thinking about new music

From like 2008-2015 there was likely nothing more over-theorized within new music than *how do we get out*. Everyone was tryna bail:

from a saturated market,
from colonial/patriarchal canon,
from an overworked collection of resources,
from a community which exists in opposition to a more diverse and explicitly political "world."

I feel like it's important to say that I think things have gotten better recently. From post-2008- and GRID-era Darmstadt, to Chicago, to events like the New Music Gathering, to the burst of West-Coast-y noise projects, to the New Discipline, to all these kids starting up rock bands - new music has spent the past decade reinventing itself. I've seen, with excitement, huge changes in the music of my peers: a newfound interest in readymade "worldly" sounds and pop-culture referentiality, a burst of passion for identity politics, and a reinvigorated desire to build a more representative global community of new music and new musicians.

This is great. It makes me happy most of the time. But for me - ideologically, aesthetically, and politically - **"new music" is unsalvageable**.

Wait wait wait - it's a technical point. I don't think "new music" is really a genre[1] of music, it's more like an anti-genre, or a class identity, or a social-cultural orientation. At its simplest, **new music *isn't* "popular" music;** it categorically, definitionally, **does not belong** to the international community of music-makers.

Two important axioms:
new music doesn't identify as a participant in the world **but**
new music uses the world as a resource, something it can aestheticize and poeticize.
It's art! It reflects upon the world, it reconstructs the word in artistic terms (and when I say "artistic terms" I mean "it sets the world in relation to the colonial, classist, and patriarchal discourse of art music.")

So, when new music shrugged out in, like, 2008, and went looking for the world,
but continued to define itself in opposition to the world,
then new music just wound up finding itself -
and so it made itself its own material.
New music is music about new music.

[1] I mean, if it is a genre, new music is literally the only genre of music that defines itself against literally all other music. New music = {music that isn't music that isn't new music}. For me, this set is too heterogenous to be a genre - it's more of an attitude. If you're not super into any of the things I say here, then just replace "new music" with "this particular attitude" and perhaps my argument will sound more palatable.

Though I am writing this *to* **v2.0**, I am (again) really thankful for and excited by their work. I am happy to consider myself a member of this community, and everything that follows is as much self-critique as it is some serious wishful thinking about the future. So, before anything further - thank you, everyone who is changing the scene, building new institutions, and subjecting both our past and present to constant critical self-evaluation.

We have come a long way -

I don't want to slander the pre-selfware new music (-2008, **v1.0**), but though this practice continues to exist, its sustainability in the era of (ethno-)national populism seems a little shaky. New music 1.0 is unabashedly and unashamedly a project of Western national-cultural preservationism - and frankly, that's fine and it has its place. New music 1.0's materials belong thoroughly to Western colonial history, and they are celebrated as such (or, as has always been the way of power, they are celebrated as materials with universal or transcendental properties). By and large, v1.0 projects are supported by cultural institutions, academies, or corporations who have a vested interest in class/cultural conservation. While I don't condemn the above politics, they do feel especially rough at this particular historical moment.

New music needed a reboot, one which could move us past the unpleasantness of colonial/patriarchal historicism (or at least the visibility thereof). Our current period of reinvention begins, an incredibly diverse but comprehensively negativistic system-purge.

> New Complexity score-core gives way to a reinvigorated Wandelweiser,
> *musique concrete instrumentale* gives way to the communion of digital noise,
> Goethe text-setting gives way to the manic theater of YouTube comment sections,
> the $20k viola gives way to the literal bucket of trash,
> the chill nationalism of avant-Americana gives way to New Sincerity and authenticity politics,
> unapologetic whiteness gives way to a concerted and admirable effort towards inclusivity;
> the entrenchment of the romantic artist gives way to the elasticity of the composer-performer,
> the fastidious specialist gives way to the kinda-lazy multimedia *Gesamkunstwerk.*

But somehow, even among all this change, I feel like we have just rediscovered the composer as white kid whose every action is somehow already interesting and somehow already art.

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When new music stopped identifying as classical music, it distilled itself to the core of its colonial project. Instead of absently celebrating a selection of already-colonized, already-classed materials (**v1.0**), new music 2.0 **just fucking colonizes everything**. The new new music has a protagonist, the *intentional amateur,* who sets everything they touch into relation to new music, in relation to a historically white practice of disembodied hermeneutical listening. The *intentional amateur* steals from pop music, reconfigures it into glitch, and pours it into modernist formal experiments or pastiche-commentary. The *intentional amateur* celebrates pop culture - not for its content, but for its representation of the social classes of those who consume it without artistic distance. The *intentional amateur* practices a kind of DIY where the "DIY" itself is the producer of a project's value. The most fundamental irony of the *intentional amateur* is their

self-identified exemption from capitalism - and - the simultaneous justification of their exploitative practices by pointing at the already-infinitely commodified status of their materials. The *intentional amateur* is always an outsider, a non-participant, a voyeur.

