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Robert Walker

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Is there a better song to sing?

ROBERT WALKER
University of New South Wales

The rise of a popular music business in the 1950s which exploited and titillated feelings and desires rather than encouraging reflection and critical examination of them was fuelled by two major contributory factors: the extraordinary ability of the electronic entertainment media to get the message across immediately and extensively, and the materially indulgent attitudes towards teenagers¹ of an older generation cruelly suppressed by economic depression and unemployment in the 1930s and emotionally damaged by the horrors of the 2nd World War (Green, 1988 and 1999; MacInnes 1959).

Thus the crucial sociological shift which, as Nicholas Cook clearly intimates, was eventually to affect the academic study of music, began in the 1950s. The social and moral lives of young people in the immediate post-war years were largely channeled through the church and its ex-cathedra social activities. The only challenge to the church youth club for the secular minds and bodies of the young in the early 1950s was the emergence of coffee bars. Now, the acid house and all-night rave parties represent normal activities for many young people, and popular music has so many individualised styles that any attempt at establishing a taxonomy is out of date before it has been compiled. The enormous amounts of money which young people have at their disposal first became targets of big business during the 1950s (Green, 1999). Music is now one of biggest businesses of all, and the boy or girl next door can become the next "pop" music mega-star in a matter of days or weeks. It is a world where the western classical musical canon jostles for attention in the market place with the latest teenage "pop" sensation, and where classical concert performers, particularly females, sell their musical prowess through visual displays of their sexuality. The academy, in such a context, might be dismissed as something of an irrelevance or, as Cook points out citing Lydia Goehr, the entrance to the museum of historical works.

(1) The 1950s was also the age of youth revolt against the controlling attitudes of society toward youth. Many plays, films, and novels of the time depict dominating parents pitted against emotionally repressed youth. The indulgence was mostly material.

This brings me to what I consider to be a main issue implicit in and certainly integral to Nicholas Cook's text, but not one he addresses directly. It is encapsulated in the question "Is there a better song to sing?", a question central to the character of Rita in Willie Russell's play *Educating Rita*. In a world where entertainment is both the medium and the message, Willie Russell's play and film poses a question which is important to the scholarly enterprise of musicology and indeed to the *raison d'être* of contemporary music education. If we in the academy have nothing to teach anyone about reasons for one piece of music being better than another, then why are we in the academy? And why do we need it? A sense of its potential irrelevance can perhaps be detected in the increasing tendency of psychological researchers in music to investigate and categorise the musical choices people make and the situations in which they are made, rather than attempt to deal with the reasons why. Literary and dramatic forms may possibly be able to address the why issue more effectively than can empirical research in that the question demands self interrogation; something alien to the commercial enterprise.

This is the source of my suggestion that Willie Russell's play be regarded as a form of research, or at least social comment, as well as entertainment. Rita is a working class girl feeling out of place among her family and friends, and perhaps subconsciously aware of the lingering remnants of 19th century self-help movements, she has the idea that there are better things to do in life than spending her time drinking in the pub singing bad songs and getting pregnant. She goes to the academy in an attempt to find a "better song to sing". What she finds at first is a cynical and mostly drunken lecturer of English literature who, with a nouveau 1960s mindset, suggests that she stay as she is, "pure working class", and not contaminate the class qualities she wants to escape from with the "fabrications" of the academy. Interestingly, the play is set at a time when the academy still studied literature rather than theories about literature as it does now.

Although Cook does not mention class, the foundations of critical theory in this century relative to the arts and humanities lie in socio-economic theories about class barriers (Eagleton, 1990). Post-structural theory from France was as much about the problems of communication and interpretation between different social classes as anything. And Richard Hoggart (1957) pointed out that not only did the working classes have perfectly useful ways of using English, but also that these ways had an integrity all their own, albeit quite different from those of the educated middle classes. By the 1960s, with "swinging London" setting the tone in the English speaking world, a revolution against the middle classes and all they stood for had begun (Green, 1999). Today, the academy, is still seen as a middle class, predominantly male bastion, and some commentators now make claims for an academically recognised equality of expressive merit across all forms of communication. Simon Frith (1996), for example, argues convincingly that the so-called masses in their attraction to popular music in all its varied forms, display intuitive and untutored critical facilities which are as

sophisticated as anything found in the academy. If true, this renders Kerman's (1985) call to musicology more a lament at a funeral than a clarion heralding renewal.

