

Contemporary Music and Its Audience: A Tale of Benevolent Asceticism?

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Abstract Descriptive statistics on musical consumption from recent surveys on cultural consumption in France show that the typical audience of classical music and opera consists of older, better educated, and of higher social status people than average cultural consumers. It is also located in the largest cities, with Parisians having a clear edge. Explanatory power of these factors is even stronger when people are asked about their taste or distaste for serious contemporary music, with the three factors of high social status, high educational level and strong musical background working together in combination to explain a propensity for contemporary music attendance. In the same time, listening to new music inherently involves a high potential for dissatisfaction. Two types of ensembles and festivals perform and promote new music: the ‘fostering invention’ type and the ‘mixing new with established contemporary music’ type. Audience of the first type is best described as consisting of stakeholders. The ultimate hope of the second type institutions is to reach lay audience. Based on two surveys of the audience of the InterContemporain Ensemble, one of the most important European organisations in the distribution of modern and contemporary music, the paper shows that lay audience displays loyalty to this highly demanding musical consumption only if it is able to supply ascetic benevolence in order to factor in the high potential for dissatisfaction with works of uncertain and variable value.

Keywords Sociology • Musical consumption • Reception of innovation • Potential for dissatisfaction

1 Introduction

Descriptive statistics on musical consumption from most recent surveys on cultural consumption in France show that the typical audience of classical music and opera consists of older, better educated, and of higher social status people than average cultural consumers. It is also located in the largest cities, with Parisians having a

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clear edge. Explanatory power of these factors is even stronger when people are asked about their taste (or distaste) for serious contemporary music, with the three related factors of high social status, high educational level and strong musical background explaining a propensity for contemporary music attendance. At the same time, listening to new music inherently involves a high potential for dissatisfaction. Two surveys of the audience of the Ensemble InterContemporain, the largest European organisation in the distribution of modern and contemporary music, were carried out 25 years apart. A stunning result of the first one was that about three quarters of the audience found it difficult or very difficult to distinguish between the different aesthetic trends within art music today; only music professionals under 35 declare themselves capable of this distinction. The identification of such different behaviours leads to a distinction between novice members, occasional members who are disappointed and give up, and committed members. The loyalty of the latter raises the paradox of a lay interest in modernity that largely lacks direct support based on a strong ability to judge. Building on the results of the two surveys, I will show how to solve this paradox.

2 Musical Consumption: Between the Classical Repertoire and Contemporary Creation

Throughout the twentieth century, composers have progressively or brutally broken with what constituted, for 200 years at least, the shared musical language of European culture, namely the tonal system. At the same time the classical works of the past provided ever more overwhelming competition for new music. Indeed, never have pieces of classical music found such a vast audience, and never has the past been as omnipresent in this unprecedented musical consumption as it is today. Never before has musical creation broken away as radically from its past as it has after the development of the media and the recording industry, which continuously reinforced consumption. Thus, more than in any other art, the place of new music in cultural consumption is limited by the competition of its own past. How can this be explained?

Unlike pieces of popular music, musical creation is above all defined by its relationship with its past. In the nineteenth century, a number of deeply connected transformations led to the dominance of an aesthetics of originality: competition between artists and the relationships between generations of creators expressed themselves through successive breaks with the past. The imperative to drive the 'progress' of musical language became an essential criterion against which the originality of a piece could be measured (Goehr 1992). The triumph of pure music (even in the opera, which became a symphonic genre with Wagner and his successors) symbolises the identification of aesthetic innovation with a rationale of transcendence and progressivity, whereas novelty had hitherto been perceived and

practiced as a fashion, an ephemeral way of renewing stylistic conventions (Dahlhaus 1980). The imperative of originality became the norm in composition: it was the driving force in the move to make erudite creation autonomous. As creation became the systematic search for new technical solutions to the problems posed by the evolution of musical language, the past appeared to be the very thing that was necessary to integrate and transcend; to be that which transmits to the composer the dynamics of movement, and of progress in art.

However, this evolution also progressively imposed another way of performing music, much more faithful to the score, and another way of listening to concerts, whose programs became more homogenous than they once were. The musical qualities of performances took an increasing importance. The role of the performer became reinforced as the competition between musicians concentrated on set of better-known and more familiar masterpieces performed with the maximum degree of skill and originality as possible. The art of performance is in fact valued for itself, if the added value of the rendition can be perceived and appreciated. For this to be possible, the piece in question must be well known enough for the consumer to provoke a specific demand for innovation in the reproduction of the repertoire as well as enough competition between professional performers to satisfy that demand.

The link that must be made between the historical development of the phenomenon of repertoire (Weber 2008) and the move towards the professionalisation of musicians enable us to explain partly why the interests of the two major categories of actors—the composer and the performer—progressively diverge (Menger 1983b). For these divergent interests to express themselves fully, the effects of three decisive evolutions in musical markets had to come together: The decline in the supply of musical works from the 1930s onwards, the aesthetic break with the tonal system on which the classical repertoire and the dominant consumption habits are based, and the decline of not-for-profit organisations' abilities to finance themselves. This resulted in a segmentation of the market which led both distributors and performers to respond to the dominant demand by consumers who were more sensitive and seduced by the classical repertoire privileged by performers, or the rediscovery of neglected works and performance styles, rather than by the more exacting audacities of musical creation.

3 The Specialised Circuits of Contemporary Creation

The omnipresent classical repertoire inflicts an intense competition on contemporary creation, and clearly has a negative impact on its audience by weakening it whilst intensifying the desire for originality among composers. But it also has a long-lasting and powerful positive effect: Living composers can benefit from the increasing prestige of past masters, whose are still widely distributed, valued and even considered sacred. The increase in consumption of cultural goods as well as the increasing number of institutions that supply and support culture disperse what

might be called the social symbolism of creation. In this, the artist appears as the accomplished figure of civilising humanism, a being who is both social and exceptional. The socio-political consequences of rendering the artist sacred are that it appears unjustifiable to abandon creativity to the laws of supply and demand, which would condemn to oblivion those works and composers of the avant-garde who take the bet of anticipating the market. The logic goes like this: If time was so important in consecrating the great artists of the past, how can we allow to hastily threaten (given its dependence on the market and the fever of immediacy) or dismiss the work and creative freedom of contemporary artists?

