

Rethinking Socialist Realism in Music

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Few art historical categories suffer from a worse reputation than socialist realism. At nearly thirty years removal from the end of the Cold War, the term still remains associated with philistinism, totalitarianism, and the sacrifice of creativity to the unholy demands of propaganda. This is somewhat surprising given that, since the start of the Great Recession, there has been a resurgence of interest in Marxism, not only on the organized Left but in academia as well. New and fruitful research on Marxist value theory, and indeed value theory as it pertains to art (which we’ve addressed in our recent work) has emerged, and new work on practical alternatives to the capitalist mode of production are helping to shape a contemporary socialist movement spurred into both action and reflection—practice and theory—by crisis. But the credibility of the notion of socialist realism in the arts has not been detectably elevated by these developments, likely because this concept is more closely associated with the Soviet experience (or, less euphemistically, with the abuses of Stalinism) in particular than with the Marxist movement in general (which, for the record, we both see as being congenitally and intractably *opposed* to Stalinist and Stalinoid state capitalism). Paging through a volume on the topic, it is often hard not to cringe. “A Marxist-Leninist outlook is the only Party line following which the Soviet artist can clearly outline the decisive perspectives of our society’s advance towards communism,” writes Georgi Kunitsyn in a classic 1967 essay on Lenin and “freedom of creativity.”

The category’s association with the Soviet Union allowed Western Marxists (the only Marxists assigned in musicology seminars) to distinguish themselves as *Western* Marxists (though perhaps not as Western *Marxists*) by rejecting it when discussing art. For Adorno, representing the True (history itself as the critical and utopian content of art) involves abandoning the reflection of a hopelessly reified “reality” by embracing just that avant-garde experimentalism Soviet authorities censured. At least some of Adorno’s principled advocacy for, say, free atonality reads like a theoretical rationalization of haute-Bourgeois musical tastes: music written to be liked by the many is hopelessly vulgar; music as a political instrument is irredeemably debased by its relinquishment of autonomy.

In music studies, the final verdict on realism was delivered on the eve of Perestroika by Carl Dahlhaus who, as Anne Shreffler has shown, had been engaged at the time in a (mostly implicit) debate with Marxist musicology on the other side of the Berlin Wall for decades. Dahlhaus is thoroughly unsympathetic in his assessment: “Any musical realism, whether ‘socialist’ or ‘bourgeois’, presupposes the existence of a heteronomous aesthetics; one where content takes precedence over form: this is so self-evident that it would scarcely need to be stated were it not that the fact that the doctrine of socialist realism[, which] has normative functions to fulfill[,] has had consequences which distort the historiographical outline.” It is, finally, in defense of just such an objective historical outline that Dahlhaus launches his critique. The purpose of his book is to reinterpret the concept of realism as a minor style category in

music, a supporting character in the history of aesthetic ideas. He deflates the concept, stripping it of its normative dimension (accorded to it by those Marxist aestheticians who regard “realist” as an honorific) as well as its pretense to identifying artworks as culminating moments in society’s Spiritual self-realization (in the Hegelian sense: the term *Geistesgeschichte* haunts his text).

While Dahlhaus’s dim assessment of the concept of socialist realism may strike one as hasty and potentially politically motivated, the West German is not wrong in locating the idea in a Hegelian lineage. At the core of the traditional conception of socialist realism is the idea that art is an ideal (often ideological) reflection (or expression) of the real condition of a social form whose ultimately determining feature is a mode of production (be it feudalistic, capitalistic, bureaucratic-collectivist, or what have you). As C. Vaughan James explains in a magisterial monograph on the version of the theory that emerged in the Soviet Union by midcentury, socialist realism is meant to have involved the coordination of three characteristics: popularity, class nature, and party function. A textbook definition of popularity runs like this: “Works of art which may be categorized as ‘popular’ are those which give strong expression to the highest level of social awareness attained in a given epoch [...] a reflection of true social conditions and of man’s most humane aspirations in his struggle for a more dignified mode of existence.” The phrase “highest level of social awareness” strikes one immediately as kin to a Hegelian model wherein art represents an objectified form of a community’s understanding of itself as a meaning- and value- generating entity.

Since the capitalist mode of production is understood to be inherently unstable and prone to internal contradiction and conflict, the highest form of a capitalist society’s self-understanding would be one which recognized its antagonistic class divisions. And, finally, since the Party is the institutional embodiment (the form of “objective spirit,” as Hegel might say) of the self-consciousness of the proletariat—of itself *as* proletariat—in its historical mission to move beyond the capitalist mode of production and collectivize production, the representation of the self-understanding of the Party in art is, quite naturally, art’s most complete flowering.

