Who needs contemporary atonal western art music?

A discussion of Julian Johnson's book Who needs classical music? *applied to musical modernism*

Entertainment vs art

As opposed to many modern scholars, Julian Johnson, in his book *Who needs Classical Music?*, attributes a very different value to western art music than to what he calls 'normative music', such as popular music and most film music. Johnson states that people mistakenly look for the value of Western Art Music only in its capacity to entertain. While insisting that entertainment and pleasure are not bad things, and that many different styles of music can satisfy the human need to be pleased, Johnson argues that there is a difference between music which does only that, and music which offers something more than that. Johnson writes that the latter offers a sophisticated synthesis of thought and feeling that emulates our own being while also offering a transformation of it. Without rejecting its physical, acoustic material, it unfolds through time in a way that exceeds that, and creates something more abstract - "something more cerebral and reflective". (Johnson, 2002, xiii) It does not merely reflect or reproduce our being or society, but takes on their dissonances in order to transforms them. In doing so it proposes different possible ways of being, and creates a tension between what is and what might be. This type of music is labelled by Johnson as 'music as art'. The temporal tension between being and becoming that is found in music as art makes it into a dynamic entity that mirrors the profound layeredness of human life in all its consonance, dissonance, and evolution (both realistic and utopian, predictable and unpredictable).

Appreciation of Johnson's concept of value in western art music requires quite a different mode of listening than most people in our current society are used to. For that reason, he argues, art music's value is at the same time the cause of its own demise: "This is the real reason that classical music fares badly today - not because it is old but because it demands an engagement of the mind through time (thought) that contemporary conceptions of music no longer recognize." (Johnson, 2002, 56) According to Johnson, today's fast-paced society and the associated social practices in relation to music make it very hard to afford a type of engagement that does justice to western art music:

> Why have we collectively refused the sophistication of thought and feeling embodied in an earlier language? And why, in its place, do we locate the height of modernity in a normative music confined to monosyllables and repetition? (Johnson, 2002, 103)

Apart from a few attempts at redemption ("Neither simplicity nor archaism are problematic in themselves." (Johnson, 2002, 102)), Johnson is quite dismissive of normative music altogether. His most pressing concern seems to be its alleged deception; hiding its simplicity behind a layer of contemporary veneer, as if the mere use of the latest technology would make it into something modern and expressive of current times. The fact that, in recent times, the attribution 'most popular' has become synonymous for 'best' has led to normative music being dominant to the extent of obliterating other styles of music.[1] At times it seems like Johnson vilifies the dominant musical culture to an extent that he

[1] A link can be made here to the effects capitalism has on small companies and proprietorships: a small private taxi company that prides itself on excellent service is forced out of the market by a big multinational, not because it offers better service, but because it is easier accessible and cheaper.

blames an entire world full of normative music lovers for maliciously trying to annihilate the sophistication of art music and replacing it with something vastly inferior and deceitful. As such, western art music, Johnson suggests, "is today a form of cultural resistance: it opposes a process by which we reduce the world to opaque, depthless objects and, with it, ourselves." (Johnson, 2002, 60)

The stark juxtaposition between Johnson's idea of the value of normative music and that of western art music creates an uneasy feeling of class difference: 'high art' and 'low art', or even 'good music' and 'bad music'. Johnson himself realises the pitfall of this divide: "In the politics of contemporary cultural style, classical music has an increasingly negative status. It's not just "uncool," but comes to be politically suspect, associated not only with a parental generation but with the tastes of an elitist social group (well-off and well-educated) whose patronage of classical music is perceived as a gesture of class distinction - in short, snobbery." (Johnson, 2002, 22) Many socio-musicological studies of recent decades (for instance those of Cristopher Small (Small, 1998), Tia DeNora (DeNora, 2000), Antoine Hennion (Hennion, 2015), and Georgina Born (Born, 2013)) have argued against this divide, as they regard the value of all music to be in the field of involvement, mediation, participation, or 'musicking'. (Small, 1998) The beauty of this is that all music is basically levelled in terms of sophistication and class - one does not need to be an expert or initiate in a certain style of music to be able to appreciate its (social) activity. By describing normative music as untrue, superficial, and escapist, Johnson clearly devaluates it in a rather short-sighted manner. While he is making an interesting point by stating that western art music should not be valued, or even listened to, in the same way as normative music, the exact same thing should then hold true in the opposite direction as well. But instead, Johnson tries to attribute the same values to normative music as he does to western art music, and because they do not hold up, he dismisses it as superficial rubbish. In doing so, he actually weakens what is a very valid and important argument. Yes, art music's value lies in a different realm than that of (a significant part of) normative music, but no, that does not mean the latter should be dismissed - normative music should merely be valued differently.

