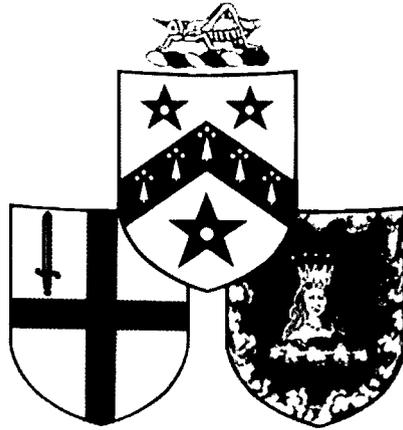


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**MUSIC**

Lecture 2

**ART IN THE AGE OF SPICE**

by

**PROFESSOR PIERS HELLAWELL**  
**Gresham Professor of Music**

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Gresham College, Barnard's Inn Hall, Holborn, London EC1N 2HH  
Tel: 020 7831 0575 Fax: 020 7831 5208  
e-mail: [enquiries@gresham.ac.uk](mailto:enquiries@gresham.ac.uk)

## Music of the Last Century: Art in the Age of Spice

In my first talk - it won't matter if you didn't hear it - I tried to identify those core beliefs in Schoenberg's thought which were to play a role in the profound split between providers and consumers of art music over the last 100 years. In this a notable feature was the high-principled disdain for popular acclaim; this was expressed by Schoenberg in a clear warning against seeking the approval of the individual listener - while his later champion, the critic Theodor Adorno, wrote more polemically:

"anyone who identifies with the new music should stand by this critical element instead of striving for acceptance."<sup>(1)</sup>

The 'critical element' referred to is the new music's role in attacking the properties of the 'old' - specifically those features that made it widely comprehensible, but blunted real expression. My starting-point today is therefore that this retreat by the avant-garde into a realm of high abstrusity from the 1940s onwards had deep implications for the autonomy of popular music: it was a family rift in which the decoupling of twin factions replaced a complex and inseparable history throughout the previous sociology of Western music.

\*From this estrangement has since developed a formidable cultural and, as notably, a commercial opposition, typified nowadays by the big CD companies' horror for anything experimental. As Adorno said, "the all-powerful culture industry says Stop! and confines itself to its unvarying constants"<sup>(3)</sup>. But what he called the "quarantining of new music" is, by inversion, also the quarantining of popular music.\*

I want now to look at how this decoupling took place. Once popular song no longer lies within the embrace of high culture, once it can no longer be the hit number from a 'classical' opera, it must be spawned from outwith it and in opposition to it. \*This rupture can be clearly observed - where else - in comparing the influential writings of Schoenberg and Adorno, from successive generations, in the late 1940s. Here I must acknowledge the authoritative discussion of Adorno and popular music by Prof Richard Middleton <sup>(3)</sup>. We do well to be armed, firstly, with his well-informed warning about Adorno's vision, from the defining discussion on Adorno in his book *Studying Popular Music*:

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1 Adorno, T 'Music And New Music', in *Quasi Una Fantasia*, Suhrkamp Verlag 1963, pp.260 (hereafter Adorno 1963)

2 *ibid.* p.254

“Adorno’s theory of avant-garde music has no room for any form of popular music. For him, the vital aesthetic principle of individuation can now be found only in the esoteric discontinuities of modern art...” (3)

Middleton cannot see a nail without hitting it firmly on the head; he is quickly onto the major flaw in Adorno’s rejection, that he lumped all species of the popular together - dispensing not only with baby and bath-water, as it were, but walling up the entire bathroom as well. \*

But I am getting ahead of myself. In 1946, with the lava-flow of American rock ‘n’ roll culture still round the next corner, it is interesting that Schoenberg is offering a tolerant, if patrician, view of different kinds of music; high-minded, and in our terms politically incorrect he may sound, but there is no disguising his essentially inclusive view of popular music, as a lower branch of one abundant tree. At this point, at least, in his words,

“There is no essential difference between the criteria”, he says: “Popular music speaks to the unsophisticated, to people who love the beauty of music but are not inclined to strengthen their minds.” (4)

