

Jean-Paul Sartre, René Leibowitz, and the Musician's Conscience

Mark Carroll

Europe's descent into Cold War during the late 1940s caused widespread anxiety in France. Ideological confusion among French intellectuals and artists was further exacerbated by concerns that the apparent preoccupation of modernist artforms with form and process had rendered them irrelevant to the broader socio-political discourse. Among the burning issues facing French musicians, particularly those with Leftist sympathies, was whether or indeed how avant-garde music could engage with the pressing political and social issues of the day while remaining faithful to the idea of aesthetic autonomy.

One of the more concerted attempts to establish an equilibrium between creative freedom and social responsibility centred upon Jean-Paul Sartre's idea of commitment in art. Sartre, whose acerbic social commentaries captured only too well the bitterness felt by many in France following Liberation, believed that the artist who was committed to social and political change had a duty to articulate his or her commitment by using expressive means that were readily understood and unambiguous.

Sartre's reluctance to include music within his idea of committed art prompted René Leibowitz to argue, in his monograph *L'artiste et sa conscience: Esquisse d'une dialectique de la conscience artistique*,¹ that avant-garde music, and Arnold Schoenberg's *A Survivor from Warsaw*, Op. 46 (1947) in particular, was capable of sustaining commitment. Leibowitz suggested that Schoenberg's application of twelve-tone technique bespoke a commitment to artistic innovation no less valid than Sartre's ostensibly content-based form of social and political commitment. Leibowitz, who moved in the same circle as Sartre, Albert Camus, and Picasso, invited Sartre to provide the preface to his book. Although Sartre's position in the preface remained essentially unchanged, he did concede that an intentionally non-signifying artform could, on the basis of its confrontational nature and the revolutionary fervour of its creator, be capable of sustaining a commitment to change the world.²

The exchange between the two men gives rise to the possibility that music composed using expanded serial techniques directly and intentionally challenged convention, at the very

¹ Paris: L'Arche, 1950.

² Sartre's preface appears in Leibowitz's *L'artiste et sa conscience*, 9–38. The preface was reprinted in translation under the title 'The Artist and His Conscience' in Jean-Paul Sartre, *Situations*, trans. Benita Eisler (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1965) 205–44.

time when the Cold War antagonists were demanding conformity and transparency in artistic expression in order to ensure fidelity to their ideological values. In short, what Sartre predicted, and Pierre Boulez subsequently delivered, was a music that would have no meaning beyond its method of composition, at a time when meaning through external association was all.

In order to understand this paradox we need first to appreciate the expectations visited upon art in general, and music in particular, by those who attempted to appropriate culture for ideological ends.³ In the supposed Left corner was Soviet socialist realism—a faux-humanist cultural policy that blurred the distinction between expectation and obligation so as to ensure that composers created music sufficiently transparent as to support the aspirations of the proletariat. In the opposing corner were cultural strategists working on behalf of Western powerbrokers—most notably the Congress for Cultural Freedom—who promoted a form of nostalgia that was intended to remind Europe's disaffected of the great legacy of European culture, a legacy that, provided they stood firm against totalitarianism, Europe would soon recover.⁴ For these strategists neo-tonal music, and Igor Stravinsky's in particular, suited their aims perfectly. So it came to pass that both sides promoted conservative music possessed of a sense of closure capable of sustaining associations beneficial to their causes.

The prejudices converged in early post-war France, which for reasons of recent history found itself at the very epicentre of the Cold War schism. Here neo-tonal music was *de rigueur* among the power elite—as evidenced by the Stravinsky-fest that followed Liberation, and later, in May 1952, by the Congress for Cultural Freedom's archly-conservative anti-Soviet display entitled *L'Oeuvre du XXe siècle* (Masterpieces of the Twentieth Century). At the same time there was a fair degree of sympathy in France for the aspirations of socialist realism, if not its methods.

