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Modernity and Musical Structure: Neo-Marxist Perspectives on Song Form and its Successors

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The study of homologies between social structures and formal structures in art has constituted a particularly challenging field of inquiry in the modern humanities. On the whole, scholarly attempts to relate music to broader sociohistorical phenomena have tended to focus on such relatively tangible musical parameters as lyric content, style, or performance contexts rather than formal structure, which, being inherently more abstract in nature, is presumed to have less ideological content. However, a few scholars have persuasively argued that formal structures in Western music reflect a general aesthetic conditioned by social economy. In particular, they have illustrated how sectionally structured, closed, teleological song forms are quintessentially characteristic of bourgeois capitalism (as opposed, for example, to feudal societies). In this essay I review some of the approaches linking bourgeois aesthetics to closed musical structures—especially sonata form and song form—and offer perspectives on the ways that the persistence of these forms, as well as the spread or revival of distinct forms, have been conditioned by the broader socioeconomic contexts of late modernity.

Attempts by music scholars to posit iconocities between form and social context have been at best sporadic and often contested or marginalized in academia. Alan Lomax’s well-known cantometrics scheme illuminated a few parallels between form and social structures, noting, for example, the prominence of bardic litanies in “old high cultures,” and the Western European preference for “simple, compactly organized melodic forms” (1968: 134–35). However, the cantometrics scheme did not explore the parameter of form in much greater depth, and even these generalizations were problematized by the system’s failure to address class stratification within a given region (e.g., South Asia or Western Europe). In the field of popular music studies, Middleton (1990: 141, 150, and elsewhere) has suggested some
insightful perspectives, invoking especially the work of A. L. Lloyd and Janos Marothy, to whom we shall return.

For their part, a handful of musicologists in recent decades have shown interest in socially contextualizing aspects of musical form. While Martha Feldman (1995) has explored parallels between ritual and form in opera, other scholars have insightfully related formal structures in common-practice instrumental music to contemporary literary aesthetics. Of particular relevance are the several publications that explore parallels between nonprogrammatic instrumental music—especially sonatas—and narrative prose and/or drama (see Maus 1997; Newcomb 1984, 1987; Treitler 1989; Cone 1989; McClary 1986; and Leppard and McClary 1987). On the whole, these insightful essays, in their distinct fashions, illustrate some of the ways in which the superficially “abstract” sonata form can in fact encode a tightly structured narrative drama. In the most standard interpretation, for example, the protagonistic theme or themes embark on an often tumultuous and exciting metaphorical journey (especially in the development section), eventually to return home safely in the recapitulation, with the reestablishment of order and the domestication of thematic material (second themes) earlier introduced in contrasting keys. The structural parallels with the novel, and with contemporary drama, are self-evident. Nevertheless, with the partial and idiosyncratic exception of McClary, none of these authors attempts to relate the presence of narrative structure in music to the material conditions that generate such an aesthetic of extended dramatic development and closure. Rather, in the tradition of musicological formalism, the use of narrative forms in music is implicitly or explicitly treated as a superstructural phenomenon evolving in a sociohistorical vacuum. It is thus only a small handful of Marxist-informed writers who have explored the socioeconomic factors that have conditioned the emergence of such an aesthetic.

On the whole, musicologists, like most other mainstream scholars, have tended to regard theseas sociomusical homologies with suspicion, if not outright derision. The standard objection, whether implicit or explicit, is that such theories are unverifiable and ideological. Rather, it is sometimes argued, Western art music has evolved in a rarefied, essentially ahistorical milieu in which it is relatively “free from direct social influence” (Temperley 1991: 399). This familiar perspective, treating nonprogrammatic instrumental music as a relatively absolute art form, is occasionally made explicit but is more often implicit, as in writings that treat the evolution of musical styles and structures as purely formal developments. While the question of the autonomy of high art is complex and has been extensively debated, few would hesitate to acknowledge a certain sort and degree of autonomy in an idiom like Western classical music, especially since it is so deeply embedded in a Kantian aesthetic of disinterestedness. Nevertheless, the denial of ideology and of sociohistorical conditioning is of course itself an ideology, and not an innocent one. Implicit in the ideology of absolute music is the notion that Western art music (“Music”) is unique among all musics of the world in having evolved as a product of purely abstract, “natural” creation and innovation. All other musics, by contrast, have been somehow stunted or warped in being conditioned—as ethnomusicologists themselves demonstrate—by their sociohistorical contexts. It should be granted, however, that given the inherently hypothetical and speculative nature of homological theories, a degree of skepticism regarding them is not unwarranted. The legitimacy and acceptance of such inquiries in academia has not been aided by the fanciful interpretive conceits indulged in by various post-structuralist writers on music—especially those more grounded in contemporary literary theory than in the rigors of music analysis.

