

This review appeared in Issue No. 10(2008) of The Open Space Magazine.

Alex Ross has written a curious book – curious in content and its position within (and position on) a broader social/historical context. It is, perhaps, best read as an attempt by Ross to vindicate the psychology of the fictional composer Adrian Leverkühn, the anti-hero of Thomas Mann’s *Dr. Faustus*, as the real pathology of modernist composers (primarily personified by Arnold Schoenberg), and therefore to play out the perceived “crisis of modernism” as allegorically predicted in Mann’s novel, which truly was an allegory of Germany’s descent into moral depravity under Hitler. Intellectualism becomes akin to barbarism, both presumed to devalue humanity. The tone is consistently anti-intellectual throughout, but it is an anti-intellectualism masquerading as soft-hearted populism, which makes the task of reviewing a delicate one, particularly if one is, as I am, unashamedly intellectual and ambivalent on the question of populism.

In spite of the author’s claim in the preface that, “Two distinct repertoires have formed, one intellectual and one popular. Here they are merged: no language is considered intrinsically more modern than any other,” (xiii), Ross does not value these repertoires equally. He is attempting to redress a perceived bias in the scholarly sphere towards a notion of “progress,” yet he does not attempt any kind of redress of the bias in the performance sphere towards works considered “popular.” Either each possesses its own sphere, or they should be (if attempting an even-handed approach as he claims) treated equally in both spheres. If it were left here, things would, perhaps, not be so bad, but soon the attack on intellectualism begins with its mash-up of Thomas Mann, Modernism, and Nazism: “Since *Faustus* is also a book about the roots of Nazism, Leverkühn’s ‘bloodless intellectuality’ becomes, in a cryptic way, the mirror image of Hitler’s ‘bloody barbarism.’ The cultish fanaticism of modern art turns out to be not unrelated to the politics of fascism...” (34). Along the way, the uncritically accepted assumptions upon which Ross bases his book are revealed. These are that the sole purpose of music is to entertain or, more high-

mindedly, to edify, through the presentation of beauty, here construed as almost synonymous with tonality (particularly major thirds, which occupy a weirdly prominent place in his analysis of composers), that there is a natural basis for beauty in music and that tonality is congruent with this basis (hence all those thirds), that music is about self-expression through a personal and emotional voice (an irritating assumption, but not as immediately troublesome as the others), and that the free market is the proper medium for the evaluation of music.

The first of these biases is evident in such remarks as: “In the end, Gershwin reunited two sides of a composer’s job that should never have been separated to begin with,” (150) by which he means the roles of “highbrow artist and lowbrow entertainer,” (150). This is a position that does not follow the necessities of logic or history in considering the question of the purpose of music and the function of its creators in society. It also, infuriatingly and against Ross’s own presentation of himself as a non-polemical writer, leaves no space for the works of composers that have a different conception of the possibilities for music’s place in society. Historically, anyone conversant with Renaissance music, much Baroque music, and certainly the music of the Ancient Greeks knows that the idea of music as entertainment had to be introduced, that it could just as easily be considered a force for ethical instruction, philosophical contemplation on the nature of the cosmos, a glorification of God, etc. It was not necessary for all of these functions to be enjoyed by large numbers of individuals, let alone any audience at all. Further, Ross’s cultural blinders prevent him from considering the very different conceptions of music beyond the Western European and Anglo-American cultural realms. I thought, upon reading Ross’s comment on Gershwin, of the tradition of Chinese literati sitting alone in quiet contemplation, performing softly on the *qin* (a type of zither), and from this absence it is clear that Ross does not possess a broad enough conception of music to properly understand, for instance, the work of John Cage. Logically, it does not follow that the systematic arrangement of (musical) sounds need only serve the narrow purpose of entertainment any more than that the systematic arrangement of symbols of an alphabet should only be used to produce documents that amuse.

To side-step such arguments, Ross introduces the cultural trope of the angst-ridden

artist: “Yet Mann knew what he was doing when he put his composer in league with the Devil. Faust’s pact is a lurid version of the stories that artists tell themselves in order to justify their solitude,” (35), which presumes that the artist feels a need to justify his or her solitude and that any such justification is akin to selling one’s soul to the devil, tearing asunder those “two sides of a composer’s job.” What is one to say in the face of this? Ross ignores history, ignores the practices of other cultures, and ignores the logical considerations of the very questions that many composers of the 20th Century were asking themselves (considering the nature of music and the functions it might play within society), thereby pathologizing any rebuttal to his assertion of the properness of composer-as-entertainer.

