

Zorn: Avant/Après/Passé

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Abstract:

Witold Wachowski's brief exchange with John Zorn provides us with many valuable insights relating to the composer's aesthetic. Zorn's professed antipathy towards audiences, his faith in the creative instinct of the "artist," and his belief in the transcendental nature of musical works (as a gateway into a world of "truth" and "beauty") are all refrains commonly encountered in many interviews with the composer. Given the fact that Zorn emphasizes these themes in his very short interview with Wachowski, we can assume that these ideas form the core of Zorn's musical and artistic aesthetic. For any person with even a basic knowledge of Western aesthetic traditions, however, these same aesthetic features and positions characterize musical institutions common to the Western art tradition, particularly the "romantic" ideal of music and composers that developed in the nineteenth century. Philosophers (most notably Hegel and Kant) along with music critics and composers (such as Friedrich Schiller, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Friedrich Schlegel, Robert Schumann, and Eduard Hanslick) all contributed to the development of a romantic musical aesthetic in the nineteenth century that emphasized the role of the artist (as a "genius" or "god-like") who created "works" that – through purely musical relations that exist irregardless of the listener's abilities – reveal hidden worlds of truth and beauty, worlds far-removed from the humdrum concerns of daily existence. Given the close (nearly one-to-one) correspondences between Zorn and aestheticians/philosophers of the nineteenth century, one could make the argument that Zorn holds a "romantic" view of music and art.

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The view of "Zorn the romantic" encounters a harsh dissonance when one considers the fact that he frequently identifies himself as an "outsider" and as someone who has much in common with composers of the "maverick tradition," composers such as Charles Ives and Henry Cowell. In short, Zorn typically identifies what he does in relation to the avant-garde. The first thing one reads when visiting the homepage to Tzadik, Zorn's record label, is "Tzadik is dedicated to releasing the best in avant garde and experimental music..." And while he does not use the term avant-garde in his interview with Wachowski, Zorn does mention Hildegard von Bingen and William Blake, both "outsider" figures in music and literature famous not only for their works but also their "mystical" tendencies. On the one hand, we have Zorn espousing a variety of aesthetic positions that are common to a very conservative, romantic view of art and music. On the other hand, we also have Zorn identifying with the avant-garde, a movement (if one can call it a movement) that is often identified as being at odds with most – if not all – of the aesthetic positions associated with the romantic ideal.

In what follows I will examine the tension between his decidedly romantic aesthetic views and his avant-garde posturing by considering his view of the “work,” the place of “truth” and “beauty” as it relates to the work-concept, and his opinions of the listener/audience. I will examine these various positions from the perspective of romantic idealism of the nineteenth century and the negation of these ideals as practiced and preached by the avant-garde at the beginning of the twentieth century.

As I will show, the effort it takes to sustain these contradictory positions ultimately dilutes the meaning of the avant-garde rendering it meaningless. I conclude that Zorn’s aesthetic commitments undermine his self-portrayal as an avant-garde composer.

The Work

Throughout the interview, Zorn consistently refers to his compositions as works. Zorn explains how “the artist’s main concern is with the work” and how his focus, his main concern, is “on the work itself.” It is quite common to refer to individual pieces of art as “works” but, as philosopher Lydia Goehr has demonstrated, this is a relatively recent trend in the history of Western aesthetics. According to Goehr, beginning around 1800, an aesthetic transformation occurred that “gave rise to a new view of music as an independent practice whose serious concerns were now claimed to be purely musical. The emerging practice became specifically geared towards, and evaluated in terms of, the production of enduring musical products. It was only with the rise of this independent conception of music, in other words, that musicians began to think predominately of music in terms of works.” (Goehr 1994: 123).

The majority of music written before 1800 served a specific purpose and was often composed for a specific occasion, typically a religious service or ceremony. Such music was not meant to endure – it was functional and, in a sense, disposable. Beginning in the eighteenth century and eventually blossoming in the nineteenth century, a remarkable transformation occurred as composers – now freed from guilds and patrons – began to conceive of themselves as independent artists who created artworks that were meant to endure. The notion of the “work” distinguishes the ontological conception of musical compositions beginning in the nineteenth century and continues to inform how we talk about and understand a great deal of art even to the present day. However, the concept of “the work” also includes transformations on the function of music (If it is not written for a religious service or ceremony, then what is the use?), the role of the composer, and the role of the audience.

The Function of The Work: “Truth” and “Beauty”

According to Zorn, “the best way for an artist to serve the world of truth and beauty is in listening to their muse without compromise.” As music became a self-contained activity and purely instrumental music gradually rose to prominence beginning in the late eighteenth and into the nineteenth centuries, composers and critics needed a way to justify the utility of music.

