

Chapter 1

Motivation

The present chapter formulates a theoretical framework in which concepts described in [Chapter 2](#) are elaborated further in an attempt to establish a discourse that clarifies the motivations behind the submitted creative work. Taking into consideration the philosophical and historical background previously elaborated, I will therefore undertake the difficult task of proposing a new attitude towards music creation that at once takes into consideration the shortcomings ascribed to the notion of *modernism* and simultaneously acknowledges the importance of the original vision of the avant-garde. The musical stance I propose, also recognizes the misguided intentions of the *modernist* anti-mimetic position and the consequences it brought to musical discourse—a criticism now credited to the first generation of artists that became associated with the label of *postmodernism*. At the same time, I accept that the same label of *postmodernism* has recently started to signify an artistic approach which encourages a permissive viewpoint towards mixing genres and styles and—by aimlessly questioning the notions of truth and universality in music—promotes the deceiving notion that nothing new can be achieved through musical creativity. I will contend this (*postmodern*) argument by applying Rancière’s concepts of the *strategic* and *aesthetic* types of avant-garde to music and pointing to the relationship that exists between music and other forms of subjectivity. By looking at the ethical functions of music and the role it takes in basic human endeavors, I will propose that there is an implicit ethical core in the definition of music. I will further argue that the shared purpose that music and language have—which is to convey emotion and meaning through sound—makes music a vital human act that is deep-rooted in our evolutionary past. This points to the notion that music conveys knowledge, thoughts and feelings that are not exclusive to music, but relate to other forms of human action and experience. Moreover, the ethical functions attributed to music also compromise the attempts at expanding the definition of *what music is* that is characteristic of the *aesthetic regime of art*. As a consequence of the relationship that exists between new types of music and

new forms of human experience, innovation in music is often seen skeptically within the community if it ceases to perform its ethical functions. Nevertheless, I will propose that there is an ethical function in-itself in music that lies within the *aesthetic regime*, for its ability to inspire new sensible forms that relate to other aspects of human activity. I will therefore argue that an important role of the musical avant-garde today is to reestablish an agreement of trust with the community by demonstrating through music that the purpose of new musical forms, concepts and definitions is to inspire new ideas, opinions, desires and emotions and not to undermine the ethical function music already performs. Finally, I will propose that this agreement can be reestablished by ... musical strategies...

1.1 Redefining the Musical Subject?

I will start explaining the basic motivations surrounding my work first by considering a problematic position that is prevalent today between people concerned with music. This dominant position is characterized by a skeptical and often cynical attitude towards new forms of thought in music. However, this attitude is dominant not without a reason: it has to do with the notion that today music is—as Alain Badiou has stated—‘negatively defined.’ Badiou clearly expresses this view in his essay entitled ‘Scholium: A Musical Variant of the Metaphysics of the Subject.’

Today, the music-world is negatively defined. The classical subject and its romantic avatars are entirely saturated, and it is not the plurality of ‘musics’—folklore, classicism, pop, exoticism, jazz and baroque reaction in the same festive bag—which will be able to resuscitate them. But the serial subject is equally unpromising, and has been for at least twenty years. Today’s musician, delivered over to the solitude of the interval—where the old coherent world of tonality together with the hard dodecaphonic world that produced its truth are scattered into unorganized bodies and vain ceremonies—can only heroically repeat, in his very works: ‘I go on, in order to think and push to their paradoxical radiance the reasons that I would have for not going on.’¹

Here, Badiou precisely delineates the situation in which so called ‘art music’ or ‘contemporary music’ is created and received today, where the only two main options seem to embrace either the joyful and permissive attitude towards mixing genres and styles now commonly ascribed to *postmodernism* or the desolate notion of *modernist* aesthetics that to this day heroically stands in ‘life support’ for more than thirty years. These two positions also seem unable at present time to inspire a profound

¹Badiou, ‘Scholium: A Musical Variant of the Metaphysics of the Subject’, p. 89.

change in the way we create, perform, perceive and think about music; nor to respond to the original premise of the *modernist* vision of the musical avant-garde, which establishes a connection between new forms of musical and political subjectivity.

Rancière's analysis gives us strong theoretical tools that can help imagining new ways of reinvigorating the *modernist* idea of the avant-garde in music without falling back to the misunderstandings that led to the 'crisis of modernity.' Nevertheless, Rancière's notion of the *avant-garde* is considerably different from the conventional one, and in order to understand his definition and relate it to music, it is important to separate it from its former association to a particular movement in music history. Even though the idea of the avant-garde in music emerged as it became associated to a group of 'modernist' composers, the concept remains useful to us now only as a way of understanding the importance of the *aesthetic regime* in the relationship between music and other types of subjectivity and forms of thought. To avoid further misunderstandings, one also needs to take special care and remember the clear differentiation Rancière makes between the *strategic* and *aesthetic* types of avant-garde.

