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**JAZZ AS CLASSICAL MUSIC  
[DRAFT]**

My question is: what is the relation between improvised and classical music? In particular, in what sense is jazz an art music? This music has many of the features of art music, despite evidently being less contrived than the great works of the Western canon. Jazz is still able to draw for its material on the charms of ephemeral pop music – what Noel Coward described dismissively as the "potency of cheap music" – which consist in their powers of association for individual listeners. When those materials are used as they are in jazz, an art of great power can be created. Jazz provides a test case in the dialectic between popular and art music. [rw] This dialectic gives rise to central aesthetic questions which are much-discussed in musicology and sociology of music, but whose deeper roots philosophical aesthetics tends to neglect. My suggestion is that jazz shares some of the features of Western art music – that apparently unique, autonomous art music which contrasts with traditional art musics such as gagaku, courtly gamelan and Indian classical music. Unlike Western art music, however, jazz is essentially an art music based on popular materials, whose artistry consists not in composition, but in the improvisation on those materials.

I intend the description as fairly innocuous, but many will have reservations about describing jazz as an art music; even more so, about describing it as a classical music. Jazz historian Scott DeVeaux writes that "in the discourse of jazz, the point at which jazz becomes 'Art' is thought to be in the move from swing to bebop. For a lot of people that's the moment at which jazz becomes itself, because it sheds what is conventionally seen as this exterior husk of commercialism. It becomes 'what it is'".<sup>1</sup> The "discourse of jazz" seems to me right in saying that jazz became an art, and one with a fairly capital "A" – a practice involving skill, with an aesthetic end, that richly rewards serious attention. But more work needs to be done to convince sceptics that this process has been a largely beneficial one.

**Legitimation by the aesthetics of imperfection**

Jazz does not need to be "legitimated" in a practical as opposed to philosophical sense. What is in question is not whether jazz has artistic value, but from where that value arises. In the past, condescension from classical music bred insecurity among jazz players, hence for example the desire of Parker and Hampton Hawes to play with string orchestras. Clearly it is patronising – in fact, not even that, just stupid and ignorant – to describe Charlie Parker as the Horowitz of the saxophone; one could equally call Horowitz the Charlie Parker of the piano.

One view is that jazz's artistic value arises in part at least from its status as improvised music. Ted Gioia, in [The Imperfect Art](#), expresses common doubts about the value of improvisation, before defending it in terms of an "aesthetics of imperfection": "Improvisation is doomed, it seems, to offer a pale imitation of the perfection attained by composed music. Errors will creep in, not only in form but also in execution; the improviser, if he sincerely attempts to be creative, will push himself into areas of expression which his technique may be unable to handle. Too often the finished product will show moments of rare beauty intermixed with technical mistakes and aimless passages." Gioia wants to show why we are, nonetheless, interested in the "imperfect art" of improvisation. His defence he labels "the aesthetics of imperfection", in contrast to "the aesthetics of perfection" which takes composition as its paradigm.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.grovemusic.com/grove-owned/music/feature\\_jazz/jazz01.htm](http://www.grovemusic.com/grove-owned/music/feature_jazz/jazz01.htm)

The aesthetics of perfection emphasises the timelessness of the work and the authority of the composer. The aesthetics of imperfection values the event or process of performance, especially when this involves improvisation. The latter aesthetic reigned supreme until the appearance of the musical work in the later 18th century, which saw a divide between composition and improvisation. As Lydia Goehr writes, "By 1800...the notion of extemporization acquired its modern understanding [and] was seen to stand in strict opposition to 'composition' proper".<sup>2</sup> It is true that Western art music generally values composition rather than improvisation, but there is a spectrum – Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven were all accomplished improvisers. The belief that composition has a higher value than improvisation began to solidify rather later than 1800, in fact.

The aesthetics of imperfection is right to insist on a relation between performance and pre-performance activity not envisaged by critics of improvisation such as Elliott Carter and Boulez – though in its claim of "pure spontaneity", a full-blown aesthetics of imperfection is excessive.<sup>3</sup> The correct view, in contrast to the extremes of perfection and imperfection, is that while interpreters think about and practice a work with the aim of giving a faithful representation of it in performance, improvisers also practice, but with the aim of being better prepared for what Steve Lacy terms "the leap":

[There] is a freshness, a certain quality that can only be obtained by improvisation, something you cannot possibly get by writing. It is something to do with the "edge". Always being on the brink of the unknown and being prepared for the leap. And when you go on out there you have all your years of preparation and all your sensibilities and your prepared means but it is a leap into the unknown...<sup>4</sup>

Many improvisers will formulate structures and ideas, and at an unconscious level these phrases will provide openings for a new creation. Thus there are different ways for a performer to get beyond what they already do, to avoid repeating themselves. For the improviser, the performance must feel like a "leap into the unknown", and it will be an inspired one when the hours of preparation connect with the requirements of the moment and help to shape a fresh and compelling creation. At the time of performance they must clear their conscious minds of prepared patterns and simply play. Thus it makes sense to talk of preparation for the spontaneous effort.

Lee Konitz puts the matter succinctly: "That's my way of preparation – to not be prepared. And that takes a lot of preparation!" This is the qualified truth in the "imperfektionist" claim that improvisation is valuable because it is closer to the original idea. Konitz has "complete faith" in the spontaneous process: "I think most people think that can be very naive, and that you do your improvising at home, and when you go out, you play prepared material, so the paying customers don't get short-changed. It's the picture I've seen all of my life. And very talented people can do it effectively – the rest sound like hacks, to me."<sup>5</sup> So spontaneity is a kind of authenticity.

