TOWARDS AN AESTHETIC OF EXPERIMENTAL MUSIC

By CHRISTOPHER BALLANTINE

EXPERIMENTAL music patently lacks an articulate aesthetic. Precisely this lack enabled a reviewer not long ago to denigrate experimental music as "a rather amateurish branch of philosophy and comparative religion, as against a genuinely musical movement."[1] Paradoxically, the detractors of experimental music include those who speak from a left-wing position. What makes this paradoxical is, as I hope to reveal, that experimental music happens to have implications that derive from, and support, such a position. One difficulty is that these implications are not often expressed at the level of the music's "content"; and current evaluations of experimental music show no awareness of the complexities of the arguments put forward by such radical thinkers as Walter Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht, and Theodor Adorno (among others), who have dealt with the problems of commitment in art, of experiment, and of an avant-garde. A knowledge of their work makes clear that an aesthetic of experimental music could well begin by attempting to situate the theory and practice of experimental music within the framework of arguments advanced by these writers. This essay is such a beginning.

I

Advances in modern technology have precipitated a crisis for art, as for society, of such dimensions that our old notions of what constitutes art, how it should be made, and so on, are rapidly becoming, or have already become, obsolete. Among those who have recognized this is Paul Valéry:

> Our fine arts were developed, their types and uses were established, in times very different from the present, by men whose power of action upon things was

1 Richard Middleton in *Music and Letters*, LVI/1 (January, 1975), 85-86.

insignificant in comparison with ours. But the amazing growth of our techniques, the adaptability and precision they have attained, the ideas and habits they are creating, make it a certainty that profound changes are impending in the ancient craft of the Beautiful. In all the arts there is a physical component which can no longer by considered or treated as it used to be, which cannot remain unaffected by our modern knowledge and power. For the last twenty years neither matter nor space nor time has been what it was from time immemorial. We must expect great innovations to transform the entire technique of the arts, thereby affecting artistic invention itself and perhaps even bringing about an amazing change in our very notion of art.[2]

Walter Benjamin placed this quotation at the head of his justly famous essay, first published in 1936, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Taking up Valéry's theme, Benjamin says that "under the present conditions of production" art has new developmental tendencies. These conditions "brush aside a number of outmoded concepts, such as creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery."[3] This much was recognized by certain musicians about the same time. Hanns Eisler attributed what he called "the crisis of concert-hall music" to "a form of production made obsolete and overtaken by new technical innovations."[4] This music must therefore undergo a "functional transformation": it must remove "first, the dichotomy of performer and audience and, secondly, that of technical method and content." (That the "solution" of Eisler's own practice — to introduce "the word" into concert music — left this music much as he had found it does not negate the acuity of his criticism.) A concrete and conscious attempt to provide an art adequate to the "present conditions of production" was made by Brecht in his Epic Theater. Inasmuch as its forms corresponded to the new technical forms — cinema and radio (as will be shown later in this essay) — epic theater corresponded to the modern level of technology. But precisely the theoretical backwardness of contemporary thought about new art — analogous to that which now faces new music — made it exceedingly difficult for epic theater to be accepted. This backwardness could not accept epic theater on account of its "closeness to real life"; meanwhile, said Benjamin, "theory languishes in

2 Valéry, "The Conquest of Ubiquity," *Aesthetics,* trans. Ralph Mannheim (New York, 1964), p. 225. The essay was first published in 1928.

3 "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in Benjamin, *Illuminations,* trans. Harry Zohn (London, 1970), p. 220.

4 Quoted in Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," *Understanding Brecht,* trans. Anna Bostock (London, 1973), p. 96.

the Babylonian exile of a praxis which has nothing to do with the way we live. Thus, the values of an operetta by Kolla lend themselves more readily to definition in the approved language of aesthetics than those of a play by Brecht."[5] What its critics did not realize — or perhaps realized and therefore resisted — was that because epic theater undermined the idea of theater as entertainment, it also undermined them as critics: its criterion, Benjamin argued, is not the effect on the nervous system but the degree to which "the false and deceptive totality called 'audience' begins to disintegrate and there is new space for the formation of separate parties within it";[6] the critic was thereby deprived of any "autonomous" system of aesthetics on which to draw.

How then, more exactly, was such a work to be judged? It is of no use whatsoever, said Benjamin, to consider a work of art as a "rigid, isolated object." To ask of the work, "does it have the right tendency (or commitment)?" and "is it also of high quality?" is to pose as two conflicting questions what should dialectically be posed as one. This can be done only if the work is "inserted into the context of living social relations." Instead of asking "what is a work's position *vis-à-vis* the production relations of its time?" one should ask: "what is its position *within* them?"[7] This question is addressed to a work's artistic tendency (and thereby, Benjamin avers, to its quality as well); but it is also addressed to the work's political tendency. Since it concerns the function of a work within the artistic production relations of its time, it is directly concerned with artistic technique. Left-wing criticism that seeks in art an explicit content is thus revealed as simplistic — and possibly ideological too, for it applauds what Benjamin calls the idea of the artist as well-wisher or patron, and forgets that his place "in the class struggle can only be determined, or better still chosen, on the basis of his position within the production process."[8] Thesis art in any case, as Adorno has shown, is perfectly acceptable to the culture industry. Or, in Benjamin's words: "we are confronted with the fact — of which there has been no shortage of proof in Germany over the last decade[9] — that the bourgeois apparatus of production and publication is cap-

5 "What Is Epic Theatre?" first version, *Understanding Brecht*, p. 3.
6 *Ibid.*, p. 10.
7 "The Author as Producer," p. 87.
8 *Ibid.*, p. 93.
9 Benjamin wrote this paper during the thirties.

