

# Music of Change: Politics and Meaning in the Age of Obama

January 23, 2012

IN A CLASSIC ESSAY[1] George Orwell describes himself as "amazed when I hear people saying that sport creates goodwill between the nations." Rather it leads to "orgies of hatred" as "young men . . . kick each other on the shins amid the roars of infuriated spectators."

With the possible exception of certain Wagner operas, musical performances do seem less likely than sports to foment actual physical violence. Even so, Orwell's characterization applies pretty well. In particular, even if it doesn't provoke race riots or ethnic bloodletting, contrary to what is frequently claimed, music does not "bring people together" at least in the sense of bringing people of differing class, racial, and ethnic lines together. In fact, it does the opposite: it tends to divide people into tribes. The musical community in which I am involved is perhaps the most tribal in this respect. Audiences of classical orchestral and chamber music, whether new or traditional, have roughly the racial and class composition of a Tea Party convention.

Those not belonging to the tribe seem to implicitly understand that a message of exclusion is being conveyed when they are confronted with it. Administrators of public spaces have by now long since recognized that classical music can be weaponized to function within the ever growing arsenal of crowd management techniques, a highly effective mechanism to dislodge the poor, black, and unwashed from New York's Penn Station, among numerous other locations to which the legions of homeless cannot be legally denied access.

Of course, the converse also applies: an ex-urban, middle aged academic like myself will certainly derive a message from a late model SUV blasting Lil Wayne, and it's not a comforting one. We might like it when we hear it in the right context, in a random encounter on iTunes, or when a student sends us a YouTube link, but the element of menace, specifically of expropriative street violence is undeniable — just as Mozart connotes menace in the form of a cop's night stick to a homeless man.

I make these observations as an introduction to some general thoughts on an overlapping subject. The waning years of the second Bush administration brought with them a wave of what was called at the time political music. Much of this came from younger composers around New York and was of extremely high quality. I'll recommend three pieces of this type as exemplary: David Little's moving and widely performed *Soldier Songs*, Judd Greenstein's riveting and impressive *Free Speech Zone*[2] composed for the excellent new chamber music group the Now Ensemble,[3] and Ted Hearne's poignant alt-oratorio *Katrina Ballads*.[4]

These works and others like them were often performed in events specifically organized as protest concerts. Greenstein's *Free Speech Zone* was included in a four-city tour of the same name programmed along with other "politically charged" works.[5] Another event along similar lines was *Republic in Ruins*[6] a concert series featuring a cross section of new music composers and improvisers as well as Emerson String Quartet violinist Eugene Drucker, with musical performances interspersed among speeches by *Nation* magazine columnists Patricia Williams and Jonathan Schell. A third, *Breaking the Silence: An Evening of Music and Discourse for Peace and Democracy*.[7] brought together a different group of musicians to "voice their concerns over the actions and policies of this administration."

Now, only a few years later the political music genre and the protests associated with it are virtually extinct. The groups and individuals who participated in the above mentioned events continue to perform frequently and impressively, but so far as I know, not in contexts which express any particular concern or anger with the direction the nation has taken. The three composers mentioned, and others of their generation continue to produce work of astonishing invention, craft, and commitment. But there has not been much indication that these works have been anything other than non-referentially "pure," in the tradition of works such as Bach's *Art of the Fugue*, Strauss's 1940 opera *Die Liebe der Danae*, or Milton Babbitt's *Partitions* largely shorn of any reference to the world, outside of that which the music itself evokes.

MOST NOTABLY, there is a complete absence of protest or even recognition within new works of atrocities and outrages of recent years. There is no cantata commemorating the Obama administration's proposals for cuts in Social Security or Medicare. There is no song cycle for Bradley Manning's torture at the hands of the military justice system, drone attacks in Pakistan, or the administration's hounding of Wikileaks founder Julian Assange. Nor is there any mention, except in the most abstract terms of the near certainty of planetary catastrophe due to global warming and the complete failure of our political system to address it.

I'm not going to pretend that I find this asymmetry anything other than disappointing: the same policies which were denounced and ridiculed when undertaken by a malaprop prone, frat boy dunce are applauded or at least ignored when undertaken by a smooth talking, neo-liberal technocrat, who, phenotypical appearances notwithstanding, (or, more likely, because of these), we see as representing the best of who we are and what we aspire to. The underlying conclusion seems to be that tribal loyalty, not commitment to any set of defensible political principles or ethical code is what defines us as artists, professionals, and individuals. Based on the functional tendency of music to divide us into tribes noted at the beginning, this shouldn't come as a surprise. But even so, insofar as the description I'm offering here is an accurate portrayal of who we are, it is not an attractive one.

