

CREATIVITY WITH A LARGE ‘C’ - CREATIVITY WITH A SMALL ‘C’

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ABSTRACT

The central distinction between western art music and popular music is frequently seen in the quality of composition. While art music composition is expected to be the work of ‘genius’, popular music is often not even considered composed music, but rather a re-arrangement of pre-shaped musical clichés. Psychologically, this distinction may be reduced to the idea of “creativity with a small ‘c’ – creativity with a large ‘C’” that is, creativity as an everyday activity available to everyone, or as a rare work of genius.

One of the reasons why music psychologists largely neglect the field of popular music may be because they do not consider the “creativity with a small ‘c’” associated with this field worth the effort. While the inexplicable work of genius is a challenge for psychology, everyday creativity does not hold the same fascination. However, the idea that “creativity with a large ‘C’” is inherently different from “creativity with a small ‘c’” recently has been questioned by both psychologists and musicologists.

A closer look at processes of inspiration and elaboration suggests that the exceptionality of western art music composition is an idea closely connected to the ‘genius myth,’ the Romantic concept of creativity. Due to large structural similarities between composition in both contexts, music psychology’s disregard of popular music seems largely undeserved.

1. CREATIVITY IN WESTERN ART MUSIC AND POPULAR MUSIC

While popular music is a common topic for music sociology, it is discussed comparatively rarely in the field of music psychology, especially when addressing the topics of creativity and composition. One reason for this may be seen in the central distinction which is frequently made between composing art music and popular music. Art music composition is usually expected to be the work of genius; popular music is often not even considered composed music, but rather a re-arrangement of pre-shaped musical clichés either at random (amateur section) or according to a formula (professional section – see Walser 1993, p. 141), therefore an inferior form of creativity.

1.1. The Perspective of Musicology

The view that composition in art music and popular music are inherently and structurally different can be explained by a musicological, as well as by a psychological point of view. From the perspective of historical musicology, composition is defined along the conventions of western art music as they have developed over time (cp. Rosenbrock 2002b):

One important landmark of this process is the gradual transition from oral to written tradition (cp. Sachs et al. 1997, pp. 508, 514-517). The score „very soon ceased to be the mere perpetuator of a tradition, to become the instrument of elaboration of the musical work itself“ (Bailey 1992, p. 59): Composed music became notated music. Notation separated music invention from sonic realization (Frisius et al. 1997, p. 589), created a hierarchy between composers and interpreters as well as between art music and popular music.

More and more, the composer was seen as an individual creator of music (cp. Dahlhaus 1979, p. 12), someone who had a distinguishable style and whose works of art were distributed under his name (cp. Finscher 1975). Since the beginning of the 16th century, a musical composition was considered an “Opus perfectum et absolutum,” unchangeable even after the death of the composer (cp. Sachs et al. 1997, p. 526). This is yet another step towards the isolation and therefore the mystification of the composer and his or her work.

As described by Cook (1998), the ‘myth of the genius composer’ was created by music lovers, critics and composers in the 18th and 19th century. According to this myth, composers like Mozart and Beethoven conceive their music in an inexplicable moment of inspiration, an “image of authorship that borders on the divine” (p. 66). For this inspiration, neither a musical instrument nor the actual writing of music notes is necessary. According to a letter that was allegedly written by Mozart, the music conceived this way is “almost finished.” These myths of the genius composer are contradicted by research studying composition sketches which prove that Beethoven as well as Mozart went through various stages of sketching and correcting their works (cp. Cook 1998, pp. 64-89; cp. Konrad 1992). Sloboda (1985, pp. 112-114) objects to the idea that there are two separate classes of composer, assuming that all composition involves „mental dictation“ as well as sketching.

The cultural value of music which is conceived by divine inspiration (cp. Sachs et al. 1997, p. 551) appears to be beyond doubt; music legitimised by such myths is meant not only to last through the ages, but also to transcend cultural differences. Therefore, the ‘myth of the genius composer’ can be seen as one reason for the worldwide distribution and reception of western art music. That is, music supposedly composed by geniuses must be considered superior to the oral traditions and improvisations of other peoples as well as to the various kinds of popular music. Leman (1999) describes another possible purpose of the Romantic creativity concept. Emerging at the time when musicians became entrepreneurs on the free market, it proved to be commercially exploitable by 19th century composers as well as by today’s music industry.

The quality of a piece of popular music is determined by other factors; there is much less consensus than in classical music, as listeners’ individual positions are considered crucial. However,

popular music has its own composition myths, myths of authenticity rather than of divine inspiration. According to Frith (1992), a piece of popular music is considered authentic when it is an expression of a person, a zeitgeist, or of an idea rather than being produced for commercial purposes only. In popular music, the 'myth of the creative artists' shares some features with the art music 'myth of the genius composer': It is based on „[...] the romantic assumption that their music is a natural 'outpouring of the soul' involving no commercial interest, no artifice, no imitation of anyone else's music and no work on the part of the musician" (Green 2001, p. 103). Therefore, being self-taught as well as conceiving music effortlessly are important aspects of legitimizing a piece of popular music as authentic to the specific audience of its genre.