If music did not serve a specific “real-world” purpose (a religious holiday or a coronation ceremony, for instance), what was its purpose? For many nineteenth century critics, music – now *musical works* – were significant in that they pointed beyond the mundane concerns of real-world existence. Musical works transcended the world of the everyday. For these critics, musical works were functionally significant in that they could reveal worlds of universal and eternal truths. This emphasis on the transcendent importance of fine art – including music – differed significantly from earlier views that emphasized the functional aim of art as it related to an individual’s moral and just place in the world. Indeed, through a series of negations, aestheticians at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century effectively severed art from any “real world” responsibilities. As Goehr points out, “at the end of the eighteenth century, it became the custom to speak of the arts as separated completely from the world of the ordinary, mundane, and everyday” (Goehr 1994: 157). Hegel succinctly describes this aesthetic transformation, explaining how art “cuts itself free from this servitude in order to raise itself, in free independence, to the truth in which it fulfills itself independently and comfortably with its own ends alone. Now, in this its freedom is fine art truly art.” (Hegel 1998:7).

The Work, the Composer, and the Role of the Audience

According to Zorn, the “entertainer listens to the voice of the outside world while the artist listens to their own inner voice.” Once again, we find precedents for this distinction in the nineteenth century. Under the work concept, the role of the composer as creator of works was contrasted with that of a composer who wrote music to entertain. E.T.A Hoffman, one of the preeminent critics responsible for promoting the romantic idealism of music in the nineteenth century made a similar distinction in his “Kapellmeister Johannes Kreisler’s Musical Sufferings” in 1815:

Is it right to torture honest musicians with music as I have been tortured today, and am tortured so often? I can truthfully say that no art has so much damnable abuse perpetrated upon it as the noble and sacred art of music, whose delicate nature is so easily violated.

If you have real talent and a real feeling for art, good; then study music, achieve something worthy of the art, and give devotees the benefit of your talent in abundant measure. If you prefer warbling away without bothering with all that then do it for yourself and by yourself, and do not torture Kapellmeister Kreisler and others with it. (Hoffmann 1989: 85)

Zorn is careful to describe himself as an “artist” and not an entertainer. As an artist, he is obligated to follow his “personal vision,” to listen to his “inner voice,” and to ignore the “rabble.” He is responsible to no one other than himself; he exists only to serve the work.

Once again, Hoffmann, writing on Beethoven in 1813, offers an early romantic perspective on the composer not dissimilar to Zorn’s:

The musical rabble is oppressed by Beethoven’s powerful genius; it seeks in vain to oppose it. ... [Beethoven] no longer bothers at all to select or to shape his ideas, but, following the so-called daemonic method, he dashes everything off exactly as his ardently active imagination dictates it to him. Yet how does the matter stand if it is your feeble observation alone that the deep inner continuity of Beethoven’s every composition eludes? If it is your fault alone that you do not understand the master’s language as the initiated understand it, that the portals of the innermost sanctuary remain closed to you? (Hoffmann 1998: 1149)

As the role of the composer shifted from someone expected to compose a piece of music for a specific occasion to that of the independent “genius” who created independent musical works, the function of the audience also underwent a transformation. Under the “romantic aesthetic” dominated by the idea of the musical work, “audiences were asked to be literally and metaphorically silent, so that the truth or the beauty of the work could be heard in itself” (Goehr 1994: 236). Zorn admits that “It may please me to learn that someone has derived some benefit from my work, but my focus is never on the audience and what benefit they may get out of it, but on the work itself.” The precise musical relations set forth by the creator/composer of the musical work demanded a contemplative and attentive audience sophisticated enough to understand the transcendental meaning and significance of the work that was unfolding before their ears. Indeed, it could be argued that the musical relations themselves were enough to guarantee transcendence and that an audience was unnecessary. The music and its meaning existed independently of the audience. Robert Schumann seems to suggest this idea, writing how “Long ago, overt ones, I wanted to establish concerts for deaf-mutes which might serve you as a pattern of how to behave at concerts, especially at the finest.

... Like Tsing-Sing, you were to have been turned to a stone pagoda, had you dared to repeat anything of what you saw in music's magic realm" (Schumann 1998: 49). Zorn would appear to sympathize with Schumann. Asked "Have you learned anything thanks to your audience?," Zorn responds, "Yes—that it is best to ignore them as much as possible and keep on working."

The Avant Garde: Anti-Art/Anti-Work

Writing in 1948, Theodor Adorno captured the avant garde's view on the status of works of art. "Today," Adorno writes, "the only works which really count are those which are no longer works at all" (Adorno 1973: 30). Indeed, the work-concept that dominated art – including music – since the beginning of the nineteenth century had been the focus of a sustained critique by artists associated with a number of twentieth century avant-garde movements including futurism, dadaism, and surrealism. Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades, to consider the most obvious examples, effectively undermined the concept of the work. In force for over one hundred years, all of the aesthetic and cultural traditions associated with the work-concept – the God-like image of the artist/creator, the imagined access to "truth" and "beauty" offered by works of art, and the disengaged role of the audience – were obliterated by a urinal signed "R. Mutt." To talk about "works" after dada is to talk about the past.