Sounding surprisingly positive, he goes on

“But what they like is not triviality or vulgarity or unoriginality, but a more comprehensible way of presentation...this does not mean that in popular music such melodies, rhythms and harmonies as one might expect in higher music must necessarily be excluded.... Listening to American popular music (remember AS lived in LA), one is often surprised at what these composers venture with respect to traditional standards.” (4)

So the view from the Olympus itself, in the late 40s, is that popular composers are dealing with the same manipulations, though with an eye to speedier reception. For Schoenberg it is not a question of people wanting a different message from different music, but of less equipped listeners needing a simpler delivery of the same musical message. As the master put it elsewhere (5): “I do not see why, when other people are entertained[by American popular music], I too should not sometimes be entertained.” Schoenberg’s stiff fatherly embrace contrasts markedly with the ideologically-charged dismissal by his pupil Adorno barely a year later,

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3 Middleton, R *Studying Popular Music*, OUPress 1990, p.36 (hence *Studying Popular Music*)

4 Schoenberg, A ‘Criteria for the Evaluation of Music’, in ed Stein E *Arnold Schoenberg: Style and Idea*, Faber 1975, p.134

5 Schoenberg, A ‘Why no great American music?’ in ed Stein E *Arnold Schoenberg: Style and Idea*, Faber 1975, p.178

in the Introduction to *Philosophy of Modern Music*. This excerpt forms part of a visionary rant by this influential modernist thinker against the devaluing of the expressive power of art by drastic overexposure.

“...Since the culture industry has educated its victims to avoid straining themselves during the free time allotted to them for intellectual consumption, they cling that much more stubbornly to the external framework ...the perceptive faculty has been so dulled by the omnipresent hit tune that the concentration necessary for responsible listening has become permeated by traces of recollection of this musical rubbish, and thereby impossible.”

So while, for Schoenberg, popular listeners seek ‘a more comprehensible way of presentation’, for Adorno they are ‘permeated by traces of... this musical rubbish’. In a way Adorno grasped something around which Schoenberg was still merely skirting - the difference in the intent of art and product, to which I will return later. His same passage continues:

“Music is inextricably bound up with what Clement Greenberg called the division of all art into kitsch and the avant-garde, and this kitsch, with its dictate of profit over culture - has long since conquered the social sphere.”(6)

For Adorno, as we have seen, that dictate of profit over culture means that what he calls ‘the revelation of truth’ is now restricted to the untainted avant-garde. Truth will not be found amid products designed for mass consumption, all of them kitsch, nor even in the tainted ritual of the symphony concert.

\*I believe that this sense of disconnection with popular material on the part of the 50s avant-garde is unique in the history and possibly even in the future history of Western music - we shall see how quickly the estrangement has since given way to *rapprochement*.\* For me there is something ominous in the absolute disconnection of art music from the popular product of its time - something hermetic that indicates an unhealthy lack of public ownership in the avant-garde - what Richard Middleton has called its ‘social isolation’. \*Maybe ‘a sense of ownership of the avant-garde’ is a hopeless contradiction. But even Adorno was to admit to ambivalent feelings about the isolation of his ‘new music’, the lame term that had become attached to the avant-garde; the backlash against this disdain for pop was to come with the American experimentalists and British composers like Bedford and Tavener in the later 1960s, for whom pop music was again legitimate territory.

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6 Adorno, Theodor, Introduction, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, Sheed, 1963 pp. 9-10

While I lack space or expertise to discuss the the evolution of jazz, its rapid, kaleidoscoped history makes an interesting comparison with the tortured progress of modern popular song. Somehow its diverse phases have failed to rupture the fabric of self-belief that binds it as a single 'tradition': thus in the words of my earlier metaphor, Jazz, unlike other music, seems still a single tree with spreading branches.\*

The new autonomy of the popular idiom since 1950 has had various repercussions. Of course, it tacitly legitimized the lowest-common-denominator values of market forces, as deplored by Adorno; but for me that mutual quarantining of 'popular' and 'art' music has proved as significant in removing the roots of popular song from a rich soil of harmonic tradition in which they were nurtured. Over this soil was laid the uniform, though satisfying, American tarmac of Blues harmony - which combined with new instrumental colour to make the 1950s such a watershed in the aesthetic of popular music. Out with the harmonic and instrumental richness of the dance band; in with five chords and the sound-world of electrified rock 'n' roll.

