

Quicksand
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February 8, 2013
Updated March 27, 2015

In early December 2012, I sent out the following request to 30 or so colleagues throughout the music world:

In the spring of 2011 I dug out the notebook I had kept in 1972 as a freshman in Alvin Lucier's "Introduction to Experimental Music" class at Wesleyan University. (I posted a scan on my website before giving it to Alvin on his 80th birthday: www.nicolascollins.com/notebooks.htm). Reading these notes for the first time in almost 40 years was sobering. Lucier had exposed me to paradigm-shifting music at the exact moment when, in the words of David Behrman, "established techniques were thrown away and the nature of sound was dealt with from scratch". Behrman's *Wave Train*, Christian Wolff's *For 1, 2 or 3 People*, Steve Reich's *Come Out*, Pauline Oliveros' *I of IV*, David Tudor's *Rainforest*, Lucier's *I am sitting in a room*, Terry Riley's *In C*, Philip Glass' *Music in Parallel Fifths*, AMM, the AACM, and the Scratch Orchestra were all less than ten years old. As an 18-year old I was witnessing the birth of new musical genres that established – in the wake of John Cage -- the axioms on which much of the music of the subsequent decades was built.

Since then I have continued to hear great new pieces, but I have detected no shift in the fundamental terrain of music that rivals the magnitude of the changes that took place in the 60s and 70s. I find this admission more than a little depressing. I've been teaching in the Department of Sound at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago since 1999. Many of the faculty are of my generation and venerate the art movements of their youth. I worry that we have fallen prey to Douglas Adams' observation: "Anything that is in the world when you're born is normal and ordinary and is just a natural part of the way the world works. Anything that's invented between when you're fifteen and thirty-five is new and exciting and revolutionary and you can probably get a career in it. Anything invented after you're thirty-five is against the natural order of things" (*The Salmon of Doubt*, 2002.)

I now question whether the 60s-70s indeed represented a true paradigm shift whose repercussions we are still sorting through, or whether it was simply one change of many, all of more or less equal value, that have been scattered over the past fifty years, overshadowed by memories of my youth.

The adoption of the personal computer as an instrument by composers in the late 70s undoubtedly had a huge impact on music, but one could argue that its impact lay more in its transformation of the production and delivery of all music than in the nurturing or dissemination of specific new musical forms.

Pop music has spawned at least two identifiably new genres: Hip hop/Rap and Ambient Electronica. Rap represents a major musical innovation, with profound economic and social impact and Hip hop's nurturing of the turntable as a virtuosic instrument is significant as a harbinger of the rise of sampling and appropriation in Pop and "serious" music alike – a bellwether of post-Modernism. Ambient Electronica was deliciously contrary within the world of Pop (No beat! No lyrics!), but seems too firmly rooted in earlier Minimalism for me to regard it as all that innovative outside of the Pop context. DIY culture has emerged as an identifiable creative technological movement in the past decade (Dorkbot, Circuit Bending), but has yet to yield a distinctive body of music.

I don't want to fall into the Adams malaise. I know I would never have become a composer if Lucier had been playing music that was 40 years old. So, for the sake of my students, not to mention my own gnawing curiosity, I am searching – not just for individual pieces of good music, but for a collection of pieces or a coalition of artists that, taken together, suggest something bigger: a movement that is striving to change something fundamental about how we experience music.

I need your help. You all understand my musical roots, but still embrace innovation. Many of you teach, and may share my pedagogical anxiety; or you curate, and feel my ennui. Some of you are young enough that you have a healthy distance on the epoch I can't seem to escape. So tell me what I'm missing, or how I'm undervaluing what I hear. Show me a sign of a Next Big Thing, or the Last Big Thing I didn't notice; some flicker of a paradigm shift; an artist, collective, festival, concert space or label that might change the musical world. Show me where I got it wrong.