The aesthetics of imperfection asserts essential differences between jazz and Western art music. But there are also growing similarities, arising from the developed artistry of jazz. One may therefore be able to describe jazz as an "art music of imperfection"

### **An alternative legitimization? Jazz as America's classical music**

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<sup>2</sup> Goehr (1992), p. 234.

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Hamilton (2007).

<sup>4</sup> Weiss ed. (2006), p. 51.

<sup>5</sup> In Hamilton (2007), Ch. 6

These similarities are stressed by a contrasting but not inconsistent kind of legitimation, suggested by Grover Sales's Jazz: America's Classical Music, whose publication in 1984 sparked a minor cultural furore. One commentator wrote (unfavourably?): "Sales not only transformed jazz from a cultural product rooted in the African American experience to [one] rooted in the American experience, but he also reclassified jazz (an urban folk music) as a national classical music". In 1987 the US Congress echoed the sentiment in a resolution designating jazz as a national treasure which deserves attention, support and resources to ensure that it is preserved, understood and promulgated.

There are three ideas here. Jazz is (1) a quintessentially American artform; (2) a kind of classical music; (3) the unique American classical music. (3) can be dismissed. There was an American classical music before jazz, although it relied on European models almost exclusively up to Ives, and to a considerable extent after (Copland and Carter did, but not Cage and Partch). The view that jazz is an American classical music is quite defensible. The "American" aspect of this claim is not my main concern, though I believe it remains true.<sup>6</sup> However, it is relevant in this sense. Those who practise a "folk" or collective art, including African-American forms such as the blues or early jazz, may come to aspire to the creation of a more autonomous art. "High art is not suited to them" parallels "Democracy is not suited to Africa". Earl Hines might have said: "I don't regard myself as simply part of the collective African-American heteronomous expression, I am an original talent in my own right".<sup>7</sup>

We need to separate (1) and (2), and then consider whether (2) is compatible with a qualified aesthetics of imperfection.

### **Is jazz a classical music?**

The claim commonly means:

1. Jazz is a serious art form in its own right, despite long association with the entertainment industry – in Adorno's language, it is an autonomous art.
2. It has arrived at an era of common practice, which is codified and taught in the academy.
3. It has a universality, and now constitutes an international language which transcends national and ethnic boundaries.

Billy Taylor defends the claim as follows: "jazz is very serious music...it has developed steadily from a single expression of the consciousness of black people into a national music that expresses American ideals and attitudes...its influence is international in scope...Americans of African descent, in producing music which expressed themselves, not only developed a new musical vocabulary, they created a classical music – an authentic American music which articulated uniquely American feelings and thoughts".<sup>8</sup> Taylor offers a synthesis of the African-American narrative – here at least, he omits the input into early jazz from musicians trained in Western art music – and the "melting pot" view of American culture.

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<sup>6</sup> Ref Gustavsen talk.

<sup>7</sup> Hadlock v Udolf. Richard Hadlock comments: "Hines, Waller, Tatum and Wilson could play a very acceptable blues when called upon but, given complete freedom, made little use of blues forms. They had scant regard for boogie-woogie, despite one of them having a hit record from that way of playing 'St. Louis Blues'. How much longer do we have to link so-called African-American musicians with Africa or with some genetic code which causes an urge to swing and play the blues?" [email to the author, 10 June 2008]

<sup>8</sup> He adds that "a typical jazz performance...demonstrates the democratic process at work. There is no conductor directing the musical flow..." Jazz: America's Classical Music, Black Perspectives in Music, Vol 14 no 1 1986.

Another proponent of this standpoint might be Wynton Marsalis, the most powerful patron in jazz as director of Lincoln Centre's jazz programme, who has been described as a "neo-classicist" – trying to codify the music, undermining its alleged "revolutionary impulses". When he became prominent in the early 1980s, jazz was at its lowest ebb commercially; Marsalis and critic Stanley Crouch defended a "jazz purism" which rejected both jazz-rock fusion and free jazz – the former as too commercial, the latter as lacking jazz values of melody and swing. Marsalis was musical advisor to Ken Burns' TV series, from the early 2000s, which follows the Marsalis line.

Jazz as academic discipline implies music programmes like that at Berklee, which encourage the idea of jazz improvisation as a craft that can be taught academically. What David Liebman calls the "apprenticeship system" of going on the road with Art Blakey, Miles Davis and other leaders has been replaced by an academic one.<sup>9</sup> Another factor is canon-creation – the ready availability on CD of the complete history of jazz from the earliest recordings. Saxophonist Javon Jackson (quoted in an article on Wynton Marsalis by Hajdu): "I'm not competing with [contemporaries like] Joshua Redman so much as [with] Sonny Rollins and John Coltrane and Lester Young and Stan Getz". During the 20th century, jazz won the universal status that was previously the claim solely of classical tradition. Like classical music, jazz has also seemingly reached the limits of radicalism. Jazz's development toward that point was rapid; within Duke Ellington's lifetime, an avant-garde surfaced; it was as if Pierre Boulez had overlapped with Bach. Much as classical tonality returned to fashion in the 1970s and 80s, jazz has lately seen a conservative reaction,

The role of critics in creating and sustaining a canon is important. Krin Gabbard writes: "The jazz history we have now really wouldn't exist without the critics... would we have Ornette Coleman without Martin Williams? There were certain artists who fit the aesthetic and the predetermined historical notions of critics so perfectly that they were written into the jazz canon by the critics."

