

Tradition and Change: Two Sides of One Coin

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Every musical tradition had a time when it was new. While this seems obvious when directly stated, few people act as if it is true. We do, however, define what the past means to us with great creativity.

Consider, for example, the famous collection of Jewish liturgical melodies referred to as “mi-Sinai.” They most likely originate in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century German Rhineland. Their designation as “mi-Sinai” might have become a way to declare that they are ancient and to be treasured. But in fact, these melodies reflected a tradition rooted in a particular time and place. In the pre-Modern world, to be a tradition meant to exist outside of time and space.

A decade ago, I served as rabbi of a congregation on the East coast of the United States. I learned that the most controversial thing I could do was to change a prayer melody. The interesting thing was that the origin of the favored melody didn't seem to matter. It could have been a composition by a great 19<sup>th</sup> century cantor, something sung in a religious summer camp, or a folk melody of recent vintage, changed drastically from an older and better known version, as folk melodies tend to be. It could be a different version of a melody sung at another synagogue a few miles away. Despite the seeming arbitrary nature of the choice, what mattered was that the congregation viewed that melody as traditional. Suggesting a change meant disrupting something viewed as fixed and unchangeable, at least not without some angst. I discovered that for many people, the term “traditional” referred to something known from childhood or something familiar and around which people formed bonds. Traditions, it is often felt, are to be viewed as an unalterable emotional anchor. At the same time, most people recognize that all things change. It is the conscious act of changing them that causes unease.

In 1829, Felix Mendelssohn conducted the revival of the St. Matthew Passion, a work composed by a largely forgotten, out of fashion composer named Johann Sebastian Bach. According to musicologist Celia Applegate, this event helped secure Mendelssohn's vision of a German society in which music played a key role in affirming the values of the enlightenment. What makes this fact relevant to the present topic is how a century-old work could be experienced as new, within the very culture in which it originated. A tradition was reborn, taking on new meaning. It was possible to forget and subsequently remember it because music making in the 19<sup>th</sup> century required live performance.

The advent of recording technology, only fifty years later, permanently changed the nature of listening and music making and thus the nature of musical memory. Recording separated the act of listening from the time, place and physicality of musical performance. No musical work that was recorded could utterly disappear from circulation, as had the St. Matthew Passion. While recordings may not always be readily

available, owing to trends in musical taste and the marketplace, they always remain potentially accessible. Performance practices may change, but a record of previous approaches remains in existence for comparison. Recorded musical traditions could no longer completely vanish. Music from a variety of places and times can rest side-by-side. Alternate versions can coexist. Witness the recent trend for the CD release of complete recording sessions, such as Columbia Records' Miles Davis studio project.

The release of previously unauthorized recordings has become possible simply because the material was available and because listener interest creates a market. But it also reflects a new philosophy. Previously, aesthetic preferences prioritized a single version of a work over all others. Now, the simple fact of recording levels the playing field between all other versions of the same material. One consequence, of course, is the availability of these artifacts to subsequent musicians for their own use. This eventuality was but an extension of philosopher Walter Benjamin's realization in 1936 that photographs trade "a plurality of copies for a unique experience" of the original. Little more than a decade later, French electronic music pioneer Pierre Schaeffer's conception of the *object sonore*, a recording of a sound to be treated as an object, became a logical consequence. His work began the new field of electronic music and, arguably, future traditions of recording studio technique.

A comparison between the aesthetic of Schaeffer and Columbia's complete Miles Davis releases with that of the synagogue setting, suggests two very different approaches to the idea of musical tradition. In one, tradition is said to be immutable and in the other, it is undeniably flexible. But the nature of these differences can be viewed in two ways. On one hand, the differences are functional. The purpose of synagogue song is to support felt connection between past and present. The purpose of art music performance is aesthetic experience. The classical music world, of course, seeks to serve the preservation of repertory, and thus treats musical tradition in ways related to the synagogue. Today's music always runs the risk of becoming tomorrow's sacred tradition.

