

# “Nothing is Too Good for the Working Class”

Last season’s announcement of the New York Philharmonic’s Henry Kravis Award, financed by a seven figure withdrawal from the ten figure bank account of one of America’s more notorious financiers, is one of many indications that while its influence has waned, classical music still has friends in high places. These connections tend to accrue mainly to high profile conductors, opera stars, and virtuoso soloists. But even those not inhabiting the peaks of the profession will occasionally find themselves recipients of scholarships, grants, or small awards for which plutocrats of various sorts have footed the bill. And so it is not uncommon to find ourselves at a dinner or reception where we, or friends of ours, are being feted and in this capacity, to shake the hand of a bona fide one percenter, engaging in small talk with him (it is usually him) or, more likely, his spouse.

While it requires a substantial leap of imagination to see much of an overlap between our interests and theirs, musicians’ comparatively close proximity to elites makes it understandable that we are more susceptible to the infection which the Marxists diagnose as false consciousness. Whether we are capable of identifying and acting politically in accordance with our real economic interests, as opposed to those of our aspirational or imagined social milieu is the question raised in my article “Composers and the Plutocracy.”<sup>2</sup> While I will have something more to say about that in the following, the main focus will be on a related, reciprocal question: whether the work which we and others in the so-called “high” arts produce has a place within a movement for the 99%. Any discussion around this subject needs to begin with the recognition that for at least three generations now, the answer to the question has been an obvious no. The high

arts generally, and classical music in particular, are seen as, if not by the elite, for them, which is to say designed mainly for their consumption and, as argued by Lawrence Levine,<sup>3</sup> serving their agenda. It will therefore seem farfetched to claim that classical music could serve as a medium for critiquing the 1% and function in support of mass movements.

But it turns out that in the not too distant past, it was taken for granted by many on the left that it could do so. The main period where this potential was explored, namely, during the political and artistic ferment within what is known as the cultural front,<sup>4</sup> provides us not only inspiration, but also indications of how a movement in which we are involved might take shape and what our role within it might consist of. For this reason, it seems worth revisiting some of this history and the controversies which became inevitable as artists made a sincere effort to function in the service of the 99%, repudiating their traditional relationship with economic and social elites.

Of course, while granting the possibility that we can move from false to class consciousness, it needs to be conceded that the well-worn stereotypes of classical musicians as mannered and obsequious servants of wealth and the wealthy are based on fact, albeit facts from three centuries ago. Then, as is well known, most composers were, like Haydn, attached to, or, like Mozart, failing to acquire positions within European dynastic royal courts. Bach at the beginning of his career was also a beneficiary of these arrangements. A good indication of what was expected of him and the others in their relations with superiors was the composer's inscription on the title page of the Brandenburg Concerti:

As I had the good fortune a few years ago to be heard by Your

Royal Highness, at Your Highness's commands, and as I noticed then that Your Highness took some pleasure in the little talents which Heaven has given me for Music, and as in taking Leave of Your Royal Highness, Your Highness deigned to honour me with the command to send Your Highness some pieces of my Composition: I have in accordance with Your Highness's most gracious orders taken the liberty of rendering my most humble duty to Your Royal Highness with the present Concertos, which I have adapted to several instruments; begging Your Highness most humbly not to judge their imperfection with the rigor of that discriminating and sensitive taste, which everyone knows Him to have for musical works, but rather to take into benign Consideration the profound respect and the most humble obedience which I thus attempt to show Him.

Bach's transparently absurd protestations of his "little talents" and "imperfections" and his entreaties to be exempted from his majesty's stern but fair judgment are a lavish albeit not atypical display of flattery, understood then not as demeaning to, but as required of, those expecting to remain at court. At the same time, musicians recognized their value and were sometimes able to negotiate favorable terms for their service. But overly aggressive assertions of independence would subject them to punishment, Mozart's disciplining at the hands of the Salzburg Archbishop being the most celebrated instance; Bach having served a prison term for incurring the displeasure of his royal patron in Dresden is another.

