

Article

"What is Good Music?"

Simon Frith

Canadian University Music Review / Revue de musique des universités canadiennes, vol. 10, n° 2, 1990, p. 92-102.

Pour citer cet article, utiliser l'information suivante :

URI: <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1014887ar>

DOI: 10.7202/1014887ar

Note : les règles d'écriture des références bibliographiques peuvent varier selon les différents domaines du savoir.

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter à l'URI <http://www.erudit.org/apropos/utilisation.html>

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche. Érudit offre des services d'édition numérique de documents scientifiques depuis 1998.

Pour communiquer avec les responsables d'Érudit : erudit@umontreal.ca

WHAT IS GOOD MUSIC?

Simon Frith

I am speaking here as a sociologist but also as a pop fan and “passive consumer.” This is work in progress and I do not come to any conclusions: what I want to do is raise questions. And the question that most interests me is what is going on when people in everyday conversation about music use the word “good,” say, for example: “that is a good record,” or “that has a good sound,” or “that is good to dance to,” or “she or he has a good voice.” What is going on when such judgments are made?

In this paper I only have time to consider a small part of this issue. I will not be able to discuss problems of musical cognition, for example, or to consider what it is in the music that people are actually hearing, to which sounds they are responding, when they make value statements. I want to focus, rather, on those statements themselves, on the discourses within which the value terms are embedded, on the general assumptions involved about how music works. And to introduce what is going to be a somewhat schematic paper, I want to give you four examples of moments when discourses about music have clashed, when accounts of “good music” have contradicted each other to ridiculous or outraged effect. Here, then, are four randomly chosen anecdotes which bring out the variety of ways in which musical value can be conceived.

My first example comes from the autobiography of John Culshaw (1981), for many years head of the classical division of Decca Records. His autobiography is instructive in general terms — because he takes it for granted that classical music records are produced commercially. The tension between judgments of commercial value and judgments of musical value are ever present in his decisions. The nicest example concerns the original recording of Benjamin Britten’s *War Requiem*. Culshaw was convinced of its musical and its commercial value — the *Requiem* was being given its first performance as part of the celebrations surrounding the rebuilding of Coventry Cathedral; its launch would be accompanied by a mass of radio, television and press publicity. Unfortunately, Britten was not, historically, a best-seller, and Decca’s bosses were not convinced that any classical music sold particularly well — its place in the Decca catalogue was a matter of prestige rather than profit. Culshaw therefore lost the internal argument about how

many copies of the *War Requiem* to press; its run was the same as for previous Britten works.

In the event the pressing (which covered the North American as well as European market) turned out to be far too small; the *War Requiem* sold out in a week. Culshaw had to wait several months for more copies (Decca's pressing plants were fully booked up with pop product) by which time the sales impetus had been lost. Furious, he confronted the man who had made the initial pressing decision. The latter apologised and explained:

Daren't take the risk old boy. First thing of Britten's that's ever sold at all. Do you think you could talk him into writing another *Requiem* that would sell as well? We wouldn't make the same mistake twice. (Culshaw 1981: 317)

Culshaw tells this story to get a laugh, but it would not be as funny if told about commercial pop composers like Stock, Aitken and Waterman. In Decca's pop division it would seem a perfectly reasonable thing to say — "write it again, we will know how to sell it this time." My first point, then, is that there is a clear clash here between commonsense assumptions about what makes Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* valuable as art and what makes it valuable as product. Or, to put it another way, when a tension between creative and sales processes began to be experienced within record companies' pop divisions, towards the end of the 1960s, it was a sign that art discourses were beginning to be applied to popular musics. I will come back to this point later.

My second anecdote comes from the biography of the novelist Radclyffe Hall who, it turns out, also wrote pop lyrics. Her biographer quotes a correspondence she had in 1918 with William Davey, the chairman of Chappell and Company, then Britain's largest music publishers. She complained that she had received no royalties for her lyrics for "The Blind Ploughman," a song which had "swept the country." Davey replied as follows:

I yield to no-one in my admiration of your words to "The Blind Ploughman." They are a big contributing factor to the success of the song. Unfortunately, we cannot afford to pay royalties to lyric writers. One or two other publishers may, but if we were to once introduce the principle, there would be no end to it. Many lyrics are merely a repetition of the same words in a different order and almost always with the same ideas. Hardly any of them, frankly, are worth a royalty, although once in a while they may be. It is difficult to differentiate, however. What I do feel is that you are quite entitled to have an extra payment for these particular words and I have much pleasure in enclosing you from Messrs Chappell a cheque for 20 guineas. (Dickson 1975: 45–46)