Many classical musicians nowadays are making efforts to become more widely appreciated by appearing on popular stages with simplified, more instantly digestible, versions of their music. But, when applying Johnson's theory to this situation, that is the exact opposite of what they should be doing. Johnson states that the dominance of the present musical culture, in which immediacy is key, does not leave room for other forms of music which acquire value through a different type of appreciation; one that requires more time and thoughtfulness. As such, would it not be much more rewarding to try and create an atmosphere around western art music that affords the "special kind of thinking that brings together the emotional and intellectual in a uniquely intense and sophisticated manner", (Johnson, 2002, 60) which is advocated by Johnson, rather than trying to imitate the methods that have proven successful for normative music?

Progress

The questions of what art is, and whether pop music should be considered art at all, will not be addressed further in this thesis, as a classification of that kind is not essential to the issues raised here. However, working from the presumption that western art music is in fact art, an important question to ask, is if art can exist without innovation, and without a certain degree of dissonance in relation to the society

that it is produced in. As seen above, Johnson argues that friction is an indispensable part of art music. But he is talking about the uneasiness of human existence that needs to be taken on and transformed (and not ignored or trivialised); not necessarily in relation to the current society. In fact, Johnson states that newness is an "objective category of the musical work", (Johnson, 2002, 109) and "a property of the work, derived from the work's transcendence of its own boundaries." (Johnson, 2002, 109) With that he explains why certain compositions that are already two hundred years old can still sound new and fresh - newer and fresher even than many works composed today - and that it also does not matter how revolutionary a composer was in their own time. It is the balance between coherence and unexpectedness, boundaries and the transgression of them, that create a sense of transcendence which is desirable, if not essential, for proper art music. This all sounds rather logical, and reminiscent, for instance, of David Huron's work on expectations in music (Huron, 2006): hearing the expected is comfortable, but being challenged to hear something surprising which then resolves into something familiar is even more gratifying ("tension-related contrastive valence" (Huron, 2006, 367)). However, as Johnson points out, centuries-old music can still sound 'new' today, implying that newness does not necessarily have to extend to the tonal language of a work of art music at all. So is stylistic change a necessity? Can western art music continue to exist without evolving further? Has it reached its limit halfway through the twentieth century with the end of tonality, and is popular music, rather than modernism, its rightful heir?

For Huron, atonality is a bridge too far, as he considers it to be so far removed from what listeners expect to hear when they are exposed to music that it can only be viewed as a deliberate manifestation of psychological irritation. If a listener is unfamiliar with a musical style, it is quite likely that they will not be able to predict how it will unfold, and will therefore be denied the rewarding cognitive and emotional effects of the confirmation (or thwarting) of prediction. Huron devotes one chapter of his book, *Sweet Anticipation, Music and the Psychology of Expectation* (Huron, 2006), to twentieth century music, in which he describes the unexpectedness of modernist music as a "contrarian aesthetic", (Huron, 2006, 333) describing it as follows:

> The music created under the contrarian aesthetic is experienced by most listeners as annoying or irritating. This should not be a surprise when the musical organization persistently transgresses the expectations of listeners who are encultured to Western musical norms - especially the norms of the classical style. (Huron, 2006, 248)

As Huron observes, Wagner's chromatic language deliberately tricks the tonally and cadentially minded listener by not giving them what they expect: a contrarian aesthetic. Schönberg's music also thwarts expectational patterns, but instead of using a contrarian aesthetic to play with people's expectation of how a piece's harmonic progression will unfold, it strives to be as removed as possible from the familiarity of the tonal sound world: not contrarian at all, as Huron suggests, but rather starting with a completely clean slate. There is a significant difference between a composer, such as Wagner, who uses highly chromatic (or contra-tonal) elements in his music to deliberately throw the listener off, and make them long for a tonal cadence, and a serial composer such as Schönberg, who uses a completely new (tonal) language, which in itself is therefore not contrarian. Huron quotes Schönberg as observing that "it seemed in the first stages immensely important to avoid a similarity with tonality." (Schönberg in Huron, 2006, 339) He then continues to show that Schönberg's tone rows are deliberately constructed

