

Neoliberal Reason, Contemporary Music, and Proximal Critique

This article explores music in an age of neoliberal reason, in order to establish a framework for understanding music's intimate relation to – and, sometimes, contestation of – contemporary political economy.¹ I do this by bringing into conversation perspectives informed by Theodor W. Adorno on music aesthetics and Michel Foucault on neoliberalism, including work by commentators such as Wendy Brown, Robin James, David Lebow, and Shannon Winnubst. This focus on music's immanent features is different, if supplementary, to the more well-established idea that a neoliberal economy is the context in which music functions as a product in the marketplace and is the condition under which play out the politics of the musician as a worker. While the logic of neoliberalism – including the status of music and musical labour as commodities – is sometimes 'framed' explicitly as the focus of compositional intention (examples below), I suggest, furthermore, that this logic is more broadly naturalised such as to provide normative, implicit trajectories for compositional thought and the interpretational (e)valuation of music. Indeed, a musical artwork can paradoxically both frame aspects of neoliberal society critically while nonetheless also being founded in other aspects of its societal logic.

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My aim to explore contemporary rationalities, and their musical (re)inscriptions, follows on from those scholarly projects that seek to consider music's immanent qualities in relation to the societies that produced them. Robert Fink's influential *Repeating Ourselves* provides a notable model. Fink probes repetitive music as echoing, refining, and modulating the repetition that was endemic to American society in the second half of the twentieth century. He argues that this music emerged from a 'culture of repetition', one in which 'the extremely high level of repetitive structuring necessary to sustain capitalist modernity [became] salient in its own right, experienced directly as constituent of subjectivity; it is in this sense that we are constantly "repeating ourselves," fashioning and regulating our lived selves through manifold experiences of repetition.' As Fink argues, it is not only in the production and consumption of music that this culture of repetition manifests; one might also read this in 'repetitive minimal music itself, taken as an autonomous, not overtly representational cultural practice' – or what I would call the formal, immanent level.² More recently, in her writing on neoliberalism and classical music, Marianna Ritchey has developed some of these themes. While her focus is primarily on the systemic conditions under which classical music is made and consumed under contemporary capitalism, Ritchey does secondarily consider how logics internal to 'the music itself' reflect these conditions. For example, writing of composer Mason Bates, she suggests that 'Bates's characteristic version of postminimalist repetition may have something to tell us about how subjectivity has been conditioned by new forms that capitalism has taken since the 1970s'; she notes additionally that Bates's use of repetition rather than development is important to this.³ Indeed, Ritchey later makes more direct use of Fink's work in order to consider how, in contrast with the seamless repetition of

² Robert Fink, *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 4.

³ Marianna Ritchey, *Composing Capital: Classical Music in the Neoliberal Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 51.

minimal music of the 1960s, more recent ‘indie classical’ music might use a post-minimalist palette that can foreground a distinct musical voice that sits apart or in relation to a repetitive texture. Or as Ritchey puts it, this voice can evoke ‘a conflict with flow, or at least [an exploration of] potential difference between mindless repetition and a fleet, alert, but ultimately powerless and isolated subjectivity that resists it.’⁴ For Ritchey, this indicates an ambivalent attitude in this music, about aspects of neoliberal subjectivity: a sonic image of a self that is displaced from a flow of culture. In this way, Ritchey gestures towards how neoliberalism – or more specifically, the relation of self and neoliberal society – might be echoed formally in a musical example.

This article further develops this interest in the immanent characteristics of music under neoliberalism, placing these in relation to associated ideas around quantification, flexibility in production and consumption, and productivity. My proposal is that music (and artistic practices more broadly) provide a theatre for working with, through, and against the possibilities of these ideas. To do this, I first outline some theoretical considerations vis-à-vis Adornian and Foucauldian discourses on reason. I outline what is meant by neoliberal rationality and connect this with the Adornian idea that music is mediated by forms of reason and knowledge contemporary to it. My proposition is that, just as the logic of Beethoven’s music discloses something of the dynamics of post-Enlightenment intellectual life and subjectivity, recent music can tell us about – and enact – neoliberal modalities of reason and subjectivity. I then outline this more firmly by explicating characteristics of the neoliberal subject. This enables me, in the second half of the article, to turn more directly to concrete musical examples, for instance through exploring how the characteristic productivity and flexibility of the neoliberal subject manifests in compositional processes and musical artworks. I choose to focus on

⁴ Ritchey, *Composing Capital*, 73–4.

a range of outwardly very different musical examples – work by Brian Eno (b. 1948), Wolfgang Rihm (b. 1952), John Zorn (b. 1953), Marina Rosenfeld (b. 1968), Bryn Harrison (b. 1969), Sarah Hennies (b. 1979), Johannes Kreidler (b. 1980), and Chino Amobi (b. 1984) – in order to demonstrate the far-reaching mediation of music by neoliberal contexts. I end by reflecting on what this means for the critical efficacy of music and critical theories of sonic practices in a neoliberal age. Doing this also draws on yet challenges an Adornian critical theory of music, which I will remind readers was formulated in response to a capitalist society that preceded neoliberalism.