Aristocratic patronage remained a source of composers' livelihoods throughout the nineteenth century, with Beethoven's annuity contract which supported him from 1809 until the end of his life secured through the contributions of a consortium of Viennese nobility. Later in the century, Tchaikovsky's musical career was lavishly supported in equal measure by the Imperial Court and by a generous allowance made available to him by his admirer, Madame von Meck, an heiress to a railway fortune. Each of these arrangements,

significantly, required very little of either composer. Most notably, it did not require their appearance at court, or even their presence in the near vicinity: Beethoven was only required to remain in Vienna, Tchaikovsky, famously, met his patroness on only one occasion, their relationship having been otherwise entirely epistolatory. Independence, as opposed to subservience was, by this point, taken as the great artist's prerogative, and elites were willing to financially underwrite the conditions necessary for artists to achieve it.

In this connection, it is hard to avoid mentioning the figure of Richard Wagner who parlayed musical genius, formidable intellect, and social connections into a position of considerable economic power and political influence.<sup>5</sup> While Wagner would be appropriated and serve as a foundational inspiration for National Socialism, less well known is Wagner's friendship with Bakunin and his leadership role in the 1849 Dresden uprisings.<sup>6</sup> That Wagner would remain in the good graces of European royals, ultimately being provided an unlimited budget by his Bayreuth patron King Ludwig, is indicative of composers relating to hereditary nobility on an increasingly equal footing—recognized by the latter as de facto “aristocrats of the soul.”

Roughly concurrent with these evolving forms of elite patronage was the ascendancy of the merchant class and the growth of cities which led to the creation of large public concert halls, performances which were highly lucrative for touring virtuosi. Fees derived from concerts were augmented by sales of composers' works through the burgeoning music publishing industry, and eventually, recordings, the combination of which provided some musicians access to real wealth. Eventually, musicians were increasingly able to cut their ties with feudal courts and patrons entirely, becoming entrepreneurs marketing and selling their musical product to an increasingly affluent consumer base.

But having managed to thrive under the market's invisible hand they found themselves increasingly subject to its vicissitudes. This became most apparent during the post-WWI period in which Europe was unable to regain its economic footing. By the 1930s, conditions had deteriorated to the point that many began to question elites' competence in managing economic affairs and moral and intellectual fitness to govern. This recognition in some cases emboldened musicians to begin to question their traditional allegiance to the political right.<sup>7</sup> It was in this context that we begin to see something more or less unprecedented in music history: groups of classical musicians committed to participating in organized radical and even revolutionary left politics.

Perhaps the first musician easily identifiable within this category was the German composer Hanns Eisler. Considered by Schoenberg his most brilliant student, Eisler would become radicalized in his early twenties, attempting to join the Communist Party (he was rejected for failing to pay his dues) and succeeding Kurt Weill as a collaborator with Berthold Brecht. Forced into exile in 1933, Eisler moved to New York City where he would exert an influence on the members of the Composers' Collective which, like the Berlin-based November Group of which Eisler was a member, consisted of artists more or less sympathetic to and operating under the auspices of the CP.

Among the Collective's membership, which included Henry Cowell (composer of "The Banshee" and other modernist classics), Marc Blitzstein ("The Cradle will Rock"), Earl Robinson ("The Ballad of Americans," "Joe Hill"), Alex North (film score for "A Streetcar Named Desire"), was the best known American composer of concert music, Aaron Copland. Copland's political trajectory during this period is representative of many in his generation. Already sympathetic to socialism through the

candidacy and writings of Eugene Debs, upon returning to New York City from Paris in 1925 Copland would belong to artistic circles which, according to his biographer Howard Pollock, "identified strongly with 'the masses' and the 'proletariat' and spoke confidently of the coming 'revolution' and the collapse of 'bourgeois capitalism.'"

Along similar lines to other artists and writers associated with the cultural front, the Composers' Collective, according to Pollock, viewed themselves as seeking "to find a style of music appropriate to the Marxist revolution," though this style turned out, not surprisingly, to be not so easily identified or achieved. In theory, all sides agreed with Big Bill Heywood's adage that "nothing is too good for the working class." When it came to the arts generally and music in particular, the question of what "the best" was and who should determine it was hard to answer. One view, associated with Eisler and at least initially influential, was along traditional lines, taking high arts and culture generally in more or less their existing form as constituting a pinnacle of human achievement.<sup>8</sup> The revolution would view them as it would any of the feudal and haute bourgeoisie's most coveted possessions, as assets to be liberated and made available to the masses, just as one would a castle, its grounds, its Rembrandts and Velazquezes, or the crown jewels.

