The Past in the Music of the Digital Natives of the 21st Century: The Sense or Nonsense of Post-Material Aesthetics

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From Adorno to Lehmann, i.e., "where do we come from"?

European, in-depth reflection on the music of the 20th and 21st centuries finds its creative genotype in the thought of Theodor W. Adorno. The German philosopher of culture, in his *Aesthetic Theory*, clearly foretold that:

> It is obvious how much a composer who, for instance, works with tonal material receives this material from tradition. If, however, he turns critically against tradition through the use of an autonomous material, one completely purged of concepts such as consonance, dissonance, triad, and diatonicism, the negated is nevertheless retained in the negation. Such works speak by virtue of the taboos they radiate; the falseness or, at the least, the shock of every triad that they permit makes this obvious enough, and this is the objective cause of the comfortably prescribed monotonousness of radically modern art.[1]

Thus, he announced the aesthetic directions of times yet to come in art. In his negative dialectic he condemned Stravinsky's work as a reminder of

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1 Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, eds. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann. Newly translated, edited, and with a translator's introduction by Robert Hullot-Kentor (London–New York: Continuum, 1997), 148.

the "masterpiece of regression,"[2] confirming the "liquidation of personality"[3] (aesthetic depersonalisation), and also stressed the utopian function of Schoenberg's dodecaphony, perceiving it as the fulfilment of the "dreams of an early bourgeoisie about mastering matter in music", about a "technical masterpiece" or "total organisation" because of "total rationalisation,"[4] but also the elimination of aesthetic experience from the experience of art, and therefore senseless art.

This dialectic appeared most clearly in music, or rather in the attitude of its creators, after the Second World War. After Adorno announced that new music aimed in advance at not being listened to,[4] a distinct division took place. On the one hand, centres for cultivating avant-garde, modern, autonomous, absolute art were created, such as the courses in Darmstadt, the Donaueschingen Festival, the Cologne WDR Studio, and the Parisian IRCAM, where composers returned from their "twelve long years" of oblivion: Webern and Bartók, Shostakovich and Prokofiev, Stravinsky and Weil, and where Luigi Nono and Karlheinz Stockhausen debuted and Lachenmann triumphed. On the other hand, there were artists who came to prominence for whom the basic argument of novelty became obsolete. Heiner Goebbels expressed this directly, writing that "music can no longer be *new* for us no matter how hard it tries."[5] He decided to use existing material, "expropriated material"—as Lukáš Jiřička writes, "giving it a second life in a new semantic context."[6] Goebbels did not hesitate to criticise the gurus of the European avant-garde, i.e. Stockhausen and Lachenmann, when he wrote: "It still seems obvious that the composer, overestimating

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2 Ryszard Różanowski, *Zrozumieć Adorna* [*Understanding Adorno*], 69, https://www.asp.wroc.pl/dyskurs/Dyskurs9/Ryszard_Rozanowski.pdf (last accessed 20 July 2018).

3 Ibidem, 69.

4 Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, translated, edited, and with an introduction by Robert Hullot-Kentor (University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 179–180.

5 Heiner Goebbels, "Odcyfrować muzykę. Sampel jako znak" [Deciphering Music. Music Sample as a Sign], trans. S. Wojciechowski, in: Heiner Goebbels, *Przeciw Gesamtkunstwerk* [*Against Gesamtkunstwerk*] (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2015), 109.

6 Lukáš Jiřička, "Zdobywca scen akustycznych. O twórczości Heinera Goebbelsa" [The Conqueror of Acoustic Stages. On the Work of Heiner Goebbels], trans. J. Derdowska, in: Goebbels, *Przeciw Gesamtkunstwerk*, 7.

his private philosophical possibilities, constructs his own system—microtonal, polyrhythmic, or even a super formula—and derives his whole creative process from it."[7] Meanwhile, as Peter Bürger writes, "the avant-gardistes' effects have lost their shock value." And further:

> To the extent that the means by which the avant-gardistes hoped to bring about the sublation of art have attained the status of works of art, the claim that the praxis of life is to be renewed can no longer be legitimately connected with their employment. To formulate more pointedly: the neo-avant-garde institutionalizes the *avant-garde as art* and thus negates genuinely avant-gardiste intentions.[8]

This division also showed the attitude of artists towards tradition—its affirmation, on the one hand, and its negation on the other, Summed up by Paweł Szymański's famous formula of "two Bs,"[9] this inevitably led to a reversal of content and aesthetic, structured around the possibilities offered by the digital revolution—widespread computerisation, the Information Age—in the time of smartphones and the Internet. We read about the digital music revolution in Harry Lehmann's controversial (and still widely commented on) new music philosophy.[10] The author announces the end of autonomous (absolute) music and the beginning of music derived from non-musical content. However, this is not synonymous with programme music, as it contains a number of relations (*Musikrelate*) that constitute a separate, expressive sound quality. Lehmann writes:

> Programme music does not usually meet the criterion of otherness; at best, it can be treated as a precursor of relational music. The direct experience of performing

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7 Goebbels, "Odcyfrować muzykę", 111.