able of assimilating, indeed of propagating, an astonishing amount of revolutionary themes without ever seriously putting into question its own continued existence or that of the class which owns it."[10]

A committed artist today will therefore "never be concerned with products alone, but always, at the same time, with the means of production. In other words," Benjamin continues, "his products must possess an organizing function besides and before their character as finished works. And their organizational usefulness must on no account be confined to propagandistic use. Commitment alone will not do it." Two things are meant by "organizing function." Firstly, they must be capable of instructing other writers in their production, and, secondly, they must improve the apparatus of production. What is meant by "an improved apparatus"? "This apparatus will be better, the more consumers it brings into contact with the production process — in short, the more readers or spectators it turns into collaborators."[11]

II

Does experimental music show evidence of improving the apparatus of production? Certainly the notion of participation is deeply rooted in its ethic. Even when the passivity of the audience is not in fact transcended so that the audience participates actively in the creation of the music, experimental music will almost invariably point towards a situation in which such cocreation might be achieved. Participation is accepted in principle, if not always attained in fact. But a genuinely participatory music has of course frequently been achieved in experimental music. As many people can join in the performance of Max Neuhaus's *Telephone Access* and of his *Public Supply* as have telephones, or access to them. In the former, the caller dials a given number; the sounds or words he makes are modified electronically and fed back to him. However, obviously nothing but "solos" are possible here. In the latter piece this limitation is overcome: the caller's sounds are mixed with those of other callers, modified, and then broadcast; a player within earshot of a radio can hear the composite sound to which he has contributed. Such pieces not only show how the media might be available for the purposes of active musical participation; they also demonstrate in a

[10] "The Author as Producer," p. 94.
[11] *Ibid.*, p. 98.

very direct way their social possibilities. "Art," said Cage in 1967 in a comment that would aptly describe *Public Supply,* "instead of being an object made by one person is a process set in motion by a group of people. Art's socialized. It isn't someone saying something, but people doing things, giving everyone (including those involved) the opportunity to have experience they would not otherwise have had."[12]

Community music of a different kind is provided by the environmental compositions of Trevor Wishart and Friends, published in a recent collection called *Sun — Creativity and Environment.* In some of these pieces, all of which have been performed, music may be a carnival-like event made in a village community by its inhabitants and lasting perhaps several days. Local skills as well as local sound-producing materials or objects may be adopted for musical use. After attacking audience participation as normally too limited, Wishart writes:

> The entire audience should, ideally, be an intrinsic part of the event from beginning to end, and when this is the case they cease to be mere audience and the event ceases to be a concert; they create the event, it is theirs, it is no longer done for them. They are no longer 'the public', divided off from the 'Artists' by an unquestionable act of God which caused some people to be born with a 'Creative Spark', an 'Artistic Gift', destined to amuse the vast hordes of the supposedly unimaginative. (What child was born without imagination?) They participate in a creative process, and in so doing perhaps realize the existence and/or importance of their own creative potential.[13]

Closer to a traditional concert situation, but negating it at every turn, is Frederic Rzewski's *Free Soup.* Here the audience, far from being passive listeners, are asked to bring instruments and to play with the "performers," who are instructed to try "to relate to each other and to people and act as naturally and free as possible, without the odious role-playing ceremony of traditional concerts." Rzewski's *Sound Pool* sets up an improvisation in which a wide variety of people may participate; its most explicit restriction is that imposed on the *stronger* players, who are required for the most part to "do accompanying work, that is, help weaker players to sound better." Equally anti-elitist is the same composer's *Les Moutons de Panurge,* which is "for any number of musicians playing melody instruments plus any

[12] Cage, "Diary: How to Improve the World (You Will Only Make Matters Worse), Continued 1967," *A Year from Monday* (London, 1968), p. 151.

[13] Wishart, *Sun — Creativity and Environment* (London, 1974), p. 8.

number of non-musicians playing anything." Some of Cornelius Cardew's music is among the most brilliantly conceived attempts to provide music-making opportunities for unskilled (as well as skilled) players. In several "Paragraphs" of *The Great Learning*, for instance, he has composed for different levels of musical accomplishment as an integral part of a thoroughly organized musical structure. His Scratch Orchestra sanctioned such differences as part of a performing body, without discrimination. In Michael Nyman's description,

> The Scratch Orchestra (singularly unsusceptible to definition though it was) defined itself not through constitutions or the intentions of one composer, but through the interests, idiosyncrasies, ideas, creativity of the group of individuals, drawn from any number of walks of life, who made up the orchestra. The Scratch Orchestra's (unwritten, unwritable) constitution was one which allowed each person to be himself, in a democratic social microcosm where (for a long time) the individual differences between people could coexist quite happily, without apparently being reduced to a common 'constitutional' or organizational denominator, where a nominal 'star' (a Cardew or a Tilbury) had no priority rights over the youngest, newest, most inexperienced member.[14]

Such an arrangement, Cardew has commented, "fosters communal activity, it breaks down the barrier between private and group activity, between professional and amateur — it is a means to sharing experience."[15] The Scratch Orchestra therefore was more than just a performing ensemble: it was an experimental *community*, which entered into social, ethical, and aesthetic experiment on a communal scale.

