

"THE FUTURE OF MUSIC"

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PART I

When I started writing this lecture I had the idea that I would interrupt it now and then for a musical example. That was a bad idea, as we all know. I don't know what made me forget. Talk and music don't mix. Different parts of the brain or something. Except in two very special conditions, which we all have experienced, the attention to the details of the voice --- whether or not anything interesting is being said --- makes us impatient with the music, which is the last thing the lecture needs. The two conditions (just to remind you of what I mean) are: first, the very casual NPR-type introduction to a long piece of music, which sort of eases you into the Vivaldi or whatever; and second, the full-speed ahead DJ on format-pop radio, who tries not to say anything except the ID, the time and the advertisement.

I can't do either of those, because the talk is too long and the examples are too short. When I rehearsed this with the examples for the first time, I could hardly bear the examples, which are actually very short and which I love as music. I was shocked. Then I came to my senses.

So first I will talk, for about two hours, and then I will play about 30 minutes of nine examples, with reference to what they were supposed to illustrate in the lecture and with discographical information, in case you should want to pursue them in full.

Most of the lecture is academic, in the real --- not bad, I hope --- sense of the term. That is, these ideas have been said many times already by people more qualified than I. But, obviously, they are only academic if you have already heard them. For some people some of the ideas will be new. So I will say them anyway, just in case.

Most of the lecture, too, is not about the future, as such. It is not about computers will get faster, and we will DNA-away all disease, and we will eat food made out of chemicals and so nobody will starve, and you can make any sound imaginable with this set of knobs and so forth. We all know that stuff. Everything they told me in the rotogravure when I was a kid has come true. And I am still looking at old movies and the same file footage but with different words on TV. And I don't feel like I have aged a bit. Strange, huh?

So, I am not going to tell you that loudspeakers will be implanted in your brain and that you will be able to listen to any piece of music that was ever made anywhere, at any time you want --- though that is part of the problem. I would guess that those of you who are too young to have known the Beatles will have grand-children listening to the Beatles, and you will be as cranky as I am about listening to "She's got a ticket to ride."

Most the lecture will be about the present, and how we got to it from the past. I think that if we could understand the present, the future would be obvious.

The future of music.

The future of music is too big for me to deal with. Only a few decades ago I thought I knew, or knew of, most of the

composers in Europe and America. That is, I knew something of their music, I knew what ideas were being attempted.

Today, of course, that is out of the question. The world of music has come to include more and more of the composers in the larger world. They live in places I have never been and will never be. I have no idea what is going on. I don't have a world-view, and it would be impossible for me to have a world view unless I devoted every waking minute to listening to every recording I could get my hands on (or, on a more practical level, every recording that I have now and that I have not listened to). And probably even then I wouldn't have a world-view. The world is too big for me.

Having said all of this, to protect me from criticism, I will make a few remarks about music as I know it, which will lead us to thoughts about the future of music.

Music is a commodity, like hamburgers, automobiles, oil, grain, currency and under-paid labor. (REPEAT)

Music is a commodity, like hamburgers, automobiles, oil, grain, currency and under-paid labor.

It can be bought and sold. Every musician, now, wants his or her music to be a valuable commodity, so that the musician can make some amount of money to, as we say, live on. We have no choice.

I can't see that anything will change in the next few years. Then I will not be around. And so, as far as I am concerned, there is not much of a future, if we are talking about change or no change. I think I have worked this out, finally, for myself. If I'm not there, there is nothing. I realize that this position or attitude of mine represents one side of an enormous philosophical problem, which I am unqualified to speak about, but I have come down on the side of "If I'm not there, there is nothing," because it speaks to my beliefs about my activities in music for the past fifty years. I became a musician as an alternative to scientist, civil servant, businessman, criminal --- my qualifications for all of which I can document --- because I wanted to make music, because music meant, when I was a child, an irrational sensual pleasure that I could not resist and, later, when I got into music as an adult, an irrational pleasure in making music with other musicians. No one who is not a musician can understand this pleasure.