1.2 The *Strategic* and *Aesthetic* Types of Avant-garde in Music

The *strategic* type of avant-garde as manifested in music is one that can be associated to a particular group of people (composers, performers, critics and other people who make, think and/or listen to music), musical institution or movement that consolidates a type of subjectivity. It is important to remember that a common ideological position is what triggers the conception of this type of group.² On the other hand, the *aesthetic* type of avant-garde as manifested in music is that which—through new ways of thinking and making music as expressed by the creation of new musical forms and structures—has the capacity to inspire and encourage new forms of thought about the life to come. Furthermore, it is crucial that the *strategic* type of avant-garde is not confused with the *aesthetic* type in as much as it will lead to further misunderstandings within the music-world.

It is important to note that one can find these two types of avant-gardes both in the musical and political spheres (as well as in the other artistic disciplines). Additionally, as they manifest themselves in music, the *aesthetic* and *strategic* types of avant-garde are intrinsically related; but only in as much as music is concerned. This relationship becomes evident in the causality that exists

²Slovoj Zizek has repeatedly emphasized how ideology is not an abstract notion or theory one simply ascribes to, but a type of subjectivity that is reflected in the way we act, on how we behave and carry ourselves on a day-to-day basis. Therefore, a musical 'movement' doesn't necessarily have to be one in which there is a 'conscious' or openly declared agenda that follows a particular position of objectified consensus.

between musical groups, institutions and movements; and the creation and reception of music. The *strategic* avant-garde as manifested in music is therefore useful to the political sphere only as much as it contributes to the *aesthetic* avant-garde—specifically as it provides a platform for the creation of ‘new sensible forms and structures.’ Hence, the way in which the two types of avant-gardes dwell within music can not be directly compared to the way in which they reside in politics. Here lies another vital point one can induce from Rancière’s enquiry: the *strategic* type of avant-garde manifests itself *differently* in music as it does in politics. From this, one can conclude for example that the activism of a musician or group of musicians as they become directly involved in politics does not reflect a relationship between music and politics, but only the involvement of a group of people—which happen to have the same occupation—in a political movement. The true relationship between music and politics is rather reflected in the *aesthetic* type of avant-garde. This argument makes evident why it is misleading to attempt to identify a movement with concerns that are specific to music with a particular political affiliation or party. The position put forward by some critics of *modernism* in music—which concludes that the emancipatory project which seeks the autonomy of music leads to totalitarianism—is therefore flawed.

Moreover, I will claim that it is very important to consider the intrinsic relationship between the two types of avant-gardes, exclusively as they manifest themselves within music. The basis of this way of thinking stems from the assertion that the *strategic* type of avant-garde has a considerable effect on the *aesthetic* type in numerous significant ways. The impact that musical movements, institutions, ensembles and other organized groups of musicians and people dealing with music, have on the actual musical results, is often underrated. Too often, people involved in creating (particularly composers in my experience) and experiencing music avoid or forget how these strategic forms of collectivity condition and influence the aesthetic result. I will even go as far as to suggest that, in music, the type of subjectivity that is synthesized in the *strategic* avant-garde is reflected or ‘embodied’ in the *aesthetic* avant-garde. That is to say, the ideology of the people involved in the creation, presentation and dissemination of music is expressed in the musical modes of action, production, perception and thought. Furthermore, the notion that the composer is the only person whose ideology is reflected in the music and that the *musical work*³ is the only carrier of meaning—an idea that up to this moment is still widespread in western culture—is also misleading. To avoid misunderstandings, I will introduce the notion of a *musical result* (as opposed to the more limited concept of *musical work*) as that which describes the complex set of percepts given by all aspects of a musical experience. These

³See Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, for a thorough discussion on the philosophy of musical works.

include for example: all sorts of aural and visual elements in music performance; the space and time in which music is performed; the way in which music is presented to the audience (including their role and participation in the musical experience); different modes of action in performance (performance practice) and composition (act of composing); the relationships established between composer, performer and audience; the context (cultural, sociological, political) in which music is presented; the way music is created, consumed and distributed; *etc.* A particular kind of *musical result* consequently discloses a type of collective subjectivity which encompasses the ideology of the people involved in the music.⁴ Additionally, within the *musical result* lies a system of elaborate symbols that synthesizes the relationships between the people involved in the collective act of music-making.

