so on would be at a serious disadvantage.

For several years in the 1970s, quotation seemed to be Rzewski’s primary *modus operandi*. He followed up *The People United* with four *North American Ballads* based quite audibly on songs of the American unionist and peace movements: “Dreadful Memories” (Aunt Molly Jackson’s lyric memoir of a 1932 coal miners’ strike), “Which Side Are You On?,” “Down By the Riverside” (a symbol of the Vietnam peace movement), and “Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues.” Rzewski’s partitioning of the piano keyboard vividly illustrates the words that everyone hopefully hears in their head while he’s playing:

Don’t scab for the bosses
 Don’t listen to their lies.
 Us poor folks haven’t got a chance
 Unless we organize.
 Which side are you on?
 Which side are you on?

A later (and subtler, to my ears) theme and variations, *Mayn Yingele* (1988), written to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the infamous Nazi Kristallnacht, takes flight from a Yiddish song in which a father complains that he works so hard he never gets to see his baby son.

Perhaps Rzewski’s most powerful political statement, however, is one that uses words, on behalf of homosexuals rather than union workers: *De Profundis*, his masterful 1992 setting of the poignant letter Oscar Wilde wrote to his former lover from Reading Gaol. Pounding not only the keyboard but his own chest and cheeks, Rzewski (or Anthony De Mare, who also plays this piece compellingly and for whom it was written) intones and pianistically elaborates words that came from the depths of Wilde’s soul and stand as a reproach to our society yet

today:

On November 13, 1895, I was brought down here from London. From two o'clock till half-past two on that day, I had to stand on the center platform of Clapham Junction in convict dress, and handcuffed, for the world to look at. When people saw me they laughed. Each train swelled the audience. Nothing could exceed their amusement. That was, of course, before they knew who I was. As soon as they had been informed, they laughed still more. For half an hour I stood there in the November rain surrounded by a jeering mob. For a year I wept every day at the same hour and for the same space of time. In prison tears are a part of every day's experience. A day in prison on which one does not weep is a day on which one's heart is hard, not a day on which one's heart is happy.

After moving to Liege in the 1980s, however, Rzewski's commitment to political music seemed to weaken, and one could argue that he gradually left the idea of humanist realism behind. His 1991 *Sonata* is based around the tunes "L'homme arme" and "Three Blind Mice" — politically significant once, perhaps, but not in recent centuries — and his recent four-hour "piano novel" *The Road*, though playfully circuitous, is thoroughly abstract.

Like Rzewski and Cardew, Christian Wolff has produced keyboard works based on political tunes. Sometimes the latter are clearly evident, as in his *Hay Una Mujer Desaparecida* of 1979, based on a Holly Near song lamenting victims of Pinochet's junta in Chile. Other times — as in his *Preludes* of 1981 based on "Hallelujah, I'm a Bum," "Big Rock Candy Mountain," and other tunes of the American labor movement — the notes of the tune form the underlying basis of a song, but are not audible. This technique, conveying little politics to the audience beyond the title of the song, seems to accompany Wolff's lowered expectations of what political music can accomplish. "One way to try to convey something political," he's said, "is with a text. That's the guaranteed way, theoretically; actually, it's not at all guaranteed . . . But at least it's a start, because people will say, what do you mean? Or what does this title mean? Or where is that text from? You create an occasion in which political questions can be raised, or a little bit of modest education can take place."

A few younger composers have picked up the mantle of political music via quotation. A rare chamber work in this genre, and quite a large one, is *No More in Thrall* for string quartet and percussion (1995) by Jeffrey Schanzer, a Trotskyite Socialist in New York City whose father survived the Buchenwald death camp in Nazi Germany. This attractive non-vocal work in five movements — a meditation on Buchenwald and similar atrocities on the common thread of racial hatred — is based on various melodies of protest and ethnic associ-

ations, such as a Yiddish lullaby "Shlof in der Ruikeit" (Sleep in Peace); the ever-handy "Which Side are You On?"; a gypsy song about being deported to a concentration camp; and the "Internationale," worldwide anthem of the socialist movement, whose opening words "Arise ye slaves no more in thrall" gives Schanzer's piece its title.

