

The Crisis in the Humanities

The Crisis in the Humanities:

Transdisciplinary Solutions

Edited by

Žarko Cvejić, Andrija Filipović
and Ana Petrov

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



The Crisis in the Humanities: Transdisciplinary Solutions

Edited by Žarko Cvejić, Andrija Filipović and Ana Petrov

This book first published 2016

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2016 by Žarko Cvejić, Andrija Filipović, Ana Petrov
and contributors

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-4438-9782-5

ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-9782-2

BEYOND THE CRISIS
OF THE AVANT-GARDE IN MUSIC:
THE POTENTIALS OF WOLFGANG WELSCH'S
CONCEPT OF TRANSCULTURALITY
IN MUSICOLOGICAL STUDIES¹

MARIJA MAGLOV

This paper's point of departure is the notion of the avant-garde in music as viewed by Serbian musicologist Mirjana Veselinović Hofman, with focus on her concept of local avant-garde, compared to the concept of transculturality developed by German philosopher, aesthetician, and theorist of culture Wolfgang Welsch. Together, these concepts put the idea of the avant-garde in music in a different perspective, especially concerning the place and time of its emergence. Inspired by those two concepts, I also investigate in this paper the status of avant-garde, radical music today, using the insights in contemporary music by Adornian music aesthetician Max Paddison and trying to read them with Welsch's and Veselinović Hofman's contributions in mind. Having presented my main theoretical protagonists, I will now proceed to examine the interconnections and overlapping of their discourses, attempting to give one of many possible interpretations of the survival of the (discourses on) avant-garde in contemporary music beyond its crisis and the potential of Welsch's concept for explaining that survival. According to Veselinović Hofman, the avant-garde in music is

a unique psychological, social, and artistic phenomenon, which arises in an organised, declared, and aggressive anti-traditional movement acting according to the specific rules of its own existence, which is—as a rule—somewhere between explosion and burning. (Veselinović 1983, 1)

As such, the avant-garde was a finished, modernist project whose crisis was resolved by its entry into the tradition, which was the only possible solution for its survival, after reaching that point of “burning” and its final exhaustion (Veselinović-Hofman 2002, 30–31). This is to say that the

avant-garde became musical data, similar to all other musical data from the vast archive of musical techniques and elements, in terms of their importance for the poetics of postmodern composers (Veselinović Hofman 2002, 29). But if we are to talk about contemporary music, could one still look for that radical nature today, outside the original context wherein the (historical) avant-garde first appeared? According to Max Paddison, there is not much hope for the survival of radical music today, if we are to accept that the “heroic age of avant-garde is over, and that the conditions that sustained it have disintegrated” (Paddison 2010[b], 205). He identifies changes in conditions from modernity to post-modernity, or from a critical awareness of history to historical relativism, but defines avant-garde as a metaphor which is “to suggest an advanced, radical, critical and oppositional art exploring the ‘New’ and previously unknown” (Paddison 2010[b], 205). Although his method and understanding of what is radical could apply, in my opinion, to different understandings of the contemporary condition (Šuvaković 2012, 19–42), it should be noted that what Paddison means by “contemporary” is only avant-garde and experimental music since 1945 (Paddison 2010[a], 1). For him, contemporary means a “legacy of very different but radical musics which can be traced back at least to the beginning of the twentieth century”. Paddison’s goal is to “clarify salient features of an advanced, critical music and to identify traces of its survival under changed conditions” (Paddison 2010[b], 206) and, one could add, whatever those conditions are. What is recognised as a salient feature of avant-garde, advanced, critical, radical music is that quality of irritation value, which Paddison recognises in John Cage’s words on music that is “keeping us from ossifying” (Paddison 2010[a], 1). Here, I would also posit avant-garde music as one that has the capacity “to irritate”, or, better said, to keep provoking, pushing boundaries—music that is there to make us contemplate its sense and being, a musical practice that constantly re-examines its own language, media, and forms of production and reception.

In that sense, two questions will shape my further examination of this problem: if such radical practices exist today, how are they (if so) connected with the historical avant-gardes/neo-avant-gardes in music? If such practices exist in different spaces and locations other than those in which they originated (in the case of the European avant-garde, Darmstadt could be taken as an example of an avant-garde music centre)—are they merely responses to current trends, or is there something more, a genuine form wherein they make that radical cut in the new context? I am more inclined to the latter option.

