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Title: Points of Unity for a Marxist Musicology

The financial panic of 2008 inaugurated a period of political soul-searching in the United States. It has become increasingly difficult to avoid the conclusion that this nation, and the global capitalist order in which it is a waning but still hegemonic power, is faced with an increasingly widespread and increasingly deep crisis of its mode of production. The tenor of electoral politics in 2016 was marked by a palpable shift in the consensus concerning capitalism's role in the story of human progress: populist economism, anti-neoliberalism, and anti-globalism are now to be found on both sides of the establishment party line. Institutionalized intellectual life, unsurprisingly, has registered the effects of this sea-change. Conferences on Marx and his legacy are now prevalent. Documentary films have been made on the subject of a Marx revival among intellectuals¹ as have fictionalized biopics about Marx² The most widely-read economics text of the last decade, Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Belknap 2013), was compelled to pay homage in its very title to Marx's magnum opus (notwithstanding Piketty's rejection of Marxist methodology and in spite of the modest social-democratic and redistributive nature of Piketty's policy proposals).

The uncontroversial and ideologically minimal view that capitalism itself is an important analytical and explanatory category, a perspective that has lurked the margins of the discipline of musicology at least since the astute but unjustly neglected interventions of the so-called "Alberta School,"³ is now commonplace in our musical corner of the intellectual world. It underlies Robin James's recent invitation to hear contemporary music with an ear to the incursions of neoliberalism into the sonic realm.⁴ It informs a spate of recent engagements with Marxian economics and sociology on the part of musicologists and music theorists.⁵ And, not infrequently, acknowledgment of the analytical utility of the category of capitalist production gives way, as it does in Marx's writings, to condemnation of capitalism.

¹ For example, *Marx Reloaded* (2011) and several recent feature-length films featuring extended commentary by Slavoj Žižek.

² For example, *The Young Karl Marx* (2017)

³ See Regula B. Qureshi (ed.), *Music and Marx* (Routledge, 2002).

⁴ See Robin James, *Resilience and Melancholy: Pop Music, Feminism, Neoliberalism* (Zero Books, 2015).

⁵ See, e.g., Sumanth Gopinath *The Ringtone Dialectic: Economy and Social Form* (MIT Press 2013) and Eric Drott, *Music and the Elusive Revolution: Cultural Politics and Political Culture in France, 1968-1981* (University of California Press, 2011).

Such critique can be heard to echo, for instance, in the unsparing negativity of James Currie's plea for a "no-music."⁶

In light of this Left turn, we feel that the time is propitious for a more formal stock-taking of "radical" musicology. What, we might ask, is living and what is dead in the broadly Marxist musicological project? What could and should a full-blooded historical-materialist musicology look like? In what follows, we outline six theses that can serve at least to clarify, if not fully answer, these questions. Each thesis states and elaborates on what we believe to be an uncontentious truths that can serve as a point of unity, or article of confederation, in the attempt to form a tendency within the field of musicology that is committed to implementing what Lukács calls "orthodox Marxism." As he writes in his seminal essay, "What is Orthodox Marxism,"

*"Orthodox Marxism...does not imply the uncritical acceptance of the results of Marx's investigations. It is not the 'belief' in this or that thesis, nor the exegesis of a 'sacred' book. On the contrary, orthodoxy refers exclusively to method. It is the scientific conviction that dialectical materialism is the road to truth and that its methods can be developed, expanded and deepened only along the lines laid down by its founders."*⁷

We submit these theses as a means of articulating a Marxian perspective from which to judge the musicological landscape--for Marxism of any sort involves a meticulous sifting of one's theoretical patrimony--and in order to pinpoint a possible, provisional basis upon which to build a coherent historical materialist program in music studies.

1. Historical materialist musicology is both a politico-ethical theory and an empirical science. It is *not* a non-interventionist sociology that is content to leave its object of theorization unchanged by its activity of theorization. And it does not make contact with, except to criticize, a post-Nietzschean tradition that indicts "instrumental reason," precise calculation, and formally valid reasoning as irredeemably diabolical instruments of capitalist consolidation and oppression (contra Adorno and Horkheimer). By saying this, we mean to unpoetically enunciate something Ernst Bloch said more figuratively when he contrasted Marxism's "cold stream" with its "warm stream," which he believed to be complementary and equally indispensable currents. This conceit is conveys the idea that historical materialism aspires to be both action-guiding and action-precipitating, and that its prescriptive and motivating force (its warm stream) is never to be uncoupled from a scientific effort to soberly and accurately assess how the world in fact is (the cold stream), i.e. to understand how society's productive and reproductive operations are channelized by what Marx called "real abstractions": labor forms, money forms,

⁶ James Currie, *Music and the Politics of Negation* (Indiana University Press, 2012).