Back in the late 1970s, when the idea of political music was much in the air and song quotation was the most widely approved strategy, I studied with Peter Gena, who quoted political tunes in his early solo and chamber works like *McKinley*, *Joe Hill*, and *Mother Jones*. Subsequently, I quoted a few political tunes myself. My quartet *New World Coming* (2001) is based on "There's a New World Coming," a 1975 spiritual by folk singer and civil rights activist Bernice Johnson Reagon (founder of Sweet Honey in the Rock):

The nations of Asia and Africa
They're taking over their lives.
The sisters and brothers south of us
Are finally gettin' wise.
Then take a look, United States
Of the North American clime,
With your strange mixture of wealth and hate
You won't be exempt this time!

In addition, my 1984 chamber piece *Hesapa ki Lakhota ki Thawapi* (*The Black Hills Belong to the Sioux*, recorded on Monroe Street) is based on not only the quotation but the gradual destruction of a Sioux melody — an attempted combination of political quotation and process piece. The tune opens in a rolling 12/8, and gradually becomes more anxious and choppy as beats are subtracted from the recurring structure. The piece was intended as a protest against yet another attempt by the U.S. government to buy away tracts of the Sioux's sacred Black Hills for the sake of the underlying uranium. It doesn't seem to have influenced national policy much.

An entirely individual case is the Chicago composer Frank Abbinanti, one of only two Americans known to me (Schanzer being the other) from the post-Cardew/Rzewski generation who might define themselves as political composers, and a Marxist at that. Abbinanti's signal work of his early career was *Liberation Music*, a piano piece based on "Bandiera Rossa." More often, however, he has stayed away from quotation, writing instrumental music that portrays moments of political struggle either through atmosphere (as in the Phrygian mode repeated notes of his *Espana: La Lucha* for brass ensemble, an homage to the Spanish Civil War) or through musical gestures that evoke the physical qualities of working class life. The leading example here is his *16 American Labor Studies* for piano which he has been reworking for orchestra, with

titles like “Cleveland Strike,” “Welders,” “The Milagro Beafield War,” “The Ludlow Massacre,” “Cincinnati Tailor.” These pieces commemorate events in labor union history by evoking the repetitive work activities of the unions referred to — picking, scraping, sewing, welding — as well as the violence of the associated strikes.

The most impressive of Abbinanti’s recent works is *Jenin* (2002), an hour-long, partly improvisatory piano work lamenting the massacre of the Palestinians in the West Bank town of Jenin by the Israeli army. Although there are no direct quotations, Abbinanti immersed himself in the tonality of Lebanese mourning songs before writing.

Ultimately, it is questionable whether quotation in the traditional sense will remain a relevant model for political music. Already today, when you play Ives’s Second Symphony for undergraduates, very few recognize tunes like “Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean” or “Down in the Cornfield” or “Rally Round the Flag.” How many people under 40 would now recognize “Bandiera Rosa” when it appears in *The People United*, or the pitches from “Big Rock Candy Mountain” in a Wolff’s *Prelude* even if you could hear them? Cultural continuity with such folk songs, songs of political protest, union songs, has been widely lost. The effect of *The People United* or *Mayn Yingele* will usually be to introduce the song to people who have never heard it before, which may be a worthwhile aim; as Wolff writes, “I hope that recalling a song will be an opportunity to recall its political occasion.” But it seems rare that the effect would tap into the collective spirit elicited by the song in the way these pieces seem intended to work, and as they might have worked a couple of decades ago.

