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Reduction – Contemporary Perspectives of a Musical Strategy

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Translated to English by Garrett Johnson

Answers to the author's two questions:

How do you access the meaning of reductive strategies for your own musical theories and practices?

Reductive strategies are central in my musical thinking as well as my daily life. In body and mind, as well as in the outside world, exist millions of interesting and interlocking ideas, concepts, and possibilities. It seems that for me personally, reduction to the basics is one of the best strategies to maintain precision, to keep from losing myself in the spectrum of possibilities, and to avoid panicking and falling apart as a consequence: the reductive process treats the material with careful economy, while simultaneously liberating, enlivening, and deepening it. It allows one to see and hear the material better: what it says, what it sings, and how it moves. Freedom arises first through (self-imposed) order, as Stravinsky once said. The questions are the same in art as well as in life: What's really important? How much of it is needed? Simplicity is often more complex than complexity.

In contrast to the mid-twentieth century (especially after the the "liberation movements" in jazz and contemporary music in the 60's and 70's), I find that minimalist or rather reductionist techniques in art as well as in life, provide feasible alternatives to the reigning "everything goes" mentality of the present. The relativist phenomenon and the enormous potential diversity it offers in art and in an everyday social context demands that one must know exactly under what criterium he or she is working and take full responsibility for those decisions – a good situation! The question is still the same: What is important? What is "essential"? What is fundamental to me, fundamental to the material, and how can the material be reduced to its fundamental? Awkward simplicity lacks tension – the tension of intelligent simplicity is the ironic conflict between self-negation and self-awareness.

How do you see the relevance of a reductive aesthetic for contemporary music?

Reduction in the "modern sense" is surely one of the most interesting musical innovations of the 20th century and is still today a feasible alternative in all possible styles to the insistence on narrative, arbitrary associations, or a belief in the quality of complexity. They form an important bridge between visual art and music. Occasionally they lead to a cul-de-sac – either where simplicity is only suggested instead of being created and constructed, or where popular "reductive" classical music should fill the empty concert halls and record company tills. Reduction isn't a patent recipe for modern, good, or even interesting art. Reductive strategies are obvious answers to the explosion of musical styles and the manifold diversity facilitated by the ready availability of history, samplers, home recording, and DIY production. They are a response to the profusion of sound waves filling the air: back to the roots – back to the future.