But the situation is more complex than simply one of democratic recognition and accessibility. The academy in the immediate post-war years was inextricably bound up with the idea of middle classness, as was the classical canon (Frith, 1996; Eagleton, 1990; Small, 1998). Society was class-ridden: Anglicans (middle class), versus methodists (working class); grammar schools (middle class) versus secondary modern then comprehensive schools (working class), and so on. Willie Russell's working class Rita eventually realises that the middle class full-time students she is forced to compete with are little better than she is academically, once their facade has been penetrated. Here, Russell suggests that class is no barrier to academic excellence, merely an obfuscation by personal style. The price of such penetration, however, is that Rita loses her working class ways and adopts middle class pretensions such as a liking for Mahler and the adoption of a middle class name. Rita ends up academically successful but socially and emotionally lost. The price of her success is that she belongs neither to the working class of her birth nor to the middle classes of the academy she has adopted. Russell, portraying the language of critical enquiry in the academy as class-ridden rather than truth seeking focusses, like Cook, on the way in which our background and self esteem affect the ways in which we think and talk about literature and music.

The emergence of influential ways of thinking and talking about music outside the academy fed into a politically charged atmosphere where female and working class opinions of either gender were seen as being systematically excluded from the academy. The scholarly enterprise thus becomes submerged in gender and class warfare where knowledge and truth claims are essentially political, and in scholarly texts it becomes almost obligatory to write, as Nicholas Cook does, about the "shit hitting the fan", the "sexuality" of female pop stars, the male oppression explicit in performances of 19th century German lieder, Beethoven's musical bonking and Schubert's homosexual harmonies, as well as confessing that "there are times when music of the classical symphonic tradition does not quite ring true to me. Increasingly it seems to me that there is something a bit forced in Brahms' symphonies [...] at one moment they sound too noisily bombastic with their parade-ground rhythms, and the next moment too self indulgently sentimental" (Cook, p. 51/47).

It is only a short step to admitting that we have no way to tell the difference between a song written specially for marketing the Spice Girls and one written by a 19th century composer inspired by "old fashioned" theories of aesthetic elegance and moral value. The ideals of Matthew Arnold's high seriousness and a morally justifiable aesthetic propounded by Kant, Hegel, Goethe, Schiller, etc. are consigned to the mausoleum, and songs which are thought to have been inspired by such ideals are reinterpreted in the political academic language of the late 20th century. In which case, of course, there is little for Rita or anyone else to learn in the academy

about value and she and everyone else might just as well stay in the pub for there are no better songs to sing. Yet in addition to the class issue and Kerman's criticism of an over emphasis on structural theory, based on the Beethoven myth, I would suggest that the comparative lack of attention to 20th century art music in the music academy and psychological research literature is at least an equally serious problem.

20TH CENTURY ART MUSIC — THE PARIAH OF THE MUSIC ACADEMY

It is indeed ironic that the academy can now include Beatles' songs in analysis classes and research reports, but still not Berio's vocal music. The energy of the world of popular music was eventually greeted in the academy by a nostalgic recognition that some musical elements in "pop" songs had affinities with past musical glories in "art" music. Cook gives scant attention to 20th century "art" music as opposed to popular music; references to the latter appear at roughly twice the rate of those to the former in the Index. Unfortunately, this precludes him from mounting a case for the early entry of music into the deconstruction game, actually pre-dating the semiotically based arguments of the French structuralists by half a century and effectively debunking the Beethoven myth before the 1st World War.

The content of the compositions and the musicological implications of works by Debussy, Stravinsky, Webern, Varese, and others, deconstructed the basis of 19th century musical expression. Debussy broke the Enlightenment logic of diatonically based structures, along with Stravinsky, and while Webern was reducing structure to a series of single sounds, Russollo and Varese were challenging the musical validity of the actual sounds of western music. This was deconstruction in action. As the century evolved composers used integral serialism exploring structure for its own sake, or borrowed musical constructions from other cultures, in particular Africa and Indonesia. Some, like Messiaen, invented their own musical language, while others like Britten demonstrated creative and highly sophisticated uses of simple diatonic elements. Composers had clearly moved on from the Pythagorean basis of melody and harmony to an increasingly eclectic range of source materials and inspiration. John Cage and his imitators even attempted to produce a form of non-music in imitation of Zen Buddhist non-intention, and in the last hi-tech decades of the century electronic music has become a major player. The music academy has shown comparatively scant interest in all this, and the research community at large has failed to address the challenges of this new music. Music psychology spends most of its efforts investigating historical musical elements and the physics of music is still concerned with establishing the innateness of the Pythagorean intervals and harmonies of the diatonic scale system.