But it was also recognized that Eisler's vision required working class audiences able to appreciate what was being provided for them, or at least a desire to achieve a requisite degree of conventional musical and cultural literacy. This entailed their being provided access to an education far above the rudimentary level that most had received. It should be understood that regarding a lack of familiarity or appreciation of the high arts as a form of impoverishment was not mere paternalism among vanguardist elements of the leadership. That workers themselves recognized their experience of cultural deprivation and economic oppression as

linked can be seen in Stanley Aronowitz's description of his working class Jewish family as committed to "'high' art [as] the only possible cultural legacy for a working class that sought to transcend the degraded conditions of its subordinate existence."<sup>9</sup> While it would result in a rightward political trajectory in his case, journalist Joe Queenan observes along similar lines that it was "Because of my working-class background, [that] 'serious' music was important to me—not only because it was mysterious and beautiful in a way the Rolling Stones were not, but because it confirmed that I had cut my ties with the proletariat and 'arrived.'"<sup>10</sup>

The demand among workers for the education enabling them to transcend their cultural impoverishment was fulfilled by two different institutions within the organized left. One was the labor unions which were, as has been observed, very different organizations from the narrowly focused, legalistic bureaucracies they have since become. An indication can be seen in a 2006 newsgroup posting<sup>11</sup> from upstate New York electrical worker Jerry Monaco:

My Italian working class neighborhood in an industrial town was ruled by General Electric, the Catholic Church, the democratic machine, and the union local. But the people in that neighborhood I remember from 1965, had a good eye for "the quality" of certain things—good food of course, but also good music . . . My great grandfather could tell you why Verdi was good and Puccini was "like adding sugar to honey" and he never even finished the third grade. . . . My great Uncle Tony could tell you why Louis Armstrong was great . . . and why he liked Frank Sinatra and Billy Holiday but why so many other popular singers were "empty." Uncle Tony never graduated from high school, but he did take classes in classical music [at] the union hall. He belonged to a reading group at the union hall and read poetry. Yes there was a poetry group for the factory workers at the union hall in Schenectady, NY. I tend to think that because such people were around I learned to

appreciate quality.

There is anecdotal evidence that Monaco's experience was not unusual: union halls fulfilled an important social, cultural, and educational function for many thousands of workers, though so far as I know, these have not been the subject of much scholarly attention.

Although the unions' role was substantial, probably more central in advancing workers' cultural education in the beginning of the twentieth century were the now mostly forgotten workers schools operated under the sponsorship of the Communist Party. These, which included the Thomas Jefferson School for Social Science in New York, the Samuel Adams School in Boston, the Abraham Lincoln School in Chicago, the Los Angeles People's Educational Center, and the San Francisco Labor School, would spread to virtually every major city with a yearly enrollment of many thousands at their peak.<sup>12</sup> While weighted towards the social sciences, economics, history, and sociology, taught from a Marxian perspective, a substantial humanities and arts curriculum was also available to students, with courses at the flagship Jefferson School in music history and music theory taught by composers such as Wallingford Riegger and Marc Blitzstein and by scholars such as Sidney Finkelstein and Charles Seeger. While these would be best described as music appreciation, that they were pitched at an atypically high level can be seen by the specialized topics covered, such as a class devoted to "the chamber music of Beethoven."<sup>13</sup> Additional evidence is provided by transcripts of the House Un-American Activities Committee making snide reference to classes taught by the distinguished emigré scholar Dr. Joachim Schumacher on "the bourgeois music culture in the period of monopoly capitalism"<sup>14</sup> and "the topography of Carl Maria Von Weber." Given the total enrollment which in some years numbered as many as 10,000, music classes at Jefferson School can reasonably be seen as having helped



create a working-class presence among the core of enthusiasts for standard repertory works which was, at least until recently, a distinguishing feature of concert life of New York City.