Defining neoliberal rationality

It would be helpful to begin with an outline of neoliberalism, as this is understood to be entangled with contemporary rationalities. Doing so affords us tools for incisive analysis of a concept that is felt to suffuse majority social and economic relations today – something that, in its pervasiveness, is otherwise difficult to render critically. This focus addresses one aspect of broader exigent concerns about music and contemporary politics. As Dale Chapman writes, ‘scholarly investigation of the relationship between music and political economy takes on a new urgency in the early decades of the twenty-first century, as we confront the ongoing turbulence of quotidian life under the neoliberal regime of accumulation.’⁵

Neoliberalism, it should go without saying, is a contested concept. Definitions differ, as do the purposes of this term’s discursive deployment. For some, ‘neoliberalism’ is a word that conjures all that is wrong with contemporary capitalism, a shorthand for everything from exploitative labour practices, to international free-market trading

⁵ Dale Chapman, *The Jazz Bubble: Neoclassical Jazz in Neoliberal Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018), 7.

(espoused rhetorically if not practically), to a war on nature, to a besuited and soulless corporate culture. These are surely some of its more visible aspects – and in terms of music industries, these aspects have been well documented.⁶ However, as indicated already, I hope for my contribution to this debate to be a little more speculative. And this is where a more precise and systematic description of neoliberalism, and the logics it brings with it, becomes useful.

In her definition, Wendy Brown starts by noting neoliberalism's heterogeneous qualities:

neoliberalism is neither singular nor constant in its discursive formulations and material practices. This recognition exceeds the idea that a clumsy or inapt name is draped over a busy multiplicity; rather, neoliberalism as economic policy, modality of governance, and order of reason is at once a global phenomenon, yet inconstant, morphing, differentiated, unsystematic, contradictory, and impure.⁷

Helpfully, her description also emphasizes that while neoliberalism is instantiated differently – that it 'takes diverse shapes and spawns diverse content and normative details' – it is nonetheless 'a specific and normative mode of reason, of the production of

⁶ Among others see, Toby Bennett, "'Essential – Passion for Music": Affirming, Critiquing and Practicing Passionate Work in Creative Industries', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Creativity at Work*, ed. Lee Martin and Nick Wilson (London: Palgrave, 2018), 431–59; Milena Droumeva, 'Soundscapes of Productivity: The Coffee-Office and the Sonic Gentrification of Work', *Resonance* 2/3 (2021), 377–94; Javier F. León, 'Introduction: Music, Music Making and Neoliberalism', *Culture, Theory and Critique* 55/2 (2014), 129–37; Matt Stahl, *Unfree Masters: Popular Music and the Politics of Work* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012); Timothy Taylor, *Music and Capitalism: A History of the Present* (Chicago: Chicago University Press), particularly Chapter 2, 'Neoliberal Capitalism and the Cultural Industries'; Ritchey, *Composing Capital*; Patrick Valiquet, 'Contemporary Music and Its Futures', *Contemporary Music Review* 39/2 (2020), 187–205.

⁷ Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), 48. Brown also notes that neoliberalism is imposed in different ways: in the Global North this took the form of governmentality; in the South it was 'violently imposed through coups d'état and juntas, occupations, structural adjustments, and militarized disciplining of populations' (47).

the subject, “conduct of conduct,” and scheme of valuation’.⁸ This follows on from an understanding of neoliberalism as formulated in Foucault’s *Birth of Biopolitics*.⁹ Brown’s notes about neoliberalism constituting a *mode of reason* and productive of certain formulations of subjectivity will become particularly important to my discussion below, although this can be summarised briefly as follows: Foucault argued for understanding neoliberalism as a normative order of reason that would become a ‘governing rationality’. One of my goals, in line with this approach, is to historicise music’s commitments to and contestations of this rationality and the subjectivities bound up with it.