8 Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Manchester University Press, University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 58.

9 "The contemporary artist, including the composer, is in the grip of two extremes. On the one hand, he is threatened with balderdash if he completely rejects tradition, and on the other hand, he may fall into banality if he turns to it too often. This is the paradox of practicing art today"—a statement by Paweł Szymański, in: Mieczysław Kominek, "Gdzie się mieści dusza?" [Where is the Soul Situated?], *Studio*, no. 9 (1996), 11.

10 Harry Lehmann, *Rewolucja cyfrowa muzyki. Filozofia muzyki* [*The Digital Revolution of Music – A Music Philosophy*], trans. M. Pasiecznik (Warsaw: Fundacja Bęc Zmiana, 2016).

> Richard Strauss' symphonic poem *Also sprach Zarathustra* is no different from the normal concert experience of absolute music.[11]

Namely, Strauss shall remain Strauss—while in relational music, the identity of the creator of the music listened to is not so obvious anymore...

The question is whether, like Adorno's philosophy—which initiated the dominance of modernist aesthetics, albeit primarily based on the development of musical material—Lehmann's philosophy, rejecting this paradigm and advocating going beyond the material towards the aesthetics of content, has the chance to define the new "new music." It is time for examples.

The relational music of digital natives, i.e., "who are we"?

The American new media expert Marc Prensky introduced the notion of digital natives and digital immigrants to behavioural psychology in 2001, indicating a syndrome of qualities describing the two generations and their different attitudes towards modern technology.[12] The former was distinguished by several criteria: birth in the digital age (after 1980); recognising their natural environment's existence in the so-called media convergence, and always being "on"— the state of being continuously connected to the Internet.[13] Monika Pasiecznik transferred Prensky's term to music criticism, relating it to young composers "who are more eager to use technology than their predecessors and do so in a very creative and brilliant way." We read further that "technological dexterity is accompanied by an awareness of the aesthetic and critical potential of the

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11　Monika Pasiecznik, "Cyfrowi tubylcy muzyki" [Digital Natives of Music], http://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/5622-cyfrowi-tubylcy-muzyki.html (last accessed 20 July 2018).

12　Marc Prensky, "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants," *On the Horizon,* vol. 9, no. 5 (2001), 1–6.

13　Compare: Radosława Mysior, "Dwa światy – cyfrowi tubylcy, cyfrowi imigranci " [Two Worlds – Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants], *Remedium,* no. 7–8 (2014), http://www.uzaleznieniabehawioralne.pl/strefa-profesjonalistow/dwa-swiaty-cyfrowi-tubylcy-cyfrowi-imigranci-cz-i/ (last accessed 17 July 2018).

media, which enable not only the crossing of genre and stylistic boundaries but also open music to new meanings."[14] Pasiecznik lists, among others, the Belgian Stefan Prins (b. 1979); the Dane Simon Steen-Andersen (b. 1976); Germans Johannes Kreidler (b. 1980) and Alexander Schubert (b. 1979); the Kazakh Sergej Maingardt (b. 1982); the Australian Matthew Shlomowitz (b. 1975); and the Irishwoman Jennifer Walshe (b. 1974). This list should be supplemented by the names of the slightly older but extremely interesting German composer Michael Beil (b. 1963), and the young Polish artists Mikołaj Laskowski (b. 1990); Piotr Peszat (b. 1990); Rafał Ryterski (b. 1992); and Jagoda Szmytka (b. 1982), along with the winner of last year's edition of the Tadeusz Baird Young Composers Competition, Paweł Malinowski (b. 1994).