So, for all Adorno's disdain, the new rebels of rock 'n' roll were changing the rules as much as the eggheads of the Koln electronic studio or Darmstadt Summer School. The raw subversion that we hear in the music of 50s or early 60s rock 'n' roll after that of the mid-30s has no parallel until the Punk reaction to the era of the Moody Blues and Pink Floyd in the early 1980s - though maybe rock 'n' roll lacked the self-conscious iconoclasm of Punk. \* We all know the popular music of the time, if not the other, but we too easily overlook this watershed. As to why this upheaval occurred, or why any such development occurs, it must be the intersection of diverse factors, rather than any one impulse. Richard Middleton sees it as a reassuring safeguard against the tyranny of the market:

"Why *those* changes, and why *then* ? Above all... the creation of hits is not simply a matter of continually plugging into a self-sustaining circle linking producer and customer. Companies certainly try to control demand, to channel it in known directions, but they are never *sure* of their market; the best they can do is to cover a spread... in order to minimize the risk."(7) \*

Jan Smaczny has pointed out that another factor in the rock 'n' roll revolution - which I have just hung upon shifts in aesthetics and instrumentation - is the arrival of the new light-weight 45 and 33 rpm record and the portable record-player - not to mention the transistor radio (8). While the old 'Radiogram' was a piece of furniture, and thus

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7 *Studying Popular Music* p. 38

8 personal communication

in the adult domain, the new Dansette player with carrying handle was designed for the bedroom of the rebellious teenager: musical autonomy was handed to the younger listener, leaving the dance band downstairs in the living-room. At a stroke the popular audience had become 10 years younger.

It is striking that Adorno was thoroughly unconcerned with even such huge upheavals as these within the 'tainted' popular genre: Richard Middleton in his important book *Studying Popular Music* notes that, in Adorno,

"there is no awareness that differentiated practices... have survived, nor that historical breaks - for example that presented by rock 'n' roll - could be anything other than pseudo-individual."

\*Middleton suggests that when Adorno probes sceptically at just the distinction I have now raised - between 1940s Jazz and, say, early Elvis Presley - then "we know that he has not done the musical analysis but simply conflated Elvis and... whom? Glenn Miller?"(9).

There's no doubt that Schoenberg's own earlier endorsement of 40's popular song is the more striking, in contrast with Adorno's blinkers; yet, given Schoenberg's belief in traditional 'craft', anyone who loves as I do the lyrical genius of Kern or Berlin may be less surprised.\*

So, let me do now do some of the analysis missing in Adorno, to reveal just such a 'historical break'. We should bear in mind Schoenberg's inclusive outlook, and the sorts of subtlety he may have admired; only thus can we set the earlier popular materials against the new harmonic and structural directness of early 1960s popular song. *Let's Face the Music and Dance*, from 1934, is one of Irving Berlin's most flexible and imaginative constructions - yet no great analysis is needed to spot that this great song exhibits, in its opening phrase, a fine example of Schoenberg's central doctrine of 'developing variation'. It seems amazing to me that a musician of Adorno's worth failed to share Schoenberg's recognition of such musical subtlety. Middleton agrees: "One could..ask why Adorno never examined specifically the..songs which *break* with aspects of the standard conventions - in particular, songs by the Broadway masters. Here we find songs which use the 32-bar form but fill it with angular melody and tonally shifting harmony." (10)

The opening phrase of *Let's Face the Music and Dance* is not answered in the traditional way, but is immediately extended into a longer, asymmetrical version of itself, rather than one that merely balances.

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9 *Studying Popular Music* p.54

10 *ibid.* p.52

[EX: i-opening phrase/ii-second phrase]

Developing variation is employed in the way the elegant turn (on the words "troub-le a-head") is extended into a sequence of compressed repeats, which finally produce an entirely unpredicted move into the major mode.

[EX iii-sequence of motif moving to major key]

If we try to imagine the song without this major-key touch, we cannot - for it is as inevitable as it is startling, an almost Schubertian flash of genius that delivers the song's message of fragile happiness.

