

A Composer's Experience in Negotiating Traditions: The Incorporation of Popular Music Influences in Contemporary Compositions

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Abstract

For the contemporary composer, the issue of inheriting a compositional tradition is complex. In addition to an understanding and incorporation of canonical sources, composers are faced with the prospect of reconciling the influences of popular music, world music, and other musical idioms. In particular, the integration of popular music influences into contemporary compositions has become increasingly common. While the use of popular idioms has been explored in the past, the current musical vernacular is now often being treated with the same reverence as traditional sources.

From the point of view of a composer, I explore how the incorporation of popular music has become part of my compositional process. When I became increasingly involved contemporary art music, popular music experiences of my youth lingered in my musical imagination. In part, the inclusion of popular influences has aided in the evolution of my compositional style. Through the examination of my own compositions, I explore the reconciliation of popular idioms with traditional sources in my music. Of course, there is a long and varied history of incorporating popular idioms into 'high art' forms of music. In addition to my own music, I also investigate the works of other contemporary composers dealing with these same issues. In particular, I focus attention on composers who have influenced my thinking in regards to the incorporation of popular music. Composers also under discussion include John Zorn, Michael Daugherty, and Steven Mackey.

For the contemporary composer, the issue of negotiating traditions has become complex in recent decades. While throughout the 20th century composers often borrowed and referenced popular music sources, recent developments have blurred the line between art music and popular music. Writing in 1941, Theodor Adorno was dismissive of the artistic significance of popular music idioms. When comparing 'serious' music to 'popular' music, Adorno was largely interested in the methods of popular music production.¹

A clear judgment concerning the relation of serious music to popular music can be arrived at only by strict attention to the fundamental characteristic of popular music: standardization. The whole structure of popular music is standardized, even where the attempt is made to circumvent standardization. Standardization extends from the most general features to the most specific ones. Best known is the rule that the chorus consists of thirty-two bars and that the range is limited to one octave and one note (Adorno 302).

While Adorno's perspective represents a particular aesthetic viewpoint towards popular music (which is sometimes still shared by some current aestheticians and composers²), many composers at the beginning of the 21st century are approaching this issue differently. In large part, composers seem to acknowledge some level of standardization but identify interesting and complex ideas within the standardization.

As suggested by my title, this presentation involves the evolution of my compositional voice. While I will be investigating a change in aesthetic value in the music of other composers, I will also explain how the incorporation of popular music idioms affects my own work as a composer. The incorporation of popular music influences into my music has become part of my compositional process. My early musical experiences involved playing in rock and jazz bands. Participating in these groups often involved composing music. When I became increasingly involved contemporary art music, these early popular music experiences lingered in my musical imagination. As previously mentioned, there has been a long and varied history of incorporating popular idioms into 'high art' forms of music. However, three contemporary composers who have influenced my thinking in regard to the incorporation of popular music include John Zorn, Michael Daugherty, and Steven Mackey.

¹ Of course, Adorno is primarily referring to jazz music of the 1930s and 1940s.

² Eric Gans references this in "Art and Entertainment" (Gans).

John Zorn

John Zorn employs several different compositional methods in his combination of popular and jazz idioms into his art music.³ However, Zorn's combination of influences is not entirely an attempt to bring popular influences into the art music world. Rather, he seems to be disillusioned with the distinctions between 'popular' and 'high art' classifications. In his music, Zorn draws equally from a number of different genres and styles.

Zorn's string quartet *Cat O' Nine Tails* is representative of the composer's attempt to blend contrasting styles of music. One of the main features of the composition is a rapid shifting between different genres of music. The sound produced by this method of composition is somewhat similar to Carl Stalling's compositions for cartoons. Indeed, Zorn indicates that he was intending this kind of juxtaposition in *Cat O' Nine Tails*.

(Cat O' Nine Tails is) a piece with a lot of drama and humor and many musical games hidden in the web of its inner details. Sly quotes and secret codes are scattered throughout my classical repertory serving as both special tributes to the composers and compositions that feed my inspirations and more importantly as unifying devices to create structural integrity (Zorn).