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<sup>9</sup> Interview in Jazz Review, April/May 2008, Hamilton (2008). REDUCE AH REFS.

### Defining popular and classical music

We need to explore in more depth what "classical music" means. It now exists as one half of a polarity, inter-defined with popular music – each concept depends on the other, though they did not quite originate together. The terms "classic" or "classical" were first applied to music during the 19th century, in circumstances which we will shortly explore. A.L. Millin's Dictionnaire des beaux-arts from 1806 defines classic ("classique") as "a term that is applied to composers who are generally admired and who are regarded as authoritative".<sup>10</sup> In 1802 J.N. Forkel, listing what he considered the most outstanding of Bach's keyboard works, added that they "may be all considered as classical (klassisch)".<sup>11</sup> According to the editors of the Oxford English Dictionary, the English word "classical" was first applied to music in 1836. "Classical music" now means:

(i) music that possesses a standard of excellence and formal discipline, belonging to the accumulation of art, literature and humane reflection that has stood the test of time and established a continuing tradition of reference and allusion.

(ii) music conforming to a style-period within Western art music, viz. the first Viennese School of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven – music in which inheres ideals of balance and proportion, in contrast to Baroque garishness and disproportion.

(iii) Western art music in general.<sup>12</sup> This sense appeared only as the contrast with popular music developed, and is the definition understood by the ordinary listener, for whom "classical music" denotes a range of music from Baroque or earlier to the contemporary avantgarde.

It was only in the early 20th century that classical and popular music began to be defined as a contrasting pair.<sup>13</sup> Popular music is music aimed at the mass of the population, though obviously much of it fails to achieve mass appeal. "Popular" is normally defined in terms of scale of activity – for example, sales of sheet music or recordings. When the English critic Haweis wrote Music and Morals in 1871, he set up a moral-aesthetic hierarchy, with German symphonic music at the top and street entertainers at the base. Wagnerian opera deepened the divide between art music and popular music, and modernism turned the divide into a rupture; and for many commentators, modernist art actively sets itself against popular culture. In music, unlike in painting, design and architecture, modernism did not fundamentally affect the tastes and practices of 20th century mass culture, though its effect on film music and, less directly, popular music has been significant.<sup>14</sup>

The most influential account of the sociology and aesthetics of the classical/popular divide belongs to Adorno. He held that from the 19th century onwards, all varieties of music, from folk to avantgarde classical music, are subject to mass mediation through the culture industry, a term which implies mechanical reproduction for the masses rather than production by them. "Popular music" in its present-day sense thus implies a mass culture. A common misinterpretation assumes that the culture industry embraces only popular music and art, but according to Adorno, it also commodifies art music of the past, transforming it into "museum-art". Popular classics are the most commodified products of this category of museum-art, and combine "popular" in the sense of having mass appeal, and "classic" in sense (iii). They include a range of music from the Baroque era to the 20th century, typified by Bach's Air on a G String, Vivaldi's Four Seasons, Mozart's Symphony No. 40 and Eine Kleine Nachtmusik, Beethoven's 6th Symphony, Wagner's "The Ride of The Valkyries", Tchaikovsky's "Waltz of the Flowers" from The Nutcracker, Debussy's "Clair de Lune", and Holst's The Planets. Popularisation does not disqualify this music from being classic, in the sense of pertaining to a standard of excellence; it can be the

<sup>10</sup> Trans. Peter le Huray and James Day in Music and Aesthetics in the Eighteenth and Early-Nineteenth Centuries, Cambridge, [1981], p. 293.

<sup>11</sup> On Johann Sebastian Bach's Life, Genius, and Works, trans. A.C.F. Kollmann, 1820; reprinted in The Bach Reader, Hans T. David and Arthur Mendel eds., New York, [1966], p. 343.

<sup>12</sup> There is a further consideration, inapplicable to music: (iv) that which has to do with Greek or Latin antiquity (Dictionnaire de l'Académie, 1694).

<sup>13</sup> During the early 20th century, the German Populärmusik gradually replaced Trivialmusik and Unterhaltungsmusik.

<sup>14</sup> Entry on "Modernism" in Sadie and Tyrrell eds. (2004).

greatest of high art. Mozart's Symphony No. 40 and Vivaldi's The Four Seasons have become popular classics and hence commodified, though unlike commodified pop music, these works were not originally a product of the culture industry.

For Adorno the split is not so much between serious and popular music as such – a division which has become, in his view, increasingly meaningless due to the almost inescapable commodity character of cultural products in the 20th century – but rather between music which accepts its character as commodity, and self-reflective music which critically opposes this fate, and thus alienates itself from society.<sup>15</sup> Popular classics are one way in which the concepts of the classical and the popular are brought together. Another is the "classic pop song", a piece of pop music which attains to a standard of excellence. – a possibility which Adorno would question.<sup>16</sup> A fusion of the genres of classical and pop is a third possibility.