I am not alone in having a rather jaundiced view of the general class milieu which I am, for better or worse, included within. In the political sphere, Glenn Greenwald has consistently pointed out the tendency of Obama supporters to mount tortured apologetics for the same policies which they deplored under the Bush regime.[8] More broadly, Chris Hedges[9] has written of a liberal class which, over the past decades, has shown itself incapable of exercising critical judgment and which by now has altogether sacrificed even its most minimal claim to moral or intellectual authority.

These are harsh judgments and possibly somewhat unfair when applied to music and those of us who try to create it, so I will mitigate them slightly. I'll do so by noting that music, perhaps to a greater degree than other art forms, consists of the creation and reinforcement of communicative bonds within groups and between individuals. A few examples will suffice to give some idea of the relevant categories: we know from the work of cognitive psychologists Laurel Trainor[10] and Sandra Trehub[11] that a form of musicalized speech known as motherese or infant directed speech (IDS) is crucial in establishing affective bonds between mothers and infant children. Also, as discussed in Steven Mithen's *The Singing Neanderthals*[12] and elsewhere, there is evidence to suggest that the earliest humans made use of music to coordinate group activities whether these were necessary work routines or drills instilling discipline within a martial class, a topic discussed in historian William McNeill's *Keeping Together in Time*. [13]

All of these instances have at their core music functioning as a communicative system to establish and enhance social bonds. It would therefore seem that deliberately addressing subjects

which expose fissures within the communities to which it is addressed is not just uncomfortable but arguably violative of music's most fundamental purposes — insofar as these can be inferred.

At the same time, any honest contemporary artistic statement must necessarily involve the recognition of some highly unpleasant truths about ourselves. And if subverting what are functionally sacrosanct rituals of the concert hall is what is necessary to convey this message to those who need to hear it, one might hope that a few composers would be willing to transgress these boundaries.

THAT THIS IS THE WAY which I see these matters should be apparent to those who have heard what I have composed in the last few years and which I won't discuss except to note the obvious, namely that there is no recipe for producing works that anyone will care about now, much less a year or a decade from now; a political recipe is no better than any other and maybe even worse.

Furthermore, when it comes to political music, it is reasonable to argue, contrary to the position I'm taking above, that not only is the notion of political music fundamentally self-negating, but even insofar as it is not, that is, insofar as political content has been conveyed through music, those works which succeed most powerfully in doing so are themselves non-political in the sense in which I am assuming above. For in these cases, rather than embodying or articulating an explicit political position, whatever referential content a work contains is not immanent but projected onto it by listeners either contemporaneously or post hoc.

As an indication of how politically meanings are constructed and conferred, I'll mention a notoriously problematic instance, Shostakovich's *Fifth Symphony*, a work which functioned as a Cold War cultural front battleground since its premier in 1937.

That the work is political, more specifically that it conveys a statement with respect to a political system, namely, Soviet Communism, is undisputed. Also indisputable is that there is no consensus as to the content of Shostakovich's political statement, either contemporaneously or now seven decades after its first performance. In a series of important essays, Richard Taruskin has shown how the *Fifth Symphony* managed to be, at different times, and even concurrently, all things to all ideological persuasions.[14] Thus, among those sympathetic to the work included some elements of Soviet officialdom who accepted a triumphalist reading of the work with the concluding D major tonality taken to represent, in the words of the unlikely commissar Count Alexei Tolstoy, "all that is bright, optimistic, life-affirming." Other sympathizers included the polemicist and author of *Testimony*, the fraudulent Shostakovich memoir, Solomon Volkov, who confidently asserted that "you have to be an oaf" to hear the finale as "a celebration of anything," least of all Socialist collectivism. Among the oafs accepting this view was Igor Stravinsky, who claimed to hear the work as a "Symphony of Socialism" in which the finale represents "the image of the gratitude and the enthusiasm of the masses." Finally, Taruskin has unearthed conclusive evidence that within the Soviet nomenklatura some were sophisticated enough to accept the possibility of a less than triumphalist reading with what one characterized as "the numb, torpid Largo" casting ominously renewed suspicion on Shostakovich's commitment to the Stalinist variant of state socialism.

It might seem that the ultimate verdict as to meaning of the *Fifth* would derive from Shostakovich himself, and for this we at least have the subtitle, "A composer's response to just criticism." But any attempt to take the words at face value needs to be accompanied by the awareness that they were written with a gun pointed at Shostakovich's head and that the gun in question was not altogether metaphorical: Stalin's notorious remark that the composer's previous experiments in bourgeois formalism were "sure to end badly" could be reasonably interpreted as an

invitation to the Gulag at best and the gallows at worst, a fate visited on several of Shostakovich's friends and acquaintances. Whatever "meaning" Shostakovich was projecting on his work in these circumstances was nothing more than the pro forma, terrified utterances which a humble shopkeeper delivers in the presence of the local mafia don.

