

# Panayiotis Demopoulos - Composer / Performer

## Music and propaganda in the post-Wall era

### 1.

**O**ur western music history is defined by the constant modification of musical activity from intuitive interactions with the phenomena of natural and organised sounds into a set of characteristic and formulaic practices understood in terms of familiarity. Furthermore, in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, owing to the establishment of copyright laws and the gradual extinction of anonymous music and also due to developments in mass distribution of published materials, the growth of music as an ideological medium has been rapid. Whether it be the *blut und boden* quality in the music of Sibelius, Vaughan Williams or Strauss, the deliberate innervations of the amorphous post-war avant-garde movements, the seemingly subversive genres of the rock and roll traditions or the aggressive, highly politicised and radical music of the North-American and European under-classes, the framework within which most Western music is conceived and operates in remains the same: through the proliferation of sound products, its role becomes steadily and exclusively emblematic of attitudes ascribed to it by the producer.

Often the producer is the creator; other times the creator is not in the least aware of the producer's intentions. At any rate, the social role of a 'musical product' is independent of the intentions of the creative input, and it is almost purely propagandistic in spirit: it seeks to promote an extra-musical idea by concealing the true nature of that idea and by presenting it within the cryptic essence of musical terms. This reality of music as an implicit organ of the market mechanism has carried through in its amplified, grimaced form into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

What of the origins of this propaganda then and how does it function?

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Music has traditionally been viewed as an intricately powerful weapon. Yet, even though the importance it holds for us is well understood, the true and precise effect it has on us may not always be immediately discernible; in fact the less discernible its executive methods and modus operandi are, the more effectively it induces the transformation of social structures and norms, and the expansion of ideological spheres of influence (and subsequently, the revelation of such secrets must be informed by the inherent errors it demonstrates in itself).

## 2.

*"Any musical innovation is full of danger to the whole state, and ought to be prohibited . . . when modes of music change, the fundamental laws of the state always change with them."*

*From Aristotle's "The Politics"*

**A**ncient comments on the subject of the political use of music tend to be viewed as anachronistic dogma today, and yet we may discover the birth of more contemporary enigmas of substance in the beginnings of our culture than is obvious at surface level. For Aristotle and Plato, controlling artistic expression strictly was crucial and prohibiting 'unnecessary' innovation was rightful. On the contrary, a prevalent obsession of contemporary society is the veneration of novelty. Certainly, the polemical nature of Aristotle's negative assertion, namely prohibiting certain musical activity, is autocratic and dictatorial given our current Christian-Democratic modes of cognition. But what is there to be said of our dismissal of the statement as moralist dogma? Isn't our current state of mind equally reflective of a totalitarian theory of government, when prohibitive opinion and dictatorial expression are automatically deemed synonymous? It is certainly very suspicious that pluralist ideals categorise moral opinion a quality which must be moderated at all times to suit a model defined by post-industrial, economic ethics; moderation being ironically the epicentre of Classical systems of values.

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Here, it may be necessary to interject a short parenthesis: a statement which suggests prohibition of a certain activity for whatever reason and however in need of improvement itself, is in fact a less coercive statement than one which forces the reader into a false sense of security and propagates forged democracy which stems from such a mythical and delusional clause as the ideal of freedom of choice; the criterion used to make this value judgement is what has always been considered a virtue by those who make statements: rational consistency. It is more and more evident in our everyday life and though our participation in the global market, that in our current delusional state is bred and endorsed the tendency for exploitation of people by other people in the name of freedom and such a characteristic lack of social concern, that even the act of exploiting is a perfectly plausible social policy that need not be concealed and one which can be openly practiced. It is not apathy, as is often said, which allows these oppressive tendencies to grow, but an unconscious endorsement which is, without exception, accompanied by a calm whisper of complementing protest.

This text does not aim and could not claim to suggest an alternative – the many genuine philosophers and true thinkers who have already contributed in researching the subject forbid such aspirations. Moreover, there is little more to be found in this writer's opinion than social apathy, immovable religious conviction and total indifference as to politically organised social morals. The only cause of its existence is to undermine any dogma it establishes itself and to reflect on the current use of music almost exclusively as a commodity.