1.2.1 *Musicking*

According to Christopher Small, the set of complex relationships that are formed between people involved in music is that which gives meaning to music. His interest lies particularly on the collective action surrounding music and defines this activity as *musicking*.

The act of *musicking* establishes in the place where it is happening a set of relationships, and it is in those relationships that the meaning of the act lies. They are to be found not only between those organized sounds which are conventionally thought of as being the stuff of musical meaning but also between the people who are taking part . . . relationships between person and person, between individual and society, between humanity and the natural world.⁵

By giving priority to the verb *to music*, as opposed to the noun *music*, he also questions the notion of the *musical work* and gives emphasis to the human action of *musicking*. Small argues that music is not an object and that *musical works* only give material for the musicians to perform, in contrast to the notion (developed as a consequence of western concert music) of performance only as a presentation of a *musical work*. He also defines the verb *to music* to include any type of action that contributes to a musical performance, which includes performing, listening, practicing, composing and dancing. He goes as far as to include actions such as selling and collecting tickets and cleaning the concert

⁴I am not implying however that the ideology of *all* the people is represented *equally* in the *musical result*. The question of how much an individual is represented widely depends on the role they take within the *musical result* and the audience's interpretation of it.

⁵Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening*, Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1998, p. 13.

hall after a performance within his notion of *musicking*. Therefore, *musicking* encompasses all social relationships and actions that are related to music-making. Furthermore, he argues that *musicking*, together with speaking, are characteristics that are at the very core of what makes us human.

I am certain, first, that to take part in a music act is of central importance to our very humanness, as important as taking part in the act of speech, which it so resembles (but from which it also differs in important ways), and second, that everyone, every normally endowed human being, is born with the gift of music no less than with the gift of speech.⁶

Recent scientific studies in a variety of specialities including neuroscience, psychology, archaeology, anthropology and cognitive musicology have also pointed towards the same hypothesis. The idea put forward by Steven Pinker that music is ‘auditory cheesecake’—that it is only a byproduct of evolution and has no biological value for humans⁷—has been challenged recently within the scientific community. These studies have shown how music plays an important role, amongst other things, in human communication, social bonding, cooperation, sexual selection, conveying emotions, psychological well-being, development of coordination and motor skills, expression of empathy, communication between infants and parents and exercising intelligence.⁸ In addition, various theories have emerged regarding the relationship between music and language; some of them even suggesting that ‘proto-language’⁹ (the predecessor of language) was a pre-linguistic, non-verbal form of communication that was a ‘musical’ form of action and thought.¹⁰ It appears that language and music have a similar evolutionary starting-point and the common purpose of communicating emotion and meaning through sound. From this research one can infer that Small is correct in suggesting that *musicking*, like speaking, is at the core of being human and performs important social, cultural and biological functions.

1.3 The Definition of Music and the *Ethical Regime*.

The important functions music performs in the development of individuals and the way in which they establish and nurture relationships within a community is what defines music as a vital human act. Perhaps this is the reason why in the musical domain—going back to Rancière’s notion of ‘the

⁶Ibid., p. 8.

⁷See Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works*, London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1998, pp. 528-538.

⁸See Steven Mithen, *The Singing Neanderthals: The Origins of Music, Language, Mind and Body*, London: Phoenix, 2006, for an overview of these studies.

⁹Mithen prefers the term ‘Hmmm’ over ‘proto-language as ...

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 147-150.

regimes of art'¹¹—music is still defined as such within the *ethical regime*. In other words, if one goes back to the question of why within music there is no change of identification with the break between the *ethical* and *poetic* regimes; I will suggest that it is because there is a strong ethical core implicit in the very meaning of *what music is*. That is to say, as opposed to the definition of the other arts, the definition of music has been tied to the ethical functions that it performs for individuals and their communities. It is worth mentioning that only dance, like music, can also be defined as such within the *ethical regime*, which points towards the deep-rooted relationship between both disciplines. On the contrary, other artistic disciplines including 'fine' art, poetry and theater are identified as such only with the break between the *ethical* and *poetic* regimes.