These two perspectives can also be found within the realm of jazz performance. Consider the differing perspectives of Wynton Marsalis, who champions jazz from bebop to the early 1960s as "America's Classical Music" with that of Miles Davis who once said: "bebop was about change, about evolution. It wasn't about standing still and becoming safe. If anybody wants to keep creating they have to be about change." While Marsalis views the past as an immutable, idealized model for present practice, Davis saw it as a temporary place in which one but briefly lives.

Miles Davis's declaration that he privileged change over stasis can also be viewed as overstatement. Despite his stated preference, one can detect a strong continuity between Davis's approach to solos in the 1950s and early 1960s with his playing during his allegedly radical period in 1969-1971. The reinvention of self that took place was more about the musical settings in which he soloed than about the concept behind his own playing. Thus, the overall affect of a new musical perspective was balanced by

continuity within the trumpet solos. This balance is not atypical. Most of us attend more to points of disjuncture from the past, while subtly affirming continuity, as we change.

It is rare that anything truly new comes into being. Musical ideas rarely are born out of nothingness. Miles Davis, cited above as a prophet of change, once said of Louis Armstrong: "You can't play nothing on modern trumpet that doesn't come from him." What he meant was that new ideas almost always build upon, react against or refer to inherited traditions. What was true for Davis reaffirmed a similar truth that guided Johann Sebastian Bach more than two centuries earlier. Bach commonly reused works by other composers, as well as his own.

The idea of building upon existing traditions operates not only within musical forms with long historical musical traditions, but also in new music. Arnold Schoenberg's atonal period is easily seen as an extension of existing trends within late 19<sup>th</sup> century chromaticism. His subsequent twelve-tone works, while harmonically radical, are remarkably classical in their use of phrasing and rhythm. Claude Debussy is famous for his use of sound to convey sense impressions analogous to shifting patterns of light. This sensibility, however, was rooted in the woodcuts of Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849). Pierre Schaeffer's innovative *musique concrete*, beginning in the late 1940s has already been mentioned. Beginning in the late 1970s, house music and rap represented another new form that depended heavily upon previously recorded material. Scholars have described this approach as "signifying", a traditional African-American form of commentary.

The musical aesthetic of reworking inherited ideas is not unlike that of computer programming, where it is common practice for existing code to be reused. The resulting assemblage is something distinctly new, yet draws upon an existing idea, however dramatically reshaped. Why should this idea be surprising? Music is an expression of human culture, and thus like all other aspects of civilizations is based upon transmission of the work of predecessors and peers. In Jewish culture, this is referred to as *midrash*, the act of telling stories about stories about stories, and thus relating the past to the present.

Emerging technologies present the contemporary composer with opposing pulls. On one hand, Western aesthetics demand originality. The composer in Western civilization is defined akin to Kant's Artist, as an autonomous individual, God-like in creative power. The Artist is guided by her own imagination and inspired genius to create things of beauty. On the other hand, composers clearly depend upon the past and upon inherited traditions. As originality increasingly means re-arranging existing data, a connection to the past is paradoxically strengthened. Some may view borrowing sound objects as a radical break, but drawing upon our inheritance ties the composer to previous traditions. As a result, an idea held by most human cultures is restored: that we all stand upon the accomplishments of our ancestors. Previous creations become our own to re-understand and re-cast in light of contemporary needs and sensibilities. As a consequence, contemporary music potentially returns to the values of folk culture, in which borrowing is a badge of honor rather than a mark of disrepute.

The main obstacle to closing this folk-elite chasm is the legal system. Composer John Oswald became famous for two reasons. He was among the first to create new music constructed entirely from pre-existing work. He may have also been the first to have his works confiscated as the result of a lawsuit. Oswald's contention was that recorded music is part of our human cultural inheritance and thus not a commodity. But contemporary legal systems have not assimilated new aesthetic ideas into their view of the status of music. Since recording transforms music into an object like all other objects, the law treats it as a commodity. And because the law rewards companies that produce and distribute the work of musicians, vested interests mitigate against change.

Existing law strengthens the Modernist concept of the musician as an individual genius. This notion must co-exist with a competing idea of the composer as digital folk musician. There seems to be no resolution to this dilemma on the horizon. Thus, the musician continues to do what she knows best: create music utilizing all available means, including drawing upon the past, however we define its role in the present. Of course, our definition will reflect what the past has taught us and, as a consequence, who we have become.