

Instruments of Music Theory Conference
Rochester, NY
November 2017

On the Timeliness of a Marxist Organology

In a footnote to his discussion of manufacture by machinery in the first volume of *Capital*, Karl Marx notes that the history of the industrial revolution had yet to achieve scientific rigor. He writes that

A critical history of technology would show how little any of the inventions of the eighteenth century are the work of a single individual. [...] Does not the history of the productive organs of man in society, of organs that are the material basis of every particular organization of society, deserve equal attention? [...] Technology reveals the active relation of man to nature, the direct process of the production of his life, and thereby it also lays bare the process of the production of the social relations of his life, and of the mental conceptions that follow from those relations.

Marx makes clear throughout the unfailingly humanist text of *Capital* that by ‘life’ he means more than the maintenance of a heartbeat. Rather, it refers to the whole of our metabolism with nature as social animals, predicated as this self-sustenance is on the preservation of an elaborately fashioned social and institutional world, one that we are compelled to continuously reproduce if we are to sustain a recognizably human, and not merely mammalian, mode of existence. Since music making is clearly a pervasive part of the reproduction of humanity by humanity, we as musicologists can see ourselves as implicitly addressed by Marx’s programmatic suggestion. This recommends a revisitation of the musicological sub-discipline of organology, not in spite of but precisely because of its apparently anachronistic and apparently anti-humanist techno-centrism. More on this point momentarily.

One thing to want from a return to organology is something scholars such as Alex Rehding have already found there: new resources for describing the dialectical unification of the spheres of the ideal and the material, the subject and the object, as these mutually condition one another in and through the music-theoretical act—an act in which, as Rehding says, an instrument can become both a “materialized theory” and an “epistemic thing.” This is not an insignificant or un-Marxian thing to want from organology.

But organology might also be the object of a more grandiose, and more brazenly Marxist, desire. This is the desire for—not to put too fine a point on it—a mediating link between, on the one hand, concrete, embodied musical practices as productive, metabolic domains of human activity and, on the other, large-scale supra-individual world-historical processes that work themselves out in keeping with their own immanent logic of development and self-propulsion. Organology, then, would tell us how music is material insofar as it is historical and historical insofar as it is material.

If this *desideratum* is taken as a starting point, then the repurposing of organology for historical-materialist ends will involve, as its first order of business, a broadening of the concept of the musical instrument so that it extends to any enabling device or method whatsoever that enters into the production of music. A musical “instrument,” in this intentionally promiscuous usage of the term, would thus include many implements that don’t get “played,” such as a score, a baton, a microphone, a sound mixer, a metronome, a concert hall. It would also include what Anthony Giddens calls “paratechnical relations,” meaning, roughly, techniques for configuring and coordinating the activities of laborers within the framework of a particular division of labor. Thus fauxbourdon (a method of rationalizing improvisation), the ritornello form in Baroque music and jazz (a method of rationalizing formal patterning), and the usual manner of arranging the players of the symphony orchestra (a managerial standardization of a method of optimizing musical workflows), are “instruments” in this sense. The Marxian phrase “forces of production,” with its deliberate ambiguity about what sorts of endogenous factors shape and provide impetus to the productive process, might at this point be introduced as a usefully open-ended piece of technical terminology.

Marx completes and supersedes Hegel by showing that the historical dynamic that Hegel locates in the realm of “spirit” is not spurious, but is instead mislocated. This is the substance of Marx’s boast that he discovered the “rational kernel within the mystical shell of Hegel’s dialectic.” Marx’s monumental sociological achievement was his demonstration that the engine of history is an empirically observable *social form*--namely, the accumulation of value--and that the basic trajectory of human social development in the modern era is accurately seen as the coming-to-be of the causal consequences that flow from the inner dynamics of this social form.

The first volume of Marx’s *Capital* is a derivation of the nature of this social form of value production from an analysis of both the historical record and the most reliable contemporary economic data. *Capital*’s second and third volumes deduce the implications of this structure and thus generate a range of testable hypotheses about how value production can be expected to transform itself, and its participants, as it matures. The fundamental transformation Marx hypothesizes is the society-wide attainment of a level of technological sophistication that allows for drastically increased average material productivity (i.e. commodity units, or “use values” produced per unit of time), which allows ultimately for the mass replacement of human labor with automated labor, i.e. the substitution of machines for bodies. The major subsidiary transformations that he saw as ancillary to and embedded in this fundamental transformation had to do with (1) the formation and development of a societal fissure that articulates and institutes oppositional divisions between two main classes of people (those who do, and those who do not, control value production), and (2) and a persistent tendency toward a reduction in the rate of profit (i.e. units of value produced per unit of value invested) of the average capitalist firm.

