

good proportions for a good music

Fabienne Audéud

On Saturday 27th November 1999, Sadie Coles HQ and Cabinet Gallery presented a Rock 'n' Roll gig at the Scala, London. Most of the performers were artists, playing Pop rock music in front of an art crowd. Artist Angela Bulloch of *Big Bottom* was tediously marking and counting the beat... Artist and curator Mathew Higgs was dancing in front of the stage... Artist Wolfgang Tillmans was taking photos... I wondered if it was comedy... but I seemed to be the only one to laugh. The music reminded me at the time of Michael Nyman's or Steve Martland's easy listening new music, sometimes too of a not-so-loud reference to noise music, then of a more straight rock gig. What did they play?

When *Frieze* editor Mathew Slotover is quoted in the *Evening Standard's* article 'Artful Rockers', saying that Rock 'n' Roll "still carries connotations of rebellion and nonconformism" and "some artists are still attracted to that kind of glamour" is it opening or closing up the debate?

If music theory is often avoided in art talks because it is too specialised and formalist, and Pop music only dealt with from the consumer's point of view (that's what the music people—and artists—like) then one is left with a safe realm, a realm where "glamour and connotations of rebellion" can be performed through yet another nice tune on a regular beat.

I can't deny the pleasure of all the people who enjoyed the gig. But can music—which I would formally define as creation of order (any order) in sound or noise, in what we hear—be *only* a question of reference, taste, or a majority of taste? In *Noise*¹ J. Attali argues that in all culture noise is associated with destruction, disorder, dirt, aggression, that noise is violence. For him, to make music is a channelisation of noise, therefore a form of sacrifice. Since it is a threat of death, noise is a concern of power and the function of music is first ritualistic, it creates political order: "The game of music thus resembles the game of power: to monopolise the right to violence. It provokes anxiety and then provides a feeling of security..." Attali considers the production of music as the creation, legitimisation and maintenance of a form of order.

In Western cultures, the making of music was for a long time the responsibility of performers/musicians. In Antiquity they were often slaves, but mythology endowed them with supernatural powers (Orpheus domesticated animals). Throughout the middle-ages, musicians remained outside of society, condemned by the Church where music had started to be written. They were itinerant, creating music and were circulating it within all classes of society. From the 14th century, Church music became secularised and autonomous from the Chant, and nobles would pay musicians to play them light songs, solemn songs, to celebrate victories and to dance. Musicians became professionals bound to a single master. Within three centuries, the jongleurs had been replaced by salaried musicians playing scored music.

The notated tonal music produced in Western Europe from the pre-Renaissance to the end of the 19th century has been developed mainly through two groups, the hegemonic religions (Catholic and Protestant churches) and the hegemonic social classes (initially the aristocracy and

later the bourgeoisie). What today we call 'classical music' was created around the Platonic theories placing musical sounds on the continuum of order/disorder. The fact that certain notes or chords sound 'right' with others was explained by mathematical rules.

But one should not confuse the mathematical calculations of ratios with the way they are applied to the creation of music and how they are used as a legitimisation of a specific order: in fact their use value within the Western practice of music is more at a cultural level than an influence on music itself. In the *Theory of Harmonics*² in 1784, Keeble writes that "as their principles are in nature, they must be fixed and immutable", claiming the universal validity of the Western musical system. Until the end of the 19th century, so called 'classical music' was composed around those rules.

Then composers and musicians started to take non-western music more seriously, questioning the rules of tonality and regularity of rhythm as the only way to hear and make music. The ratios within sounds did not change: it was their use values. It is not because Western ears are used to certain arrangements of notes and chords—around the concept of the tension and the resolution of the tension—that composers have to develop music only around those rules.

To simplify to the extreme a complex evolution I will mention only some of the formal changes:

Chromatism (initiated by Wagner and Debussy) replacing diatonism, the loss of hierarchy within the degrees, complex chords and aggregates instead of chords in the traditional harmony, dissonances that are not used to put the stability of the consonance into focus but played for their own sound; Schonberg developing a system of series as composition structures; Jazz introducing another form of scales; Industrial noises regarded as musical sounds by the Futurists; Noises into composition, Varese; Pierre Schaeffer using the recording techniques to create a "musique concrete" through the editing of tapes, opening the way to electroacoustic music; Boulez and Stockhausen following Schonberg's work on systems of series and developing it into a 'total serialism' (rules for heights, lengths, intensities); Xenakis using the computer for statistic calculations as composition principles to create a scholastic music funded on a structure of mass; Cage working on the idea of chance to create a 'non-interventionist' music; Reich and Riley using the repetitive process to challenge the experience of music in time; La Monte Young and Max Neuhaus transforming spaces into musical instruments; Improvising musicians extending the technique on a variety of sound producing bodies as well as traditional instruments, reclaiming the performance of music outside the hegemony of the composer's score.