In this essay I limit myself in many respects to what I would consider to be a most obvious and unassailable basic premise: that there is at least an indirect causal relationship between the emergence of capitalist modernity and a coherent bourgeois aesthetic (reaching its classical phase in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries), one manifestation of which is the predominance of closed, internally structured musical forms, especially sonata form and “song” form. This class of forms uses techniques of symmetry, recapitulation, and internal development to achieve dramatic climax and clear closure. It thus stands in contrast to open-ended, additive, or variative forms that are characteristic, for example, of pre-modern musics (several of which may residually survive in modern societies for various reasons).

If the mere mention of the term “bourgeois” suffices to alienate many contemporary music scholars, it may be useful to point out how unique song form has been to bourgeois societies (or sectors of societies), or more specifically, how uncharacteristic of pre-modern, non-bourgeois societies it is. Thus, in traditional non-Western musics, or in pre-Renaissance Western music, one finds a considerable variety of formal structures, but very little that possesses the features here identified with song per se. These traditional forms would include the following:

- Strophic song (using “song” in the general sense). In this form there is little or no extended musical development. Most typically, the numbers of strophes may vary according to the demands of the particular performance context. Often, as in the case of country blues, the Urdu or Persian ghazal, or traditional flamenco, the strophes need not relate to each other in poetic theme, but are expected to be self-sufficient, independent, epigrammatic entities. Such independence also characterizes genres like punto cubano or Puerto Rican seis and aguinaldo, in which, despite a degree of lyric-thematic unity, each ten-line décima strophe is expected to be a conceptually complete and closed entity, with a dramatically concluding final line. For its part, the bardic
epic litany sung strophically to a short melody differs in constituting an extended narrative form, rather than a series of discrete verses; however, it shares the absence of musical development, or of any formal structure exceeding the length of the strophe itself. Moreover, the bard typically performs fragments rather than the entire work and feels free to omit, rearrange, or elaborate given portions of the internal chapters and passages. The category of strophic song would also include rounds and canons.

- Open-ended “additive” structures. This category includes a variety of forms. One set would comprise entities like the North Indian khyāl, in which the exposition of a rāg could last anywhere from a few minutes to an hour, depending on context and other factors. Here the composition (the chālī) is used primarily to punctuate improvised passages, which may vary indefinitely, within certain conventions, in number and length. Also in the “additive” category would fall performances consisting of concatenations of short tunes, as is characteristic of much Irish or Balkan traditional dance music. Conspicuous again is the absence of a fixed formal structure or length, especially in the quintessential traditional dance context.

- Ostinato-based forms. Many of these overlap with the above two groups. As is well known, ostinato forms are particularly characteristic of (but hardly unique to) African and Afro-American traditional musics. They would include the mbira piece consisting of variations on an opening melody, or the drum ensemble music in which a reiterated pattern accompanies the litany of a master drummer, or of vocalists, or is itself subjected to variations.

What is lacking in all these forms, which Marothy (1974) terms “collective-variative” idioms, is a sense of dramatic progression and closure, such as song form achieves through techniques of symmetry, recapitulation, use of arch form, strong and weak cadences (“masculine/feminine,” ouvertéclos), and/or a conventional, logical sequence and number of internal sections. Pre-modern forms may incorporate such loosely teleological features as a general increase in intensity, as, for example, in South Asian qawwālī, or even an alternation of fast, energetic sections with slower, more moderate ones (as in North Indian Bhojpuri-region chowtāl). But even these forms are flexible entities whose length and internal structures are open-ended. As in virtually all the forms outlined above, the sense of closure is limited to a general length determined by convention, and achieved at the local level by, at most, a final cadential flourish or figure (e.g., the tihāl/korvāl of Indian classical music).

Song form contrasts markedly with these structures. The 32-bar AABA song form and its variants epitomize the closed arch form, and retain this characteristic even if repeated two or three times (but generally not more). As an example of a typical modern Euro-American popular song, one may take the Beatles’s “I Want to Hold your Hand,” whose form recurs in nine of the eleven songs on the LP Meet the Beatles. It may be schematized as follows:

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>verse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>verse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>bridge (“and when I touch you . . .,” sung solo)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>verse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>bridge (sung duet)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>verse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(A)</td>
<td>repeat of final lines</td>
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It should be obvious that rearranging these sections or, for example, adding several more “A” sections at the end would disrupt the logical structure of this song.