I can say with honesty that, when I started, I did not intend to be a composer. When I first realized I wanted to be a musician, I did not know what a composer was. I'm not sure now that the term was in my vocabulary. Maybe it's no different for lots of you. Music is a present-tense activity that has an irresistible attraction, like, say, sex. Certain people are drawn to it.

There must have been a time when music was not a commodity. Or there might be a place even now where music is not a commodity. I can't imagine what that idea about music could be. Maybe a kind of "dharmic" --- if you will pardon the expression --- assignment. My father was a musician and so I am a musician. I am provided for. I don't know how the world began or how it will end, but I am a musician and I am provided for.

But that's gone. Now, anyone can be a musician and a composer, and that is why we are having this discussion.

It is in the nature of a commodity to destroy the resources that produced the commodity in the first place. (REPEAT)

It is in the nature of a commodity to destroy the resources that produced the commodity in the first place.

Who would have imagined that the humble hamburger, which was brought into commercial existence only a mere fifty years ago, would destroy the resources of the Great Plains of the United States, which some nutritionists only thirty years ago said could grow enough food of the right sort to feed the whole planet. (Francis Moore Lappé, in her book, "Diet for a Small Planet," maintained that the buffalo, which had adapted to the indigenous grasses of the Great Plains, could provide more meat over an indefinite period of time than could cattle even in the present. But the buffalo-burger is apparently out of the question.) The hamburger needed cattle. The cattle needed corn (in the final force-feeding stage), because the indigenous grasses of the Great Plains did not produce cattle with enough meat fat to make a good hamburger. (And it did not produce enough cattle.) The corn needed water. And so the wells got deeper and deeper. And now, according to Ian Frazier, author of a presumably well-researched book, "The Great Plains" (Ferrari, Strauss, Giroux, 1990), the enormous aquifer that lies beneath the Great Plains from northern Texas up into Canada and from the Mississippi to the Rockies is only one-fifth full and will take

a long time to fill up again, even if we stop eating hamburgers tomorrow. So the hamburger has moved on, in its powerful drive to exist as a commodity, to the rain forests of the Amazon, which are being cut down to make a place for cattle and corn in the presence of new water.

There is some question about whether cutting down the rain forests, apart from ethical considerations, is going to help us in our immediate goal of continuing to exist and to enjoy music. And so, as of now, the hamburger as a commodity, is almost as dangerous as the possibility of a nuclear accident. Not on the same time scale, of course. But if there is no nuclear accident in the next fifty years, hamburgers will probably do it for us.

Who would have imagined that the internal combustion engine and its toy, the automobile, a way to go from one place to another faster than one could walk, would distort the economies of half the world and apparently destroy the protective layer of the planet.

Who would have imagined that Coca Cola, a simple mixture of water, sugar, a couple of fruit flavors and cocaine would destroy the tribal nations of Central America, where previously people lived on yams, meditation and a few leaves of something that made them feel good in an atmosphere almost without oxygen?

Footnote: For a brilliant article on the question of why we kill each other I refer you to "Always Time to Kill" by Jason Epstein in the New York Review of Books, Vol XLVI, Number 17, Nov 4, 1999. Mr. Epstein's article is about the "why" of mass warfare, but its observations could, I think, be applied as well to the "why" of large numbers of humans acting with total disregard for consequences in matters such as ecology. There is obviously something wrong with us. We are practically unique among species.

I will skip a discussion of petroleum, grain, currency, under-paid labor and other commodities, which would only use up valuable time.

Music has become a commodity. Every composer and musician I know wants his music or her music to be a salable commodity in the whole world. Maybe there are some exceptions, but soon they will be converted.

It is in the nature of a commodity, too, to be chosen for

its success by persons who are impartial to the "quality" of the commodity as understood by the consumer. (REPEAT)

It is in the nature of a commodity, too, to be chosen for its success by persons who are impartial to the "quality" of the commodity as understood by the consumer.