In addition to its role in developing an appreciation for “the classics,” what can be referred to as the organized left, that is, the Communist Party, along with its splinter parties and labor unions (some affiliated with the CP, others hostile to it) frequently used their facilities and publicity networks to present musical events. While only some of these featured classical musicians, the scale on which these occurred was impressive. One of the most important venues was the ILGWU’s summer retreat Unity House whose 1,200-seat open air concert hall, according to a pamphlet circulated at the time, featured “famous guest stars” in addition to orchestral programs performed by a “brilliant, permanent company of musicians.” A 1938 *Life Magazine* profile<sup>15</sup> of the “million dollar resort” suggests that it “would make a fine setting for a movie,” describing a boy-meets-girl romance against the backdrop of “listening to string quartets” and the 2,000-volume library. The union workers pictured in the issue look like nothing so much as present day students at my own school (Bard College), privileged hipster sophisticates sporting wrap-around sunglasses, chinos, and sneakers. While probably a cynical attempt by *Life* and its publisher, the notorious media mogul Henry Luce, to promote the ILGWU as a bulwark against other more left leaning unions, it is nonetheless revealing that *Life* presents union life as having achieved not only decent wages and working conditions for its members, but something approaching glamour.

What these anecdotes attest to is the organized left having assumed a role not just as an inheritor but, to a significant extent, as a curator of artistic high culture. Furthermore, as

mentioned earlier, it would be high culture along the most traditional, so-called Arnoldian lines, a reference to the Victorian figure Matthew Arnold who famously described the arts as "the best which has been thought and said." The implicit statement conveyed by the left was that the kind of relationship of the arts with society that a reactionary nineteenth century Eton headmaster envisions is not only not inconsistent with economic radicalism but that a workers' state offers its best hope for survival.<sup>16</sup> While subsequent decades offer conflicting evidence as to whether this was a reasonable status for the left to aspire to and whether it could assume it effectively, there is some evidence in its favor. In particular, while much was amiss in the later years of the Soviet Union, it can in retrospect be seen as the last bastion of classical music in something approximating a traditional, viable, and even vibrant form: it was more or less unanimously conceded that the greatest virtuosi of the second half of the twentieth century, Richter, Oistrakh, Rostropovich, among many others, were nurtured by the Soviet System and found a place as cultural icons within it. Furthermore, unlike in the West where postwar avant garde composers tended to be relegated to the status of "uninvited guests to a dinner party," in the words of Polish composer Witold Lutoslawski, Soviet contemporary composers such as Shostakovich and Schnittke were honored by general audiences, their works being appreciated as at once contemporary and as a legitimate extension of the tradition, in sharp distinction to the attitudes of audiences towards the self-conscious "Year Zero" ideology promulgated by Western high modernists such as Pierre Boulez. Richard Taruskin's report of the premier of the Shostakovich 15<sup>th</sup> Symphony describes the audience receiving the work as "a grateful, emotional salute to a cherished life companion, a fellow citizen and fellow sufferer, who had forged a mutually sustaining relationship with his public."<sup>17</sup> This was, according to Taruskin, "altogether outside the experience of any musician in my part of the world." In

particular, it would be hard to imagine this reception applying to any Western composers of the postwar period, even the most celebrated who were to some degree respected, but in an important sense not beloved.



Their seminal role within the Soviet Union notwithstanding, the Eislerian/Arnoldian vision of high arts within working class culture would not, ultimately, be sustained by left political formations in the West. Among the reasons for the decline was, on the one side, intellectuals becoming increasingly aware of the climate of repression under Stalin, which extended to the targeting of creative artists, most notably Shostakovich. In response, most composers and musicians would abandon the Communist Party, fracturing their alliance with the working class achieved under the cultural front umbrella, with most ultimately finding themselves somewhere on the spectrum from the liberal left to the neo-conservative right. On the other side, the working class would not always be as open as Aronowitz and Monaco would have

predicted to the attempts to provide them with cultural and artistic guidance. Among many indications, a consultant hired by the ILGWU to offer advice on programming at Unity House noted that "the working class patrons. . . did not care for the serious entertainment, nor did they want to be uplifted, report[ing] that Unity House had too much culture, classical music, heavy drama, and surreal dancing. [He] suggested that it lighten up with lowbrow humor, dance contests, amateur nights and costume balls."<sup>18</sup> As the unions were abandoning their commitment to high culture in the 1950s, composers were moving in the other direction, viewing themselves, as noted in a widely circulated article<sup>19</sup> by Milton Babbitt, as "specialists" in an arcane technical discipline, who should no more make accommodations to popular tastes than would an algebraic topologist or quantum physicist. Predictably, it would not be long before the gap between working class and high musical culture would widen to the point that no bridge between the two would seem possible or even imaginable.