This is one of the justifications for the creation of a specialised market for musical innovation. The social narrowness of the consumption of a particular type of art or artwork at a given time does not predict with certainty the attitudes of future generations. The argument, and the mechanism of socialisation of artistic risk that results, can be directly applied to those creative works that, though they are in total rupture with the languages of the consecrated music of the repertoire, act as the agents of the drive for movement and innovation in art. Isn't the risk taken by the artist who does not respond to the established demand first and foremost correlated with the uncertainty of the later estimation of the value of the artwork?

In reducing the risk of short-term failure, the specialised agents who produce and distribute new artworks foster among many composers the assimilation of creation with the systematic search for new solutions to aesthetic problems, with uncertain chances of succeeding in the long-term. The number of specialised festivals,¹ contemporary music groups that are subsidised or established in universities, productions of concerts or broadcasts concentrated on new music by public radio stations,² and centres of research and creation all multiplied after 1945. These specialised circuits provide 'niches', in the environmental sense of the work, where composers are able to produce, to be performed, and free to experiment without fearing the effects of unwavering 'natural selection' that would otherwise be imposed on them by the laws of the market.

Over time the musical creation of the post-war avant-garde led to the establishment of an administered market fed by a heavily funded demand from public organisations or subsidised musical institutions, and supported in many different ways by public radio stations (Menger 1983a).

It is easy to see the benefits that creative professionals take from the construction of such specialised organizations. Without them, contemporary musical production would be crushed by the double competition of past masterpieces and popular music. It is towards these circuits—and under the control of the composers involved in decision-making—that public requests for new works, subsidies for the programming of contemporary pieces, assistance for research in musical technology, and career support for specialised performers, are generally directed.

¹Darmstadt, Donaueschingen, Royan, Varsovie, Graz, and many other.

²For example WDR in Cologne, SWF in Stuttgart and Baden Baden, RAI in Milan, ORF in Vienna, BBC in London, Radio-France in Paris, RTE in Madrid.

The separation between orchestras and ensembles reproducing the traditional classical and pre-classical repertoire on the one hand, and circuits of contemporary music on the other, may correspond to a kind of division of labour in the way the risks associated with innovation are managed. Instrumental ensembles and specialised festivals of contemporary music act as a sort of sieve or filter to introduce a large number of works, allowing professionals to make an initial selection. Traditional establishments of distribution are then responsible for distributing among a wider audience those pieces that were well received in this first selection. The protected market thus mimics a traditional strategy for promoting innovation, which is very common in the cultural industries: An independent sector made of small production units functions as a research or testing laboratory, subject to the direct or indirect control of the major firms which ensure the selective valorisation of their products (Bystryn 1978; Accominotti 2017).

This model must be refined in order to be applicable to music, as it can also apply to cultural industries or to the art market—with its galleries, public institutions and foundations. The group of small organisations that promote contemporary music is very heterogeneous. It includes: organisations of specialised performers and subsidised composers (as is often the case in Europe); ensembles working within universities or conservatories (very common in America where composers are also frequently professors); but also more informal initiatives via events jointly organised by actors of the avant-garde circles in music, or theatre, visual arts or multimedia arts, such as in Brooklyn. These many organisations, sharing the space of the major urban centres without interacting, and only brought together very occasionally by festivals, do not seek to enlarge their public beyond the usual circles of amateurs of artistic innovation and experimentation. In each major town, one or two specialised and heavily subsidised ensembles, often affiliated with the public radio, operate outside of this nebula and attempt introducing recent modernity to a lay public. They do so with a program combining new pieces with works and composers already established as classics of the century.

Specialisation also has some less anticipated and more ambiguous effects. The ideal of permeation which is at the basis of this selection model aims at the small number of creators and works that become established over time, as the choices of professionals converge, and end up being incorporated within a reasonable time into the major instrumental, symphonic and lyrical repertoire that attracts the majority of listeners and music-lovers. Yet the coexistence between a specialised and a traditional sphere does not necessarily lead to the desired permeation, but might instead veer to a rigid separation, perpetuated by the two spheres themselves.

Indeed, segmentation plays on the relation between the production of and demand for innovation. The pressure of final demand (of lay consumers) which would weigh on composers if they were directly dependent on the traditional music market, is replaced by the expectations of intermediary demand in the specialised market, that is, of music professionals themselves (composers, critics, cultural administrators, publishers, performers, music teachers, educators, students, etc.) and professionals of other artistic sectors. These intermediary publics are in fact the primary destination of production in specialised spheres, because they are the ones

who are directly interested in the constant renewal of musical supply, in the systematic exploration of innovative possibilities, however esoteric they may be. We can thus see how the specialised sphere is constructed. As these specialised circuits in the distribution of new pieces are established, an increasing proportion of demand from the state, foundations, universities, non-profit cultural organisations, festivals, etc., are directed at these circuits. Thus a form of synchronisation can emerge between the specialisation and the structures of distribution, whose sole mission is to promote novelty and the working conditions for creation, since the pieces are written in accordance with this perpetual norm of aesthetic production, which the public of art professionals present at concerts of contemporary music has priority in judging. In addition, competition through experimentation has prompted composers to use non-standard instrumental ensembles and technologies, making it more complicated and more expensive to integrate new works into the classical repertoire performed by standard orchestras and ensembles.

After 60 years of experimenting with all the parameters of composition, it is easier today to see that the changes introduced into the musical system through innovation and its diffusion cannot simultaneously procure the aesthetic and symbolic benefits of radical emancipation from the past, and a rapid fusion in the listening habits of the consumer between the flow of new pieces and the unceasingly increasing (with successive rediscoveries and interpretative fashions) flow of past works. But the dialectic between innovation and inclusion in the repertoire does not unflinchingly obey this movement towards mutual estrangement. First, the course of aesthetic innovation is not linear, there are movements towards neo-tonality, repetition, and towards eclectic syntheses of compositional solutions that would have seemed irreconcilable only 10 years ago. All this highlights the fact that aesthetic competition is not simply organised according to a teleological scheme of cumulative ruptures with every past convention, as it was in the good old days of the most radical avant-gardism. Second, a two-tier model of distribution of new music gradually emerged. Among the ensembles and festivals promoting new music, the 'fostering invention' type has firmly established itself along the lines of segmentation depicted above, with its audiences made out of stakeholders of the contemporary music creative game. The second type mixes new with 'established' contemporary music consisting of works by famous living composers. Various programming strategies are devised to build a repertoire of contemporary music. Cooperations and alliances with general-purpose orchestras and ensembles are developed to perform it alongside the repertoire of nineteenth and twentieth century masterpieces. My case study of the Paris Ensemble InterContemporain and its audience refers to this second type.