The relationship between music and politics remained central throughout European history. For the proto-Christians of the first ten centuries A. D. music became the main form of liturgical worship and a common point of reference for the distinct cultures of the Middle East and the Greco-Roman world. Initially the Church remained reluctant to introduce instrumental music in the liturgy as it acknowledged how that would have serious implications on the discipline required for meditation and prayer. According to John Chrysostom:

*“Here [in the Church] there is no need for the cithara, or for stretched strings, or for the plectrum, or for art, or for any instrument; but, if you like, you may yourself*

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*become a cithara, mortifying the members of the flesh and making a full harmony of mind and body. For when the flesh no longer lusts against the Spirit, but has submitted to its orders and has been led at length into the best and most admirable path, then will you create a spiritual melody."*

The Christian Churches, the most important political institutions in Europe for over fifteen centuries grew more and more enthusiastic and accepting of the services that music might offer their establishments. Analysing how and when this happened is the subject of serious and laborious study, but it may be safely assumed here that with the addition of much music to the liturgy, the meditative nature of worship was altered into something far more worldly and visceral. That instrumental music became increasingly essential to the life of Christians with focus shifting from meditation and prayer to expression and communication is clearly documented. People as well and universally known as Desiderius Erasmus protested:

*"We have brought into our churches certain operatic and theatrical music; such a confused, disorderly chattering of some words as I hardly think was ever in any of the Grecian or Roman theatres. The church rings with the noise of trumpets, pipes, and dulcimers; and human voices strive to bear their part with them. Men run to church as to a theatre, to have their ears tickled. And for this end organ makers are hired with great salaries, and a company of boys, who waste all their time learning these whining tones."*

As Christianity lost its absolute political power so did the relationship between music and worship become more and more central to the life of the Church and as, subsequently, secularism gained ground in central Europe, the value of secular music increased. The age of printing, the age of enlightenment and the age of nationalism in Europe were the three distinct periods during which music felt the repercussions of deep social reforms. Thus the composer of music transformed through these ages from his anonymous beginnings, to Kappelmeister, onto Christian court servant and heroic freelancer.

Musical landmarks such as *Orfeo e Euridice*, the *St. Matthew Passion*, the *Eroica Symphony*, the *Symphonie Fantastique* and the *Ring cycle* are very descriptive of the

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political environments in which they were born and of the way musicians viewed themselves and their poetry in relation to the world at different times. These works of art, however, lack the operative element which drives musical propaganda: the intention to primarily coerce the listener into a state of critical lethargy.

For the composers of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century political life was demanding things of them; the *entartete musik* block but also the more popular and populist writers were aware of the pressures put on music by the advent of cinematography and the culmination of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* principle in the age of mechanised propaganda, especially at times of war. For the first time, the composer became a truly intercontinental figure, acquiring a primitive global identity.

In spite of the alleged break from tradition in the post-war, it was the total continuation along the lines of control-expert, musical feudalism that occurred, diversifying the culture industry and adding new, more accessible products to the menu in the name of social progress. In terms of ideological function there is little to distinguish between in the music of John Cage and the music of Elvis Presley; there are some differences in the packaging of the products, one box is dressed in luminous Chevrolet colours, the other in faux-Japonais rice paper. And the music is boxed of its own account, not due to arbitrary extraneous description. The content, one can be honest some 50 odd years later about music which is old, is often embarrassingly insipid and true listeners have whispered this to each other all along; but this was talk forbidden in the concert hall foyer or the rock'n'roll record shop, the old, pre-internet temples of the music industry.