At some point, quotation may be replaced, if it hasn’t been already, by sampling. Millions of young people who’ve never heard Holly Near’s “Hay Una Mujer Desaparecida” to recognize it in quotation would recognize, say, a recording of Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech if incorporated into an electronic piece. One might say that the sampling of riot noises in Bob Ostertag’s *All the Rage* is a kind of quotation, and I suspect that many more young electronic musicians than I know about have started using such sampling with political intent. It seems a potent new force for political music.

Political Music Without Text: Socialist Realism

When we step into the supposition that music can have political impact without words being involved, we find ourselves in much murkier philosophical territory. A prevalent common-sense view indicates that music can

seem political only when text is involved. The conviction that purely instrumental music has no identifiable content was strongly expressed as far back as Plato. In the *Laws*, admittedly, he writes that one —

would never commit the grave mistake of setting masculine language to an effeminate scale, or tune, or wedding melody, or postures worthy of free men with rhythms fit only for slaves (*Laws*, 669c),

— giving us to believe that melodic modes and rhythms can at least in themselves portray character and social class. However, this comes in a discussion of the appropriateness of music to text setting. Only a paragraph later, when he turns to the solo music of an aulos player or harpist, he backtracks a little:

It is the hardest of tasks to discover what such wordless rhythm and tune signify, or what model worth considering they represent. (*Laws*, 669e)

A prejudice against the meaningfulness of instrumental music thereafter persists throughout most of history, relaxed slightly by the 17th-century German Doctrine of Affections (*Affektenlehre*), which attempted to systematize signifiers of emotional affect in music via analogy with ancient Greek and Latin rhetorical figures. Even here, however — despite a general association of minor modes and slow dotted rhythms with sadness, and triplet rhythms and major modes with joy, as well as attributing a quality such as “yearning” to the rising minor sixth — the *Affektenlehre* was primarily concerned with the appropriateness of music to text. (Although once you admit that music can be appropriate or inappropriate to text, you’ve implicitly opened the Pandora’s box of music having connotative potential.) Instrumental music could be a pleasant entertainment, but was considered incapable of making a statement about the world — and so most people probably continue to believe today.

It was with the arrival of Beethoven’s heavily dramatic music, and its contrast with that of Haydn and Mozart, that music lovers began to think it capable of philosophical statement. As E.T.A. Hoffman wrote:

Haydn’s music reminds us of a blissful world, eternally youthful before the Fall; Mozart takes us into a spirit world of love and melancholy, of irrepressible longing; while Beethoven’s music sets in motion the lever of fear, of awe, of horror, of suffering, and awakens just the infinite longing which is the essence of romanticism.

From here it is a relatively short step to the doctrine of socialist realism propagated in the early Soviet Union and in communist circles. This is not to be confused with Social Realism, which was primarily a visual art movement; Social Realist painters like Ben Shahn dealt with subject matter that had to do with the poor, or with class issues in society. Obviously, an untexted symphony can’t

literally be about the poor, but the kind of metaphorical reading of symphonic form that became popular following E.T.A. Hoffman was adduced to speculate on the moral character of symphonies and other major works. In Communist countries, such metaphorical readings grew to assume the level of official critical dogma.

In the mid-20th century, Fascist and Soviet Communist ideologies took very specific views of what constituted healthy and decadent trends in instrumental music. Starting in 1929, the Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians (RAPM), and later the Union of Soviet Composers (which replaced it in 1932), pressed on composers the necessity of the dogma of “socialist realism,” a term officially defined as “the truthful and historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development.” “The masses,” wrote the *Literary Gazette* in 1932, “demand of an artist honesty, truthfulness, and a revolutionary, socialist realism in the representation of the proletarian revolution.” What “truthfulness” meant here was a continual glorification of the social ideals and achievements of communism. A 1936 *Pravda* article titled “Chaos Instead of Music” forced Shostakovich into official disfavor, and made clear that deviations from the socialist realism program would not be condoned. Prokofiev, who returned to the Soviet Union in 1936 and became trapped there when his passport was confiscated in 1938, bent over backwards writing communist-glorifying works based on Russian folk tunes like *Zdravitsa* (*Hail to Stalin*, op.85), but even his ten-movement cantata for the 20th anniversary of the October Revolution (op.74, 1936–7), on texts by Marx, Lenin, and Stalin, was declared insufficiently socialist realist, and denied performance until 1966.