For its part, sonata form, with its clear, if flexible exposition-development-recapitulation structure, represents an extended elaboration of this same approach. As in the 32-bar AABA pattern, symmetry and arch form are again evident, and the sense of dramatic motion, climax, and closure is intensified through the tonal wanderings, transformation, and eventual recapitulation of the thematic material.

Naturally, many music genres combine features of the open-ended, collective-variative technique with those of song form. Many of these can be seen from a diachronic perspective as transitional entities. The gradual evolution of song form in Western music, through the lai and virelai on down to the sonata and popular song format, is traced with extraordinary erudition and clarity by Marothy (1974). In my own prior short article on this subject (Manuel 1985), I looked briefly at three traditional collective-variative forms (Urdu ghazal-song, Mexican huapango, and Cuban rumba) and illustrated how they have acquired certain features of structured song form in the process of being commercialized and informed by bourgeois aesthetics.

**Historicizing Song Form**

The emergence and spread of song form, and of a general aesthetic in which it is embedded, cannot be attributed to a single historical factor, but to a set of aspects related to modernity in general. One significant, albeit intangible factor presumably involved the advent of a new conception of time that accrued from the invention and spread of mechanical chronometers, especially from the seventeenth century. The advent of timepieces naturally facilitated the ability and inclination to think in terms of temporal blocks and, by extension, of formal sections in music that could be arranged spatially in...
The rationalism which now dominates the whole intellectual and material life of the time. The principles of unity which now become authoritative in art—the unification of space and the unified standards of proportion, the restriction of the artistic representation to one single theme, and the concentration of the composition into one immediately intelligible form—are also in accordance with this new rationalism. They express the same dislike for the incalculable and the uncontrollable as the economy of the same period with its emphasis on planning, expediency, and calculability. . . . The things that are now felt as “beautiful” are the logical conformity of the independent parts of a whole.

The rational basis of the new aesthetic was explicitly articulated in the sixteenth century by Italian theorist Leone Alberti, who described the work of art as “so constituted that it is impossible to take anything away from it or add anything to it without impairing the beauty of the whole” (quoted in Hauser, 1957: II, 89). As Alberti clarified, the new aesthetic demanded the logical conformity of parts to the whole and highlighted a dynamic dialectic between foreground and background elements.

The aesthetic manifestations of this new sensibility are evident in several art forms. In painting, they are reflected in the new emphasis on creating a unified, complete, balanced, closed formal structure on the painted surface. This approach contrasts, for example, with the busy clutter of so many earlier paintings (see Hauser for illustrations). In literature, the obvious counterpart is the novel, with its tightly knit, rationally structured form. Unlike earlier, nonbourgeois forms of extended narrative, the novel has not merely a beginning and an end, but a coherent internal structure with a clear sense of creative design and logic. It differs in this sense from the short ballad or from an extended narrative epic, which typically is performed only in fragments and which lacks in its internal sections a clear sequential development. Thus, for
example, while Homer's *Odyssey* has beginning and concluding chapters, the internal chapters occur in no particular order, and could be rearranged, supplemented, or omitted without impairing the work as a whole. A musical rendition of such a ballad would naturally exhibit the same collective-variative looseness.

It should be obvious that song form, representing the complete expression of a given content, constitutes a musical embodiment of a distinct and new architectural aesthetic. As suggested above, one cannot rearrange or omit sections of a sonata, add a ten-minute coda, or insert several strophes into the middle of a 32-bar AABA song without disrupting the logical form of these entities. Similarly, as noted above, the parallels are obvious between such narrative structures and sonata form, in which the protagonistic themes wander afar and eventually return home, and the disorder and tension introduced along the way are logically resolved.

Another important set of developments underlying the new aesthetic are those involving the replacement of pre-capitalist collective values by a new sense of individualism. As Marx (1964: 96) wrote, "Man is only individualized through a process of history. He originally appears as a generic being, a tribal being, a herd animal." The rise of individualism creates a new dimension of dualism between the self and society that did not exist before capitalism. As with the new emphasis on rationality, the emergence of what Maroty terms the "bourgeois Ego" is not a purely superstructural phenomenon, but is clearly linked to the rise of an economic system based on the output and production of the individual (or nuclear family), rather than the village, clan, or guild. Thus, communal line and circle dances typical of pre-capitalist societies give way (via the minuet, waltz, and *contredanse*) to intimate couple dances. Paintings, with a new sense of realism, increasingly portray ordinary people (especially the bourgeoisie) in everyday street or domestic scenes, instead of focusing on mythological or religious icons and stereotypes. New techniques of chiaroscuro and especially perspective heighten not only realism in general, but also the sense that one is viewing a scene from the vantage point of a specific individual. Literature and drama, from the Elizabethan period on, in a similar trend toward realism, stress sentimental personal situations, often concerning the private lives of ordinary people. Lukacs highlights the novels of Balzac as epitomes of this trend.

