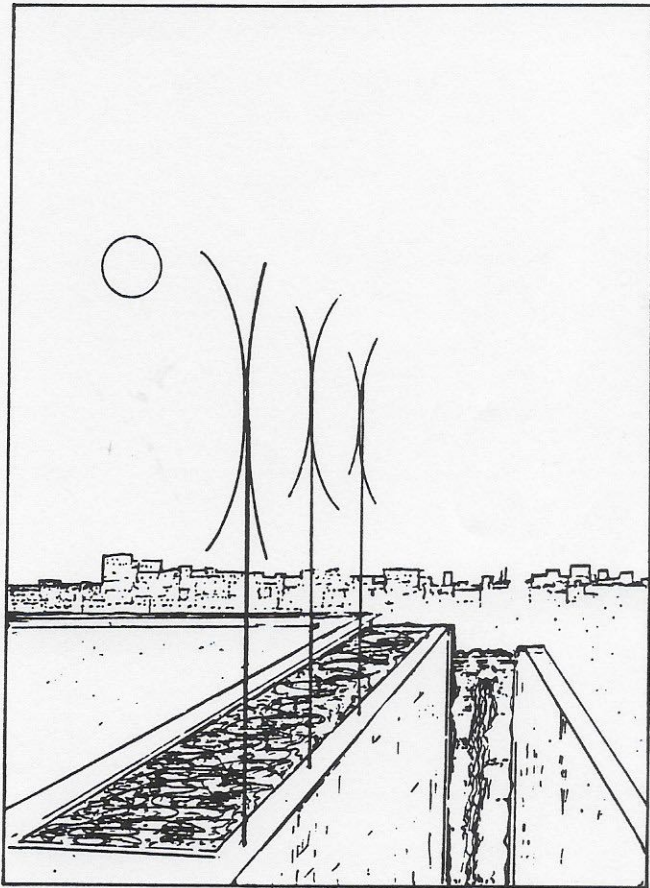


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Ideas and Visions of New Musics

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Quality and Quantity (if we're lucky) or Marcuse's problem ain't been solved yet

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The following is an idealist's paper concerning our leaving the twentieth century. After looking into the lot of ideals formulated some three decades ago by Herbert Marcuse, among others, what is called the sorry state of today's music world is investigated. This leads to twenty-seven ideas which are presented concerning one future for contemporary musics.

This is an ideas paper.

0) Preamble

This is an idealist's paper which is an ideas paper. The tale begins in the idealist late 1960s, visits the capitalist realist 1990s, allows for idealistic views from the same decade and conjectures about new musics in the coming decades. The social critic Herbert Marcuse's thirty year old *One-Dimensional Man* will serve as the thread that ties the four parts together.¹ It is a visionary – be it highly outspoken-book concerning the abuse of technology by society while proposing more useful applications for a future world. The dialectics of quality and quantity as referred to in the title has been taken from this book and will be discussed below. The 1964 criticism tastes as bittersweet and the idealism as worthy of pursuit thirty years later as they did at the time. This reference therefore illustrates the distance between idealism and reality, then and now. It also helps in demonstrating how essential it is to find ways to assimilate some of yesterday's and today's idealists' concepts into culture as today's reality – inside and outside music – barely reflects the positive ethos of the sixties. (It has been assumed in this text that the 'positive' is anyone's goal.)

1) Idealism 1960s

"Contemporary society seems to be capable of containing social change – qualitative change which would establish essentially different institutions, a new direction of the production process, new

¹ Marcuse, H. (1966, orig. 1964) *One-Dimensional Man*. Boston: Beacon Press.

modes of human existence. This containment of social change is perhaps the most singular achievement of advanced industrial society."