To bolster his argument against musical modernism, Ross latches on to nature, to the overtone series in particular, as a means of supporting the assertion that audiences will only respond to the sounds of tonal music. Aside from the extreme cultural chauvinism of his presentation, Ross also misrepresents or misunderstands the facts surrounding the relation of tonality as a system, the perceptual categories of consonance and dissonance, and the realities of psychoacoustics. The tendency in Ross’s thought towards over-simplified binary oppositions is here apparent: he presents his case as though only two options are on the table: tonality or atonality (à la Schoenberg). To be sure, the opposition of tonality and atonality would appear to be a semantic tautology, but in reality these labels are applied to particular musical styles (or techniques). Tonality, in particular, has come to mean something other than what Ross makes it out to be. This misunderstanding of the reality of tonality is at the heart of Ross’s misreading of Schoenberg’s *Harmonielehre* (to be discussed later) and Hermann Helmholtz’s *On the Sensations of Tone*, which, in Ross’s words, “...tries to explain why certain intervals attack the nerve endings while others have a calming effect. At the head of Helmholtz’s rogue’s gallery of intervals was the semitone, which is the space between two adjacent keys on a piano. Struck together, they create rapid ‘beats’ that distress the ear,” (56). Anyone who has read Helmholtz thoroughly will be shocked to read this, and yet it comes to form the basis of Ross’s attack against atonality, and his argument in favor of tonality -- and particularly major thirds, about which Ross waxes poetic in discussions of Messiaen, Terry Riley, Sibelius, and others. Had Ross clearly understood Helmholtz (who

never constructed a “rogue’s gallery of intervals,” but who scientifically studied the physiological and psychological mechanism in the apprehension of pitch) he would have felt compelled, I am sure, to disclose that those major thirds he loves so well are egregiously out of tune with their corresponding overtone of the fundamental pitch¹, creating just the kind of beating Ross offers as evidence of the natural inferiority of atonality: “Similar roughnesses [beatings] are created by the major seventh, slightly narrower than an octave, and by the minor ninth, slightly wider. These are precisely the intervals that Schoenberg emphasized in his atonal music,” (56).

The extent of Ross’s misunderstanding of the relationship between the harmonic spectrum, tonality, and consonance/dissonance is apparent in his discussion of Messiaen’s “chord of resonance”, “...in which eight distinct pitches from the natural harmonic series sound together (C, E, G, B-flat, D, F-sharp, G-sharp, B-natural). Strongly dissonant in effect, it still has the C-major triad at its base – a ‘natural’ foundation for an abstract form,” (447). First, C-major is, in fact, the abstract form in this discussion, though Ross portrays it as “natural.” He is correct that these pitches are derived from a harmonic series (the first eight odd-numbered partials of the fundamental, C), though he glosses over the fact that they are equal-tempered approximations that will differ from their corresponding overtone by as much as a quarter-tone. The dissonance of the collection is ensured by their being forced through the prism of equal temperament, that E included. C-major, a unit of meaning only in reference to tonality, is in no wise “natural,” nor is the temperament in which the pitches are presented. The invocation of the “naturalness” of tonal triads and of those lower partials of the overtone series as support for the “naturalness” of tonality is a refrain, disturbing for its lack of understanding of the materials it invokes, that occurs again and again: Of Sibelius’s 7th Symphony: “...it is made up of the ‘natural’ building blocks, thirds and fifths and octaves,” (169) or of La Monte Young, “Young has never written anything resembling conventional tonal music. For some reason his ears have an aversion to the fifth partial of the overtone series, which is tied with the interval of the major third. Without the

¹ The beating of equal-tempered major thirds distressed Helmholtz enough that he included a design for a keyboard that would allow pure thirds and fifths in order to eliminate this beating from standard tonal harmony in *On the Sensations of Tone* (see Appendix XVII, “Plan for Justly-Toned Instruments with a Single Manual”).

major third, triads are impossible,” (495). Aside from the fact that, as any beginning theory student should know, triads are possible without the major third (the diminished triad), Ross is confusing the tonal interval with its nearest corresponding natural phenomenon (in the overtone series). Western music may have developed by stopping its harmonic considerations at the fifth partial (approximately the major third) prior to the introduction of temperament, the tempered third thereafter standing in for the pure third, but there was no necessary condition requiring things to develop in this way, as was pointed out by Harry Partch who, in mid-century, based his own individual style on the first eleven partials.