This letter is interesting in a number of ways, not least for its revelation that Chappells were apparently, routinely breaking the law — the Copyright Act of 1911 included lyricists in musical copyright regulations even though the music publishers had campaigned against this. But in general terms, Chappell's distinction between the appropriate rewards for routine pop production and for individual craft skill is embedded in the law. It is illuminating, for example, to follow plagiarism cases through the British courts since 1911. What are the criteria which judges have established for the assessment of musical 'originality'? From the start they took it for granted that anybody with even a modicum of musical skill could write a pop song, that there were only a limited number of note combinations that could be arranged to make a popular tune. To prove plagiarism, then, it is not enough to show that two songs are just the same; you have to prove that the person who 'stole' your song had heard it before they wrote their own. Otherwise, the fact that two pieces of pop music are identical simply reflects the fact that all pop composers are constrained by the same limited formulas. The discursive arguments here, embedded now in legal precedent (and complicated in 1988 by the introduction of songwriters' "moral rights" into British copyright law), concern the role of individual authorship in establishing the value of a piece of music.

The third sort of conflict I want to describe occurred a few years ago at a day school in Birmingham organised by the International Association for the Study of Popular Music. We arranged for a young, local group who were booked to play in a city centre hall that evening to come along at two o'clock in the afternoon. The sound crew (hired by the concert promoter) arrived early too, and proceeded to carry out the whole business of the soundcheck — setting up the amplification equipment, measuring the hall's acoustics, miking up the musicians, etc. — in public. The audience (a surprising number of whom were local musicians) sat in a circle round the mixing desk while the mixers explained, sound by sound, what they were doing.

When everyone was wired up and levelled off the band ran through a complete song. As it finished somebody in the audience asked them to do it again "with the vocal mixed up because we couldn't really hear the voice." The engineers adjusted their levels, the band played the song again, and the audience agreed that they sounded much better. The mixers were asked the obvious question: "why didn't you mix it like that yourselves the first time?" And they replied: "because she [the band's lead singer] can't sing." And suddenly there was a raging argument between mixers and musicians about what constituted a "good sound." The mixers were categorical: musicians do not understand good sound. They are egomaniacal, concerned only to hear themselves; they have no sense at all of what is going on in acoustic space; audience pleasure thus depends on sound "experts" who are

“detached.” The musicians were equally categorical: all sound mixers are deaf; this is one of the reasons why they become sound mixers. Instead of having to listen to music they can simply look at their lights and knobs and dials, adjusting them not by reference to musical effects but according to the rules of some pseudo-scientific acoustic theory (the theory they had been expounding all afternoon). The musicians felt more strongly than I had realised that as public performers they were powerless (particularly when starting out), that sounds were imposed on them by engineers in the studio and on stage alike.

The argument here was an argument about professionalism, but it involved also contrasting judgments of sound quality, as does my final example of value clash. It has been instructive to read the debate around the introduction of compact discs. CDs were originally sold, like previous technological developments in sound recording, in the language of “fidelity.” The sales pitch was that what we were getting was a digitally stored sound that was more faithful to the sound of the original (presumably live) performance than analog recording could be, that digital recording gave a truer account of music’s real dynamics. CDs’ detractors, meanwhile, irate rock critics like myself, argued that digital sound storage was actually “unfaithful” to the sound of rock music, which, by critical consensus, should sound “impure.”

In the last twelve months I have changed my mind about compact discs. As record companies have shifted sales emphasis from selling classical (and progressive rock) CDs to the repackaging of “simpler” forms like 1950s rock ‘n’ roll and 1930s jazz, so they have developed a new concept of fidelity: on compact disc you can now hear all the original studio mistakes! You can hear, say, someone spill a cup of coffee just as Bo Diddley begins to strum; you can hear the gasps Fats Domino makes before he hits the keyboards. Compact discs can give you the “real” version of what happened in the studio as against the limited, inevitably cleaned-up vinyl version. The rock critic’s valorisation of impurity, the rock (as against classical) version of authenticity is now catered for.

