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# Veni, vendidi, vici

Mr. Businessman's (I came,  
I advertised, I conquered)

## New Music and Media

Leigh Landy  
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"Can one really distinguish between the mass media as instruments of information and entertainment, and as agents of manipulation and indoctrination?"

Herbert Marcuse  
*One-Dimensional Man*

### I. MEDIA

In this hardly dated remark lies the heart of the challenge posed by the media.\* Although Marcuse was obviously referring to mass media—specifically to television, radio and news periodicals—I believe a direct parallel can be drawn with the two media most often used in music: radio and recordings.

On one hand these branches of technology can be applied powerfully, especially when harnessed to creativity. On the other hand such media are far more often associated with mass appeal, with the consumer society, with certain types of "packages" ("The Best of..."), with profit, with propaganda—in short, with industry and politics. To picture this polarity, consider the often fascinating, relatively unknown video works realized by various contemporary artists, as opposed to the daily doses of television series and game shows made for every bedroom and kitchen. It is not my contention that the artist is faced with the choice of one or the other; rather, I feel the artist should find the combination best serving his or her qualitative needs, needs not necessarily determined by the various media industries, but instead needs based on formulated (experimental) artistic criteria.

The above discrepancy between quality and quantity stems from a much more far-reaching problem—namely, the almost magnetic power of Western technology over the consumer. Marcuse put it quite succinctly in *One-Dimensional Man*: "A comfortable, smooth, democratic unfreedom prevails in advanced industrial civilization, a token of technological progress." Technological advance in the form of household inventions in Western society is introduced to the consumer as something inevitable and personal; therefore, the consumer is expected to utilize them.

It takes little imagination to realize how great the media effect is on culture as a whole. Artists who do not allow one or more media a central place in their work run the risk of remaining relatively anonymous, because the home has become as much a showplace as the galleries and concert halls.

Two questions of fundamental importance arise. First, is technological development, of which media development is but a small part, really a form of progress? I would think that this question would be more correct if it began with the word *when*. If the consuming masses were to become more critical of objects that serve minor functions and that are made to fall apart after a certain time, some comfort might be given up and replaced by common sense.

The second question concerns manipulation. To what extent are consumers—including artists—manipulated by the media? By "manipulation" I mean manipulation of the mind (political propaganda, fashion-mongering) as well as manipulation of the pocketbook (everything costs "only \$xx.xx" (i.e., everything is costly).

\*Media, a word with many contemporary ramifications, is used here as a shortening of "communications media" and not in the sense of, say, string quartets and electronic music, as two among many musical media.

### II. MUSIC & MEDIA

How can one relate Marcuse's statement to music in terms of media? To begin, think of the radical change in live music in the last eighty years. It is a well-known fact that in most Western societies folk music—true folk music—has slowly but surely been disappearing from daily life. Of course, the presence of live music, folk or otherwise, has always varied from culture to culture, but when one compares the functions of music in an African society today to that of a European society, the difference is shocking.

How many sixteen-year-old European youths go regularly to concerts (one of the few ways of seeing music performed live)? How many have never been at all? I would guess the latter group to be a vast majority. It is understandable that with the coming of the relatively "toilless" life of our century, the participation of the untrained in musical activity—that is, dancing, singing or playing along with musicians locally—has waned. New music and dance centers such as the discotheque have evolved, in which various media, hence not live musicians, play the central role. These discotheques cannot be considered an integral part of life in a given culture, because they are not accessible to all. What, then, has replaced folk music?

The only music that is universally accessible these days is the music presented by the media. The selection involved in broadcast programming and in recording repertoire—a selection often involving the factor of commercial potential—thus has an enormous effect on music appreciation on a wide scale. Few people have taken the radical step of disposing of their radios; even fewer have never owned a radio to begin with. Considering this, and considering the enormous quantities of sound-production components sold yearly, one can easily conclude that the influence of the media on the "average" listener is overwhelming.

This influence is often based on fashion, be it in terms of musical content (being "in") or in terms of apparatus. The latter, as has been pointed out by many social critics, often seems to receive the most attention. What does a stereo installation look like? Does it have two or four channels? "Did you say one?" Does it include the latest digital gadgetry? Has the noise level really been reduced to 1/100th the potential of human perception? Etc.

I do not consider it important to delve more deeply into the problem of the newness of machinery; the only question here for the modern musician is whether we can use new machines, or whether we are capable of designing other apparatus for our own goals.