The ability that human beings have to communicate and perceive emotion and meaning through music is also tied to music's identification and to the ethical functions it performs. It is by no coincidence that already in Ancient Greece, Aristotle observed that music has an immense power to change people's state of character and that different types of music affect audiences in different ways. According to Aristotle, music represents various types of emotions and actions that closely resemble those that the listener undergoes in reality as a result of the performance.¹² It is as a consequence of this link between music and human experience, emotion and action that communities have attempted to regulate and evaluate music according to the ethical functions it performs. One could consequently argue that music that lies within the *ethical regime* is evaluated for its ability to affect people in a way that is considered appropriate by the community, given a particular situation. This argument also points towards one of the reasons why labeling music as different 'styles' or 'genres' seems to be a dominant practice within communities: by knowing what kind of music to expect from a specific 'style', it is possible to anticipate the type of experience the audience will go through. This is also one of the reasons why innovation in music has been discouraged and even censured by communities for centuries. The modification of musical styles within the perspective of the *ethical regime* implies an unexpected change in one's experience and a potential threat to the community's consensus of what is considered to be the appropriate way in which people are to be affected by music. Furthermore, innovation in music has been perceived as a political threat in the past since new forms of music produce new experiences that might stimulate behavior outside the political order.

Plato, in his *Republic* already warns about the danger that innovation in music might pose to the order of the State:

¹¹See pp. 4-8.

¹²See Aristotle, 'The Aims and Methods of Education in Music' in *Politics*, Trans. Ernest Barker, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, pp. 309-310.

Put briefly, then, those charged with care of the city must hold fast to this, so that the city may not be corrupted unawares; but beyond all else, they must guard against innovation in gymnastic and music contrary to the established order, and to the best of their ability be on guard lest when someone says that people care more “for the newest song on the singer’s lips,” the poet may be understood to mean not new songs but a new style of singing, and to comment it. One must not praise such a thing, nor so interpret the poet, but guard against changing to a new form of music, as endangering the whole. For styles of music are nowhere disturbed without disturbing the most important laws and customs of political order—as Damos says and I believe.¹³

Therefore, the Platonic view regarding innovation in music is that it is threatening to the social agreements and political organization of the State. Even though the idea that innovation in music might endanger the political and social contracts of the community today might seem hard to imagine, it still gives us a clue towards an attitude that up to this day is still widespread, that is: that innovation in music regarding its own rules, hierarchies, subject matter and genres is still received with reservation, suspicion and even fear amongst the wider community (if compared to the visual arts for example). In my opinion, this is due in the most part for to two main reasons. First, considering the implication that music performs certain ethical functions, innovation can be seen with skepticism as it could lead to confusion, uncertainty and even irritation, if music ceases to perform the functions expected by the community successfully or does so less efficiently. Secondly, given the immersive and participatory (either by listening or performing) aspects implied by the definition of music that establishes a link between music and human action and experience, innovation in music can be associated with new and unpredictable experiences and behavior. Therefore, it is not surprising that some people would be distrustful in allowing themselves experience something they are not familiar with or are uncertain about.¹⁴

¹³Plato, ‘Music and the Constitution’ in *The Republic*, Trans. R.E. Allen, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006, p. 117

¹⁴On a related note: according to recent research in cognitive science, most people stop acquiring new musical tastes by the time they are around twenty years old. This might be as a result that as people grow older, they seem less open to new experiences. See Daniel Levitin, ‘My Favorite Things’ in *This is Your Brain on Music: Understanding a Human Obsession*, London: Atlantic Books, 2006, pp. 231-233.

1.4 An Ethical Function within the *Aesthetic Regime*?

Going back to Rancière's notion of the regimes of art, if one considers the ethical core implicit in the definition of music simultaneously with music that falls within the *aesthetic regime*, one might run into a deadlock: if music is to be evaluated *only* by the functions it already performs within the community (and innovation in music is seen as a disruption of these functions), music that lays within the *aesthetic regime* appears as having no apparent noble purpose. To resolve this problem one needs to point towards the relationship that exists between music and other forms of human endeavor. If music is evaluated and appreciated for its capacity to inspire new ideas, opinions, beliefs and desires, then one can argue that there is an ethical position implicit in music that falls within the *aesthetic regime*. In other words, there is an ethical function in-itself in breaking with previous models of music making and in questioning the very notion of *what music is*. This function is precisely that of imagining and experiencing through music, new forms of action, production, perception and thought.