Matters came to a head following the declaration of the Prague Manifesto in May 1948, which called upon composers world-wide to embrace socialist realism.⁵ Among those in France to respond positively was Serge Nigg, who was Boulez's class-mate at the Paris Conservatoire. Nigg had, like Boulez, studied twelve-tone technique with Leibowitz. Nigg felt sufficiently moved by the Manifesto as to disavow his avant-gardism in favour of a musical style that accorded with socialist realism's demands for transparency and accessibility.⁶ The former he fulfilled through the use of texts, the latter through a recourse to tonal musical forms.

The sight of one of his former students publicly declaring solidarity with Zhdanovian cultural doctrine prompted a series of articles from Leibowitz. These were published in Sartre's journal *Les temps modernes*, and were subsequently gathered together under the title *L'artiste et sa conscience*. Leibowitz's basic position was that the Prague Manifesto was correct in asking musicians to assume a greater social responsibility, but wrong in demanding that they disavow avant-garde techniques in order to do so. The underlying purpose of *L'artiste et sa conscience* was therefore to discredit socialist realism by pointing to Schoenberg's *A Survivor from Warsaw*

³ A detailed appraisal appears in the present author's monograph *Music and Ideology in Cold War Europe* (Cambridge UP, 2003).

⁴ The Congress's activities are described by Peter Coleman in *The Liberal Conspiracy: The Congress for Cultural Freedom and the Struggle for the Mind of Postwar Europe* (New York: Free Press, 1989).

⁵ 'La crise de la musique: Le manifeste de Prague—Les réactions des musiciens français,' *Les lettres françaises* 228 (7 October 1948): 6.

⁶ Nigg outlined his position in conversation with the Stalinist music critic Pierre Kaldor, see 'Entretien sur la crise de la musique,' *Les lettres françaises* 229 (17 October 1948): 6.

as a shining example of a conscience-driven, as opposed to State-imposed, affirmation of social commitment.

Leibowitz felt duty-bound to address Sartre's trenchant opposition to the idea that music, the sounding tones themselves, were capable of articulating a commitment to social and political change. Sartre had detailed his views on art and commitment in his earlier group of essays published under the title 'Qu'est-ce la littérature?'⁷ Here it emerges that Sartre's idea of commitment brought together his existentialist belief that Man *is* Man because he alone is free and able to decide his place in the world, with the Marxist aspiration that society is truly free only when all its members enjoy an equal degree of freedom. The committed artist is one who in his exercise of his own freedom seeks to address the lack of freedom in others. But there was a caveat in that commitment to freedom was for Sartre embedded only in the meaning of a given work, and as only the writer deals directly in meaning only he could commit himself and his art to ensuring the freedom of others.

'One does not paint meanings' Sartre wrote, 'one does not put them into music. Under these conditions, who would dare require that the painter or musician commit himself?'⁸ Sartre's understanding of the word 'meaning' turned on the idea that it was what he called 'the thing which inhabits' the creator's system of signs, a system that conveyed the work's significance.⁹ The best to which music and painting could aspire was to carry significance, and even then they were dependent upon a third party conferring that significance upon them. Sartre's position can best be understood by turning to his critique of Picasso's *Guernica*. To Sartre, *Guernica* was an object. The painting's potential significance reaches beyond its existence as an object to the actual event that it depicts, which is the wanton destruction of the Spanish town Guernica by the Fascists during the Spanish Civil War. The problem for *Guernica* in Sartre's estimation was that the viewer's attention is more likely to focus on the object itself, rather than 'the thing which it inhabits'—the necessity to confront Fascism. In effect it is up to the viewer to rationalise their sensory or emotional reaction to the painting in order to confer a significance upon it, to see it as a system of signs from which a meaning might be drawn. For this reason *Guernica* was not committed art: 'Does anyone think that it won over a single heart to the Spanish cause?', Sartre asked.¹⁰

Turning his barbed quill to music, Sartre was no less forgiving in his preface to Leibowitz's book:

[M]usic is a *non-signifying* art. Slovenly minds might have taken delight in speaking of a 'musical language.' But we are perfectly aware that a 'musical phrase' has no designated object: it is in itself an object. How then can this mute evoke for man his destiny?¹¹

So despite being of the opinion that socialist realism was 'a perfectly reasonable theory of art,' Sartre ridiculed the Prague Manifesto's attempt to invest music with a greater burden of responsibility:

⁷ *Situations II* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1948). Citations used here refer to the translation of 'Qu'est-ce la littérature?' that appears in 'What is Literature?' and Other Essays, intro. Steven Ungar, trans. Bernard Frechtman (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1988) 21–245.