The rhetorical arguments about the introduction of the compact disc have obvious similarities to the earlier rhetorical arguments about the introduction of black vinyl LPs in the late 1940s. Compton Mackenzie, founding editor of the British classical music magazine *The Gramophone*, argued, for example, for 78s and against LPs not simply because (like me now) he resented having to replace an entire record collection, but also because of the LPs’ threat to what he considered the ideal listening experience. The 78 collector had to be an “active” listener, had to use his or her imagination to hear the sound that was buried in the 78s’ bumps and crackles, had to keep jumping up to change the record which could never be, then, background music. By contrast, Mackenzie suspected (accurately enough) that LP

listeners would be essentially passive, able to put their feet up, their thoughts aside, not needing to work at listening at all.

The same sorts of anxieties were clearly present in rock critics' initial suspicions of CDs (and pop videos); we also believed that some sort of "active" relationship between listener and recorded music was being threatened by a new technology, a new technology which was putting all the emphasis on the surface of the sound such that what you hear is all you are going to get!

The importance of these arguments is that they draw attention to the spurious distinctions (which underlie much musical argument) between nature and artifice, between "true" (i.e., live) and "false" (i.e., studio manufactured) music. The most interesting comments I have come across on this value clash were gathered by *Hi Fidelity* magazine in 1966 to accompany a polemical article by the pianist Glenn Gould. One point Gould wanted to make (as part of his championing of recorded over live performance) was that whatever their public claims, record companies were inevitably in the business of faking live music. Classical record producers had to persuade people that they were having the experience of a live (i.e., concert hall) performance in the very different, restricted acoustic space of their homes. This was confirmed by Richard Mohr, musical director of RCA Victor's Red Seal label:

The ideal for a phonograph record is the concert hall illusion or rather the illusion of the concert hall illusion because you can't transfer the concert hall into the dimensions of a living room. What you can do is record a work so that you think you're in a concert hall when you listen to it at home. (Gould 1966: 49)

"Live" rock albums, similarly, have to record audience applause so that it sounds the way we expect it to sound — on record; this does not actually bear very much relationship to how audience applause sounds to us in the real concert hall or rock stadium. As Gould pointed out, the sound of the live performance to which records are supposedly faithful is, in fact, constructed in the studio. These days live music has to sound like recorded music in order to sound live.

What I have been trying to suggest here is that arguments about the value of particular pieces of music can only be understood by reference to the discourses which give the value terms concerned their meaning. Arguments about music are less about the qualities of the music itself than about how to place it, about what it is in the music that is actually to be assessed. After all, we can only hear music as having value, whether aesthetic or any other sort of value, when we know what to listen to and how to listen for it. Our reception of music, our expectations from it, are not inherent in the music

itself — which is one reason why so much musicological analysis of popular music misses the point: its object of study, the discursive text it constructs, is not the text to which anyone listens.

Rather than agreeing, then, as a sociologist, that, of course, musicologists understand music and I do not, in the rest of this paper I want to suggest that, in fact, sociologists can make their own contribution to the analysis of musical meaning and value. My arguments are derived (somewhat loosely) from two sociological models, first Howard Becker's (1988) account of "art worlds," second Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) concept of "cultural capital."

Howard Becker suggests that to understand art objects and people's response to them we have to understand the institutional and discursive processes (the art world) in which they are constructed as art objects, as works to which a particularly sort of aesthetic response becomes socially appropriate. Pierre Bourdieu uses the concept of cultural capital to relate cultural values to social structural variables (age/class/gender/ethnicity/etc.), to the questions of power that Becker puts on one side. The reason why different people engage with different art worlds relates to the amount (and type) of cultural capital they possess. The aesthetic response, in other words, has to be understood by reference to the social organisation of taste which patterns people's morality, sociability, lifestyle, habitus, etc. Putting Becker and Bourdieu together (and extrapolating somewhat from what they actually say) I want to suggest that in very broad terms music is valued according to three types of discursive practice (relating to Becker's three sorts of art world, to Bourdieu's three kinds of taste group).

The first art world I want to describe, the first "taste public," is what I will call (although it is not an altogether satisfactory term) the bourgeois world (or what Bourdieu calls dominant culture). In terms of this paper, the bourgeois art world is the world of classical (or art) music. What institutions sustain its values, construct the terms in which its values are articulated?