Marcuse: xii

It is a sense of nostalgia that arises when one ponders the positive nature and viewpoints that characterised the 1960s: hippie culture and Woodstock; cries for reform against the establishment in Paris, Chicago and many other cities in 1968. In the performing arts, Cage, Fluxus, Happenings, contact improvisation and Living Theatre come to mind. 'Alternative' and 'post-scarcity' urban and decentralised societies are described by a number of sixties thinkers and even put into practice by a small minority of individuals and communalists. Technology and, for lack of a better word, the untenable were part of many people's daily lives. In the case of the writer, a great deal of time was spent in areas of applied mathematics as a means of job security, while Taoism and anarchy were major sources of creative inspiration. In any event experimentalism as a way of life was embraced by a large number of people. How far away that now seems.

2) Realism 1990s: "What goes up must come down"

"The traditional notion of 'neutrality' of technology can no longer be maintained."

Marcuse: xvi

"[We can speak of] democratic unfreedom . . . in the sense of man's subjection to his production apparatus."

Marcuse: 1, 32

"To take an (unfortunately fantastic) example: the mere absence of all advertising and of all indoctrinating media of information and entertainment would plunge the individual into a traumatic void."

Marcuse: 245-246

To reach the 1990s, we must see when and how things started to diverge from those liberating 1960s. Musically, the first warning shot was given in the early 1970s when, after more than a decade of monumental musical change in contemporary music, many composers chose to return to melody, identifiable genres, safer compositional approaches.

[Idea 1] *It is believed that the steps towards conservatism in the seventies were taken due primarily to a changing economic climate (i.e., there was little money for risk taking).* Certainly some had other reasons including disenchantment, but the sixties culture faded quickly across the board in the following decade; music was no exception.

[Idea 2] (Furthermore): *It seems that hero envy increased in the seventies.* This implies that a great deal of less dynamic businessmen and men (read: composers) who didn't know how to sell their products (read: pieces) aggressively really suffered

given the fact that music's heroes were not necessarily the best – most clearly did have a good 'rap'. But were these heroes writing the music that 'had' to follow the idealist sixties? Surprisingly, most likely they did, in perceived accordance with the changed economic climate. In a sense it reflected the old adage, "What goes up must come down", but how much of that 'up' was retained?

After what Tom Wolfe has called the 'Me Decade', the seventies pushing individualism at the cost of anything to the limit, we were treated to the 'No Non-sense Eighties', a time when the orange had been squeezed and squeezed again where we all thrived on not sharing that last drop. In sum, today's negativism has been inherited from two difficult decades.

[Idea 3] (Ouch): *The nineties is characterised by its unemployment, its atmosphere of 'keep your hands off anything vaguely dynamic – the status quo is hard enough'*. In other words, with the 1994 economy in its third or so year of maybe starting its recovery, we find ourselves in a phase where virtually the entire world has gone market economy – Thatcherism – 'forget about culture if it ain't the top ten'. Granted, some of these remarks are quite rhetorically stated; our milestones are just being set up at the moment.

So what does this imply with respect to today's music?

[Idea 4] (A problem): *There is an overabundance of musical languages today*. This is primarily due to the huge number of musical developments of this century, especially in what is called contemporary music. Many ideas remain young after decades as they have not really been provided with the chance to be tested or to root properly. To make things worse, the presence of too many musical languages makes music appreciation difficult for specialists as well as for those interested, let alone for the untrained listener. This is a consequence of the 'me epoch' and the individualist 'I must be unique' ethos which is currently omnipresent.

[Idea 5] (A fact): *Most of today's contemporary music is completely marginalised in society*. This need not be as bad as it sounds if one is able to define 'communities' of appreciation for certain sorts of music (see idea 18 below). It is, given the talent among today's musicians, completely idiotic when you realise that:

[Idea 6] (Food for thought): *Our culture's appreciation of the art music of dead composers far exceeds that of living ones*. Today's composer sounds as exotic to the listener's ear as does Machaut or a distant culture's harmony and rhythms. The 'mean' of the majority of the public is clearly the ephemeral hit parade, but as far as 'art music' is concerned, the 'mean' is around the year 1812. To add insult to injury:

[Idea 7] (Beethoven would roll over in his grave if he knew): *Given the success of Britain's Classic FM and other nations' equivalent radio stations, art music has been 'promoted' to the level of furniture music, easy listening (or not listened to music) for the masses, digestible five minute titbits with advertisements providing a change of pace*. One wonders what this says about today's listener's attention span.

