

Occupy Wall Street, Composers and the Plutocracy: Some Variations on an Ancient Theme

I

In the six month since its difficult birth in mid-September, Occupy Wall Street has attracted a widespread and largely favorable reaction among the public with [a recent poll indicating](#) 54% support, far higher than most political institutions, established parties and elected officials. Of course, the reaction has not been universally favorable. The political right wing has been withering in its criticism, but they have not had a monopoly on their viewing Occupy as an alarming, corrosive and even sinister development in political consciousness. Indeed, some of the most brutal and violent assaults against Occupy encampments have been undertaken by municipal governments in Oakland, Albany, Portland, and Chicago having the reputation as at least liberal, and even on the radical left.

So the question of who supports Occupy is by no means as unproblematically aligned on the left/right spectrum as it initially appears. As for specific social classes and professional categories, matters are just as confused, with supporters claiming a broad representation from all walks of life and critics of Occupy denigrating participants as trust fund babies or slacker college grads who need to “get a job”. When it comes to artists generally and composers in particular the question of how involved we are is more problematic still, and is likely to remain unanswerable for the foreseeable future.

But that doesn't mean that composers can't usefully discuss the question with an eye to learning more about who we are and what makes us tick. And it is with that in mind that I will offer the following short answer: based on my experience as a relatively active participant in the movement and my having attempted to organize support for it among composers [here](#), I don't think that we have been well represented in the Occupy Movement. This, however, needs to be accompanied by a disclaimer; more than most professional categories, composers are profoundly committed to what we do. Keeping our distance from OWS prevents us from getting mired in the swamps of politics something which we would avoid as we would anything else which takes us away from our work.

That said, we know this cannot be the entire explanation. For example, many of us will recall having devoted considerable energy to the Obama campaign, demonstrating that composers can be highly political when we want to be. With this in mind, we can return to the original question: why have we not been involved in a movement whose stated objective is advancing economic justice for the 99%?

Now a somewhat more problematic answer suggests itself: for centuries, composers were beholden to the one percenters of their day, the feudal aristocracy. And while aristocratic patronage would decline during the 19th century, the traditions and political allegiances inherited from this golden age live on. While we are not, like Haydn, required to wear powdered wigs and military uniforms, the barriers separating us from the plutocracy are significantly less pronounced than those obtaining in other professions. And as the degrees of separation diminish, we are more likely to view economic elites as individuals who, like any others, deserve our respect rather than as a class that has earned our contempt.

That we are in relatively close proximity to them can be seen in the following tour of some of the premier arts

institutions with which we are associated or at least hope to gain favor. Having familiarized ourselves with these surroundings, I will continue with some reflections on the broader picture which emerges, and conclude with some thoughts on how composers who choose to become active in the OWS movement can most usefully direct their energies.

A good place to begin is with the winner of this year's Alice Ditson Prize for the promotion of American music, the New York Philharmonic. Much of the credit for this programming goes to the recently appointed music director, Alan Gilbert. But the financial wherewithal for these programming decisions is provided by the NY Philharmonic board and its chairman, Gary S. Parr. Mr. Parr is currently CEO of Lazard, his bio on the [NY Phil](#) website informs us, in which capacity he "has recently advised on transactions such as the sale of Lehman's North American investment banking business to Barclay's; the sale of Bear Stearns to JPMorgan; he served in numerous capacities at Morgan Stanley, including as vice-chairman—Institutional Securities and Investment Banking."

Accepting a commission from or performance by the New York Phil in no way implies that we are sympathetic with these activities—for example, the "sales" of Lehman and Bear Stearns[1] underwritten by the extortion of hundreds of billions of taxpayer dollars. But it does mean that we have an indirect financial stake in concentrating wealth in the hands of one percenters like Mr. Parr who provide the ultimate financial basis for our work.