4 Contemporary and Classical Music Audiences: How Close?

Even if challenged by the “cultural omnivorism” argument initially put forward by Peterson and Kern (1996) and widely discussed since, in order to check to what extent people develop a taste for diversity and variety in listening music, the dominant theory in cultural sociology still states that “music is an unusually polarized cultural field. It plays a key role in defining elite cultural forms, but is also central to many kinds of popular sub-cultures (disadvantaged, youth groups, ethnic minorities)” (Savage 2006, p. 161).

As for contemporary music, the “polarization thesis” would assume that it is a simple subfield of what performing right societies call “serious music”. By contrast, proponents of the rise of omnivorism in musical consumption might see it as an area able to blur the frontiers of the various genres, provided that new trends in contemporary music aesthetically echo less polarized consumption behaviors, with a new generation of composers, acting as Trojan horses, willing to get rid of the old-fashioned divisions and battles of the twentieth century.

Actually, as I will demonstrate from data referring to the French situation over the last three decades, the main predictors of preference for classical music have an even stronger explanatory power when it comes to contemporary music: The dream of merging several types of audiences and musical tastes seems less than likely, except for particular events—festivals, musical events marketed as such (e.g. the “Boulez meets Zappa” famous concert).

Over the last 40 years, the successive surveys on cultural consumption in France have repeatedly shown that the typical audience of classical music and opera consists of people that are older, more female, better educated, have higher social and occupational status and are located in the largest cities, with Parisians having a clear edge, as shown in Table 1.

The explanatory power of these factors is even stronger when people are asked about their musical preferences, as shown in Table 2 based on the same survey data.

Given the increase in the level of education and income and their likely impact on cultural consumption as well as the increasing supply of classical music concerts, participation should have been widening over the last decades. Data shown in Table 3 provide a rather disappointing answer. Using a rather rough index (attendance of at least one classical music concert in the past 12 months), surveys show that participation peaked from the late 1980s to the late 1990s and decreased since, in nearly all occupational status and age groups. The only countervailing factor is the obvious advantage of residing in Paris, where the concentration of musical organisations has a major impact, both on the probability of going to a concert or to the opera, but also on the probability of knowing and attending a wide range of musical events.

General cultural consumption surveys very rarely make a special case for contemporary music, as its low popularity makes it nearly impossible to measure the weight and characteristics of its audience in an ‘omnibus’ study. Only once did

Table 1 Musical genre most listened to (% per row)

	French pop songs	World and traditional	International Pop, RnB	Electro music	Hip hop, rap	Metal, hard rock	Pop, rock	Jazz	Opera	Classical music	Other
Total population	68	25	38	15	14	7	28	17	9	27	8
Gender											
Men	62	24	35	19	17	11	32	19	7	25	8
Women	74	26	40	11	11	4	24	16	10	29	8
Age											
15–19	36	14	55	41	42	17	39	7	1	9	6
20–24	50	25	55	33	43	15	41	17	2	14	11
25–34	61	24	54	23	21	11	42	15	3	13	9
35–44	71	27	47	14	10	11	38	17	6	22	9
45–54	77	29	37	7	5	5	30	20	8	29	9
55–64	79	27	20	3	2	1	14	23	13	41	6
65+	79	22	9	2	1	0	2	17	22	49	7
Level of education											
Primary education	77	24	26	10	10	3	12	13	11	29	9
Certificate of professional competence	72	25	43	12	13	8	29	15	6	21	7
Junior secondary education certificate	69	27	38	16	12	6	24	16	9	24	11
High school diploma	68	26	40	14	10	7	30	20	11	33	8
B.A.	69	29	46	12	9	8	47	26	10	34	7
Master+	58	29	35	11	8	8	43	35	16	45	7
Student	40	20	54	40	36	17	47	14	2	13	7
Occupational status											
Self-employed	79	28	38	15	8	9	26	16	4	22	7

Higher managerial and professional occupations	62	30	33	11	10	9	46	33	15	41	7
Intermediate occupations	67	31	46	12	12	10	46	21	7	25	7
Employees	75	23	46	15	13	5	26	14	3	19	8
Workers	67	23	44	21	19	11	31	11	4	15	9
Former self-employed	79	14	7	3	1	1	5	18	14	43	5
Former higher managerial and professional occupations	62	25	15	0	1	0	7	36	27	68	4
Former intermediate occupations	80	27	14	3	0	1	9	22	21	64	5
Former employees	83	26	12	3	0	0	5	17	18	43	8
Former workers	82	20	12	1	2	1	7	10	14	32	10
Unemployed	54	26	52	24	26	9	33	16	4	20	10
University students	43	25	52	37	34	15	50	17	2	16	9
High school students	35	14	56	44	40	20	44	10	1	9	6
Housewives	75	25	33	8	10	5	13	14	12	25	10
Other inactive	82	25	45	7	8	6	29	20	9	26	10
Size of urban area											
Rural commune	75	23	35	12	10	8	26	14	6	23	7
Less than 20,000 inhabitants	69	20	35	16	12	9	25	13	5	24	8
20,000–100,000 inhabitants	68	26	41	16	15	8	29	18	11	26	8
More than 100,000 inhabitants	68	25	41	17	16	7	31	18	9	28	7
Paris suburbs	56	31	39	12	18	6	27	24	10	29	13
Paris	53	35	23	20	11	9	32	35	24	53	7

Source: *Pratiques culturelles des Français*, Paris, Ministère de la Culture, 2008

Table 2 Musical genre preferred to (% per row)

	Non music listeners	French songs	French pop	International pop songs	RnB	Electro pop (tektonic, dance...)	Techno	Rap	Pop	Rock	Jazz	Classical music	Other genre	No genre cited
Total population	8	13	20	6	4	2	2	3	3	7	3	8	15	5
Gender														
Men	7	10	17	6	3	2	3	4	4	9	4	8	17	6
Women	9	15	23	6	4	1	1	1	3	5	2	9	13	5
Age														
15-19	0	1	5	4	16	8	7	16	4	16	1	1	15	6
20-24	2	4	9	5	12	4	6	9	5	13	4	1	19	8
25-34	1	10	17	10	6	4	5	2	7	11	3	1	17	6
35-44	2	11	24	10	3	1	2	1	6	9	3	4	18	7
45-54	6	17	29	6	1	0	1	0	2	8	3	7	15	6
55-64	12	17	28	3			1	0	1	2	4	15	12	5
65+	24	18	18	2		0				1	3	19	12	2
Level of education														
Primary education	18	18	22	4	2	1	2	1	1	2	2	8	16	4
Certificate of professional competence	5	12	25	8	4	1	3	2	3	8	2	7	15	5
Junior secondary education certificate	6	10	24	7	3	4	2	2	2	3	5	10	19	5
High school diploma	4	10	23	7	3	1	1	2	4	8	4	12	14	6
B.A.	1	12	20	7	4	1	1	0	8	11	5	10	13	8
Master+	2	9	14	6	1	3	1	1	5	14	8	18	11	7
Student	0	2	5	6	12	6	6	12	6	18	3	1	15	7
Occupational status														
Self-employed	8	14	27	7	1	1	2	0	4	10	1	7	12	5
Higher managerial and professional occupations	1	8	18	5	2	2	1	1	7	14	9	10	14	7
Intermediate occupations	2	11	20	8	4	1	1	2	7	11	4	7	15	7
Employees	4	15	29	8	3	2	1	2	3	5	2	4	15	6