The trajectory of tonality was, then, inextricably bound up with the development of systems of temperament and the eventual settling on equal temperament (in which only octaves are pure, perfect fifths and fourths are quite good and everything else is noticeably out of tune with its corresponding overtone). The advent of temperament and equal temperament, in particular, lead to an interest in modulation and the use of the ambiguity of function of a given pitch based on its new-found enharmonic equivalence to some other pitch (before equal temperament the pitches G-sharp and A-flat were different)². In doing so, the practitioners and patrons of tonal music developed a tolerance for the out-of-tuneness of their equal temperament, accepting their thirds, sixths, and sevenths beating and all; and so the aesthetic evaluation of consonance was unmoored from any absolute correlation with the psychoacoustical phenomenon of beats *through cultural practice*. Indeed, in Java, and now in much microtonal music, beating has not been overlooked but rather aestheticized. Balinese gamelan orchestras are tuned in pairs, one slightly higher than the other so as to create beats. In reference to our equal-tempered system, once one has accepted the beating of equal-tempered thirds, there is no reason to presume that one will be incapable of accepting the beating of equal-tempered seconds (as is already the case in many tonal contexts), and so Ross’s persistent argumentation for the “natural” beauty of tonal music (rendered on equal-tempered instruments) as opposed to non-tonal music, fails.

Beyond the argument for tonality as the superior means of organizing a musical work, Ross also introduces the idea of the “personal voice” as a fundamental criterion for the

² As discussed at length in Arnold Schoenberg’s *Harmonielehre*, Ross’s treatment of which will be examined below.

evaluation of the collected works of a composer. This “personal voice” is not simply a matter of self-differentiation through novel means, as is clear when he writes of Steve Reich that his “approach differs starkly from the thinking inherent in Boulez’s total serialism and Cage’s *I Ching* pieces, where process works behind the scenes, like a spy network employing front organizations.³ Reich’s music transpires in the open air, every move audible to the naked ear.... sounds from a variety of sources are mediated by technology, broken down by repetition, folded into the composer’s personal voice,” (501), and subsequently on the work of John Adams: “Sundry sounds are broken down and filtered through an instantly recognizable personal voice, sometimes exuberant and sometimes melancholy, sometimes hip and sometimes noble, winding its way through a fragmentary culture,” (513). This “personal voice,” for Ross, must be “instantly recognizable,” and “audible to the naked ear” rather than working “behind the scenes.” What this means, then, is that Ross is drawn to music that reveals itself, more or less fully, in the course of a first listening. The attributes of a “personal voice” are idiosyncrasies existing within an otherwise intelligible structure, which can only be provided by tradition, and which defines the set of acceptable sounds for musical use and delineates the boundaries of those uses. The works of Cage and Boulez do not fit into this paradigm of the “personal voice” because they have too radically departed from the accustomed musical sounds and/or musical uses of sound. They are not immediately intelligible to the “naked ear” but reveal themselves over repeated listening and study.

The bias towards the immediacy of the works of a composer like Reich is simply an aesthetic preference, one that follows from Ross’s uncritical assumption that music should convey emotion, as evident in his critique of the current avant-garde in Europe: “Thrilling as the latest voyages in ‘novel spheres’ may be, much contemporary music in Austria and Germany seems constricted in emotional range.... The great German tradition, with all its grandeur and sorrows, is cordoned off, like a crime scene under investigation,” (527). Ross is much more in his element with composers like Benjamin Britten, who “provocatively compared the regimentation of culture in totalitarian states to the self-imposed regimentation of the avant-garde in democratic countries. Any ideological organization of

³ Ironically, the spy metaphor is one to which Ross objects, as vitriolic and authoritarian, in Schoenberg’s writings (59-60).

