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A precious idiosyncrasy – musical quality and its assessment

A means of exclusion

One of the most powerful instruments for exclusion in the arts is the argument of quality. As a binary alternative between good and bad, it holds such power because the criteria are obscure, implicit and shifting. In its original meaning a notion of multifariousness meaning 'character, disposition, particular property, feature, kind', it has mutated to an instrument of generalised binary division. This relegates any Other to the function of the confirming opposite of the Self: there is no 'good' without an opposed reference point of a 'bad'.

It is only quite recently that an awareness of the need for fair representation has prevailed in the field of music. This shift has allowed many formerly marginalised and excluded groups to gain access to the stages and reach wider visibility, and has also contributed to a greater diversity amongst the public. It is a sudden and positive moment of self-evaluation which goes along with interesting theoretical reflections entrenched in feminist theory, post-colonial studies, and a critical approach to the philosophy of technology. Yet, whilst there might be better and more just representation and a fresh wind of change, I want to sound a critical note: programming more women and people of colour might not make a real change as long as we don't ask what this does to the music itself. And while I think it's useful to start a necessary shift by means of formal tools (such as quota), we need to make sure that ultimately the paradigm shift happens on the artistic level. Only then a variety of possibilities of creativity in form, content, and practices will open up and become available for all. Ultimately, this must be a quest on how shared values are expressed through art, as Claire Bishop states: 'the assumption that value judgements are necessary […] as a way to understand and clarify our shared values at a given historical moment.'[1]

To develop a notion of quality, it is necessary to make judgements and to disenfranchise the notion we need to understand the mechanisms behind it. In this article, I argue for this necessity, and look for alternatives to the binary model, and how those might be applicable within the specificities of the sonic realm. While visual and textual arts have related to the strong feminist stances of the 1970s, the musical field for the longest time has considered itself to be unpolitical – 'just tones' – and chances to revitalise were missed, especially in Western art music. Susan McClary notes in the foreword to her 1991 book *Feminine Endings*: 'it almost seems that musicology managed miraculously to pass directly from pre- to postfeminism without ever having to change – or even to examine – its ways.'[2] Having missed this important historical impulse, today it is still unclear in what way sound and music are related to social and political realities.

It is therefore not accidental that the following reflection by writer Lucy Lippard, contesting the stance that the identity (including gender) of the artist is irrelevant to the artwork, has its roots in the realm of the visual arts of the 1970s, although it is obviously valid for sound and music too:

> Art has no gender, but artists do. We are only now recognizing that those 'stereotypes', those emphases on female experience, are positive, not negative, characteristics. It is not the quality of our femaleness that is inferior, but the quality of a society that has produced such a viewpoint. To deny one's sex is to deny a large part of where art comes from. [...] Art that is unrelated to the person who made it and to the culture that produced it is no more than decorative.[3]

The correlation that Lippard points out is more difficult to demonstrate in music because a culture that philosophically connects to the visual (including the visuality of text) offers no leverage to recognise it in connection to the sonic. When there are no images or words, we don't precisely know where in the music concrete parts of reality, like identity of the maker or context, might materialise, which also means that its qualities

stay unclear. Or, put another way, if we acknowledge the relation sound and music have with reality, we need to change the way we speak about its quality.

Music speaks: cultural mediation

Used without clarifying its criteria, the argument of quality holds the status of a myth with the power to in- or exclude. It influences decisions on what music is funded, distributed, programmed, canon-worthy – or condescended to, ignored and forgotten. A number of recently 'discovered', formerly marginalised female and/or racialised composers can serve as examples of this mechanism. During their lifetime or at a younger age, a set of criteria of quality which weren't made explicit have then excluded them. But often – setting aside the formal category of Otherness – the criteria which give their music audibility now are equally implicit, and the frameworks for artistic or aesthetic validation remain very arbitrary. In my opinion, if the applied criteria are not made transparent and their use clarified, the same problem will be repeated and the emancipation of the musical field will stay at a surface level. Clarification will offer the chance to reinvigorate the field, its aesthetics and practices, and implement the diversity of the makers in a sustainable way.