In order to elaborate on that idea, I will draw on Veselinović Hofman's interpretation, because of its re-examination of the specifics of avant-garde in music related to the place and time of its emergence, which proves valuable. Crucially, she posits her thesis of local avant-gardes bearing in mind all the specifics of the avant-garde in music in relation to other arts, in order to question the principles of musical avant-garde in general.

Some specifics of the avant-garde relate to the formation of groups (in music, acting more like schools with distinguished individuals), the nature of avant-garde manifestoes (mostly in the form of music festivals with their institutional structure geared toward promoting new music, or in the form of one especially influential work), and, most importantly, in relation to tradition, since Veselinović Hofman notes a strong evolutionary line, in contrast to breaking with everything that came before (Veselinović 1983, 23–32, 153–155 and Veselinović Hofman 2002, 29). But the main point of departure in comparing the characteristics of the avant-garde in arts and music is the “time location” of the musical avant-gardes. As Veselinović Hofman states, the historical avant-gardes as recognised by Peter Bürger are not recognisable as such in music (Veselinović Hofman 2002, 29). A truly avant-garde meaning in music was reached by, among others, Boulez, Stockhausen, Ligeti, Penderecki, Lutosławski, and Cage—who actually worked at the time of the neo-avant-garde in the other arts. But while their compositional techniques were new and ran against established practices and traditions, it is evident that they also could not avoid a strong connection with the legacy of the preceding generations, as seen in the connection between integral serialism and dodecaphony, or between aleatoric and integral serialism. This points to the conclusion that the avant-garde in music does have its own logic of existence in comparison to the situation in other arts. With that in mind, Veselinović Hofman elaborates on art theorist Renato Poggioli's thesis on the life cycle of the avant-garde, which ends with a breakdown or death of the avant-garde; Veselinović Hofman interprets this moment of breakdown, and, we could say, of the actual crisis of the avant-garde in music, as one stage in its existence, which is followed by an interim stage when its status is questionable and then, finally, resolution in its becoming tradition (Veselinović 1983, 27–30).

This is obvious in the context of postmodern music, or, rather, that line of postmodern music where the radical grain of the modern is still present. The first postmodern composers were actually former avant-gardists, for example, Stockhausen. As Veselinović Hofman explains:

when the avant-garde entered the final stage in its survival, when it entered tradition and became a historical value like any musical phenomenon that

preceded it, and which, by the way, the avant-garde had negated, former avant-garde composers looked to the musical past and started looking through individual sound contents and conventions (Veselinović Hofman 1997, 53),

where avant-garde accomplishments also belong. The notion that techniques of the avant-garde became just one item in the whole institution of music grew even more evident in the work of the next generation of composers. However, Veselinović Hofman's main focus in this context is the debate on those features of the postmodern that actually represent elements of the avant-garde. These are recognised in different categories, such as neutrality of material (in the avant-garde, this relates to music without a past; in postmodernism, it is inverted to the idea that the origin of the material in the historical sense is not as important as its sound quality in the particularity of one composer's work), universality (in the avant-garde, this is based on the idea that music is not defined by national conventions but by the normative; in postmodernism, this is the orientation toward the idea of the necessity of bridging different spatial and temporal relations), compositional technique (in the avant-garde, it was a subject of fetishism and the need to create new sound universes; in postmodernism it is emphasised as the key to musical work, since it is a means of not just structural, but also semantic organisation of the material), and pointillist structures as an auditory emblem of the avant-garde (Veselinović Hofman 1997, 136–139, 144–145). For Veselinović Hofman, these are all indicators of the “avant-garde conditionality of status of some of the key categories” (Veselinović Hofman 1997, 145) of the postmodern, which leads to the conclusion that “the postmodern sees itself at one moment as an avant-garde project” (Veselinović Hofman 1997, 147). That point of view is in accordance with theories that see the postmodern as a continuation of modernity, one of them certainly being the viewpoint of Wolfgang Iser. For him, the postmodern is not an antithesis of the modern, or a break with it, but, on the contrary, its transformation. In that sense, the title of his book, *Our Postmodern Modernity* is very indicative (Velš 2000). Here, Iser states that the postmodern presents a radical empowerment of those features that defined the modern, and that postmodern thinking presents “thought development and realisation of the radical modern of this [i.e. the 20th] century” (Velš 2000, 94–95). This thesis is not just complementary with Veselinović Hofman's thesis on the second/postmodern life of the avant-garde, but also enables us to identify some features of the postmodern as latently present in modernity, or the “heroic” age of the avant-garde.