While Zorn does not specifically combine popular music influences in *Cat O' Nine Tails*, the composer juxtaposes several avant-garde performance techniques with a number of quotations from various genres.

While Zorn's music is interesting and engaging, it lacks, to my ears, a sense of continuity. Individual gestures within the piece are clear, and isolated moments of the composition are compelling. The composition, much like many of Zorn's compositions, relies on the irony of juxtaposing contrasting material. However, I am interested in writing music that achieves a clear sense of structure and form.⁴ While Zorn's techniques are helpful, the composer does not provide an obvious path for the incorporation of popular idioms.

My first attempt to reconcile Zorn's compositional style with my idea of a large musical structure is reflected in my first string quartet. The work, written in 1997, is structured on a rotating ostinato. The ostinato is based on a rock guitar riff of my own design. The idea of the rotating ostinato is somewhat similar to the 'phase shifting' of minimalist composers. A rotating ostinato operates by continually shifting material from the beginning of the ostinato and moving it to the end of the musical figure. Essentially, the ostinato rotates with each repetition.

Example 1: Original position of the ostinato

Example 2: Quarter note rotation of the ostinato

Using this technique, the ostinato repeats throughout the composition, and the rotation continues until the figure returns to its original form. While the concept is simple, there are complex combinations that are possible with such a technique.⁵

³ Of course, John Zorn also began the professional career as a jazz musician.

⁴ Of course, it is often interesting to mask and alter the form of the composition. It is not always necessary for the form of a composition to be entirely clear on the first hearing. However, when working with a complex musical language, it is sometimes helpful to have a clear and understandable form. In part, this helps the listener to perceive the larger musical statement and not become lost in the musical language.

⁵ For example, it is possible to split an ostinato into two uneven parts. Each part would rotate at a different rate until the original position is finally achieved.

While an ostinato continues throughout my quartet, sections of contrasting musical material occur with each repetition of the ostinato. These overlaid musical sections consist of a variety of musical styles. In some ways, the result is similar to Zorn's *Cat O' Nine Tails*. However, in my case the ostinato serves to ground the composition. In this sense, I combine modern compositional techniques with Zorn's concept of rapidly shifting styles.

My first string quartet integrates my rock background with my background in art music. However, the composition is not entirely successful. Despite the grounding provided by the ostinato, the alternation of musical styles in the quartet is discursive; a coherent musical statement is not always perceivable in the composition. While the composition is not a success, it represents my first serious attempt to combine popular music influences into my own music.

Michael Daugherty

Michael Daugherty's combinations of rock and jazz influences initially drew me to his music. However, while elements of popular music can be found in Daugherty's music, the composer seems more interested referencing the notion of popular culture concepts rather than popular music. Daugherty's *Motown Metal*, for example, becomes more of an exploration of timbres rather than clear references to Motown music. In his program notes to the composition, the composer indicates his intended synthesis in *Motown Metal*.

The composition is inspired by the sounds and rhythms of industrial Detroit: city of automobile clamor and the sixties Motown sound. The composition highlights instruments made only of metal: four horns, four trumpets, three trombones, tuba, vibraphone, glockenspiel, triangle, cymbal, gong, anvil, and brake drum. *Motown Metal* is an assembly line of ascending and descending glissandi and rapid chromatic scales, predominantly heard in the trombones. The tuba, glockenspiel, and anvil create a funky polyphony, while the trumpets and horns play big band staccato chords. I draw on my experience playing percussion in sixties soul music bands and drum and bugle corps to create brassy industrial-strength polyrhythms (Daugherty).

However, while Daugherty claims to have been inspired by the Motown sound, this influence is often difficult to perceive in the composition. While the composition has a rhythmic vitality that is reminiscent of some Motown compositions and the sound that Daugherty creates is interesting, the composition seems to have little to do with Motown music and more to do with American culture. Indeed, many of his other compositions, such as the Superman-themed *Metropolis Symphony* and the bassoon solo *Dead Elvis*, reflect an interest in popular culture themes and not necessarily popular music influences. In some ways, popular music acts as a veneer in Daugherty's music. The musical material is not entirely derived from a synthesis of popular music idioms.

