

Musical experimentalism as the avant-garde: a Bürgerian approach

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Abstract: The concept of the musical avant-garde has been defined in many different and even conflicting ways in the critical discourses of new music, musical modernism and the avant-garde. In my presentation, I approach the question of the musical avant-garde from the perspective of experimental music, especially through the concept of musical experimentalism. My starting point here is the two-part division of the musical avant-garde: modernism and experimentalism (Nyman 1999 [1974]; Born 1995). I examine this division on the basis of Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-garde* (1984).

In his theory of the avant-garde Bürger argues that avant-garde art protests against the autonomous status of art which is manifested in the separation of art from the praxis of life. From the Bürgerian point of view, avant-garde art rebels against the idea of 'art as an institution', a concept by which Bürger means both the productive and distributive apparatus (museums, concert institutions and so on) and the ideas about art that prevail at a given time and that determine the reception of works (like art theory and criticism).

I argue that a similar principle can also be found in the practice and philosophy of musical experimentalism and its relationship to modernism. Experimentalism protests the "high art" status of musical modernism and aims to break its closed aesthetics. At the same time, experimentalism is dependent on modernism, just as avant-garde art is dependent on Aestheticism in Bürger's theory.

Since the 1950s, when the protest of experimental music against musical modernism achieved its clearest and most notable manifestations, experimental music has created a separate and even isolated sector of its own, namely, the tradition of experimentalism (Born 1995; Mauceri 1997). I claim that by creating a distinctive tradition of its own, experimental music fails to work as the avant-garde, because it has lost its connection to its antithesis, which the avant-garde, by its very nature, always requires. Furthermore, I consider the question of whether the musical avant-garde might again be possible in the twenty-first century if contemporary experimental music would recognise the institutions with which it works.

The idea of experimental music as a tradition or a style of its own has fully emerged in the musicological discourse in the beginning of the twenty-first century. For example, Ashgate recently published an anthology called *The Research Companion to Experimental Music* (2009). Five years earlier, Continuum published its anthology *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music* (2004), which concentrates on ideas related to the concept of experimentalism. The idea of experimental music as an independent musical style and tradition, covering the music of chance music and sound art to free improvisation, thus appears to be comparatively new in the field of musicology.

Obviously, when treated as a separate tradition, experimental music loses its avant-garde potential. For this reason, I prefer to speak of musical experimentalism rather than experimental music in order to emphasise that experimentalism is not a style, but a certain aesthetic and a technique that has to be recreated again and again in relation to other, current musical practices.

As Cox and Warner suggest in their introduction to *Audio Culture*, experimentalism can be understood as '[p]ractices such as open-form composition, free improvisation, and experimentalism which are taken here not as fixed historical entities but as ongoing musical strategies that are continually being adopted and reshaped for new contexts' (Cox & Warner 2004, xv).

Very few musicological studies have explored the idea of musical experimentalism as it relates to musical modernism. In the first history of experimental music, entitled *Experimental music: Cage and Beyond* (1974), Michael Nyman defined experimental music as an opposition to European modernism. Nyman viewed the distinctions between the experimental and the avant-garde (by which he means European modernism) as "ultimately dependent on purely musical considerations" (Nyman 1999, 2): "[n]ote the key European avant-garde words, 'integrate', 'harmony' and 'balance', which show that the responsibility for making relationships is in the hands of the composer, whereas Cage is far more willing to allow relationships to grow naturally (ibid., 29)".

Another study that utilises the paradigm of musical experimentalism and modernism is Georgina Born's *Rationalizing Culture: IRCAM Boulez, and the Institutionalization of the Musical Avant-Garde* (1995). Interestingly, Born uses the paradigm to bring to light the aesthetics of modernism, especially Pierre Boulez's. Born's "antagonistic counterpoint" [Figure 1] presents the dimensions of the essentially aesthetic division of experimentalism in a multifaceted way, emphasising the determinist, scientific, theoretical and intellectual-like features of modernism as opposed to the indeterminist, irrational, empirical and experiential features of experimental music.