\*To underline its pedigree, we may compare this with Schoenberg's own exposition of asymmetry in Brahms, from the *String Sextet op 18*, cited in 'Brahms The Progressive' (11). Here a lop-sided 3-bar phrase is compressed, then here too extended to include a whiff of the minor key - a good comparison with Berlin's masterpiece.

We may also note, too, that the end of Berlin's phrase is individual in the way it postpones a conventional cadence - and note also that the balancing phrase we do not get after the opening is really taken to be 'understood' and gone beyond.\* Schoenberg had warned that "Rapid solutions or leaps from assumptions to conclusions would endanger popularity" (4), yet in fact that is just what happens here; this icon of its time has proved memorable just because of its elusive sophistication.

Such range of harmonic expression was not to be restored to popular music until the songs of Paul McCartney: even here, though, Glenn Gould felt that "for the Beatles, the neotriadic persuasion is a guerilla tactic - an instrument of revolution" (12). Be that as it may, 1960s bands contemporary with the Beatles demonstrate how thoroughly the sealed sequences of Blues harmony had replaced the old flexibility: several chord changes are held severely in check around a tonic, wandering no further than the relative major. No one operated this more powerfully than The Kinks, as any of their songs from the 1960s will show. Nor is this limitation necessarily a negative: the social anger of *Dead End Street* relies on just this tight harmonic net, its gallows humour built upon flashes of major key and on the raw, dead-pan brass solo. The simple chord progression is as starkly unchanging as the twists of the Berlin song are mercurial. The central point to note is the block regularity of the opening verse - the phrase leaves and returns to A mi, and is perfectly

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11 Schoenberg, A 'Brahms The Progressive', in ed Stein E *Arnold Schoenberg: Style and Idea*, Faber 1975, p.416

12 Gould, G 'The Search for Petula Clark' in ed Page *The Glenn Gould Reader*, Faber 1984, p.304

balanced by its answer.

[EX Intro/1st phrase]

In fact there are some individual progressions in the coda section 'People are dying on Dead End Street' - but a single, sealed harmonic capsule contains the whole universe of the song.

\*Let me suggest that the move away from harmonic sophistication has left the way open for a new pervasive imprint on the surface of later popular music - if belatedly so: it is arguable that the rise of what was initially dismissed as the 'fad' for 'world music' has been just such a pervasive force in popular music since 1980. The rhythm - and timbre-based sounds of innumerable folk musics have filled the former role of harmonic tradition, as the new orthodoxy surrounding many areas of the genre - if today's diversity allows us to call it a genre. These sounds have at the same time had much bearing on today's 'serious' music scene, from genuine assimilation (such as Ligeti's 'African' rhythms) to the worst sort of cultural tourism. It is probably not necessary to stress that this influence has worked in harness with other factors, chief of which is the information revolution that brings all recorded materials within global reach.\*

Despite the profound estrangement between art music and its popular cousin, the pendulum has appeared to swing back quite remarkably in recent times. The text-book musical picture of the 1950s, of the estranged and discrete orbits of, let's say, Bill Haley and the young Stockhausen, gives little grounds for predicting this. Yet, not 40 years later, we find such stylistic ferment running between popular and art musics as to make those very designations, such as 'popular', tricky and unfashionable - while suggestions of relative seriousness, never mind relative musical worth, are absolutely forbidden. Within my lifetime we have developed from musical apartheid between art and entertainment into a situation where no assumptions may be made, or at least expressed, about the intention of any music.

This is despite differences of intent more blatant now than they were between the first Rockers and the Darmstadt serial composers:\* the commercial impetus behind management of the early rock 'n' roll bands was innocence itself compared with today's fight for world markets by huge corporations and rock promoters. Now we even have the 'music business', a term from which 'concert music' is tacitly exempted, due of course not to different criteria but to its pitifully small financial turnover.\* This situation requires that we distinguish more than ever between material seeking to excel within a individual framework and

that conforming to market criteria, so as to appeal, in the most basic examples, most quickly to most people.