No one, for a moment, believes that the well-paid hamburger executive eating a hamburger on TV would eat a hamburger, now that he is well-paid, except on TV. But somebody, not a musician, will determine the commodity value of a certain kind of music. And we will be stuck with that decision until another comes along.

It is in the nature of a commodity, too, to try to eliminate all competition. (REPEAT)

It is in the nature of a commodity, too, to try to eliminate all competition.

It is not a coincidence that the commodity as the dominant element in our lives has risen exactly in parallel with the rise of fundamentalism, in all religions, in our belief about the nature of God --- if you will pardon the expression. Fundamentalism wants to exclude all other ideas. The commodity wants to exclude all things like it.

The ultimate goal of the commodity in the eyes of the commodity producer is to have only one of every kind of thing. (REPEAT)

The ultimate goal of the commodity in the eyes of the commodity producer is to have only one of every kind of thing.

If we are to believe the holy books, which is questionable, and if we are to believe science, which is, at times, equally questionable, this would mean the end of the world. According to the holy books and to science there has to be at least two of anything in order for anything to be around for very long.

It is believed by some that this is not true. There are long-standing beliefs that a woman can produce another human being without the cooperation of a man and that this happens today more often than we think. I made a note of research on this possibility in the "Character Reference" anecdote for the "Willard" section of the opera, ATALANTA (ACTS OF GOD). The note

says simply that two, British, Doctors of Medicine have done reputable research on the subject of "virgin birth" and have come to believe that it is more common than we think.

(Incidentally, science, it seems, often comes around to confirming long-standing beliefs. So, in spite of what you are thinking at this moment, I would urge you not to write off this possibility. I mean, the possibility of virgin birth.)

The problem --- for the commodity producer: of there being only one music; the situation where everybody in the world, listening to the radio or watching television or whatever, is listening to the same recording of the same piece of music at the same time; the ultimate goal of the commodity producer --- is not that this is necessarily bad --- who is to judge what that would mean? --- but (the problem is) that we are not capable as human beings at this time of being of one mind. There are too many distractions --- from our memories, our imaginations and our immediate physical desires and needs --- for us to be of one mind. We are divided among ourselves and within ourselves, and that division produces distractions that impede the dominance of the commodity. In fact, the commodity impedes itself.

The structural paradox for the commodity producer in music, at the moment, is that the performance of the music in every medium --- all day, everyday, everywhere --- is supposed to sell more recordings, but of course recordings sold will probably be listened to and that listening time, at the moment, will interfere with the on-going business of propagating commodities. We are having this problem today. We all know people who have record collections they have never listened to or have listened to just once. That's ok. Buy it, but don't listen to it. Especially, don't get "attached" to it.

Of course, the solution is simple. It is being discussed even as I speak. Sell listening-for-the-first-time-only --- all day, everyday, everywhere. Don't give them anything they can keep around and play repeatedly. You think this is crazy? I just read that Rupert Murdoch suggested that since Americans are willing to spend fifty dollars (with accessories) to go to a baseball game, they should be willing to spend three or four dollars to see it at home on TV. The people from Diet Coke and It's a Rock must have taken him in the back for a little chat. The Diet Coke and the Chevy are supposed to go home, Rupert, and the people have to keep being reminded to buy them and take them

home, and if they have to pay to watch the game, they will resent being reminded. They are perfectly happy, if they think the game belongs to Diet Coke and Chevy and they get to watch for free. They won't be perfectly happy if they buy the game and the game belongs to them and Diet Coke and Chevy keep interrupting it. Paying for cable is bad enough.

This is not to say that the commodity will not become more powerful and efficient. I could predict, at the expense of seeming crazy, that in the near future --- probably not in my lifetime, but maybe --- there will be one hit record everyday, for one day only, and that it will be played in every medium for all of that single day. "Proprietary" technology might prevent us from copying that record in any way. But who would want to copy it anyway? Tomorrow is another day.

Of course, the hit record will not "change" in any perceivable way from day to day. It is in the nature of a commodity to resemble itself as much as possible from use to use. (REPEAT)

It is in the nature of a commodity to resemble itself as much as possible from use to use.