Meanwhile, throughout the 20th century the Beethoven myth as been propagated commercially. From the 1890s the role of the media of the gramophone, the radio, and the cinema made the music of the 19th century into popular commodities. Beethoven is always a more saleable commodity than Bartok which prompts one to

ask about the role of media power in establishing any contemporary myth. The establishment of a Beethoven myth during the political turmoil of the first half of the 20th century was not all to do with music, there were political reasons, especially in the totalitarian regimes of the 1930s. As if to ignore the roles of the media and various political power structures in the propagation and maintenance of the Beethoven myth, Cook claims that it was created by various 19th century myth makers ranging from composers (Brahms), to performers (von Bulow) and writers (Rolland) giving us a right to critically re-examine its basis. Here Cook is providing an apologia for a politicised critical theory and a decentering from authority. Decentering has long been a favourite buzz word in postmodern writing and Stanley Fish's (1980) old war horse about the authority of interpretive communities and individuals over that of the author of the written word was posed before such ideas reached musicological theory. Yet by critically examining traditional or established knowledge it doesn't follow that it can be modified. Indeed, it is essential that postmodern argument engages with myths and traditional knowledge in order to make a case. As Hutcheon (1988) puts it, such criticisms operate "in clearly paradoxical terms, knowing that to claim epistemological authority is to be caught up in what they seek to displace".

DECONSTRUCTION AND THE PAST

As with all societies, in retrospect we can see contradictions, unfair and unjust power structures at work, distortions for socio-political reasons, and many other failings. We can learn from such things, as Paul-Michel Foucault (1966, 1975) shows in his arguments about the different meanings of such terms as crime, madness or sexuality through the ages. He demonstrates that meanings have no ontological status since they are derived from contextual usage. However, his argument was not that we can re-interpret the meaning of crime or madness as they existed in historical contexts, but rather that we should regard our present interpretation as no more than a product of our present context. He gives no licence or logic for deconstructing the dead. Deconstructing historical art works is obviously post mortem, rendering it pointless as an exercise in political change. Unless of course such criticism has a cleansing political purpose on a par with Mao's cultural revolution or Stalin's brain washing exercises! Criticism of past events cannot replace one mantle of essential truth with another! Postmodern deconstruction of history is, because of the absence of retorts from those involved, merely self serving rhetoric. Foucault's point is that evidence in the form of an "archeological" study of context from past times helps us understand the meaning-making of those; it does not constitute a deconstruction of meanings from times past using today's criteria and context.

Individual ownership of songs, for example, is a well documented phenomenon in many indigenous cultures, to do with deeply held spiritual beliefs where the songs are believed to hold essence, the spirit in fact, of the person, or the events depicted.

They are not about personally "authentic" representations, in Cook's sense, of some transient emotional state. Rather they contain vital links to ancestors and to spirit beings which provide their bedrock for existence. Traditionally, cultural protocol allows only owners to perform their songs. Failure to observe these traditional laws sometimes meant execution. We would now condemn such punishment, as we did with suttee on the Indian sub-continent. We seek to understand such thinking as scholars, but as caring human beings and by common consent we condemn practices which cause harm. In our scholarly dealings with the "other" we have no political or moral right to challenge or reinterpret in our own image the interrogations of meaning. Is it really any different with the music of dead white European males?

While the western traditions of thought now reject any idea of relying on ontological presence, many indigenous cultures have no such qualms about whether or not something contains essence or presence of what to them are unquestionable truths. Indeed one of the most contentious issues facing aboriginal peoples everywhere is the tension caused by the confrontation between, on the one hand, the modern western skepticism about such things with its postmodern insistence on the rights of the individual to negotiate "my" meaning and, on the other, the aboriginal practices of handing down traditional knowledge provided by accepted living authorities. For this reason, Cook's final optimistic suggestions about music being a way to break down barriers through negotiated meanings is arguably just another form of imperialism, especially to a culture about to be assimilated or destroyed. Cook (p.129/120) argues, "we use music as a means of insight into other cultures, then equally we can see it as a means of negotiating cultural identity". But who is doing the negotiating, whose identity is involved, and from what positions of power are the negotiations occurring?