In retrospect, it appears obvious that the Eislerian/Arnoldian view could not survive the general resistance to the imposition of a high art which most found alien and an increasingly uncompromising and hermetic classical music establishment celebrating its refusal to be dictated to by an unsophisticated broad public. What would eventually supplant Eisler as the dominant musical philosophy informing not just the Communist Party but the left across the board was one which would embrace and celebrate working class musical culture, rather than repudiate it as alienated and degraded. This view would be associated with another Composers' Collective member, Charles Seeger, then a composer and musicologist, now best known as the father of Pete Seeger, who should be seen as functioning as a proselytizing Aaron to his father's Moses.

Whereas for Eisler, the foundation of the new musical culture would remain recognized masterworks and classical forms in which they were composed, the Seegers rejected elite, haute bourgeois high arts as inherently undemocratic and authoritarian. Rather, what needed to be recognized and celebrated by the left were indigenous popular forms of music, which, while necessarily expressively impoverished and stunted by capitalism, would provide the foundation on which a rich proletarian musical culture would develop. Among these indigenous styles was the urban, cosmopolitan variant, jazz, the subject of Seeger's *Daily Worker* colleague Sidney Finkelstein's "Jazz a Peoples Music," one of the first serious studies of the idiom, anticipating by many years its eventual institutionalization within university jazz studies departments and canonization by Ken Burns (among others) as "America's classical music." The rural variant was folk music, which Pete would passionately champion in a now seven-decade-long career. Folk would become during the fifties culturally and commercially central, as groups such as the Weavers (of which Pete was a member) and then their well-scrubbed, depoliticized successors such as the Kingston Trio, the New Christy Minstrels, and The Brothers Four, took their place on the hit parade.

The folk revolution would be succeeded in short order by rock, which would, to an even greater degree, define itself by its rejection of high art and elite culture: gone were traditional forms celebrated by Eisler, almost entirely vanished were extended self-contained instrumental works, these replaced largely by songs, usually of dimensions appropriate for commercial airplay. Orchestral instruments would be displaced by the guitars inherited from the folk revolution, with amplified guitar becoming the vehicle for virtuosic displays of a familiar Liszt-Paganinian sort, albeit projected into stadiums holding audiences two orders of magnitude larger than those of the nineteenth century.

A more conspicuous and significant departure can be found in the extra-musical accouterments of the concert ritual. The new standards, which applied to both folk and rock, and the public's quick and enthusiastic acceptance of them were accurately described in a recent letter<sup>20</sup> to the *New York Times* from Grant Wiggins of Hopewell, N.J.: "For the past 40 years, rock has taught us that emoting and participating with our bodies and voices are part of the show. You can't do that in a concert hall. The entire society dresses informally now; concerts still involve formal wear by the audience, as if back in the 1890s."

As Mr. Wiggins suggests, not only would formal concert dress, tuxedos, evening gowns, high-heels, and patent leather shoes be replaced by the worker's blue jeans, shirts, and sneakers or cowboy boots. Acculturated speech would be replaced by vernacular r-droppings, diphthongizations, "ain't," "wontcha," and "dontcha." Field hollers and screams of the evangelical church were imported for use both by the performers and audience. Most conspicuously, the repressed codes of behavior claimed by Levine as mechanisms to discipline a restive working class at the turn of the previous century would be jettisoned with audiences now taking for granted active as opposed to passive participation in the concert ritual. All this would be at least superficially consistent with Seeger's philosophy, if not to his liking, as will be discussed momentarily.

Before we engage this point, it is worth digressing to note that the replacement of haute bourgeois standards of decorum by those associated with the working class is often taken as a victory, the cultural equivalent of the storming of the winter palace or the sans culottes entering Versailles. But if this was a victory, it needs to be well understood that it was a tiny skirmish in a much larger war in which the devastation of

the working class was virtually total. The indications of the defeat are by now so familiar as to barely require mentioning, among them, the aggregate wealth of the top 500 families exceeding that of the bottom 100 million, the decline of private (and now public sector) union density to single-digit levels reminiscent of the darkest, most Dickensian periods in industrial history, the leveling or even drop in life expectancy of lower income groups over the past two decades, etc.<sup>21</sup>

Rather than merely register a correlation, another possibility is along Eislerian lines, viewing the collapse of high musical culture as connected to the decline of the working class and its capacity to resist the elite campaign against it. That this explanation might seem dubious is partly indicative of the distance that we have travelled from the Composers' Collective. Among the few who have been willing to link the collapse of the left's core agenda to the collapse in musical high culture is R.G. Davis who, in the late 1980s, attempted to rehabilitate Eisler in one of the initial issues of the seminal left journal *Rethinking Marxism*.<sup>22</sup>