in a way that avoids any tonal implications, as they show significantly less "tonal concentration" than randomly created tone rows - interpreted by Huron as a manifestation of contrarianism. (Huron, 2006, 342) If, on the other hand, one were to view dodecaphony as a completely new musical language - a new tonality rather than an atonality - Schönberg's attempts to avoid traditionally tonal references could be construed as a clear sign for the listener: *this is a different tonal language, do not be tempted to attribute any diatonic values to it*. By viewing the aesthetic of serialism as being based on contrarian principles, it will always remain a disappointing expression of anti-tonality, as is implied in the word *atonal* as well. Even though this seemingly trivial difference might not matter to audiences who attend a concert expecting to be 'tonally pleased', Huron's observations suggest that Schönberg's musical language is based on nothing more than psychological irritation, stating that "many of the musical devices used by Wagner, Schoenberg, Stravinsky, and others make sense only when viewed as serving the goal of psychological disruption through thwarted expectation." (Huron, 2006, 350) Granting pleasure or satisfaction (tonally or otherwise) to the listener is not the (main) function of western art music (or any art, for that matter), and it certainly was not Schönberg's main objective, but there is possibly much more to it than only irritation and unease, as Huron suggests.

Johnson, too, recognises the inaccessibility and unpopularity of contemporary atonal western art music (CAWAM) and attributes this phenomenon to the music´s lack of connection to the everyday: "By definition, it is involved with limits, redefinitions, and reformulations rather than making statements in the enclosed space of familiar musical terms." (Johnson, 2002, 105) However, for Johnson that is no reason to dismiss its potential value, but merely an unsurprising consequence of its resistance to immediacy. He acknowledges that the difficulty of the musical language of CAWAM is an easy target for critique, and lists a number of often heard charges:

- arrogant and elitist
- self-obsessed
- victimised
- in contempt of its audience
- uncommunicative
- too intellectual
- devoid of feeling
- largely white, male, and middle-class

But for Johnson these accusations are in turn a sign of the attitude of modern society towards art music:

> Unpopularity is not so much the choice of contemporary composers as it is their fate. It remains so as long as they choose to continue the tradition of classical music - that is to say, an art form that deals discursively, on its own specifically musical terms, with the construction of a complex subjectivity and its relationship to the demands of the whole. This has a fundamentally ethical impetus: to pursue a truthful musical mediation of social reality wherever it leads rather than capitulating to something more immediate and entertaining. (Johnson, 2002, 104)

Huron does not seem to recognise any value, let alone necessity, in CAWAM, but also does not continue to lay out his ideas for the future of western art music. If the only requirement for 'good' music comes from its capacity to play with anticipation and gratification, then there would be no need whatsoever for art music to continue to evolve; the current normative music is more than capable of

fulfilling that role. For Johnson, on the other hand, writing a pop song as musically simple as a Schubert song, is in fact denying 200 years of history, which is "odd", if not "unthinkable" and "a deliberate act of historical dressing up". (Johnson, 2002, 102) The fact that today's normative music has ignored modernism altogether only strengthens the sense of alienation further: "it lays bare a historical disjunction that we normally evade." (Johnson, 2002, 102) Not evolving over time would be extrinsic to any real form of art - stagnation is regression - because, with the evolution of human life, the "universe of artistic possibilities" (Johnson, 2002, 102) changes too, and if it is indeed art's function to transform our reality and transcend both our social and personal existence, surely art (music) should evolve along with it.

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Where Huron basically blames atonal composers for writing incomprehensible music - and in the process rather short-sightedly takes Schönberg's music as representative for the entire language that is serial music - Johnson does recognise the importance of CAWAM, but blames the audience for 'collectively refusing sophistication' and a lack of understanding. These two perspectives are fairly representative of the wider discourse about the topic,[2] but I would argue that both are unproductive. While Johnson makes a valid point in arguing that the nature of art (music) is to remain impervious to normativity and market value, his condescending attitude towards popular music, and in fact the vast majority of the (potential) audience, will not be likely to entice them into listening to CAWAM more. That is why I would suggest turning our attention to the performer, as co-creator of the musical artwork and active agent between composer and listener, to deal with the current 'crisis of musical modernity'.

[2] For instance, Agawu (2009), Boros (1995), Dusman (1994), Lerdahl (1992).