The same can be said about our relations with Sanford Weill, the chairman of the board of another pre-eminent uptown musical institution, Carnegie Hall. In this capacity, composers are grateful to Mr. Weill for helping to foot the bill for the [impressive range of contemporary music under Carnegie's auspices](#). This Dr. Jekyll is complemented by the

Mr. Hyde who was the former CEO of Citibank, the company perhaps most responsible for the marketing of subprime loans which were to blow up the economy, immiserating hundreds of millions, while helping itself to hundreds of billions of dollars in bailout funds.

Returning to Lincoln Center, we find ourselves truly in the belly of the beast upon entering the David Koch Theater, named after the notorious sponsor of far right initiatives, and home to the New York City Ballet, a frequent and consistent advocate for American composers. Also in this category is the New York City Opera, whose orchestra is now being subject to a vicious union busting campaign by its director, George Steel, which Mr. Koch and others of his ilk would undoubtedly heartily approve of. A few lateral steps will land us in the Metropolitan Opera, whose \$300 million budget is underwritten by a board including billionaire heiresses from the publishing and oil industries, a managing director of Goldman Sachs, and former CEO of Texaco. Among the more problematic features of the Met in recent years has been the Alberto Vilar Grand Tier, the name having been removed following the donor's conviction on multiple counts of defrauding investors.

Mr. Vilar reminds us that not all of the crimes on which were constructed the great fortunes we benefit from went unprosecuted. Moving a couple of blocks uptown from Lincoln Center provides us with more evidence: Merkin Hall was presided over for many years by Ezra Merkin, the chief marketer of the Bernard Madoff line of investment products, whose once eager purchasers are now required to subsist on Social Security, having lost their life savings to the smooth talking Talmudic scholar, White Shoe lawyer, and music lover. Some of the programs at Merkin have been sponsored by the Milken Center for Jewish Music and here we are submerged in the previous wave of financial crime presided over by the Milken brothers, the notorious junk bond kings.

Major artistic institutions such as these are, of course, well known for their longstanding connections to financial elites, so the above list could be continued almost indefinitely. Given that the latter has become a de facto criminal class, we shouldn't be surprised that our tour has by now degenerated into a kind of perp walk—albeit perps attired in Brooks Brothers suits with refined musical tastes.

It was at least partly in reaction to the stifling artistic climate created by these stuffed-shirt connections that the downtown school of composition would arise in the sixties and seventies, though it was probably inevitable that, as it became established, downtown institutions would be underwritten by similarly problematic sources. This became apparent in the nineties when numerous downtown events received sponsorship provided by the pre-eminent rogue corporation of its day, Philip Morris, including a major gift to the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Another source was the DIA foundation, established by the heiress of the Schlumberger oil services fortune and most notable for its sponsorship of a six-year residency of the iconic minimalist composer La Monte Young.

Another pole of downtown, the Bang on a Can Festival has now been held for some years at the Winter Garden of the World Financial Center. This merits comment since, as I write this, OWS demonstrators are being violently dispersed by the police at the behest of the Winter Garden's owners, Brookfield Properties. This dichotomy provides a renewed demonstration that elites have little difficulty countenancing expressions of artistic radicalism. Indeed, they will open their doors to it and—quite literally—invite us in. But when radical style turns into radical substance—that is, when it challenges the economic basis of elite prerogatives and privilege—the one per centers of today, as of generations past, are ready, willing, and able to replace the proverbial velvet glove of acceptance

with an iron fist of repression. This is the logic through which the Winter Garden, formerly the site of many years of the classical music world's version of Woodstock, has just now become a war zone.

Interestingly, one of the board members having signed off on Brookfield's actions is Diana Taylor, the live-in companion of the Pontius Pilate of OWS, Mayor Bloomberg. The billionaire Mayor himself is also a strong supporter of the arts although, in another indication of the entanglement of the public and private, his contributions frequently compensate for budget cuts enacted in his executive capacity. That there are strings attached to these donations became clear when *The New York Times* [reported](#) that the beneficiaries were expected to enlist in support of the mayor's controversial ballot initiative to revoke term limits.