As Taruskin observes, this remark, and, its expansion within a possibly ghostwritten explanatory essay constitutes the totality of what Shostakovich had to say about the *Fifth* in the three decades which remained to him after having completed it. Given the absence of a definitive statement from the composer, and the contradictory attributes assigned to it, we are left with a labyrinth of multivalence from which it is hard to see any way out.

BUT IF THE SEMANTIC LEVEL OF description yields nothing more than a morass, the syntactic level, which is to say, the organization of musical materials which is at the core of Shostakovich's compositional technique, offers more promise. Due to the relative neglect of formal studies of composers of Shostakovich's general stylistic orientation, the requisite taxonomy is only now being developed by music theorists.[15] While by no means easy, questions of this sort — how Shostakovich fashioned and organized his musical materials — do seem to allow for certain kinds of real answers. This state of affairs contrasts sharply with questions with respect to meaning which are, it would seem, ultimately mysterious — a hall of mirrors in which the orientation of the observer is implicated in what appears.

It is these purely formal elements of the work which not so much enable but compel us to seek answers about its ultimate content, even if, as Taruskin notes, very few are forthcoming. That we would find it necessary to provide such answers is not a testimony to the inherent and pervasively ambiguous content of the work. Many, if not all, musical works are necessarily exactly that. Rather it is a testimony to the inherent sophistication and appeal of the musical syntax that listeners feel compelled to search for these meanings and feel required to attach their preferred ideological perspective onto the work.

What is political about the work, then, is (paradoxically) what is least political about it: namely its unmistakable and demonstrable commitment to traditional, timeless principles of musical craftsmanship, those which have existed under all socio-political systems ranging from the most benignly libertarian to the most repressively authoritarian. In this sense, every piece of music demanding attention is inherently apolitical.

This background provides a more sympathetic perspective through which to view the quick evaporation of the protest music wave discussed (and deplored) earlier. According to this view, composers now, as was Shostakovich then, are negotiating the same ideological currents as the society in which they are attempting to survive. If the political climate is favorable for a dissident statement, then it will be projected onto even a nominally apolitical work. In the absence of a broader movement providing a lexicon through which a critique of state and corporate power can be conveyed, whatever political content injected into music will come across as preachy, self-righteous, and hectoring. Conversely, in a climate of political ferment, whatever qualities which force us to attend to music, to feel that it is speaking to us, can allow us to contextualize the work as in the service of political content. Under these circumstances, the fundamental bases of our relationship to the world and to each other generally, and to works of art in particular will be understood as political or at least politicized.

Shostakovich's *Fifth Symphony* is not the only work which projects highly contradictory images when refracted through the lens of conflicting political ideologies. Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*, also

widely performed within the Soviet Union, would be understood in stark, Marxian terms its "fate" motive embodying the "final conflict" between the proletarian mass and counter-revolutionary bourgeoisie, a reading contrasting with the predominant liberal Western narrative which tends to view the victory motive as pertaining to the struggle of the heroic individual against impersonal forces and social conformity associated with the Leviathan state. Less problematically, the "Va, pensiero" chorus from *Nabucco* was a natural choice as the unofficial anthem for the *resorgimento*, though a more revealing indication of the predisposition to project political content was the reinterpretation of earlier Verdi operas as premature exponents of a liberatory narrative. Finally, a contemporary example is provided by the sphinx-like character and works of Bob Dylan, which continue to be championed by leftists as definitive classics of the civil rights and anti-war protest movements despite the routine denial of this content by Dylan himself and his sullen denigration of the entire genre as "music for fat people."

As mentioned before, all of this casts a more sympathetic light on composers' apparent failure to directly engage political subjects. The explanation I'm proposing, it should be noted, relies on an implicit comparison between the political climate which prevails here now and the Stalinist police state with which Shostakovich had to contend. Many will, of course, find it hard to see any similarities. But while the differences, needless to say, are stark, it is, at the same time necessary to recognize that what Noam Chomsky has famously described as "thought control in democratic societies"[16] is exercised here in a manner notable both for being comparatively mild and also for its effectiveness.

