

Abstract Music, Concrete Action

By Stefan Kac

E-Mail: stefan@stefankac.com

If there is an upside to the catastrophic events that both the country and the world have endured at the hands of the Bush Administration, it is the opportunity to learn from history with the intent of preventing its repetition. While a general apathy and indifference on behalf of the American citizenry is a common theme to which present and future commentators will no doubt return frequently, there must also come a time to evaluate specific actions of specific people at specific times: what they were doing and why, and what, perhaps, they could have done differently. As musicians specifically, but also more generally as artists, there has never been a better time to ask this question of ourselves and our peers, difficult as it may be to stomach the answers.

Despite the difficulty in objectively defining what is and is not art, let alone what constitutes good and bad art, many artists and audiences have come to accept as a matter of blind faith that the intended creation of art is an inherently positive and constructive action regardless of the content of the work or the circumstances of its creation. It is no coincidence that, within this group, those who see art primarily as a vehicle for social or political activism comprise a sizable majority. This essay seeks to refute and condemn this line of thinking, arguing instead that it is stifling and counterproductive from both an artistic and ethical standpoint. It proposes an alternative ethical framework by which art and activism are wholly separate endeavors, hence operating under the assumption that the two presently have a mutually destructive rather than constructive relationship. The author believes that current events in both the political and artistic spheres provide copious amounts of evidence in support of this position, but none so damning as the havoc wreaked by the Bush Administration at a time when art-as-activism complacency runs rampant among contemporary artists and audiences.

Artworks which are neither representational nor functional will never cease to be controversial, and nowhere is this more true than in music, often said to be the most abstract of all the arts. There is rarely a satisfying explanation for any person's attraction to the most abstract works of music, whether it be sought in the realm of hard science, sheer superstition, or anywhere in between, but even with such an explanation in hand, it would appear impossible to evaluate this attraction on an ethical level because aesthetic value judgments are of a fundamentally different type than ethical judgments. The abstract aesthetic value of any particular artwork is an issue destined to fall permanently outside the purview of morality, for insofar as such judgments are based on aesthetic properties, they are not moral or ethical in nature at all.

Nonetheless, abstract art as vocation poses an urgent ethical question should it come to dominate the individual's life sufficiently to preclude engaging in certain other activities. In other words, if community service, for example, is a necessary condition for moral integrity, and the demands of one's vocation interfere with the ability to perform community service, then the vocation is a barrier to achieving moral integrity. In being presented such a challenge, it is not altogether unusual to leap at any and all opportunities to kill two birds with one stone, or perhaps even to work a little bit too hard at interpreting a situation as such for one's own edification. How wonderful it would be if the service-minded musician could simply continue going about his or her business in a way that also fulfills some broader obligation to society; what a relief it would be to combine one's obligations to one's art with one's obligations to collective humanity. Hence, for musicians, the issue ultimately becomes not separating the good music from the bad, but understanding the limitations of both kinds when it comes to what (if anything) they are able to accomplish outside the realm of abstract sound.

Does the most abstract music contribute enough to the world to justify devoting one's life primarily or entirely to its creation instead of any number of other noble causes? For many who claim fealty to "The Arts," it would be blasphemous to answer "no," yet that is clearly the correct answer. To equate the creation of the most abstract music with humanitarianism is an egregious ethical misstep; to do so would be to conflate entertainment and service, essentially putting oneself before others in a plainly offensive manner. It could be rightly assumed that anyone who does so either is not aware of the scope of suffering and injustice that takes place in the world, or that this knowledge does not move them beyond a state of casual resignation. Those who believe the causes of art and service to be of comparable importance find themselves in an indefensible position. Were they to encounter a musician who held such views exclusively towards his or her own work, they would clearly see the error. What prevents them from making this connection, however, is a blind allegiance to "The Arts" collectively, a fatally relativistic mindset which leads to an inability and/or unwillingness to judge case-by-case, hence enabling the delusion of a concrete and objective value of all art based entirely on its appendices and little (if at all) on even their own feeble aesthetic judgments of its value in the abstract.

To rank the value of the most abstract music lower than that of service is not to denigrate the former, but simply to recognize the primacy of the latter. Musicians, after all, are people and citizens first. Those who desire to be so certain of their larger contribution to society would be wise to turn away from the maddeningly subjective realm of aesthetics and towards something simpler and unrelated. Community service, activism, and civic engagement are pursuits which are more widely acknowledged and immediately effective at making the world a better place than any single piece of music could ever be, no matter how great its abstract aesthetic properties or supposed activist content. That this view would be seen as philistine is symptomatic of a fundamental misunderstanding of not only of what it means to serve others but also of what the very essence of music really is. The most vital service is that which aspires to nothing beyond its scope as service, with the possible exception of the personal satisfaction derived from reflecting upon how these actions have benefitted others.