Poetry, especially in the wake of Wordsworth, places a new emphasis on introspection, while Boswell's *Life of Johnson* heralds a new biographical genre. Correspondingly, their lyrics, while often amatory, seldom depict the romantic, "confluent" love of two autonomous individuals. Far more characteristic are devotional panegyrics, heroic martial ballads celebrating historical or mythological figures, or, in the case of erotic verse, portrayals of the repressed desire of an essentially one-dimensional stock figure who is explicitly embedded in an inhbiting social environment. Thus, in a typical verse encountered in innumerable folk and classical songs, the young wife expresses the fear that her nocturnal tryst with her lover (or husband!) will be overheard by her mother-in-law. (In traditional Indian rural joint families, relatively new phenomenon of sentimental love between two autonomous, socially free individuals operating in an ahistorical, virtual world of the emotions. Maroty would relate this trend to the emergence of the commodity-producing bourgeoisie. Giddens (1992) supplements this interpretation by grounding modernity's "transformation of intimacy" and the emergence of "confluent" (rather than carnal) love to the liberation of sexuality (especially for women) from procreation (e.g., via contraception), and from danger (e.g., death in childbirth), and a general process in which human agency is heightened and individuals and relationships are increasingly "dis-embedded" from prior social inhibitions, conventions, and moorings.

As Maroty writes,

In music, the main formal expression of "ego-centeredness" is the solo song, emerging as the central category of bourgeois music as a whole, and entailing all the other consequences in tonal system, rhythm, polyphony and other formal elements of music. (1972: 16)

Thus, rather than constituting a mere "formal achievement," song form represents a narrative framework typically establishing a tonal, melodic, and thematic "home" (the "little world" of the bourgeois Ego), which is then departed from and ultimately returned to safely. In this sense song form develops an extended dialectic of foreground and background by metaphorically juxtaposing the safe, intimate private world (e.g., of the self, or nuclear family) with the unstable, threatening/exciting dynamics of the external world.

The links between formal structure and sense of social identity are particularly conspicuous when lyric content is considered, as a cross-cultural sampling of traditional vocal genres indicates. Traditional music in North India, for example, falls overwhelmingly in the collective-variative category, whether in the open-ended, elaborated classical *khyāl* or the unpretentious strophic folk song. However different such idioms may seem, in musical terms they share an absence of the distinguishing features of song form, sacrificing long-term development and delayed gratification for such purely foreground features as melodic and rhythmic intricacy and textual interest. Correspondingly, their lyrics, while often amatory, seldom depict the romantic, "confluent" love of two autonomous individuals. Far more characteristic are devotional panegyrics, heroic martial ballads celebrating historical or mythological figures, or, in the case of erotic verse, portrayals of the repressed desire of an essentially one-dimensional stock figure who is explicitly embedded in an inhibiting social environment. Thus, in a typical verse encountered in innumerable folk and classical songs, the young wife expresses the fear that her nocturnal tryst with her lover (or husband!) will be overheard by her mother-in-law. (In traditional Indian rural joint families,
married couples typically sleep apart and are expected not to show affection before their parents.) The protagonists of the Urdu ghazal are similarly stereotypical in their condition of unrequited love. Thus, the ghazal’s archetypical ‘ashiq (lover) rails against social conformity, swoons over a woman he has but glimpsed on a balcony, and weeps over the indifference with which his beloved is obliged to treat him. Ghalib, for example, writes:

In her case it is a pride in her honour, and in mine a modest concern for self-respect; How could I meet her in the street? How could she invite me to her house?9

Accordingly, this lyric and musical representation of a socially grounded stock figure takes place not in the context of an extended song form, but in a strophic rendition in which each couplet is musically and semantically complete and independent, constituting a concise epigram—a jewel in a necklace, or a flower in a garland—relying on a repertoire of stock similes and references. There is neither character development nor long-term musical structure or narrative.