Thinkers such as Adorno have considered how post-Enlightenment knowledge and experience is incorporated within music – particularly from Beethoven onwards – as well as how these modalities of reason and subjectivity are further developed and contested in music that was critically oriented towards the standardising mass culture of the twentieth century. My interest is in what happens after this; how more contemporary forms of reason come to predominate what we know and how we live. Hence my allusion to historicising: forms of ‘reason’, as practiced in Beethoven and then Schoenberg’s times (key points of focus for Adorno), cannot be assumed to apply so readily to the music of today, in which new forms of reason make themselves known, and make the world knowable. Nonetheless, I maintain that reference to Adorno’s thinking is useful for two reasons. First, his analyses of critical thought and critical artistic practices after the Enlightenment (Beethoven et al.) and under twentieth-century modernity (Schoenberg et al.) provide points of reference for comparison with later developments under neoliberalism. Secondly, more implicitly, I want to draw on his

⁸ Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 48.

⁹ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 49–50.

insistence that music and art contribute to human experience through teasing open utopian possibilities otherwise foreclosed by normative logics – music can do this, for example, through reminding us that forms of reason and truth exist beyond forms that predominate contemporary society. But, again historicising, one should add that how music explores this in a neoliberal age is different from earlier times. As David Lebow notes, neoliberalism has ‘generated new contradictions and crisis tendencies’ that are not reducible to the terms of the state capitalism and culture industry identified by the Frankfurt School.¹⁰

When Adorno and his Frankfurt School colleagues wrote of the market and of mass culture, they had in view a particular species of capitalist society, in relation to twentieth-century European and American contexts. This was a broadly liberal, industrial capitalism, one in which neo-Marxist critique could still find valuable utility in words such as ‘bourgeois’. These were the contexts in which the Frankfurt School thinkers not only developed their long-term critical projects – these contexts suffused many of these thinkers’ own personal histories. As Stuart Jeffries persuasively argues, a number of these thinkers’ own critical work was made possible by a certain level of material wealth afforded by industrialist and merchant fathers who, paradoxically, also stood Oedipally as targets for critique.¹¹ Here it is worth noting, however, that Fumi Okiji has argued Adorno’s focus on bourgeois subjectivity was, even in its own time, exclusionary; from this observation she has developed a substantial account of ‘jazz as critique’, through dialectically preserving yet surpassing Adornian reflections on how and what music can act critically.¹² Nonetheless, bourgeois subjectivity and twentieth-

¹⁰ David Lebow, ‘Trumpism and the Dialectic of Neoliberal Reason’, *Perspectives on Politics* 17/2 (2019), 381.

¹¹ Stuart Jeffries, *Grand Abyss Hotel*, Chapter 2, ‘Fathers and Sons, and Other Conflicts’ (New York and London: Verso, 2017), 33–63.

¹² See Fumi Okiji, *Jazz as Critique: Adorno and Black Expression Revisited*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018.

century capitalism provided interconnected frames of reference for Adorno's critical aesthetics of music.

This liberal capitalism, through its later mass cultural developments, connoted a specific kind of rationality. As Shannon Winnubst has argued – drawing as Brown does on Foucault's analysis of liberalism and neoliberalism – this centred on the marketplace as the source of value, placing emphasis on economic calculation.¹³ While liberal capitalism looked to the market, a sense of natural rights and justice was still maintained.¹⁴ Liberal thought conceived law as a neutral and rational set of principles and actions, and incorporated a notion of “citizens” as neutral bearers of rights.¹⁵ Hence social rationalities were affected by the market, though subjects and their social relations were also figured through an authoritative *juridical rationality* that was the premise for relations between subjects within the context of the marketplace. As Lebow notes, liberalism conceives of the ‘invariant identity of the moral person as a rights-bearing citizen’.¹⁶

In the analysis undertaken by Foucault, and developed further by Brown, Winnubst, and others, neoliberalism emphasizes a *calculative rationality* over a juridical one. Whereas liberal capitalism relied on the marketplace as a source of veridiction, neoliberalism values this as *the* site of veridiction. We should note here that ‘veridiction’ is, as Brown explains, ‘Foucault’s coinage for the production and circulation of truths that are established, rather than foundational, but, importantly, govern.’¹⁷ The liberal subject’s ‘invariant identity’, noted by Lebow, becomes replaced by a neoliberal

¹³ Shannon Winnubst, *Way Too Cool: Selling Out Race and Ethics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 35.

¹⁴ These rights were at least notionally afforded to some, at the exclusion of others. See Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Winnubst, *Way Too Cool*, 92.

¹⁵ Winnubst, *Way Too Cool*, 95.

¹⁶ Lebow, ‘Trumpism and the Dialectic of Neoliberal Reason’, 382.