Similarly, the most vital music is the realization of a sonic intent which deals wholly in terms of sound, free from any undue burden or obligation to serve other functions or agendas for its creator.

The more equally members of society share the burden of community service amongst each other, the less there is for each of them to do and the more time remains for pursuits such as art, whether it be as vocation or hobby. Conversely, painting art as service for one's own edification runs roughshod over the integrity, quality, and efficacy of both endeavors, leaving important acts of service for others to do, and condemning art to be judged functionally rather than aesthetically. It would not be unreasonable to assume that the potent appeal of combining art and service is in part responsible for the increasingly popular assertions that, among other things, art:

- makes kids smart
- keeps kids off drugs
- is an essential part of the economy
- can be a vehicle for social change
- is a hallmark of civilized cultures

It is left to the reader to consider whether any or all of these statements might get the cause and effect backwards. Either way, because consensus on aesthetic value is a logical impossibility, in no case can the value of art or music in the abstract ever be pointed to as an attribute in the public arena. Art in the abstract offers nothing remotely approaching the clear-cut and agreed upon value of making kids smarter or fueling a movement; it can have any value at all only in the mind of an individual who judges it as such via the aesthetic experience, an inherently subjective process that is not subject to ethical evaluation. This is what has driven a sizable majority of musicians and music lovers towards a trumping up the items listed above (among others) coupled with an auspicious and disingenuous refusal to argue in favor of art for its own sake. Alas, this is the only tenable position in the political arena, and in this capacity it has undoubtedly facilitated a smattering of progress here and there. However, it also presents a dangerous trap into which many a victim has fallen: having established a concrete and objective value for music itself as service, and by extension service to music as service to all, the advocate is wont to excuse themselves from other service obligations on the grounds that their involvement with or advocacy for music constitutes just such a contribution in and of itself.

One could not be faulted for being suspicious of this attitude simply by virtue of the quite obvious potential for abuse. The cumulative extent to which such abuse actually takes place is something which cannot be verified with any authority, yet even operating under the assumption that those who hold themselves in such high regard as dual function musician-servants are being entirely genuine as to what they believe they are accomplishing, it can be said that in aiming to combine the creation of sonic beauty with a selfless devotion to others, they achieve significantly less in both areas than they would if they were to pursue them separately.

This claim is easier to prove in the service area than the art area, and the discussion that has already taken place ought to suffice as support. When it comes to

art, it is, of course, impossible to say conclusively whether it is true or not, for this depends on individual aesthetic judgments of artworks which aspire to make service or activist contributions. Suffice it to say that, despite often sympathizing strongly with the political viewpoints expressed by such artists, the author's experiences to this point have led to the formation of an utter contempt for such works, along with the strong feeling that the functional obligations placed on them are directly responsible for their high rate of failure in the aesthetic realm, as well as for instilling a certain aesthetic numbness in audiences who embrace the art-as-service framework.

What is much more easily established is the contradiction lying at the heart of service-oriented arts advocacy. The single-minded support that music education, for example, enjoys is predicated overwhelmingly on service attributes of questionable provenance (as in the list above) rather than the simple desire to involve children in music making for artistic and recreational reasons. Such advocacy would otherwise seem more like an irrational fixation, since countless other activities accomplish the same desired non-musical results even more effectively, but do not involve music making. One assumes that it is rational by virtue of being the result of an aesthetic attraction to certain pieces of music, but wishes more individuals would be honest about this in public. If making music was dangerous (like playing with guns), or completely inane (like talking on the phone), parents and arts advocates would not be so quick to extoll its value as a diversion for the kids. The support it enjoys is a tacit acknowledgment of the primacy of what can only be called its abstract aesthetic properties, regardless of whether or not these individuals are willing to admit it, or indeed if they are capable of understanding the relationship (their relationship with sound) at all.

Another problem with music as service is that, as with referring to "The Arts" collectively regardless of content, the term "music" is too broad. One must be an incorrigible relativist to support a service initiative that deals only in these most vague terms; the real question is: "Which music?" or "Which arts?" Turning to music based purely on its service value is a terrible way to proceed because this constitutes judging an artwork for nonaesthetic reasons (an act of which "judging a book by its cover" is the most famous example). Perhaps the given service initiative requires that the music must be able to be written and/or realized by those with no previous training; perhaps lyrical subject matter is prescribed based on demographics; or perhaps stylistic constraints are imposed in order ensure that the particular participants are engaged for the appropriate amount of time. When it does come to judging pieces of abstract music aesthetically, individuals seldom agree on anything; as socially uncomfortable an option as this might be, it is also the most honest. Conversely, in being relatively objective, judging music based on non-aesthetic properties such as service value enables a broader consensus, but it forces all involved to take on a false consciousness, suppressing their own capacity for the perception of beauty and, in place of this, embracing whatever functional purpose it is that the artwork is intended to lend itself to.