The answer is that the organising institution of bourgeois music is the academy — the music departments of universities, conservatories, the whole panoply of formal arrangements and practices in which classical music in its various forms is taught. Central to this world, then, is the teacher/pupil relationship, and the belief that musicians must serve an apprenticeship, progress through fixed stages (like the Royal College of Music's instrumental grades) before they are "qualified" to play. The bourgeois music world constantly faces a tension between its firm sense of musical tradition (which has to be preserved, documented, refined and elaborated) and an equally firm belief in the value of creativity and the importance of the new and the original — the avant-garde (creativity defined *against* traditional authority) can only be understood within this discourse; it is not a term which can

simply be taken away and applied to other musics.

In terms of consumption, the bourgeois music world is heavily dependent on scholarship, on the accumulation of the knowledge about musical history and the compositional process without which score and performance cannot be understood. The scholarly skills developed in university music departments — archive skills, textual reading skills, etc. — are just like those developed by art historians or literary critics. Their purpose is the same: to establish the canon, to come up with a coherent, linear historical narrative. But to sustain the classical music world such academic skills must make their way out of the university to the general bourgeois public which thus depends for its necessary knowledge on a set of semi-academic institutions and practices — music journals and newspaper critics, concert programmers and classical music radio stations like the BBC's Radio 3, which bridge the gap between high music scholarship and everyday domestic musical appreciation.

While laymen and women can gain access to the classical world, then (and they are encouraged to develop their own musical knowledge and analytical skills, to collect records, to build up a music library, to learn from sleeve-notes), this world is strictly hierarchical. There is a clear distinction between the composer of a work and its performers, between performers and their audience. The central bourgeois music event, the concert, offers, then, in its ideal, a transcendent (wordless) experience, something special, something apart from the everyday world and from normal experience. The seriousness of classical music is both made possible by and registered in a whole series of conventions that surround performance. We so take these conventions for granted that it is disturbing to go to a classical music concert and find the performers dressed in secular clothes rather than evening dress — I can still remember my shock as a child at seeing a chorister in York Minster reading a newspaper while he was waiting for his next singing part in a Bach mass. It seemed quite wrong that this musician was not sharing in the seriousness of the occasion (overlaid here by religious awe) for the audience.

To summarise, then, the bourgeois or art music world is organised around a particular notion of musical scholarship and a particular sort of musical event, in which music's essential value is its provision of a transcendent experience that is, on the one hand, ineffable but, on the other, only available to those with the right sort of knowledge, the right sort of interpretative skills. Only the right people with the right training can experience the real meaning of "great" music.

The second source of evaluative discourse I want to describe is what I will term the folk music world (roughly speaking what Bourdieu means by popular culture). The argument here is that the value of music has to be understood in terms of cultural necessity — ideally, there is no separation of

art and life. The appreciation of music is therefore tied up with an appreciation of its social function. Many of the terms and arguments of this discourse are familiar from ethnomusicological studies of non-Western, non-capitalist cultures, but the question I want to raise is how the terms of folk culture are sustained in the ways in which people talk about popular music in the West too. How is folk discourse sustained in a society in which “folk” music is rarely made according to its own ideology?

This ideology has two key components. First, the folk world, like the classical world, emphasises the importance of tradition. It has its own archives and archivists, its own scholars and scholarly journals. The emphasis, though, is less on history and the accumulation of knowledge, than on “purity” and the correct (traditional) way of doing things. Folk music is thus evaluated (and condemned — Dylan going electric) according to concepts of unchanging musical “truth.” Second, the folk world is organised around a set of performing rituals, rituals which guarantee not the bourgeois experience of transcendence but are, nonetheless, marked off from everyday life.

The most developed and important folk ritual is that special musical event, the folk festival. The folk festival describes a time (usually a weekend) and a space (usually outdoors) within which folk values — the integration of art and life — can be lived. Hence the strict festival conventions: the famous performers must come and have a drink with their audience in the tent after the show; anyone in the audience must be able to stand up somewhere on the site and perform themselves — there is a constant attempt to deny the actual (commercial) separation of folk stars and folk fans. The folk festival wants, in short, to solve the problem of how to construct musical “authenticity.” The festival offers in itself the experience of the folk ideal, the experience of collective, participatory music-making, the chance to judge music by its direct contribution to sociability.

The third source of musical discourse is the commercial music world (what Bourdieu would call majority culture) about which I need not say much. Its values are created by and organised around the music industry, around the means and possibilities of turning sounds into commodities — musical value and monetary value are therefore equated, and the sales charts become the measure, and the symbol, of “good” pop music. The commercial music world is also organised around particular sorts of musical event, events (concerts, discos) which offer a kind of routinised transcendence, which sell what is normally called “fun.” Fun is an escape from the daily grind (which is what makes it pleasurable) but is, on the other hand, integrated with its rhythms — the rhythms of work and play, production and consumption.