These tendencies may still seem new and surprising in music; but they merely take up in a more modern form the changes noted by Benjamin and others forty years ago in some of the other arts. They constitute what Benjamin described as a vast melting-down process, "in which many of the contrasts in terms of which we have been accustomed to think may lose their relevance." This process "not only destroys the conventional separation between genres, between writer and poet, scholar and popularizer, but . . . questions even the separation between author and reader."[16] Film is one example: "the newsreel offers everyone the opportunity to rise from passer-by to movie-extra"; as a consequence of this, "any man might even find himself part of a work of art." Thus in Russian films some of the

[14] Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* (London, 1974), p. 114.
[15] Cardew, ed., *Scratch Music* (London, 1972), p. 16.
[16] "The Author as Producer," pp. 89-90.

players "are not actors in our sense but people who portray *themselves.*"[17] (This process, says Benjamin, has been held back in capitalistic Western Europe.) Contemporary literature is subject to the same changes. The situation that existed for centuries, whereby "a small number of writers were confronted by many thousands of readers," has been changing since the end of the last century:

> With the increasing extension of the press, which kept placing new political, religious, scientific, professional, and local organs before the readers, an increasing number of readers became writers — at first, occasional ones. It began with the daily press opening to its readers space for 'letters to the editor'. And today there is hardly a gainfully employed European who could not, in principle, find an opportunity to publish somewhere or other comments on his work, grievances, documentary reports, or that sort of thing. Thus, the distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character.[18]

Similar changes can be discerned in the theater, notably in the work of Brecht. Speaking of the didactic play, Benjamin notes: "through the exceptional austerity of its apparatus, it facilitates and encourages the interchangeability of actors and audience, audience and actors. Every spectator can become one of the actors."[19] Such sympathies are in keeping also with surrealism, which, although it transmutes the artist into a magician does not thereby separate him from other men. The poet, Breton said, walks "in broad daylight" among ordinary men. The magic is within reach of all; everybody is blessed. "Poetry," added Lautréamont, "must be made by all, not by one."[20]

For Brecht a further reason why changes in the (theatrical) apparatus of production were necessary was that art had become merchandise, and was therefore "governed by the laws of mercantile trade." "At present," he wrote around 1930, "the apparati do not work for the general good; the means of production do not belong to the producer."[21] The theater, as apparatus, is given "absolute priority" over the plays. "This apparatus resists all conversion to other purposes, by taking any play which it encounters and immediately changing it so that it no longer represents a foreign body within the apparatus — except at those points where it neutralizes

17 "The Work of Art," p. 233.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 234.

19 "What Is Epic Theatre?" second version, *Understanding Brecht*, p. 20.

20 Quoted in Maurice Nadeau, *The History of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Howard (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1973), p. 52.

21 "The Modern Theatre Is the Epic Theatre," *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York, 1964), p. 35.

itself." Thus the theater's apparatus falsifies; for economic reasons "it theatres it all down.[22] Epic theater answers this assault by causing a "battle between theatre and play," and so destroys the old apparatus. This is a transformation that corresponds to "the whole radical transformation of the mentality of our time."[23]

III

The Dadaists sacrificed market values by means of what Benjamin called the "studied degradation of their material." Through the conscious use of the unmarketable — trivia, obscenity — they achieved "a relentless destruction of the aura of their creations." Experimental music seeks to achieve this too, very often in a similar way. Benjamin traces the "aura" of a traditional work of art to its ritual function: ritual — "the location of its original use value" — is the basis of the unique quality of the "authentic" in a work of art. In the Renaissance things began to change; the secular cult of beauty "clearly showed that ritualistic basis in its decline and the first deep crisis which befell it." The advent of photography, "simultaneously with the rise of socialism," then posed a serious threat to the artistic aura, precisely because it attacked the possibility of authenticity at its root; in photography no one print can claim to be the uniquely authentic print. But the real crisis occurred only a century later. Now, "for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual."[24]

What social tendency provides the basis for this contemporary decay of the aura? Benjamin answers: "the increasing significance of the masses in contemporary life." The masses today want to "bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly. Thus is manifested in the field of perception what in the theoretical sphere is noticeable in the increasing importance of statistics. The adjustment of reality to the masses and of the masses to reality is a process of unlimited scope, as much for thinking as for perception."[25] Precisely the same social basis underlies experimental music. It too, in principle and often in practice, destroys the aura of a work — not through reproduction

[22] "The Literarization of the Theatre," *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 43.
[23] "The Epic Theatre and Its Difficulties," *Brecht on Theatre*, pp. 22-23.
[24] "The Work of Art," pp. 239-40 and 226.
[25] *Ibid.*, p. 225.

but by situating the phenomenon of "closeness" at the very root and as the very essence of the artwork. Gone are the notions of exclusiveness, of elitism, of a private code, of expertise, of the unique and permanent work of art, of "creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery." The musical work in principle becomes creatable by everyone through a revolution in the apparatus of musical production (which includes its language), just as the work of art becomes in principle possessable by everyone through a revolution in the apparatus of *re*production. To be sure, mechanical reproduction did not enter into musical art as early as it did into visual art; in the nineteenth century music responded to the desire for availability and "closeness" by developing ever larger resources of production in performance (grand opera, bigger orchestras). It is not until the development of sound recording that music undergoes a reproductive revolution, a change that culminates some time later in the emergence of composition onto magnetic tape: *musique concrète* and electronic music wholly defy aura and the notion of "authenticity." But meanwhile music was already on the way to meeting these challenges in another way — through the introduction of alea as a principle of performance, which in itself negates the possibility of a unique authenticity, an aura, in the work. Mechanical reproduction in painting guarantees an infinite number of *identical* prints (as does sound recording); alea guarantees an infinite number of *different* versions or realizations. Both make it impossible for an aura to attach to the final product.

The emancipation from ritual achieved by mechanical reproduction (of which Benjamin speaks) can be seen also in the dress worn by audiences at concerts of experimental music, and in the rejection by such music of the traditional concert hall. The distinctive, formal clothes that are conventionally worn at concerts of traditional music have been displaced. The new audiences by and large wear their ordinary, everyday dress to experimental music concerts: they observe no distinction between "life" and "art" — or, rather, the art is felt as bearing a close and necessary relationship to life, and this proximity is confirmed equally by the disappearance of the traditional distinction in dress and by the emigration of experimental music from the hallowed traditional performing area. The pulling down of the barrier of exclusiveness and ritual is of a piece with the investigation of life in art, of which Benjamin and Brecht speak.