music, he said, distorts a composer's natural voice, his gift and personality," (413). Taking this idea of the "natural" or "personal voice" of the composer in light of his attempt to vindicate tonality as "natural" (and passing over, for the moment, the obvious logical error of equating totalitarian societal restrictions to those one places on oneself), Ross's position does seem to possess an inherent logic. If tonality is the natural means of making sense of tones sounding together in a musical work,⁴ then it follows that it is the proper medium for the expression of a composer's "natural voice." As long as the understanding of tonality as a cultural development is suppressed, this argument holds. It ceases to do so when a historical and scientific understanding of the development of Western tonality into the 20th Century is allowed. But surely something *is* lost if we turn our backs on this established means of constructing musical works, whether considered "natural" or not. The preponderance of music we encounter in this culture (almost all popular music, for instance) is tonal, and so we are, from our earliest encounters with music, conditioned toward (at least) an implicit understanding of tonality. We can attribute (vague) impressions and associations to the music because it is music of a kind with which we are familiar. This allows for the expression of emotion (as vague impression), which is dear to Ross's musical priorities, and which must be a casualty of new forms of structuring music that do not at least leave us some of the old structures – phrases, gestures, meter, etc. – to latch on to in our reception of the work. So the prioritizing of emotional expression gives one reason to support tonality, even in the face of the serious challenges it met in the first half of the 20th Century, and to underplay the work of composers who were less interested in emotional expression than in intellectual questions concerning the organization of music, the definition of "music," and the perception of sound.

This interest in the emotional content and immediate intelligibility of music also explains Ross's disproportionate focus on theatrical works that, whatever their musical content, are fitted with the more concrete signifiers of the theater, even when they lack

⁴ This position was argued in more detail in Roger Scruton's *The Aesthetics of Music* (1997, Oxford University Press). The argument fails for many of the reasons that Ross's fails, particularly in reference to a lack of knowledge concerning acoustics, psychoacoustics, and the history of tuning and temperament; but it does raise some interesting points along the way.

tradition narrative. Ross's reliance on text from the libretto or description of the stage action easily overshadows his musical analysis, as he attempts to reveal the psychological import of the work, as in his discussion of Strauss's *Salome*:

At the climax, the head of John the Baptist lies before Salome on a platter. Having disturbed us with unheard-of dissonances, Strauss now disturbs us with plain chords of necrophiliac bliss. For all the perversity of the material, this is still a love story, and the composer honors his heroine's emotions. (8)

These "plain chords" can only acquire their association with this "necrophiliac bliss" through the action on the stage; dissonances, "having disturbed us," are put into the service of psychology rather than an inherently musical logic; and so the abstractness of musical sound is poured into the container of human activity (even if these human activities are far-fetched and only acted out on the stage). We see the same motivating factors underlying Ross's interest in nationalist composers such as Sibelius: "Precisely because these composers communicated general feelings of mourning for a pretechnological past, or more simply, yearning for vanished youth, they remained acutely relevant for a broad public," (160). Again, he latches on to some (relatively) concrete experience, now man's experience of nature, by which to interpret the music he describes: "In a central section depicting a physical or mental storm, whole-tone harmony crumbles into near-total chromaticism, upward- and downward-slithering patterns of notes. Like a wanderer lost in the woods, the listener struggles to find a path through the thicket of sound," (169-170).

Ross marries these assumptions regarding the "naturalness" of tonality and the proper function of a composer as entertainer and emotional guru speaking through his or her unique "personal voice" to two assumptions strongly rooted in the current American Zeitgeist: anti-intellectualism and an unwavering faith in the free market as the arbiter of all value. The anti-intellectualism plays out like American politics, with snippets taken out of context to sully the character of the utterer rather than providing a refutation or discussion concerning the ideas contained in the original context. This treatment is particularly leveled at Schoenberg and Theodor Adorno (and Pierre Boulez gets quite a drubbing, too). Ross

represents Schoenberg's *Harmonielehre* as follows: "*Harmonielehre* turns out to be an autopsy of a system that has ceased to function... To dramatize this supposed decline, the composer augments his discourse with the vocabulary of social Darwinism and racial theory... Schoenberg applied the concept of degeneration to music," (59). Ross goes on to list some of the shocking terms found in Schoenberg's book – strong words, indeed, though not as shocking as Ross paints them when encountered in their original context, peppered throughout a few hundred pages of text. Ross misses the metaphoric implication of tonality as an organic system (here enters some of the biological terminology about life and death and inbreeding – for the record, none of the terms listed by Ross, nor any I subsequently found in a casual re-reading of Schoenberg's text carry any racist overtone). What Ross does not do is address the content of Schoenberg's text, explain why Schoenberg sees tonality as having "ceased to function." Of course, to do so would require a firmer understanding of the relationship between equal temperament and tonality than Ross seems to have at his disposal, but it is just this relationship that is the core of Schoenberg's critique of tonality. At any rate, Schoenberg hardly sounds as dogmatic as he is painted when he writes: "Let the pupil learn the laws and effects of tonality just as if they still prevailed, but let him know of the tendencies that are leading toward their annulment. Let him know that the conditions leading to the dissolution of the system are inherent in the conditions upon which it is established,"⁵ – by which Schoenberg means equal temperament allowing enharmonic equivalence.