Yet the commercial intent of music-as-product is nowhere being admitted where people wield what Schoenberg called the 'Criteria for the Evaluation of Music'. This is partly because the distinction is hard to codify, going as it does to assumptions about motive - what is the composer's priority? \*If the distinction were being made, it would probably be done clumsily anyway. It is quite misleading, for example, to rely on music's surfaces, assuming say that a work involving ethnic influences or non-Western instruments is any less artistically-driven than a string quartet, or that a bit of pseudo-Vivaldi for wind band is not just a popular product in fancy-dress.\* So rather than tread carefully we do not tread at all; the purveyors of organized sound are just one big happy family, from descendants of Schoenberg - a composer who once screamed at an ingratiating film producer "My music is NOT lovely" - through to Britney Spears, while embracing everyone in between.

I believe that what we should be doing, as I tried to do earlier, is to identify merit *within* languages of music, rather than pretend that everything is part of one great road-show, and subject to the same criteria for that merit. The new orthodoxy of musical relativism is for me a kind of bouncy castle - undoubtedly fun, but hard to find our feet in and definitely inflated.

It is quite possible to respect something without pretending that it is cognate with something else. I meet with composers from the domain of media or pop on terms of great mutual respect, I think, but we at once uncover not similarities in our working framework but the most startling dissimilarities, on everything from funding to typical time-scale of projects and, of course, the demands of clients.\* The fact is that the expectations of a commissioner asking me for a string quartet relate only to duration and date - perhaps resting on some basic awareness of what I do, competence etc. For a composer providing news bulletin sig tunes, freedom of duration would be a positive hindrance, while song-writers have yet tighter assumptions within which to operate. These are not merely imposed by the market, but are thought-forms intrinsic to their art, as they were for Troubadours 600 years ago.\* I shall return to the ethics of commissioning in my fifth talk.

Other arguments are to hand for taking a realistic approach to the different terrains and trajectories of musical genres. Listening to a specialised record programme covering big band Jazz or the Blues - say Paul Jones or Michael Parkinson on Radio 2 - we are likely to hear them praise an artist as 'one of the finest musicians of all time'. Why should they not make such claims, just as we do in the classical sphere all the time? The designation '*within this field*' is surely understood. They are not comparing Fats Waller to Harrison Birtwistle, or saying Eric Clapton is 'better than' Stefan Grappelli.

This question, of the context in which we wield the 'criteria for the evaluation of music' brings me to the Mercury Prize. Here is a feast of relativism whose shortlist this year included, in addition to a range of folk singers and Indie bands, the CD (it being a prize for recorded music) of Nicholas Maw's *Violin Concerto*. The coverage of the shortlist announcement centred not on the incongruity of this but on the absence of a Jazz contender, as if the failure to represent every established corner of recorded music were the controversial feature. For that is, apparently, the brief of the Prize, to survey 'recorded music' as if it is a field - perhaps the 'level playing-field' so fervently sought in our public life. That, of course, is what it is not: there is nothing level about the comparison between an album of songs with guitar and a work for violin and orchestra of 40 minutes' duration - not because of durations or musical forces, but because of antecedents, assumptions and intent.

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*The Daily Telegraph* said of shortlisted artist Damon Gough that "His name has been mentioned alongside Nick Drake... Beach Boy Brian Wilson and even Bob Dylan." Nicholas Maw, meanwhile, a composer in his mid-60s, is in the post-romantic tradition of Britten, a master of lush orchestration and long-term harmonic progression whose music has been compared to that of Strauss and Berg. Mr Gough argues in the interview

"I think it's necessary to reflect the spectrum of music that's out there. You can't grow up with blinkers on, only liking one style."(13)

But he is referring to styles *within* popular song - just as the radio host is denoting a singer 'one of the greatest' *within* a genre. Nowhere in this interview does he mention the classical/orchestral entry.\*

I mean less to attack this institution than to point out that it embodies today's mealy-mouthed approach to the evaluation of music. There is

little harm in rounding up a shortlist of diverse specimens for commending by the industry to the public. But a showcase is not a comparative award, which suggests assessment of relative success in achieving similar goals. It is as if the Booker Prize were to shortlist three novels, two poems, a children's comic and an economics textbook, on the grounds that all are fiction.