Modernism/ Serialism, Postserialism	Postmodernism/ Experimental Music
Determinism	Indeterminism, nondeterminism
Rationalism	Irrationalism, mysticism
Scientism, universalism	Sociopoliticization
Cerebral, complex	Physical, performative, simple
Text-centered	Practice-centered
Linear, cumulative, teleological	Cyclical, repetitive, static
Within a unity of difference to popular music	
Nonreference, absolute difference, nonacknowledgment	Reference, transformation
Within a unity on technology	
Scientific, theoreticist	Empiricist, artisanal
High-tech, institutional	Low-tech bricolage, entrepreneurial
Institutional base	
East Coast universities	West Coast, art colleges, art institutions
Institutionally and state-backed	Self-employed, performance-backed
1. The antagonistic counterpoint of musical modernism and postmodernism.	

Figure 1. Georgina Born's antagonistic counterpoint of musical modernism and experimentalism (Born 1995, 63).

The avant-garde as art's self criticism

The differences between musical modernism and experimentalism closely resemble the friction between avant-garde art and aestheticism in Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974). From the Bürgerian point of view, experimentalism appears as the truly musical avant-garde, for in the music of the twentieth-century it most closely resembles the aesthetics of avant-garde movements. In fact, what is usually called the musical avant-garde, for example, dodecaphony and serial music, does not resemble the aesthetics of the early twentieth-century avant-garde movements. Frank X. Mauceri has remarked that the European avant-garde cannot be seen as the antithesis of experimental music, as Nyman suggests. Instead, Mauceri argues, the essential countercultural nature of experimental music is adopted from the early twentieth-century European avant-garde movements. (Mauceri 1997, 190–191.)

Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-garde* is probably the most widely known and widely quoted avant-garde theory ever written. According to Gregg Horowitz, it is also "the most fully articulated theoretical account of the avant-garde we have" (Horowitz 2003, 752). In the field of musicology, however, Bürger's theory is not that often cited – understandably, because Bürger's discipline is literature, and he makes no reference to music in his writings. As highly criticised as Bürger's theory is, it does work as a tool for defining the concept of the avant-garde on a general level, creating a critical outlook on the relationships of the different concepts of art within art institutions and also without.

According to Bürger, avant-garde art works as art's self-criticism of the autonomous status of art. The autonomous status of art was developed along with the embourgeoisement of culture in the romantic era, when art lost its connection to the real lives of people and ultimately worked only as an enjoyment or a pastime. This separation of art from the praxis of everyday life was made visible by the Aestheticist art movement in the late nineteenth-century. In Aestheticism the distance between art and life became the content of the artworks. The most famous of the Aestheticists, Oscar Wilde, summarised the Aestheticist doctrines in a somewhat ironic sense, as follows:

(1) [...] Art "has an independent life, just as Thought has, and develops purely on its own lines"; (2) [...] "All bad Art comes from returning to Life and Nature, and elevating them into ideals"; (3) [...] "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life"; and (4) [...] "Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art". (Quoted in Dowling 1998, 36.)

The overall idea of Aestheticism, the idea that art is absolutely autonomous and separate from the praxis of life and bears no relationship to any other life purpose, is certainly an ideological concept, as Gregg Horowitz points out (Horowitz 2003, 754). According to Bürger, on this ideological ground created by the Aestheticists, avant-garde art established its aesthetics. Opposing the Aestheticists ideas, avant-garde artists wanted to return art to the domain of life. As Dowling points out, among twentieth-century artists, the Aestheticist concept of a unified and autonomous art remained the great obstacle "to reestablish a vital relation between art and life. [...] Aestheticist art became an escapist, 'affirmative' realm that needed to be smashed before it could be reintegrated into the life-world of praxis and sociopolitical effect." (Dowling 1998, 36.) But, as Bürger mentions, avant-garde artists were not trying to integrate art into the daily life

praxis of the bourgeois whom the Aestheticists were rebelling against. On the contrary, they accepted the aesthetic rejection of the world and its means-ends rationality. Actually, the avant-garde was not against Aestheticism, but rather, like it, it was anti-bourgeois and based on an antipathy to bourgeois culture. (Bürger 1984, 49.)