It should be recognized that attempts at advancing a political agenda through pulling artists' purse strings are uncommon. In the concert music world they are rarer still, the only recent instances which come to mind involving donors pressuring the Boston Symphony to rescind an invitation to Palestinian rights supporter Vanessa Redgrave and subsequently to cancel a concert staging of John Adams' opera *The Death of Klinghoffer*. That these instances are so rare might be taken to be indicative of orchestra boards' tendency to maintain a hands-off policy with respect to artistic decisions. But it would be a mistake to claim that they do not exercise significant influence, albeit in an indirect fashion. As elites have understood for generations, their simple presence at the upper levels tends to insure that they will not have to exercise direct veto on forms of expression of which they would disapprove.

Rather, a climate is created in which artistic decisions are made with an awareness of the location of certain political boundaries, and those at all levels of the organization choose not to transgress them. These decisions

don't need to be conscious as those making them have often, to cite a remark by Noam Chomsky, "internalized the values of the elites themselves" to the degree that they do not require guidance or discipline. The extent to which we do so will be the last subject I will address.

The claim just made is a slightly more pointed formulation of the suggestion made previously that our long history of aristocratic patronage may offer an explanation for our inherent tendency to throw in our lot with the one percent. But there is more to our identification and affinity with elites than shared history and economic self-interest. First, as composers we function in an executive capacity, one which involves, to cite a typically piquant aphorism of John Cage, "telling other people what to do." Just as the CEO dictates the precise specifications of a product and the conditions under which his labor force produces it, composers, if anything, go a step beyond the most repressive corporate executive, dictating every gesture by a workforce which is almost totally under the control of the choreography we produce for them in our scores. The megalomania of a composer like Wagner and that of a CEO like Rupert Murdoch may not be so different after all, and it should come as no surprise that the Met, a three ring circus of gesamkunstwerkliche activity, is the most generously endowed of all art institutions.

Second, just as CEOs define themselves according to an intensely structured and rigid hierarchy which they have succeeded in ascending, so too do classical musicians take for granted something roughly equivalent. Our training as performers or composers is founded on the notion of the transcendent musical masterpiece—those works whose inherent excellence and structural sophistication have allowed them to survive the Darwinian competition for survival in the musical marketplace of the concert hall. Our own work, insofar as it is successful, also manages to survive and thrive within its

own place and time. In accepting this hierarchy, and the basis on which it rests, we recapitulate what are by now familiar arguments of corporate executives in the top 1% as to their own fitness and legitimacy. Given this shared set of attitudes, the mutual affinity of composers and plutocrats probably shouldn't come as a surprise. And, to return to the original observation, it is more or less natural that we would view with suspicion a movement whose commitment to radical democracy seeks to challenge not just the basis of the social hierarchy, but the notion of hierarchy itself.

Finally, there is the matter of the highly controlled, quasi police-state atmosphere of the concert hall, one which forces audiences to submit passively to the experience imposed on them by the composer. As pointed out by Lawrence Levine in his much discussed 1988 book *Highbrow Lowbrow*, it is no coincidence that domestic classical music institutions were created by industrialists at the turn of the century confronted with mass popular uprisings. The codes of conduct attached to classical music were seen by them as a means to impose discipline on what they regarded as a dangerous mob and their support for it can be seen as another front in the war waged by elites against "the rabble" That we might not perceive ourselves as having allied ourselves with them does not mean that we are not objectively supporting their broader agenda.

At this point, it should be recalled that what I have laid out here are my opinions, which I have reached in the absence of rigorous studies relating to the representation of musicians within OWS, none of which, to my knowledge exist. That said, there are two pieces of hard evidence, albeit limited and circumstantial, worth mentioning here. The first is the Occupy Musicians website alluded to previously, and the mixture of negative responses and non-responses I received in my attempts to organize for it. Compounding this with the

relative absence of names of well-known composers, many of whom were contacted for inclusion and chose not to sign on, provides one general indication that composers have kept their distance from OWS.