Nevertheless, Daugherty's music did indicate an alternative to Zorn's incorporation of influences. While Zorn seems to be interested in the irony of juxtaposing material, the success of Daugherty's work relies on a coherent musical statement. While I do not find it useful to incorporate all of Daugherty's compositional techniques into my music, the composer is interested in a blend, albeit not always apparent, of popular influences into a large musical statement.

Steven Mackey

Steven Mackey, on the other hand, takes a unique approach to combining popular music and art music. For example, Mackey has explored the possibility of merging the electric guitar into the modern orchestra. *Tuck and Roll* is the composer's attempt at an electric guitar concerto. Whereas Zorn relies on the juxtaposition of differing musical materials and Daugherty makes references to popular culture, Mackey attempts to merge perceivable popular music influences into a cohesive statement. In his program notes to *Tuck and Roll*, Mackey explains part of his compositional thinking.

In my mind, I am working in the tradition of Mozart and Stravinsky, exploring all that *pure* concert music can be. But my past, present and future is checkered by the fact that the sound of the electric guitar is like mother's milk to me and its iconoclastic milieu, between avant garde experimentalism and libido driven vernacular, was my grade school (Mackey).

Here Mackey indicates that popular music influences are simply part of his natural compositional voice.

Mackey's combination of "pure concert music" and popular music can be heard in the first movement of *Tuck and Roll*. While the distorted guitar near the beginning of the piece has an obvious

prominence in the orchestration, Mackey also attempts to blend the sound of the guitar with the instrumental families of the orchestra. This outlook attracts me to Mackey's technique; Mackey's influences are imbedded within his music and are not simply points of reference.

Fey: a piece for bass clarinet

Mackey's approach influenced my recent work for bass clarinet, *Fey*. *Fey* combines my interest in jazz and rock with my compositional techniques. *Fey* is based on a set of scales of my own design. While the harmonic language of *Fey* is not derived from popular music, the character is very much inspired by the performance style of John Coltrane and Jimi Hendrix. The extreme dynamic shifts reinforce the frenzied nature of the composition. In addition, the rapid alternation between high and low registers is reminiscent of Hendrix and Coltrane's soloing techniques.

While *Fey* does not directly quote the jazz or rock idioms, the popular influences are, like Mackey's rock influences, incorporated into a larger musical statement. The material in *Fey* has less of an ironic character than Zorn's music and a more direct popular music influence than Daugherty's music.

Summary

In a recent Composers' Institute concert, conductor Osmo Vänskä noted that many of today's young composers show a direct influence from rock music and other popular styles (Vänskä). Indeed, rather than alluding to popular music, composers are integrating rock and popular styles into contemporary compositions. This move from using popular music as a veneer or simply referencing popular music to an integration of popular music is one way composers are negotiate traditions. In addition, the technology used by art music composers in electro-acoustic music and the technology used by artists working the realm of popular electronic music has become the same. In this way too, genre distinctions become blurred and greater importance is placed on a creative statement.

One way in which each of the aforementioned composers has influenced my compositional thinking is the disregard for genre distinctions. Zorn, Daugherty, and Mackey rely on a background in popular styles. Over the course of the past few years, I have not found it exceedingly helpful to separate art music from various types of popular music. For example, I have particular pieces I continually reference when faced with a compositional problem. I repeatedly gain a great deal of insight from Debussy's *Piano Preludes* and Bartok's *Concerto for Orchestra*. However, I have also learned much from the study of Jimi Hendrix's soloing and improvisational techniques, and pieces such as John Coltrane's "A Love Supreme" demonstrate an interesting approach to motivic variation. While my compositional approach may continue to change, my early musical experience will remain linked to my experiences with popular music. In the end, these experiences are an essential part of my voice as a composer.

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