Had I given this text a few more read-throughs I would have inserted a few clarifications:

I am very aware that my memories and paradigmization (to coin a phrase) of that epoch are highly colored by my race, gender, nationality and stylistic preferences, in addition to my age.

My comments of pop music innovation are cursory.

Usually my ear and eye are drawn to incremental change and individual expression, rather than movements; this email grew out of an unusual moment of pullback to consider larger historical trends.

I would greatly prefer to be proven wrong: I don't want to accept that paradigm shift has a place in culture, but I want the evidence clearly refuted.

Some form of mild mid-life crisis was undoubtedly a factor prompting my broadcast of this plea, exacerbated by being surrounded by the young people I teach. But the catalyst was an October 2011 New York Times review of a concert in the SONiC Festival, in which Anthony Tomasini exalted “young composer today, born after the stylistic battles that stultified creativity during the 1960s and 1970s”. The article festered for a year: could it be that, as a victim of Adams’ Syndrome, I not only had dismissed innovations of the past decades as being against the natural order of things, but actually misread the stultified creativity of my youth as something gloriously promising? I had to know how far off the mark I had strayed. Hence my screed.

I got responses from about a dozen recipients; several of them instigated a back and forth of emails as we ran various topics to ground.

Ben Neill suggested that, “‘the next big thing’ is the democratization and the socialization of the process of making art and music.” This, of course, has been touted as the promise of the web for years, and we are beginning to see some evidence. Ben echoed comments made by Paula Matthusen a year previous, in a conversation about these concerns: that social networks and file sharing represented huge cultural changes, with profound musical implications. I agree with this assessment, but neither Ben nor Paula could point to a specific “masterpiece” that has emerged from this new social-technological environment – the contemporary equivalent of *In C* or *Come Out*, for example (works one might regard as similarly rooted in the democratization of tape recorders in that previous era).

It may well be that our new digital tools herald the end of the masterpiece – or at least of our ability to discern a masterpiece within the flood of music being made and distributed so effortlessly. I remember hearing Arto Lindsay in 1999 compare the current music scene to that of 1980: “If you worked at Soho Music Gallery [a record store where Lindsay, John Zorn, and many other musicians worked at the time] you could be pretty sure of hearing every interesting new record that came out; today, well, I’m a music junkie and I buy *way* too many CDs, but still I hear only a fraction of what’s out there.” It’s getting more difficult to pluck the signal from the noise. The next big thing may be doing a very good job of hiding itself. As art historian Susan Tallman observes, YouTube can be seen as a fulfillment of the Fluxus creed that “everyone is an artist” -- only now these activities are so integrated into everyday life that they are no longer identified as “art.”

Several of my respondents suggested I extend my golden moment backward or forward a few years, to place it in a larger context. Kyle Gann wrote:

The nature of music certainly broadened commendably at that point [1960s-70s], but for me the important issues didn’t fundamentally change. If anything, I would say that, if serialism represented a temporary rightward detour from music’s gently curving trajectory, the Cage-Lucier-Tudor-Oliveros shift seemed, to me, an equally temporary, if entirely welcome and compensatory, leftward detour. As a historian, in fact, I have

tended to explain the explosion in American music in the 60s as the resurgence of an American aesthetic born in the 1920s that had been swamped by the deluge of European composers who came here to escape the Nazis. I was excited about *Piano Phase* and *Vespers*, but I really only saw them as the beginning of something that had potential for future development, not as great victories in themselves. I tend to think about music in centuries rather than decades. What I did get completely sucked into was minimalism, and I felt sure that all music would turn in that direction. But I also rather quickly connected minimalism to the 40s quiet music of Cage and Harrison, and beyond that to Henry Cowell's *New Musical Resources* and Erik Satie, and even Nancarrow. The newness of it all wasn't more important to me than its historical connections, which, for me, helped validate it.