In a vivid image Benjamin summed up the current trend towards

the desacralization of art. "The point at issue in the theatre today," he said,

> concerns the filling-in of the orchestra pit. The abyss which separates the actors from the audience like the dead from the living, the abyss whose silence heightens the sublime in drama, whose resonance heightens the intoxication of opera, this abyss which, of all the elements of the stage, most indelibly bears the traces of its sacral origins, has lost its function.[26]

Nowhere is the desacralization of contemporary art clearer than in that experimental music which seeks out the unique peculiarities of individual human beings and allows these to dictate much of the shape and content of the piece — a process already prefigured at the very moment that a composer stops writing every detail of his notation and withdraws, conceding authorship (in the same measure as he withdraws) to the players. Such a piece is Alvin Lucier's *I Am Sitting in a Room,* which creatively *uses* Lucier's own speech impediment: a marked stutter. He reads the text; this is recorded, played back into the room, and rerecorded; the rerecording is then played back and recorded again — and so on. Slowly this process filters out the content of the original text and replaces it with the resonant frequencies of the room, in the distinctive rhythm of his original reading. Thus the speech impediment is transcended; it becomes precisely that which gives the music its interesting rhythmic quality. Lucier says that he is more interested in the smoothing-out of his impediment in the piece than in the exploration of the room-resonance. Another composition of his, *The Only Talking Machine of Its Kind in the World* — "for any stutterer, stammerer, lisper, person with faulty or halting speech, regional dialect or foreign accent or any other anxious speaker who believes in the healing power of sound" — has a somewhat similar aim, achieved by different means.

The type of response demanded of an audience in most pieces of experimental music is another aspect of the process of "filling in the orchestra pit." More than for possibly any other Western music, an audience for experimental music is expected to respond *creatively.* A member of the audience is not faced with a pregiven distinction between foreground and background, with certain discrete and readily graspable musical "facts," with a given and sensible structure, with clear and sanctified boundaries which define what one's attention should include or exclude. (Even if not all these features are

[26] "What Is Epic Theatre?" first version, p. 1.

absent, they are at any rate markedly less present than in traditional music.) Such situations provide exercises in perception, or new ways of seeing or hearing, and as such they are perfectly in keeping with Cage's statement about music not being an occasion for passivity: "Most people think that when they hear a piece of music, they're not doing anything but that something is being done to them. Now this is not true, and we must arrange everything, I believe, so that people realize that they themselves are doing it, and not that something is being done to them."[27]

IV

One of the central themes in experimental music is improvisation. And it is here that one sees so clearly the social aspect of experimental music, related both to the transformation of the music apparatus and to the desacralization of the musical work of art. Improvisation makes cooperation and *social* behavior, in the best and highest senses, into an aesthetic matter. By transposing concrete social issues and values in this manner into the sphere of the aesthetic, the audience may gain practice at observing social norms, the performer may gain practice at behaving in social ways, but in a sphere free from the pay-offs or the penalties that accompany asocial behavior in everyday life. Historically, all forms of group music-making reflect types of social behavior, kinds of social relationships, derived to a large extent from current social practice, but wrought in the artwork in a form considered to be an ideal form of actual practice. In a Mozart string quartet, for example, we have a series of relationships in an "ideal" form, derived from current practice: however, the form of their derivation, as Adorno has shown, is that of a *negation* of that practice. Now the presence of the composer and of accepted, known "rules" which govern all participants is itself part of that current practice, and speaks of a world in which rules and values can be agreed upon, at least among the class to whom the music is addressed. Improvised experimental music does in relation to *its* current social practice what a Mozart quartet did to its own; but the absence of an omnipresent and omniscient composer speaks now of a world in which the precise form of the negation of current practice must be *discovered,* in which there are few already-agreed-upon rules or values. Cornelius

[27] Quoted in Nyman, *Experimental Music,* p. 21.

Cardew has spoken of those values that *can* be agreed upon in advance. He gives special place to self-discipline, which he sees as the

> essential prerequisite for improvisation. Discipline is not to be seen as the ability to conform to a rigid rule structure, but as the ability to work collectively with other people in a harmonious and fruitful way. Integrity, self-reliance, initiative, to be articulate (say, on an instrument) in a natural, direct way; these are the qualities necessary for improvisation. Self-discipline is the necessary basis for the desired spontaneity, where everything that occurs is heard and responded to without the aid of arbitrarily controlled procedures and intellectual labour.[28]

To put this general argument in other terms: in traditional music, the musical language is predetermined to a very great extent; it is a *donnée* and to that extent a kind of "fate." In experimental music, on the other hand, the notion of this pregiven "fate" is radically overthrown; the horizons of the musical language are established anew with each piece, or at any rate each performance.

If the significance of improvisation in experimental music is that it is "open" and without predesignation, without "fate," then this privilege is made possible by the language of experimental (and much avant-garde) music: a language more empty of connotation, of grammar, than any musical language in the history of the West — and therefore more full of possibilities for significance to be vested in it. This absolute "openness" explains why as a matter of principle anyone can enter into it; it also explains why the most remarkable and undreamt-of significance can arise out of the combination of the most apparently independent and disparate elements.