Experimentalism as the Avant-garde

From a Bürgerian approach, the avant-garde essence of experimentalism is most clearly outlined in the debate between musical modernism and experimentalism. Likewise, between Aestheticism and avant-garde art, the fundamental difference between modernism and experimentalism crystallises in the question of form. Among other things, Bürger saw the avant-garde as a reaction to the culmination of the forms and languages of art, for example, in the poetry of Paul Valéry and Stéphane Mallarmé. This culmination has been seen as representing a crisis in the arts, in which forms were developed to their extremes. As a result of this development, the content of art was weakened. (Hautamäki 2003, 59.)

A similar idea of the culmination of form and crisis in the content of art is also familiar from the histories of twentieth-century music and the musical avant-garde. For example, musicologist and composer Erkki Salmenhaara stated in his early history of twentieth-century music *Vuosisatamme musiikki* (engl. The music of our century) that in serial music, the possibilities of musical material are explored right to their ends, including in melody, harmony and rhythm. For Salmenhaara, serial music represented "the end of an end" (Salmenhaara 1967, 185–186). In a similar manner Jan Maegaard, in *Musiikin modernismi 1945–1962* (engl. Musical modernism 1945–1962), stated that in serial music, the overall development of Western art music from J. S. Bach onwards is brought to an end: "[t]his development is to be called a crystallizing process", Maegaard suggests. (Maegaard 1984: 57–58.)

The idea of serial music as the dead end of musical modernism resembles the idea of Aestheticism as a culmination of forms and a weakening of the content of art. In his study of *Adorno's Aesthetics of Music* (1993), Max Paddison connects the modernist aesthetics to the idea of the separation of art and life, advocated by the French Symbolists, who, according to Paddison, "emphasized both the separation of art from life and the process of progressive control over 'material' (as *matière*, 'matter') which rather encouraged the intensive development of the art work as a 'closed world'." Paddison saw the development of "art works as closed worlds" as being essential to the development of "modernist aesthetics" (Paddison 1993, 69–70; Hamilton 2007; 86). As Jochen Schulte-Sasse mentions, the difference between modernism and avant-garde art clearly lies in the difference in interests: modernism is interested in form, whereas the avant-garde is interested in institutions:

Modernism may be understandable as an attack on traditional writing techniques, but the avant-garde can only be understood as an attack meant to alter the institutionalized commerce with art. The social roles of the modernist and avant-garde artist are, thus, radically different. (Schulte-Sasse 2004, xv.)

In relation to musical modernism and especially serial music, it would be logical to understand experimentalism as a postmodernist response to the dead end of modernist aesthetics. But calling experimental music "postmodernism" is troublesome, for it is obvious that the idea of

experimentalism was born before the 1950s. For this reason some scholars have called the early twentieth-century experimentalists "proto-postmodernists". For example, Andy Hamilton writes: "[m]averick avant-gardists such as Satie, Ives and Duchamp enjoy a problematic relationship with modernism and may be better regarded as proto-postmodernists (Hamilton 2007, 154)."

In my view, the difference between the concepts of experimentalism and postmodernism is that, unlike experimentalism, the concept of postmodernism seems to be essentially related to the determinist idea of modernism. By the "determinist idea of modernism" I mean to the idea of continuation and inevitable development and the belief that every new innovation is a logical consequence of something else that happened earlier. This kind of modernist thinking represents a certain historical determinism in the domain of music (cf. Heiniö 1984, 56).

Unlike modernist thinking, experimentalism rejects modernist idea of development and its pursuit of newness. Already the earlier musical experimentalists rejected the "high modernist" and form-centred, Aestheticist-like tendencies in music. Satie protested post-romantic intellectualisation and complexities in music by composing pieces with simple harmonies and melodies, by using repetitive forms and by his overall antagonistic attitude. According to his own explanations, also Charles Ives wanted to connect music with life. Obviously, the futurist Luigi Russolo was making avant-garde attempts when he advocated the idea that noises are sounds of life and promoted ideas about the un-intellectualization of music, the destruction of formal thinking and the free will of the musical material. That was also Edgard Varèse's aspiration: to allow sounds to move freely in space. Even John Cage started his project of experimental music twenty years before the so-called postmodern era. And these are only the most famous examples of musical experimentalism that pre-date postmodernism.