Let's look at parallels from the point of view of the Marcusean one-dimensional man. [Marcusean idea 8] *It is worrying that in our cultures one speaks more of what a television can do and what it looks like than what is broadcast on it*. Perhaps today's equivalent would be our obsession with faster and less expensive apparatus: this does not necessarily relate to forms of progress; better applications might, however.

At this point the quality <-> quantity question comes up for the first time. Market economies are usually more aligned to quantity than to quality due to profit incentives; broadcast policy is the same in most cases. Assuming that anyone reading this text is interested in maximising quality (of product, of life) in one's own culture, a shift would be welcome. Proposals will be treated below.

[Marcusian idea 9] *Today one might not be able to distinguish between the mass media as informative sources and as manipulative, indoctrinating agents.* Marcuse's doubt concerning the "neutrality" of technology of thirty years ago seems equally worthy of attention today. One wonders in 1994 who is to blame for allowing this sort of manipulation to continue to exist. The excuse, "Because the people want it!" is the quickest way into a Marcusian vicious circle and is thus a means of carefully avoiding the significance of this problem.

[Marcusian idea 10] (Where does one go from here?): *The technological twenty-first century is going to see an end to most forms of toil.* Marcuse sees the end of toil as symbolising the end of struggle, which, in terms of time, is primarily dependent upon the fluctuations of that economic vector's pointing, going up or coming down. The effective use of the free time that a toilless society would provide would be reflected in the quality of culture, a central notion to any idealist view of musics and their cultural contexts in the coming decades.

3) Idealism 1990s: "What comes down must go up"

"Introduce a *qualitative* change in the technological continuity: namely, production toward the satisfaction of freely developing human needs."

Marcuse: 23

... and isn't that 'up' a bit overdue? Are we in for neo-post and post-post movements or might the ball roll forward in the coming years, i.e., similar to the periods of the early 'teens through the mid-twenties and the fifties through the sixties? Isn't it about time for the third revolution in a century? To realise this: [Idea 11] *Society's interest in things contemporary must increase.* If a country's football coach or major figure skater has a hangover, the entire country knows about it the following day at the latest. This fact is as ridiculous as today's non-popular musician's obscurity. However, looking at how things are developing in the theatre, film and literature fields, there is reason for hope. If so:

[Idea 12] *One should be wondering more about tomorrow's new musics.* In other words, what kinds of new can we expect? Also, why are we ignoring this question and swimming in our status quo? Anyway, whichever way one goes, the word 'discovery' just might play a role here. On the other hand:

[Idea 13] *Tomorrow's composer need not expect to be added to the list of Wagners and Stockhausens and other Helden of music history, not because she or he is inferior, but instead due to tomorrow's world's not needing mega-composers.* We will return to this shortly with respect to tomorrow's communities. Furthermore:

[Idea 14] (Failed, I truly hope): *Musics which are virtually impossible to understand will see their demise in terms of appreciation (sic!).* There was a time when operas were watched (or not) because one was supposed to be there, where few understood the libretto. Today there exist works too complex to permit the listener to grab on to anything but the complexity itself. Music of confusion is due for a

decline of interest. It would be preferable to have user-friendliness reign, which of course does not have to mean that a work must be friendly to the user.

[Idea 15] (Key idea/1): *After thesis (600 years of European music history) and antithesis (the two periods of revolution in music of the last hundred years), the time for Hegelian synthesis is now due. This should characterise tomorrow's new music.* Synthesis is used here in terms of marrying the old to the new as well as in terms of fusions of currently separate styles of any genre of music and finally in terms of merging various practices within the performing arts.

[Idea 16] *There will be a great deal of space for individual creativity in tomorrow's music as long as the huge diversity of 'languages' is brought back into some coherency.* This sounds more conservative than is meant. The idea pertains to some people's creating compositional approaches and selling them as being at least as important as the end product which has rarely aided music's moving forward. Conversely, future musics should be much more 'why' oriented. When music has its dramaturgy explained, it is expected that the breadth of music in turn will become more coherent.