One of those features is transculturality, as recognised in Welsch's concept, which he actually argues was present in earlier epochs as well, but could not be recognised as such due to the domination of inadequate concepts of culture.² According to the explanation given by the art theorist Miško Šuvaković, this concept means

the passage or transposition of one cultural pattern through different cultures, or networking heterogeneous cultures in the practices of performing complex realities. (Šuvaković 2010, 356)

Welsch sees the world surrounding him, at that time the postmodern world, as marked by transculturality at every level. At the macro level, he identified transculturality as a result of the networking of different cultures; he also identified hybridisation, which means that every culture is potentially immanent to another or is its satellite, because of cultural mixing (high and popular culture included) and because of the erasing of the difference between “mine” and “yours”. He also saw it at the micro level, because every individual could be seen as a cultural hybrid, as the result of different cultural influences under which he or she is formed, moving through different social worlds with the possibility of creating various identities (Velš 2000, 76–80). Transculturality does not mean “one uniformed world civilisation” but is “intrinsically tied to the creation of a new diversity” (Velš 2000, 85), while it is noted that those differences do not exist between separate cultures but are formed in transcultural networks. How may we comprehend transculturality at work? Šuvaković explains this by referring to different approaches to Kant in aesthetics as an example. He says that there is no quest for “the *real* Kant”, and emphasises that “the French, German, Slovenian [...] *Kant-pattern* is not the entire concept of Kant, but is a pattern of specific cultural formation separated from the more complex hybrid milieu” (Šuvaković 2010, 358). This principle is the same whenever we discuss transculturality: there is the transposition of a pattern as part of a broader transcultural formation, which is not a unique, real model, but its every occurrence in different contexts is equally valid.

When it comes to postmodern music, this principle is evident in the idea of using different models connected with a musical past and present, various styles, genres, and origins of material. For a postmodern artist, fragments of this diverse music serve as those kinds of models that are transposed in different contexts. Such patterns could also be, of course, emblems of avant-garde compositional techniques. Since we know transculturality is one of the features of the postmodern in general, the described situation in music is no exception. But, when it comes to finding

traces of transculturality in modernity, we can draw on Veselinović Hofman's thesis of the local avant-garde, since it can serve (although it was conceived before Welsch's concept) as an example that gives certain gravitas to Welsch's theoretical concept.

A local avant-garde relates to avant-garde practices that come with certain suspensions in different peripheral cultures, as compared to the centre from where they spread. Instead of interpreting this phenomenon as mere imitation of techniques of great composer figures of the avant-garde, Veselinović Hofman acknowledges that

a repeated avant-garde is no avant-garde any more, but it is a fact that it can't be seen as absolute in the sense that it could be expected that it has the effect of breaking news. One must have in mind that it can erupt at a greater geographical and temporal distance from its initial centre and with an analogue (destructive) effect. (Veselinović Hofman 2002, 24)

Bearing in mind all those previously mentioned specifics of the avant-garde in music, Veselinović Hofman further argues that "the musical avant-garde in Yugoslavia was avant-garde as much as musical avant-garde was avant-garde in general, compared to other arts" (Veselinović Hofman 2002, 29). In that context, the idea of a local avant-garde does not just mean that the avant-garde movement influenced the milieu where it emerged, but that it was itself changed by that milieu (Veselinović Hofman 2002, 24). In my view, this could also be understood as an effect of transculturality. In that sense, we could understand the avant-garde not only as a phenomenon that had its rounded life in a certain space and time, which is the only one in the game of interpretation, but also as a pattern circulating in the European transcultural network, having different modes of articulation in accordance with different contexts, each one of them being legitimate in its own right. As Welsch would say, "even when people rely on similar cultural elements, they would give them different meaning and different arrangement in whole" (Welsch 2004, 8).