Nevertheless, the establishment of the *aesthetic regime* in music, which redefines the 'musician' as a practitioner of whatever falls into the category of 'music', has still not been spread out through the wider community. The reason, I believe, is that the agreement of trust between the wider community and the musical avant-garde has been weakened as a consequence of the practice of some musicians that can be associated with the notion of *modernism* (mainly, those seeking music's 'purity' in composition through a militant anti-mimetic attitude and those who only advocate 'authenticity' and 'sterility' in performance practice). These practices have also generated an attitude commonly held by many musicians today, which avoids addressing the most basic ethical functions that the community associates to music while pursuing only their individual musical priorities. If the *aesthetic regime* in music is to be acknowledged and appreciated widely, an agreement of trust needs to be reestablished between the musical avant-garde and the community. Considering the ethical core implicit in music's definition, it is likely that the community will be unwilling to be open to new musical experiences if they fear that the ethical functions music already performs within the community will be disrupted or negatively altered. Therefore, this agreement needs to demonstrate that the purpose of creating new music is not to betray its ethical functions, but to inspire and experience new forms of subjectivity—and *this in-itself has an underlying ethical function*. Additionally, if this agreement with the wider community is to be reached, it needs to be embedded within the *musical result* and cannot only be expressed theoretically through verbal and written forms of public dissemination.

1.5 Strategic Views on Aesthetic Forms

If a positive redefinition of music is to take place, and an agreement of trust to be reestablished between the musical avant-garde and the wider community, it is crucial to examine the fundamental aspects of how music is created, performed, presented and disseminated today. This includes a significant revision and modification of the *strategic* forms of collectivity in music. In other words, in order to reinvigorate (within the musical sphere) the *aesthetic* type of avant-garde, the *strategic* type of avant-garde also needs to be rethought and reworked. Furthermore, if the agreement of trust between the musical avant-garde and the community is to be regained, I believe it is important to consider the ethical core implicit in the definition of music in parallel with a strong desire towards innovation and change in all aspects of music-making. In other words, while acknowledging the audience and their perception of what the fundamental ethical functions of music are—by making them experience something that they would associate with their idea of music-making within the *musical result*—at the same time challenging these very notions and putting into question the fundamental aspects of music-making. If one subscribes to this position, one should also consider the role musical groups, institutions, ensembles, industry and movements might have in the *musical result* one is involved with, in order to determine whether these groups might help in the establishment of new *aesthetic* forms. Moreover, it is vital to consider the audience as well as the context, time and space where the music is to be presented as this too has a direct causality with the *aesthetic* result and its visibility, and plays a significant part in the disclosure of a particular type of experience.

Additionally, I believe that the creative process in music should also involve devising and composing these *strategic* aspects of music-making into the *musical result* by creatively reworking the modes of performance, composition, presentation and dissemination of music and rethinking the relationships between composer, performer and audience. Innovation within the *strategic* avant-garde can be achieved through many different approaches and might involve a diverse set of practices. Some examples of how these strategies may be used as a creative tool are herewith described:

Composers and performers may have a role determining the type of musicians and ensembles they collaborate with—one may contemplate the possibility of collaborating with musicians from different backgrounds and traditions, whether they are trained to read notation or they come from an improvisation background. One might work with traditional (already existing group of musicians from a specific tradition) or mixed (musicians from different backgrounds) ensembles and devise how its members may interact with each other (making decisions on the performance dynamic). Communicating with other musicians through a musical score or by other forms of transmission could also be

considered as creative decisions. The use of different types and combinations of scores (traditional, graphic, etc), practicing and rehearsal strategies and the use of aural and visual cues might also be taken into account. New strategies in the act of composing a score (using new compositional processes, algorithms or tricks) or an electro-acoustic composition (different ways of recording, triggering and processing audio) may also be examined. The specific venue (considering its historical and social context as well as its acoustic and visual characteristics), clothes, styling, lightning and other theatrical elements in a performance as well as the role of audience and its relationship to the *musical result*, are decisions that one might contemplate as belonging to the musician's creative process. Finally, choosing the way in which music is documented, produced and distributed—by choosing for example the type of media (video/audio recordings, printed CDs, MP3s, digital/printed scores, etc), how it is produced (low/high budget, produced at a professional or home studio, low/high definition, etc), combined (audio/visual, acoustic/electronic, printed/digital) and disseminated (through the internet, printed through a publisher or CD label, self-published, etc)—may also be seen as part of the musician's creative output.

If these strategies are used creatively, they can be instrumental in radically changing the ways in which we make and experience music. Moreover, they have a direct impact on the *musical result* and might contribute—if carefully examined and put into practice—to the emergence of new aesthetic forms. I believe 'art music' or 'contemporary music' can be positively redefined through the sensible use of these strategies and without falling back to the anti-mimetic stand commonly ascribed to *modernism* or the permissive attitude which doesn't seek to achieve anything new that is associated to *postmodernism*. At the same time if these strategies are used reasonably, they can also help strengthening the agreement of trust between the musical avant-garde and the wider community.