For instance, a tank of gas may take you to different places while it is being used, but the tank of gas should resemble the prior tank of gas as much as possible. And the hamburger may have different effects on your body chemistry from day to day, but the hamburger should resemble the prior hamburger as much as possible.

In the meantime --- that is, coincidentally --- every person in the world (who is not resting for the moment in the "external" world of the compound of commodities) will be trying to make a piece of music that is as different from the commodity-music as his or her imagination will allow. Just for a little variety. No other reason is needed. The spice of life, etcetera.

It is in the nature of a commodity to create resistance to itself. (REPEAT)

It is in the nature of a commodity to create resistance to itself. (As opposed to the situation of creating a tradition, as in some kinds of music we know of and admire, but don't understand the practice of, in spite of what we say about it

among ourselves.) And so there will be a music of resistance. Every person involved in music will be trying to create a "different" music, created through individual exertions. (That is, without help.)

There will be little common language among these individual exertions. There will be, perhaps, a common recognition that "we all do it." I'm not sure of this. There may be rumors of this or that extraordinary accomplishment. There may be actual examples of individual exertions being heard by persons other than the composer. But there is no reason to believe that these rumors or these exemplary exertions will be "scotched" by the "commodities police," because there will be no need for them to be "scotched." Everything will be moving too fast.

It is pointless to try to imagine what the day-to-day hit records will sound like. The super-highways take us to where the super-highways want us to go. They will sound like what the commodities producers want them to sound like. They will sound, as much as possible like the hit record of the day before.

But what will the individual, secretly imagined, non-commodity compositions sound like? I have said that there will be little common language. But that is wrong. There will be the common language of the instruments, the synthesizers and the computer software and whatever is available. But there has to be something that is more profound than that technological commonness, which would amount to nothing more than mere tinkering.

So in this discussion we are basically concerned with what is the future of music of the kind that we --- probably almost everyone in this hall --- are devoted to and compose. We are not concerned with the future of African music or Chinese music or the music of the people who live 15,000 feet above sea-level in the Andes, or even, curiously, Icelandic music. Unless we take care of them, to use a phrase, they will take care of themselves. We are a small group and we are concerned with ourselves. What is the future of the sort of music that I compose or that Roger Reynolds composes or that the rest of you compose?

The strongest force in the music of today in America is nostalgia. It is the basis of music as we know it.

America is approximately one-hundred years old.

Approximately one hundred years ago the European immigrants and their American Indian employees were killing buffalo, beaver, sea otter and every other thing that moved, as fast as they could. This enterprise was a great success. There are no more buffalo, beaver or sea otter --- or almost anything else, for that matter.

Footnote: When Europeans first arrived on the North American continent, one of the most numerous of the new animal species in evidence was the Green Parrot, eight to ten inches long, three to four pounds, a non-stop talker. They were everywhere from the Atlantic to the Mississippi. They were considered to be worse than a nuisance. They were considered to be a blight, like the Biblical locusts. You think pigeons are bad. Imagine a world of Green Parrots. Imagine the noise. Now there are a few Green Parrots in parrot stores.

The European immigrants were also killing the remaining American Indians and the American Indians were still killing each other. All of us, European immigrants, African-Americans, Asian-American and American Indians pretty much took it back to basics. A continent without forests, without animals and without anything resembling communication between the variously located dreams of riches and the various pockets of resistance and resentment that gathered in clumps around the river forks, the swamps, the desert hideaways and downtown and uptown in the cities to the ocean.

But we had brought in music from the "old country," which persists today. For instance, Beethoven in the orchestras, polkas in the taverns and a piano in every living room.

I am too old and tired to attack the way things are. The Metropolitan Opera can keep on playing Italian opera until, when they are hit by a car, they bleed spaghetti sauce. Orchestras in strange places where the palaces are the triangular Hyatt Hotel with external elevators can keep on playing Beethoven until they go broke. That's okay with me.

All of this is nostalgia on a gigantic psychopathic scale.