While David Toop's take was:

As I get older I realise that the innovations of early modernism were far more complex than we thought, having their roots not only in the European and American avant-garde but in the strange symbiotic, unbalanced relationships and consequences of colonialism and global industrialisation. Whatever would have developed out of that misunderstood hybridisation was cut apart by World War II, the ending of which unleashed a wave of creative destruction. When we talk about the 60s and 70s (interminably) we are actually talking about the 1940s and 50s, a 15-year period that is overlooked while accounts of the 60s and 70s are overcooked.

Toop was also one of several friends who tried to discourage me from obsessing about movements and paradigm shifts:

The framework of thought that is drawn to movements is faulty, I believe, always looking for the next big thing and consequently missing the flow of invention happening right now, or yesterday, often in isolation or anomaly. I would suggest that many of those revered pieces that have become canonical are not as good as we thought they were but if we grew up thinking of them as breakthrough works then we are unable to hear them clearly. We are in no position to compare them with anything new because they have become set, as frozen revelations....it's a common mindset in those of a certain age.

I am shocked by the easy acceptance...that experimental music was somehow synonymous, in large part, with a small group of white men from the USA. Now we are consumed by the brilliance of this canonical group, consumed by nostalgia for what they achieved, and yet they were part of a continuum, a much wider and far more complicated picture that is interesting for its connections rather than its heroes.

As educators, artists, musicians, composers, writers, whatever, we have to get our head out of this quicksand that the wretched 1960s has dumped in

our paths and get to work. It's a different kind of excitement, a different way of reaching an audience, a different kind of practice. Often it's small but that was true when I started out. The way we perceive the world is changing, or has been changed, so the experience of listening is different. It's not about heroes, or canonical works, or paradigm shifts; that's all retrogressive, as far as I'm concerned. You just have individuals and groups doing wonderful work and not-so-wonderful work, some of which gets remembered and some of which doesn't... This kind of underground movement is always going on, sometimes rising to the surface and perceived as a paradigm shift, sometimes vanishing or being suppressed by political or market forces.

In March 2015, as part of a conference on "Noise in Music" at Greenwich University (UK), I sat down on stage with Toop for a "conversation" that used this essay as a starting point. He was quick to take me to task on several perceived weaknesses in my thesis. He reiterated his observations that my musical worldview was limited almost exclusively to white American males, and stressed that during the same period of his life he was deeply engaged with music of India, Southeast Asia, and other non-Western cultures: "this music was more meaningful to me than the works you describe." I acknowledged my myopia, but – sadly – at that time power and influence across domains lay in those soft white hands (as it still largely does).

The issue for me remains not how passionately certain music is loved by any one consumer, but rather how influential that music is on a large number of creators. In research science the impact of a particular paper can be gauged by the number of times it is cited, yielding a potentially useful metric for evaluating paradigm shift. But artistic influence is less quantifiable – the closest we get to such a metric might be the proliferation of a name coined to describe a new style: Minimalism, Punk and Hip Hop have had an impact proportional to the familiarity of these terms, in contrast to Maximalism, 16rpm and Chap Hop.

Bob Ostertag shared some of Toop's reservations:

The idea of huge paradigm shifts requires a huge paradigm: a single narrative of musical development that extends over generations and in regard to which a large number of people think it matters whether its course is "shifted" or not. We don't have that any more. I would say that the generation that inspired you was the last generation to be part of a paradigm that people cared about. Cage's music caused outrage. Can you imagine anything that would cause outrage now?

We now have a vast terrain of hugely varied stuff. I think your statement that Hip hop/Rap and Ambient Electronica are the two identifiable new genres to emerge is a pretty big understatement. I guess I would also venture that nothing is going to "change this musical world," as you say, because it is simply too diffuse. I might also venture that endeavors in this new terrain that garner attention are going to have less to do with, say, what sort of musical resources are valid (as in: can noise be music? can

silence be music? can a circuit be a score, etc.), and more to do with the nature of this diffuse new world itself.