The composition rules that defined the *natural rightness* of music and which were the base of 'classical music' are the ones used for what I call Pop (which is different from popular). Tonal composition on regular rhythm are to be found from traditional to Progressive Rock, easy listening Jazz or reinterpretation of classical melodies, most Dance music (Techno to Trance), to what I would describe as the "musically-politically correct Pop" of the Scala's Gig. Of course Pop is not consciously 'about' sounding 'right' and is not openly con-

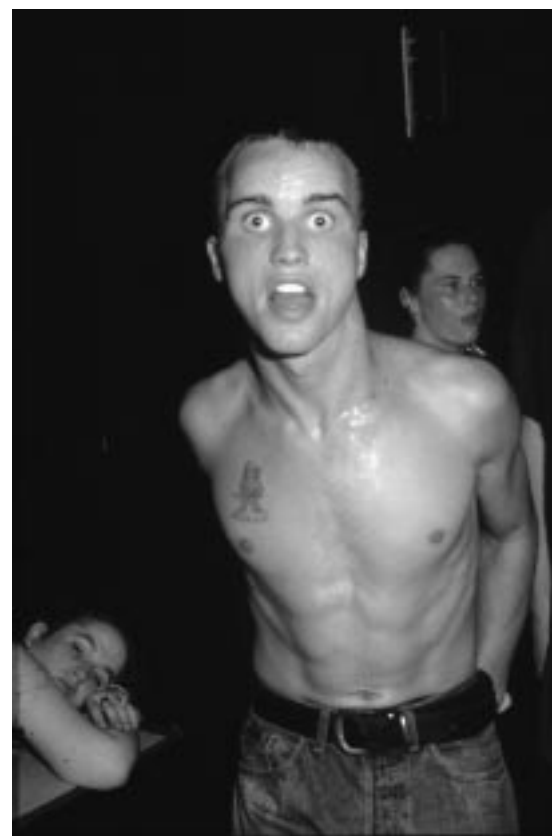


image: Wendy House

cerned with the ratios within sound mentioned earlier. It is nevertheless the way sound is used, as notes ordered on a classical scale (sometimes with some so called "ethnic" influences) and arranged in tonal chords and melodies on top of a metronome pace. The instruments are not clearly the ones from the traditional orchestra (except that we see more and more violins around, and that keyboards are built on the traditional tonal principle).

The other formal aspect of Pop that is in accordance to the principles 'of the right music' is the regularity of rhythm. Rhythm in Pop is the choice of rhythmical sequences repeated throughout a piece, always on the 4/4 structure (some exceptions in Drum & Bass on 3/4), marking the first beat. There are of course variations in the way the sequences are produced and the pace but not, as far as I know, in the reducing concept of rhythm as a repeated pattern. We all know the overwhelming experience of a repeated pattern of rhythm, it is physical, it makes us want to move, to dance. In Western cultures, people dance in very defined circumstances. They don't always dance when they hear Pop—they might think about it or remember dancing to certain music; but the argument that Pop is based on regular rhythm because it is good to dance to does not seem to be relevant to most situations where music is heard.

I am often given the example of African music as the ultimate justification for the "natural and universal" value of a regular rhythm. There is no Pop music that would slightly approach the complexity of traditional African rhythms and on the other hand dance and music making in traditional African Cultures are "interrelated components of the same process" as Olly Wilson puts it in her article *The Association of Movement and Music as a Manifestation of a Black Conceptual Approach to Music-Making*³. She writes that "the Western assumption of a division between consciously organised sound (music) and movement associated with that sound (dance) usually does not exist there... The music is the dance and the dance is the music." We are far from being able to compare

those practices with DJs playing for a crowd of dancers.

There are of course innovations (or noise) within that Pop grid of regular rhythm and tonal melodies: the rhythmical specificity of Punk was to accelerate the pace of Rock, the way Rock had quickened the pace of Blues. Blues was cleaned by Rock of its complexity and danger, and the melodies of Rock were simplified by Punk. But the fact that the musicians didn't play their instruments in the traditional way, over-amplification, noise, unsharp tuning or a raw voice created what I call 'noise' within the Rock structure (and what I find interesting in Punk), endangered it in a way. But the formal grid was not fissured.