More relevant is the question of content. The often-made comparison concerning East-bloc broadcasts and Biblical sermons, exhorting one to *believe*, is apropos here. For is it not true that when the consumer—especially the youthful one—listens regularly (as is expected) to radio or "Top Pop" television broadcasts, he or she probably will develop a taste for many of the "packages" the media have to offer? In terms of music appreciation for the masses, these packages are analogous in our societies to the Bible within a Christian society or a collected edition of Marx and Engels within a Communist one. To avoid boredom or commercial stagnation, these packages must regularly be modified with ephemeral shifts in fashion, or vogues.

A cursory glance at music history shows that dynamic continuity, historically and culturally, has been one of music's strongest points; why, then, must today's music change with very little technological invention? Why must a vogue last but a couple of years, and why must old music (e.g., older than five years) be put prematurely to the grave (only to be resurrected as "golden oldies")? This is a result of capitalist manipulation, which has not only subjected most music to the marketplace but has also discarded most folk musics as not commercially viable and has placed esoteric new music on the shelf of "low promotion."

The media have affected the content of music in another way. As most musicians are bound to the media, and as most radio programs are based on prerecorded material, the professional aim of most musicians is to be recorded as often as possible. A recording is a registration of an event but also a way of "perfecting" a given performance using modern technology. The road to this perfection is a studied multi-channel technique of montage, repeated performance, and in most cases a final splice-down to no mistakes. This implies that one of the primary bases of music—namely, the spontaneity involved in music making—is being replaced by extreme rigidity, an element known only to some premodern Western classical music. It also implies that one can be presented with a recording of a given improvisation which has been made permanent in the mind of many a listener. Is this really the musician's intention?



Michael Peppe

Radio has a potential brainwashing effect—not in the sense of manipulation, as already discussed, but rather in terms of allowing "listeners" to "tune out." How many people turn on the radio so that they can be "kept company" and then do not listen to the music at all? Some use the steady beat of disco music or the soft, synthetically produced sounds of "easy listening"—or Muzak—to guide them in their household chores. Is this the Western equivalent of Indonesian farmers creating a complicated rhythm to optimize pounding rice? The disco beat sometimes comes dangerously close to the heartbeat; Muzak is often used to stimulate the purchase of merchandise or the desire to eat. What in heaven's name are we letting the media do to us?

One thing we do know is that, at least as long as the energy holds out, these media will retain an important share of our cultural reality. If we do not reconsider their Orwellian influence, who knows how flattened out our aural taste buds will become in the coming years? The media, again, do not have to be exploited in this manner. It is capitalist commerce that has provided the formula for making this happen. One hopes that that which has been done, and is done, can be undone, slowly but surely. Yet only in new music have I seen indications of that.

# New Music and Media

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In our world of new music we do suffer from dependence and related illnesses of the media, but fortunately to a much smaller extent than in a realm like pop music. This is true primarily because new music has not exhibited a great deal of commercial potential and has therefore not been promoted as much as other musics by various public relations agencies. Nevertheless, the allure of media propagation entices almost all involved in contemporary music. Let's look at new music and the media, first in terms of the media (radio and recording industries) and then from the point of view of the musician.

Radio in most countries has been relatively unkind to new music and its musicians. This has two consequences. First, many people who are "regular" radio listeners do not get enough exposure to this music, which influences potential concert going and acquisition of recorded material. Second, as indicated above, since radio and television have helped cut down concert practice enormously—and participatory music almost completely—in many societies, the lack of attention paid to modern music by the various radio stations can have a lethal effect on the dissemination of contemporary music.

One would expect the information media—radio, television and newspapers—to be reasonably supportive of the contemporary culture of a society. This might be seen as a form of nationalism—support your artists—something that is quite normal in many Third World societies. This support should lead to the coexistence of traditional and experimental cultural development, creating a broad artistic basis in a society. However, since the radios of the First and Second Worlds (happily, with exceptions) have decided to provide the public with music they consider to be appropriate for the masses, relatively unknown new music is one of the first to be dropped. Of course it is the musician who is called the guilty party for creating music with no potential mass appeal. But since music making is a process that develops by way of feedback, less music making broadcast means the less feedback, creating a large communication gap. In the urban United States the picture is not so gloomy, because of the enormous number of radio stations. There is often something new to hear. But the programs that are offered can often seem unstructured, incoherent to the "uneducated listener," because regional collaboration among music broadcasters seems to be relatively rare. In the Netherlands, a country with some 250 active new-music composers, there are four radio stations, of which only one is on the air 24 hours a day. One station broadcasts classical music an average of ten hours a day, including some seven hours of twentieth-century music a week (mainly during work hours or relatively late in the evening). How can a composer expect to have his or her music made known with so few available possibilities?