The second piece of evidence implicating the unexpressed attitudes towards OWS comes in the form of the numerous comments attached to the viral Facebook posting created by Los Angeles-based composer Eric Guinivan:



While it is always a dicey business to excavate the foundations of a joke, in this instance it is revealing that the majority of the respondents simply register agreement with the proposition, making note of the disproportionate representation of a small number of elite composers in the world's concert halls, "Sooooo true. Ha, ha!" says one.

But these comments beg the question: why does pointing out this self-evident truth seem funny to us? What appears to be operative here is humor of the classic Freudian type: the joke masks the introduction of a taboo topic, namely that the Darwinian world of the concert hall is a brutal one in which very few of us can be expected to survive either in the here and now or in the future. And so we tend to broach the subject in jest or after a few beers.

Another possibility is that the humor resides in the Pythonesque absurdity of the premise: that programming decisions should be, like the OWS general assembly, radically democratic, granting all composers, living or dead, equal access to public performances. The logical consequence of this philosophy, for example, that the Wagenseil Piano Concerti should be programmed with the same regularity as those of Mozart would strike many as coming close to a dystopia, of course. One commenter's avowal that "he's with the 1% on this one" seems to be a recognition that this scenario, equivalent to imaging a hospital intensive care unit staffed by chimps, is perhaps better left to the imagination.

In either case, whatever is the basis of the joke, which I found as amusing as everyone else, the reactions to it are entirely self-referential at best or merely self-absorbed. They give no indication of any particular sympathy or, for that matter, even any understanding of the basic issues which have motivated OWS and its supporters.

In laying out some of the reasons for our not having done so, I don't mean to suggest that composers can't be active participants in OWS. If there are any doubts of our potential, they will be removed by viewing Alex Ross's extraordinary video taken on Lincoln Center Plaza following the final performance of *Satyagraha* at the Met on Dec 1. In what is by now a minor legend, Phillip Glass decided against taking his curtain call on stage and to stand with occupiers on Broadway across the plaza requesting that the Met audience exiting the theatre join them. Police barricades had been erected to prevent precisely this—a demonstration in support of Occupy in Lincoln Center—but Glass's presence, the message of the opera, and occupiers' repeated reminder that "the opera is your life," proved so compelling that hundreds ignored the police orders.

It needs to be well understood that these actions were illegal—indeed textbook cases of civil disobedience; had typical OWS demonstrators disobeyed police orders would have subjected them—possibly hundreds of them—to arrest at least, violent assaults at worst. Indeed, Glass himself could have reasonably been charged with incitement, a serious felony. But, even in the nascent police state into which New York City has devolved under the current administration, such a response would have been unthinkable. The opera audiences engaged in the act are one of the few constituencies which Bloomberg must treat with deference. And Glass himself has by now become an iconic figure, one of the very few classical composers who can legitimately stake a claim to real cultural and even moral authority.

That Glass's protest appeared in the pages of *The New York Times* speaks to the unique power which classical music and classical musicians still command. Resting on top of the pinnacle of elite artistic culture, constructed on generations of aristocratic patronage, our work provides us an entry into in the inner sanctum of the one percent. Few of us will ever achieve the status as composers which will allow us this access. And, it could reasonably be argued that Glass, a member of the composerly one percent, knowing that he is immune from retaliation, can exercise his rights to protest in a way which composers of the 99% cannot. Some of Glass's numerous detractors may see his activism as nothing more or less than another public relations stunt profiting from the "buzz" surrounding the now fashionable OWS movement. But that is too cynical. All that needs to be said is that Glass stepped up to the plate. It remains to be seen how many of the rest of us will.

II

The tendency of composers to throw in our lot with those Theodore Roosevelt called "economic royalists" will not come as a surprise to some in that it amounts to another form of

what the Marxists call false consciousness. Another probably more familiar variant of this minor pathology was personified by the brief celebrity of Joe the Plumber during the 2008 campaign who, it will be recalled, was concerned that Obama's economic policies would place an excessive burden on him, as a prospective owner of the firm he worked for.