⁷ <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lukacs/works/history/orthodox.htm>

property forms, state forms, and so on. To succinctly state what we understand to be a pivotal historical-materialist precept: it is necessary to accurately interpret the world in order to be efficacious in changing it, and accurate interpretation depends upon the existence of an objective class interest in its being changed (hence Lukács's and Trotsky's frequent references to a prospective, non-ideological "proletarian science"). The application of this tenet to the special case of music and its study is straightforward, at least in its programmatic outlines: musical practices (conceived in the broadest possible sense) are potential and perhaps essential contributors to the culture-building operations that must of needs accompany the effort to build mass, majoritarian support for the dismantling of capitalism. Succinctly, if somewhat jargonistically: the process of building what Enrique Dussel calls "the consensus of the poor" by conquering what Gramsci calls "hegemony" will be a process with countless musical reverberations. And, moreover, an informed approach to this synthesis of the musical and the political must set its sights on a truly scientific and systematic understanding of how both music and capitalism matter-of-factly work.

Few musicologists today will reflexively repudiate the idea that music and musicology might be part of an interventionist or activist agenda. There is little blasphemy left in talking politics at AMS, as Susan McClary might have put it.⁸ Indeed the now common post-positivist, liberal-progressive view would appear to be that it is certainly allowable, and much of the time praiseworthy, for academic research to overtly endeavor to have directly socially beneficial consequences (e.g. the repatriation of imperialistically confiscated cultural objects, or the remuneration of hyper-exploited subaltern musical commodity producers). Even more common is the sentiment that scholarship of whatever sort should evince, and should attempt to inculcate in its readers, a politically ecumenical (within the boundaries staked out by a basically establishmentarian "left-of-center" creed) multiculturalist anti-eurocentrism.

These and similar scholarly ambitions are not to be rejected out of hand. But the Marxist must judge them based on an assessment of their potential for contributing to the project that is by Marxist lights paramount: that of coming to understand, in order to harness, music's capacity for fostering class consciousness amongst the constituency of the collective "subject-object of history"--i.e. the working classes and others dependent on the wage fund for their subsistence.

Marxist scholarship, if it is to be something over and above materialist sociology, must embody an overarching commitment to the adoption of cultural (among other) means to an economic end: communism. And, in appropriate dialectical fashion, communism is itself understood as a material means (in the form of universal abundance and prosperity) to a cultural end (the self-realization and flourishing of the socially-integrated, morally precious individual). The Marxist musicologist's mandate to draw distinctions between progressive and nonprogressive scholarly interventions is a discriminative task that extends as well to all forms of music-making (all actions that produce and reproduce musical culture). Musicology in the Marxist mode proceeds from the evaluative postulate that some musical practices (or some features of

⁸ What is this a reference to?

thereof), some ways of musically being in the world, are more conducive to the emancipation of the “universal class” than others. This assessment needn’t be crassly instrumental or voluntarist, as it would be if it claimed that only agitprop music, workers’ choruses, and protest songs deserve the imprimatur of the Left. A more nuanced question than “what good can music do to galvanize the labor movement (not that this is a terrible question) is “what would a good overall musical culture be like?”, where our sense of what constitutes cultural *goodness* is animated by both a totalizing vision of a possible future condition of radical human freedom (and music’s involvement therein), and also by a preparedness here and now to take the measures necessary (however incipient or incremental they appear) to ultimately realize that vision. These measures might well be connected in the present moment with an attempt to cobble together, and thereafter hold together, a transitional culture--which, again, one can expect to have a musical dimension--that is both insurrectionary vis-à-vis the capitalist mode of production and collectivist with respect to its internal constitution and self-representation.

II. Marxist musicology is not faced with a choice between Eastern and Western currents. Since the dissolution of the Second International, the Marxist tradition has been riven by the legacy of the Russian Revolution. In the US, the Cold War set the parameters of discussion on Marx and socialist culture within academia. In our moment, however, we would do well to dispense with any such anachronistic template. Historical materialism has no internal compass that points east or west. And certainly the adoption of the historical-materialist standpoint should not be taken as an implicit endorsement or exculpation of self-described Communist regimes of the past or present (although it might help us say much that is interesting and relevant about them). Crucially for musicology, the fact that historical materialism is in no sense in the business of Stalinist (or Maoist or Castroist or Titoist) apologetics means that it can unapologetically help itself to the insights of theorists who labored under, or even sympathized with, those bureaucratically distorted workers’ states, or state-capitalist autocracies, or whatever one wishes to call them.