In practice, however, the implications of socialist realism for instrumental music were rather superficial. Lyrical melodies were preferred, as more acceptable to the masses; complex rhythms, especially those associated with American jazz, were worse than suspect; and reliance on Russian folklore and folk tunes were encouraged. Symphonies were supposed to express optimism, and thus end triumphantly in major keys; Shostakovich’s Fourth Symphony was damned partly for ending pessimistically in minor, and he redeemed himself by ending the Fifth in major. His “Leningrad” Symphony, whose finale portrays the rout of the German army by Russian forces, was taken up as an icon of the Russian spirit during wartime, but official critics quibbled with the fact that the theme of the German army went on at greater length than that of the Russian army. The conductor Samosud tried to persuade Shostakovich to add vocal soloists and chorus to the finale in a hymn of praise to Stalin; Shostakovich declined and adjudged that “the optimism

is entirely sufficient.”

It has been difficult in the West to arrive at a consistent and fair critical attitude to take towards works that were written under such oppressive governmental directives. With the fall of the Soviet Union, many Russian and former Soviet composers (including in New York, recently, Khatchaturian) have been undergoing indulgent reassessment.

Music as Metaphor for Social Order and Process

The idea that, not only through its emotional expression but through its very structure and methodology, instrumental music could have an effect on political thought, is a phenomenon of the 1960s and ’70s. Attempts during that time to address the political situation in wordless music took two forms:

1. musical structure as an analogue of an ideal, or at least preferable, society
2. musical performance as a model for ideal, or at least preferable, social interaction

The first idea was largely, though not entirely, the contribution of John Cage. From almost the beginning Cage had seen his music as a reflection of society, and more specifically as encouraging a different relationship to society; he preferred, as he put it, “acting in the gap between art and life.” As early as 1943 Cage defended his music for percussion orchestra in terms bemusedly but rather precisely restated by an anonymous *Life* magazine reviewer:

Cage believes that when people today get to understand and like his music, which is produced by banging one object with another, they will find new beauty in everyday modern life, which is full of noises made by objects banging against each other.

Cage spent much of the late 1940s writing uniformly quiet pieces like *In a Landscape* and *Dream* because, he wrote, “it did not seem to me that there was any good about anything big in society.” These examples reveal, though in opposite ways, a tendency to encourage the listener to appreciate specific kinds of things: positively, in encouraging an acceptance of noise and “un-musical” sounds, and negatively, in encouraging a distaste for large, bureaucratic ventures.

In the late 1940s a crisis came. Cage had been attempting to express in his music the nine Indian emotions (erotic, heroic, odiousness, anger, mirth, fear, sorrow, wondrousness, and tranquility), and, noticing that even an erotic or heroic piece might draw only laughter

from the audience, decided that the attempt to communicate emotion in continually advancing musical styles was futile:

I had poured a great deal of emotion into the piece, and obviously I wasn't communicating this at all. Or else, I thought, if I were communicating, then all artists must be speaking a different language, and thus speaking only for themselves. The whole musical situation struck me more and more as a Tower of Babel.

Cage's well-known ultimate response was to turn to using chance processes and forfeit any illusion of communication whatsoever. At the same time, his writings reveal a hope that the anarchy of his music would encourage an appreciation for anarchy among listeners. Cage disliked, he said, the exercise of power, preferred non-hierarchical types of organization, believed with Thoreau that "that government is best which governs not at all," and refused to vote. Starting with *Music of Changes* for piano (1951), Cage's music demonstrated the behavior of the kind of society he hoped would eventually arise in the world.