It is a truth of human nature that the capacity for the perception of beauty is always too powerful to merely be turned on and off as the beholder wishes. The impulse is stronger yet when the beholder finds themselves in a setting which they have been socially conditioned to treat as an opportunity for aesthetic contemplation of an artwork. Hence, practitioners of service music are faced with the challenge of bypassing any innate or acquired aesthetic faculties their audience might possess and appealing directly to this social conditioning. Having suppressed the more immediate artistic motivations that typically lie behind the creation of an artwork, is it no surprise that the service artist's rate of aesthetic success is so low. By presenting an artwork to be judged non-aesthetically, the service artist not only forces an uncomfortable dishonesty on the audience, but also commits a dishonest act themselves.

Aside from community service per se, there is another sense in which music is often viewed as service, if not only implicitly. It has become fashionable to make a distinction between musicians who "play for themselves" and those who "play for an audience," the latter hence being elevated to the moral high ground and the former dismissed as self-indulgent nihilists. In reality, this is nothing more than the institutionalization of popular taste in the colloquial musical vocabulary of the day, a point underscored by the fact that those musicians who "play only for themselves" are without exception the ones working in abstract "modern" or "avant-garde" idioms.

By the logic of this music-as-service framework, giving people what they want to hear is an act of service which the musician is ethically obligated to fulfill, while the act of presenting something unfamiliar and challenging is condemned simply by virtue of the discomfort it is sure to impart to the uninitiated (never mind the possibility that anyone in the audience may actually desire such a challenge). The value of a piece of music is then determined solely by the sheer number of people who line up to consume it, and musicians who serve others by pandering to them are commended whereas those whose personal musical voice is at odds with mass taste are scolded. Among other things, it is a very capitalistic perspective, having distinctive echoes of "the customer is always right," and indeed, appealing to as many people as possible is also the most lucrative option available to a musician, which should be the first hint that not only is this position ethically flawed, it is altogether backwards.

In practice, few musicians attain mass commercial success without compromising something artistic, but in such cases, rare as they may be, those few musicians deserve no more accolades for being marketable than a professional basketball player does for being tall. They may also be talented, but above all, they are exceedingly lucky that large numbers of other people are attracted to them for something they would be doing anyway. For the others (the vast majority), there are usually some difficult choices to make along the way, and those that stick to their guns are the heroes, not the goats, for they are the ones that ensure the biodiversity that keeps the contemporary musical ecosystem running. Of course, one can decide to compromise in certain situations and not in others, and all else being equal, this is

probably the most practical approach where earning a living through one's art is the first priority. No one who compromises is a bad person for this reason alone, but does anyone believe that such individuals are motivated more by some abstract concept of service embedded in reaching the most people they can rather than by the material gains (however meager) to be reaped from wider appeal?

The traditional dichotomy between art and entertainment is often criticized for jumping to the conclusion that one cannot encompass the other, and it is indeed tenuous to assume that works traditionally categorized as art are not entertaining per se to their audience. The word "entertainment" often connotes something casual, passive, and inane, whereas art is considered to be more serious, stimulating, or complicated, and hence the two are seen as somehow mutually exclusive. This dynamic has been institutionalized in the lexicon in the form of terms like "easy listening" without taking into account that there are some who find it very easy to listen to avant-garde music and very difficult to listen to anything else. In this case as always, whether a piece is "easy" or "difficult" to listen to has nothing to do with its own intrinsic properties and everything to do with who exactly it is that is listening.

The "playing for yourself"/"playing for others" dichotomy is a crafty little tag line, something Karl Rove could have come up with if he did not have more important things to worry about. It draws a righteous line in the sand between the selfish and the selfless, simply, effectively, and ignorantly. Attractive as it might sound, there really is no aesthetic moral high ground at all to be claimed by artists; in ferreting out a particular person's impact on society broadly, their actions as a citizen are infinitely more important than their actions as a musician. To that end, it stands to reason that the world would be better off with honest musicians who serve their community in their spare time than it would be with great hordes of complacent fame-seeking narcissists who think that they are making the world a better place simply by existing.

Instead of trying to make music look like service any way it can, society ought to be capable of admitting that there is something inherently selfish in why musicians play music (not to mention in why audiences listen to it), and that without this, many great masterpieces would never have been created. As great as these masterpieces might be, abstract music is no substitute for concrete action. Musicians, for their part, ought to be willing to admit that a satisfied audience takes less away from a performance than a poverty-stricken family takes away from the food shelf, and that the musician who feels a such a glow from reaching that audience could in fact experience the same feeling magnified tremendously without touching their instrument and likely do more good in the process. The ever-expanding diversity of the contemporary musical landscape seems to ensure that there will be something out there for everyone, but in turn, everyone must be tolerant of this diversity and allow it to exist without projecting non-aesthetic moralization onto it. Meanwhile, there exists a staggeringly diverse array of needs in the world, and scarcely a single one of them is most effectively addressed through art of any kind.

1 September, 2008