¹⁷ Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 67.

conception of subjecthood, where the subject is a ‘formally empty receptacle filled up through enterprising choices.’¹⁸

Crucially, it should also be stated that under neoliberalism the ‘economy’ of the marketplace becomes expanded, to inscribe economic rationality over spheres that were once conceived noneconomically.¹⁹ For Foucault, for example, the biopolitical names a ‘rational’ quantification of life itself, such that governments and other institutions might track and seek to influence patterns and ratios of, for example, births and deaths across a population. As Winnubst summarizes: ‘neoliberalism as an epistemological intervention: the transformation that occurs when economic rationality is extended into matters as intimate as the relation between parent and child, as abstract as genetics, as political as education, and as sociobiological as health care and public hygiene.’²⁰ Lebow writes, similarly, that neoliberalism ‘strives to build an empire of market choice that invades every domain of life, and deposes all other social, political and solidaristic institutions and values.’²¹ In Adornian-Horkheimian terms, instrumental reason, that was manifested through both liberal capitalist economy and post-Enlightenment scientific epistemologies, finds new expressions across broader registers of social existence, with the latter construed increasingly in terms of quantification, verifiability, extraction, the efficiency.²²

The notion of calculative rationality profoundly alters how individuals and society itself conceive themselves. For instance, Winnubst has developed this idea in

¹⁸ Lebow, ‘Trumpism and the Dialectic of Neoliberal Reason’, 382.

¹⁹ As Brown writes, “[E]conomy” is also detached from exclusive association with the production or circulation of goods and the accumulation of wealth. Instead, “economy” signifies specific principles, metrics, and modes of conduct, including for endeavors where monetary profit and wealth are not at issue.’ Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 62.

²⁰ Winnubst, *Way Too Cool*, 48.

²¹ Lebow, ‘Trumpism and the Dialectic of Neoliberal Reason’, 382.

²² See Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

relation to identity under neoliberalism, through arguing that social differences become conceived of as fungible – that is, as circulating within a field of interchangeable units that strips identities of ‘any historical meanings’; identities are ‘served up for endless self-enhancement and manipulation.’²³ Robin James has argued that calculative rationality manifests when analysing the social, as conceived quantitatively through a framework that regards the social as a set of occurrences that might be charted in terms of their frequency, (mis)alignment, and potential for ‘harmonisation’ through better management.²⁴ Lebow suggests that public life becomes a consumable through, among other developments, news-as-entertaining and the consumption of social media – part of a longer development of a postmodernist economy of images.²⁵ What is common to all these different points of focus is – it is worth restating – the notion that neoliberalism is not a set of policies as such, *but a mode of rationality*. Or as Brown summaries, ‘the norms and principles of neoliberal rationality . . . set out novel ways of conceiving and relating state, society, economy, and subject and also inaugurate a new “economization” of heretofore noneconomic spheres and endeavours.’²⁶

New formations of rationality that comprise neoliberalism are entwined with new subjectivities. I take the view here that the story is not simply one of the subjectivities of a liberal rationality being wholly replaced by a neoliberal form. Rather, subjectivity today should be understood to refer to a complex mix of liberal and neoliberal modes.²⁷

²³ Winnubst, *Way Too Cool*, 118. Here Winnubst explores metrosexuality by way of example.

²⁴ Robin James, *The Sonic Episteme: Acoustic Resonance, Neoliberalism, and Biopolitics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

²⁵ Lebow, ‘Trumpism and the Dialectic of Neoliberal Reason’.

²⁶ Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 51. In Foucault’s own words, ‘neoliberalism’s distinctiveness, Foucault repeats, lies in “taking the formal principles of a market economy and referring and relating them to, projecting them on to a general art of government.”’ Brown, then citing Foucault, *Undoing the Demos*, 61; Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 131.

²⁷ Winnubst, *Way Too Cool*, 43. A helpful heuristic table is also provided on p. 45. As Foucault points out, this creates conflicts between different ‘selves’: ‘the juridical theory of the subject . . . does not fit together with . . . the very designation and characterization of *homo oeconomicus* [Foucault’s term for neoliberal entrepreneurial subject].’ Foucault cited in Brown, *Undoing the*

Nonetheless, there are distinct attributes of the latter mode, that relate to features of neoliberal society already identified above. This is important for our purposes because music, in the Adornian conception, can be understood as charting changing practices of subjectivity, the social conditions that mediate it, and forms of reason that enable it to come to identify itself as such. Below, I unpack more concretely some ways in which contemporary music does this. To pre-echo some of that discussion here: compositional work becomes bound-up with a notion of ‘productivity’ and open-ended process, often related to the self-management of one’s working method; one observes the aestheticising of the flexibility and mobility that is associated with flow and circulation (over and above stable, ‘invariant’ fixity); and composers work within a reframed ‘economy’ of musical materials and practices.