Mark Trayle, on the other hand, acknowledged that there was something special about the music of the epoch I describe, but he puts it in the broader social and political context. In contrasting subsequent musical movements, Trayle (perhaps unwittingly) echoes Simon Reynold's recent book, *Retromania*:

That music came out of a history of revolution against the common practice period of music. A long history of small stretchings of the envelope of what could be considered good and proper music saw a period of exponential development from Strauss (R., not J.) to Schoenberg to Cage. Then the curve went pretty much straight up after the atom bomb. Cage vaporized the score. Racial tension exploded in the US. Radical Marxist actions panicked Europe. Etcetera, etcetera. A period of political and cultural revolution kicked in that gave us the great music you name below. And don't forget about pop music: revolution, amplification, and drugs combined to energize the Summer of Love and the events of May 1968.

Generally the students love the music we loved, and it can influence them profoundly. It's still powerful stuff. But I would say that my students have zero connection to the symphony orchestra or common practice, to the notion of their work being an outgrowth of the revolutionary period of Western classical music. The problem now is...what is there to oppose? There is no common practice. There is an endless bifurcation and recycling of styles and genres. I think it's most visible in pop music. I listen to a lot of radio because I commute in the car. I've heard three or four rehashings and slight modifications of Phil Spector's girl groups. I've heard punk reinvented numerous times. I've heard bands that sound like other bands from just 10 years ago, with no nod at all to that history. I've heard new terms for genres such as "chill-wave", "shoe gaze", etc. etc. I remember when pop music took over the term "new music"... that was during the late 80s. Recently I heard a band interviewed on the radio and they said they were listening to a lot of "experimental music", by which they meant experimental pop. The ability of popular culture to shape-shift and territorialize other musics, aided by the immediacy of the internet, is truly amazing.

I think this shape-shifting obtains in whatever you'd like to call "our" realm of music, though not to such an extent (I blame it on a lack of marketing expertise). And there are so many young practitioners in this area. I don't think there are any "stars" with the staying power of a Lucier or an Ashley or a Reich. I don't think anyone's making The Next Big Thing, and I don't think they particularly care to. There are just momentary flashes of brilliance in a larger social network of people making music. Kids are doing it for themselves without the notion of contributing something revolutionary to the history of music... because there IS no music history anymore. The energy of revolution is diffused

across a million Facebook, Soundcloud, and Bandcamp pages, hundreds of 'experimental' labels. I think that thousands of small revolutions can be more interesting than one big one. It makes for a very colorful sonic universe.

Or, as Veniero Rizzardi put it, “a change is happening, but nowhere we are expecting it.” Rizzardi also repeats Trayle’s observation of the relationship that students have to the music of that earlier epoch:

I see many young people (say, under 30) who tend to have the same references we have, in pop as well in art music; in other words they are nostalgic of some revolution that happened at a certain historical point, and believe that it would never happen again. Be this a narrative of some sort, it is nevertheless shared by generations that came after us. We are probably a very special generation, and this may be our real problem.

Where most of my respondents chose to focus on big issues and movements, Dan Wolf and Andrew Raffo Dewar opted to provide listening lists of “stuff since the 80s...where energy and invention exist” (Wolf’s words). This list included algorithmic composition, neo-minimalists, homemade instruments and amateur performance, alternative tunings and spectral experiments – all interesting, but familiar enough to me already. The kicker was his inclusion of Sound Design (I don't know how I neglected to credit this rapidly developing field in my caveat paragraph where I gave lip service to Hip Hop):

Sound design in major films. Here is the real future of complexity and polyphony in music. What Ren Klyce did in *The Social Network*, for example. "Serious" composers make do with four channels of sound. Film sound editors begin with 64, then start layers in multiples of 64. We can't even begin to compete.