⁸ Sartre, 'What is Literature?' and Other Essays 28.

⁹ Sartre, 'The Artist and His Conscience,' *Situations* 216–17.

¹⁰ Sartre, 'What is Literature?' and Other Essays 28.

¹¹ Sartre, 'The Artist and His Conscience,' *Situations* 214.

The Prague Manifesto for its sheer naïvety is a joy. It calls upon us to cultivate ‘musical forms which allow [social justice] to be attained, oratorios, cantatas, chorales, etc.’ Good God, these hybrids are nothing but babblers, making small talk to music. What they are really saying is that music should be only a pretext, a means of enhancing the glory of the word. *It is the word* of which Stalin will sing, the Five Year Plan, the electrification of the Soviet Union. Set to other words, the same music could glorify Pétain, Churchill, or Truman. By changing the words, a hymn to the Russian dead of Stalingrad will become a funeral oration for Germans fallen before the same city. What do the sounds contribute? A great blast of sonorous heroism; it is the word which will speak. There can be no musical commitment unless the work of art is such that it can only receive one verbal commentary.¹²

Sartre would have regarded his position confirmed by the way in which Beethoven’s *Egmont* overture was, in the space of a little over ten years, appropriated by the Nazis, who used it to introduce their foreign language broadcasts; the German Democratic Republic, which lionised it as a ‘revolutionary vision of the future’; and the Congress for Cultural Freedom, which used it at its founding ceremony in West Berlin.¹³ So, depending upon one’s ideological stance, Beethoven’s sounding tones were either the pinnacle of Aryan culture, a vision of an egalitarian socialist utopia, or all that was noble and just about Western culture.

With regard to Schoenberg’s *A Survivor from Warsaw* Sartre pointed out that the composer ‘could not avoid recourse to words’ in conveying his intended meaning, and with that his commitment.¹⁴ But in his defence of Schoenberg, Leibowitz had pursued a different rationale. Firstly, Leibowitz chose (and with good reason considering he himself was a Polish Jew) one of Schoenberg’s few overtly political works as his case in point; secondly, Schoenberg’s use of *Sprechstimme* allowed Leibowitz to include the text in his consideration of the music, thereby creating a linkage between the composer’s musical and extra-musical concerns; and thirdly, he argued that a commitment to radical artistic innovation is no less valid than, and indeed forms an integral part of, social commitment.¹⁵

With regard to this third and most important point, Leibowitz established the linkage between culture and politics here under consideration by arguing that: ‘at the same time as there are reactionary regimes in place in America and the USSR so, too, is there organised resistance to radical innovation in each of these centres—resistance that comes in the form of the impresario in America, and the Council of State and the Prague Manifesto in the USSR.’¹⁶ With this Leibowitz was able to conclude that Schoenberg, in confronting cultural reactionaries, was also by implication confronting their political brethren.

Schoenberg’s struggle against entrenched conservatism acquired the didactic import requisite to Sartre’s idea of commitment because, in the case of *A Survivor from Warsaw*, the anti-Fascist meaning of the work went hand in hand with a compositional process that effectively led by example. Schoenberg was in Leibowitz’s estimation presenting a parable concerning the nobility of the human spirit in the face of unspeakable evil. If the listener or musician wanted to help to overcome such evil, they should confront reactionary forces in whatever guise they adopt, just as Schoenberg chose to confront musical reactionaries.

¹² Sartre, ‘The Artist and His Conscience,’ *Situations* 214.

¹³ David Dennis, *Beethoven in German Politics, 1870–1989* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale UP, 1996) 169.

¹⁴ Sartre, ‘The Artist and His Conscience,’ *Situations* 214.

¹⁵ René Leibowitz, ‘La signification de l’engagement musical,’ *L’artiste et sa conscience* 75–87.

¹⁶ Leibowitz, ‘La signification de l’engagement musical,’ *L’artiste et sa conscience* 82.