To repeat the so-tired-as-to-be-silly refrain aimed at so many people in v2.0: "ok, fine, but this isn't new, this is all super 1960's, these people aren't radical." I am really not interested in having this conversation. Whether or not new music 2.0 is just a cyclical inversive reanimation of v1.0, its practice is nonetheless often at odds with its intentions. Regardless, the v2.0 I'm talking to is the new music of the internet. Its amateur has inherited an unprecedented virality and its DIY involves some seriously accessible gadgetry. Most importantly, this is the v2.0 of some seriously evolved politics.

The central organizing principle of **v2.0**, despite some exceptions, comes from a desire to rewrite its checkered colonial inheritance. It plays chicken with itself, aggressively championing inclusivity politics while remaining hyperprotective of the long-dead white-male babies in its bathwater. It depersonalizes discrimination, it decouples the sexism and racism of the past few centuries from the heroes with whom it asks us to place our music in discourse. It asks people to fight for their whole lives, and for people to have fought for centuries before them, only to enter a system which is, itself, definitionally contingent upon the modes of power that have resisted their entry at all costs. A system that **venerates** these modes of power.

v2.0 is characterized by public calls for inclusion. But these calls are *rarely* intersectional, and often kind of baffled: where is everyone (implicitly, else)? Is the solution to our field's profound sexism and racism the preservation of a musical and discursive practice

that fixates on a white, male-dominated history and
worships a white, masculinist conception of authorship and
relies upon thoroughly entrenched colonial institutions to survive,
so often tokenizes the music of people who aren't white and male to perform its wokeness and
features colossal financial barriers to entry and
requires colossal financial privilege to sustain oneself therein?[2]

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If one doesn't ground a call for inclusion in the destabilization of *exclusion*, one both softens the appearance of exclusivity and hardens its persistence. To that end - new music 2.0 uses its *(laudable)* identity politics *(laudably)* as a kind of scalpel, which *(laudably)* excises the prior uncomplicatedness of so much of the western canon - but

(really unlaudably)

it also uses its identity politics to reconstruct a white, upper-class cultural utopia around itself.
(A utopia which, for example, definitely doesn't listen to rap music).

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[2] This isn't a rhetorical question, I just think we need to think very hard about how exactly we can go about making things better. Let me reframe this - if new music was a company, this litany would be its mission statement. Why are we trying to amend the hiring practices of such a company? If this is the job description, why are we clamoring to work here? Why are we even buying goods made by this company to begin with?

I've been spending a lot of time thinking about this "utopia." We built it out of cultural isolationism, out of the legitimation and bulwarking of this isolationism through our politics, and (mostly) out of privilege.[3] The "utopia" is a community of people and histories and references and venues and values *within which* everything that happens is *already* art, *already* of interest, and *already* and *immediately* important. One can see the most shit symphony in the entire universe and still "come away with more" than if you'd watched an episode of *Vanderpump Rules.* That "more" - that's value generated by class. It's like a hologram - it organizes social groups, it surrounds the stage, it props up the discourse, it is indissociable from all activities we call "new music."

The *intentional amateur* **cannot exist** outside of this utopia; it grants their activities automatic value. And so, finally, **this** is my beef with so much of new music 2.0 - that in accepting, sustaining, and relying upon this "utopia," v2.0 exists in the *same universalizing, platonic, elitist world as its predecessor.*

So let's address the "utopia" more directly. Instead of thinking about it as a community (of people, places, things) - think about it as a mechanism through which your work is privileged (over the work of other musicians). What does it allow you to do?

New music *allows* me to make any sound into art.[4]

It *allows* me to experiment with any media I choose (regardless of my training) and it also *allows* me to experiment with zero media at all apart from decontextualized classical instrumentality.

It *allows* me to present my work in whatever form with whatever history I want. It *allows* my work to elude categorization, through the privilege of selective ahistoricism. It *allows* me to flirt with scenes but never participate in their communities or histories.

It often *allows* me to say to others "hey this is weird/complex/alien/unfamiliar/avant-garde music and you might not be into it" and it *allows* me to think less of them if they, in fact, aren't. Further, it allows me to *identify* my music with and as rejection.

It *allows* me to shame people who use the same instruments that I do for reasons I find unsophisticated, even though they might reach many more people than mine does. Further, it *allows* me to mobilize my (economic or social) politics as a weapon precisely calibrated against perceived unsophistication.