Workers	5	11	20	10	4	2	6	3	3	7	1	3	18	6
Former self-employed	28	15	21	1						1	4	16	12	3
Former higher managerial and professional occupations	8	10	14	4						4	10	34	14	2
Former intermediate occupations	12	12	24	4		0			0	2	6	28	10	3
Former employees	21	19	24	3		0				0	2	14	12	3
Former workers	25	25	19	2				0		1	1	11	13	2
Unemployed	2	7	15	6	7	4	6	6	3	8	3	5	22	7
University students	1	3	5	7	10	7	6	9	7	16	5	1	15	8
High school students		1	4	4	16	6	6	15	4	22	1	1	16	5
Housewives	11	17	26	6	3	1	1	1	1	1	2	9	16	5
Other inactive	11	18	24	5	4	0	1	2	8	1	6		13	5
Size of urban area														
Rural communes	9	16	26	7	2	1	3	1	3	7	2	7	13	5
Less than 20,000 inhabitants	9	15	22	5	3	2	2	2	2	7	2	9	15	5
20,000–100,000 inhabitants	8	12	19	6	5	3	4	3	3	6	3	7	17	4
More than 100,000 inhabitants	8	12	20	7	5	2	2	3	4	7	3	8	12	6
Paris suburbs	8	9	15	4	4	2	1	3	4	7	5	9	22	7
Paris	6	7	5	2	4	3	1	1	4	14	12	19	18	5

Source: *Pratiques culturelles des Français*, Paris, Ministère de la Culture, 2008

Table 3 Trends in attendance of classical music concerts, 1973–2000 (% of population)^a

	1973	1981	1988	1997	2008
Total population	7	7	9	9	7
Gender					
Men	8	8	10	9	7
Women	6	7	9	10	8
Age					
15–24	6	8	6	6	4
25–39	10	9	10	9	6
40–59	7	8	13	12	8
60+	5	4	8	10	9
Occupational status					
Farmers	4	5	4	3	2
Craftspeople, merchants, entrepreneurs	7	7	8	7	8
Higher managerial and professional occupations	22	25	31	27	20
Intermediate occupations	13	13	14	12	9
Clerical and domestic workers	7	9	7	7	3
Skilled workers	8	5	4	4	2
Unskilled workers	2	4	4	2	1
Retired	5	3	8	9	9
Other	9	9	7	11	6
Size of urban area					
Rural commune	3	4	5	7	5
Less than 20,000 inhabitants	7	4	7	8	4
20,000–100,000 inhabitants	6	6	8	8	6
More than 100,000 inhabitants	10	8	11	10	9
Parisian suburbs	7	13	15	10	8
Paris	15	27	26	27	28

Source: *Pratiques culturelles des Français*, Paris, Ministère de la Culture, 2008

^a% of people interviewed who reported having attended at least one concert of classical music in the past 12 months

the recurrent survey performed by the French Ministry of Culture include ‘contemporary music’ among the kinds of music respondents were asked to mention as the one more often listened. As shown in Table 4, it ranks very low.

An alternative way of approaching the audience and taste for contemporary music in omnibus surveys is to focus on individual musical works. In his statistical portrait of the British musical field, Savage (2006) included Philip Glass’ *Einstein on the Beach* among the works respondents were asked to report as having listened to and liked or disliked, or not listened to or unknown (Table 5). Not surprisingly, very few were familiar with it, in clear contrast with Mahler’s *Fifth Symphony*, not to mention Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons* or pop music. Miles Davis’ jazz piece is in a position that is only slightly more favorable than Phil Glass’ work. Savage concedes that the cultural omnivore thesis may find some support mainly in the highly educated middle class where people are no longer just fans of classical music but

Table 4 Musical genre most listened to (% of total population)

French popular songs	47.0
International popular songs	19.9
Classical music (incl. baroque music)	18.6
World music (reggae, salsa, etc.)	10.4
Rock music	10.2
Background music, dance music	7.3
Jazz	7.3
Folk music	4.9
Opera	3.8
Film music, musicals	3.5
Operetta	3.5
Hard rock, punk, trash, heavy metal	2.4
Rap	2.2
Contemporary music	1.3
Children's music	1.0
Military music	0.9
Other genres	1.5

Source: *Enquête sur les pratiques culturelles des Français* (1997), DEP/Ministère de la Culture
 Note: Total is larger than 100% as respondents could cite more than one musical genre

Table 5 Knowledge and taste of musical works in the UK (%)

	Listened and liked	Listened, do not like	Not listened, have heard of	Have not heard of	Don't know
Wonderwall, Oasis	46.6	13.8	13.2	26.2	0.2
Stan, Eminem	31.1	17.8	16.4	34.6	0.1
4 Seasons, Vivaldi	55.7	6.1	17.6	20.5	0.1
Einstein on Beach, Glass	3.3	2.7	10.5	83.4	0.1
Symphony 5, Mahler	19.3	6.1	21.1	53.2	0.3
Kind of Blue, Miles Davis	12.7	3.3	14.3	69.5	0.2
Oops, I Did it Again, Britney Spears	26.4	39.2	11.8	22.4	0.2

Source: Savage (2006, p. 164)

may also be interested in rock and jazz, as well as, to some extent, in heavy metal. But modern and contemporary serious music stands far apart on the map of musical preferences. Negative correlations with other genres are higher than in the case of classical music.

5 The Characteristics of the Audience of Contemporary Art Music

A more satisfactory way to study the audience of contemporary music is to perform a monographic survey devoted to one or to a set of specialized musical institutions. In the early 1980s, I surveyed the audience of Ensemble InterContemporain, a leading organisation in the distribution of modern and contemporary music founded by Pierre Boulez (Menger 1986). Another sociologist, Dorin (2013) surveyed it again 25 years later. Although the designs of the surveys were somewhat different, some of the results can be compared and display striking similarities in several important respects. After reporting some basic findings on key variables, I will mainly focus on a paradox brought to light by the first survey, and confirmed by the more recent one.