[Idea 17] (Key idea/2): *For the above six points to take place, educating the young in terms of the discovery of musics available today will have to be greatly modernised.* The earlier one starts, the better. This is self-evident. Furthermore:

[Idea 18] (Key idea/3): *The concept of 'communities' in the sense of groups with similar interests however large or small-scale will take on a new role as our technology will allow much greater contact of community members.* Just as in traditional cultures, music for and in the community will become a household word. A community may be local or spread out nationally or even internationally. Some will embrace existent values; more progressive ones will question, that is react against established values. As a consequence:

[Idea 19] (Key idea/4): *Participation will return to music making. It will no longer be music equals tell people what to do; it will be music made through a collective evaluative process of devising.* This process is known as the workshop approach.

[Idea 20] (Key idea/5): *In the future workshop approaches to music will again be the norm, not the exception. This is already true as far as a good deal of popular music and jazz is concerned, but it will also take precedence in tomorrow's 'serious' music. The workshop approach will be applied to music technological development as well.* Certainly hierarchies will be broken down, anti-hierarchical thinking being a remnant of the idealism of the sixties. In principle, the workshop approach to music recognises every person's individual talents and technological needs. This represents a true, as opposed to pie-in-the-sky, return to participation and community. In this way self-serving artists' ghettos and the "more fun to play than to hear" syndrome of a good deal of contemporary music will become past tense as workshop members will have already offered feedback before the birth of a work and continue to do so afterwards. One might call this a kind of quality control. Consequently new forms as well as revised, more mature, old forms of experimentalism will represent ways to bring some excitement and discovery back into music making alongside traditional performance practices.

[Idea 21] (By the way, in a highly technological world): *Live music may not disappear as so many believe; instead it will take on a new role in the community and find a balance with high tech music dissemination.* Live music need not necessarily mean symphony orchestras and brass bands, but can also refer to that group of musicians and composers (ideally, they would be the same people) preparing

workshop compositions for their community of listeners and similar communities in their own as well as in other geographical areas. But after our years' experience of playbaking, will we still know how to sing?

The word 'quantity' has been touched on several times. So far it has been used as representing products for the masses. Tomorrow it will represent choice.

[Idea 22] *Although mass culture is most likely here to stay, it may become less massive as the media offer the consumer more choice. As the price of providing that choice drops, those involved in producing culture will be free to spend more energy on the quality of what they offer as this will attract a targeted community of interested people.* In a dog-eat-dog media world, money and listeners/viewers count. Quantity must dominate quality and the Marcusean dragon of media manipulation reigns supreme. In a greater media network where fibre optic cables will provide the eyes and ears with more than they could ever want and where home technology will become increasingly sophisticated in terms of its applications, special interests will grow and quality will consequently become the common denominator. A higher quality of media content will walk hand in hand with a higher quality of life. Communities will become more diverse than they are currently; quality and quantity will find synergy.

[Idea 23] *The word 'marginal' will be ready for the rubbish heap of history some day as each artist should slot into at least one community theoretically easily.* This infers that we turn the word 'marginal' into 'acceptable'.

[Idea 24] *As a reaction to the growing reality of the 'Global Village', there will be a return to and a modernisation of a number of local values in order to retain international diversification before it's too late.²*

[Idea 25] (Combining a number of the above ideas): *There will certainly always be room for music as entertainment, including the mass cultural versions (and why not?). However, with more firmly defined communities emerging, there will be different roles for music as an art form than is currently the case. This role change will reflect the move away from dead towards living culture. The concept of music as consumer product in the first instance must be shelved. Furthermore, there will be a renaissance of music as a part of life.* The latter point is based on the premise that most people will have much more free time. Music as part of one's daily life has been fundamental to most societies throughout history and is a serious candidate to be brought back a.s.a.p. This music making can be private, collective or made in some formal connection. It will be promoted from what one does when there is nothing else to do or from the above-mentioned furniture music to . . . an integral part of life where it duly

² Marcuse's belief is that we should not constantly pursue universals, as local situations are often indeed different. (This can pertain to areas as divergent as agriculture and music.) Along the lines of this anti-universal approach, he wonders whether "underdeveloped countries can make the historic leap from the pre-technological to the post-technological society" (46), i.e., one combining the global with the local. Might this jump embrace traditional (music) values?