Under the romantic aesthetic, art had become institutionalized and individual works were perceived as enduring objects whose value lay in their ability to transcend the everyday world by offering glimpses into the worlds of truth and beauty. The historical avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century – identified by Peter Bürger as futurism, dadaism, and surrealism – rejected this view of art and the work (Bürger 1984). In the opinion of avant-garde artists, truth and beauty had no meaning, especially in light of the atrocities of two World Wars. Art – to be meaningful – could no longer be cordoned off from life. For these avant-garde artists, art and life were inseparable. In the words of Bürger, "the intention of the historical avant-garde movements was defined as the destruction of art as an institution set off from the praxis of life" (Bürger 1984: 83). In the collective mindset of the avant-garde artists in the first half of the twentieth century, the work of art was replaced by the idea of "anti-art." Anti-art was a critique of the institution of art as practiced under the romantic aesthetic tradition that gave birth to the work-concept. Furthermore, anti-art was not disengaged from the real world. Anti-art forced audiences to confront the horror of everyday existence through provocation, shock, outrage, and anger. The intentions and aims of the historical avant-garde movements are captured in André Breton's memorable pronouncement that "the simplest Surrealist act consists of dashing down into the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, into the crowd" (Breton 1969: 125).

Ultimately, the ideas and practices of the historical avant-garde movements were no match for the institutionalized powers that had developed alongside the romantic aesthetic. It did not take long until early pieces of anti-art created by avant-garde artists were displayed in museums alongside more traditional works of art.

By the middle of the twentieth century, works by Marcel Duchamp, Salvador Dalí, and others were displayed next to works by the old masters in museums as pieces of music by Erik Satie and Edgard Varèse were being performed next to works by Beethoven and Brahms in concert halls throughout the world. The original aims of the avant-garde movements had successfully been co-opted by the institution of art and anti-art was transformed into works.

In retrospect, it seems naïve to believe that artists and their art could successfully undermine the well-entrenched and heavily subsidized institutions that had developed in the wake of the romantic aesthetic. The mission of the historical avant-garde was, it seems, doomed to fail. And while the original aims and goals of the historical avant-garde movements could never supplant Art (with a capital A) and its works, the label has persisted albeit in a diluted, historicized way. Contemporary artists and movements that appeal to the label “avant-garde” are, according to Bürger, “more accurately described as “neo-avant-garde.” Despite sharing a label with their historical forefathers, the neo-avant-garde has very little in common with artists active within movements such as futurism, dadaism, surrealism, or the Situationists. Instead, neo-avant-garde art and the institutions within which neo-avant-garde artists display and promote their works can – with very little effort – be understood within the very traditional and conservative models typically associated with the romantic aesthetic. As Bürger remarks:

To the extent that the means by which the avant-gardistes hoped to bring about the sublation of art have attained the status of works of art, the claim that the praxis of life is to be renewed can no longer be legitimately connected with their employment. To formulate more pointedly: the neo-avant-garde institutionalizes the avant-garde as art and thus negates genuinely avant-gardiste intentions. ... Neo-avant-gardiste art is autonomous art in the full sense of the term, which means that it negates the avant-gardiste intention of returning art to the praxis of life. And the efforts to sublimate art became artistic manifestations that, despite their producer’s intentions, take on the character of works (Bürger 1984: 58).

And this, it would seem, adequately describes Zorn and his relationship to the avant-garde. As a neo-avant-garde artist, Zorn has been very successful utilizing much of the rhetoric and institutions associated with the work-concept and the romantic aesthetic. Indeed, Zorn has become something of a gatekeeper for experimental music in New York City. Through his record label, Tzadik, and his performance space, The Stone, Zorn ultimately decides who can or cannot have access to his brand of neo-avant-garde art practices.

Curiously, the “freedom” granted avant-garde artists is not so free after all when you have to answer to one person (Bürger 1984: 58). Furthermore, Zorn is perfectly content, it would seem, for his music to exist solely as music with no impact or meaning behind or beyond the notes themselves. The clever compositional techniques he employs in his compositions – number games derived from ancient mystical treatises, buried borrowings from past masters, etc. – all serve to focus our attention on “the work itself” and not how the work can be meaningful outside of the concert hall or apart from the recording.

For Zorn, the avant-garde isn’t a lifestyle but a label he conveniently adopts when it suits him. There is nothing shocking about a romanticized avant-garde.

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