In particular, Davis endorses Eisler's view that "simple music does and can reflect only simple political thinking." While conceding that they will not necessarily do so, "it is easier for people who appreciate complex music to move on to an appreciation of complex political problems, than for those who limit themselves to folk (pop, rock, gospel, blues, etc.)" Echoing Eisler's endorsement of the "rigorous methodology," of serialism as "inherently anti-thetical to fascism," Davis argues that the "sonata form [which] entertains two thoughts working simultaneously" embodies a "Hegelian . . . notion of contradiction" and thereby can support a critical discourse. The "easy resolution of folk which has come down from the 1930s into the 1980s via Charles Seeger and his followers is almost always 'feel good' music . . . with only room for one theme and little for oppositional dialogue." This is because

the form of most folk and almost all jazz/pop music does not (cannot) even reflect industrial social relations as we know them, much less make a comment on them. Classical music, or music organized by a trained composer, art music, is more likely to produce an instructional metaphor (and form) with which to examine the foundations of corporate society.

While I would not necessarily endorse it, Davis's equation of "easy listening" with the easy platitudes of corporate public relations and government press releases propagated through the commercial media seems reasonable enough. A bit more of a stretch, but certainly worth considering is Davis's metaphor relating the habits of thought necessary to grasp the logic of an extended composition, say, the Sibelius Fifth Symphony, with the sort of critical engagement required to make sense of the systems of hierarchy and control in complex political economies.

It probably won't come as a surprise that Davis's article made little impact, and was likely regarded by the few who read it as somewhat eccentric. The reason for this returns us to Seeger and to the basic outlines of the Seegerian philosophy. In particular it requires the recognition that these have by now achieved a nearly hegemonic status in popular consciousness—including among the left. Eclecticism of the sort endorsed by both Seegers now reigns supreme, all musical genres are equally worthy of celebration, assumed, when subject to the form of analysis appropriate to the genre, to inevitably reveal considerable and sometimes astounding subtlety and sophistication. This provides the grounds for taking as established truth Duke Ellington's remark that all styles are equally able to produce the only two meaningfully distinguishable types of music: good and bad. And with this comes the corollary that musicologist Robert Fink advanced more than a decade and half ago and worth restating here, that classical music is by now "one style among many and by no



means the most prestigious.”

Accepting Ellington leaves Eisler and the Eislerians on shaky ground—proselytizers for a self-important elite agenda bearing some resemblance to the vanguardist intolerance which would be a notably unattractive feature of the state socialist regimes many of them endorsed, reluctantly or otherwise. From this follows the rather underwhelming conclusion that rather than escaping their class to the greener fields of high culture, the workers could have gotten what they wanted by staying where they were. Stanley Aronowitz’s father and Jerry Monaco’s uncle had no reason to have felt deprived in the first place. The education they received could have been better directed to an appreciation of what they already possessed. Rather than climbing the high culture mountain, they could have gotten to the summit by driving their air-conditioned Impalas up the other side.

To the extent that the demise of musical high culture and the elevation of popular forms, both in terms of their prestige and their nearly complete domination of the musical marketplace, constitutes a triumph, Seeger has triumphed. But it is by no means clear that Seeger himself would have regarded it as such. One indication to the contrary is provided by an iconic moment within rock history, the 1965 Newport Folk Festival at which Bob Dylan made his final break with unamplified folk music, assaulting the audience with a maximal volume Maggie’s Farm. Charles, nearly 80, accompanied Pete. And while accounts of Pete’s hostility to amplified rock are likely highly exaggerated by Dylan fans wanting to construe a Seeger-Dylan standoff in mythic, Oedipal terms, Charles likely did have misgivings both with respect to Dylan’s performance and with the form which the rock revolution was ultimately to take.