The empirical analysis of cultural practices and tastes approaches the consumption of art music through a series of inequalities: Among major cultural practices, attending classical concerts or opera performances concerns only a small minority of individuals, whose social status, level of general education and musical background (in terms of extensive learning and performing practice) is abnormally high. The characteristics of the audience of modern and contemporary art music combine the characteristics of the publics that appreciate all forms of contemporary art, with certain other traits that are more specific to the taste for classical and modern-classical music. This is where the three sources that feed the audience of modernity come from. As detailed in Table 6, a very large proportion of the public shares the socio-economic characteristics of the attendance of classical music concerts and opera houses: Members of professional, managerial and technical occupations are overwhelmingly overrepresented among the audience at EIC, with the added nuance that those who are acquainted with modernity have more often learnt and practiced music than the average listeners of classical music—two thirds of the members of the audience at EIC in 1983 and 57% in 2008 reported a strong musical instruction and high level of past or still active musical practice. As a second distinctive characteristic, the taste for contemporary music, like that for other contemporary art expressions and manifestations of the cultural avant-garde, is an insider tale: People from artistic, intellectual and academic occupations—musicians, composers and future music professionals, creators and professionals of other artistic spheres, as well as academics, researchers and teachers—count for more than one third of the audience. Finally, less commonly the frequentation of modernity is associated with preferences that are typically more eclectic in instances where, on the one hand, symbolic affinities for innovation are entwined with the values of progress, and on the other hand, the identification of competing aesthetics is entwined with the struggle of generations. Here preferences tend towards jazz and more sophisticated forms of popular music, and is opposed to the traditional taste for more classical music.

Table 6 Socioprofessional structure of EIC attendance in 1983 and 2008 (%)

	EIC audience 1983	French population 1983	EIC audience 2008	French population 2008
Farmers	0.0	6.3	0.0	2.0
Craftspeople, merchants, entrepreneurs	2.2	7.8	3.3	6.0
Artists, music, art, medi and publishing professionals	16.0	0.2	9.7	0.8
Teachers and professionals in secondary and higher education and research	27.3	1.6	25.9	3.0
Other higher managerial and professional occupations	30.2	6.8	52.7	12.3
Intermediate occupations	21.6	17.6	2.5	24.9
Clerical and domestic workers	2.3	26.9	5.4	28.4
Skilled and unskilled workers	0.1	32.9	0.5	22.6
Total	100	100	100	100

Percentages in population refer to people aged 15 and more

Source: Menger (1983a, b) and Dorin (2013) *Surveys of the public of EIC concerts* (subscribers and non-subscribers)

6 The Situation of the Listener: Resistance, Conditioning or Development?

The sociology of cultural consumption, as theorized by Bourdieu (1979, 1993), considers public resistance to artistic innovation to be mainly the product of the gap between the modes of perception required by new artworks, and the socially dominant forms of decoding for already established artworks. Put in another theoretical frame, the gulf represents the costs and delays innovations incur when challenging music performing, programming and listening conventions, before getting absorbed (Becker 1982). The periods of systematic and cumulative break between creators and the past only maintain, or worse, amplify the gap. This explanation is relativistic in that it imputes the totality of the delay in accepting novelty to the greater inertia of codes of perception, that is, the inertia of the social mechanisms of formation and distribution of cultural competencies.

From the previous analysis, we can deduce, as does Adorno (1975), a rigorous hierarchy of states and behaviour in listening and consumption. The pinnacle is a sort of high-unattainable ideal, occupied by certain rare professional musicians able to adequately perceive the content of contemporary composition. In this hierarchy, a small segment of the public acquires listening capacities through familiarity but without acquiring the necessary knowledge. The vast majority of listeners approach the modernity of their time and are forced to listen with ears that are insufficient, as most of their interest stems from an often superficial consumption of the information and symbols associated with the value of novelty, progress, modernity or contemporaneity. Moreover, their progress towards competence is not guaranteed because variety of experience takes precedence over thorough

understanding. But in spite of the slowness of its realisation, the socio-political ideal remains cultural democratisation, the conversion of the greatest number to the frequentation of art music, under the direction and control of professionals of creation and mediation.

The 'ecological' interpretation of resistance and conversion to musical innovation contrasts with the previous analysis. The most general and immediate cause often put forward for the failure of new works is based on a simple observation: The immediate acoustic environment is almost exclusively tonal, in both its elaborate forms (such as in classical music) and in its more basic forms (popular and ambient music, film and television scores, etc.). If this environment can condition the public, it is because individuals appear to be shaped and even paralysed by their habits. Logically the modification of this acoustic landscape would be enough to free these listeners from their stubborn and pernicious habits. In its radical form, this 'ecological' hypothesis would lead to abolishing the distinction between specialised creators and experts, on the one hand, and passive lay audiences, on the other. The latter would be hardly different from the former if we accept that they all share the capacity for creativity, which can be applied to doing as well as to listening, and which destroys the barriers between these two states, as long as it can be deployed outside cultural conditioning (for an extensive discussion of both views, see Menger 1983a).

A slow climbing to reach the knowledge that only specialists ever fully possess? Or the virtues of spontaneous perception enabling a freer approach to art because one is less encumbered by culture? Are these opposing figures of the ideal listener both pure utopias? Are they as dissimilar as the currents of creation that bet either on the systematic overcoming of the past—which requires the listener to have a rational accumulation of experience and knowledge and the progress of acculturation—or, on the contrary, on de-conditioning and the *tabula rasa*, as in electro-acoustic music? Or do they represent different segments of the actual audiences of contemporary music? Again, the study conducted in the early 1980s and replicated somewhat differently in the late 2000s will provide some answers.