### **Classical music as popular**

Some writers argue that "classical music" as such – and not just the "popular classics" – is a kind of popular music. For instance, Middleton writes: "What is now commonly known as classical music [was], in a sense, the first modern popular music, laying the foundations for what would subsequently be its installation as the core of middlebrow taste".<sup>17</sup> Parakilas, in his "Classical Music as Popular Music", argues that classical music is not a "normal" phenomenon, even among classical musics in world history, but is the product of special historical conditions: "Adaptation to new uses and new media gives classical music new kinds of popularity, but the popularity of classical music continues to be specialized. Even when [it] reaches people in numbers which would be impressive for popular music, that popularity is explained...by the music's special associations rather than by its universal appeal".<sup>18</sup> Parakilas holds that Western art music is not a "normal" variety of classical music. Singing of the Psalms was perpetuated in ancient Hebrew culture, as the singing of Homer was in ancient Greek culture, he holds; Christian churches maintained their repertoires of chant from medieval times to modern. But the modern-day classics of Western music are unprecedented in being perpetuated by primarily musical institutions, as opposed to schools and religious bodies which incidentally cultivate music. Until around 1800, conservatories, opera houses, orchestras, music publishers and journals were devoted principally to new music; only then did they began perpetuating what they would earlier have discarded, the best recent works in their repertoires, from which eventually appeared a new perpetuated repertory. This is the background against which the word "classic", long in literary and artistic use, was first applied to music.

One objection to applying the term "classical music" to Western art music is the apparent implication that it is the unique classical music. Clearly it is not. However, I will argue that even its unique "abnormality" in Parakilas's sense is now qualified by the appearance of a comparable "abnormal" classical music, jazz.

Cohen defends the interesting idea that art is the focus of an "affective community, a group whose intimacy is underwritten by their conviction that they feel the same about something, and that that thing – the art – is their bond". He continues by arguing that "distinctions

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<sup>15</sup> Paddison (1982). Even Beethoven's music, which does not (for Adorno) accept its character as commodity, is commodified in radio transmission (see "The Radio Symphony") because of the muted playback abilities of the equipment of the time – Adorno softens his view as technology develops.

<sup>16</sup> "Classic pop songs" are often represented by polls of 100 greatest songs, etc.: "Imagine" by John Lennon, "Bohemian Rhapsody" by Freddy Mercury and Queen, "Hey Jude" by The Beatles, "Every Breath You Take" by the Police... [= popularly accepted as classic?]

<sup>17</sup> R. Middleton, "Popular Music", in New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians.

<sup>18</sup> Parakilas (1984), p. 1.

between high and low, and rare and popular [cut across] the distinction between wide and narrow ranges of human connection. Some works connect me with many people, including, sometimes, considerable varieties of kinds of people [while others] connect me with very few people...people who are much like me...And sometimes a work of depth connects many of us partly because we do not relate ourselves to it in the same way."<sup>19</sup> On Cohen's view, a single person might join both high and low audiences, and thus be an appreciator of both fine and popular art; and a single work might find favor with both audiences. This is not a problem for the classical/popular distinction however, as Panofsky points out. It may be a defect in an artwork that it appeals only to a limited audience, he writes, using regrettably sexist imagery:

...commercial art is always in danger of ending up as a prostitute...noncommercial art...as an old maid. Noncommercial art has given us Seurat's "Grande Jatte" and Shakespeare's sonnets, but also much that is esoteric to the point of incommunicability. Conversely, commercial art has given us much that is vulgar...to the point of loathsomeness, but also Dürer's prints and Shakespeare's plays.<sup>20</sup>

While he does not belong in Panofsky's category of incommunicability, it is a criticism of a great composer such as Schoenberg that his art seems to lack broad diachronic appeal.

### **The critique of "jazz as classical music"**

Factual and normative dimensions of the question should be separated, even though they interpenetrate. There is the question of whether, as a matter of fact, jazz exhibits classical tendencies, and the question of whether such tendencies are, or would be, desirable. Some will argue that jazz is still poised uneasily between art and entertainment, close to popular music in the ordinary sense of the term, and contrasting with Western art music.<sup>21</sup> Brad Goode writes: "How far the musician is willing to go to meet his or her audience is a personal matter. My observation is that most jazz musicians, post be-bop, consider themselves to be 'artists' and consequently only consider the integrity of the music during their performances." He finds this attitude inadvisable for someone who wants to make a living as a jazz musician. I would argue that jazz can still be a classical music, even though it plays with the divide between the classical (in Parakilas's sense) and popular (in the mass sense). This is one of its distinctive strengths as an art of improvisation, as we will see. And Jeff Williams writes: "Improvising on standards, jazz standards and so on is not quite where we are right now, though no doubt it will continue. The highly trained musicians coming out of conservatories these days are also composers who construct their own labyrinths for exploration. It's a full-fledged art music now in that regard, leaving the casual listener in the dust, much as contemporary classical music has. And in this milieu there can frequently be heard something approaching aesthetic perfection in improvisation. The studiousness involved leaves little to chance."

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<sup>19</sup> Cohen... "The Simpsons and some Marx brothers movies connect me with both very young people and some widely varying kinds of people my own age and older"; artworks with more limited connections include some stories by I.B. Singer and Richard Stern.

<sup>20</sup> Panofsky (1995), p. 120. Panofsky actually writes "vulgar or snobbish (two aspects of the same thing) to the point of loathsomeness", but since neither Ted Cohen nor myself understand what this means, I have cut it.