Malinowski has, for a long time, been under the great charm of Beil's work—associated with the Hohschule für Musik und Tanz in Cologne, Beil is a composer who subtly and very naturally combines classical techniques of creating sounds with electroacoustics and video technology. His (less than 30) compositions represent the purely instrumental; audiovisual genres in which the video layer helps to distinguish the additional sound layers, and finally, a circle of widely understood instrumental theatre. At the same time, the artist clearly defines his attitude by writing that: "In the last century, the focus of composing, listening, and analysis in New Music shifted to the invention of new material and new structures. I want to distance myself from this approach, categorically. In my opinion, it's irrelevant whether it is even possible these days to invent new sound or forms because audiences aren't looking for this anyway."[15] So what is the basis of Beil's composition? Music that has already been composed, a quotation that—taken out of context—begins a new life, decomposed into parts, and fulfils the function of organising subsequent elements of the musical work: melody, harmony, and timbre, as well as its final message. Therefore, what is new in the process of Beil's composing is the aforementioned technique

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14 Pasiecznik, "Cyfrowi tubylcy muzyki" [Digital Natives of Music].

15 Michael Beil, "AV – Music and Video," *eContact!* 13.2, https://econtact.ca/13_2/beil_AV.html (last accessed 20 July 2018).

of a kind of "working with quotation" (*act of quoting*) and the technique of audiovisual palindrome, while it is typical for him to shape the score legibly and segmentally, and to use counterpoint techniques: the audiovisual canon in simple movement and the crab canon. *Karaoke Rebranng!*, the final version of which dates from 2013, is an interesting example for the analysis of Beil's compositional language. Its genesis was the use of material from the previously completed theatrical work *Branng!* (to be discussed later), performed by a group of instrumentalists, and "some of the fragments of *Branng!* become a karaoke song. The musicians sing like in *Branng!*, not with a soundtrack containing a recording of a famous singer, but they play with themselves."[16] They play with each other and against one another; in the initial phase of the piece, only a live band is visible on stage (it is also the composer's intention to achieve a certain illusion of live performance since an electroacoustic counterpoint still accompanies the musicians). In the second phase, next to the musicians, a video projection of the same band performing the initial phase is introduced. In the next part, the video layer is replayed backwards, because, as the composer says: "I am obsessed with reversed sounds, I try to get away from them, but they follow me all my life."[17] This provides an interesting accumulation of sounds, which are yet another use of the starting material. Which is... the *Queen of the Night* aria from Act Two of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, used earlier in the *Branng!* theatre piece, expropriated again in *Karaoke Rebranng!*, devoid of meaning, deconstructed and, if perceptible, then only subcutaneously. The clear reference to the aria at the end of the composition is intended only to emphasise its material connection with the earlier theatrical work. In *Branng!*—a truly Kafkaesque drama based not only on melody (the hit of the aforementioned aria) but also on the text describing the nocturnal bomb attack from *Rigodon*, Louis-Ferdinand Céline's novel—the aria gives a visual-sonic context, situating one

16 Beil, programme notes to *Karaoke Rebranng!*, trans. P. Malinowski,
     http://www.michael-beil.com/Texte/Karaoke.html (last accessed 20 July 2018).

17 From Maarten Quanten's interview with the composer (2013),
     https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v2lvamE8zYE&=256s, trans. P. Malinowski.

of the characters on stage as its potential interpreter (the theme of the night then functions in layers, a specific palimpsest of themes of night bombardment and the magic of the nocturnal queen), whereas in *Karaoke Rebranng!* there are no direct links to Mozart, the content of *The Magic Flute*, or the aria's melody, although throughout the whole composition there is not a single sound that did not come from the aria. This strategy turned out to be risky, its meaning emphasised by the composer himself, who admitted that: "none of the audience members I spoke to actually realised that none of the music was by me, or that the text was in large part about the glorification of war. No one noticed that the orchestral accompaniment for Daniel Gloger was made up entirely of vocal recordings in a similar manner to the flute version of the string quartet in *Die Zwei*, even though the Mickey Mouse voices were clearly audible. For me this means: the more concrete and clear or even unambiguous the meaning and signs that are employed, the quicker they lose their original meaning and become a tabula rasa for the listener who is aware of them."[18] Thus, as in the case of programme music, Beil's relational music requires an awareness of the composition's genesis. Otherwise we risk pronouncing judgments that reduce the work to the category of a joke—to quote one of the Polish reviews of the piece: "Michael Beil in *Karaoke Rebranng!* created something of a video-musical Möbius band, in which the musicians encounter a recording of themselves played backwards... everyone is reconciled by drunken Mozart."[19]

Many young artists have become fascinated by working on someone else's material when creating new sound qualities. One of Kraków's "angry young men," the previously mentioned Paweł Malinowski, has also recently taken up the theme of the night in the piece *Nachtwanderung* for orchestra. The composer admitted: "The starting point for me was the fascinating sound of the culminating chord from Gustav Mahler's *Nachtmusik I*

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18 Beil, "AV – Music and Video."