Of course, the difference here is that, unlike Joe, few composers imagine ascending to an economic status where we would benefit from policies designed to enrich the 1%. Rather, our tendency to do so has at least a superficially rational basis: while we will not be the recipients of the flood of cash precipitated by upper-income tax cuts, "right to work" legislation, the repeal of the Glass-Steagall act and the bail out of financial institutions, our close proximity and historical ties to the elites-so the thinking goes- will insure that we will be first in line to collect the scraps from their table. Even if we don't believe in trickle-down economics providing broad social and economic benefits, our narrow interests might be served by the making the richest still richer.

But while we might (as do many others) adopt this morally questionable posture, there are reasons for believing it is shortsighted purely on self-interested grounds. While the initial discussion above focused on the ties between classical music institutions and economic elites, zooming in on the picture a bit reveals that composers are rarely the beneficiaries of plutocratic largesse to the degree many of us would hope.

The reasons for this have to do, first, with the reduced status of classical music relative to other musical genres. A generation or more back, classical music had an effective monopoly on elite philanthropy, as can be seen, for example, in the names attached to the major halls for classical music in New York- e.g. Avery Fisher, Morgan, Frick, Carnegie etc. In recent years, elite philanthropy has tended to balance

their support in the direction of diversity, with jazz having been a particular beneficiary. Some have gone even further in their support of what had been, in prior generations, denigrated as "commercial" musical genres. A good example is the former Microsoft billionaire Paul Allen whose [major contributions](#) in his hometown of Seattle have gone towards the construction of the rock and roll museum and the purchasing of fan memorabilia associated with icons of rock history. Providing financial support to an enterprise which has shown itself capable of competing most effectively within the marketplace would seem to constitute a kind of coals to New Castle philanthropy. Despite, or maybe because of this fact, it has become increasingly routine among the new generation of financial elites.

Secondly, even within the world of classical music proper, composers tend to be viewed somewhat more ambivalently than instrumentalists. While the latter might be regarded as (at worst) mere technicians, few would question the competence of a violinist able to dispatch a Tchaikovsky Concerto or a pianist able to rip through Rachmaninov Etudes. As I discuss [here](#), composers have had to contend for at least two generations with the charge of charlatanism, emanating not just from philistines but from credible, sensitive and even eminent cultural and intellectual figures, and that our claims for expert status are an elaborate scam to our essential artistic incompetence.

This widely shared, if infrequently expressed, perception of contemporary music as an intellectually and artistically bankrupt enterprise began to take hold in the sixties, and would become increasingly widespread to the extent that it has had a clear influence on the perspective and priorities of economic elites. One consequence is not only are legendary patrons on the model of Madame von Meck, Baron von Swieten, or Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge absent from premiers of significant pieces of contemporary music, they are conspicuously absent

from the title pages of contemporary scores. In their place are the names of a hodge podge of foundations whose surprisingly paltry awards often require a "consortium" to be formed to insure anything like a reasonable fee for the composer.

Interestingly, in recent years, composer advocacy groups have tried to resuscitate the tradition of individual patronage by matching donors with composers and ensembles with a personally inscribed final score and an invitation to the gala premier performance. The first and most conspicuous success of this approach was the Daniel Variations, funded by an Oakland lawyer by the name of Richard Goodman.

Aside from obvious, namely, to applaud Mr. Goodman and those who facilitated the commission, two aspects of this initiative are worth noting. First, the sum of \$70,000, while certainly generous in terms of the usual fees composers tend to receive, is, in fact, quite small when one considers that the recipient is Steve Reich, perhaps America's most eminent and widely acclaimed composer. A striking comparison is with paintings produced by equally well-established contemporary visual artists. These routinely sell in the high six figure range-with [a solo show](#) by artist Damien Hirst netting the controversial British installation artist over \$150 million-far more than most composers, even those of Reich's stature-receive in a lifetime of work. Even within the concert music world, this fee suffers considerably in comparison to the high five figures which top level soloists and conductors command for a single night's work. In any case, one trusts that Mr. Goodman recognized his having gotten an extraordinary bargain.