<sup>21</sup> Though there are continued claims, e.g. by Emmett Price, preceding reference, that it is a folk music. One of many versions of a possibly apocryphal anecdote concerns Big Bill Broonzy, interviewed on a Chicago radio program by Studs Terkel. After Broonzy sang, Terkel asked, "Is that a folk song?" Broonzy replied, "I ain't never heard no horse sing it."

Setting aside the view of jazz-hating philistines who deny that jazz could be classical, there are three main reasons for regarding the tendency as undesirable – that it makes jazz elitist, safe, and static.

(1) Elitism. Bourdieu and others have analysed autonomous artworks as cultural capital and expression of social status.<sup>22</sup> Clearly they are right to insist that knowledge is power, and that knowledge of the arts can both impress and oppress. However, one cannot infer from these sociological truths that the classics are inherently a bourgeois category, and that, for instance, an alternative "people's art" is required. For by the same token, "street credible" knowledge of popular music is power also – intimate knowledge of hiphop is cultural capital too. The classics are not a merely a bourgeois category, and it is not elitist to say this.<sup>23</sup> The common and mistaken view that classical music – Western art music – is "elitist", may also incline some to deny that jazz is a classical music.

This mistaken view, which Parakilas shares, is culturally debilitating. Classics in all artforms are not "the preferences of the elite", they are the common heritage of humankind. Following Jonathan Rose in The Intellectual Life of the English Working Classes, I prefer the term "the classics" to "high culture". As we saw, the classic is the accumulation of art, literature and humane reflection that has stood the test of time and established a continuing tradition of reference and allusion. It demands, and best rewards, seriousness and intensity of attention; but this does not mean that it is the preserve of the socially and economically dominant classes.<sup>24</sup> The concept of the classic is backward-looking in making essential reference to the test of time, but contemporary high culture is that which critical opinion predicts will become classic. (Clearly, one must allow that new works can belong to high culture.) At the time they are produced, many future classics have minority appeal, but this often broadens. The process of canon-formation raises many questions, but it is interesting to note its stability in freer societies, in contrast for example to canons imposed by totalitarian regimes; this is a debate which cannot be pursued here. Although I do still refer to "high culture", reservations about its misleading elitist implications must be borne in mind.

Over the course of history, the classics come to appeal to a larger number than the local preferences of popular culture. In crude commercial terms, this year, Celine Dion sells more than Beethoven, Charlie Parker or Jimi Hendrix, and over 50 years Cliff Richard sells more than any of these, but over 200 years Beethoven, Parker or Hendrix will sell the most. As Parakilas puts it, "The rock song has one kind of popularity because it is current; the symphony has another kind because it is classic, because it never becomes dated".<sup>25</sup> Here is an explanation of the phenomenon that Ted Cohen describes: "very popular works are typically thought to be slight, to be 'easy,' to be superficial, [and so] many people are able to appreciate them. On the other hand...precisely because of its enormous, penetrating depth, [the greatest art] must be able to reach all who are genuinely human... on this account, Hamlet is transcendental, Dallas is subterranean..."<sup>26</sup> The explanation of this phenomenon is that Hamlet reaches a large audience diachronically, while Dallas reaches one synchronically, only to disappear rapidly into the obscurity whence it came.

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<sup>22</sup> Bourdieu (1987).

<sup>23</sup> Elitism is discussed further in Hamilton (forthcoming 2008).

<sup>24</sup> Rose (2001) argues that classic literature offers a versatility of insight which is itself empowering and subversive: "If the classics offered artistic excellence, psychological insights, and penetrating philosophy to the governing classes...then the politics of equality must begin by redistributing this knowledge to the governed classes" (p. 7).

<sup>25</sup> Parakilas (1984), p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> He continues: "This striking incongruity has been present for some time. [For Hume] the truly beautiful has pleased at all times, in all places, and [also] there are ages in which no one can apprehend the truly beautiful. He seems to say both that the truest beauty is for everyone, and that it is reserved for a very special very few" (Cohen (1993)).

(2) Connotations of respectability. A Village Voice writer comments: "...jazz is ever more officially referred to as 'America's classical music'...what is that supposed to do for jazz? Legitimize it, make it blandly respectable and therefore ignorable?"<sup>27</sup> Such critics may suspect that describing "jazz as classical music" is an attempt to legitimate jazz by associating it with Western art music. To reiterate, our search is for legitimation in a philosophical not a practical sense. The Village Voice response is any case a clichéd one. Is classical music bland? Outside the annals of Socialist Realism and its fellow travellers, is it normally a criticism of an artwork that it is not politically radical? Are King Lear, Monteverdi's Vespers, St Paul's Cathedral or Turner's "Rain Steam and Speed" blandly respectable and therefore ignorable?

Even Parakilas concedes too much to the criticism, when he writes that the classics belong to individual listeners, to the musical authorities which conferred classical status on them, and finally to the social and political authorities which support those musical ones:

Classical music is approved music; it is politically and socially safe...Still, the politics of comfort make many listeners uncomfortable.... not only some who do not like classical music anyway, but also...music scholars who insist on remembering the powers which classical music has lost.<sup>28</sup>

It would be naïve to ignore such considerations. But before subscribing to the "power politics" aesthetic of Cultural Studies, we must ask what these familiar descriptions involve. What is this "belonging"? Am I supporting the political status quo when I read Thomas Hardy's poetry or listen to a Beethoven piano sonata? Because they manifest independent thought, under an authoritarian regime such actions can take on an oppositional hue; it does not follow that under a liberal democracy they become objectionably complaisant.