The idea of music as a model for society is a Cagean notion and an attractive one, but not without pitfalls. Certainly for myself and presumably for many musicians of my generation, Cage changed the connotative associations of the word "anarchy," from the negative meaning of chaos and confusion to that of disciplined action without the top-down imposition of hierarchical structure. One could argue that it took Cage's writings and lectures to accustom us to this view of anarchy, that the music couldn't have done so on its own; yet as a music critic I would be loathe to disallow the power of words to teach us how to hear music differently. Enjoyment of Cage's randomness-based works like *Hymnkus*, *Four*, and *Europeras I-II* has certainly increased my appreciation for the unintended patterns formed by random events. On the other hand, I still get as irritated as anyone else when I'm composing and the phone rings.

From a Marxist standpoint, Cardew criticizes Cage's randomness for presenting

"the surface dynamism of modern society; he ignores the underlying tensions and contradictions that produce that surface . . . He does not represent it as an oppressive chaos resulting from the lack of planning that is characteristic of the capitalist system in decay (a riot of greed and exploitation)."

Cage's idea of sounds being "just sounds," he continues,

"reflects the conception of things as being isolated from one another, hence there is no point in investigating their interrelations, and if nobody investigates the relationships between things then the bourgeoisie will be able to maintain its rule. The 'randomness' idea is a familiar weapon of the bourgeois ideologists to divert the consciousness of the masses from the real laws (laws and randomness are

counterposed) underlying the world and human society."

When New York Philharmonic musicians infamously revolted during a performance of Cage's *Atlas Eclipticalis* and destroyed some of the amplification equipment, Cardew could not fault them, seeing the action as a manifestation of class struggle, the

"sharply antagonistic relationship between the avant-garde composer with all his electronic gadgetry and the working musician."

Taking a cue from Mao, Cardew points out that Cage could have studied the reasons for the musicians' action and benefited from self-criticism. Instead, he went back to making music that "speaks only to a tiny band, a social intellectual elite."

Inspired by Cage's insights but disagreeing with his philosophy (in fact, so few people have accepted Cage's philosophy that the cliché that he is "more important as a musical philosopher" is pretty ludicrous), other composers took from him the idea that music, through re-ordering perceptions, could influence political behavior. Whether this is what Karlheinz Stockhausen was after or not, Cardew took Stockhausen to task for the mysticism with which he surrounded himself and his performances, calling it a traditional tool to distract the masses from the fact of their oppression.

"[T]he mystical idea is that the world is illusion, just an idea inside our heads. Then are the millions of oppressed and exploited people throughout the world just another aspect of that illusion in our minds? No, they aren't . . . Mysticism says 'everything that lives is holy,' so don't walk on the grass and above all don't harm a hair on the head of an imperialist."

Cardew and his Marxist associates sought for ways to break down, within the music, the elitism they saw in Cage and Stockhausen. One of the simplest strategies they arrived at was to write a piece that anyone can play, that doesn't require large and established organizations for a public airing. There is a minimalist tradition of such works, including first of all Terry Riley's *In C* (1964) and later Frederic Rzewski's *Les Moutons des Panurge*, a 1968 "process piece" in which all of the musicians try to build up a melody by playing first the first note, then the first two, then the first three, etc. Mistakes are entirely acceptable — the music becomes more interestingly canonic, in fact, once everyone is no longer in unison, and thus the performer who cannot achieve perfection need not be ashamed. Further, Pauline Oliveros has gone so far as to make many pieces that involve audience participation, and for which musical training is neither required nor necessarily an asset. Such works remove music from what many people see as the elitism of the classical music world.