Wolf also contributed an excellent inventory of “lost opportunities”-- technologies and genres that, like the hologram, just haven’t lived up to their promise or hype: laptop ensembles and network music; sound installations that are little more than tape playback; sampling and Plunderphonics; Pop’s obsession with recycling its past (see Simon Reynolds once again); the dearth of post-Wolff/Zorn game-based improvisation.

Otomo Yoshihide and Adachi Tomomi focused on the social aspect of large-scale musical shifts. In Otomo’s words (as told to Clive Bell):

Focusing on the state of the music in the last moment before it is recognised as a language by the musicians and listeners. The great thing about these experiments is that while they ask bold and essential questions, they maintain an everyday stance. They’re conducted in the company of the audience, just as one might have lunch with a group of friends.

Or as Adachi observes, the musical changes of the late 1960s and early 70s should be seen as a manifestation of the large-scale social changes taking place across the globe at that time, rather than as an isolated artistic movement.

Gann contributed one unexpected takeaway to the conversation. In explaining why my list of landmark compositions didn't line up exactly with his, he made the following observation on the role of technology in the music:

In the '70s the definition of music didn't shift for me as radically as it did for you. One reason is that I never had nearly as much talent for technology as you have. The advent of personal electronics opened up an exit off the musical highway that led to "sound art," if that is still a category, and hundreds of composers poured into it. I was excited to discover it as a listener, and still admire it, but that exit wasn't open for me. I tried punching IBM cards and later got into MIDI, but the magic of natural sound didn't emerge when I touched the machines. As a result, years after Lucier changed your life, I was still writing notes on paper with a pencil much as Brahms had.

After years of struggling with the definition, history and context of Sound Art I find Gann's image of an "exit ramp" an extremely compelling and useful insight.

What did I learn from all this?

- Anthony Tomasini is wrong. Far from being stultified, creativity flourished during the 1960s and 1970s. As Trayle and Rizzardi observe, those landmark pieces are still loved and continue to have relevance and influence half a century on. This relevance sets this music apart from the "serious" music that was 50 years old at the time I was a student (Schoenberg, Vaughn Williams, Strauss, Sibelius), much the way the Beatles proliferate on playlists today while vaudeville does not.
- Douglas Adams and David Toop are right. I am in no position to compare those iconic pieces with anything new because "they have become set, as frozen revelations....it's a common mindset in those of a certain age" (i.e., over 35.) This mindset obscures the fact that some "kind of underground movement is always going on, sometimes rising to the surface and perceived as a paradigm shift, sometimes vanishing." In *Love Goes to Buildings on Fire – Five Years in New York That Changed Music Forever*, his recent book on music of the 1970s, Will Hermes quotes Dave Longstreth, of the band Dirty Projectors, comparing the Brooklyn music scene of the 2000s to "making classical music in the teens and twenties, or making jazz in the sixties...I feel lucky to be involved in it." It sounds just like me talking about my time as a student of Lucier. As Veniero Rizzardi said, "Be this a narrative of some sort, it is nevertheless shared by generations that came after us."
- That said, the odds of witnessing another major paradigm shift in music

are getting slimmer with technology's increasing "democratization and the socialization of the process of making art and music" (Ben Neill.) And, as Bob Ostertag observed, we no longer have "a single narrative of musical development that extends over generations and in regard to which a large number of people think it matters whether its course is 'shifted' or not." In Toop's words, it's no longer "about heroes, or canonical works, or paradigm shifts ... we now have a vast terrain of hugely varied stuff."

These conclusions leaving me feeling humbled, and a wee bit embarrassed, but satisfied enough to put my Big Questions aside after so many months of musing. Jonathan Chen's initial reaction to my screed was, "how do these issues impact your creativity?" I answered, "not at all – it's a historical and philosophical question." To which he replied, "then it seems to me to be inconsequential (short answer)." Maybe he's right. In any case, it's time to get my head out of this quicksand, as Toop admonished, and go back to work. My sincerest thanks to those who took the time to read my rant and reply – it's been a valuable education.