Music creation in popular music is frequently denied composition status by historical musicology, as it is usually neither notated, nor does it create the same kind of musical hierarchies as art music compositions: Composition may be a group activity of a band (cp. Rosenbrock 2002a); as interpreters and composers are often identical, there may be an „interlinking“ of composition and performance (cp. Green 1997, p. 83).

Even among amateur popular musicians, especially among the members of pop and rock bands, composition is a very common practice (cp. Ebbecke und Lüscher 1987, p. 199). It greatly differs from the ideals of composition dominant in western art music (cp. Rosenbrock 2002b); ideas about quality, authenticity and musical superiority vary immensely between different audiences of popular music. These three factors may be considered reasons for its relatively low prestige: With possible exception of a few outstanding artists' works (such as the Beatles), composition in popular music is usually considered „creativity with a small 'c'“ both by musicologists and music psychologists.

2.2. The Perspective of (Music) Psychology

Maley (1997) explains the difference between „creativity with a small 'c'“ and „creativity with a large 'C'“ as follows: „Creativity with a large 'C'“ is historical creativity, the discovery or creation of something which is entirely new to society, ergo the rare work of a genius. If an individual achieves something new to him- or herself only, it is considered personal „creativity with a small 'c'“ – an everyday activity available to everyone.

The question whether both kinds of creativity are structurally different is discussed controversially. Weisberg (1989) insists that famous creativity is frequently mystified in scientific and popular discourse. By assuming that a creative idea spontaneously occurs in the unconscious, creativity becomes something unexplainable as well as unachievable for most people. Weisberg argues that creativity research has focused too much on the character traits of well-known creative individuals, depicting them as exceptional geniuses, but neglecting the fact that their creative achievements were the of many years of study and work. He documents how outstanding artistic achievements were frequently based on the prior work and experience of the artist; all art can be considered the result of a communal cultural development in addition to individual accomplishment. Weisberg sees creativity not as an inherent trait of certain individuals, but as something achieved by learning and intensive work in a specific domain; he sees

no inherent difference between individual and socially relevant creativity. Therefore, creativity is available to everyone.

A crucial question in creativity research is the role of social evaluation: While Csikszentmihalyi (1999, p. 321) argues that only social impact can make an idea creative, Eppstein believes individuals can be creative even if their ideas are never perceived by any other person. Csikszentmihalyi demands a „distinction between what is good for the person and what is good for the culture“, between “creativity with a small 'c'” and “creativity with a capital 'C'” (cp. Csikszentmihalyi, Eppstein 1999); self-expression, he argues, is personally important and regenerative, but rarely creative.

While the importance of „creativity with a small 'c'“ in education and as a means of personal self-expression is broadly acknowledged, it is generally seen as vastly inferior to „creativity with a capital 'C,'” not only as creativity without social impact, but as inherently less creative creativity. Therefore, “creativity with a small 'c'“ is not granted 'proper creativity status.'

2. INSPIRATION AND ELABORATION

One of the reasons why music psychologists largely neglect creativity in the field of popular music may be that they do not consider the “creativity with a small 'c'“ associated with this field worth the effort. While the inexplicable work of genius is a challenge for psychology, everyday creativity does not hold the same fascination.

However, the inexplicable character of 'great' western art music composition is strongly based on the Romantic conception of creativity, especially on the idea that great composers such as Mozart and Beethoven conceived their music as a whole. This view sets their method of composition apart from ordinary methods employing preliminary sketches, the use of a musical instrument and improvisation. De-masking these views as myths would mean that the relationship of the two kinds of musical creativity is much closer than generally assumed. This in turn might mean that composition in popular music deserves the same kind of attention as composition in western art music.

Most composition processes can be divided into two parts – inspiration and elaboration. Elaboration usually involves the conscious use of certain strategies to transform initial, sometimes very basic ideas (Bresgen 1983, p. 11) into a refined piece of music. These strategies vary among cultures and musical genres, but within a genre, there is often a more or less fixed set of elaboration strategies which can be studied and learned by composers (cp. Gardner 1991, p. 102). The phase of elaborations involves combining parts and of making musical decisions on the basis of aesthetics and of previous knowledge. Inspiration, in turn, is generally considered something which composers cannot consciously control or produce; it is the more mysterious aspect of composition.

Emphasizing the role of inspiration means understanding composition as something that cannot be learned. Therefore, the focus on one of the two parts of composition has a central part in the controversial discussion that is essentially related to the Romantic concept of creativity.

Regarding inspiration, not only its importance but also its source is a cause for dispute. Does it inexplicably appear out of nowhere, is it generated by improvisation, or is it nothing more than a transformation of music that is already existing?