Quality in all its ambiguity is a prerequisite for inclusion in the canon, which in turn will set its own framework. 'Canonicity exerts tremendous cultural power, because it creates a narrative of the past and a template for the future', summarises musicologist Marcia Citron.[4] She explains how in the field of Western art music, rooted in the body-mind division of the Enlightenment, non-functionality became a primary value, with the author and the oeuvre as its representatives. Behind this assumption lies the idea that music is abstract and not concerned with societal or political matters, since it doesn't work within a visual or textual framework; its ways to express cultural or ideological values stay elusive. Susan McClary has shown that this is a false assumption which doesn't take into account sound's specific force of mediation, notably via the body, emotion, intuition, and memory, and how this level of communication holds great power. She explains how music operates under the radar – incognito, as it were – and is extremely effective in this way.

> The organisation of sexuality, the construction of gender, [and] the arousal and channelling of desire [...], music may perform these functions even more effectively than other media. Since few listeners know how to explain how it creates its effects, music gives the illusion of operating independently of cultural mediation.[5]

Underlying this mediation are musical idioms that are kept operative between members of a community. This is not abstract but closely related to ideologies that a society agrees upon – be it implicitly – at a certain point in history.

> Like any social discourse, music is meaningful precisely insofar as at least some people believe that it is and act in accordance with that belief. Meaning is not inherent in music, but neither is it in language: both are activities that are kept afloat only because communities of people invest in them, agree collectively that their signs serve as valid currency.[6]

Even today, understanding this correlation does not seem an urgency for our field, due in large part to the massive visual and textual communication about and around sound and music: the words of a song, video-clips, professionally staged photo-shoots, the visuality of sound- and music software, etc. are ubiquitous. Music without words or imagery then appears as rather 'niche', confusing because too abstract, elitist or aloof – again, without clarifying these criteria of quality.

The importance of judgement

Prioritising identity categories, while potentially a useful tool for change, can result in the assessment of the music itself becoming ambiguous and unstable. Where the diversity of makers and music, and the importance of context are acknowledged, a different set of criteria needs to be put into use, which can't be read through the good-versus-bad framework, and which sometimes seems to only be peripherally linked to music. Music stemming from different contexts than we are familiar with, requires another openness, and a listening attitude without expectation, but still a concentration on the aesthetics of the music itself.

To understand the mechanisms behind judgements, I turn to Hannah Arendt, who has spelled out how judging is a political responsibility. Arendt defines politics as action directed at structuring and organising the living together of people, of our communality. It is concerned with people in their human plurality, which is manifested in both their equality and diversity. Part of this are shared moral standards and hierarchies of values, defined within a web of human interconnections. This is summarised in the following quote from *Vita Activa/The Human Condition*:

> The realm of human affairs consists of the web of human relationships which exists wherever men live together. The disclosure of the 'who' through speech, and the setting of a new beginning through action, always fall into an already existing web where their immediate consequences can be felt.[7]

With this as a condition in mind, Arendt explains how making judgements is an important constituent of the appearance in, and construction of, the political realm. Humans depend on others, not only in their physical needs, but especially for the life of their minds. Taste and opinions reveal the unicity of a person, and in this way creates kinship at the same time. For Arendt, making judgements is a way to shape the shared world, and abstinence from judgement is equal to foregoing this responsibility, which will keep the status quo in place.

To make a judgement, a group of people will debate their opinions, and that is a collective, shared activity, for which certain human features and processes are necessary, such as

common sense, enlarged mentality, and imagination. The most important instance for the rendering of judgements, however, are the spectators: they make meaning of what has happened, after the events have taken place. Spectators are a heterogeneous plural: they are not involved in the act, but are always involved with fellow spectators. They represent a multitude of perspectives, and as such the shared world.

This emphasis on intersubjectivity, on the 'necessary other', echoes the focus on ways and methods of listening in music over the last 70 years, for a large part triggered by the possibilities of self-observation which sound-reproducing technology has offered. This focus on auditory perception highlights how meaning and quality are created in the minds and bodies of the listeners, and how this depends on an individual momentary mental disposition, on memories and associations, as well as on the listening environment, something that composer Éliane Radigue never ceases to emphasise:

> Listening is the method for obtaining the availability [...] which is the openness towards what sounds are telling us. [...] It's the quality of the listening one brings to sound that makes it perceptible; it's the listening that makes it our own, according to the quality of our attention. If you open your body and your mind to listening with an active attitude, you will draw out very specific things. The condition for listening is obviously different according to the point in time, according to one's state of mind. That's the mirror effect, it's a reflection of one's state of mind in that moment. There exists a means of listening to any sound and making music of it.[8]