Foucault argues that the neoliberal subject is characterised by becoming a ‘subject of interests’. This means a number of interrelated things. First, that the subject becomes entrepreneurial; selfhood becomes defined by a maximising of outcomes from one’s own self-investments. The worker in this sense becomes ‘human capital’.²⁸ In present energies expended through investing towards future surplus, the subject becomes geared towards prospective future successes in these terms. A self that cannot invest in itself is a bad neoliberal subject, as no surplus human capital is possible. Institutional mechanisms reinforce this emphasis on self-investment, and are reshaped in line with a maximisation of human capital that is construed as open-ended. ‘Just as the corporation replaces the factory, *perpetual training* tends to replace the *school*, and continuous control to replace the

Demos, 56.

²⁸ Foucault discusses ‘human capital’ at length in ‘Chapter 9: 14th March 1979’ in his *The Birth of Biopolitics*. Brown also notes that ‘As a subject becomes a field of enterprises, society is oriented “toward the multiplicity and differentiation of enterprises,” rather than toward the exchange of commodities.’ Brown, also citing Foucault, *Undoing the Demos*, 66. Also note the subject becomes a field of enterprises rather than simply ‘consumer’ in the singular.

examination,' writes Gilles Deleuze of what he calls this new society of control.²⁹ Less emphasis is placed on distinct 'rituals' that ossify the superseding of one kind of identity-position or subjectivity by another. This entrepreneurial selfhood is related to a second characteristic of subjectivity under neoliberalism: the aforementioned economisation of spheres – including discourses and practices of selfhood – that were once designated as noneconomic. Subjects' becoming 'entrepreneurs extraordinaire' means 'intensifying our interests in and through markets of any and all stripes' – with for example social differences conceived as fungible identities in circulation.³⁰ Hence, it is not just in the world of work that the subject acts entrepreneurially; 'calculations of supply/demand and cost/benefit become the model of all social relations.'³¹ Paradoxically, this 'marketplace of self' means that the success and truth of the self is located beyond the self, with identity moving 'from the ability to articulate a deep interior desire into the socially externalized barometer of success.'³² In accordance with this entrepreneurially and externalised character, the ideal neoliberal subject is productive and flexible in its ability to respond dynamically to forces of a changing 'marketplace' (in the expanded sense, including fields once-conceptualised noneconomically, such as the social).

Music, criticality, and neoliberal society

Having outlined neoliberal rationality, and some initial consequences for subjectivities, we are better positioned to reflect on music and art's relation to subjectivity under neoliberalism, as opposed to the liberal capitalistic mass culture that was the focus of the classical Frankfurt School theorists. We can achieve this, first,

²⁹ Gilles Deleuze, 'Postscript on the Societies of Control', *October* 59 (1992), 5. Emphasis in the original.

³⁰ Winnubst, *Way too Cool*, 35. Winnubst makes this larger argument about the fungibility of social difference through her book as a whole.

³¹ Lebow, 'Trumpism and the Dialectic of Neoliberal Reason', 382.

³² Winnubst, *Way Too Cool*, 39.

through reflecting on Adorno's suggestion that music embodies social antagonisms – now in the context of neoliberalism – and, second, by turning towards specific musical examples such as to unpack these reflections more concretely. I will argue that music and art can dissolve or recast the reified forms derived from everyday society. Just as the dream, in the psychoanalytic view, can work with materials of the day just past, softening the strictures of daytime rationality and infusing these materials with feelings that trace long before this, the hard edges of the quantifiable in culture provide materials for reworking in the artwork. Social forms become musical ones. Adapting Marx: the solid melts into sonorous air.

In Adorno's discussion of reification brings with it a language of 'congealing' and of 'ossification', whereby the once liquid and dynamic become hardened, become solid. Of philosophy, Adorno refers to its 'speculative element' operating through a reenlivening of that which is reified in its concepts: 'The thought movement that congealed in them [concepts] must be reliquified, its validity traced, so to speak, in repetition.'³³ His historical theory of musical material provides another example of criticality's coextension with a liquifying gesture. This follows Adorno's emphasis on elements of once-dynamic subjective expression becoming 'frozen' or 'sedimented' into apparently objective forms. In this account, the task of the critical composer becomes, in one sense, to resist a mere reproduction of these ossified materials, to attempt instead – echoing the speculative philosopher – to excavate from these something expressively genuine, or to examine these forms in relation to possibilities of expression or truth that are excluded otherwise.

³³ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 2007), 97.