A musical experiment recently carried out at the University of Natal aptly demonstrates this point. Four musicians, all with experience in contemporary improvisation, and all of whom had played together on previous occasions, undertook to perform a group improvisation in circumstances where no player could hear any of the others. Each player, with his instrument(s), was closeted alone in a room remote from those of the other players; microphones and contact microphones fed the sound produced in each room to a small auditorium where the total sound was recorded on a four-channel tape recorder (one channel for each player) and simultaneously played to an audience through four independent loudspeakers. There were absolutely no guidelines for the improvisation, except to play "musically" and to attempt to "commune" inaudibly with the other players; apart from this, the players had deliberately avoided dis-

[28] Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 107.

cussing anything beforehand (including the approximate length of the performance.) It was clearly an experiment — the outcome was unforeseeable, and three of the four players were sceptical in varying degrees. The performance ended spontaneously after seventy-five minutes, fifteen minutes after the first player had stopped. The audience — and the players, on hearing the playback — were amazed. The composite improvisation was an unqualified success in musical terms: the musicians seemed unerringly to be playing *as a group,* responding to each other with what appeared to be uncanny sensitivity. That each single player had improvised well was not in doubt and not surprising; but that the playing of the four simultaneously made a "piece" of such unfailing musical sense seemed to defy explanation. Subsequently the tape recording of the event was subjected to further experimentation. The four individual channels were separated, and then rerecorded in various staggered ways: each single improvisation starting one minute after the other, then another recording with a five-minute delay after each beginning, and so on. The discovery — in something approaching the natural-scientific sense — was that each new combination yielded fresh musical significance and continued to make good musical sense. The explanation, one had finally to conclude, lay in the nature of the idiom: precisely because the idiom was free of pregiven content it was more adaptable, more amenable to rearrangement, and more open to everchanging significance being vested in it, than any earlier Western music.

It is worthy of observation that experimental music's avoidance of predetermination and its search for a new language are two more respects in which its program echoes that of Dada. By means of a quotation from Apollinaire, Eluard (in his Dada phase) justified his experiments with language:

> O mouths, man is looking for a new language
> No grammarian can legislate.

In Dada, the interest in and search for new meanings and a new language to incarnate them went hand-in-hand with a belief in the importance of what Breton called "objective chance," or what others might call coincidence. The same nexus precisely is found in experimental music: the meaning to be incarnated is not predetermined, not even its "horizon" need be known in advance; but the *method* by which it is to come into being is one that frequently, indeed almost always, involves a fundamental engagement with chance.

V

The emptying of sounds of their significance, fully achieved in experimental music today, follows directly upon the tradition of Debussy, Schoenberg, Webern, and others, where sounds progressively lose their grammatical referential value, and become more empty and open. As such, experimental music fulfills Adorno's criterion that in a world where the accepted realms and procedures of meaning are administered, art must not aim at "formal conceptual coherence," but rather "suspend," by its "mere appearance," the "rigid co-ordination-system of those people who submit themselves to authoritarian rule."[29] The function of art is defined dialectically, in terms of the negative: "In the world of alien administration, the only adequate form in which works of art are received is as the communication of the incommunicable, the smashing of reified consciousness."[30] Therefore, art (particularly, experimental music) is in revolt "against positivist subordination of meaning"; it "jolts signification."[31]

Such "jolts" — where the safe, taken-for-granted world is called into question — are created by other, more obvious means too. Cardew's *Memories of You* (1964) is an example. It is a piece for piano solo, but the piano merely defines the orbit of the action. Sounds are to be made, according to a specific notation, in the immediate vicinity of a grand piano; the nature of the sounds is not prescribed, so that the piece might well be performed without the piano ever being played. Thus the grand piano becomes virtually a mere reference point in the center of the performing area. The title is neatly ironic. Other examples were provided by the Scratch Orchestra's performances of "popular classics." The draft constitution of the orchestra, drawn up by Cardew in 1969, lists these classics as one of the group's basic sources of repertoire:

Popular Classics. Only such works as are familiar to several members are eligible for this category. Particles of the selected works will be gathered in Appendix 1. A particle could be: a page of score, a page or more of the part for one instrument or voice, a page of an arrangement, a thematic analysis, a gramophone record, etc.

The technique of performance is as follows: a qualified member plays the given particle, while the remaining players join in as best they can, playing along,

[29] Quoted in Phil Slater, "The Aesthetic Theory of the Frankfurt School," *Cultural Studies*, VI, 196.

[30] Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie* (Frankfurt am Main, 1970), p. 292. Quoted in Slater, *loc. cit.*

[31] Adorno, "Commitment," *New Left Review*, LXXXVII-LXXXVIII (September–December, 1974), 77.

contributing whatever they can recall of the work in question, filling the gaps of memory with improvised variational material. As is appropriate to the classics, avoid losing touch with the reading player (who may terminate the piece at his discretion), and strive to act concertedly rather than independently. These works should be programmed under their original titles.[32]

Such activities have much in common with Dada's "violations" of sacrosanct works of art — the best known of which was Duchamps's addition of moustaches and a goatee to the *Mona Lisa*. And both these spring from a motive very similar to one of the motives underlying Brecht's epic theater: the alienation of the familiar. For alienation, says Brecht, "is necessary to all understanding. When something seems the 'most obvious thing in the world' it means that any attempt to understand it has been given up."[33] The tyranny of the obvious must be attacked: "what is 'natural' must have the force of what is startling." In this way uncritical submission and empathy on the part of the audience are prevented.