To recognize what these may have been requires looking more

closely at Seeger's stated views which are somewhat subtler than Davis's critique of them would suggest. One statement is contained in a memo<sup>23</sup> Seeger wrote in his capacity as director of the WPA Federal Music Project overseeing those working under the FMP's auspices. Most prominently, Seeger will be seen to promote a horizontalist musical culture privileging active participation in music above passive listening: the former is the "essential thing," whereas the latter was "secondary" according to him. Complementing this was a rejection of the peaks of musical achievement, i.e. the production of masterpieces as the standard by which musical culture should be judged: "As every person is musical . . . [t]he musical culture of the nation is to be estimated upon the extent of participation of the whole population rather than upon the extent of the virtuosity of a fraction of it." And given that "music as a group activity is more important than music as individual accomplishment," "professional music" should not be "artificially stimulated." Finally, perhaps most challenging of all, Seeger wasn't interested in whether a piece of music was or was not, in some sense, "good"; rather he was interested in "what is it good for?"

These amount to a direct attack on the Eislerian vision of the high musical arts, albeit of a familiar sort. The "artificial stimulation" Seeger refers to implicates the many years of subsidized, formal training which are necessary for classical musicians; in contrast, the skills required to perform in most other styles are learned "on the job," mainly by performing and socially engaging with others. The subsidies are justifiable if one assumes that the masterpieces of the literate medium have a unique, transcendent value. But this assumption is challenged by Seeger, raising doubts as to whether the question of musical quality—"what is good"—is even meaningful in the absence of an understanding of what is gained by defining a hierarchy of musical value—"what is it good for?" Asking the latter question turns back on itself classical music's commitment to "timeless masterpieces,"

equating these to an economy similarly hierarchically organized albeit around the production of concentrations of wealth and power. How can we criticize one, and celebrate the other, Seeger quite reasonably asks the left?

The implications of Seeger's horizontalism, its rejection of rigid hierarchies of taste defined by the traditional, sacralized canon, its devalorization of tuxedo-clad celebrity conductors, singers, and instrumentalists, its deflation of the pomposity of traditional concert music rituals are of a piece with a populist left critique particularly applicable to a self-improvement oriented, Mortimer Adler-reading bourgeoisie of the 1950s. But a minute's thought will reveal that what was intended as an attack on the musical culture of the previous century dominated by the classics is just as applicable to the contemporary musical hierarchy in which the classical canon has little to no place. Most conspicuously, music has for years been dominated by a hierarchy of stars having a more or less comparable public profile and social status as Liszt, Caruso, Bernstein, or Paganini. And music fans are obsessed with what they take unproblematically to be "the best" relying on objective rankings systems such the top 40, youtube hits, or downloads as a proxies for quality. Rock critics such as Chuck Klosterman and Ken Ward, by now far more numerous and visible than the Olin Downses and Harold Rosenbaums of the last century, argue passionately over elaborate and subtle points of interpretation within what has become an equally sacralized rock music canon. Classical music competitions—the Queen Elizabeth, Tchaikovsky, and Naumberg—have somehow limped on into the new century but by now much more prominent are their farcical repetitions in the form of *American Idol* and its assorted spin-offs. And while musicians tend not to have traditional conservatory educations, rock is thoroughly professionalized, with layers of highly trained studio engineers, video technicians, legal

staffs, and marketing and sales personnel engaged in the promotion and distribution of what is a major commercial product.

Furthermore, now that conventional musical literacy no longer poses a barrier, there is considerable room for amateur participation in music making, though it is not obvious that it is of a sort with which the Seegers would have had much affinity. For it is likely that the advance of communications technologies, having made professionally-produced music available for free to all those wanting it, has made for a less participatory music culture, the production, as opposed to the consumption, being left to those who have successfully negotiated the obstacles of the commercial marketplace. Performing music which used to mean manipulating the eighty-eight keys of a keyboard or the six strings of the guitar now tends to mean entering the sequences of keystrokes necessary to download an MP3 on I-tunes. DJ's have now blurred the boundaries of the skills required of the performing musician with that of the listener. Is this really the kind of participation Seeger envisioned, or is it nothing more than a slightly elevated form of passive engagement?

All this should be sufficient to demonstrate that, with the exception of a few minor points of overlap, both Seeger's and Eisler's visions of a proletarian musical culture are far distant from where we are now, as is the broader social and economic transformation which both were committed to. What has triumphed is, of course, capitalism, and within it a musical culture reflecting the dominance of markets as much as, if not more than, in other aspects of society.

