

Musical experimentalism as the avant-garde: a Bürgerian approach

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Abstract

The concept of the musical avant-garde has been defined in many different and even conflicting ways in the critical discourses of new music, musical modernism and the avant-garde. In my presentation, I approach the question of the musical avant-garde from the perspective of experimental music, especially through the concept of musical experimentalism. My starting point here is the two-part division of the musical avant-garde: modernism and experimentalism (Nyman 1999 [1974]; Born 1995). I examine this division on the basis of Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-garde* (1984).

In his theory of the avant-garde Bürger argues that avant-garde art protests against the autonomous status of art which is manifested in the separation of art from the praxis of life. From the Bürgerian point of view, avant-garde art rebels against the idea of 'art as an institution', a concept by which Bürger means both the productive and distributive apparatus (museums, concert institutions and so on) and the ideas about art that prevail at a given time and that determine the reception of works (like art theory and criticism).

I argue that a similar principle can also be found in the practice and philosophy of musical experimentalism and its relationship to modernism. Experimentalism protests the "high art" status of musical modernism and aims to break its closed aesthetics. At the same time, experimentalism is dependent on modernism, just as avant-garde art is dependent on Aestheticism in Bürger's theory.

Since the 1950s, when the protest of experimental music against musical modernism achieved its clearest and most notable manifestations, experimental music has created a separate and even isolated sector of its own, namely, the tradition of experimentalism (Born 1995; Mauceri 1997). I claim that by creating a distinctive tradition of its own, experimental music fails to work as the avant-garde, because it has lost its connection to its antithesis, which the avant-garde, by its very nature, always requires. Furthermore, I consider the question of whether the musical avant-garde might again be possible in the twenty-first century if contemporary experimental music would recognise the institutions with which it works.

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