The shift from discussion of ideas to the discrediting of the thinker by means of implicating him (always him in this book with the exception of a brief nod to Ruth Crawford) in some fascistic hatemongering is the single most disturbing aspect of this book. Throughout the text, Ross highlights modernist, intellectual composers' racist and fascist tendencies (sometimes alleged, sometimes well-established) while offering apologies for the behaviors of his composer-heroes who had very real involvement with the Nazis (Sibelius, Strauss, Shostakovich, Orff): "Although Schoenberg opposed the Nazis unstintingly, he was

⁵ Schoenberg, Arnold. 1978 [1911]. *Theory of Harmony* [*Harmonielehre*]. Roy E. Carter, trans. Berkeley: University of California Press, page 29.

hardly free from authoritarian impulses... in the course of running the Society for Private Musical Performance in Vienna, he said, he had become ‘a kind of dictator,’ and on encountering internal opposition, he did something ‘which under other circumstances would be called illegal: I dissolved the whole society, built a new one, accepted only such members who were in perfect agreement with my artistic principles and excluded the entire opposition.’ This is precisely how Hitler took power in 1933,” (322). No matter how asinine Schoenberg may have been, this comparison of Schoenberg to Hitler is like comparing an apple (the leader of an organization for the presentation of music with no intention of preventing other such organizations from forming and operating freely) to an orange (the leader of a totalitarian government bent on world domination and genocide). Ross also writes that “The Faust metaphor honors the dread that Schoenberg’s juggernaut inspired in early listeners,” (35) as if Schoenberg’s music had the power to silence all others, which it certainly did not – these are the years that gave us Stravinsky’s early successes – and, “Schoenberg, in 1908 and 1909, would unleash fearsome sounds that placed him forever at odds with the vox populi. Hitler would seize power in 1933 and attempt the annihilation of a people,” (10). Of others of a modernist bent: “As so often in the modernist saga, revolutionary impulses went hand in hand with intolerance and resentment. Ruggles and Varese muttered between themselves about consumerism and vulgarity that were ruining American culture, for which they tended to blame the Jews and the Negroes,” (13). On Boulez: “...he actually welcomed the infusions of German culture that were administered by the Nazi authorities,” (361).

However, on the (more tonal) Sibelius, after informing us that “In a message to Nazi troops... he allegedly said: I wish with all my heart that you may enjoy a speedy victory,” Ross counters that, “Privately, Sibelius was tormented by the promulgation of race laws in Nazi Germany...” (175). We are made to feel sorry for Sibelius’s sense of paralysis, one that is equally attributed to Nazism and modernist attacks on his music and amplified by alcohol. On Carl Orff, “The man may have been politically duplicitous, but his passion for teaching was profound, and it probably touched more lives than any music described in this book,” (184). On Shostakovich in relation to *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*: “Seen from one angle, then,

Lady Macbeth is nearly an opera in the service of genocide. In other ways, however, it is anything but a propaganda work,” (226). Furthermore, Ross writes that, in spite of his service as president of the Reich Music Chamber, “Strauss’s behavior was not always as contemptible as it seemed,” (324) “...questions have been posed about Richard Strauss’s murky, unheroic behavior in the Nazi period, but they are the wrong ones to ask,” (218). If they are not the correct questions to ask of Strauss, Shostakovich, Sibelius, and Orff -- whose actions took place within the very real framework of two distinct genocidal campaigns -- why are they the correct questions to ask in reference to Schoenberg (who fled the Nazis) and a couple of grumbling anti-Semites who, as far as I know, limited their actions based upon their prejudices to the (still despicable) attempt to keep Jews out of a particular music society? (Copland and some of his associates formed a competing society because of this.) I raise this issue, not to implicate one side or the other, nor to pass judgment upon any of these composers, for I fully believe that the realities of survival at that time were such that I certainly cannot comprehend them. I raise the point to implicate the author’s charity towards populist composers and parsimony towards the modernist ones – to point out his reluctance to treat composers of differing dispositions equally.