Wolff, during the 1970s especially, pioneered the concept of pieces in which the process of rehearsal and performance becomes a model of social interaction, a way of revealing to the performers what kind of power struggles erupt in interactive situations, and how to avoid them. His early pieces such as *For One, Two, or Three People* (1964) had placed performers in the situation of reacting to each other according to rules, with some leeway. Wolff says that he was later made aware of the political implications of the “democratic interdependence” required by such pieces, but hadn’t thought about that at the time, since this was before his and Cardew’s political awakening in 1971–72. Later pieces such as *Burdocks* (1971), *Changing the System* (1972–3), and *Exercises* (1973–5) offered performers choices about what sections to play when, as well as parts that could be played in any clef by any instrument.

In 1975, I remember performing, as a student among many others, in *Exercises* at the *June in Buffalo* festival. Afterwards the performers engaged in a discussion to examine how the piece went. Those who had taken an aggressive leadership role during rehearsals and made decisions for the group declared that the process had indeed been a model of democracy and cooperation. Those of us who had been quieter and held back pointed out that the others had been rather dictatorial, and that we felt like we had been railroaded. The performance had been a model for the problems of a democratic cooperative, but not necessarily for the solutions. The other issue for such pieces, of course, is that in a sense they seem to be performed for the benefit of the performers, with little regard for what the audience will experience. In this way one could say they assume a non-European performance practice, such as Native American dances in which every member of a village participates either as musician or dancer.

Somewhat more effective at times is the use of theater to illustrate underlying political realities. Notable in this respect is the group that formed at Champaign-Urbana under Herbert Brün’s mentorship, the Performers’ Workshop Ensemble consisting of composer/actors Susan Parenti, Lisa Fay, Jeff Glassman, Arun Chandra, Mark Enslin and others. Consistent with their aims, this group largely avoids the usual avant-garde circuit, performing instead in malls and public spaces to reach a local and unsuspecting public. The group’s pieces, musically structured even when theatrical, reveal the psychological workings of power relationships. One of the more describable examples is Parenti’s tape piece, *No, Honey, I Can Do It!*, in which her speech melodies uncomfortably delineate the vocal nuances people use as they debase themselves in favor of others, or Chandra’s

In Detention, in which the speech of the “singer”, reporting on the excuses given for the murders of prisoners by the administration, is placed against the trivial sounds of banging on bars and pillows. The Performers’ Workshop Ensemble is the most effective group of political musicians I know of in recent decades. The fact that their work remains localized and obscure is emblematic of the condition of political music at its purest.

One more word might be said about the practice of drawing analogies between musical structure and social organization, which arose with Cage’s explorations of musical and social anarchy. Second to that, the most common comparison has been between communism and 12-tone music, an analogy which seems to rest on the following three points:

1. Both represented the attempt to order, by rational means and a relatively small number of principles, phenomena that had traditionally been ordered by more heterogeneous and intuitive means;
2. A presumption of historical inevitability on the part of each movement’s adherents, with a resulting disdain for those who didn’t get with the program; and
3. The fact that the 12-tone period, dated from Schoenberg’s first 12-tone row in 1921 to the rather sudden decline in the style’s prestige in the late 1980s, coincides almost exactly with the period of Soviet Union communism.

But that’s all. It would be historically ludicrous, I think, to argue that 12-tone music could potentially lead to a greater tendency toward communist thought, or that 12-tone music would be a particularly appropriate means of expression for communist political ideas. Clearly Stalin thought the opposite. To pursue this train of thought, one could begin analyzing why the European aristocracy loved the stately, orderly musics of Lully and Haydn, and why the rising bourgeoisie preferred the voluptuous, emotionally volatile piano concerti of Grieg and Tchaikovsky — and the answer would not lie, I suspect, in the underlying tonal or rhythmic structure of the musical language, but in terms of what kinds of perceived entities are created on the surface of the music, and what happens to them in terms of tension and resolution. Art is not about reality, but about appearances, and the road to a music that would bring about desired changes in society may well not be the straightest or most literal.