Furthermore, although a partner in a successful and thriving real estate practice, Mr. Goodman does not appear to issue from upper ranges of the 1%, those whose accumulated fees, bonuses and salaries land their incomes in the eight or even nine figure range. For them, such a sum would represent only a tiny fraction of their disposable income, in the same

order of magnitude of what they would dole out for a dinner at an East Side restaurant—two orders of magnitude below what they earmark for a [child's bat mitzvah](#) or [sixtieth birthday party](#).

This raises the question of how our world would be different had the traditional sources of elite patronage, namely the highest levels of the plutocracy, decided to make a serious commitment to composers, say to the tune of eight or nine figures. This would not be unprecedented. To take a couple of examples, in donating [\\$200 million to Poetry Magazine](#) Ruth Lilly, an heir to the Eli Lilly fortune, single-handedly greatly expanded the opportunities for the creation, appreciation and dissemination of the work of contemporary poets. Also in this category, colleges and universities are reliable recipients of elite philanthropy with even relatively small schools now able to engage in nine figure capital campaigns. Meeting this goal, as a college development director once observed to me, requires a million dollars a day coming in over the transom. Reich's entire commissioning fee would therefore require diverting a mere twenty minutes from the firehose of cash which many college and universities take for granted as available to them.

That said, by now we should be sufficiently aware that, barring a freak event—an eccentric billionaire taking an interest in contemporary music—no large increase in philanthropic support is likely to be in the cards. Rather what we know is almost certain to materialize is more of the same. The rich will continue to consolidate their wealth, extracting it ever more effectively from the ninety nine percent, keeping most for themselves and their heirs. A few approved, uncontroversial charities will benefit from the many trillions of dollars controlled by the upper 1%, many of the most deserving of these (as pointed out above) made necessary by policies which the 1% themselves had strongly supported and lobbied for. The arts will remain a low priority for most of

the rich, except when, as is sometimes the case in the visual arts, investing in it offers the potential for significant returns.

The impoverished world which composers must now negotiate is, of course, only a small piece of the broader neo-liberal reality which has obtained for most of our adult lives-one where the victors have hoarded the spoils of a successfully waged class war reducing much of social, cultural and artistic life to rubble. So complete has been their victory that we now see it not as a product of human agency but as the natural environment which we must acclimate ourselves to as best we can. There is, according to Margaret Thatcher's phrase "no alternative", all those believing otherwise taken as hopeless romantics at best or merely ridiculous. At least, so the story has gone for some years and there is little reason to believe that composers have been any less accepting of it (or at least resigned to it) than anyone else.

There was, of course, a shining moment when it seemed that cracks were becoming visible in the edifice of neo-liberalism. This occurred with the financial collapse of 2008 and the subsequent election of an African American president running on a platform of hope and change. But these prospects for hope were shown to be a chimera and by now few see any prospect for reversing the ever intensifying domination of our society by money and those obsessed with accumulating it.

Furthermore, artists and musicians had an early preview of the disillusionment with the Obama administration which is by now widespread. These came in the form of indications that, despite the hopes of many, the administration would do little to improve on the starvation regimes imposed on federal arts agencies by Republican and Democratic administrations for two decades. The background can be seen in [a Nov. 21, 2008 letter](#) sent to the Obama transition team from a collection of arts

advocacy organizations containing detailed proposals for a significant reorientation of federal arts priorities. Central among these was a request for significantly greater federal support for the arts, with the recommendation that the budget for the NEA be increased to attain the real dollar peak reached in 1992.