In other words, while musicians are actively creating the events, it's the listeners who make sense of what they heard through their judgements, and are free to define and discuss parameters of aesthetic value. Jennifer Lynn Stoever takes this consideration even further in its political relevance and explains how sound is 'read', interpreted within a set of subjective frameworks of personal and cultural experiences: 'An aural complement and interlocutor of the gaze, the listening ear is what Judith Butler calls "a constitutive constraint": a socially constructed ideological system producing but also regulating cultural ideas about sound.'[9]

The Other, *an* other

The problem with judgement as we know it is its binary principle wherever categories are applied. The corrective step away from the idea that the reality of makers is unrelated to their music allows for their identity to be respected, revealed and contextualised, with room for more diversity and inclusion. Often however, 'other' becomes yet another binary category, without respect for the importance of the uniqueness of maker, work, and situation.

Philosopher Adriana Cavarero considers this a consequence of philosophy's striving to generalise. She builds on Hannah Arendt's idea of intersubjectivity in the form of the necessary other, to validate uniqueness, and to create a bond between uniqueness and intersubjectivity. Cavarero sees narration as a useful tool to give shape to this rationality. As a typically female sphere it is opposed to the universalising tradition of philosophy:

> [P]hilosophy ought to be more cautious in playing around with the endless game of the other. By continuing to transport the category of alterity into the intimacy of the self, contemporary philosophy in fact produces the inevitable consequence of impeding every serious naming of the other in so far as he/ she is *an* other.[10]

A unique other is a counterpart, not a category, and is defined through natality, the fact of being born into an existing world, and the trace that is left through narration. Together, both observing and retelling create the intersubjectivity in an objective shared world that keeps our culture alive. Cavarero states that 'unlike philosophy, which for millennia has persisted in capturing the universal in the trap of definition, narration reveals the finite in its fragile uniqueness.'[11] This would also mean that uniqueness can't be controlled. It is a gift, depending on a multiplicity of factors within the web of the shared world. It can be only described, not prescribed: 'the uniqueness which pertains to the proper is always a given, a gift.'[12]

A curatorial dilemma

Here arises a curatorial problem: how can a model for quality for what is 'good music' integrate uniqueness and subjectivity, and at the same time comply with a general validity of quality assessment?

The circular movement between listening and playing, between composer, performer and public also includes the curators, and at a quite specific place in that fabric artist-organisers as well, artists who consider it part of their creative practice to facilitate interaction and exchange with fellow artists. Here a tension can easily arise between the wish and advocacy for diversity in the field, and the need to be able to connect to the work of others within the scope of a personal artistic practice. Judgement might then become a balancing act between extending the horizon and losing the feeling of being affectively involved. It can help to remind oneself that there are many modes of listening: from a simple curiosity, to actively getting involved, to strong identification. Contextualising or changing formats can help to change listening and judgement habits and can be an effective tool for organisers. In the process, we too are listeners and can observe our listening habits and broaden our emotional horizons.

The autonomy of the sonic sphere

The importance of, and respect for, uniqueness as a prerequisite for determining the quality of music is complicated by the means by which it is conveyed: sound. Cavarero exemplifies this correlation by means of the voice, which is located in an in-between space: between sound and meaning, between body, mind and logos, between people as a natural multiplicity.

Especially highlighted in voice are both its uniqueness – which is necessarily an embodied and therefore sexed uniqueness – as well as its reciprocity. Cavarero underlines the materiality of the acoustic sphere, and with it the element of corporeal pleasure, in contrast to ideas of music as being immaterial or abstract.[13]

In the philosophic tradition of the West, the voice has been relegated to the service role of carrier of thought and speech. In this way, Cavarero says, 'where the sonic is captured in a system of signification, philosophy refuses to concede to the vocal any value that would be independent of the semantic.'[14] Such an independence would necessarily bring to the forefront qualities proper to the agency of sound: sound is resonance and acoustic relation, dynamic, physical, transient, ephemeral and time-based, depending on bodies in a reciprocity of emitting and receiving.

The fact that Éliane Radigue opts for oral transmission as a complement to listening in her compositional practice does not come as a surprise then. It is a tool which respects the autonomy of the sonic and enables a direct dialogue between composer and performer, without the interference of the authority of the visual score. Within the shared musical experience hierarchies are suspended, such as between composer and performer, listening and speaking, technology and nature, modulation and resolution. The musical work becomes a matter of responsibility and reciprocity, rather than of control and expectations. The process subsequently extends to the listener, as a communal collective or intimate experience by means of the sounding object. This 'object' can't however be looked at and its quality assessed in this way – it can't be self-explanatory. Its specific quality is always in-between and elusive and not in the object itself.