Leibowitz's impassioned logic apparently forced Sartre to reconsider at least the stridency of his position. Non-texted music, as Sartre then understood it, was incapable of performing the didactic function required of committed art because it was non-signifying. But given that both ideological antagonists sought to appropriate supposedly meaningful art to their own heretical ends, then perhaps an *intentionally* non-signifying artform, one impervious to the imposition of an external meaning or set of values, might be capable of neutralising, and perhaps even undermining their cultural agendas. Sartre concluded his preface to Leibowitz's book by foreshadowing the possibility of such an art emerging:

Is it so impossible that an artist will emerge today, and without any literary intention, or interest in signifying, still have enough passion, to love and hate it, to live its contradictions with enough sincerity, and to plan to change it with enough perseverance, that he will transform even this world, with its savage violence, its barbarism, its refined techniques, its slaves, its tyrants, its mortal threats and our horrible and grandiose freedom to music? And if the musician has shared the rage and hopes of the oppressed, is it impossible that he might be transported beyond himself by so much hope and so much rage that he could sing today of this voice of the future? And if this were so, could one still speak of 'extra-aesthetic' concerns? Of 'neutral' subject matter? Of 'significance'? Would the raw material of music be distinct from its treatment? I ask these questions to you, my dear Leibowitz, to you and not to Zhdanov. His answer I know.¹⁷

The answer to Sartre's question came possibly in the form of Boulez's expansion of serial technique to parameters other than pitch. Expanded serial technique became what the Parisian commentator Fred Goldbeck was to describe as a 'war machine designed to kill convention'.¹⁸ Extending Goldbeck's metaphor, expanded serial technique was a machine which in its treatment preserved intact the elemental qualities of the music. A machine that rather than seeking to communicate or to be understood was concerned with plumbing the expressive nadir of art. A machine which, as a quasi-scientific and highly rationalist compositional procedure, reflected both the savage violence and refined techniques of the period. A machine through which Boulez exercised Sartre's 'horrible and grandiose freedom' in order to confront the reactionary forces that sought to extend their power through aesthetic conservatism.

A relationship between culture and renewal lies embedded Boulez's later article of faith:

I believe that a civilisation which tends towards conservation is a declining civilisation because it is afraid to go forward and ascribes more importance to its memories than to its future. Strong, expanding civilisations have no memory: they reject, they forget the past. They feel strong enough to be destructive because they know they can replace what has been destroyed ... The French Revolution decapitated statues in churches; one may regret this now, but it was proof of a civilisation on the march.¹⁹

The course of Cold War history, and the subsequent rise of the 'new world order,' confirms that reactionary cultural ideologues of any persuasion have little time for a civilisation on such a march.

¹⁷ Sartre, 'The Artist and His Conscience,' *Situations* 222–23.

¹⁸ Fred Goldbeck, 'Avantgarde: Ciphers, Games and Spells,' *Twentieth Century Composers, Volume IV: France, Italy and Spain* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974) 126.

¹⁹ Pierre Boulez, *Conversations with Célestin Deliège* (London: Eulenburg, 1976) 33.

Why, then, did not Sartre's idea of commitment in art lead us all to an egalitarian utopia? Why didn't avant-garde music 'destroy the destroyer,' as Theodor Adorno once put it?²⁰ The most direct and simple answer, one that Clement Greenberg, Adorno and Sartre himself realised, is that there is precious little to be gained in seeking to overthrow the bourgeoisie using bourgeois art-forms.²¹ The failure of such a utopian aspiration does not, however, undermine the importance of the exchange between Sartre and Leibowitz. It was they who alerted musicians to the possibility that its most infuriating quality, its lack of intrinsic meaning, rendered avant-garde music resistant to appropriation by those who in the name of Cold War ideology tried to divide what passed for the civilised world between them.

²⁰ Theodor Adorno, 'Commitment,' *Aesthetics and Politics*, trans. Francis McDonagh (London: New Left Books, 1977) 190.

²¹ This is one of the principal findings of Clement Greenberg's seminal essay 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch,' which is reproduced in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon, 1961) 3–21.