It also needs to be recognized that any comparison between the climate of Soviet Russia and our own is flawed in a very different respect: it has now been nearly a half century since what can be even loosely classified as contemporary classical music has had the capacity to communicate its message to a broad public. This status contrasts not only with canonic composers such as Shostakovich but also with pop music icons like Bob Dylan who, like Shostakovich, command not only huge followings but also significant cultural authority. The verdict reached by musicologist Robert Fink a decade ago that classical music is "merely one style among many and by no means the most prestigious"[17] while a bit shocking at the time, now seems fairly uncontroversial.

While granting the niche status to which it has been consigned, contemporary classical music does still in some fashion continue to function as a "high" art form as it has traditionally: works having comparatively tiny audiences, performed in small performance spaces by obscure artists in and around downtown New York receive respectful and sometimes enthusiastic coverage in remaining organs of the artistic and political establishment, most notably the *New York Times*. And some composers including those mentioned, while not addressing a broad public with the same degree of cultural authority which Shostakovich took for granted three generations ago, manage on rare occasions to produce work which transcends its now compressed boundaries.

Of the composers mentioned above, one can take credit for what the industry would call a "breakout" piece of this type: Judd Greenstein's *Change*[18] released in March of this year would become an NPR classical music pick of the month, subsequently reaching high positions on the Amazon, i-Tunes and Billboard classical charts. In its video incarnation as the musical component of *Plan of the City*, *Change* has now acquired upwards of 90,000 hearings after having been posted to the website [www.vimeo.com](http://www.vimeo.com) in June.

While still small in comparison to commercially viable genres, these figures begin to approach levels at which it becomes reasonable to discuss a work not just in terms of its form but also in terms of its content, that is, as indicative of broader social and political attitudes which it embodies and communicates to its audience. Just as Shostakovich demands, and still provokes, exegesis of its political content and reception, so too can Greenstein's *Change* be approached along similar lines.

Moreover, *Change* invites these sorts of questions for several reasons. First, while *Change* has not provoked much political controversy, thanks to the internet we do have access to a substantial number of reactions in the form of online reviews, facebook postings, and comments attached to blogs and websites where it has been discussed. Secondly, whereas Shostakovich's political sympathies, insofar as they were in any way unconventional, are, for obvious reasons, unknown, Greenstein has written perceptively and at considerable length on political subjects, his Williams College thesis on *Plan Colombia* having been published in a prestigious undergraduate journal.[19] Finally, the basic musical materials of the work itself allow for a similar multiplicity of interpretations as does the Shostakovich, and for many of the same reasons.

What listeners report hearing in *Change* won't come as a surprise to those familiar with it. The major tonalities, the Rossiniesque motoric energy, the consistently rising gestures, the syncopated vamps introducing elaborately wrought passages of what turn out to be, on closer examination, highly refined and brilliantly controlled traditional counterpoint, all these add up to a musical statement of (in the words of one critic) thoroughgoing "cheerfulness." Another critic is impressed by the "openness and optimism in the music ... very far from the hyper-intense anxiety, hysteria, and despair that are almost to be expected in much new concert music." [20]

Here comparisons to Shostakovich's *Fifth*, in particular to the finale, seem unavoidable. The fortississimo D major brass fanfare which closes the piece is optimistic in much the same way as *Change*. Or is it? Similarly optimistic are the soliloquys of Ophelia in *Hamlet*. "Only a total oaf" would fail to recognize the underlying current of denialist hysteria which Shakespeare dramatized as Ophelia's response to Hamlet's betrayals and which Shostakovich communicates through the *Fifth* — according to the dissident perspective of the work. Volkov's description of the Shostakovich's *Fifth* as rendering a celebration "forced" by "someone beating you with a stick . . . saying 'your business is rejoicing, your business is rejoicing'" seems equally applicable to the almost unrelieved succession of upbeat proclamations conveyed through *Change*.

I should say that I don't know of anyone else who has raised the possibility of the dissident hearing of *Change* I'm suggesting here, and I will admit that my own political sympathies no doubt play some role in my willingness to do so. That said, many aspects of the piece and its composition come into focus if one hears the piece as providing insight into the interior landscape prevalent among those in their twenties — one encapsulated in their self-administered description "generation last": a generation which has not only stopped hoping for change but has banished the concept of hope from their mental lexicon.

In support of this interpretation, it should be noted that Greenstein, like many other artists in and around New York, was an active participant in the Obama campaign. Another beautiful work for the Now Ensemble, *Folk Music*, was donated to Obama for America for which it functioned with considerable success as the accompanying music for a fundraising video.[21] Greenstein's blog[22] contains entries on both musical and political subjects, the latter staking out positions consistent with the prevailing climate in denouncing crimes of the Bush regime, and celebrating Obama's rise, albeit voicing considerable skepticism as troubling signs began to emerge.