This leads neatly to that other assumption, faith in the free-market. “A gap had opened between the ideal of modernism as the antithesis of mass culture and the reality of America as a marketplace in which absolutely anything can be bought and sold,” (138). Ross does not remain the neutral observer of this phenomenon – no surprise given his statements regarding Gershwin. He bemoans a situation in which “the majority [of composers] make a living by teaching composition, and their students usually become teachers themselves... sooner or later they realize that modern popular culture has no place for a composer hero...” (515-516) and “New music played a very limited role in the Cold War arts bonanza. All the same, many American composers found themselves in a relatively happy situation... Colleges that once had only one or two composers on their faculty now had four or five... The institution of tenure gave the American composer unaccustomed feelings of financial and psychological security,” (400-401). He continues, “Of the multifarious strands of American music, one in particular began to prosper in the university environment: composition

informed by twelve-tone techniques,” (401). Ross goes on to discuss such composers as Elliott Carter and Milton Babbitt, the latter having “produced music so byzantine in construction that one practically needed a security clearance to understand it,” (401). Ross reveals some of his own bias in the repeated use of the term “Byzantine”. On Ruth Crawford: “This earnest, self-deprecating woman went on to write some of the most fabulously byzantine music of her time,” (271). Of Steve Reich’s recollections of his not-now-famous fellow students: “Steve Reich remembers attending composition classes where students showed off byzantine scores whose intellectual underpinnings could be discussed ad nauseum. Then he’d go hear Coltrane play with his quartet,” (478). Given the valorization of American minimalists (who do not make their living as professors) that has been a cornerstone of Ross’s career as critic and his proclivity for linking modernist intellectualism with totalitarianism, not to mention his linking of anti-Byzantine sentiment with the irreproachable cool of John Coltrane, one can have little doubt as to Ross’s position on the effect of university support on the musical output of American composers: it allowed the sustenance of an “anti-social” form of music that no longer seeks to be both highbrow art and lowbrow entertainment. “Moreover, only in a prosperous, liberal, art-infatuated society could such a determinedly anti-social class of artists survive, or find an audience. The bourgeois worship of art had planted in artists’ minds an attitude of infallibility, according to which the imagination made its own laws. That mentality made possible the extremes of modern art,” (38). Ross prefers his music sociable and accessible, its sociability and accessibility, let alone worth, to be derived from the market economy that has made of Reich, Glass, and Adams our most “successful” American composers. One cannot miss the glee in the authorial voice when, with the assessment of these American composers behind us, Ross offers this on the future of modernist music in Europe: “The European modern-music utopia will not last forever. In recent years, as welfare-state economies have struggled to stay afloat in the global free market, arts budgets have shrunk. European composers may soon be confronted with the interesting challenge, long familiar to American composers, of writing for a paying audience,” (524).

The narrowness of Ross’s conception of musical success is startling coming from

someone (as music critic of the widely circulated weekly, *The New Yorker*) with the power to significantly influence popular perceptions of composers living and dead. One thinks that Ross might be reaching a moment of self-reflection as he discusses the role Olin Downes, music critic for *The New York Times* from 1924 to 1955, played in the positive reception of the works of Sibelius:

...Downes believed that classical music should appeal not just to elites but to common people, and from the bully pulpit of the *Times* he boldly condemned the obscurantism of modern music – in particular, the artificiality, capriciousness, and snobbery that he perceived in the music of Stravinsky. Sibelius was different; he was ‘the last of the heroes,’ ‘a new prophet,’ who would rescue music from cerebral modernism. At heart, Downes’s motives were good; he wished to celebrate the music of the present and saw in Sibelius a serious figure of mass appeal. But his attacks on Stravinsky were merely tendentious. It would have been more productive to show what the two composers had in common rather than using one as a stick to beat the other. (172).