The Marxist musicological tradition by and large took on board the paradigm of an intrinsically directional dynamic of historical movement. Marxists saw the goal of a historical-materialist science of music as that of illustrating how the history of music is incorporated into the sweeping narrative trajectories characteristic of the Marxist ordering of the past.

But many attempts to specify the exact mechanism that embeds music in history's directional dynamic have been hand-wavy in the extreme, or fly in the face of basic scruples about explanatory adequacy. For instance, Janos Marothy, in *Music and the Bourgeois, Music and the Proletarian*, attempts to yoke musical developments to the directional dynamic of the capitalistic modern era by correlating music and capitalism at the level of, respectively, style and class. Specifically, he argues that the unifying link is a certain formal analogy between musical genres that exhibit symmetry and repetition and forms of consciousness that are appropriate to--and that emerge historically with--the advent of social classes in capitalist society:

The formal principles [of symmetry and recapitulation] do not merely coincide chronologically with the emergence of the commodity producer's consciousness...but they also have a causal connection with it. The same 'egocentric' view of the world which led, for instance, to the 'picture-frame stage' and to monocentric perspective in painting and which, among the common musical categories, has given pre-eminence to song, is also responsible for the world-concept in music in which musical expression became monocentric.

Pruned of its ponderous jargon, this pretty much says: the existence of *da capo* arias is explained by (and is perhaps impossible without) the existence of something called a "bourgeois worldview." And the evidentiary basis for this claim is that *da capo* arias and the bourgeois worldview are putatively similar in structure. Marothy's theoretical gamble is that a supposed *homology* between class-based worldview and a specific musical genre can do serious explanatory work. Thus is music's *stylistic* history represented as being audibly determined by a key feature of the development of value production, namely, the fact that, with the development of this historically specific social practice, "Society as a whole [splits] up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other — Bourgeoisie and Proletariat," with, allegedly, distinctive and mutually exclusive worldviews.

Criticizing a claim like this in detail is unnecessary; its preposterousness and sociological glibness speaks for itself. Marothy's whole book reads like a desperate attempt to find something sufficiently Marxist-sounding to say about the history of musical style, as though the need to strike a tone of orthodoxy outweighed the need to speak the truth (which may well have been the case under Hungary's Soviet-installed quasi-Stalinist regime). Here, method is clearly an albatross around the neck of explanation.

This is both curious and unfortunate, given that there is a patently fruitful and rewarding way of bringing Marxist insights to bear on the history of music and its styles. In short, Marx's genealogy of value production tells us how and why technology develops as it does. And the migration of various technologies into the realm of musical production--which typically but not

always proceeds as an exogenous application of innovations and apparatuses that originate elsewhere in the economy--is a major determinant, perhaps the prime determinant, of the way in which musical lives are led at a given historical juncture. Marxist musicology heretofore has succumbed to the enchantments of the superstructure--it has dwelt in the lush garden of musical meaning and expression, the constitution of subjectivity, modes of awareness, and allegory (music as a symbolization of history, rather than an effect of history)--but has regrettably neglected the base.

A properly Marxist musical organology would allow us to track the co-development of both music's productive forces and their appertaining social relations. It also grants us valuable insight into the manner in which the mode of production (the productive forces as implemented within specific relations of production) shape musical experience and conceptuality. This is to say that the superstructure is not to be ignored--but it must be accorded its proper place in the order of explanation.

For a case in point, consider the emergence of music printing in the commercial centers of Europe, especially Venice, around the turn of the sixteenth century. The introduction of print technology into the heart of musical life--the consequences for the spread of musical literacy were of course momentous--followed from the creation by the for-profit book publishing industry and a market for music books. Even today, the history of music printing remains focused on the intellectual virtues of individual inventors, such as Ottavio Petrucci. More relevant than biographical minutia, however, is the existence and structure of a social form - a market economy - in which ingenuity is incentivized as a source of super-profits derived from a monopolistic market share. Ottavio Petrucci, for example, did indeed perfect a three-press technique that had been carried out with less success by others before him. But this achievement only takes on historical significance in the framework of an already up-and-running system of value production. Had Archimedes invented moveable music type, this would probably have been a historical dead-end rather than a revolutionary moment.