Note that the critical is not *just* about liquification, or at least total liquification; this is an important element of a *dialectical* method, one that is not simply oppositional: ‘In criticism we do not simply liquidate systems [of thought]’, Adorno writes in *Negative Dialectics*.³⁴ That is, the pursuit of truth is not simply a path rejecting solidity, the dissolving of concepts as such – just as Derrida’s deconstructive method is not simply a destructive method, that eviscerates the possibility of meaning, but one that instead attends to the conditions and structures under which meaning is possible. Schoenberg’s liquification of tonality, similarly, was a critical method that operated in relation to the fixity and constraints of objective forms.³⁵ Nonetheless, one can emphasise here that criticality was effected in large part through a *liquification* that was otherwise overlooked by dominant social logics geared towards solidification and reification. With Adorno’s work, the solidity of social objectivities become liquified in the artwork. This of course makes complete sense in terms of the solidity of social forms and institutions that underpinned Adorno’s situation historically.

But this does not stand today. In contemporary neoliberal society – and perhaps since the rise of postmodernism that followed shortly after Adorno’s death – social forms are in themselves conceived as liquid. Zygmunt Bauman’s phrase ‘liquid modernity’, is helpful in emphasising this.³⁶ The solid, hard edges of social forms seem more malleable than they once were. This observation has important implications for the critical efficacy of music and the arts today. The ‘liquification’ that Adorno diagnosed in Schoenberg’s approach held critical potential for its time. To perform this liquification now, however, may be to remain in step with the dominant logic of a liquid society. If, once upon a

³⁴ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 24

³⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London and New York: Continuum, 1997), 304: ‘if composers were not permitted to be inspired by forms as a whole, which would instead be predetermined exclusively by the material, the result would lose its objective interest and fall mute.’

³⁶ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012).

time, art's liquification of the social afforded a critical inverse to society's reified solidity, today's society is always already liquified. What is art to do in this context?

One possibility is for art and music to revert to something solid, in the face of all the uncertainties of the swells and flows of a liquid society. Where this is asserted forcefully, this can manifest reactionary responses that assert a conservative retreat into the known: a 'stable' and exclusive canon of masterpieces, jingoistic nationalist music, performative matter-of-fact rhetoric about what is and is not music. More subtly, recent experiments with music's constituent materialities suggest re-examining music's relation to concrete phenomena – crises of materiality spur explorations around what we think material *is*, in music and society more broadly.³⁷ This suggests possibilities for a critical function of art and music that needn't be construed solely in terms of an *inverse* to the dominant character of a contemporary social formation: critical art's liquifying potential, in the face of society's solidity; or, alternatively, art's exploration of the solid, in the face of the liquid.

I would like to develop a more complex picture of what musical criticality means vis-à-vis contemporary neoliberal logics. I pursue this through further considering the relation between music, neoliberal rationality, and the neoliberal subject. I do this, first, in terms of the latter's commitment to productivity and the Foucauldian economisation of the once-noneconomic, mentioned above. Second, I consider this subject's celebrated 'flexibility', a feature it shares with some of the materials this subject makes use of to maintain itself – as subjects and objects both circulate as assets within the expanded 'economy' of neoliberal culture. This is enabled through reference to a number of very different musical examples.

³⁷ Samuel Wilson, *New Music and the Crises of Materiality: Sounding Bodies and Objects in Late Modernity* (New York and London: Routledge, 2021).

Productivity, composition, and artistic process

Neoliberal rationality emphasises a different manner of production than that which undergirded the commodity-driven culture industry of the twentieth century. As Wendy Brown has noted, the economisation of the subject (as ‘human capital’) involves ‘an emphasis on entrepreneurship and productivity [that] replaces an emphasis on commodities and consumption. Productivity is prioritized over product; enterprise is prioritized over consumption or satisfaction.’³⁸ One sees here a move from product and commodity-form, to productivity.

Composers are caught in a double bind: neoliberalism celebrates management and quantification of production, yet at the same time denigrates the ‘inflexible’ specialist knowledges that are traditionally associated with work such as (‘New’) music composition. The ideal worker under neoliberalism accords with the principle of ‘flexible specialisation’. This, as Ritchey helpfully summarises, refers to ‘the ability to create a wide variety of products for sale in a large number of markets.’³⁹ Flexible specialisation names a production process geared to generate multiplicity in its outputs. This contrasts with the ‘inflexible’ character of twentieth-century mass production, that would result in a standardised product suited to the mass market (‘market’ in the singular). Correspondingly, in the new economy, the composer’s most ‘successful’ strategy is, therefore, a process of making that is organised or managed, yet one that enables flexibility in what is produced. This enables ongoing productivity not centred on the production of a particular artistic output (‘product’), but – if you will – a production of production: a spurring of more, often iterative projects and multiple possibilities, towards open-ended and changeable futures. Accordingly, each project becomes construed as a

³⁸ Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 65–66.

