

CULTURAL COMMENT

MAKING ART IN A TIME OF RAGE

By Alex Ross February 8, 2017

In the face of Trump, many artists report feelings of paralysis. Should they carry on as before, nobly defying the ruination of public discourse? Or seize on a new mission, abandoning the illusion of aesthetic autonomy?

What is the point of making beautiful things, or of cherishing the beauty of the past, when ugliness runs rampant? Those who work in the realm of the arts have been asking themselves that question in recent weeks. The election of Donald Trump, and the casual cruelty of his Presidency thus far, have precipitated a sense of crisis in that world, not least because Trump seems inclined to let the arts rot. Headlines along the lines of “What is the Role of X [music, dance, poetry, hip-hop] in the Age of Trump?” have proliferated. (Is it necessary to aggrandize the man by giving him an Age?) Competing tactics of response present themselves. Do you carry on as before, nobly defying the ruination of public discourse? Or do you seize on a new mission, abandoning the illusion of aesthetic autonomy? Many artists report feelings of paralysis. “Engaging isn’t working and neither is disengaging,” the Chicago musician and critic Doyle Armbrust writes, in an arrestingly unconventional program note for a recent Budapest Festival Orchestra performance of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony.

In the field of classical music, practitioners habitually respond to man-made disasters by quoting a statement that Leonard Bernstein made on November 25, 1963, three days after the assassination of John F. Kennedy. The previous day, Bernstein had led the New York Philharmonic in a performance of Gustav Mahler's Second Symphony, the "Resurrection." Afterward, Bernstein explained why he had offered, in place of a conventional requiem or memorial, Mahler's "visionary concept of hope and triumph over worldly pain." Bernstein's words have been tweeted and Facebooked countless times since the advent of social media, and have made the rounds again since November 8th: "This will be our reply to violence: to make music more intensely, more beautifully, more devotedly than ever before."

In a recent post for the Log Journal, an online publication affiliated with the Brooklyn venue National Sawdust, the scholar and critic Lucy Caplan cast useful doubt on Bernstein's sonorous cliché. "Even in context, this sentiment seems conveniently unimaginative, a rationale for limiting the scope of one's action," Caplan wrote. "A generous interpretation of Bernstein's words suggests that musicians can transform art's political impact by doing what they're already doing—only better. But I'm skeptical of the idea that a more perfect art can really bring into being a more perfect union. Bernstein makes vague allusions to Kennedy's presumably political 'goals,' but the only goals he names are musical ones: intensity, beauty, and devotion. Are these really the ultimate aims of musical performance in a time of violent crisis?"

This is a harsh thing to say of Bernstein, who rarely missed a chance to politicize music, and who routinely irritated much of his audience by doing so. (When I was a teen-ager, I watched him deploy Mahler's Second in an anti-nuke concert at the National Cathedral.) Yet he ignored a dark historical reality: not only are intensity, beauty, and devotion insufficient to halt violence, they can become its soundtrack. Wilhelm Furtwängler's renditions of Beethoven during the last years of the Nazi regime attained a fury of expression that few performances have matched. The conductor's apologists argue that these recordings convey an unspoken resistance to the Nazi regime. But they could have served—indeed,

almost certainly did serve—to bolster a sense of national fortitude in the face of an advancing enemy. At heart they were mute, noncommittal, open to appropriation. The same may be said of any form of artistic expression that fails to make its political convictions explicit.

At the other extreme are those who believe that, in a time of crisis, the ordinary rituals of making art must cease. Caplan notes that some of her friends have been quoting Gwendolyn Brooks's 1949 poem "First Fight. Then Fiddle":

... Carry hate
In front of you and harmony behind.
Be deaf to music and to beauty blind.
Win war. Rise bloody, maybe not too late
For having first to civilize a space
Wherein to play your violin with grace.

These are invigorating words, although Caplan pinpoints an inherent paradox: Brooks's poem is "art sending the message that it is not yet time for art." If artists everywhere were to give themselves over to agitprop, something essential would be lost. To create a space of refuge, to enjoy a period of respite, is not necessarily an act of acquiescence.

As Caplan concludes, these extremes are, in fact, illusory. Both Bernstein and Brooks were engaged artists who were moving along separate paths toward similar goals. In any case, one can never predict how a work will be received in the public sphere. First-rate agitprop has a way of drifting far from its primary causes. Aaron Copland's "Fanfare for the Common Man" took inspiration from a speech by the New Deal firebrand Henry Wallace; it has since been played at Republican Inaugurations, Rolling Stones shows, and amusement parks. Conversely, works that were never intended as tools of resistance

can assume an oppositional role. On Inauguration Day, the percussionist and conductor Steven Schick was in San Francisco, leading a concert of challenging contemporary and late-twentieth-century pieces. In a program note, he spoke of a “resistance born of complexity”—of the dissent implicit in artistic work that cannot be assimilated into the pop-culture machine that Trump has mastered and disarmed. “When 140 characters count as a complete thought, perhaps the occasional thorniness of a longer musical essay might reassure us that important things cannot be abbreviated,” he wrote.

Ultimately, artists of integrity will have no choice in how they respond to the Great Besmirchment. Those who thrive on politically charged material will continue in that vein. (In contemporary classical music, Ted Hearne is a master of that mode; recent works have addressed WikiLeaks, race relations, and the Supreme Court.) Yet those who devote themselves to numbered string quartets or painterly abstractions should not feel pressure to forsake their destiny. The task of the audience is to absorb art’s conflicting messages and remain alert to unexpected revelations. In the wake of the election, I turned to the furiously rebellious music of Julius Eastman, the gay, black composer who died in obscurity, in 1990, and who has experienced a renaissance in the era of “Moonlight” and Black Lives Matter. At the same time, I delved into the Passions of Bach, which, in their godlike way, at once stand apart from the contemporary world and encompass it entirely.

I also went back to Wallace Stevens’s 1941 lecture “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” which had guided me in the aftermath of September 11th. At the height of the Second World War, Stevens notes, a London gallery presented an exhibition of Jacob Epstein’s flower paintings. The catalogue was prefaced with a quotation from Shakespeare’s Sonnet No. 65: “How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea?” Stevens exclaims, “What ferocious beauty the line from Shakespeare puts on when used under such circumstances!” In light of present-day reality, the nobility of its language might seem archaic, false, and dead. The same might be said of the Epstein paintings that were exhibited amid the Blitz. But the

“grandeur that was, the rhetorical once,” can operate with unpredictable force on the contemporary mind:

As a wave is a force and not the water of which it is composed, which is never the same, so nobility is a force and not the manifestations of which it is composed, which are never the same. Possibly this description of it as a force will do more than anything else I can have said about it to reconcile you to it. It is not an artifice that the mind has added to human nature. The mind has added nothing to human nature. It is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality. It seems, in the last analysis, to have something to do with our self-preservation; and that, no doubt, is why the expression of it, the sound of its words, helps us to live our lives.

At first glance, this appears to be an exceptionally eloquent version of Bernstein’s “reply to violence”—the self-justification of an aesthete who wishes to stay the course. But the phrase “violence from within” has a sharper edge. It implies a kind of agony of rededication, an emergency of the soul. It forbids the indifference of routine. Art becomes a model for the concerted action that can only happen outside its sphere.

Alex Ross has been contributing to The New Yorker since 1993, and he became the magazine’s music critic in 1996.

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