19 Rafał Wawrzyńczyk, "Kotły i fortepiano" [Kettledrums and Piano], http://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/6112-kotly-i-fortepiany.html (last accessed 20 July 2018).

—the second movement of Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 7."[20] Aside from Mahler, in Malinowski's work, one can find traces of Bach, Schubert, Brahms and the Swedish group Roxette; he is also inspired by Stanley Kubrick's cinematography and Mikhail Bakhtin's theories. Ultimately, both the intertextual and performative strategies are among ideas that have a decisive influence on the final shape of the works. From the first category, it should be recalled, following Michał Głowiński, that "a borrowed element can play a variety of roles in its new environment, sometimes contradictory to the ones it was equipped within its original environment. We are dealing here with the phenomenon of decontextualisation and recontextualisation. Decontextualisation because an element has been taken out of a text or a certain type of texts, detached from what gave it meaning; recontextualisation because it has been introduced into a new context, and it is there that it is supposed to function, without losing what could be called a testimony of origin."[21] In the extremely interesting work *Faites vos jeux* (2017), Malinowski takes from the narrative of Kubrick's film *Barry Lyndon* the scene in which the countess is seduced by the main character in the presence of the reverend who controls her. It is a static scene, set around a card-game table, devoid of dialogue and with repetitive gestures, seemingly trivial but extremely tense. The trio of characters is translated into a trio of performers. But here is not only the film scene expropriated but also the musical background of Kubrick's film—the second part of Franz Schubert's *Piano Trio* Op. 100 is de- and then recontextualised! "The sound material," as the composer writes, "was based on the formal construction of Schubert's *Trio*, but in the process of composition it undergoes both temporal (first of all, the tempo was slowed down four times) and tonal transformations (the work is performed on muffled instruments and a prepared piano)."[22] At the same time, the composer preserves the

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20 Paweł Malinowski, programme notes to *Nachtwanderung*, in: programme book for the *Wawel at Dusk Festival*, Kraków, 7 July – 25 August 2018, p. 17.

21 Michał Głowiński, "O intertekstualności" [On Intertextuality], *Pamiętnik Literacki*, no. 4 (1986), 83.

22 Malinowski, *W stronę komponowania tekstem* [*Towards Composing with Text*], an unpublished paper read at the student session ELEMENTI – PERFORMATICS, organised by the

performative qualities of the film scene—the layout of the performers on stage corresponds to the placement of the actors in the film; the language of gestures derives from the script (although it is presented at a slower pace); and the whole is complemented by the screening of the original scene, suitably edited. What intrigues the composer in the film, and what he wanted to keep in spite of the scene being torn out of the plot's context, is the relation between people, the desire to translate the tension between the film's characters into creative tension between the musicians of the piano trio—tension from which new music is created.

Sense or nonsense of post-material aesthetics, i.e., "where are we heading"?

Will neo-avant-garde post-material aesthetics, post-Internet art, new performative conceptualism, or the idea of conscious music turn out to be worth preserving, or will they all pass away like so many cultural trends before them? Only time will tell. It is important to observe these trends, to react to them and argue with them, in order to see the performative shift that contemporary humanists have noticed, a shift that "is a sign and an effect of adaptation of the humanities (and especially their theories) to the challenges of contemporary culture, at a time when it becomes clear that the metaphor of the world as a text has no potential to explain the problems faced by the modern world (genocide, terrorism, technological progress, globalisation processes),"[23] along with discrimination, indifference, anonymous Internet aggression, intellectual regress, etc.

The past has always been present in music, be it with an affirmative, neutral, or negative attitude—yet still, it was always there. In the music of the digital natives of the 21st century, it seems to be present very clearly;

Music Theory and Composition Students' Research Group of the Academy of Music in Kraków, Kraków, 2018.

23 Ewa Domańska, "Zwrot performatywny we współczesnej humanistyce" [The Performative Shift in Contemporary Humanities], *Teksty drugie*, no. 5 (2007), 52.

in fact, it reflects their status. The past induces the reaction of young composers—active and committed creators who do not so much read reality as a specific cultural text but react to it in an obvious and natural way. The continuously controversial creator of the notion of the *new discipline*, a performer and composer, a young idol—Jennifer Walshe, blurs the boundaries between music and theatre, sound and gesture, composer and performer, and says:

> Or from a different perspective, maybe what is at stake is the idea that all music is music theatre. Perhaps we are finally willing to accept that the bodies playing the music are part of the music, that they're present, they're valid and they inform our listening whether subconsciously or consciously. That it's not too late for us to have bodies.[24]