Veselinović Hofman's concept of local avant-garde offers the idea that an avant-garde is also possible beyond the place of its initial appearance, which does not mean it is less legitimate because of its delayed emergence. In my view, this concept is valuable because it enables one to argue that, since the avant-garde can be understood as a pattern with many occurrences, this pattern could also "survive" in different contexts, suggesting the notion of radicality. Thus, the idea of what one might call the avant-garde-like quality, or the quality of radical music could actually be sought in quite diverse spatial and temporal contexts of contemporaneity. And when there is a link between the historical avant-

garde and specific postmodern and contemporary practices, I would emphasise Paddison's understanding of the history of radical music (which can be traced back to the beginning of the 20th century, as was mentioned before), because he goes on to say that we "could argue that contemporary music also has a history of being 'contemporary'" (Paddison 2010[a], 1). Paddison himself is aware of the danger of what soon comes to look like "the construction of a tradition, and even a canon" (Paddison 2010[a], 4), which is in conflict with the idea of the critical and self-reflective in music. One way to avoid this situation is, in my opinion, to try to work with the concept of transculturality, precisely because of that idea of moving through a trans-space network, where different patterns could be engaged in various combinations, depending on the context of time and space. This enables an understanding of the avant-garde and its many lives and legacies beyond its crisis and proclaimed death. As this is one possible way to interpret postmodern music in relation to the history of music (as the avant-garde was something that preceded the postmodern) and also modern music in relation to geography (as in the case of local avant-gardes), my suggestion is that via the concept of transculturality we may arrive at a (con)temporary understanding of contemporary relations to avant-garde techniques and qualities of radical music, its revisions and reception in contemporary musical practices, at the same time avoiding a discourse on radical practices as a value *per se*, but as one among many cultural patterns.

Notes

¹ This paper was written as part of the project "Jean Monnet Module—*Musical Identities and European Perspective: An Interdisciplinary Approach*", No. 553391-EPP-1-2014-1-RS-EPPJMO-MODULE, led by Prof. Mirjana Veselinović Hofman of the Faculty of Music, Belgrade, in the academic year of 2014–15.

² Welsch has in mind Johann Gottfried Herder's concept of culture, but also the concepts of multiculturalism and interculturalism derived from it. His concept of transculturality is an attempt to revise these, in his view, problematic concepts and also to transcend the contradictions of globalisation and particularisation. For an elaboration of this problem, see Velš 2002, 70–89.

Bibliography

- Paddison, Max. 2010[a]. "Introduction. Contemporary Music: Theory, Aesthetics, Critical Theory." In *Contemporary Music: Theoretical and Philosophical Perspectives*, edited by Max Paddison and Irène Deliège, 1–18. Aldershot: Ashgate.

- . 2010[b]. “Postmodernism and the Survival of the Avant-garde.” In *Contemporary Music: Theoretical and Philosophical Perspectives*, edited by Max Paddison and Irène Deliège, 205–28. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Šuvaković, Miško. 2010. *Diskurzivna analiza: prestup i/ili pristup “diskurzivne analize” filozofiji, poetici, estetici, teoriji i studijama umetnosti i culture*. Belgrade: Orion Art.
- . 2012. *Umetnost i politika: savremena estetika, filozofija, teorija i umetnost u vremenu globalne tranzicije*. Belgrade: Službeni glasnik.
- Velš, Wolfgang. 2000. *Naša postmoderna moderna*. Novi Sad: Izdavačka knjižarnica Zorana Stojanovića.
- . 2002. “Transkulturalnost—forma današnjih kultura koja se menja.” *Kultura* 102: 70–89.
- Veselinović, Mirjana. 1983. *Stvaralačka prisutnost evropske avangarde u nas*. Belgrade: Univerzitet umetnosti.
- Veselinović Hofman, Mirjana. 1997. *Fragmenti o muzičkoj postmoderni*. Novi Sad: Matica srpska.
- . 2002. “Teze za reinterpretaciju jugoslovenske muzičke avangarde.” *Muzički talas* 30–31: 18–32.
- Welsch, Wolfgang. 2004. *On Acquisition and Possession of Commonalities*. Accessed January 8, 2015.
<http://www2.uni-jena.de/welsch/abstr%20Artificial%20Paradises....pdf>.