Such devices testify to an attitude to the audience entirely different from that manifested in previous art. There is now no attempt to dominate or manipulate an audience. The actor's idea of the audience, says Benjamin — and this applies equally to the performer's idea in experimental music — "is essentially different from the animal-tamer's view of the beasts who inhabit his cage." These are players "for whom effect is not an end but a means." Thus the audience becomes "an assembly of interested persons" (rather than "a collection of hypnotized test subjects"), the stage "a convenient public exhibition area" (rather than "the planks which signify the world"), and the text — again, alike for epic theater and experimental music — "a grid on which, in the form of new formulations, the gains of that performance are marked" (rather than "a basis of that performance").[34] In a performance of experimental music the audience is not insidiously drawn into the music for the sake of a profound emotional experience; indeed, the music inhibits precisely such a response. Rather, as in epic theater, the audience "will quickly feel impelled to take up an attitude to what it sees." In Brecht's words, "once illusion is sacrificed to free discussion, and once the spectator, instead of being enabled to have an experience, is forced

[32] Cardew, "A Scratch Orchestra: Draft Constitution," in *The Musical Times*, June, 1969, pp. 617-18.

[33] "Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction," *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 71.

[34] "What Is Epic Theatre?" first version, pp. 10 and 3.

as it were to cast his vote; then a change has been launched which goes far beyond formal matters and begins for the first time to affect the theater's social function."[35] The attitude of the audience for epic theater — and, if my hypothesis is correct, for experimental music as well — is one that Brecht characterized as that of "smoking-and-watching." It is an attitude that brings about "a theatre full of experts, just as one has sporting arenas full of experts."[36] But insofar as it rejects the "direct impact" of Aristotelian aesthetics which "flattens out all social and other distinctions between individuals," non-Aristotelian drama (and music) rejects the notion of "a collective entity," a "common humanity . . . created in the auditorium *for the duration of the entertainment.*" Non-Aristotelian drama (and music) "is not interested in the establishment of such an entity." In requiring its audience to take up an attitude, to cast its vote, "it divides its audience."[37] Such an audience will be at the opposite extreme from that stigmatized by Brecht in the following passage, however exaggerated his portrayal of it:

> Most 'advanced' music nowadays is still written for the concert hall. A single glance at the audiences who attend concerts is enough to show how impossible it is to make any political or philosophical use of music that produces such effects. We see entire rows of human beings transported into a peculiar doped state, wholly passive, sunk without trace, seemingly in the grip of a severe poisoning attack. Their tense, congealed gaze shows that these people are the helpless and involuntary victims of the unchecked lurchings of their emotions. Trickles of sweat prove how such excesses exhaust them. The worst gangster film treats its audience more like thinking beings. Music is cast in the role of Fate. As the exceedingly complex, wholly unanalysable fate of this period of the grisliest, most deliberate exploitation of man by man. Such music has nothing but purely culinary ambitions left. It seduces the listener into an enervating, because unproductive, act of enjoyment. No number of refinements can convince me that its social function is any different from that of the Broadway burlesques.[38]

If for Brecht such occasions were characterized by hypnosis rather than anything resembling autonomous thought, one of the ways he hoped to begin to rekindle thought was by means of laughter. "Speaking more precisely," wrote Benjamin, "spasms of the diaphragm generally offer better chances for thought than spasms of the soul." Like experimental music, "epic theatre is lavish only in the occasions

[35] "The Modern Theatre Is Epic Theatre," *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 39.

[36] "The Literarization of the Theatre," p. 43.

[37] "Indirect Impact of the Epic Theatre," *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 60. Italics in the original.

[38] "On the Use of Music in an Epic Theatre," *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 89.

it offers for laughter."[39] One example of such humor in experimental music is LaMonte Young's *Piano Piece for David Tudor No. 1,* written in October, 1960:

Bring a bale of hay and a bucket of water onto the stage for the piano to eat and drink. The performer may then feed the piano or leave it to eat by itself. If the former, the piece is over after the piano has been fed. If the latter, it is over after the piano eats or decides not to.

VI

Heinz-Klaus Metzger has written:

the term 'experimental music', if it is to be given any . . . meaning, could refer only to music which by its own terms of reference is an experimental arrangement, and can therefore not foresee the results that will work out in performance.[40]

Experimental: the term itself suggests a music "fit for the scientific age" — the condition Brecht required of theater. "An act the outcome of which is unknown," Cage calls it. Cage also distinguishes this music from music which is "a thing upon which attention is focused." Experimental music requires something different: "the attention moves towards the observation and audition of many things at once, including those that are environmental — becomes, that is, inclusive rather than exclusive."[41] Some experimental music is aimed explicitly at discovery in almost the natural-scientific sense — for example, hearing the unhearable (Lucier's piece for the alpha rhythms of the brain), or discovering the inherent characteristics of a room or environment (Lucier's *Vespers,* and *I Am Sitting in a Room).* In *The Queen of the South* Lucier explores those sounds that are effective in making iron filings (or sugar or other granules) move on flat surfaces responsive to sound. The piece bears an acknowledgment to Hans Jenny, upon whose recent work it is evidently based; Lucier's piece for alpha rhythms *(Music for Solo Performer)* resulted, says Nyman, from the composer's "contact with the work of physicist Edmond Dewan of the Air Force Cambridge Research Lab in Bedford, Massachusetts who was engaged in brainwave research in connection with flying"; and Lucier's *Quasimodo the Great*

[39] "The Author as Producer," p. 101.

[40] Metzger, "Abortive Concepts in the Theory and Criticism of Music," *Die Reihe,* V (1959), 27.

[41] Quoted in Nyman, *Experimental Music,* p. 1.

Lover reflects "the recent research into the communication system of whales."[42] A work such as LaMonte Young's *The Tortoise, His Dreams and Journeys* represents what Nyman calls "a continuous practical research into certain psycho-acoustical phenomena"; or, as Young says, "To my knowledge there have been no previous studies of the long-term effects of continuous periodic composite sound waveforms on people."[43] A quite different way in which improvisation may be experimental is, as Cardew has pointed out, its search for sounds that operate subliminally rather than at a manifest cultural level, and its investigation of the emotions that are stirred by such sounds.

