

Fencing music: Did John Oswald's *Plunderphonic* signal a new paradigm for commercial music in the digital age?

Mark Walters

Communication & Science Studies, University of California, San Diego, USA
markwalters79@yahoo.com

Abstract

This paper will examine John Oswald's *Plunderphonic*, an art music project begun in the 1970s. I argue that *Plunderphonic* complicated modernist assumptions about music in order to confound market logics that define musical production as original, univocal and fixed. Borrowing from Frederic Jameson's "Forword" to Jacques Attali's *Noise*, I claim that *Plunderphonic* exemplifies "the possibility of a superstructure to *anticipate* historical developments, to foreshadow new social formations in a prophetic and annunciatory way." Oswald used sampling and digital manipulation to challenge three staples of the modernist art music paradigm: univocality, originality and authority. I argue that the challenge signaled by Oswald's work has grown even stronger since 1990, when the Canadian Recording Industry Association's successfully sued him.

Chris Cutler (1994) and others have shown how Oswald's work complicates assumptions about what was materially and methodologically possible for musical recording in the 1980s and subsequent decades. Oswald capitalized on new technologies and the collapse of high and low art forms into one another, prefiguring cultural debates about the dispositions of musical property in the digital age. Borrowing from James Boyle, I claim that the CRIA's suit against Oswald can be read as part of a greater friction between modernist legal structures (built on intellectual property and protectionism) and emerging post-modernist musical practices (built on sampling, manipulation and ironic juxtaposition). Borrowing from Mikhail Bakhtin and James Wertsch, I assert that Oswald's work exposes what may be an irreconcilable tension between music's "authoritative" function (as "cooked", finished work) and its "internally persuasive" function (as "raw" source material). Thus, *Plunderphonic* re-positions the composer and audience in relation to one another and calls for a re-thinking of modernist assumptions-- prevalent both in the academy and in the music business-- about the relationships between composition, performance, reception and critique.

CV

Mark Walters is a lifelong choral musician and former academic librarian whose scholarship focuses on the intersections between intellectual property, cultural production and musical/dramatic performance. A second-year doctoral student in Communication and Science Studies at the University of California, San Diego, Mark holds an MA in Literary & Cultural Studies from Carnegie Mellon University and a Master's in Library Science from the University of Pittsburgh. Later this summer, he will be presenting a paper on Mantjarvii's *Canticum Calamitatis Maritimae* at the 40th International Ballad Conference in Amsterdam and Terschelling, and will be touring Ireland with the La Jolla Symphony Chorus in late July.