What made the letter more likely to be taken seriously was the widespread recognition at the time that a large increase in federal government spending was required to compensate for the multi-trillion dollar loss in demand resulting from the financial crisis. Arts institutions had a particularly strong case to make as recipients of these funds on two grounds. First, as has been shown in numerous studies, arts spending, in comparison to other forms of stimulus has a very high multiplier effect. That is, a dollar which is spent on the arts remains in circulation within the consumer economy, producing other forms of economic activity, amounting to, [according to studies](#), six to eight dollars generated for every dollar invested, considerably more than other forms of stimulus, most notably tax cuts for middle and high income earners. Secondly, the projects funded by arts agencies tend to be, to appeal to a phrase briefly in circulation, “shovel ready” which is to say that the infrastructure necessary for the project is already in place such that the funds will be put into circulation in relatively short order— months as opposed to years in the future. For example, across the country numerous presenting organizations are already in place, as are the halls and staff necessary to accommodate the events they book. While they have suffered year after year of budget cuts, most could easily ramp up their activity from two, three or four concerts a year to eight nine or ten, and they could do so within the current fiscal year. This contrasts with, for example, expenditures on the federal highway program requiring years of advanced planning before ground is broken on many projects.

These and other arguments for increased funding were advanced at a meeting with transition team officials in December of 2008. According to those present, the proposal received a respectful hearing with arts advocates coming away encouraged that, if not the whole, at least a reasonable fraction of their \$392.2 million request would materialize. Follow up discussions seemed to be favorable and the group made plans accordingly. When the administration released its budget, the proposed figure was \$155 million, reflecting no increase over previous years. Subsequent budgets have included not increases but cuts to the NEA. The additional proposals outlined in the letter, including the appointment of a cabinet level arts administrator and increased cultural exchange, have, like so many of the hopes invested in the administration, withered on the vine.

One the one hand, this is just another instance of a constituency discovering what turned out to be their bankrupt investment in the Obama brand. But more significant than this is to notice the extent to which the consortium's proposal was itself indicative of the same neo-liberal mindset dominant in the administration: the proposal, after all, called for an increase in the NEA budget to 1992 levels of funding-namely, those which were obtaining at the height of the neo-liberal era, following three administrations committed to fiscal austerity. What arts advocates should have recognized was that the relevant comparison was not to 1992, a period of comparative economic health but to 1932 when the entire nation was in the first throes of a full-blown depression.

Then, as the legend goes, in a few weeks, the Roosevelt administration created the alphabet soup of federal agencies which began to lift the nation out of the depression. Embedded among these were substantial funds for the arts, most notably through the WPA which sponsored numerous free concerts of new and traditional music, including premiers of works by Aaron

Copland, Virgil Thomson, and Elliott Carter among many others. For us, the lesson of this history should be that robust and enthusiastic, as opposed to grudging and paltry support for the arts existed, and not so long ago, taken for granted within, indeed, defining the lives of our parents and grandparents generation. There is no reason, aside from a mere failure of imagination that we should be limiting our demands to the worm's eye horizons imposed on us by neo-liberalism. It is not only in our self-interest to recognize that there are enormous concentrations of wealth which could and should be tapped via taxation to support composers of new music and the ensembles performing it, it is our civic duty to demand that our maximal, and not just minimal needs are met.

For what might seem to be extravagance, not just in the arts, but in all areas of government's public function, is the bare minimum of what is necessary to prime the pump and return the economy to normal levels of growth and employment. The broader principle, which has been common knowledge among economists for years, has now been again demonstrated through the vindication of the predictions of Paul Krugman and others that President Obama's \$700 billion stimulus would only be sufficient to staunch the hemorrhaging of jobs following the credit crisis and would not make a dent in a 9% unemployment rate. Rather, what was required went far beyond not only what those schooled in the Washington/Wall Street Consensus were recommending but what they could imagine as within the realm of possibility.

As a professional class whose business involves constructing worlds of our own imagination, we are among the best able to recognize the truth of the saying that not only is another world possible but also that it is now absolutely necessary. If it appears not to be so, within the stunted imaginative world of corporate bean counters and Washington technocrats, that is all the more reason why we should be demanding the impossible. It is to the great credit of the

occupy movement that we are now asking the right questions on these and related subjects and to increasingly able to see what have always been the fairly obvious answers.

Footnotes

1. For a detailed examination of these cases see, for example, recent books by [William Black](#) and [Nomi Prins](#).