The scientific frame of mind of "what can we discover?" is thus one of the central irreducible features of experimental music. The active experience of this attitude is what cannot be captured on a phonograph record, which therefore has "no more value than a postcard" (Cage). Such a frame of mind is totally future-oriented: its sole intention is to produce — in an attitude of open-minded, open-ended discovery — the *future*. By comparison, Western traditional music tells us what is, or has been, known or hoped or felt; its performances reproduce the *past*.

The scientific attitude evinced here is not new to twentieth-century art. Benjamin applauded film because it promoted the mutual penetration of art and science, and noted: "it is difficult to say which is more fascinating, its artistic value or its value for science."Its capacity for discovery was to be located in two closely related areas. Firstly, by the use of such techniques as the close-up, or the focus on details that may be hidden from ordinary view, film "extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule over our lives." Secondly, by means of slow motion, its capacity for infinite mobility, its "dynamite of the tenth of a second," film burst asunder the prison world in which we appeared to be hopelessly locked. Experimental music does precisely the same. The microphone, contact-microphone, amplifier, tape recorder, and shortwave radio have extended our comprehension and freed us from our auditory prison world in an exactly analogous way. If the camera "introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses,"[44] then the techniques of experimental music introduce us to uncon-

[42] *Ibid.*, p. 91.
[43] *Ibid.*, p. 123.
[44] "The Work of Art," p. 230.

scious sound production and hearing. Dziga Vertov's marvelous homage to the camera in his manifesto printed in the magazine *LEF* in 1923 could stand, *mutatis mutandis*, as a homage to the microphone:

I am an eye. I am a mechanical eye. I, the machine, show you a world the way only I can see it. I free myself for today and forever from human immobility. I am in constant movement. I approach and pull away from objects. I creep under them. I move alongside a running horse's mouth. I cut into a crowd in full speed. I run in front of running soldiers. I turn over on my back. I soar with an aeroplane. I fall and rise with the falling and rising bodies. This is I, the machine, manoeuvring in the chaotic movements, recording one movement after another in the most complex combinations. Freed from the obligation of shooting 16 to 17 frames per second, freed from the boundaries of time and space, I co-ordinate any and all points of the universe, wherever I want them to be. My way leads towards the creation of a fresh perception of the world. Thus I explain in a new way the world unknown to you.

For Brecht, a scientific spirit of investigation had to be one of the essential attributes of art in the twentieth century:

I must say that I do need the sciences. I have to admit that I look askance at all sorts of people who I know do not operate on the level of scientific understanding: that is to say, who sing as the birds sing, or as people imagine the birds to sing. I don't mean by that that I would reject a charming poem about the taste of fried fish or the delights of a boating party just because the writer had not studied gastronomy or navigation. But in my view the great and complicated things that go on in the world cannot be adequately recognized by people who do not use every possible aid to understanding.[45]

Galileo, Brecht reminds us, saw a swinging chandelier; "he was amazed by this pendulum in motion," and his amazement was precisely what enabled him to arrive at an understanding of the laws that governed its movement. This "detached eye," according to Brecht, is what theater audiences must develop; it is the job of the playwright to put them in situations where this attitude is required of them.[46] In a piece composed in 1968 Steve Reich requires his audience to observe *and listen to* a number of pendulums in motion. Microphones are suspended above loudspeakers, released simultaneously, and allowed to swing at their own speed. They feed back through the speakers. The piece consists of a changing series of feedback pulses, shorter at the beginning and longer at the end when the mikes swing more slowly; the piece ends with unbroken feedback when all the mikes are at rest.

[45] "Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction," *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 73.
[46] "A Short Organum for the Theatre," *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 192.

Brecht suggests that people today want "rational" entertainment — what Benjamin called the "dramatic laboratory" — because of "the whole radical transformation of the mentality of our time." What is certain, he says, is that

> the present-day world can only be described to present-day people if it is described as capable of transformation. People of the present day value questions on account of their answers. They are interested in events and situations in face of which they can do something. . . . In an age whose science is in a position to change nature to such an extent as to make the world seem almost habitable, man can no longer describe man as a victim, the object of a fixed but unknown environment. It is scarcely possible to conceive of the laws of motion if one looks at them from a tennis ball's point of view.[47]

VII

Benjamin noted the existence of a profound dialectic in the development of art:

> One of the foremost tasks of art has always been the creation of a demand which could be fully satisfied only later. The history of every art form shows critical epochs in which a certain art form aspires to effects which could be fully obtained only with a changed technical standard, that is to say, in a new art form. The extravagances and crudities of art which thus appear, particularly in the so-called decadent epochs, actually arise from the nucleus of its richest historical energies. In recent years, such barbarisms were abundant in Dadaism. It is only now that its impulse becomes discernible: Dadaism attempted to create by pictorial — and literary — means the effects which the public today seeks in the film.[48]

This dialectic precisely defines the relationship between experimental and avant-garde music: not a fruitless opposition but a fertile and changing interplay between the more and the less radical, the more and the less systematized. The two are complementary — indeed, possibly of necessity; one might ask whether either could exist in its familiar form without the other. And this connection points to their relationship to the modern world: they are the twin parts of what we might designate a quasi-scientific practice. In other words, the one experiments, the other adopts; the latter has implications ("hypotheses") which the former explores (subjects to experiment).

If audience participation entered composition haphazardly and

[47] "Can the Present-day World Be Reproduced by Means of Theatre?" *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 275.