Transforming condoms, dental aid and other expensive paraphernalia into ideological symbols for whole generations of people, through the use of plain doctrine, mushroom philosophy and sheer social pressure was the main preoccupation of the post-war. In the East, some resistance to these attitudes existed, no matter what awful truths of basic tyranny bely it. But with Glasnost and the fall of the Berlin wall the road was opened for total market expansion across the globe. This post-wall era is our time; the time of third and fourth generation cultural recycling, yet by no means an uncomfortable time to live in, especially for a Westerner. The duration of this period

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is of course unknown and its historical examination will be accurately performed only *a posteriori*. Still, one or two impressions of it may be canonised here.

## 3.

**I**n the last twenty or so years, both the presentation and conception of music have become standardised in the West. A replacement of the polarised world of cultural attitudes by a pluralist vision ensures that extreme propaganda may be concealed by way of its being criticised in set ways and it vandalises the principles of understanding by way of establishing autochthonous, ruling quests which disallow genuine questioning.

Quite naturally a critical attitude which is the by-product of those complacent agents who act on account of the belief that they think independently of societal conditioning, induces maximum aesthetic coercion through the assumption that critical thought in ideology-based systems of government is possible in the first place.

In this way propaganda escapes from the boundaries of political speech into the advertising space, which is emerging as the entire plateau of human thought. Music, inherently abstract and lacking in semantic boundaries is then the perfect platform for this propaganda and becomes one of its main identities – the familiarisation and atomisation of musical styles, genres and even musical items and cells ensures the codified function of music propaganda. In a nutshell, music is reduced to an omnipresent cinematic effect.

A good example of how music has been playing this role in any post-enlightenment culture, to an extent, can be found as early as 1810 in the opera house of Paris during Napoleon's reign: "*No opera may be performed without my express command*" the emperor announced to the director – today the emperor is replaced by a set of economical directives on profit management and the odd apocryphal business group

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decree; the result is that music is to be found almost everywhere and to be carefully listened to almost nowhere.

This condition is a new not a worse condition; a value judgement here would be a compromise to the purposes of this critique. Those who work for today's 'Napoleonic courts' certainly act in total support of utilitarian idolatry – but whether this is an indication of general ethical tendencies is a subject for the moral philosopher, not the creative artist, to investigate. What is obvious, however, is the existing antinomy between global ideology and commodity practice: freedom ideals and functional directives never go together well, at least not in terms of logic or even the hybrid philosophy of 'ontologistics'.

Which brings us to the heart of the matter; it is this oxymoron, that music propaganda has been based upon after the 1950s, hence its revolutionary character:

*"The revolution will not be televised"* rapped Gil Heron Scott in 1974, 25 years before BMG released and distributed globally *the Very Best of Gil Heron Scott*. The revolution will indeed not be televised, because the only possibility for a revolution exists if television producers think it good entertainment to instigate one; in which case it is not a genuine revolution but a different creature, one whose breathing depends on transaction and receipt upon request. The dead used to be the best for sale, but now we have gone a step further – the best for sale are those who are likely to die soon: Che is in fact only a T-shirt and Kurt Cobain's troubled face has become the definitive decorative wall garment.

As was observed many years ago by Adorno: *"In the end, the glorification of splendid underdogs is nothing other than the glorification of the splendid system that makes them so"*.

In the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century music propaganda is even dictating moral Law to us in an ominously profound way. The ideal of self-determination is cleverly exploited by musical ventures such as the Live Aid extravaganzas. In this manner, political activism – a diminution of communal generosity into self-absorbed mental violence – becomes music itself. The audiences and musicians who join in these cruel,

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neo-imperialist rituals of straight ideological blackmail are wearing the insignia of generosity over their bourgeois uniforms, very much like North American television management gurus conceal greed with categorical, *tableaux vivants* rhetoric.