One tends to talk a great deal about cultural similarities and differences these days with respect to the question of universals. It is pleasant to note that for example the market economy weekly "The Economist" has unexpectedly occasionally stated that European and American countries should not necessarily try to install their own value systems in developing cultures that have very different social structures. In the future, Marcusean society may universally see the end of toil; the 'how' to attain it need not be singular.

belongs. As technology becomes more affordable, reliance on state or private funding will eventually diminish. Musicians of all tastes will have more freedom to develop what they please in their communities as opposed to feeling a sense of compromise in order to meet competitive funding criteria upon which they are dependent.

[Idea 26] *Music as celebration will take on a range of new forms. It may still take place in a church or disco, at a rave or any other form of concert, in the community or even in the CD-ROMed home or anywhere with tomorrow's walkman. Each community will be able to define its known celebration(s).* This is a traditional element of music that even the Muzak corporation cannot kill.

[Idea 27] *In terms of tomorrow's technology we can expect new developments where interactive feedback is possible and individual human taste is taken into account. This makes technology less impersonal and will broaden applications enormously.* Nicholas Negroponte of the MIT Media Lab speaks of the "personalisation" of future technology, of smart technologies that interact more intuitively with the user than is currently the case. This idea illustrates why virtual reality is thriving in its current primitive forms as the user is back in the picture. For those who have not been paying attention, electroacoustic algorithmic music is here to stay. Children manipulate their compositions and even choose their musical atmosphere in today's Nintendo computer games. And of course the algorithmic jukebox will also be with us soon enough. It will help a user avoid boredom from hearing a piece too often, by newly composing music for every mood. Furthermore tomorrow's performer will jam interactively with a personally programmed digital back-up band.

These are but a few ideas of how we can fuse musical with technological, socio-cultural and economic developments in such a way that we might be able to put that word 'positive' back on the map. Surely it will be difficult breaking down the capitalist barriers that stand like the old Berlin Wall, but almost all the technology exists which is necessary to assist in the proposed changes. Isn't it about time that Marcuse's "unfreedom" die a quiet death, where choice (i.e., quantity) and quality merge?

4) Realism 2000?

Dead culture is dead, long live the deceased! If our societies can refocus attention on today's and tomorrow's art and recognise a good deal of contemporary work that has been thus far virtually ignored, words like 'coexistence' and 'better balance' will seem appropriate. In this way new performance practices will emerge which can embrace existent ones and, who knows, possibly use existent instruments as well. If we acknowledge the possibilities described above, become part of the democratic process of righting the wrongs, there will be more coherence in tomorrow's music and music appreciation and Herbert Marcuse might still get his way.

To conclude: it probably isn't either/or, but instead both/and in terms of quality <-> quantity. Yet if we do not break out of or at least better organise our little margins – it isn't going to happen by itself – we will still be screaming about the Marcuse problem in another thirty years' time.

We will therefore continue along our current non-path unless we move forward, a need in a dynamic culture. This need necessitates experimentalism and respects vision. There must be idealism and, more fundamentally, there must be ideas to move our cultures forward. They redefine themselves constantly at present through rapid acculturation and assimilation. It is incorporating the old with the new, synthesis, that helps us to evolve in this ever-changing world. Ideas are necessary for synthesis.

It is hoped that the reader has been provided with a few useful thoughts here. This writer will attempt to be among those idea-hunters (read: composer/musicians experimenting) in the future. In spite of the current 1970-1994 lull, experimentalism as a way of life (or however you want to call that particular drive to move forward, discover, try out ideas) is alive and well and here to stay as far as at least a few of us are concerned. In other words: hasn't the time finally arrived for the proposed return of idealism, where we can take on the challenge of new ideas?