Traditional flamenco is in some respects a more recent product, but tends to illustrate the same lyrical and musical atomism. Flamenco pieces, however sophisticated and elaborate, are essentially collective-varietive in character, consisting of strophic renditions of stock tunes; the length of a flamenco piece is loosely governed by convention rather than by any internal structural logic. Accordingly, most lyrics consist of strophes (of three, four, or five short lines) which may be thematically unrelated to each other; even if related, they are expected, as in the case of the ghazal, to be epigrammatic statements that are semantically and affectively complete in themselves. As in similarly atomistic genres like blues, or North Indian thumri, verse fragments often recur in distinct song lyrics, and may to some extent be freely inserted by singers and poets. In flamenco, in a manner reminiscent of the ghazal, the singer/poet rails against social constraints, addresses the world from behind prison bars, shudders with repressed desire as he passes the beloved’s house, and portrays himself as grounded in a specific social milieu. For example:

For you I abandoned my children and hastened my mother’s death
Now you have gone and left me—may God punish you.4

What this singer shares with the ‘ashiq of the ghazal and the young bride of Indian folksong is that he is portrayed as deeply, indeed pathetically embedded in a specific social situation. In this sense all these protagonists differ dramatically from the personae represented in the modern sentimental ballad, whose depiction rigorously eschews any reference to time, place, watchful in-laws, or sociohistorical grounding of any sort.

The transition from open-ended, strophic ballad to closed song form is especially transparent in the replacement of the Mexican corrido by the bolero in the early twentieth century. As Mark Pedelty (1999) insightfully notes, the strophic corrido was the quintessential folksong genre of pre-revolutionary Mexico, celebrating the traditional values of a rural, patriarchal, communitarian society via lyrics about great men, great horses, heroic battles, and epic betrayals. Despite its rural collectivist goals, the Revolution (1910–17) had the effect of dramatically urbanizing Mexican society and bringing most Mexicans into the orbit of capitalist socioeconomic relations. Urbanization and capitalist modernity brought not only dislocation and alienation, but new sorts of opportunities, especially in the form of the unprecedented personal freedom from family and community constraints. The archetypical musical vehicle for the new worldview of the Mexican urbanite was not the archaic and quaint corrido, but the urbane, sophisticated, and romantic bolero. Unlike the corrido, the bolero portrays not historical (and hence socially embedded) protagonists, but abstract, autonomous individuals voicing their intimate sentimental laments in a generally non-gender-specific manner. Accordingly, as Pedelty (1999) observes, whereas the corrido was collectively created and transmitted as an oral tradition, boleros were composed by known artists (such as Agustín Lara) and disseminated by a capitalist music industry. A further distinction—not noted by Pedelty, but quite typical of such genres—lies between the strophic, open-ended form of the corrido and the closed formal structures of the bolero. These latter, although variable, generally cohere to “song” form in combining a logical, fixed, and finite number of 16- or 32-bar sections to achieve symmetry and closure. Like the sentimental lyrics, the use of such formal structures must be seen not as a slavish imitation of contemporary Yankee trends, but as an abstract musical expression of a new worldview conditioned by new lifestyles and modes of production.

Late Modernity and Postmodernity: The Return of the Repressed

As we enter the new millennium, and indeed for the last several decades, music culture both globally and within the developed West itself have come to represent a set of particularly complex and diverse discursive fields in which no single style or format can be said to dominate, whether in popular or classical music. Insofar as song form is linked to capitalism and bourgeois aesthetics, one might well assume that such a form would be more pervasive and hegemonic than ever. The communist and socialist blocs, which once comprised a third of the world’s population and posed a serious threat to capitalism, have definitively collapsed and no longer serve as
viable socioeconomic models or alternatives. Global capitalism has triumphed and penetrated world economy to an unprecedented degree, and the mass media fill the world with predominantly bourgeois images of consumerism, individualism, and Western-fashion style and modernity.

There is no doubt that song form, in diverse variants, has accordingly achieved an unprecedented sort of presence. Whether in locally produced or imported forms, the pop ballad, invariably combining sentimental love with standard song structure, has become a substantial component of nearly every major music culture in the world. While ethnomusicologists (perhaps not entirely without reason) continue to lavish attention on more distinctively local aspects of music cultures, the pop ballad—from Chinese gangtai-yue and “pop Java” to the coonings of Julio Iglesias—has become the global common denominator of contemporary world music culture. In many regions—particularly East Asia—the pop ballad has come to marginalize all other forms of traditional and local music. As mentioned earlier, several collective-variative forms (e.g., rumba, pop ghazal, and huapango) have accommodated to song form by adapting some of its features. Similar syntheses can be seen in several other genres (such as pop flamenco).

In Western popular music culture, song form continues to be pervasive, if not quite as unequivocally predominant as during the Tin Pan Alley era. One might hazard an estimate that around one half of mainstream Euro-American popular music coheres with song form, particularly some variant of 32-bar AABA form. This form has pervaded even “rebellious” youth genres like punk and heavy metal, not to mention contemporary rhythm ‘n’ blues. As for art music, sonata form has of course been effectively deconstructed since its apogee of the Classical and Romantic periods, which coincided with the triumphant heyday of the European bourgeoisie in social, political, economic, and ideological fields. Nevertheless, despite the trajectories of serious composers since 1900, the tastes of the listening public remain firmly committed to the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century common-practice styles, themselves pervaded by sonata form, however flexibly interpreted by late Romantic composers.