³⁹ Ritchey, *Composing Capital*, 67.

point on the thread of an ongoing ‘artistic practice’. The ‘success’ of such a strategy might also be framed in terms of the economisation of the once-noneconomic aspect of artistic making. Namely, the resulting ‘surplus value’ afforded by the ‘investment’ that the artist makes in their practice is maximised where this production process affords many and varied possible artistic ‘products’. This is a broad tendency that can be manifested in different ways. One example is found in Dave Chapman’s account of the solo performer, who today often makes use of looper pedals and other prosthetic technologies; the solo performer can become ‘something quite like the idealised subject of human capital’, through self-managing towards maximised future surpluses. Or, as Chapman puts it, ‘looping devices and other artificial extensions of solo performance can be understood as a means of generating maximal results from minimal means.’⁴⁰ More broadly, this leveraging of possibilities runs in line with a neoliberal subject that looks to increase its capital – including one’s own ‘human-capital’ – on the basis of an investment in one’s self and one’s social and material relationships. Consequently, compositional practices and musical logic are in a tought relationship with socially and economically derived forms of rationality. Below I explore some further implications of this idea, regarding compositional processes.

Neoliberalism takes us beyond the standardised processes of production and consumption that dominated liberal capitalism – including Fordist production and consumption under the Culture Industry. It embraces diversification of goods and services. It also pluralises and eschews totality, in a way that echoes the collapse of historically dominant forms of authority, and indeed of an authoritative symbolic (I

⁴⁰ Chapman, ‘The “One-Man Band” and Entrepreneurial Selfhood in Neoliberal Culture’, *Popular Music* 32/3 (2013), 459–60. Chapman comments for example on Robert Fripp’s Frippertronics, suggesting that from the late 1970s, this enabled ‘[Fripp] to become a nimble, efficient economic unit, in anticipation of the volatile socioeconomic conditions that he predicts for the years ahead.’ (458)

expand on this last point momentarily). Foucault argues that under these late modern conditions the longstanding Marxist critiques of capitalism, as a “standardizing, mass society of consumption and spectacle” . . . no longer function in the same critical manner in the widespread, multiplying, diffuse practices of neoliberalism.’⁴¹ Indeed, neoliberalism explicitly develops an embrace of diversity, not just of goods but also of social identities. Social difference is ‘intensified, multiplied, and fractured in the ongoing stimulation of competition’ under neoliberalism.⁴² Lebow has argued that the standardising culture industry of the Frankfurt School’s analysis has, under neoliberalism, been superseded by a *culture market* ‘characterized less by monopolistic production from above, and more by extreme competition and participation from below’.⁴³

What does this mean for new music in general, and experimental music in particular? As a first step in answering this question, it is worth noting that the ‘new’ of ‘new music’ is doubly significant: not only does this literally designate music just composed – in the chronological sense – but it also of course suggests an aesthetic sensibility derived from a modernist commitment to music pushing forward, pursuing ‘the new’. Whilst it is not *necessarily* the case, one should admit to the possibility that performing newness today reiterates a neoliberal logic that demands constant innovation. Ritchey charts this well in her *Composing Capital*. As she notes, ‘Business journals and corporate policies link diversity to “innovation,” although specifics are rarely given.’⁴⁴ Ritchey argues that this idea of ‘innovation’ is highly visible in US classical music discourse – in for example, discussions around use of recent technologies

⁴¹ Winnubst, *Way Too Cool*, 30–1, opening with a quotation from Foucault.

⁴² Winnubst, *Way Too Cool*, 104.

⁴³ Lebow, ‘Trumpism and the Dialectic of Neoliberal Reason’, 385.

⁴⁴ Ritchey, *Composing Capital*, 38.

and the incorporation of diverse musical styles in a single musician's output.⁴⁵ As Andrea Moore has noted, contemporary music ensembles and projects 'that claim entrepreneurial origins are especially prized for their "innovation" and "flexibility".'⁴⁶

Writing of 'indie classical' – music that defines itself against a supposedly dry and academic modernism – Ritchey goes on to point out that its intermixing of styles is often more manifest in marketing and press rhetoric than in the music itself; broadly this music adopts 'motivic repetition and a regular rhythmic pulse: sounds that have characterized much of the music in the postminimalist tradition for decades. They ['indie classical' composers] imbue this repetition with dramatic expression and a few signifiers from other genres.' Indeed, this incorporation of diversity is accompanied by a promotion of flexible stylistic crossing, as a 'market imperative.'⁴⁷ In-keeping with this, Tim Rutherford-Johnson has elsewhere noted how 'aesthetic permissiveness after postmodernism became an almost moral obligation to cross boundaries of style and genre. . . . As those border crossings stopped being radical and became idiomatic, however, crossover work became a way of appealing to new audience segments and a tool within the marketing of contemporary music.'⁴⁸ Diversity and innovation here worked together in the creation and selling of music. Indeed, the fungibility of social identities that Winnubst has identified is manifested quite openly here, as different cultural reference points were incorporated as commensurate figures, circulating and furnishing diverse musical output that simulates and modulates interrelations between them.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Ritchey, *Composing Capital*, 26.