WHOSE SONG IS BEST?

Clifford Geertz's (1973 and 1983) notion of culture being the webs of significance human societies weave shifts authority to the members of the culture and places the problems of meaning-making and value recognition in the realm of interpretations of culture and engagement with the forces which shape a culture. Here one should not confuse cognitive mechanisms (thinking about music), which psychologists refer to as information processing, with the ethical and moral imperatives which inform the processing. Information processing requires criteria by its very nature, and these criteria are to be found in the very belief systems around which culture is built. With 19th century music these are to be found in the aesthetic, social, philosophical and political ideals which fired up the intelligent imagination of the times. Geertz's webs of significance, and Kerman's ideal of context informing performance suggest that something quite different from sexual games of male domination were occurring in 19th century art music, particularly as articulated in the various philosophical tracts of the times.

In any culture value is determined by accepted interpretations of those who know, those who by common consent have access to the things a society values. In 19th century European society belief in some ontological presence in works of art into which the listener or observer and the performer sought to lose themselves was common. John Keats' notion of *negative capability* (*i.e.* losing one's conscious self through assimilation into the object of contemplation) was an important feature of artistic expression in the 19th century (Forman, 1952). When Charles Dickens publicly read extracts from his novels, the audience sought to get into the received notions of the characters and the events. The same views were held about music. The 19th century audience did not negotiate meaning so much as absorb it as presented. If there is a Beethoven myth based on uncritical reception it is because this was the 19th century way of receiving and expressing music!

We apprehend value and meaning through engagement with contextualised moral and ethical aesthetic imperatives to the extent of examining their efficacy in the context of the skill with which the composer and performer make them manifest in musical sound. The academy's job is to uncover these imperatives and reveal the symbiosis between theory and practice irrespective of what the commercial media might be doing. For the commercial media there can be no such imperatives and consequent musical symbiosis underpinning "popular" music and comparisons with the aesthetic of past times is pointless. The commercial media in whatever it sells, either art or "pop", exists for one reason only: selling products. Value in this context is determined by profit margins. The values associated with art music products of any era belong to an entirely different realm. To argue for a plurality whereby popular music and art music stand on the same pedestal as cultural products is to confuse the market place with the realm of ideals. The former is simplistic and pragmatic in its goals, whereas the latter attempts to address the problems of the human condition.

We cannot escape the fact that we are mortal and no amount of money, power or influence can alter that, as exemplified in the many versions of the *Faustus* story. It is to these issues that value in "art" in any culture speaks. This is not to say that mere entertainment or sensuous pleasure cannot inspire valuable art in this sense, but it is to claim that the transient, superficial and patently exploitative products of contemporary popular culture have little value precisely because of these trivial and unethical attributes. If we can claim a hierarchy of value then it must range from exploitative and trivial entertainment or titillation at one end to addressing matters more profoundly and with more complexity and contemplative length at the other end. It is not so much in the topic being addressed or the musical genre used as in the way it is addressed and the reasons why.

Sensuality, or sexuality, has always been with us, but there are crass and childish ways as well as subtle and sophisticated ways of exploring this essential side of human behaviour. The latter are more valuable than the former when they reflect the highest achievements of which humans are capable. Value cannot lie in base

exploitation. The differences between Madonna's song parodying the Pieta and Salome's singing in Richard Strauss's opera or The Spice Girls' Wannabe and Carmen in Bizet's opera is that of titillation and exploitation versus a striving for some depth of illustration and critical reflection through artistic and aesthetic media. One plays on the short term sensation and the immediate titillated response, the other attempts a more considered, a more sophisticated exposition of the issues using complex musical rhetoric and structure. One requires reflection and contemplation involving the higher cortex, the other the low level sensation akin to smelling wood smoke or bacon frying. I am not, of course, implying that all popular music is trivial nor that all art music is profound. Clearly this is not the case. There is trivial art music. But I am arguing that the role of the academy is to identify and clarify the issues surrounding value in more complex ways than either politics or commercially induced popularity is capable of. Better, in this context, means at the very least requiring a response of the intellect as opposed to that purely of the flesh. One has nothing against the flesh of course, but humans do have brains which should not be left out of the game. For these reasons there are better songs to sing².

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Address for correspondence:

Robert Walker
School of Music and Music Education
University of New South Wales
SYDNEY NSW 2052
Australia
e-mail: aw@unsw.edu.au

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