And yet, even this prominence of song form seems markedly incomplete in comparison with the all but complete hegemony of global capitalism and its accompanying ideologies today. Since 1900, sonata form has been perpetuated only by the most conservative or neoclassicist of serious composers. And in the realm of popular music, song form has come to be raveled, if not surpassed in quantity, by other forms, particularly those ostinato-based idioms informed by Afro-American music and its derivatives, including rock. Meanwhile, of course, many traditional collective-variative forms, from the mainstream Urdu ghazal to Irish traditional jigs and reels, continue to enjoy considerable resilience and popularity. Given the unprecedented dominance of capitalism, and, one would think, of the subsequent hegemony of bourgeois ideology, this lack of correspondence would seem to require some explanation—unless one chooses to discard the entire notion of homology between aesthetics and socioeconomic context.

In many respects, however, the apparent discontinuity between aesthetics and social economy is a superficial one, and belies a deeper correspondence which in its own way affirms the validity of homological theories. The contemporary persistence, and indeed, the dramatic reemergence of collective-variative forms inconsistent with song form can in fact be seen as grounded in several historical developments since the heyday of bourgeois ideology in the nineteenth century. The persistence of traditional idioms (e.g., strophic forms) outside the developed West can be attributed to various factors. Homologies notwithstanding, there is no doubt that artistic forms can enjoy a degree of autonomy and historical momentum, which may ensure their survival even in periods of dramatic social transition. Nostalgia, cultural nationalism, and other attitudes may further contribute to the survival, and even dynamism of genres like Hindustani music, or of the Urdu ghazal-song, which have successfully managed the transition from feudal to bourgeois patronage. The markedly uneven nature of capitalism and modernity in such societies—where many aspects of pre-modern socioeconomic life persist—also naturally contributes to such aesthetic conservatism. Further, most music cultures are complex and heterogeneous, allowing modern and pre-modern idioms to coexist side by side. Moreover, a sophisticated homological theory proposes not a vulgar one-to-one determinism, but a relatively loose iconicity in which, for example, song form would constitute the most typical form, but not the sole form, of bourgeois society (or of a society dominated by bourgeois ideology).

By far the most significant cause of the relative decline of song form has been the general undermining of many aspects of bourgeois ideology and aesthetics accompanying the advent of late modernity and capitalism. For although capitalism may be triumphant as never before, the stable, coherent, and comfortably dominant worldview of nineteenth-century bourgeois values has suffered a series of blows. As has often been noted, the advent of world wars, the specter of nuclear annihilation, the ecological despoiling of the planet, and the persistence of poverty and class inequalities have rendered implausible the complacent positivism that animated bourgeois ideology at its peak. Notwithstanding the collapse of socialism, the internal contradictions of capitalism have become in many respects more profound than ever, especially as the mass media promote on a global scale a consumerist desire for unattainable goods. As socioeconomic underclasses become recognized as permanent components of even developed societies, a new form of alienation undermines bourgeois ideology from within.

The ramifications of these developments in the field of elite culture have been well documented, involving self-conscious high-modernist attacks on all the formal achievements of early modern aesthetics—including the proscenium stage, the structure of the novel, and, in painting, perspective and the illusion of three-dimensionality. In art music, they have inspired an
abandonment or deconstruction of tonality, song and sonata form, and other essential aspects of common-practice music. In Euro-American popular music—and global popular culture influenced or inspired by that music—the evisceration of classical bourgeois ideology and aesthetics has included the new valorization of music structures based on ostinato and modality (especially the blues scale). The Americas—and particularly Afro-American culture—have played the seminal role here, providing the crucial distinctive ingredients of rock music in all its worldwide variants.

Writers informed by Marxist or neo-Marxist approaches have offered various, often complementary perspectives on these developments. Perhaps least plausible is that proposed in the second half of Marothy’s (1974) otherwise brilliant tome. Writing from a sanguine Marxist vantage point during the heyday of world socialism, Marothy heralded reemergent collective-varietative forms, like jazz and workers’ songs (e.g., “John Henry,” or Pete Seeger’s repertoire) as anthems of the rising proletariat that was destined to claim sociopolitical power in the foreseeable future. In retrospect, of course, such optimism scarcely seems tenable, given the effective demise of socialism, the irrelevance and marginalization of workers’ songs, and the essentially apolitical nature of modern jazz. (It nevertheless finds a quaint echo in the writings of some contemporary cultural studies theorists who purport to find subversive political content in all manner of pop culture phenomena—from rock rhythms to baseball caps worn backward.) What is prescient, however, in Marothy’s argument is the dynamic conjuncture of residual and emergent art forms—a consideration to which we shall return.