As for Greenstein's subsequent political trajectory there is less to go on, though what there is seems significant. In particular, Greenstein was among the few musicians joining with Noam Chomsky, Immanuel Wallerstein, Cornel West among others in signing an open letter[23] calling for intensified protest directed against Wall Street bailouts, civil rights abridgements, environmental pillage, perpetual war, and other policies of the administration.[24] Greenstein has not made any direct statements as to whether he has re-evaluated his political commitments either in various interviews he has given recently or on his blog which has fallen silent, with only a few postings since 2009, these limited to musical topics. While silence can usually be reasonably equated to consent,

here it seems more appropriate to see it as stunned disbelief at the havoc which an administration, widely seen as the repository of the hopes of a generation, is visiting on the nation and the world.

Finally there is the matter of the title, which, under a dissident reading constitutes the amputated hindquarters of the now notorious sales pitch accompanying the roll-out of the Obama campaign. "Hope" having been extinguished, what remains is late capitalist Change understood as it was by Marx: a society under the heel of perpetual revolutions in production and marketing and through which "all which is holy becomes profaned."

In examining possible hearings of *Change*, it is worth bearing in mind Taruskin's insistent exhortation that "no one owns the meaning of (Shostakovich's) music." The Soviet commissars who found much to celebrate in the "optimism" of Shostakovich's *Fifth* were within their rights to do so. And no doubt many of the 80,000 downloads of *Change* were experienced as a nostalgic, albeit infinitely higher quality reprise of the kinds of emotions elicited by the insipid Will I Am youtube video[25] which would become the unofficial anthem of the Obama campaign, in all its preeningly cynical, celebrity driven vacuity. For them, the comment of one critic comparing the effects of the music to that of Prozac would seem to be applicable, though the allusion to a pharmacologically induced sense of well being is perhaps revealing of something deeper. For probably a more common response is to experience the work as "transformative" of one's surroundings, which is to say as escapism. Indeed, the video *Plan of the City* embodies exactly this narrative as the musicians take flight in a space ship and embarking on an inter-planetary exodus welcomed at their destination by throngs of admirers.

The hijacking of our political discourse and institutions by corporations and the wealthy and with it the careening of our civilization toward unparalleled economic and environmental catastrophe makes such escapism not only predictable but maybe even defensible. Under such circumstances it may be that, in the words of poet Martin Espada, "music is all we have," all other forms of artistic experience necessarily being by their nature too referential to support the all-pervasive denialism which we have been required to adopt out of self-defense, or self-regard. If so, Walter Pater's often cited reference to all arts aspiring to the condition of music assumes an ominous connotation. Classical music may have begun to regain its status as queen of the arts, as it had in Soviet Russia, but now, as then, at a cost which no sane person would be willing to bear.

## Footnotes

1. George Orwell, *The Sporting Spirit*, 1945.
2. Judd Greenstein, *Free Speech Zone*, 2004.
3. Now Ensemble.
4. Katrina Ballads.
5. Full Disclosure: my work *Apology (to the next generation)* was included in this group.
6. Republic in Ruins.
7. Breaking the Silence.
8. For a recent example, [here](#) and [links within](#).
9. Hedges discussed his work [here](#).
10. Laurel J. Trainor publications.
11. University of Toronto, Infant and Child Studies Centre.
12. Steven Mithen, *The Singing Neanderthals: The Origins of Music, Language, Mind and Body* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2005).
13. William H. McNeill, *Keeping Together In Time: Dance and Drill in Human History* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard Univ. Press, 1996).
14. See, most notably, Richard Taruskin, "Shostakovich and the Inhuman: Shostakovich and Us,"

in *Defining Russia Musically* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997). Quotations below are drawn from this essay.

15. See for example, chapter 4, Dmitri Tymoczko, *A Geometry of Music: Harmony and Counterpoint in the Extended Common Practice* (Oxford Studies in Music Theory, 2011).
16. Noam Chomsky *Necessary Illusions*, 1989.
17. Robert Fink, "Elvis Everywhere: Musicology and Popular Music, Studies at the Twilight of the Canon," *American Music*, Vol. 16, No. 2, Summer 1998, 135-179.
18. Judd Greenstein, *Change*.
19. *Hemispheres* (pdf), 2001.
20. These and other critical commentaries are posted at New Amsterdam.
21. See video.
22. Judd Greenstein, *Why?*.
23. *Occupy Movement Still Going Strong*.
24. I should mention that I solicited Greenstein's signature along with that of several other composers. He was the only one to sign.
25. See video.