The compositions of Walshe and also, earlier, Olga Neuwirth and Pauline Oliveros—just like the digital natives of today—draw on tradition, often breaking many taboos and emphasising the gravity of everyday life. They all create works that are interactive manifestos—once again socially and politically involved—but they also share their personal fascinations and admit to influence, without complexes, without the division into high and mass culture, approaching sources such as literature and Internet Tweets alike. In other words, they refer to tradition without building monuments, in their own, original (but not indifferent) ways, often succumbing to a kind of nostalgia for the experienced past, identifying themselves as the "RE" generation (from retromania, reissue, reinterpretation, re-enactment, and so on).[25] The dangers of such an attitude, which await its followers, are caricatured reception or, at best, the suspicion of parody and cynicism, the indication of a low level of technique, pointing out the lack of inventiveness, and finally, emphasising the secondary nature of music itself—as subordinate to performance. Does the above balance come to zero? It is hard to say. On the other hand, being absolutely sub-

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24 Jennifer Walsche, "The New Discipline," http://www.borealisfestival.no/2016/the-new-discipline-4/ (last accessed 20 July 2018).

25 Compare Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).

jective and seriously summing up and concluding the reflections above, to paraphrase Szymański's formula about banality and balderdash, between the grip of Mahler or feigning ignorance of Mahler, perhaps it is worth instead considering the choice of his de- and recontextualisation.

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ABSTRACT

*The Past in the Music of the Digital Natives
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Is the inspiring idea about music
proposed by Harry Lehmann (*Rewolucja
cyfrowa w muzyce. Filozofia muzyki /
The Digital Revolution in Music. A Music
Philosophy*, Kraków 2016) being followed
by equally interesting and valuable
music? This is a question that should
be asked in the face of such cultural
phenomena as a democratisation of
art, plunderphonics, sampling, and
remixing, finally post-material aesthetics.
When interpreting the music of our
time based entirely on material from
the past, it will be necessary to tackle
the definition of the digital revolution,
substantive-aesthetic turn and post-
material aesthetics as well as to attempt
to place these topics in a broader context
of the evolution of New Music from its
emergence in the philosophy of

STRESZCZENIE

*Przeszłość w muzyce cyfrowych tubyl-
ców XXI wieku. Sens czy nonsens estetyki
postmateriałowej?*

Czy w ślad za inspirującą myślą o muzyce
proponowaną przez Harry'ego Lehman-
na (*Rewolucja cyfrowa w muzyce. Filozo-
fia muzyki*, Kraków 2016) idzie równie
interesująca i wartościowa muzyka? Oto
pytanie, które należy postawić w obliczu
takich zjawisk kulturowych jak demokra-
tyzacja sztuki, plądrofonia, sampling i re-
miks, wreszcie estetyka postmateriałowa.
W procesie interpretacji muzyki naszych
czasów, tej opartej w całości na materia-
le z przeszłości, konieczne będzie zmie-
rzenie się z definicją rewolucji cyfrowej,
zwrotu treściowo-estetycznego oraz este-
tyki postmateriałowej oraz próba osadze-
nia owej problematyki w szerokim kon-
tekście ewolucji Muzyki Nowej od czasów
zaistnienia jej w myśli Th. W. Adorno,
urzeczywistnienia w twórczości
kompozytorów związanych z kręgiem

T. W. Adorno, embodiment in the oeuvre of composers associated with the Darmstadt circle until its crisis and criticism focused of the musical material of modernism in the works of Goebbels and philosophy of Lehmann. Drawing on reflections by e.g., H. Goebbels, P. Brüger or J. Walshe the present author proposes an interpretation of the music of the so-called "digital natives," including Michael Beil and Paweł Malinowski, from the point of view of both sound (acoustic value) and sense (semantic value).

KEYWORDS: digital revolution, reversal of content and aesthetic, post-material aesthetics, Michael Beil, Paweł Malinowski, contemporary music

Darmstadzkim aż do jej kryzysu i krytyki skoncentrowanej na materiale muzycznym moderny w twórczości Goebbelsa i filozofii Lehmana. Korzystając m.in.: z refleksji H. Goebbelsa, P. Brügera czy J. Walshe zaproponowany zostanie szkic interpretacji muzyki tzw. „cyfrowych tubylców", m.in. Michaela Beila i Pawła Malinowskiego, z punktu widzenia tak brzmienia (wartości akustycznej) jak i sensu (wartości semantycznej).

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: rewolucja cyfrowa, zwrot treściowo-estetyczny, estetyka postmateriałowa, Michael Beil, Paweł Malinowski, muzyka współczesna