To say ‘we’ and mean ‘I’ used to be an insult to the intelligence of an audience but now transpires an act of brotherly revelation. From the giant screens is heard the biblical dictum “He who is not with me is against me”, making it clear that all criticism is cynicism, that any opinion which does not abide with this misery-based entertainment, does not agree with the virtue of saving human lives. So the precious statistics of counting money online say and so we must believe, or else... After the luxuriously groomed Fuhrers satisfy the substratum of the concept of celebrity charity – and it is certainly not *miser cordia* or anything of the sort – they go on to flap the talent-less wings of a shamelessly and curiously rich elite on stage, solidifying the validity of their message by ‘making music’ specifically aimed at ‘delivering the third world from famine and poverty’. The cultural third world stands right there beneath the feet of the polished Act, remote from the stage but reaching for it, chanting away praise to its multi-headed, multi-branded, grinning Emperor.

The – by now global – audiences are not able to observe the total logical fallacy of having faith in this political and cultural proposition, nor do they care to. By this stage they have, through renaming their complacency as charity, become ‘comfortably numb’ whilst believing they are extremely active. It is by all accounts a historic day of triumph and heroism and a political upgrade for music from tool of government into the executive ranks; pop music is no longer propaganda for policy or ideology, but propaganda for itself and for the industry it represents and is.

It will be tiresome for both reader and writer to make yet another criticism here, at this point of no return; perhaps the words of the poet best describe such a music and how its people listen to their World:

*Now is the globe shrunk tight  
Round the mouse’s dulled wintering heart.  
Weasel and crow, as if moulded in brass,  
Move through an outer darkness*

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*Not in their right minds,  
With the other deaths. She, too, pursues her ends,  
Brutal as the stars of this month,  
Her pale head heavy as metal.*

*(Ted Hughes 'Snowdrop')*

## 4.

All contextualised polemic against the ideal of “progress” is inevitably doomed to being paleoconservative, *kulturkampf* anachronism or ideology and it is to ironically acquire commodity value with the passing of time. Verbal resistance to this propaganda is futile because of the very vague terminology associating morality with both monolithic dogma and freedom, amorality with both apathy and extreme social conscience and immorality with both contemporary and primitive codes of values.

Hermeneutic ambiguities of this kind serve the purposes of total confusion, which is a desired philosophical shelter, but can also be an infinitely physiognomic tool in the hands of an oppressor; with music the notions of progress and innovation have been central in the use of propaganda. In 1942 Dr. Joseph Goebbels wrote words that might have been spoken by the libertarian leader of the 21<sup>st</sup> century:

*“...we can hardly maintain that the waltz of our grandfathers and grandmothers is the pinnacle of musical development... Rhythm is one of the foundations of music. We no longer live in the Biedermeier era, but rather in a century whose melodies are governed by the thousand-fold hum of machines and the sounds of motors. Our war songs today are different from those of the World War. The radio must take account of this if it is not to run the risk of being stuck in frock coats. We do not want to offend*

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*anyone, but do feel obliged to consider the reasonable requests of our fighting and working citizens...”*

Even though the arguments in this segment are not irrational in themselves they beg the answer given by Adorno a few years later:

*“...The cheap aestheticism of short-winded politics is reciprocal with the faltering of aesthetic power. Recommending jazz and rock-and-roll instead of Beethoven does not demolish the affirmative lie of culture but rather furnishes barbarism and the profit interest of the culture industry with subterfuge. The allegedly vital and uncorrupted nature of such products is synthetically processed by precisely those powers that are supposedly the target of the Great Refusal: These products are the truly corrupt...”*

Here is a rare occasion when one must make a clear choice between reason and treason; the contemporary metaphors are simply too many and too obvious to refer to explicitly.

To end this rather morbid essay on a positive note, it ought to be maintained that Music itself is not a conquerable beast or measurable quantity. Even if we choose to reduce our musical experience to a trading symptom with brutal cynicism, we are unable to avoid participating in a spiritual pursuit, impossible to describe outside itself. By this account alone commercial practice transpires as a temporary cul-de-sac when compared with the greater avenues of human artistic endeavour; a mere side-effect of our current political condition and cultural surrender. The size of this dead-end and the force with which we may impact upon it, depends on extra-musical events and unforeseeable if not improbable magnitudes. But the tendencies we can employ to keep it in check and prevent musical propaganda from asserting its tyrannical rule in the short term are clear.

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## 5.