Weisberg (1989, p. 187) argues the latter that is, works of art are transformations of other works of arts, drawing on the experience of the artist as well as of society as a whole. The composer Harold Shapero calls the sonic memory a main source of inspiration (quot. a. Gardner 1991, p. 102). As every kind of composition has to be embedded in the musical conventions of its genre to be understood (cp. Sachs et al. 1996, pp. 549-550; Rösing, Bruhn 1993, pp. 517-518), the idea of a complete *creatio ex nihilo* appears to be absurd.

The importance of improvisation as a source of inspiration is frequently underestimated. As argued by Rösing und Bruhn (1993, p. 515) and Bresgen (1983, p. 11), there is no clear boundary between composition and improvisation. Lehmann und Kopiez view “both composition and improvisation as consisting of trial and error with iterative selection of the best solution” (2002, p. 4); therefore they “tap into the same mental mechanisms and require similar prerequisites” (p. 6). They both fulfil a similar function; audiences cannot always distinguish between them (pp. 2-3; see Frisius et al. 1997, p. 539).

Improvisation is an important source of inspiration in popular music. Especially in pop, rock and jazz bands, individual and collective improvisation is used more or less intentionally as a means of generating ideas (cp. Hemming 2002, p. 156; Green 2001, p. 45).

The same, however, can be said of western art music, as two examples will show. C.P.E. Bach wrote: “...a good future in composition can be assuredly predicted for anyone who can improvise, provided that he writes profusely and does not start too late” (quot. a. Aranosian 1981, p. 67). Haydn frequently generated ideas by improvisation (cp. Aranosian 1981, p. 74, Benett 1973 p. 12). As reported by Cook (1998, pp. 69-70), the idea that ‘true’ composers do not need an instrument for their creation is part of the 19th century genius myth.

However, this does not mean that inspiration without an instrument is impossible; many composers report of the sudden, inexplicable appearance of musical ideas in their heads (cp. Gardner 1991, p. 102; Rösing, Bruhn 1993, p. 516). Leman (1999, p. 286) stresses the importance of inner aural representations for the composition process (cp. also Cook 1990, p. 195, 188). Therefore, generating musical ideas in one’s head is not uncommon at all; according to Hindemith, it is something that happens to virtually everyone. What distinguishes the composer from the non-composer is the ability to preserve, to refine and to process these ideas, in short, to turn them into fixed pieces of music by means of elaboration strategies (quot. a. Bresgen 1983, p. 11).

If musical inspiration is a relatively small part of the composition process, influenced partly by improvisation and sonic memory, something that even happens to non-composers, there is no reason to assume that it does not happen to the composers of popular music. A main difference of both areas of composition

can be seen in elaboration strategies, as those strongly depend on the musical genre in which a composition is rooted: Many genres have a specific schema for composition (cp. Leman 1999, p. 289). According to cultural conventions, these conventions may be more or less complex; the scope for variations within a genre may be smaller or greater. In all genres there may be composers who are deemed greater than others of the same genre by relative consensus. However, there appears to be no psychological reason to term composition in art music mysterious ‘creativity with a capital C’ and composition in popular music as *per se* psychological uninteresting because of its ‘small c’, everyday nature.

A notable difference between composition in popular music and composition in art music is its availability even to novices. As Kleinen (2002, p. 8) points out, composition in popular music is not generally taught or learned at any institution. Most songwriters, whether playing in a band or working by themselves at an instrument or a computer, are self-taught. Unlike novices of western art music, popular musicians frequently start composing at the very beginning of their engagement in the domain. Members of pop and rock bands often compose their own songs (cp. Ebbecke, Lüscher 1987, p. 199; Rosenbrock 2002a): Just like some join a band before they know how to play their instruments, they start writing original material before learning strategies of elaboration, acquiring skills through ‘learning by doing.’ The greatest difference between composition in art music and popular music appears to be the difference in education and experience, not the inherent structures of inspiration or creativity.

3. CONCLUSION

The idea that composition in western art music is inherently ‘creativity with a capital C’, while creativity in popular music is inherently ‘creativity with a small c’ cannot be supported by empirical evidence: In both areas, processes of inspiration and elaboration appear to be structurally similar. Therefore, when dealing with composition processes, music psychology should take into account genre-specific methods and musical schemas rather than basing its research on the Romantic concept of creativity.

The psychological distinction between the two kinds of creativity has a large impact on the way creators and their works are received in society. In addition to an aesthetic, subjective distinction of works of arts one likes or dislikes, it gives certain works of art a legitimisation of being “inherently great.” They have been composed by geniuses.

If music psychology adopts this way of thinking without questioning the Romantic concept of creativity, it not only continues to neglect the domain of popular music creation as an area of study, but also supports a creativity concept which alienates creativity from most people and even composers.

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