In Drum & Bass, the rhythm is created mostly by the repetition of looped samples. There are real variations and accelerations of pace through the juxtaposition of sequences, but within an overall structure of extremely regular beats. In fact, the implacability of the beats created by electronics tools is not endangered by the rhythmical innovations (even if sometimes the drumming samples invert the traditional hierarchy of instruments by creating the body of the music—the only noise added to the frame).

Some dance music goes back to a rhythmical structure where the first beat is not accentuated within the rhythmical section by playing only the pace, the metronome becomes the instrument. A simple melody (often in 4/4) would do the subdivisions. It is as if the first bar of a dance piece or maybe a piano piece for children of the classical period was quantized, sampled and looped. The level of sound and the qualities of the chosen sounds change so that bits of classical music can wear a contemporary sound and can be danced to.

The composition concept has moved from the writing of a long musical sentence, with tensions and the resolutions of tensions, to the repetition of shorter and shorter musical phrases.

In fact, the formal complexity of classical and contemporary music can not be compared with Pop: the term becomes irrelevant. It is the reason why Pop is usually talked about from the audience point of view, within cultural studies and not in formal terms. The fact that the musical tonal development is reduced is obvious, the fact that rhythm is the repetition of a few patterns is clear, and this is not about value judgements. Can the choice of ordering notes in a classical way and repeating them on the base of identical rhythmical sequences be neutral? How can such a choice avoid the reference to the political statement of the "right order in music for the right sort of music?"

It seems to me that Pop music does not need to legitimate its own order through an 'explanation', a musical development, a sentence, a dense contrapuntic evolution, a long evolution towards a resolution. It doesn't need to build itself from a simple order (the right platonic one, the enlightenment one, the natural one) into a more complex order (the simple order fully developed and illustrated through for example: a symphony), it just needs to repeat itself because it is not about representing a fixed order or power: it is power.

I hear Pop as a totalitarian formal device, a well tested musical structure where power exercises itself. As it does not illustrate, justify, question or endanger the order within music, it plainly states it and loops it. Pop has its strength in its ability to integrate slight changes, stylistic variations, so called new sounds. What I think Pop does is clean the dirt in music: Pop silences music. Pop today is a formidable power tool that co-opts opposition. Opposition within music (no atonal Rock but progressive, avant garde Rock, never ever a rhythm that is not a repeated pattern) and opposition within the political potency of music. It is the slight flexibility of the

frame that makes its strength. If it were rigid it would break. It manages to carry and then annihilate social opposition, political revolts, youth rebellions, identity or gender demarcations and ethnic differences because what it does within the space of music, it also does within the social realm. If classical music used to represent social and gender order, I claim that Pop music now silences people, musicians, listeners and everybody who hears it. What it states is just become 'normal', obvious, unquestioned...

Pop carries its legitimisation in its name: *Popular*. But Pop is not popular, it is the prerogative of Pop to be popular. It is a 'simplification/repetition' of the class-representation structure, the *classical* one. It uses the support of the majority principle—which is difficult to question without going into a political analyses of the idea of democracy. It also uses the support of centuries of tradition (which goes unnoticed or is even negated): Pop is rarely acknowledged as the dressed & looped samples of the Platonic and Enlightenment theories of music, but rather as the expression of a youth culture that it has the luxury or duty to represent.

Pop benefits from the legitimisation of the revolt of a generation and it sits comfortably on the credibility of a repressed minority of Black American musicians through its roots in Blues and Jazz. A lot of people who were not heard otherwise chose the Pop medium "to express themselves".

It is difficult to split the music and the visual spectacle of Pop. What Madonna, Boy George, Kurt Cobain and many others address in terms of sexual and body politics is more at a textual and visual level than a musical one. The political aspect of their practice is probably quite successful because it uses a medium that is in itself not dangerous and usually not critical, but what is said in the other physical space which is sound is about obedience to a power structure. They might not have any problem with that power but I do. I do not trust a message that tells me "be sexually free... dress the way you want... disobey the rules... fuck the power;" when the subtext is: "There is a beat and it will be regular for ever... This is how sounds should be put together as it is in nature, and it has been so for centuries and centuries... This has always been the power of music and this is popular."

As a product, Pop doesn't need to create markets. Dance music for example is left to grow and evolve in clubs by the work of young musicians and DJs who bring innovation into the frame. The consumer's reaction is instantly tested in the space where the product is actually reinvented in the context of a quick changing (life-time of a piece of music before its come back?) but safe realm.