Footnote: For a strange and disquieting article on nostalgia in America I refer you to "Death of the Cowboy" by Larry McMurtry in the New York Review of Books, Vol XLVI, Number 17, Nov 4, 1999. Mr. McMurtry points out that the "cowboy," as we know him from the movies, novels, rodeos on television, Marlboro

advertisements and on and on, never really exited. Where did the cowboy come from? The cowboy is a mythical figure, rooted in nostalgia. Maybe in the case of the cowboy the nostalgia was for the dreams of freedom that the immigrants brought with them. A nostalgia for a dream of a better life.

A good number of the musicians at the Metropolitan Opera might be Jews, a few of whom may have gone to Italy on their Fulbright. But why would they play Italian opera? God, why would they play Wagner? The commonplace answer is that music has no political meaning. That is, the music is not meant to evoke the time, place or political climate of when it was composed. But this is obviously crazy, when even the relatively uninformed listener like myself can identify by the rhythms in the Italian operas that there must have been --- and I have read this --- different kinds of Italian popular bands, from which the music of the popular Italian operas was derived: Italian "standing" bands, Italian "running" bands, Italian "horse" bands.

To say nothing of the words. It is important that all of us, I believe, are thrilled to listen to a foreign language when we have no obligation to respond. Foreign language overheard is heard as music, in a way that we can never hear the language we speak. So, it is not musically crucial that we understand the words in operas in foreign languages. Words are important, if you understand them (and especially if they are good), but they are not crucial to a musical experience. Mostly, though, we understand what's going on, without understanding every word.

I go to the opera as a Jew or as a descendant of Appalachian hill-billies (who resent the term) or as a Mexican-American from New Mexico or as any one of the numberless combinations that make up America, and I am transported to some Italy, say, of the past.

There is nothing remotely Italian about the Metropolitan Opera. But there it is. Planted in the middle of New York City, once catering to the left-over nostalgia of a huge number of Italian immigrants who then "controlled" the city, and catering now to the unfocussed nostalgia of its current audience. It continues in its reenactment of Italy becoming a nation, arming itself, drawing borders, trying pathetically to conquer Ethiopia, collapsing into economic chaos and black and white movies. The Metropolitan Opera, were it an individual, would be hospitalized. Such is the power of nostalgia.

At the opera I am transported to a place and time where there is no disorder. There is disorder on stage, and it is called melodrama. We don't believe it. This is important: that we don't believe it. We do believe, when we are young (or even momentarily sometimes when we are older), what happens in the movies. It is important to remember: we do not believe what happens in opera. Therefore, opera can have no plot. It is foolish to argue that opera --- any opera --- can have a plot; that is, that the "characters" and their apparent "actions" and the apparent "consequences" are related in any way. Opera can be story-telling only. That the story-telling happens on stage and that musicians are making music in the pit (to reinforce the story told) is entirely coincidental. The story might as well be told at the kitchen table with a crazy aunt and uncle as the soprano and tenor. Opera has become "performance art," because it has lost its meaning.

Most people in America don't know --- in the matter of their genealogy --- much beyond where their grand-parents came from, if they know that. So we invent where we came from in our music. Only music, among the sensual pleasures --- for some strange reason that I have not heard discussed in science or philosophy --- has the ability to stop the present, to stop time and to move us mentally to another time and place. Real or unreal, it doesn't matter.

(Maybe the reason is simply that music uses time and so it displaces the time of the present for a few minutes of relief from the time of the present. I don't know.)

(Maybe, too, visual artists would protest that a painting can do that for them. It doesn't do it for me. And visual artists spend far more time listening to music than they spend in museums. The question of the "why" of music, when taunted by Joyce's much-quoted observation about the "ineluctable modality of the visible," is answered in the simple fact that music does it. The modality of the visible is suspended, up-staged as it were, by the powerful nostalgia of the passage of sound. We can sit in a concert hall, more or less untroubled by the bizarre regimentation of the architecture and the "theater" of the performance --- the orchestra dressed as if for a funeral --- and be relieved of the present for a few minutes.)