The tripartite structure I have suggested of bourgeois, folk and commercial

music worlds, of high art, folk art and mass art discourses, is familiar enough (and may come naturally to a Briton used to the BBC division of Radios 1, 2 and 3). Wilfrid Mellers' musicological accounts of pop musicians (Mellers 1984 and 1986), for example, trace the ways in which performers start out as "folk" musicians, get absorbed into the commercial process and then emerge as "artists." Similarly, in *Sound Effects* (Frith 1981) I suggested that in trying to distinguish its practices from those of "commercial" pop, rock's 1960s ideologists drew on folk values on the one hand and on art values on the other.

In the end, then, what is involved here is not the creation and maintenance of distinct, autonomous music worlds but, rather, the play of three discourses across all these worlds — hence the sorts of dispute with which I began this paper. For musicians and listeners in the bourgeois, folk and commercial music worlds alike, value judgments reflect a path being traced through the confusing noise of *competing* discourses. If, for example, the standard line of rock' n' roll history is that an authentic (i.e., folk) sound is continually corrupted by commerce, it could equally well be argued that what that history actually reveals is a commercial musical form continually being recuperated in the name of art and subculture. In the folk world, similarly, the terms "authentic" and "artificial" are used to describe exactly the same musical processes. Thus bluegrass, a musical form the invention of which can be dated precisely (in 1946), stands now (in an annual summer season of bluegrass festivals) not just for the North American folk tradition but for the North American mountain and country traditions too (see Cantwell 1984). Bourgeois music makers, too, know well enough that their livelihood depends on commercial logic, that art and commercial values have to be reconciled in practice if kept at a distance in rhetoric — listen, for example, to any North American classical music radio station and hear how the deejays imply, in their distinct, reverent tones of voice, that what is on offer is still a transcendent experience even if it is, now, punctuated by advertisements for banking and insurance.

One point I can make about this is that such bourgeois/folk/commercial music discourses do not exist autonomously either; their terms developed in relationship — in opposition — to each other; each represents a response to the shared problem of music making in a capitalist society; each can be traced back, therefore, to the late Eighteenth Century (see Shiach 1989 for a general history of the entwined discourses of art, folk and commerce). In research terms this means that we should cease to treat the classical, folk and pop music worlds as if they were distinct objects of study but, rather, examine them comparatively, tracing their contrasting solutions to the same problems. How is music learnt and taught in the different worlds? How is skill defined? How are the lines drawn between the amateur and the

professional? How do the different worlds regard innovation? (See Finnegan 1989 for an example of this kind of comparative research.)

My own feeling is that such comparative sociology would reveal far less clear distinctions between these worlds than their discursive values imply. After all, one of the most striking aspects of popular music history is the way in which the same music can change its discursive significance. Rock, for example, was, in evaluative terms, quite systematically reconstructed in the 1960s, and in the 1930s jazz was understood, in bewilderingly quick succession, first in commercial, then in folk, and finally in art terms: *Melody Maker's* critics changed the way they wrote about jazz — and therefore, presumably, the way they heard it — in the space of a few months (see Frith 1988). If the meaning of “good music” is so unstable how can we possibly assign it to the notes alone?

REFERENCES

BECKER, HOWARD S.

1982: *Art Worlds*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

BOURDIEU, PIERRE.

1984: *Distinction, A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

CANTWELL, ROBERT.

1984: *Bluegrass Breakdown*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

CULSHAW, JOHN.

1981: *Putting the Record Straight*. London: Secker and Warburg.

DICKSON, LOVAT.

1975: *Radclyffe Hall at the Well of Loneliness*. London: Collins.

FINNEGAN, RUTH.

1989: *The Hidden Musicians, Music-Making in an English Town*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

FRITH, SIMON.

1981: *Sound Effects*. New York: Pantheon.

1988: “Playing with Real Feeling — Jazz and Suburbia,” *New Formations*, 4: 7–24.

GOULD, GLENN.

1966: “The Prospects of Recording,” *High Fidelity Magazine*, 16: 49.

MELLERS, WILFRID.

1984: *A Darker Shade of Pale*. London: Faber & Faber.

1986: *Angels of the Night*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

SHIACH, MORAG.

1989: *Discourse on Popular Culture*. Cambridge: Polity.