From data gathered in 1983 on frequency and seniority in attendance, it appears that the audience of EIC concerts was made out of three different layers: One third of newcomers, around 40% of listeners with previous experience in contemporary music listening, and 30% of the regular public. Instead of just building on cross-sectional data of the social characteristics of the public, we have to turn to the dynamics of careers in musical consumption. Among newcomers, young people (especially students) and members of intermediate professions are slightly over-represented. Yet the newcomers' participation is volatile, and youth correlates positively with attendance intensity and seniority only for artists and to a lesser extent, for intellectual professions. Such a correlation helps delineate intermediary demand as contrasted with final, lay demand and it also gives clues about the underlying self-selection and self-reinforcement process at stake. Music is one of the best identified addictive cultural goods. Barriers of entry are high, but rewards are addictive for those who get hooked. It is no wonder that with the increase of seniority and frequency in musical participation the rate of artistic and intellectual

Table 7 Musical background (training, practice, concert participation) of EIC concertgoers (% of listeners in each segment)

	Newcomers at EIC	Listeners with some previous experience with EIC concerts	Regular listeners at EIC	Overall audience
Size of each segment	34.7	38.2	27.1	100.0
% out of 100 in each column				
No musical education	49.6	36.2	25.5	38.1
More than 6 years musical training	21.4	34.7	50.0	34.1
No practice of an instrument	42.3	31.0	18.6	31.7
Previous or current piano practice	23.0	40.0	50.0	36.8
Participation in 10 or more concerts during the last 12 months	34.4	39.7	63.0	44.4
No participation in any contemporary music concert during the last 12 months	75.2	60.4	36.4	59.1

Percentages to be read as follows: out of 100 newcomers, 49.6% have no musical education

Source: Menger (1983a, b), *Survey of the public of EIC concerts* (subscribers and non-subscribers)

professions rises. Table 7 details the explanatory factors of participation in EIC concerts that relate to previous musical experience.

Once listeners start attending contemporary music concerts, how can the organization keep them involved and induce loyalty? A high rate of subscription is the safest way cultural organizations have found to get cash in advance and to secure a significant share of their box office income as far as they can induce loyalty among their customers. It also gives them powerful means to influence their public's behavior and choices, by building series that combine inputs in order to meet their various goals (e.g. supporting new music and commissioning new works, building an audience, educating it, cooperating with sister ensembles).

When asked about the two main reasons (out of five) for subscribing to EIC concert series, subscribers of the core segment of the audience—that of professional, technical and managerial workers making up three quarters of the audience—rank the proposed items as reported in Table 8.

The rank order of the asserted reasons suggests that lay listeners, more than musicians, artists and art world professionals, predominantly play safe and hedge their bets. Novelty, especially when termed research, looks almost as appealing as discovery of new works by renowned contemporary composers. The so-called 'young composers' category is the familiar label for uncertain quality at its utmost. No wonder it ranks lower, with the exception for art professionals. The lowest rank given to 'the high level performance' motive may be interpreted as an indication of the reputation of the EIC whose standards of performance are renowned and self-evidently viewed as of the finest quality.

Table 8 Subscription motives of EIC concertgoers (% of listeners in each segment)

	Artists and art world professionals	Secondary school teachers	Higher education and research personnel	Public service executives	Engineers and senior technical personnel	Overall audience
Listen to new or unfamiliar works of renowned contemporary composers	46.8	59.8	48.9	46.5	0.6	50.7
Get information about recent musical research and attend their presentation	54.4	44.5	46.7	43.1	53.9	46.9
Get a better understanding of the classics of the twentieth century	32.9	45.2	48.9	44.8	48.3	46.8
Listen to works of young composers	51.9	35.8	36.7	46.5	0.3	38.4
Attend high level performances of twentieth century repertoire	25.3	17.5	18.9	0.2	14.6	18.6

Listeners had to choose a maximum of two reasons for subscribing and choosing concert series among the five proposed

Source: Menger (1983a, b), *Survey of the public of EIC concerts* (subscribers only)

7 New Music, Uncertainty and Potential for Dissatisfaction

Let us have another view of the ranking of subscription motives by assuming that the different kinds of music supplied by EIC can be ranked according to their potential for dissatisfaction. To get an idea of this potential, I asked people to report 'how easy or difficult do you feel it to discriminate among the various styles of contemporary music' (Table 9). Answers provide a rough index of aesthetic intelligibility as well as of the kind of ascetic benevolence required to a journey with contemporary music.

The results are stunning. Even within an audience of a high average social status and general education as well as strong musical education and consumption, about three quarters of the listeners express discomfort when it comes to find their way into the forest of modernity. This perplexity level decreases with seniority in attendance and only falls significantly for music professionals under 35 who take full advantage and satisfaction of playing the game of quality evaluation and stylistic categorization they are familiar with.

The difficulty to judge and discriminate has of course different meanings depending on a listener's background and expectations. What are the qualities that the different segments of the audience look for in the music? Roughly, lay

Table 9 Judgmental perplexity of EIC concertgoers

	Newcomers at EIC	Listeners with some previous experience with EIC concerts	Regular listeners at EIC	Overall
Size of each segment	34.7	38.2	27.1	100.0
Feel that the various styles of contemporary music are difficult or very difficult to discriminate	75.3	81.0	57.0	72.0

Percentages to be read as follows: out of 100 newcomers, 75.3 feel difficulties
 Source: Menger (1983a, b), *Survey of the public of EIC concerts* (subscribers and non-subscribers)

music lovers with longstanding familiarity with classical music above all wish that the freedom of invention didn't come at the cost of 'readability' or 'audibility' of the pieces, that is the clarity of their construction and perceptibility. Audience members whose preferences also go to jazz and/or pop, insist on the qualities of 'creativity', 'spontaneity', 'humor', and 'non-conformism' instead. As for the most competent listeners, those most familiar with modernity, they mention architectural complexity as the true reservoir of authentic and desirable innovation.

Furthermore, the organization itself has to balance its goals in order to avoid both the trap of excessive support of freshly composed music whose value is highly uncertain and to resist the opposite temptation of giving the lion's share of its programs to big names. Yet, how can it address the paradox of a large majority of a highly cultivated people admitting their perplexity when faced with the Babelian diversity of musical languages?

How do people react when experiencing perplexity? There are two ways to investigate this issue. First, one can study loyalty versus disaffection, on the basis of the behavior of subscribers who extend their investment or drop out. Table 10 documents the subscription renewal rate, controlling for the numbers of years of participation.

Attrition increases with age, other things being equal, with a critical turning point—a subscription renewed at least for 3 years is a clear signal of a sustained involvement. Half of the new subscribers are under 30, but this younger half represents only 1% of the listeners with a subscription seniority of 3 years and more.

The second evidence at hand comes from the survey of non-subscribers. Newcomers are on average younger and less familiar with new music and aesthetic research. For them, the "trial and error" consumption method applies, as is the case for all experience goods whose value and potential for gratification are unknown before consuming them. Actually, youth can be associated with the relative diversification of recruitment and its later centrifugation dynamics, as well as with the commitment to novelty (as is the case of young music professionals). Indeed, subscription as a pattern of consumption is avoided by artists, as well as art and media professionals, who quite often are invited and/or preserve their freedom of choice, without the constraints imposed by a subscription.