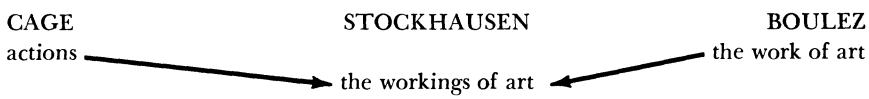
[48] "The Work of Art," p. 239.

unpredictably in Cage's music (for example), then in an avant-garde work such as *Momente* Stockhausen has composed this into the piece as an integral and predetermined part of the structure. Even though here it is not an actual audience that participates, the link between the experiments of, say, Cage and *Momente* is nevertheless valid. A more precise instance of experimental music influencing avant-garde music is that of Stockhausen's contact with David Tudor. Their acquaintance helped the composer formulate a new attitude to the role of the interpreter in his own composed music — an attitude which Tudor was able to impart because of his own deep involvement in American experimental music which viewed the performer in this way. For Tudor, as Karl Wörner has pointed out, was not so much a "performer" as a "partner," less an executant than a creative accomplice. As such, he was quite different from Stockhausen's ideal type of interpreter, who would perform an unambiguous score in the prescribed, "correct" way. As a result of their encounters, Stockhausen came to see that a more "open" attitude towards the score and a freer rein for the interpreter could achieve the decisive step of reinvesting the performer with some of the responsibilities of creation. Around this time (1954/55) Stockhausen began writing works that embody this new attitude.

But avant-garde music also provides aspects for experimental music to contradict. The music of the avant-garde, in its purest or most "classical" manifestation, is still exclusive in its skill orientation, still elitist, whereas experimental music is, both in principle and often in practice, inclusive and participatory. This difference is manifested also in the different social status of the two musics: Boulez is performed at the Royal Festival Hall, Cardew in Ealing Town Hall; journals devoted to the avant-garde (e. g., *Perspectives of New Music*) are academic in a conventional sense, those devoted to experimental music (e. g., *Source*) are iconoclastic and may even be antiacademic in tendency; avant-garde composers tend to be respected "establishment" figures, while experimental composers are, if anything, members of the "antiestablishment."

Perhaps more than any other contemporary composer, Stockhausen exists at the point where the dialectic between experimental and avant-garde music becomes manifest; it is in him, more obviously than anywhere else, that these diverse approaches converge. This alone would seem to suggest his remarkable significance. Of Boulez, Stockhausen has said: "His objective is the work of art, mine is

rather its workings." And of Cage: "A composer who draws attention to himself more by his actions than by his productions."[49] Thus the following polarity of extremes and their confluence emerges:



It is worth stressing that the underlying unity of these extremes is not in question and is after all what makes the dialectic possible. This unity is summed up in Morton Feldman's recent observations:

> What music rhapsodizes in today's 'cool' language, is its own construction. The fact that men like Boulez and Cage represent opposite extremes of modern methodology is not what is interesting. What is interesting is their similarity. In the music of both men, things are exactly what they are — no more, no less. In the music of both men, what is heard is indistinguishable from its process. In fact, process itself might be called the Zeitgeist of our age. The duality of precise means creating indeterminate emotions is now associated only with the past.[50]

VIII

The episodic character of experimental music and avant-garde music ("moment form" for example) has often been noted. In this respect, too, music corresponds to the new technical forms: cinema, radio, television, and the press. And this is one further feature it shares with epic theater. The connection between Brecht's theater and the new technical forms was sketched by Benjamin:

> In film, the theory has become more and more accepted that the audience should be able to 'come in' at any point, that complicated plot developments should be avoided and that each part, besides the value it has for the whole, should also possess its own episodic value. For radio, with its public which can freely switch on or off at any moment, this becomes a strict necessity. Epic theatre introduces the same practice on the stage. For epic theatre, as a matter of principle, there is no such thing as a latecomer.[51]

Advanced literature in the twentieth century has also been episodic. Significantly, *Ulysses* was one of Brecht's favorite books. Michel Butor admitted that he had never read *Finnegan's Wake* right

[49] Quoted in Karl Wörner, *Stockhausen: Life and Work*, trans. Bill Hopkins, (London, 1973), pp. 229 and 236.

[50] Quoted in Nyman, *Experimental Music*, p. 2.

[51] "What Is Epic Theatre?" first version, p. 6.

through; he claimed that an episodic approach to the book was the correct approach, because one had to collaborate with the text by reconstituting it for oneself, uniquely. "The aesthetic object," Eduardo Sanguineti comments, "is no longer a complete thing which is placed in front of the spectator."[52]

IX

If some experimental situations are trivial or patently absurd, this may not necessarily be a bad thing, especially if one views them as *experimental* occasions. It is part of a scientific frame of mind to realize that experiments may fail or be inappropriate, and that there is something to be learned from these failures. And if one views the relationship between experimental and avant-garde music as symbiotic, then such failures may actually be necessary and inevitable in the development of a healthy and creative modern musical culture. Besides, frequent involvement with the progressive (questioning, socializing) aspects of experimental music may inculcate desirable new habits of perception, expectation, and response in audiences. To claim this is no more than Benjamin claimed in arguing for the importance of film *despite* its frequently trivial content. Film, par excellence (he maintained), has developed new habits in audiences, and these habits amount to a change in perception. The audience on a mass scale now participates; the aura has been wiped out; and members of the audience now habitually see themselves and their relationships to each other and to the artwork in a new way. This could not have been achieved by contemplation alone. Therefore we should not be too concerned if much film content is disreputable. For film abolishes cult value and inaugurates the era in which the audience is at once final critic and true coauthor.[53] The very same is true of experimental music.

[52] Sanguineti, "The Sociology of the Avant-Garde," in E. and T. Burns, eds., *Sociology of Literature and Drama* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1973), p. 395.

[53] "The Work of Art," pp. 241-43.