

How should we listen to a new piece of music?

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How should we listen to a new piece of music?

It seems to me that when we experience anything new, we compare it-wittingly or unwittingly-with previous experience. All of us, as music lovers, have had the pleasure of being "surprised" by a piece of music: we listen to an unfamiliar work by a familiar composer-say Bach, or Haydn, or Beethoven-and suddenly the composition zigs where we expect it to zag. We might not recognize the surprise as a change of key, a change of tempo, a change of dynamic, or whatever else, but we do perceive it as an interruption of The Expected, as The Expected veers off on a new, or at least changed, course. These momentary pockets of musical confusion are exciting, and it could even be argued that these misdirections and sleights-of-hand comprise the real substance of a composition. By this I mean to suggest that the aesthetic value of a work of musical art, at least in the case of the musical artworks with which we are most familiar, depends upon the composer "breaking the rules." What are these "rules"?

"Inevitability" is a term often ascribed to the music of Bach (some of whose music you will be hearing later this evening). What is meant by "inevitability"? Do we mean to suggest that members of an audience-few of whom are composers, or even musical scholars-are so attuned to Bach's compositional practice that they ostensibly could, after hearing only the first half of a composition, return home and compose, themselves, the work's conclusion in exactly the same manner that Bach would have? Of course not. And think about this: would one truly want to hear music that is "inevitable"? If a listener could, in fact, predict every hook of melody, every progression of harmony, and every sudden change in register or dynamic, how much fun would that really be? The pleasure of surprise would be lost. When people laud Bach's work by calling it "inevitable," I think that what they mean is "Bach's music makes a lot of sense." And it does. But how? One important factor in our ability to recognize and appreciate music of the common-practice period (the music we learn about in school, and the music we hear on the radio and in public performance) is the large-scale structure that informs many compositions from that era. Though there are a variety of forms and phrase-structures utilized in these classic works (classic with a lower-case "c"), the paradigmatic possibilities are for the most part similar, and all are based upon principals of functional harmony. That is, pitches are grouped into hierarchies (scales) whereby some pitches are more important than others, or-perhaps this is a better way to describe the situation-some pitches have functions that are different from the functions of others. Over time, most of us have

become familiar with these common-practice tendencies of certain notes, or certain groups of notes, to be followed by certain other notes, or certain other groups of notes. The large-scale forms of common-practice compositions reflect and reinforce the familiar hierarchical relations of pitches within major and minor scales, and we have become comfortable with these forms; from The Beatles to Bach, from Beethoven to Duke Ellington, music follows a logical path. So when we are pleasantly "surprised" by a musical figure, what we are perceiving is a slight hiccup in the musical discourse, where the familiar formal plan is momentarily "freshened" by a clever idea. The music we love is filled with clever ideas.

In a sense, it seems to me that we could argue that the musical works of the common-practice period are all commenting upon one another. That is, the musical "surprises" we hear are saying "a-HA, you thought the music would go one way (based on other compositions you've heard), but it has in fact gone the other way, and isn't the composer a clever fellow for having tricked you, while at the same time managing to continue the overall musical flow in a more or less familiar way." This is where that term, "inevitability," comes into play. Excellent music is inevitable, but it is inevitable only in retrospect. Once we've heard the unfamiliar jolt, we re-define it as part of the musical language of that particular work, and-as the composition progresses-what was once a shock becomes part of the hierarchy, and we experience the aesthetic and intellectual joy of having broadened our musical horizons a bit, and having become familiar with yet another way of embellishing a familiar form.

Something happened in the late nineteenth century. Many compositions became so replete with "embellishments" and "jolts" and "zigs" and "zags" that it became more and more difficult for the audience to "stay on course." The composers' surprises altered the large-scale and small-scale form to such a degree that the meaning became obscured. No longer did music seem inevitable, and no longer did audiences feel comfortable. In addition, composers who were pushing the boundaries of surface-level, moment-to-moment pitch relationships became impatient with the traditional large-scale forms (forms developed, after all, to reinforce tonal relationships that had become by that time partially or entirely inapposite). Composers abandoned old forms for new structural paradigms more closely related to the new hierarchies that had been developed in the realm of pitch and harmony. This upheaval continues to the present day. As composers continue to grow, some audience members are left behind. Without familiar hierarchies and structures, music is no longer surprising-how can something be a surprise when nothing can be anticipated? To the unprepared, much contemporary music is jarring-"interesting" at best, "incomprehensible," at worst.

So I return now to my initial question: how should we listen to a new piece of music? Can a new work be compared to music of the past? The answer is a qualified "sometimes." It is possible that a new composition might share characteristics with our beloved classics, but more likely than not there will be more differences than similarities. Can we, then, compare a new composition to other new compositions-ones with which we are more familiar? The answer to that is, again, "sometimes." Composers of today have a million and one options for compositional style and technique, and as difficult as it

may be to compare composers to one another, it is sometimes even difficult to compare multiple works by the same composer, as many composers attempt to redefine their personal style with each new composition.

So... to what can we compare a new composition? My suggestion is that when we listen to a new work, we should compare it with itself. We must make the assumption that the composer is composing within a set of rules. In the "old days," we were familiar with these rules before we arrived at the concert hall, but today composers are more free than ever before to experiment, so our job as listeners has become more broad: we must glean, from the music itself, the hierarchies and structures inherent in each particular piece, and only after that task has been accomplished may we experience the familiar joys of recognizing similarities and connections, chuckling at misdirections, and admiring the composer's clever tricks as he leads us down a path that makes a certain amount of sense.

In my own music, I try to maintain a high degree of what we might call, for lack of a better term, "self-referentiality." All aspects of a given work are related to a few fundamental principles that govern the work's composition. These principles might be new, and unique to the work in question, but my aim is to utilize these principles consistently, varying them subtly and intelligently, and applying them in multiple ways to multiple aspects of a composition in such a manner that musical gestures that may have seemed unusual at the beginning of a composition become, by the end, familiar. To make an analogy, I am introducing a new vocabulary (new "words" made from familiar "letters") in each composition. By using strict and consistent grammar, this vocabulary becomes internalized by an audience to the point where it will recognize the manner with which I am "playing" with the rules and forms of the work. This is my goal as an artist.

In the pieces you've just heard, self-similarity is achieved (or, at least, attempted) in a variety of ways—ways perhaps more complicated than we'd like to get into in this forum. But it might be interesting to know that there are only four twelve-note series of pitches used in these two compositions, and in fact these four "rows" are themselves intimately related. And the rhythmic structures of the two works are not only intimately related to each other, but are also isomorphically related to the pitch rows used. I mention these two trivialities not to suggest any compositional brilliance or singular achievement on my part, but rather to reassure you, the intelligent listener, that though many of these sounds may be new and unusual, I have done my best to include you in the fun, and it is my hope that you will be able to make meaning out of the vocabulary of this work, and recognize the same sort of "consistency-with-a-few-surprises-thrown-in" that you hear in all carefully-composed music.

Before Dr. Carlson performs the two works again, he and I would be very happy to answer any questions, or hear any comments that you might have.