Ironically, Western Marxists share with their Eastern counterparts a reflection model for understanding art’s relationship to the real and true. Rather than rooting the theory in a (Herderian) idea of national Spirit (“popularity”), Adorno and Lukacs appeal regularly to an undifferentiated “Bourgeois worldview” of which art is a sensuous reflection. Equally ironically, Adorno, especially, identifies in music, and prizes it for possessing, a capacity for curating images of the world as it really is, i.e. as it has been shaped and re-shaped by capitalist modernity. As Adorno tells us in a comparison between the self-contained drama of the “bourgeois era” and the sonata-allegro form, the right kind of analytical contemplation of artworks of these genres reveals that

the sense in which a drama, a sonata-like product of the bourgeois era, is said to be crafted—i.e. composed of tiny motifs that are objectified by dynamic synthesis—has echoes of commodity production. The link between technical-artistic procedures of this kind and material ones belonging to the industrial era is obvious, although it has remained obscured thus far

All this is to say that, whatever their very real *political* differences may have been, Western and Eastern Marxists butted heads in aesthetics largely out of a narcissism of small differences. Their debate, ultimately more stylistic than substantive, masks an underlying Hegelianism in which art is valorized to the extent that it is (or to the extent that it enables) self-conscious cognition of reality because of certain niceties of its form and content.

Now, the very thought that music itself, owing to such niceties, could be a fitting instrument for the attainment of robust knowledge of reality under capitalism, is almost too ridiculous for words. The only thing to be done with Adorno's idiosyncratic crypto-socialist-realist theory concerning music's social signification is to provide an etiology of its distinctive theoretical pathology; a reconstruction and defense of the position is out of the question, given that nearly every assertion Adorno makes about music is fruit of the poison methodological branch. Instead of rehabilitating realism by attempting to defend a version of it shorn of Soviet perversions, what we would instead propose to do is to turn the notion of socialist realism on its head so that music *can* be talked about in a "socialist-realist" framework.

A way of doing that which is consistent with what seem like the most basic commitments of Marxian theory, is to ascend from the form and content harbored *within* the artwork to the socio-factual context *encompassing and interpenetrating* the artwork. We must move from music's *Inhalt* to its *Sachzusammenhang*, i.e. the material framework within which the artwork shows up as a knowable, explicable thing. This move can be framed in terms of the questions it impels one to ask. Rather than asking, What is it about the musical artwork's structure or meaning that would allow it to be called "socialist" or "realistic?" one can instead ask "what about the artwork shall we investigate, insofar as we occupy an overall epistemic perspective that deserves to be called "socialist" and "realistic." As it turns out, in a dialectical twist, answering the second, good question permits us to give a kind of answer to the first, bad question. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the theoretical maneuver we are suggesting—one that could be characterized as the sublation of interpretation (of artworks) *by* interpretation (of social contexts as determined by circumstances of production)—is executed by, in the first place, getting back to basics and coming to terms with what Marx and Engels actually said.

Neither Marx nor Engels formulated a mature aesthetic theory. Nevertheless, oftentimes Marxists who want to approach the subject seriously begin with *Marxological* aesthetics. Authors like Mikhail Lifschits (an archivist and researcher at the Moscow's Marx-Engels Institute) and Dave Laing (an arts journalist for the Communist Party of Great Britain's publications) introduce their respective monographs of the subject of Marxist aesthetics with an overview of everything the founding duo wrote about the arts. Given Marx's trajectory of intellectual development from German Idealism through to a thoroughgoing materialism rooted in Ricardian economic theory, this survey is unsurprisingly weighted toward the writings of the young Marx (whose early involvement in the Young German movement saw him publish poetry in a decidedly Romantic vein). What matters most for a historical materialist approach to art is not what Marx himself wrote about art. It is what Marx taught us about, and the tools he gave us for teaching ourselves about, the various societal configurations within which art is produced. Hence we would rather begin with Marxian theory as it is manifest in the theoretical contributions of the mature Marx, the version that appears in the four volumes of *Capital*.

There, Marx presents his theory of capital as a theory of social relations. The capitalist mode of production is what it is by virtue of the way in which individuals stand with respect to one another and with respect to society's wealth. In *Capital*, he is at pains to distinguish this standpoint from a series of naive views. The section in Volume One on the commodity fetish is a case in point. The naive view holds that the value of objects inheres in those objects the way red inheres in the skins of apples. The naïve view isn't stupid. After all, as commodities appear on the market, their costs for the most part attend them as if proper to them. Diamonds *seem* as though they should cost a lot. Costs are moreover impersonal: the going rate for gas doesn't change simply because my tank is empty and I want it to. The correct, scientific view, however, reveals that value is objective in a very different sense. It is an emergent property that supervenes on a set of social relations producers and consumers have entered into, wherein goods are exchanged according to, on average and on the whole, their magnitude of socially necessary labor time (a number of labor hours that are required, in average circumstances, to produce a good of a certain sort). Capitalist relations between buyers and sellers have their basis in a practice of exchange that enforces a "law of value" that abstracts from the concrete labor (*actual* labor, as opposed to average labor) that goes into the production of any given commodity. The naive view fails to correctly interpret things as they actually are, but the interpretation it gives is valid within and *internal* to the social relation that generated the phenomenon in the first place.

