

Panayiotis Demopoulos - Composer / Performer

The loss of musical instruments

a brief polemic on musical pyromania

The image of Jimi Hendrix burning an electric guitar on stage has emerged as an emblem of 20th century music. We read that: “*The set ended with Hendrix burning his guitar onstage, then smashing it to bits and tossing them out to the audience. The show instantly catapulted Hendrix into US stardom*”. A few years prior to that near sacrificial ritual taking place, a well-known and too frequently referred to political group burned books in a square of Europe. No particular sociological insight is required to discern that acts of middle class vandalism – the Western underclasses have always been perfectly aware of the status they enjoy globally, for all the supposed solidarity with the poor of the world – are instigated, staged and promoted by agents whose main interest may only be extraneous to literature or music.

The above reference to Hendrix (or any other creation of the culture industry) is not a direct criticism; however, all teenaged and confused veneration of pentatonic obstinacy aside, his legacy remains that of pure fetish and iconography. Thus, the reign of mediocrity is well established, but what of its origins; what is the cause of the tendency to burn books and witches for political or entertainment purposes, what lies at the root of the need to destroy a musical instrument? The psychoanalyst will suggest a translation to phallic realms, the sociologist will point to dominance and struggle, while the theologian will undoubtedly speak of the soul. They will all, nevertheless, omit the fact that the performer is not responsible, for were he to consider his acts wrong in a legal sense he might still be unable to utter “*mea culpa*” truthfully.

Instruments that we now know only from historical testimony have been, almost without exception, the casualty of human aggression. The hydraulis for example, the precursor of the organ, was a predominant instrument in the secular life of the Roman and Byzantine

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empires. It has not survived in its initial form, nor as an 'original' copy, because of centuries of conflict. It is safe to assume that the last instruments of that time were destroyed by invading armies rather than frustrated musicians. What is of further interest is that the loss of the hydraulis may be a defining cause of further conflict; one of the main liturgical differences between the Orthodox and Catholic Churches is the use or absence of organ music, hindering a possible reunion as some ten centuries of separate musical development have led to very distinct ways of worship.

Also, it was in mourning that instruments were not allowed in synagogues after the Romans occupied Jerusalem, a clause that persists to this day. It may appear insignificant whether the faithful sing or play in worship, but aesthetic issues often become dogmatic principles: according to a number of Muslim clerics, music itself is a sin. Therefore, those who practice it are sinners and depending on dogmatic density and punishment practice it can be deduced that, infrequently, musicians ought to be beheaded.

Another, more relevant, syllogism suggests that :

All instruments are new then old.

New music wants new instruments.

Therefore old instruments are not wanted in new music [and may as well be used for lighting a bonfire].

There is evidently nothing new in the destruction of musical instruments. A careful look at *Syntagma Musicum* informs us that little has survived in recent continental history. However, the inclusion of destroying instruments in musical environments, other than that of comedy, is a contemporary phenomenon. Annea Lockwood's piece *Piano Burning* exemplifies this attitude: the performer is asked to tune an upright piano at a very high pitch and then set it on fire. "Why not?" ask those scandalized by any protest, as if manic destruction were the epitome of freedom; but the question is not real, because those posing it would rarely listen to an answer, hence the infuriation at the first sign of real questions posed.

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Often, the loss of musical instruments has also been an accident. During the allied bombings of central Europe in the 1940's a number of old instruments were destroyed in the ensuing fires. More tragically, prototype electronic instruments such as the groundbreaking inventions of Jörg Mager were forever lost. Interestingly, little is said about these paradigms of senseless atrocity. They are deemed by most historians to be natural events. This is really an absurd proposition and sadly, every time we discuss the subject, our aptitude to protect culture from violence deteriorates. After all, Anton von Webern was murdered by a trigger-happy U.S. army chef because he dared to smoke outside; burning harpsichords is loose change.

The impenetrable validity of any consistent syllogism is subject to criticism depending on whether we accept the premises it is based on. Macintyre writes that “without a teleological framework the whole project of morality becomes unintelligible,” and perhaps this is correct. Still, even if one were not to question morality itself, given the “free-shooting” nature of contemporary teleology, a number of practical, if not moral/ethical, problems do arise. The political truth is relative, Desdemona loves Cassio, then she loves him not, Othello gets angry anyway, because that’s what he likes to do, he is a free man, unbound by moral nonsense and thus is born the cause of all things unpleasant.

Indeed, the teleology of comments in this essay is Epicurean, satisfying the one parameter set by Kantian morals: not every pleasure is desired; we want pleasure which will not result in greater pain than it brings happiness. It is a plain, practical thought, which is not saturated by ideology nor is it philosophically derived, and it is not distant to hedonistic principles. To go back to free shooting, not unlike Kaspar’s ploy in *Freischutz*, the temptation of allowing destruction as a plausible moral direction is only the bullet which will kill him and him alone. Still, let there be no doubt. Tradition, the accumulated wisdom of many, stands firm against the philosophical dilettantism of the so-called emancipated individual. The creative mind does not look for an objective truth. It follows the only truth it knows, its dogma is derived from a human desire to tame desire itself.

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Musical instruments are our material creation. One of the requisites for their existence is the application of principles invented or discovered – depending on one's ontological predilection – to the process of building them. In isolation, their annihilation by human hands is either an accident, or a conscious, violent dismissal. It cannot be anything else (excluding the case of the Vienna vegetable orchestra), regardless of the excuse that has technological advances requiring constant renewal and destruction being a necessary evil in the cycle of life.

What can a writer command in defense or protest against that part of the human element which remains inherently violent? It is no longer time to shy away from condemning the faceless aggressor in us. We have tried the bleak gusto of his fantasy and found our music in embers. We also experienced one of the most astonishing phenomena of our time: the adoption of the musical archetype of the brute, by those with a supposed interest in music.

At this stage, never mind reading too messianic: those who wish harm upon our memory of musical humanity whatever the plethora of their voices, whatever their colours and intentions, will offer no satisfying explanation when they suggest as their motive the instant gratification attained by causing conflict and commanding marketable notoriety. They speak nothing other than the inane dictum that old things must stand aside for new things, as if the time origin of an object or instrument were some sacred value tag. These are the truly obsolete, the suicidal forefathers of culture; murderers – not of babies, that would have been forgivable – but of things that we cannot even begin to understand or speak of. The distinction is not polemical, for that would defeat all purpose, but it is clear and it leads to a polemic: They, who burn instruments and stand on one side and we, who build them on another.

Miroslav Holub wrote about them and of their lasting legacy in our world – the musical heritage that most people endure today:

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*From burning Troy we took away
These rags of ours,
Teeth in a glass
And a tattooed grandpa...*

*...and like a fingernail
grown into the flesh
our truth
was always with us.*

*we slept embraced,
rags wrapped around us,
teeth in a glass.
Just like home said grandpa*

*Nothing had happened in fact
Only we understood
That Troy
 Perhaps
 Had really*

Fallen