Pop is the ideal capitalistic product: started with the recording industry, no heavy inputs, no research, self feeding, self tested, adaptable to quick adjustments (but never really changing), same products for a majority of consumers; recycling friendly with the come-backs and nostalgia phenomena; widely cross fertilising other economical sectors: from fashion ('listen to his clothes!' as Frank Zappa had it⁴), home recordings and music equipment, sonorous decoration for supermarkets, images for any kind of stationery goods to the constant feeding of certain press.

I am often told that a lot of small labels keep a real subculture of Pop alive, that even if the industry holds a monopoly in terms of production and distribution, other kinds of Pop music are offered outside the few "majors." Progressive or avant-garde Rock and their opposition to the recording industry (or their non-acceptance by it) do not weaken the economic and political power of the Pop business. On the contrary: *they feed it*, they create its solid ground, its vital, "healthy" and quiet opposition. The 'creative' investment of the overall Pop industry is taken care of by those who think they can work without the economic power of the entertainment industry. The small labels are the guardians of the temple as long as they produce a music according to the same ruling principles. Their strictly musical input as well as their political positions are quickly sucked out and managed, if not with the very same people, then

with more flexible individuals who will reproduce the product: the music, the 'attitude' and the sub-products. The structure is strong: *The periphery regenerates the centre.*

The actual making of music becomes marginal to fit the given instruments, the given tonal and regular rhythm grid and the capitalist structures of distribution—the making of music as we saw it at la Scala fitted the given instruments, the given effect pedals and samplers, the given tonal system, the given rhythmical grid. The power of Pop music is not only about production, centralisation, colonisation and total distribution within capitalism: it is the fact that its form is in total harmony with it all. There is a shift from the representation of power to the unquestioned exercise of it. As Alice Creicher writes in her article *The Genius in the Bourgeois Society*⁵ "the star doesn't deliver representation anymore because it is promiscuous like the media itself, it doesn't hide capital anymore, it states it."

On a practical level, Rock standards, strictly Pop bands tracks, dance music and all their stylistic variations, easy listening classical music, reinterpretation of traditional jazz pieces, artists' Pop bands, and all the other costumes of Pop are occupying most social aural landscapes. Everything with a regular beat that sounds right. It's on television, in the streets, in shopping malls, inside the shops, in bars, in pubs, in public places, in cars, in parties, in video art, in performance art clubs, in galleries, in music venues rented out by galleries. There is only one space outside of specialised venues where a non-Pop music is represented: cinema. There, lyricism, the uncanny, the frightening, the diabolical, the alien, the ridiculous are very effectively edited with contemporary-style compositions or extracts of contemporary music pieces. Music is mimicked or reduced to a melody, a stylisation, a phrase, a song or an effect, into what Adorno would call the fetishization of musical pieces. Except for the cinema sound track, every other space where there is a social link between people is occupied by Pop. H. Draxler writes in the exhibition catalogue for "Market" by Group Material:⁶ "Today the media's mass rituals of subjugation guarantee domination outside politics..."

The ability to depoliticise the message of Rock into Pop has become openly exposed: Janis Joplin's Blues makes a perfect sound track for a Mercedes TV ad. Soft Drum & Bass for a bank, Jimmy Hendrix for another car... a strings ensemble plays an atonal chord for the flu symptoms: the message is clear.

In *Unmarked*⁷ Peggy Phelan writes that if visibility was an equalling power, then almost naked women would rule the Western Culture...

Pop music—the notes arranged to sound right on a regular rhythmic pattern—fulfils the aural space. It states power through the reassertion of a fixed order to the people who share the hearing. The social relations become defined by the power stated through the music. It doesn't represent the divisions within society any more but it creates unquestioned links between a redefined audience, a new social contract. It co-opts opposition and empties political statements, the principle of the right order in music for the right sort of music is disguised in popular fun, in body politics through visual signifiers... in sonoric subjection.

Works cited:

1. Jacques Attali, *Noise, the political economy of music*, Manchester University press, 1985.
2. John Keeble, *The theory of harmonics*, London 1784; (quoted by Richard Leppert, in *The sight of sound, Music, Representation, and the History of the body*, University of California Press).
3. Olly Wilson, *The association of movement and music as a manifestation of a black conceptual approach to music making*, in *More Than Dancing, Essays on Afro-American music and musicians*, ed. by I.V. Jackson.
4. Frank Zappa, *The Real Frank Zappa Book*.
5. Alice Creicher, *Das Genie als Bederfnis der bergelichen Gesellschaft*, in *Akademie*, 1995.
6. Helmut Draxler, exhibition catalogue for "Market", Group Material, 1995.
7. Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked, the politics of performance*.

image: Wendy House