It is in this light that the mid-century musical culture wars should be seen. For a brief period, the counter-hegemonic potential of Seegerian musical styles (folk and rock) was realized and played a role in the mass movements of the

sixties. But it soon became clear that a part of the foundation on which they were constructed would be unable to support the aspirations that were projected onto it. For just as workers themselves suffer from what Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb in their classic study<sup>24</sup> call “the hidden injuries of class” so too does working class culture reflect the routine degradation, tedium, and imposed ignorance which the Aronowitz and Monaco families were committed to escaping. Eventually, what was taken initially as transgressive political content turned out to be no more than another circus provided by elites in exchange for ever diminishing bread. Worse, the “revolution” in musical style resulting in the global hegemony of rock music, was celebrated by the right as a validation of capitalism’s transcendent virtues.

This among other indications would seem sufficient to validate Eisler’s equation of simple music with the toxic simple truths of public relations and capitalist “common sense.” With capitalism now in deep crisis, it might appear to those of us whose musical lives have been committed to preserving the sonatas, variations, minuets, and fugues that Eisler claims should constitute the foundation of an oppositional musical culture that our time has finally come. But any optimism along these lines should be combined with the critical Seegerian awareness that elite, haute bourgeois musical culture can be, and usually is, deeply alienating to those outside its walls and is often designed to achieve precisely this end.

Related to this is the increasing awareness that the reports of the demise of classical music are now no longer exaggerated, at least in the sense of it having become a dead language—its repertoire of gestures, inventory of timbres, limited formal roadmaps and performance rituals leaving it largely unable to communicate to audiences other than the most geriatric. All that tells us what we already know: our project is to build a new world either on the foundations of the old or, more likely, if the past is any guide, somewhere else

entirely. We should be doing it everywhere—in and outside of music.

## Footnotes

1. This piece had its origins in a talk at the James Connolly Forum in Troy, NY, on March 15, 2013. I would like to thank Connolly Forum director Jon Flanders for the invitation and the Connolly Forum audience for questions which precipitated many of the ideas that are discussed herein. Also, thanks to Anton Vishio, Karl Lerud, Mark Mishler, Noam Chomsky, and Alex Ross for commenting on the draft.
2. John Halle, "[Occupy Wall Street: Composers and the Plutocracy](#)," *New Politics* (14/1 2012): 85-96.
3. Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).
4. Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1996).
5. I am indebted to Anton Vishio and Alex Ross for reminding me of this oversight in an earlier draft.
6. See [here](#) for an excellent discussion of Wagner's political commitments and alliances.
7. E.g., Schoenberg described himself as a "royalist," and Stravinsky expressed "veneration" for Mussolini, as did Webern (somewhat more ambiguously) for "this unique man" Hitler.
8. For Eisler's views on these matters, see James Wierzbicki, "Hanns Eisler and the FBI," *Music and Politics* (2/2: 2011), and R.G. Davis "Music from the Left," *Rethinking Marxism* (Winter 1988): 7-25.
9. Stanley Aronowitz, *Roll over Beethoven: The Return of Cultural Strife*, (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1993), 107.
10. See [here](#).
11. See [here](#).

12. I am grateful to Joel Kovel to bringing these remarkable institutions to my attention.
13. Marvin Gettleman, [Lost World of U.S. Labor Education](#): Curricula at East and West Coast Community Schools, 1944-1957.
14. See [here](#).
15. "ILGWU: A Great and Good Union Points the Way for America's Labor Movement," Life Magazine (August 1, 1938): 45.
16. A concise formulation of the idea is attributed to the late journalist and labor scholar Robert Fitch: "The bourgeoisie takes very bad care of its cultural inheritance."
17. Richard Taruskin, "Double Trouble," The New Republic, (Dec. 24, 2001): 26-34.
18. Lawrence Squeri, Better in the Poconos: The Story of Pennsylvania's Vacationland (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002).
19. Milton Babbitt, "Who Cares if You Listen?" High Fidelity, Feb. 1958.
20. Grant Wiggins, [letter to the editor](#), New York Times, Nov. 25, 2012.
21. Documentation provided in, for example, Jeff Madrick, Age of Greed: The Triumph of Finance and the Decline of America, 1970 to the Present (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011).
22. R.G. Davis, "Music from the Left," Rethinking Marxism (Winter 1988): 7-25.
23. Quoted in Pete Seeger, Where Have All The Flowers Gone: A Singer's Stories, Songs, Seeds, Robberies (Bethlehem, PA: Sing Out, 2005).
24. Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, The Hidden Injuries of Class (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1972).