(3) Allegedly static common practice. This final objection is the most powerful, I think. It is a musicological commonplace that in the 18th and 19th centuries, Western art music entered an era of common practice based on functional harmony and the tonal system of major and minor keys. This era came to an end with the "emancipation of the dissonance" by Schoenberg and his contemporaries. Arguably, there is a corresponding period in jazz that still persists. Conrad Cork for instance argues that the evolution of jazz practice was rapid for about five decades, and became much reduced since the 1970s: "This could be because the music has atrophied [or] because it has arrived at a period of common practice, where it can function on its own terms".<sup>29</sup>

Others take a less favourable view of the phenomenon of common practice, arguing that it means that classical musics and languages are no longer created actively; but are conserved in conservatories; interpreters study the seminal texts in order to restore them to life. Thus Emmett Price writes that "Classical implies static, non-changing; a relic frozen in time. Jazz has never been static, non-changing or frozen", while Alex Ross refers to the "pernicious"

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<sup>27</sup> Village Voice 01/09/01.

<sup>28</sup> He cites Andrew Porter's comments on Verdi's Un Ballo in Maschera, while denying its continuing relevance: "Serious opera has always been a political art, and it was not for nothing that Bourbon censorship forbade the performance of 'Ballo'".

<sup>29</sup> Cork, Harmony With Lego-Bricks, p. 73. He continues: "André Hodeir (1955)...claimed that jazz had traversed five centuries of [Western European art music] musical history in as many decades! Prior to André Hodeir, the word 'classic' was applied to the New Orleans jazz of the 1920's. Hodeir was probably the first to deny that classification [arguing that] the first 'classical' period in jazz was the 1930's, when it first became an art form sui generis, as musicians found freedom in their efforts to incorporate the momentous discoveries of Louis Armstrong..."

implication that jazz "has become 'classical' in the pejorative sense: complete, finished, historical".<sup>30</sup>

But classical music is not the curatorial exercise that the authenticity movement in early music can come across as. The idea that classical musics are "static, non-changing, frozen" is misguided. Rather than resuscitating corpses, as Parakilas argues, the classical repertory keeps "certain old works...ever-popular, ever-present, ever-new. It is an idea founded on reverence for the past, but not necessarily on a modern scholarly conception of history....[It may not take] notice of historical differences between one work and another within it", as proponents of early music do.<sup>31</sup> Classical musicians "resemble popular musicians in rendering their entire repertory in a common present", he adds:

[But unlike] monastic choirs or sitar players or nightclub musicians or singers of traditional ballads, [they] decide the right style of performance for each work according to its place in history. They do not, however, reconstruct performance styles archeologically, as early-music performers do...[but read] the whole tradition as a map of expression...divided into style-periods, each representing a stage of evolution...Romanticism is an answer to Classicism; Impressionism and Expressionism and Verismo are divergent outgrowths of Romanticism.

The classical style of playing Beethoven is not Beethoven's style of playing, but a style about Beethoven. Performers...have to learn their way around the whole tradition before they can render any one style. They have not learned Classical restraint unless they have also learned Romantic passion...

...[They] play Bach and Bartók on the same instruments and with a single, if flexible, technique. [But they] perform a score with a particular kind of faithfulness to history: the score by itself tells them just what notes to perform, as it does not do for early-music performers...<sup>32</sup>

This reverence for the exact notes transmitted by history, Parakilas concludes, is characteristic of classic repertoires. The point does not carry over to jazz, however. His comment that since Charlie Parker has become "classic jazz", musicians give classical performances which reproduce exactly the "text" of a recorded performance, probably refers to Supersax's arrangements of Parker solos; George Russell's arrangement of Miles Davis's solo on "So What" is another example. However, these cases are not central. They are an "early music" rather than classical tendency in jazz. As an improviser's and not an interpreter's art, jazz imposes strict limits on former possibility, but less so the latter.

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<sup>30</sup> Emmett Price, <http://www.allaboutjazz.com/php/article.php?id=807>, November 8, 2003; Classical View: Talking Some Good, Hard Truths About Music by Alex Ross, 12 Nov. 1995, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9A00E2D61439F931A25752C1A963958260&sec=&pagewanted=2>

<sup>31</sup> He continues: "A classical repertory need not be kept up-to-date with works from the period just past. **[BUT if it is, it is living!]** The repertory of Gregorian chant, for instance, was considered closed by the time of the Renaissance, and performers did not sing the older chants within that repertory differently from the younger chants, though the repertory as a whole was performed differently from place to place and from one period to the next." [Anxiety of influence can inhibit, and make the classical dead.]

<sup>32</sup> He adds: "Early-music performance makes the classics sound unfamiliar. Harnoncourt's ways of performing Bach sounds unfamiliar compared to Klemperer's, not only because in the late-twentieth century it happens to be newer, but because it is based on an idea of discontinuity between the past and the present. [It] makes Bach belong to his own time, not to all time. It frees him from the burden of being timeless, immortal, and universal, the burden of being classic. It removes him from a tradition belonging to listeners today and returns him to a tradition which those listeners can only imagine".