It *allows* me to present my (fucking objectively) apolitical work as sociopolitically vital and urgent. (Or, for bonus points, it *allows* me to present my (fucking objectively) politically *conservative* project as leftist/Marxist/radical political action).

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[3] Yes, there is a huge difference between perceived class status and actual economic status. I'm still looking for an amazing tweet I saw a few years ago that said something along the lines of: "racism is the idea that white kids who make under $30k a year can identify as rich."

[4] Instead of emancipating sound, John Cage emancipated a privilege apparatus by which a cultural elite could claim any sound as artistic property.

Ok sorry about all of the negative stuff. Whether or not you agree with my *super sweeping* generalizations of the past 200 years of music history, you might agree with me on a few things:

a) Whenever you make music, you are actively making references to cultural constructs. It's likely with these references, even moreso than with the ***pure sounds*** of your music, through which you are attempting to communicate yourself.

b) History takes place in the *present.* When you make a historical reference you are referencing a vital present which has already re-appropriated the object of your reference.

c) We participate in this present, we have agency within it, and this agency commands our responsibility. It's probably good to understand both some critical history and some present-day associative constellations of the references you make.

d) No part of the music you are making exists in a vacuum or is otherwise pure and free from social/cultural content. Or, on the flip side, if your project acknowledgedly uses social/cultural content as a resource - your *farming* of said resource is also already the social/cultural content of your work.

I think no matter where you might fall in the 1.0/2.0 spectrum, these are good things to remember.

And as with all discussions of privilege, it's useful to reflect on how someone might go about their business without perpetuating this compromised mechanism. Here are some things I'm trying to incorporate into my own music-making. It's hard and these are just suggestions, but I think a lot of it is doable:

a) Don't be an intentional amateur. It's fine, even amazing, to be an amateur - just don't fetishize it. There's no art more obsessed with technique than that which makes the lack of technique its object.

b) If you're making music, don't rely on platonist, modernist community standards for production quality. Give a shit about how your music sounds. Learn audio production. Give a shit about what your music looks like, go talk to a friend who knows stuff about visual art and curation and engineering. Yes, making things sound good is expensive - but the more you know, the more you can do with less (and **that's** what DIY means literally everywhere else).

c) Play shows with or next to people who don't have the same (aka automatic) discursive means to value-creation that your field grants you.

d) Perform your own work.[5] Identify as a musician, not a composer. Find other musicians who will perform with you and make your music together. Feature guest artists. Ask for help, ask other people what they think. Attribute authorship to the group, you made it together.

e) You are always supplying (most of) the context for your work - go about intentionally supplying that context. If the context for your work *is* the Western canon, then go for it! Regardless, don't rely on the apparent cultural contextlessness (especially speaking to my fellow Americans on this one) of "new music" when presenting your work. Apparent contextlessness is just what power looks like. Ground your work within a conceptual framework that is concrete and communicable.

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[5] Actually, and sincerely, **new music 2.0 is building a fucking amazing infrastructure to support precisely that so BLESS UP 2.0!**

f) If you make classical music that's awesome! I think classical music is great and super gorgeous and occasionally really nice. But also like be a little more low-key ok? Like stop saying that your music is universal or sublime and stop being mad when people think it sounds like film music. It does. (And if you don't like classical music, stop writing classical music lol.)

g) Don't flirt with scenes. Privilege allows us access to the visibility of a scene without working one's way through its support system. If your music happens at the intersection of scenes (which likely most of our music does), invite all prior scenes into the construction of the new scene. Allow for a porous border between your scene and the scenes from which it comes - invite the work of those from whom your have learned into your new scene.

h) If you teach young composers, ground your pedagogy in some serious economic realism. Stop perpetuating the notion that radical self-expression guarantees livelihood in some transcendental marketplace. If you're in the academy, be aware of your students' debt status. (And if you have tenure and you are not actively rioting against your department's adjunct system…)

And I think these might be the most important ones:

i) Stop calling your music "new music" or "weird" or "complex" or "avant-garde" or "post-genre" or "electroacoustic" just chill tf out. Literally every kid with a computer and a guitar is making avant-garde electroacoustic music at this very moment. Sure, this is a little bit of language policing - but what if **instead of a genre, new music is just a class identity?** Stop identifying your work by its class status.

j) Care about who comes to your shows. If your entire audience consists of people vying for your academic position, you have failed. And, also, care about how many people come (*especially* if your project buys into value systems based on communicationality and radical self-expression).

k) Listen to pop music (aka "music") and learn from it. Learn its history. It will make your world feel small and it will blow your mind.

l) Make friends with people who don't do the same thing you do, talk to them, and then work with them.