It is reason, then, not fageyism nor snobbery masquerading as reason, that militates against such comparison of entities that are not cognate. \*We know, of course, that no playing-field is really level - a contemporary classical prize, or a Jazz award, has to mediate between diverse practices - but stylistic difference is not the same as separate intent; it operates, as we have seen, within a genre, while intent differentiates between different genres.\*

What we have is an obsession with maintaining equality between genres, which reaches into our arts institutions. Yet this equality is a sham: everyone knows that contemporary art music is a minority interest (for reasons I explored last time) that is hopelessly uncommercial. This is not to impugn the *popular* artists with the suggestion that they are driven by commercial considerations; they are of course serious in their artistic practice. The distinction is the Adornian one about musical individuation: today's art music continues to retain a high degree of resistance to framework, rather than submit to demands of genre that make the majority of Mercury Prize contenders good commercial prospects. A popular song, however original - the Beatles' greatest offerings included - fulfils certain expectations of tonal circuitry and internal organization that are not applicable to the open-ended art work. Richard Middleton offers a range of specific song-forms covering songs from Led Zeppelin to Bob Dylan, and gives this vital summary:

"Altogether, then, at this macro-structural level it is certainly true that almost all popular music works within the sphere of the known."(14)

For this reason, it is fair to say that Maw's *Violin Concerto* is subject to few if any of the same thought-forms as the remainder of the Mercury Prize shortlist. \*We may note, too, the sea-change that this distinction represents within art music: those boundaries that I described around popular song - tonal circuitry, familiar framework etc - were the very ones defining classical music as *lingua franca* 200 years ago. Those well-trodden Classical symphonic outlines were the equivalent not of today's avant-garde but of its popular song.\*

I have described a state of profound cultural caution around these distinctions. This rests, of course, on an apparent disintegration of boundaries; the wiggly lines between today's sub-styles make the polarity of the 1950s seem relatively straightforward; the presence of 'experimental' intent within the modern genre is an obvious stumbling-block toward assessment of today's music.\* My own youth was peopled with the work of the semi-experimental groups of the 70s, who appeared to exemplify the 'compositional' *within* the commercial. Much of this repertoire hovers on the fringes of Middleton's superb apophthegm quoted above - working 'within the sphere of the known'; he describes a Pink Floyd piece as "a piece *composed* as a whole", and suggests this is "music 'for the mind' rather than.. for dancing" (15) - clearly lifting it free of the aforementioned sphere. \*

Numerous such works by Pink Floyd and fondly remembered others fit this experimental designation. Yet these are a minority; below the deceptive surfaces, the distinction about 'the sphere of the known' still holds good for most musics. \*A huge gulf still lies between the output which, operating within that sphere, assumes a level of consumability and that which, operating to expand that sphere, rests more on Adorno's ideal of autonomous logic.\*

It seems to me no help to any music to disregard this distinction in the way that is currently fashionable. Nonetheless, it is important, and plain honest, and to admit that a music that defies this distinction is possible and immanent. 'Crossover' works, usually by composers from the popular sector moving into other waters, have to be treated as individual cases, and instrumental surface can be misleading - but true fusion is possible. A good example is Frank Zappa's work with Ensemble Modern at the end of his life. This next example, meanwhile, predates Zappa's 'classical' experiments, but it shows I think that he was in the late 60s already ripe for a foray beyond 'the sphere of the known'.

[EX Frank Zappa, from *Hots Rats* album (1969)]

Clearly Zappa was seeking open-ended, personal expressions that draw as heavily on the avant-garde as on his own background. It is a measure of the fluidity of today's musical situation that chamber arrangements of Zappa's pieces by Philip Cashian have already been performed. He is a genuine specimen of fusion, whose recorded legacy will always remind us that there *are* more than two kinds of music.

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15 *ibid.* p.29

Fusions hewn from Rock have, in the 1990s, been joined by fusions that spring from world music, equally colourful and equally resistant to my criteria. Such musicians as Talvin Singh owe less to Western concert music than do Frank Zappa's efforts, which does not of course make their intent any less artistic; the further we move from the charted waters of whatever musical materials are our background, the less sure we should be about the social context of any music.

Let me stress finally that I am not so foolish as to associate all popular work with market forces; but I strongly suggest that we should be alive to key structural and other assumptions that may prove to be obstinately incomparable between the diverse genres of music today.