Conclusion, with a Last Word by George Orwell

Writing this survey has made me pessimistic about the possibility of political music in general, at least personally. If a necessary aim is to reach mass audiences, we composers are so far behind the pop musicians as to have little hope of ever becoming comparatively visible on the cultural landscape. Pop musicians encounter the public via a stage persona that lies outside the talents of many of us; however much I may agree with Diamanda Galás's politics, however effective I find her methods, I am unlikely (we all hope) to don heavy stage makeup and follow her in making a political statement which is, after all, as much theatrical as musical. The idea that only text can render music political is so ingrained, so apparently commonsensical, that the number of music lovers who could be convinced otherwise is probably statistically insignificant. It is possible that musics like those of Wolff and Cage have a subtle influence on the perceptions of listeners and performers, leading them in a saner direction, but the evidence is chimerical. It may be true only in the sense that chaos theorists will trace a connection between a butterfly flapping its wings in China to a resulting hurricane on the opposite side of the world. In any case, we have no guarantee that the result will be in accord with our intentions. As Cage wisely titled his diary: "How to Improve the World (You Will Only Make Matters Worse)."

A more solvable problem, but one that would have to be consciously confronted, is that our writings about political music remain grounded in a Marxist vocabulary which, whatever truth it may contain, is so old-fashioned as to seem a specialist jargon. "Bourgeois," "proletarian," "hypostatized" — these are terms that no longer communicate our situation or our intentions. The failure and discrediting of communism in the Soviet Union and China has made any revival of socialist thought, however warranted and welcome, an uphill climb. We are indeed involved in a class war — a war waged by the corporate class, who have obscured the fact by somehow making the very term "class warfare" a term of derision. It is, moreover, as Chomsky says, a "perfectly conscious" class war "against working people, the poor, the unemployed, minorities, even members of the middle class." For it to succeed — and it is succeeding — it is equally necessary for the corporate/political class to understand

that there is a war and to pretend to the rest of us that there isn't. The vastly increased concentration of media in the 1980s and '90s has made it well-nigh impossible to dispute corporate propaganda in any widespread way. And how are we going to make clear in music a situation that we have overwhelmingly failed to clarify in words?

So having begun with a grandiose statement from Mao, let me close with a more modest one (though from the same decade) by who wrestled with these issues all his short life, and who gave, in "Writers and Leviathan," the most precise statement of the problem I've read. He's writing specifically about novelists and essayists, who during World War II were sometimes pressed into writing government propaganda, so for "writer" you'll have to substitute "artist" or "composer," and for "literary," "artistic":

Do we have to conclude that it is the duty of every writer to "keep out of politics"? Certainly not! . . . I only suggest that we should draw a sharper distinction than we do at present between our political and our literary loyalties, and should recognize that a willingness to do certain distasteful but necessary things does not carry with it any obligation to swallow the beliefs that usually go with them. When a writer engages in politics he should do so as a citizen, as a human being, but not as a writer. I do not think that he has a right, merely on the score of his sensibilities, to shirk the ordinary work of politics. Just as much as anyone else, he should be prepared to deliver lectures in draughty halls, to chalk pavements, to canvass voters, to distribute leaflets, even to fight in civil wars if it seems necessary. But whatever else he does in the service of his party, he should never write for it. He should make it clear that his writing is a thing apart. And he should be able to act co-operatively while, if he chooses, completely rejecting the official ideology. He should never turn back from a train of thought because it may lead to a heresy, and he should not mind very much if his unorthodoxy is smelt out . . .

But does all this mean that a writer . . . should refrain from writing about politics? Once again, certainly not! There is no reason he should not write in the most crudely political way, if he wishes to. Only he should do so as an individual, an outsider, at the most an unwelcome guerrilla on the flank of a regular army . . . Sometimes, if a writer is honest, his writings and his political activities may actually contradict one another. There are occasions when that is plainly undesirable: but then the remedy is not to falsify one's impulses, but to remain silent.

Personally, I have plans to continue writing political music, with text. But I will keep in mind that music has its own inviolable truth — and that actions speak louder even than notes.