This could read as an apology for Ross, himself, who uses the populist stick to beat the cerebral moderns, to designate one “the middlebrow ideal of popular modernism” (352) and the other a group of “anti-social” composers declaring “my time will come” (24). Any hope that Ross will pick up on his own suggestion, that he will re-imagine the critic’s role as one drawing connections and thereby educating its readership on the music, whatever music, under discussion without value judgment, is quickly dashed as he continues to place the blame for modernist music’s (relative) failure in the free market solely on the shoulders of the composers, not acknowledging that the composer plays only one small part in bringing his or her product to the market and drawing attention to it. The media, in this present society, is where demand is created. The responsibility is shared. Much of it falls on people like Ross: if the media players use their position to advance their own personal tastes, then the market demand becomes skewed from the start.

But, then, this still rests on the assumption that the goal is market success, which, for a large number of artists, it is not. Ross completely misses this possibility and for this reason cannot begin to understand the cultural critiques of Theodor Adorno, whom he

lampoons intermittently as a cantankerous elitist. It was Adorno's position (glossed over as "the politics of style" in this book, pages 356-35) that, particularly in the wake of the Holocaust, art needed to find a new way – a way that was not easily co-opted as propaganda or taken as a medicine to transcend the pain of the world so that we would not have to consider it⁶. Unwittingly, Ross supports Adorno's position as he tells of Coplandesque rip-offs used in support of Ronald Reagan's presidential campaigns or the eventual adoption of pre-existing music to the totalitarian causes of Stalin and Hitler: "Precisely because of its inarticulate nature, [music] is too easily imprinted with ideologies and deployed to political ends," (306), but of experimental music: "Experimentalism proved to have no propaganda value..." (219). This is precisely the point. Those musical expressions that are easily digestible, due to their establishment within the culture, and that have come to take on vague meanings such as "heroic," "martial," "pastoral," are taken for granted as means for the conveyance of aesthetic value judgments. Insofar as the content is not concrete (relative to language or images), language or images may be fitted to music associated with the vague meaning desired – even with the open American plains, a kind of Wild West pastoral. Also, these forms, as an outgrowth of the culture, are, in Adorno's analysis, imbued with the ideals of the culture. A broken culture will need new cultural forms to reconstitute itself in a healthier fashion. The older forms cannot disrupt one's expectations sufficiently enough to direct attention back onto the form, itself, to cause one to wonder what is going on – to think in new ways about what is at hand. This sentiment, even before Auschwitz, was widespread among modernists in all arts media in the wake of the tremendous human loss and political incomprehensibility of the First World War.

Taking his cue from *Dr. Faustus*, Ross treats World War I as a mere bump on the road to the greater atrocities to come, and so he cannot possibly give the psychological underpinnings of modernism their due. Rather than reckon with the content of Adorno's

⁶ Ross comes out in favor of the position that sometimes what we need is precisely this kind of medicine, so that we might find the strength to continue in our pain (445). Adorno sees any looking away from such cultural pain as an abdication of one's moral duty. The point is debatable, and a debate would be interesting, but Ross chooses instead to attack Adorno's character and ignore his ideas so that he does not have to look at his own assumptions critically. For more on Adorno's argument, see the introduction to *Philosophy of Modern Music* (2003) [1948] New York: Continuum. Also available in other translations under the title *Philosophy of New Music*.

argument mentioned above, at least to frame the impulse of certain modernists as one reasonable reaction to the horror of World War I, Adorno is (mis)represented, as follows: “Theodor Adorno and Virgil Thomson, the same dyspeptic duo that tried to stomp out Sibelius, mocked the cult of Toscanini, Walter Damrosch’s music-appreciation lectures for children, and other instances of classical hype in the thirties... ‘It is highly doubtful,’ Adorno sniffed, ‘if the boy in the subway whistling the main theme of the finale of Brahms’s First Symphony actually had been gripped by the music’...” (265). This, of course, shows Adorno in a bad light, as it is intended to do. If one were to go to the source of the quote, though, and discover its context, one would find that it comes towards the end of a long argument as to why the radio, at its point of technological development in the early 1940s, was woefully inadequate for the transmission of the timbral range necessary to make sense of orchestral music, as timbral differentiation is a significant component in the demarcation of the structure of an orchestral work⁷. Adorno’s secondary objection was to the imagined listening situation of a radio listener at home, with its many distractions and interruptions – a fear that has come to pass, and has also been normalized in a culture pervaded with car radios, home stereos, iPods, etc. How often does one hear music over these media without some distraction intervening at some point? How often does one get in the car and turn on the radio right at the beginning of a piece (particularly of classical music) and get out of the car right at the end of a piece? The boy in Adorno’s quote has not failed to “be gripped by the music” in the sense of being emotionally moved, as we would use the term today, but in the sense of having grasped the music, apprehended it in all its timbral and structural nuance. While Adorno was not without his faults, Ross’s misleading presentation and taking words out of context serves only as a dodge – an excuse for glossing over the very important thought of this “dyspeptic” intellectual. To my knowledge, incidentally, Adorno never wrote anything against music appreciation lectures for children and he absolutely did not believe that “common folk” just could not understand great music. He was, famously, opposed to mass mediated music for its inferior sound quality, for the encouragement of counterproductive listening strategies, and for his political convictions as a Marxist.