Similarly controversial, although in some respects more nuanced, is the perspective of Adorno regarding the aesthetic and specifically musical ramifications of late modernity’s alienation. Adorno, paralleling the thought of his Frankfurt School colleague Herbert Marcuse, was particularly concerned with what he saw as the subtly but perniciously despotic and totalitarian nature of modern capitalism, which, under the guise of liberal democracies, promoted a stultifying consumerism, conformity, complacency, and analytical passivity. Robert Witkin (1998: 35, 45) summarizes Adorno’s views:

In the face of these social developments, the continuing affirmation, in bourgeois ideology, of the reconciliation of the individual and society [as in the metaphorical narrative of sonata form] loses truth-value even as a formative ideal. Its survival as ideology served the negative purpose of disguising the totalitarian nature of the conformist pressure in modern society by making it appear to be the reconciliation between individual and society that was promised by an earlier bourgeois society . . . . Classical tonality, no less than linear perspective or the conventions of the absolute drama, was integral to bourgeois ideology. As ideology, it offered an image of reconciliation. In an antagonistic society constructed for the exploitation of nature, all social relations bear the scars of that antagonism and no identity is pos-

For Adorno, the mindless, mechanistic use of standardized song form in commercial popular music epitomized the conformism, commodification, and decline of critical faculties and human agency in the new political and economic order. He also regarded the neoclassicist revival of sonata form in art music as equally specious and false. In general, Adorno’s argument is at once insightful, provocative, and problematic in several ways. Not the least of its contradictions is the sense in which modernity—especially as depicted by writers like Sartre, Marshall Berman (1983), and in many ways Marx himself—is characterized by a fundamental condition of freedom rather than totalitarianism.

If Adorno’s thought will remain controversial, what seems self-evident is that the spread of a new musical aesthetic—as represented, for example, in the rediscovery of ostinato-based forms—represents some kind of popular disaffection with or ambivalence toward bourgeois aesthetics, classical bourgeois ideology, and modernity in general. While Marothy’s attempt to locate this development in a progressive proletarian consciousness seems untenable, other writers have more convincingly linked this new sensibility to issues of sensuality and ethnic (or racial) identity. Paul Gilroy’s The Black Atlantic, for example, links the new musical aesthetic in a particularly nuanced and insightful way to a cross-cultural nexus of Afro-American alienation and aesthetics. Echoing Marothy’s stressing of the class rather than strictly racial groundings of early jazz’s aesthetic, Gilroy is careful to foreground the seminal nature of the Afro-American musical contribution without essentializing racial difference. Further, as he and other contemporaries suggest, central to the emergent aesthetic is a new spirit of sensuality that seeks to liberate the body from the demands of capitalist work and control. In a manner again reminiscent of Marothy, Gilroy perceptively illustrates how the Afro-American architects of this sensibility and musical aesthetic were able to draw on the raw materials of existing, pre-modern images, symbols, and artistic practices. These would naturally include the ostinato-based, collective-varietative musical forms, from ring shouts to responsorial work songs. These idioms survived long enough to be available for creative rearticulation into blues, rhythm ‘n’ blues, rock ‘n’ roll, and other idioms on down to rap and interethic syncretisms like British-Punjabi bhanga.

As Gilroy, George Lipsitz (1994), and others have stressed, the new musical sensibilities can be seen to reflect a critique of modernity and of capitalism, but not in the form of a headlong confrontation from an external, liberated zone (whether geographical, social, or attitudinal). Rather, they constitute immemorial critiques largely from within modern capitalism itself. As such their strictly political significance—that is, as a challenge to the
global capitalist world order—is arguably nil. Nor can they be unproblematically linked to a specific class configuration, such as the bourgeoisie or the underclass. It would thus seem that in the New World Order, with class struggle at a stalemate, these aspects of sociomusical evolution have tended to be conditioned primarily by features other than class-based sensibilities.

Conclusions

As Adorno articulately lamented, the inherently abstract nature of entities like musical form renders problematic any attempt to ground them in material history, generally atrophying one or the other of the elements of the term "sociology of music." Given the narrowly positivist approach of sociology during the mid-twentieth century, even the most plausible of sociomusical hypotheses enter a twilight zone as soon as, under empirical rules of the game, they are shown the bill and asked for incontrovertible proof that Beethoven's music really had something to do with humanity and the bourgeoisie emancipation movement, or Debussy's with the sense of impressionism and with the philosophy of Bergson. (Adorno 1962:1976:195)

With socialism defunct and global class struggle stalled, mainstream academics are perhaps more likely than ever to be skeptical of attempts to ground phenomena like formal musical structures in socioeconomic contexts. Yet it should be reiterated that for all its uses and abuses, the greatest strength and overriding emphasis of Marxist theory—whether regarding economics or culture—have always been in formulating a framework for the critical analysis of capitalism rather than providing a blueprint for a utopian socialism. If mainstream musicologists have shown little interest in pursuing structural links between class history and aesthetics—including specific features of musical aesthetics—then they effectively abandon the field to others who remain intrigued by the explanatory power of holistic cultural theories informed by Marxism.