The Bürgerian concept of the avant-garde correlates with the experimentalism that positions itself outside the institutions of Western classical music. Maybe experimentalism's most effective criticism of the institutions is the statement that "anybody can be a composer", definitely a dangerous idea, according to Western classical music tradition, which worships composers as geniuses, practises music in elitist academies and concert houses and requires long and arduous education. The most important feature of avant-garde art in Bürger's theory is manifested in an experimentalism that aspires to bring art back into the domain of life. Composers who truly represent experimental thinking always have this goal in the background.

Another reason why it is justifiable to see experimentalism as the avant-garde is its fundamentally countercultural working principle. Experimentalism questions the prevailing concepts of music, the institutionalisation and commercialisation of music, whether popular or classical, in contemporary society. Experimentalism is a way to demolish, rebuild, fluster and criticise the way of practising the music prevailing at a given time and therefore, it is always dependent on the concepts of the music of its time.

On contemporary experimentalism

After the 1950s, when experimentalism worked as a counterforce to musical modernism in the context of Western classical music, experimental music practices have constituted their own independent, separate and even isolated sector in the field of contemporary art. Currently, there are, for example, a great number of festivals describing themselves as "festivals of experimental music". Practices that were once experimental, such as freely improvised music, experimental electronic music and sound art, are very popular today, at least for being marginal, as is often claimed. However, in the twenty-first century, there are many kinds of sounding practices that

embody the tradition of musical experimentalism. But it is quite obvious that, at a time when experimentalism has become a tradition and even a style of its own without dynamic connections to other contemporary music, it has also lost its avant-garde potential. By isolating itself, experimentalism fails to work as an avant-garde art, that is, it fails to work as a real countercultural force.

According to Bürger, one of the most important achievements attained by avant-garde art was to make the institutions of art visible. Bürger states that "[t]he category of art as institution was not invented by the avant-garde movements [...] but it [...] became recognizable after the avant-garde movements had criticized the autonomy status of art in developed bourgeois society." By the concept of 'art as institution' Bürger "[r]efers to both, the productive and distributive apparatus" and "the ideas about art that prevail at a given time and that determine the reception of works." (Bürger 1984, 22.)

In musical experimentalism the idea is to make the institutions of music visible, meaning both the music as institution, i.e., the ideological and aesthetic conceptions of music of the prevailing time, and the music institution as the productive and distributive apparatus of contemporary music culture. Naturally, these two sides of the institutionalisation of music are interwoven.

It is often argued that avant-garde art is only a historical phenomenon and one that is not possible in contemporary culture. But if we consider avant-garde art as a criticism of the institutions of art, is it not true that the institutions of music are alive and doing very well in the contemporary culture? As avant-garde scholar Irmeli Hautamäki states, the concept of the art institution in its contemporary sense was not invented before the Second World War. According to Hautamäki, the contemporary concept of the art institution consists of specialised spreading, publishing, exhibiting, museum, research, marketing and financial strategies. (Hautamäki 2007, 23.)

Besides the institutions, at least from the perspective of Finnish contemporary music, it seems that the autonomous concepts of music are also still alive. The practices of classical music are still elitist and totally institutionalised and still rely on "the great masters". Even modernist aesthetics seems to be alive among contemporary composers, albeit perhaps veiled behind ecological, naturalist-like and experiential discourses. The institutional limits are strong, and even though today it is usual to speak of the fragmentation of musical culture and of a situation in which "everything is possible", is it truly thus?

If experimental practices were to recognise the principles of contemporary ideological and practical institutions of music and question their conventions, an avant-garde art would still be possible. But as a separate tradition, experimentalism has become autonomous. Being musically autonomous, contemporary experimental music comments only on its own tradition and history. When the concept of art is closed, it is alienated from the rest of the world — the richest, fullest and most amazing source of experience for avant-garde artists. The avant-garde potential of contemporary experimentalism lies on the borders of contemporary musical institutions.

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