⁷ Adorno, Theodor W. 2002 [1941]. “The Radio Symphony” in *Essays on Music*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

The overall tone *The Rest is Noise* promotes suppression of intellectual discourse (through dubious means) in favor of a “middlebrow’ vision of American culture - the idea that democratic capitalism operating at full tilt could still accommodate high culture,” (261). Ross celebrates the composers he believes to have accomplished this, though he never articulates what this “high culture” is, precisely. When he states in the Epilogue that “Composers may never match their popular counterparts in instant impact, but in the freedom of their solitude, they can communicate experiences of singular intensity,” (543) it seems that he is contradicting his own critique of modernism. Isn’t this solitude what those modernists were bracing themselves against with their anguished cries of “my time will come!” while those who avoided solitude and found an audience by writing “music of the present” were being lauded? Ross has introduced no criteria for the evaluation of music other than mass appeal determined according to market success, so what is it he believes (classical) composers can achieve that their counterparts in the areas of Pop, Rock, Hip Hop, R & B, etc. cannot? What are these “experiences of singular intensity,” and wouldn’t the totally isolated (modernist) artist have more to offer in this way if solitude is the precondition to such experiences? In the absence of consistent criteria by which to support his judgments, I can only presume that Ross’s concern is not with a reasoned presentation of information regarding the history of musical composition in the 20th Century but, rather, with an attempt to use whatever argument seems at that moment to justify his pre-existing position.

With all this said, I do feel that Ross is well-meaning, though his reach exceeds his grasp, and he is correct to address the historical circumstances of the development of the art of musical composition, even if his historical understanding seems to be limited to The New Deal, and World War II, with a slight bleed-over into the beginnings of the Cold War. These qualities cannot atone for the severe deficiencies of the book, yet they are all I can find to say in its favor. *The Rest is Noise* is very much a product of its time – one that, sadly, does more to vindicate Adorno’s views on mass mediated culture than many articles that treat Adorno with some academic respect. To place Ross within his own context, then, we have anti-intellectualism, regular guy populism, and faith in the free market as the arbiter of

value in all aspects of human endeavor – a mixture that places his ideological framework in accord with a broad segment of the populace of the United States, one that has been used by the Bush administration as its PR modus operandi. It is no wonder that Ross never gives the actual positions of modernists such as Schoenberg and Adorno a fair hearing. To do so would also require Ross to implicate his own assumptions and the ideological bases on which they rest. The result is inevitable: an individual's attempt to vindicate his own opinions against those of a specialist class to which he does not belong (without actually refuting the substance of their arguments) packaged as a much-needed remedy to a circumstance of which the majority of the audience would be unaware (how many classical music radio lovers have felt the “Schoenbergian juggernaut” bearing down on them through the lower end of the FM dial or the offerings of their local symphony orchestra?) but which they would be manipulated into believing was a rampant attack on all they hold dear musically after reading the book. For myself, as a composer of thorny intellectual works (from beyond the dichotomy of tonal/atonal), I can only hope that such fare is a passing fad – not because the non-specialist should not be allowed to speak or might not have something valuable to offer, but because the avenues for the presentation of such thoughts as might be thus expressed are presently dominated by this Zeitgeist at the expense of a critical look at their content (witness the voluminous praise that has been heaped on this book in the popular press). In his attempt to reach a non-specialist audience of classical music lovers, Ross exploits this spirit and aggravates the very divide he claims to be bridging while ignoring the actual role he could, as a highly visible music critic, play to bring the “two distinct repertoires” together.