Very few broadcasters throughout the world have reasonable budgets for radio recordings or air live performances of contemporary music. European radio does provide various opportunities for specific performers and composers to broadcast concertized pieces, studio recordings, or radiophonic works. It would be hard to support oneself, however, as a musician making only radio recordings. In any event this network of opportunities has given new music the bit of reputation it has today on the continent. In the United States most private radio stations give little attention to contemporary music. The public stations that pay such attention usually do so on such tiny budgets that they are grateful whenever a composer or musician provides them with a prerecorded tape. I do have the feeling, however, that contemporary musicians and composers are beginning to "infiltrate" the broadcasting world. If the ensuing agitation achieves concrete results, we may yet see some growth in new music propagation. Of course I do assume that most composers have taken the radio into account in their compositions, in that for them the radio is an acceptable concert stage along with, or instead of, the concert hall.

The recording industry's influence has been as stimulating to new music (through the potential of recording) as suppressing (through selectivity and promotion of that which gets recorded). The lack of promotion is understandable, for there seems to be hardly any tangible reason in the capitalist system we inhabit for record distributors to push most new music records; an interested public supposedly knows which labels specialize in new music, and knows as well where to find them. In this sense the dearth of new music or on many major recording labels has not hurt new music very much. On the other hand, the record and tape industry has kept up in terms of recording quality and technological development (noise reduction, multichannel recordings, and the soon-to-appear video disks) so that the stringent demands of, for example, electronic music composers who do get recorded can normally be met. The number of recent compositions of about twenty or forty minutes' duration reflect the influence that the record has had on contemporary composition, neither an avoidable nor a regrettable development.



Illustration by Catherine Stine

## Westernization of Egyptian Music for Television

Nonwestern peoples often confuse technology with culture, and since Western technology is worthwhile acquiring, they conclude that Western culture and Western music are also desirable. They forget that while one type of technology may be replaced by another type of technology without appreciable damage to either, various types of music cannot. Music is the expression of a people's values, traditions, feelings, and ideas, crystallized in unique musical systems, forms, rhythms, and instrumental ensembles. This value system cannot be easily replaced by another value system. Example: An Egyptian concert on Cairo Television. Forty string players in black tuxedos, sitting on chairs arranged as in a Western orchestra, are led by a conductor in tails in the performance of a musical composition. The image projected is totally Western.

What is wrong? First, all forty musicians play the same instrument—a Western violin—in unison. The violin takes the place of the much harsher-sounding kamanje, or rebab, traditionally played vertically like a cello. Second, unison is unknown in the Middle

East. Several instruments playing together create a heterophonic sound. The original composition is a *taqsim* for several musical instruments like the ney (flute), the 'ud (lute), the kanoon (zither), the kamanje (violin), the darbukka (drum), to be played solo and in ensemble for interludes. Third, large orchestras do not exist; the traditional ensemble consists of six to eight players. Fourth, musicians sit on the floor and wear the national costume. Fifth, there is no conductor.

But what is most disappointing is the distortion of the music itself: the original *taqsim* has lost all its flavor in the elimination of the distinct sound produced by the individual instruments, the microtonal structure of the melodies, the heterophony (echoes) generated by the ensemble players, and most of all the ability to improvise, vary, and embellish melodically and rhythmically. Result: neither Western nor Egyptian music, hardly music at all.

by Johanna Spector

Excerpt from a discussion you can read in the next *EAR Magazine East*.

I believe that the basis of this "media envy" is in the feeling of many that new music should be heard by as many listeners as possible, as this form of recognition might be the best road to "success." Success, of course, is what you make of it. Still, I would think that most contemporary musicians should be happy when there is a specific public, a "community," local or international, interested in their music. Such a community can be created through live music without the help or even the use of the media. Nevertheless, when a medium is found useful or necessary, the subject of quality versus quantity should then arise with regard to the public as well. Shouldn't we be more satisfied with a small active public than with yearning and fighting for the "big gig"—with which we would probably reach a less interested large audience?

The other side of the story is that regardless of new music's current non-mass appeal, new musicians are often the pioneers of various technological developments. Modern synthesizer pop music flourishes, thanks to thirty years of serious electronic music composition and research. Multichannel tape techniques were first sought out by musicians, and only then by recording companies.

It is my feeling that new musicians have the unique opportunity to concentrate on the first, more constructive use of media as described by Marcuse. Our needs are specific but within reach as long as we do not allow consumerism or media envy to overcome us. The small record label, for example, is becoming enormously viable for new musicians; these releases, although they receive little to no publicity, do seem to find their way to the public most affiliated with this music. As composers and musicians put more and more on paper and on tape and record, as they learn what

the constraints are in the broadcasting world (e.g., live performances often set aside for fancy packaged programs), as long as the modern musician does not struggle to obtain a mass audience that simply does not exist, we have an excellent opportunity to explore and apply the media in a creative way.

—Leigh Landy  
Amsterdam, December  
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