### **An era of common practice in jazz: repertoire, method and style**

How then does the concept of a common practice apply to an art of improvisation as opposed to one of interpretation of composed works? The phrase "in the tradition" is common in jazz, but what does it signify? The common practice or tradition relates to three things: the materials which improvisation is based on, which until quite recently consisted mainly of a repertoire of standard songs; the method or approach to improvisation, for instance a thematic approach, or the Berklee pattern-based model; and finally, the style-periods of jazz to which all except the most original contemporary practitioners adhere, such as bebop, hardbop, modal jazz, fusion, free jazz, and so on. The first sense of common practice, common repertoire, is the clearest. The term "standard" appeared from the late 40s or early 50s onwards, referring to the Great American Songbook of classic showtunes and film-themes written mostly between the 1920s and 1950s.<sup>33</sup> These standards, and the smaller number of "jazz standards" by composers such as Monk, Ellington, Coltrane and Davis, are the repertoire of modern jazz. It became accepted that a working jazz musician had a good knowledge of these standard songs, which provide a fruitful basis for improvisation, and a common language for players who have not met before.

From bebop onwards, players wrote original compositions on standard harmonic structures, as well as ones not based on those structures but which follow the style of show-tunes; in both cases their lines were often originally improvisations (Charlie Parker). Expansion of the standards repertoire into post-1960s pop material has been limited. Not anything can be good or idiomatic jazz material; British pianist John Law's use of plainchant does not seem convincing, while Bill Evans's composition "Waltz For Debbie" is perhaps too saccharine for jazz use. But there are surprises, for example Abba's "Waterloo" as performed by Yuri Honing.

Jazz common practice as a method involves an approach to improvisation, through model solos and scale-patterns, which is taught in the jazz conservatory, and reflected in self-tuition manuals. Classic recordings from the era of Lester Young or Charlie Parker onwards are treated as works and objects of study, whose solos are classics – an important element of classicisation that we will return to later.

The final element in common practice is the place of the style-periods. The era of common practice dates from bebop, or perhaps Lester Young's first groundbreaking recordings in 1936. But there now exists what could be termed the postbop jazz mainstream, which assimilates elements from the 1950s onwards in a "common present". (Thus even bebop might need preservation, hence the possibly ironically-titled British band, "Bebop Preservation Society"). In Western art music, the tradition extends from Bach to Brahms or later, in jazz it extends from Miles Davis to Michael Brecker, or later. When Ornette Coleman or Anthony Braxton are described as players who are "in the tradition", this means that despite their avantgarde credentials, they have essential connections with the era of common practice – bebop in the case of Ornette Coleman, perhaps the cool playing of Warne Marsh and Lee Konitz in the case of Braxton.<sup>34</sup> Such avantgardists may make recordings that are "in the tradition" – Braxton's recordings of Monk or Tristano compositions, for example.

Critics of jazz as classical music reject the idea of common practice manifested in these three ways. They disparage the standards repertoire because it now has little meaning for the

<sup>33</sup> "Standard" also has a use in wider popular culture, beginning in the LP era with Ella Fitzgerald's Songbook albums from 1956 onwards, and Frank Sinatra's albums from the same time.

<sup>34</sup> Though Konitz has vigorously repudiated the claim that he could have influenced Braxton.

younger audience.<sup>35</sup> Academic Berklee methods and postbop style preservation means that having emerged from the same academic institutions, "all performers now sound the same". But there remains a wide variety of interpretations among both classical and jazz performers despite academic or conservatory training. More damaging to individuality in Western art music, probably, is the pursuit of recorded perfection, which leads to performers sounding like their recordings, rather than exercising interpretational spontaneity in each performance. In jazz, individuality is extinguished not by academic training as such, but by the wrong kind – that which encourages dependence on pattern-playing. Maoist permanent cultural revolution is neither possible nor desirable – it is too much to expect radical innovation and originality from all practitioners.

The avantgardist critique of jazz as classical is not a negligible one, but there is an alternative reaction, which sees jazz players as like classical performers in rendering their entire repertory in a common present, but deciding the right style of performance on each occasion, according to the historical place of the material.<sup>36</sup> Although in jazz "the piece" is simply a basis for improvisation, there is sense to the idea of authenticity to the standard repertoire. Pianist Bill Carrothers was told of a song that Wayne Shorter brought to Miles Davis's mid-60s band, but which the leader never called: "Finally Wayne said, 'How come we never do that tune? It's a nice tune.' And Miles said, 'It's because I don't know what that tune wants'". Carrothers continued: "When you start to impose your will on the song, it doesn't quite work. Whatever I end up doing with a song, it has to refer back to its original essence in some way – or what I think the essence is!"<sup>37</sup> Trumpeter Brad Goode, in contrast, is not concerned with capturing a song's "essence": "My goal is to use the song as a means of expressing my own essence...I need to know a song to a great depth before I perform it [so it] can become an adventure in exploring new possibilities, rooted in spontaneity and interaction, rather than in presentation or style. I have no real arrangement or version of any particular tune. What I have is familiarity".<sup>38</sup>

Standards can be reinterpreted in many ways without losing their identity. When Bill Evans recreated "But Beautiful", he transformed the rather trite pop song, making it beautiful in a way that could not have been imagined. Lee Konitz's method of looking at the original publication, and then making incremental changes to the theme rather than treating it as a set of changes, encourages in-depth treatment of the material.<sup>39</sup> But "updating" as in Wynton Marsalis's Standard Time, or the work of pianist Jessica Williams, threatens the integrity of the material, distorting it and making one wonder why the musicians did not simply use their own material.