Petrucci secured privileges that afforded him an exaggerated rate of profit. His own capital and that of partners was thrown into production for the sake of appropriating surplus value produced by wage-laborers. His firm acquired presses, type, ink, paper and the other materials necessary for production at a cost that was then transferred to the value of the finished book. In addition, the firm took on labor costs, both in the form of housing and board for indentured *garzoni* and in the form of wages for press workers. The books were then sold below their ultimate market value to retailers (in which many publishers in the sixteenth century also had capital wrapped up) who would realize the final value of the book at the point of sale, transferring ownership of the article to a consumer, on as open a market as one could find in Europe at that time. Swindles aside, profit in the industry were derived from the difference between the value-added of labor and share paid to labor. Petrucci's industry was, then, straightforwardly exploitative in Marx's sense and is a clear instance of vinctuated productive

capacity and productive relation. When the printing business became unprofitable for him later in life, Petrucci, like any other capitalist might have, invested in a paper mill.

Marx distinguished between what he called 'real' and 'formal' subsumption of production under the capitalist mode. Formal subsumption occurs when a given merchant firm incorporates production into its enterprise. Real subsumption entails alterations in the technical and organizational parameters of production to meet the needs of profit maximization imposed by the form of inter-firm warfare that is engendered by competitive capitalist social relations. Music printing in Venice and beyond in the sixteenth century was determined by this real subsumption. Indeed, the musical press was itself an innovation of efficiency. The pristine, thrilling quality evident in Petrucci's first books gradually declined over the course of his publishing career. Three impressions became two. Pierre Attaignant, who received the first privilege to publish music in France, a boon that turned him into a proper Parisian bourgeois, printed pages with a single impress. His development did not augment the use-value of the book. Indeed, the printed page was significantly less clear and pristine. But since it was much less labor intensive, the French developments quickly spread across Europe and resulted in a general development of social productive forces in this realm. The decline in quality that resulted from the new model crystallized the social meaning of the emergent musical commodity.

The increase in productive efficiency and the development of a market for musical publications were both sea-changes in European musical life, but were arguably not the most profound. More fundamentally, the musical object being produced attained a new status in its industrial commodity form. The social need that it met was no longer particular, but general. Long before music printing commenced (and long after), music was committed to paper and ink on a commission basis. The intended user was fully imbricated in the fabric of a communal practice that reproduced some determinate aspect of social life. The use-value of printed music, however, was of a different kind. This music responded to a general social need. Its production was not at all for the sake of the *consumption* of music but rather for the valorization of value invested; the capitalist music publisher cares only that people buy his publications, and not about what they do with them. Since records from book shops that sold music in this period were imperfectly preserved, we know relatively little about who the actual consumers of printed music were in this period. However, records that do survive paint a picture of a market with a great deal of internal variety. Sales records from the late sixteenth century show polyphonic music bought by so different a set of customers as a customs official and a leather-worker. (Incidentally, the leather-worker bought the more learned compositions.) At least some of these purchases must have been for the sake of owning a fancy object that could serve as a store of value or a mark of luxury, rather than as a musical tool. And the fact that the music books that sat on shelves unsold were eventually used (as one source tells us) to wrap groceries, evinces the kind of status these objects sometimes held with respect to human need.

The progressive development of productive forces in Marx hardly represents straightforwardly “positive” growth, in an ethical sense. Every so-called advance contains a negative seed. As he famously puts it in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*:

“At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or—this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms—with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure.”

The transformation brought about by the subsumption of musical publication under the capitalist mode of production socialized music writing and helped to democratize music literacy. In printing, the notes on the page completed their evolution from pneumatic to sign. Additionally, the mechanical structure of the presses themselves was determined by a division of labor. The development of music publication has followed a path laid out for it by the social relations of production under which it is made.

One can see the historical culmination of accelerating productive efficiency in publication in the digital music file, the reproduction cost of which is so low as to militate against the profitability of the very system that “manufactures” them. Since labor is the only source of value, the social consequence of the competitive drive for maximized profits through the development of the forces of production is a decline in the overall rate of profit in the system as a whole. Indeed, the technological revolution in music publication is part and parcel of a general crisis of profitability our own capitalism is experiencing right now.

To conclude: a Marxian progressivist approach to the explanation of musical phenomena prompts us to ask how musical production might transcend the social relations that spurred its teleological development in the first place. We are invited to imagine what musical organs are proper to a form of music making which retains the socialization of production, but which brings that production under the rational control of a society of freely associated musickers. Our musical existence is largely passive, because heavily--indeed oppressively--conditioned by organs of telecommunication that lead to an almost universal musical deskilling. Will truly free humans settle for musical lives like ours?