In addition, the moment is long overdue for an upending of the assumption that a “Western,” critical, normative, undogmatic, cultural, politically unblemished, young-Marx Marxism can reasonably be opposed to an “Eastern” naturalistic, legalistic, reductive, politically subservient, old-Engels Marxism. This distinction never really carved the theoretical landscape at its joints, though the binarism itself was ideologically reflective of a real geopolitical division. In any case, ours is no longer a historical conjuncture in which it matters very much on which side of the iron curtain a particular contribution to historical materialism arose. Present exigencies (among which is the need to know the *truth* about a natural and social world open to human intervention is the only basis for selecting which theoretical paradigms to exploit and develop as we move forward.

As a result of political pigeonholing, as noted earlier, much music scholarship in the historical materialist tradition has simply gone unread. Ripe for unearthing, curation, and analytical reconstruction are the musicological arguments of such figures as János

Maróthy, whose masterpiece, *Music of the Bourgeois; Music of the Proletarian*, remains one of the most ambitious and sustained accounts of music history from a politically committed Marxist perspective. On our side of the pond, the work of Sidney Finkelstein represents the most important American contribution to this workerist literature. (Finkelstein's writings on jazz and American popular genres formed the basis for Maróthy's insights on the subject.) And, of course, there is the better-known but still neglected oeuvre of Georg Knepler, a student of Adler and a life-long communist cultural worker, much of whose prolific output remains untranslated. A handful of other names could be added to this list, and there is no doubt a treasure-trove of East German and Soviet musicological literature that needs to be recovered. In other words, there is something like a tradition that awaits inheriting. On top of this, while it is true that critiquing bourgeois methods and presuppositions is an important exercise (carried out most assiduously in music studies by Henry Klumpenhouwer and James Curries), an equally important task is a positive one: that of appropriating and building upon the achievements of non-Marxist scholarship. Without Ricardo there is no Marx, and without the New Musicology there is no Marxist music scholarship. Or, to place historical materialism in dialogue with a very recent development: historical-materialist musicology, if it is going to take its "materialist" label seriously, cannot afford to ignore Gary Tomlinson's latest work on music and evolution. Historical materialist musicology must be latitudinarian in its attempts to build a case for itself, and must remain open to good-faith debate about its methods, while also remaining uncompromising and forthright about its distinctive political aims.

III. Marxist musicology is not *Ideengeschichte*. With much important scholarship on Soviet and East German music history developing in the field, it is important to distinguish being a historical materialist musicologist from being a historian of ideas. The aim of a historical materialist musicology is not principally that of narrating the story of how socialist ideology gets mapped onto musical theory and practice during what Hobsbawm calls the "short 20th century." Its broader concern is with the social totality and the way it parses itself into holistic, functionally articulated, semi-autonomous, historically determined spheres of activity. Thus an image of a vast network of interrelated musical practices--"musicking" full stop, as Christopher Small's pioneering work allows us to say--and a correlate notion of how the musical lifeworld, all told, is embedded in and inseparable from a social totality whose dominant and defining feature is a form of economic organization, serves as a kind of regulative ideal for Marxist musicology. This methodological postulate orients its necessarily systematic and (in a neutral, non-Althusserian sense) structuralist inquiry.

This does not mean that a Marxist musicology (by virtue of some specious commitment to a materialism indistinguishable from naive, unreflective naturalism) is not interested in concepts, or in the individual and unique human agents who possess concepts, or in autonomous and morally assessable actions performed in accordance with concepts. After all, the dialectical relationship between forces and relations of production--which Marx understands to be at least one of the keys to unlocking "the laws of motion" of modern society--links concrete, embodied human practices quite

closely to the ways of thinking that reflect, structure and guide those practices. Furthermore, the Marxist concern with ideology differs from its idealist counterparts precisely in recognizing the mutual imbrication of, on the one hand, conceptuality itself and, on the other hand, the practices of making--the varieties of labor--through which concepts both enter the world and react back upon it. Wilfrid Sellars famously identified possession of a concept with mastery of the use of a word. Marx might have identified it with mastery of a rational process in which a tool is used to bring into existence a desire-satisfying thing.

IV. Music is Normative. Musical practices are what they are by virtue of the norms that they embody and express. Understanding what a musical practice is means understanding that and how it is a purposive, conceptually-guided way of doing something. It also means understanding the material conditions that resulted in some collection of practice-constituting norms being authoritative for some community, used by the community in organizing and assessing its practices. The authority of certain musical norms, we take it, derives in part from those norms that govern production generally.