It should now be clear that jazz exhibits the same trifurcation as Western art music: early music (curatorial approaches to New Orleans jazz, Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker), classical music (postbop mainstream) and new music (free jazz and free improvisation – though these are perhaps acquiring their own "classical" status). As we saw earlier, "classical" jazz performances that reproduce the "text" of a Charlie Parker performance constitute an "early music" practice peripheral to mainstream jazz practice. Organisations such as Lincoln Center do sometimes manifest this early music tendency – the players are meant to improvise "authentically", and not explode into Coltrane-like sheets of sound on a Jelly-Roll Morton tribute. But to reiterate, this is an "early music" tendency, in contrast to the less specifically

<sup>35</sup> The only standards my students know – Music students as well as Philosophy – are "Summertime", "Over The Rainbow" and "Moon River", if the last one counts.

<sup>36</sup> Parakilas adds that classical performers do not introduce pieces as pop performers do. Even André Previn would never introduce a performance of Beethoven's 5th Symphony with the words, "It goes something like this..."

<sup>37</sup> REF. However, a quick Google search shows that "doing what the songs wants" is almost a cliché among pop performers. For instance, Lyle Lovett, <http://www.paulsnyder.net/lyle.htm>.

<sup>38</sup> Jazz Review interview, forthcoming.

<sup>39</sup> Hamilton (2007b), pp....

historical tendency of finding the song's essence. However, it is important to note the danger that if one separates new from classical music in this way, the latter becomes safe and static by definition. Hence a key question for both Western art music and jazz: how exactly is a musical tradition demarcated?

The classics exist in our present, as many writers have acknowledged (for instance Jan Kott in Shakespeare Our Contemporary). Repertoires become classical when they cease to be thought of as mere entertainment and start to be seen as texts worthy of faithful interpretation. At the 19th century Paris Opera, Gluck operas were played thousands of times [check Johnson], not as "classics" but as standards or old favourites, broken up and reassembled to please the audience. Today they are classic, and their integrity is maintained; musicologists argue about definitive versions. Classics are timeless and transcendental, appealing to all historical eras, because they capture what is essential about humanity; they lose their historical contingency and become – in one sense of the term – autonomous art, a concept which through the work of Adorno has become essential to aesthetic understanding. Autonomy is a feature of classical music implicit in Parakilas's account, in the idea that the institutions which began to perpetuate classical music were primarily musical ones. Folk music is heteronomous, but so arguably is the art music of Balinese gamelan. Jazz has developed autonomy from direct social function as entertainment. When Jazz At Lincoln Center re-enacts famous recordings and performances, they make jazz canonical, and direct it into the category of autonomous art. This is a much more positive description of the phenomenon. In contrast, in the club environment, the music is often just background to drinking and talking – a modern version of Tafelmusik.

#### **Art and entertainment: jazz as an art music of improvisation**

In jazz, an aesthetics of imperfection, expressed through improvisation, allows popular materials to achieve art music status. In its early decades, jazz grew out of the entertainment industry, and used its materials; later jazz players developed loftier aspirations. As we have seen, for some writers, a classical art is one that requires restoration, while a living art involves novelty and innovation; while there can be creativity in the interpretation of a classic, the creativity is the limited kind that re-enacts or reanimates. This is a misguided account in the case of many classical performing arts, I believe. Interpretation is neither "mechanical reproduction", as proponents of the aesthetics of imperfection often view it, nor restoration as in the case of painting. Of course there are different approaches, as there are in the restoration of paintings; but there never was a pristine authentic performance – the performing arts involve inexhaustible interpretation. As Parakilas notes, classical performers are not aiming to replicate historical Beethoven performances; that is the project of the early music tendency.

It is mistaken to contrast "classical arts" and "living arts", therefore. In performance, whether jazz or Western art music, the era of common practice has not come to an end. The debate here centres on the question of the continuity between classical and new. Parakilas's assumption is that classical and new music are separate approaches, but if there is a continuum, the contrast between classical and living arts is undermined. Jazz common practice, like that of Western art music, aspires to exist in a "common present" with so-called living arts. There is nothing wrong with classical exemplars provided they are regarded as inspiration rather than rigid template. The dialectic in my original Aesthetics of Imperfection article recurs, therefore. Improvisation in jazz is perfectionist in having affinities with Western art music; while interpretation in Western art music is imperfectionist in having affinities with improvisation. But the limits on classical perfectionism in jazz, given that it is essentially an art of improvisation, are considerable. Recordings such as A Love Supreme or Mingus Ah Um, are rightly described as "classics". Such recordings are fixed in their perfection, and work without qualification to classicise jazz. Concert recreations of A Love

Supreme reconstruct but cannot replicate the recording; replication would be perverse, and would fail artistically.

Jazz's status as an improviser's rather than an interpreter's art bears on its status as classical because improvisation is an expression of performers' creativity. In improvisation, the performer and not the composer is the primary creator. In interpreted music, the composer is the primary creator, and the performer is secondary, though still creative. This fact sets limits to the "classicisation" of improvised music, depending on whether the performer takes the Bill Carrothers or Brad Goode attitude to the material – whether the song's essence, or their own, is the primary concern. It is interesting that the value of spontaneous creation, as opposed to pre-prepared solos, began to be stressed at the very time – the transition from swing to bebop – that jazz was becoming an art music, and therefore "classicised". That is, improvisation became valued in jazz as the music was gaining an identity beyond the realm of entertainment and commercial commodification.

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