Autotheory: subjectivity does not equate to narcissism

This idiosyncratic temporary meeting between those who are involved in musical creation – listeners, performers, composers, curators – through the sonic is unique and subjective. However, subjectivity is traditionally viewed obliquely when it comes to musical creation. As Marcia Citron explains, it is precisely in the name of non-functionality, which is high up in the quality hierarchies, that overcoming the subjective, the here and now, is traditionally taught as a goal in music education.

Lauren Fournier has developed the method of autotheory to value the subjective in the arts. It implies a circular shuttling between the personal 'auto' and the larger perspective of the 'theory'. The goal is to validate the relevance of the subjective experience in the arts, designed to hold up a mirror to society. Fournier points out that the personal has too often been dismissed as narcissism in the past, especially in the case of female and racialised artists, as they have been 'particularly vulnerable to charges of narcissism [by their being] historically overdetermined by their bodies-in contrast.'[15]

> [There is a] distinction between 'narcissism', on the one hand, and 'selfawareness' on the other, the two being, by the logic of this statement, mutually exclusive. In contrast to the uncritical narcissist, lacking in cognizant selfreflexivity […], is the self-aware person. By being conscious of what they are doing, the person who is self-aware is a different animal from the person who is not aware of their self-looking – namely, the narcissist.[16]

In this sense, autotheory is a method rather than a set of applicable criteria which, although developed in the framework of visual culture and literary studies, can be equally useful to reflect on quality in the realm of the sonic.

> Through its fundamental shuttling between the autobiographical and the theoretical, the self-reflective and the critical, and through its knowing complication of the lines dividing 'theory' from 'autobiography' and both from 'fiction', autotheory provides new insight into these long-standing and ongoing problems related to narcissism and the autos in theory and philosophy.[17]

As a method, autotheory works against the binary, revealing 'the tenuousness of maintaining illusory separations between art and life, theory and practice, work and the self, research and motivation, just as feminist artists and scholars have long argued.'[18]

It is a fitting method when working with sound, which is dynamic, oscillating, unstable, a method which resonates with the qualities that are inherent to sound as an artistic medium.

A precious idiosyncrasy (conclusion)

How to reshape the idea of what quality could mean in the field of sound and music, if we want it to be an instrument to diversity and for a richer source of creativity - this has been a long standing, and continuing, investigation for me.

A deeper exploration of this question means that some seemingly self-evident conditions for judgements on quality need to be scrutinised. Next to learning to think outside of the binary 'good-versus-bad' quality model, the notions of uniqueness and the specificity of the sonic as means for cultural mediation need to be integrated. Qualities can be many things, and can be a dynamic and self-determined set of features which can be adapted to maker, context and functionality. However, they need to be made transparent. In this way, making judgements can become a positive act of self-determination, constitutive for the culture we want to exist in; judging itself does not create exclusion, rather it is the way we judge. Sharing music creates a very special bond between people. In order to preserve this precious idiosyncrasy, we might limit ourselves to describing its qualities rather than expecting a fulfilment of fixed criteria. ■

1 Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells – Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London/New York: Verso, 2012), 8.

2 Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 5.

3 Lucy Lippard, *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Essays of Feminist Art* (New York: The New Press, 1978/1995), 82.

4 Marcia J. Citron, *Gender and the Musical Canon* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 1.

5 McClary, *Feminine Endings,* 53.

6 Ibid., 21.

7 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 183.

8 Julia Eckhardt (ed.), *Éliane Radigue – Intermediary Spaces/ Espaces intermédiaires,* translated by Eleanor I. Weber (Brussels: umland editions, 2019), 48.

9 Jennifer Lynn Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line – Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (New York University Press, 2016), 13.

10 Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives – Storytelling and Selfhood,* trans. Paul A. Kottman (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 43.

11 Ibid., 7.

12 Ibid., 19.

13 Adriana Cavarero, *For more than one Voice – Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression,* trans. Paul A. Kottman (Stanford University Press, 2005), 129.

14 Ibid., 35.

15 Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2021), 43.

16 Ibid., 61.

17 Ibid., 64.

18 Ibid., 2-3.

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