To make this point clearer, let's look at things for a moment through a wide-angle lens. The capitalist mode of production systematically abstracts from the use(fulness) of the commodity-objects it produces. It does this by treating all useful objects as equivalent insofar as they are bearers of exchange value (which measures how much human labor entered into their production). The defining end of capitalist production is profit maximization, at the level of the firm, such that the system is only incidentally concerned with the creation and distribution of use-values. Under capitalism, use-values are, and can only be, mere ontological pegs upon which to hang price tags. Capitalism is thus not at all structurally concerned with addressing urgent human needs or of promoting individual or collective wellbeing. Instead, commodities are produced, as it were, for their own sake. Exchange value is its own justification, accumulation its own rationale. We can see a perfectly literal illustration of the phenomenon of production for production's sake by noticing the astonishingly large proportion of the economy's activity that is given over to the production of means of production, which are used to produce means of production, which are used to produce means of production, and so on. (Andrew Kliman gives the example of iron being mined to create metal that is made into machines that are used in the iron mine.) It is not all fanciful to claim that the spread of the capitalist regime made generally available to capitalism's human executors (capitalists and workers) the concept of rational, productive activity that serves no purpose beyond itself, as well as the related concept of a system imperative that makes no essential reference to subjective preference satisfaction. Nor is it surprising that art-making would subsequently be drawn into this conceptual force-field. Art-productive practices, succumbing like everything else to capitalism's inexorable march across history and geography, come to be abstracted from social use and purpose, in various ways at various stages of capitalist development. The *Fruhromantik* aesthetics of musical ineffability, 19th-century musical absolutism and organicism, art for art's sake in its various manifestations, and 20th-century dodecaphony (with its ostentatious repudiation of the aesthetics of pleasure), are all normative practices (forms of

musicking constituted and defined by constellations of rule-following behaviors) whose genetic similarity is traceable to the capitalist economic form and the norms encoded in and made authoritative by it.

XI. Marxism is a Humanism. One goal of historical-materialist musicology that should not be overlooked is that of specifying the preconditions for a more human (perhaps, finally fully human) mode of music making. In our own capitalist society, music making is deeply influenced by the productive relations that predominate in a (global, pervasively commodified) world system. Accordingly, a substantial proportion of the musicking that goes on among us is either directly for the sake of commodity production or has no identifiable *raison d'être* apart from the reproduction of labor power that will later be expended in some other kind of toil that is generative of surplus value. As a result, music always to some extent appears to us as a “great heap of commodities” to be consumed rather than as, or rather than *exclusively* as, a participatory form of self-realization that expresses the values of ethical *Gemeinschaft* while also affirming the dignity of the individual subject. The Hegelian-Romantic conviction that it can and ought to fulfill this latter function should be paired with a materialist assessment of the circumstances under which it could do so: just as the right kind of musicking can help to make possible the supersession of capitalism, the supersession of capitalism will for the first time make possible a form of music making that is consonant with our species being. Hence “utopian” speculation about a “perfect” (non-alienated, fully free) form of musicking, which is of course inseparable from an unsparing critique of all that musically exists, lies very entirely within the scope of historical-materialist musicology.

XI. Marxist musicology is a suicidal endeavor. The Marxist musicological program is ultimately and self-consciously self-undermining, in two senses. First, the historical materialist project, if it is rigorous in following out its own implications, necessarily transcends and subsumes specific disciplines and specializations. A Marxist intellectual cannot be a Weberian *Fachmensch*. Accordingly, there could be no authentically Marxist project in the domain of musicology that did not ultimately explode disciplinary boundaries. This is an immediate upshot of a methodological holism that insists that phenomena cannot be understood in isolation, owing to the nature of both phenomena and understanding. Opposed to this holism is a notion of *interdisciplinarity* that understands the relationship between fields as one of dialogue, mutual recognition, and maybe mutual aid between distinct and perhaps oppositional formations (akin to liberal capitalism’s notion of the relationship between what it calls “interest groups”). Historical materialism, which is not so much interdisciplinary as anti-disciplinary, is enriched by extending its boundaries so as to encompass musicology, but in so doing it must in effect abrogate musicology as a disciplinary silo.

Marxist musicology is self-undermining in a second sense. Marxism seeks the abolition of social classes and the annulment of people’s alienation from the social product. It is only in a class society that it is either conceivable or desirable that there be a special coterie of professional music experts--petty proprietors of specialist musical

knowledge—whose activity usually transpires at a significant level of institutional removal from most of society's institutions of musical production. This is not to say that the very category of musical knowledge is merely a symptom and product of a violent, exploitative capitalist society. After all, as Guido Adler reminded us long ago, musicology is in some sense as old as human music making itself, and may in fact predate the phenomenon of class. Knowledge *per se* is neither sinister nor suspect (despite Foucault's darkly anti-Marxist characterization of it); proprietary knowledge vested in an intellectual caste is the thing to dislike. The point is that the distinctively historical-materialist acquisition of musical knowledge, insofar as it is pursued within the academy, must initially transpire within an institutional framework whose artificial borders it is bound to violate and whose economic substratum it is pledged to annihilate.