One alternative, thus, is to pursue a formalism that would regard the emergence of a coherent aesthetic (e.g., demanding the logical conformity of parts of the whole) as a purely technical development whose clear parallels to broader socioeconomic evolution are in the nature of a fantastic coincidence. The obvious limitations of this approach should not of course inspire us to suspend critical faculties and endorse patently implausible theories. At the same time, political developments (such as the demise of socialism) should not blind us to such phenomena as the overwhelming correspondence, and evident causal relation, between the rise of capitalism and that of a bourgeois aesthetic which prescribes a particular approach to musical form. In addition, as I have suggested, in a period when class consciousness and class-based political struggles are at a relative nadir, and when a single economic system (global capitalism) seems destined to triumph indefinitely, it is entirely possible that other social factors may play more important roles in conditioning musical aesthetics. It is in this sense that the best of cultural studies approaches incorporate the most heuristic aspects of neo-Marxist thought, while supplementing them with considerations of gender, ethnicity, and other relevant themes.

Notes

1. In this sense, for example, Cervantes's episodic Don Quixote is conservative, although in its content (the ironic treatment of its protagonist) it constitutes a key landmark in the emergence of literary modernism. By contrast, most of the dramas of a contemporary, Shakespeare, are premodern in their fascination with royalty but reflect a distinctly bourgeois sensibility in their tightly knit formal structures, which are essential to dramatic motion and character development.

2. See Hauser 1957: II for further discussion of this development. Accordingly, during this period painters, freed from the collective guilds, came to sign their own works and be renowned as master artists rather than mere craftsmen.

3. From the popular ghazal "Dil hi to hai na sang o khisht"; see Matthews and Shackle 1972: 124.

4. "Por ti abandoné a mis niños, mi maréa de mi alma se me murió, ahora te vas y me abandonas, castigo te mando Dios" (traditional soleares).

5. As son and salsa developed out of rumba, they transformed the initial litany-like canto section into a closed song, typically in 32-bar AABA form; the second section, the montuno, remains ostinato-based. The pop ghazal and Mexican huapango discussed effectively grafted structured, closed song format onto strophic patterns (see Manuel 1985).

6. As Writkin illustrates (1998: 43–45), Adorno's perspective parallels that of Lukács regarding literature, although Lukács affirmed the novel's ability to expose rather than mask the contradictions in bourgeois society.

References


The Hip-Hop Sublime as a Form of Commodification

ADAM KRIMS

To historicize as a Marxist is to historicize as a totality, and one of the signal differences between a Marxism worthy of the name and more so-called vulgar versions is the willingness on the part of the former to historicize itself. Much of the Marxism in the initial version of the present essay, after all, is most profoundly an end-of-the-twentieth-century Marxism, not only in the objects it describes but also in the relative (but emphatically not ultimate) autonomy it grants to superstructural forces. But even more curious, and worth remarking, is the existence of this volume itself, whose contextualization in the so-called return to Marxism in the humanities offers, it would seem, some illuminating perspectives on music studies in general.

Music studies in anglophone academia, of course, have never entirely lacked Marxist contributions. David Morley (1993) must certainly be invoked in this context; and while predominantly anti-Marxist in its rejection of totality and economic determination, cultural studies has certainly entailed some remnants of Marxian notions, for example in the work of Reebee Garofolo, George Lipsitz, and many others (whom I would want to signal, nevertheless, as not fully Marxist, if in the latter term one wants to preserve some notion of totality and determination by the relations of production). But Marxism in musicology and music theory itself, even the burgeoning field of popular(-music) musicology, has been remarkably lacking, even conspicuously so. Of course, as has been remarked in so many different places, social engagement on the whole within the field of musicology has long been sporadic, and seems to have prospered only since the advent of the "New Musicology." And furthermore, the early theoretical sources of the New Musicology were themselves strongly anti-Marxist: as examples one could cite the feminisms borrowed by Susan McClary, Gary Tomlinson's borrowings from Foucault, and the post-structuralist literary theory that informed the work of Lawrence Kramer and many others.