Table 10 Turnover rate among subscribers at EIC concerts

Number of years of subscription	Numbers of subscribers	Subscription renewal rate for 1982–1983 (%)
1 year	351	16.0
2 years	234	19.0
3 years	131	41.0
4 or 5 years	99	68.0
6 years and more	69	85.5

Source: Menger (1983a, b), *Survey of the public of EIC concerts* (subscribers and non-subscribers)

8 Exit, Voice or Loyalty?

Given that new music has a high potential for dissatisfaction (approximated by the high level of perplexity expressed), it is easy to understand the ‘exit’ option,³ which simply means dropping out more or less rapidly, or attending from time to time, as discussed previously.

The ‘voice’ option has largely disappeared: Very rarely do audiences protest and make noise today. Salient examples of past misplaced scandals are numerous and striking enough to de-legitimize those who may hope to be able to influence composers and bend their creative work. The history of the reception of new music in the twentieth century is marked by successes and scandals as spectacular as they are ephemeral. It was also marked by a passion for modernity which attained an unusual intensity in certain periods such as the end of the 1960s in Europe, for reasons that were inextricably aesthetic, social and political, at a time of social contesting against the capitalist system, student revolts, counter-culture utopias, and aesthetic wars between the Ancients and the Moderns which favoured the typical alliances between the artistic avant-garde, social movements and generational struggles (Menger 1983a). Does the fact that scandals have become more rare, as Adorno had noted already in the 1960s, mean that innovation is better tolerated, more rapidly accepted, or rather that it is simply neutralised because it is essentially situated in a separate sphere of evaluation? New music faces the same paradox as the other arts because of its subversive audacity, often directed against institutions. But nowadays, it is also widely subsidised by the state and distributed by public institutions, after having first been defended by independent organisations essentially supported by private sponsors such as *Domaine Musical* founded in 1953 by Pierre Boulez in Paris or the Austrian ensemble *Die Reihe* founded by Friedrich Cehra.

The ‘loyalty’ option is the only one that needs additional explanation to solve the paradox of an interest in modernity largely lacking direct support based on the ability to judge. How do listeners react when faced with new pieces that are, by definition, unequally interesting and have a strong ‘potential for disappointment’ because the historical filter has not yet selected the best? Faced with this modernity

³On exit, voice and loyalty options, see Hirschman (1970).

that is difficult to understand, do they react with a support that is durable or temporary and followed by disaffection? The public would thus be composed of a continually renewed flux of listeners, first attracted by novelty and then discontented, to the point where the audiences of these new pieces only result from rapid movements of attraction and repulsion. Surveys enable us to provide precise answers to these questions based on the reconstitution of consumption trajectories: Novice members, occasional ones who give up and committed ones.

Novice audiences are younger but less musically cultured than stable audiences: Many of them never learnt music and do not play an instrument. They are slightly more likely to be from the middle class than committed audience members. One can wonder whether the combination of these factors makes young listeners less exposed to classical musical culture, and more sensitive to the breaks in artistic innovation?

The recruitment of novices relies on two well-known cultural democratization mechanisms: The middle classes are slightly over-represented and average age of new entrants is much lower; this is especially due to the share of students among the group of novices. Better receptivity of young listeners to novelty and cultural innovation should not be confused with the myth of cultural virginity as the key factor enabling listeners to embrace avant-garde art music just because of their lack of musical instruction. Indeed, the data point to a self-selection process: Intensity of individual participation in contemporary music concerts positively correlates with higher educational and occupational status. To be more specific, the share of teachers, researchers, and of music, art and media professionals, increases with sustained attendance: Within that core segment, among three quarters are under 40 years of age. Youth can therefore be correlated both with higher diversity in the social composition of the audience, and greater social homogeneity as soon as consumption of contemporary music is seen through the lens of sustained participation and cumulative investment, referring then to the core segment of artistic and academic devotees.

Just as irregular audiences react with disaffection or sporadic attendance to the disorientation they feel when faced with new pieces, the more stable audience is made up of laypeople (in addition to professional musicians and artists) that are willing to demonstrate their loyalty even when facing long-lasting bewilderment. This is because they see themselves, and not the composers, as responsible for the breakdown in aesthetic communication and they confer enough value to the pieces to wager that the benefits of prolonged frequentation are able to bridge the gap between their current perception and the satisfaction of a perception improved through long-term investment. These listeners more readily identify new musical production with the search for new solutions to complex problems.

This principle is used by creators and cultural mediators to persuade the public that the paradox of lay consumption—an interest in modernity largely lacking direct support based on the ability to judge—is merely a necessary compromise dictated by the exploratory nature of aesthetic invention. Fundamentally, frequenting new pieces means also accepting to share the risks; the risk taken by the composer in search of successful originality must correspond to the risk of the listener, uncertain of the value of what will be heard. This pact requires the listener

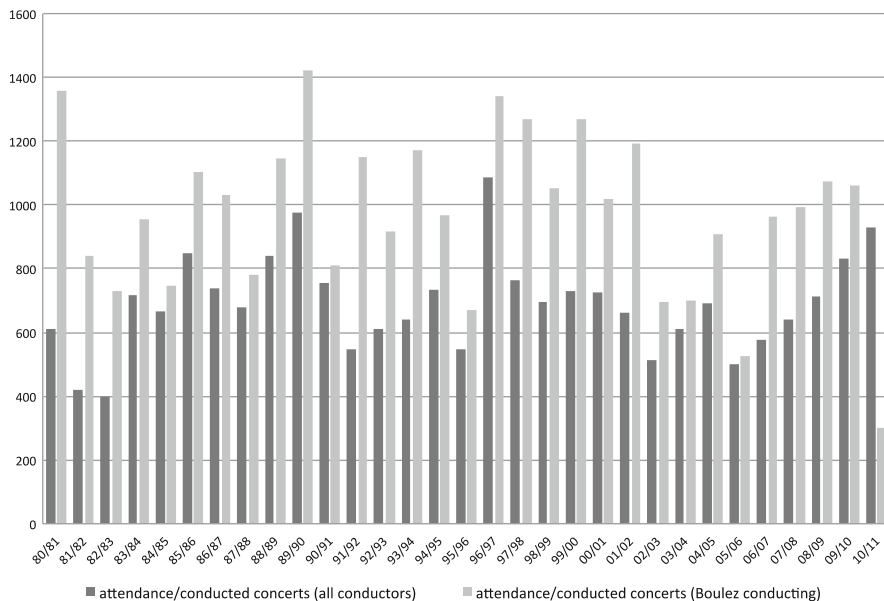


Fig. 1 Typology of programs and attendances (Source: Dorin 2013)