**T**he discovery and dismissal of the principles of music propaganda can only be achieved by appearing to support it and by undermining it internally. Its impenetrable, gigantic defences can only be penetrated by a Trojan horse, immune to bribery and transformation with the nature of propaganda itself defining the purposes of this infiltration: propaganda's Achille's heel is its dependence on identity as a *principium individuationis*.

Were creators to grow indifferent to celluloid prototypes, were audiences to seek the omni-dreaded vacuum of *tabula rasa* and had all those concerned with music the desire to simply attempt to reflect on the autonomy of things, the fascist maltreatment of ideas by the faceless and barbarous monopoly of thought would fail to hold a grip as powerful as the one it holds currently on the human imagination.

The anonymous author creates music not for remuneration, nor for public attention; he is not even a hero to himself – the narcissistic dimension is negated by the very fact that the moment of personal gratification through identification is the moment of personal debasement; the tables of moral fulfilment are thus turned. As for the purpose of that music: it exists and subsists in itself, pure as it is meant. Any manufactured claim to authorship by anyone *a posteriori* is both incredulous and aimless as the only identity such a 'product' has for the market is its lack of identity. In short, unlike Superman, the anti-hero must remain unnamed or the revealed identity will act as the very kryptonite he dreads.

Still, even with revealed identities scattered through the map, once the virus of such a niche for anonymous music has been established, the gates will open. As soon as a number of anonymous sources appear on the charts of popular music, the spread of the phenomenon will have to be inevitable and the scale of the sabotage of the propagandist machinery will have to be proportionately severe to its own power. This

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is not the vision of a bitter and twisted *Germinalesque* mind, but the only answer to the bulldozer of musical experiences that is the music industry.

Ultimately, music propaganda is, in the post-Wall era, one of the most important messengers clarifying product descriptions and payment arrangements to a consumer. The development of identity designs is for this reason crucial and fervently maintained as an independent sector of activity; anonymity has the great potential to cause serious and permanent damage to this established procedure. For the market – despite the frequent reminders of the value of diversity – similarity and familiarity are far more precious ideals than dissimilarity – hence the categorisation of distinct essences in compact groups. Individuality as a virtue and diversity as a local attribute appear in disjointed quantities and mask the true dimension of our human capacities, forbidding and mispronouncing our desire for cohesion whilst forcing mass iconolatry.

Therefore, anonymous activity, truly individual and to an extent independent of extraneous influences as it stands by definition, is an enemy to the cause of profit which is precisely why it has been eliminated as a possibility from our collective social agenda. Again, the positivist will cry out: “*This is what the people chose, what they want*” (the people being the quality of a poll majority) – a possibility that this is true exists, but it would be a lamentable truth for that matter.

Not surprising then, that even our flailing avant-garde maintains a dichotomy of character in the face of this predicament. One camp represents the remote, socially invalidated observer seeking Music in the chaos of a complex and mutating society, too cowardly to assume an anonymous identity, too comfortable to discard the assumed/assigned role of the overfed pariah. The other, represents the happily cautious late follower of developments, the parasitical alternative lifestyle promoter, dreamer of research grant bliss and producer of little/creator of even less; both camps collaborating equally with the music industry in the name of historicism, as their duty – not their obligation – would have it. Those who do not fall under these categories (note the contagious nature of archivism) are simply not part of the music industry. Even though this is no creative disaster, it means that the anonymous writer remains unheard and achieves nothing in social terms.

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Still, it must only be a matter of time. When the first few anonymous makers of music contribute their work towards an audience somehow, the market's disruption could be far more severe than expected and a 'revolution' against musical propaganda could commence. To go back to Heron-Scott's prophecy, such a revolution will not be televised, but unlike other revolutions it will not become a commodity either; it does not need to be televised, it needs not to be televised and it cannot be televised for there is nothing to put on the screen. Such a revolution may come to nothing, but it will be its own nothing; such a revolution will be true because – unlike this signed paper – it will bear no name and no purpose outside its content.