A Marxist inquiry into musical reality ought similarly to effect a methodological shift from studying musical "objects" (works, style periods, etcetera) from within a perspective internal to this or that aesthetic ideology or normative hermeneutic system (e.g. Adorno's commitment to interpreting middle Beethoven as, unbeknownst to Beethoven and his audience, providing an organic sound-image of utopia) to studying the actual social relations within which concrete musicking takes place, as well as the conditions for the reproduction of those relations. Music is made and consumed by individuals who have entered into determinate, intersubjective relations with one another, and aspects of music's form and content are not in general, and could not in general be, secrets to be decoded, any more than the meanings of words in a public linguistic practice could be systematically covert. Form and content are just those sensuous and semantic features of artworks that participants in a practice acknowledge as salient to the satisfaction they take therein, some of which features are straightforwardly consequent upon the social relations that subsist within groups of musickers. For example, music made by players whose skilled labor is hired out for the performance of works that are ultimately the property of an intellectual property landlord (a composer), under conditions in which the beat is given to them dictatorially by a boss (a conductor), will not tend to be music that exhibits a palpably *grooved* metrical organization such as is characteristic of music made by an ensemble of improvising soloists who must have recourse to a robustly predictive, communally rather than autocratically managed metrical scheme. So too, the iterative, variative design of a sea shanty, as well as its call-and-response structure, follow from the standing the singers have with respect to one another in the process of making the work song, which typically is accomplished during the making of something else. Investigating music-making through the lens of its own circumstances of production, or that of broader circumstances of production in which it is

embedded, consists in drawing out the implications for form and content of the relevant (historically developing and economically conditioned) social relations.

Of course, for a Marxist, the capitalist mode of production is not just one form of social relation among others, not simply one among many lenses through which this or that cultural product might be glimpsed. Rather, the advent of capital as dynamic process of the self-expansion of value is simply the most important thing that ever happened to us humans. Musical understanding is incomplete to the extent that it is innocent of the ways in which musical events, objects, and institutions institutions and objects have been variously subsumed—and, when not subsumed, nevertheless unavoidably inflected—by this process.

That's a way of being a realist about music. To be a socialist about it, one need only hold realistically-conceived musical practices to be answerable to norms that are distinctively socialistic. That could go any number of ways, and need not debase itself to the level of crass dismissal of anything that isn't a workers chorus (which is not to denigrate the noble genre of workers choruses). It should be uncontroversial to say that there are certain kinds of social relations that socialists of whatever stripe, and most especially Marxist Humanists, wish to see universalized: relations typified by non-alienation, non-coercion, the pleasurable exercise of aptitudes and excellences (from each according to his ability), autonomy, freedom, love, mutuality, and care (to each according to his need). And it should be equally uncontroversial to say that artistic practices, and most especially musical practices, as ensembles of normatively structured interpersonal relations, can do a better or worse job of fostering or instantiating these values.

Values of those sort are the unintended offspring of value of the other sort, value as the iron law regulative of exchange relations. With the advent of self-valorizing value, exchange relations come to subsume an ever expanding number of practices. In the wake of this expansion, previous forms of relation (primarily those of mastery and servitude) appear as relatively unmediated, even natural (in the *Grundrisse*, Marx says that they appear as “nature idolatry”). The new relations of proprietorship and exchange give rise to the socialization of production and the expansion of human capacities. Crucially for Marx, at a certain stage in this process, the mutual indifference of human beings insofar as they are exchanging proprietors gives way to solidarity and the collectivization of production by an ascendant proletariat. The relations that emerge are concretely universal, in that they have reconciled the fact of mutual dependence with the liberty of the individual.

This brings us to our conclusion, which is a modest about what might be a good thing to mean by “socialist realist” used as a predicate that attaches to a *kind of musical practice*. Socialist realist musicking would be a modality of music making that is self-consciously realistic and socialistic *about itself*. Such musicking would be characterized by relations of musical production that are (to the extent capitalism makes possible) socialistic in the above sense, and would take a realist perspective on the material forces that enable or constrain the implementation of those selfsame socialistic musicking relations. These relations would be what they are by virtue of having for themselves (explicitly and not just implicitly) an organizational form that preserved individuality through collective action. While this is not directly a feature of the form or content of the music, it nevertheless can be expected to have formal and contentual consequences. Such an image of a socialist realist music making abandons the idea that music

necessarily *reflects* social realities in its form and content, or necessarily helps to usher in a socialist future in its function. Into its place steps the idea that music *is* a social reality of a certain sort; that it can be a social reality of a certain *desirable* sort; and that it can be known to be so by those who engage in it.