to suspend their judgment and possible immediate dissatisfaction, to endorse full responsibility for it instead of incriminating composers, and to gamble on a possible future satisfaction, that is a return on a committed participation (see Hirschman 1982, on the mechanism of self-ascription applying the psychoanalytic therapy situation). This wager would have little chance of being concluded if the public was not recruited primarily among artists and professionals in cultural spheres, teachers, researchers, engineers and students, and wasn't highly familiar with cultural and musical practices. Nor would it be efficient if the symbolic membership of an artistic cause (that of modernity) were not among the motives for satisfaction to be had from the listening to pieces of uncertain quality. Similarly, it would not work if institutions that obtained the largest audiences, beyond the professional circle, did not use a series of more or less didactic tools to keep the listener progressing, as well as some simple principles to efficiently keep people interested in novelty of uncertain value—such as mixed programs combining the performance of new or very recent compositions as well as modern classics and already established contemporary works, and the recourse to leading authorities such as Boulez, who acts as a guarantor in his double role of composer and conductor.

Some evidence supports this conclusion that can be found in the two following graphs drawn from Dorin's (2013) recent survey. With an audience getting older and in part better experienced (listeners under 35 represent 18% of the audience in 2008, as opposed to the 43.5% in the 1983 survey), the core content of the attractive 'safe modernity' has shifted from the masterpieces of the early modernity to those of second half of the twentieth century (Fig. 1). And Boulez's role as a guarantor

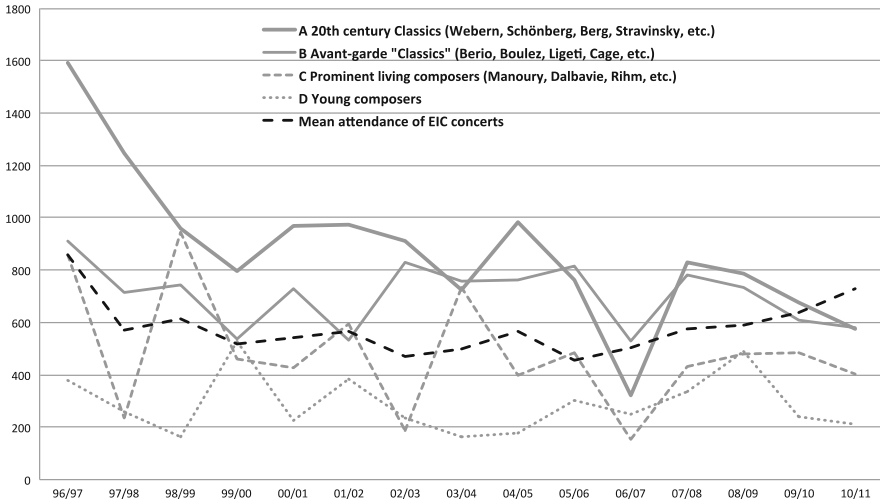


Fig. 2 Compared attendances at conducted concerts (Source: Dorin 2013)

certainly peaked in the 1980s and 1990s, during the first decades of the Ensemble’s career, then receding somewhat. This may suggest Boulez’s charisma became a routine, to speak like Max Weber, with diminishing returns of Boulez’s leadership to the organization. It certainly is an effect of his lesser involvement too, when Boulez turned 80 in 2005. Figure 2 compares attendance levels of concerts conducted by Boulez versus others.

In reality, the taste for new music is reinforced among all those who have a thorough knowledge of music or, failing that, can transfer onto it the symbolic values of intellectual invention and research to which they have been made sensitive through their education or professional activities. This is why those people who are durably interested in new music are above all found in intellectual and artistic professions, as well as in information, audio-visual and performance positions, and that their level of musical acculturation increases with the regularity of attendance. One result of these studies remains essential however: Committed audience members are more cultivated but also younger than occasional audience members. Their youth can thus be associated with the relative diversification of recruitment among the more uncertain and more versatile modes of consumption, as well as with the social homogenisation of the committed audience.

9 The Narrow Audience of Creation: An Eternal Law?

The uncertainty of immediate aesthetic evaluations and the risk taking associated with listening to new pieces must not be confused with the argument which, in order to motivate the suspension or the prudence of critical judgment on contemporary

production, invokes the failure of new works or composers in general, drawn from historical observation of artistic life. To say that the public's misunderstanding of innovators is nothing new is self-evident, but to say that it governs the history of music is a deceitful over-interpretation. If the scenario were eternally the same, if the discord were recurrent and thus eternally temporary, history would teach us nothing but its own repetition. Yet contexts change: Composers who were victims and then beneficiaries of much delayed consecrations do not have the same place in the musical sphere decades apart. The profile, the size and the meaning of the gap between supply and demand of music cannot be analysed only according to the formal scheme of the rule of a structural gap, no more than the preferences and reactions of the public can be easily compared from one period to another. If it were necessary to mention a decisive principle of variation in the behaviour of composers as well as audiences, it would be the idea that the space of choice, for both these groups, is under constant modification. This would confer on the aesthetic decisions of the former and the evaluations of the latter, properties and meanings that are fundamentally changing. In other words, the past, source of sacralisation of the contemporary creator, has not always been invariably governed by the consciousness of time that prevails today.

The existence of this space of choice is a reminder, for example, that before the musical revolutions of the twentieth century, a continuum had long existed between the different styles and spheres of musical production and consumption. It was thus frequent for a 'serious' composer to write in the light or functional genres and that among composers of the same period, or even in the production of a given composer, there co-existed several creative attitudes. The musical creation of the second part of the twentieth century was much more profoundly segmented; the attitude of systematic breaks and experimentation became the dominant norm in producing and evaluating the originality and excellence of compositions (Meyer 1967). It rapidly led creators seeking consecration to take position in the same segment of production, which was a new situation historically. That this segmentation was less radical in the last decade of the twentieth century than in the four decades that preceded it is sufficient to remind us that history is not a linear succession of breaks. It should also remind us that that the competition of different aesthetics may lead to returns to tonality, to formal minimalism, to stylistic syncretism, to the eclectic combination of compositional languages—before other radicalisms attempt to break down these paths of invention and their ambitions for more immediate seduction.

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