⁴⁶ Andrea Moore, 'Neoliberalism and the Musical Entrepreneur', *Journal of the Society for American Music* 10/1 (2016), 34.

⁴⁷ Ritchey, *Composing Capital*, 70–71.

⁴⁸ Tim Rutherford-Johnson, *Music after the Fall: Modern Composition and Culture Since 1989* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 75.

⁴⁹ Robin James writes at length of something similar in popular music, arguing that apparent 'post-genre' music is analogous to claims of 'post-identity' politics – with both reinscribing white

One aspect of this new dynamic of artistic productivity can be observed in the turn towards ‘process’ in artistic making – that is, an interest in ‘process’ as opposed to ‘product’ – and the way in which contemporary interests in process express a different cultural dynamic to investments in ‘process’ in artistic work(ing) prior to neoliberalism. Process, it goes without saying, has become an important concept for late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century musicians, sound artists, and artists more broadly.⁵⁰ This has a number of roots: often traced to Allan Kaprow’s Happenings, Fluxus events, Cage’s resistance to producing yet-another musical ‘product’; American minimalism and repetitive music also contributed, and Steve Reich’s proposal of staging music *as gradual process* are worth particular mention.⁵¹ These practices of the 1960s and 1970s were often posed critically towards High Modernist composition which – counterintuitively with respect to its ‘inflexible’ products – nonetheless emphasised the technical processes of compositional making: the total serialists in the 1950s actively experimented with new methods of making; one might even reach to the start of that century, where twelve-tone technique concretised a different method of compositional technique.

But let us consider how ‘process’ has come to mean something different than it did in these earlier explorations. One sees changes both in processes’ relation to consumption and, as already noted, to production (with ‘productivity’ venerated under neoliberalism). Regarding consumption, it was often asserted that engaging process in art turned away from the product (the now-clichéd mantra of, ‘I’m more interested in

normativity and supremacy. James, ‘Is the post- in post-identity the post- in post-genre?’, *Popular Music* 36/1 (2017), 21–32. While she does not do so in this article, one can note that James draws on Winnubst extensively in her later *Sonic Episteme*.

⁵⁰ Kim Grant has elaborated critically how embraces of process in art-making sit within the contexts of industrial and postindustrial labour practices. Kim Grant, *All About Process: The Theory and Discourse of Modern Artistic Labour* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2017).

⁵¹ Steve Reich, ‘Music as Gradual Process’, in *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, ed. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner, 304–6 (New York and London: Continuum, 2005).

process than product'). 'Process' in art once promised liquification of the reified commodity-form that predominated cultural life. In short, process contrasted with, unveiled, or resisted something hidden – the history of making, the artist's labour, our fetishism of the object – of that primary form consumed under high capitalism. Today, while the commodity-form persists, new forms of and for consumption have emerged. This goes hand-in-hand with 'liquification' in everyday life, its institutions and practices, already mentioned above. Economic systems and (post)digital technologies embrace processes and liquid streams of capital, media, and data on a daily basis. These flows are managed and contoured, verified and distributed. 'Process' is not – if it ever was – merely negative to consumer culture, or something hidden away, to be disclosed in acts of artistry; consumer culture today *takes process as one of its dominant forms*. And so, it is questionable if process in music and art today can promise liberation from dominant modes of production and consumption. Or, at least, process cannot do so *as such*, proffered critically for purposes of contravening the rationality upon which a contemporary monetized culture is founded. Today one need critically reassess the panoply of process-focused – and often indeterminate – artistic methods that are derived from the work of Cage, the Fluxus artists, and so on in the 1950s and 60s; such techniques take on new resonances and critical implications in post-1970s art and music – that is, after the expansion of neoliberal rationality accompanying a form of culture industry that places different emphasis on the commodity-form (the reified entity supposedly exploded by a turn to process). With all this said, I would like to consider how compositional processes might intersect or resonate with contemporary processes of production and consumption, such that artistic practices critically work-through and/or normatively reinscribe the dynamics of a productive subject.

Key here is the connection that ‘productivity’ in the day-to-day sense – like process in the artistic register – comprises activity without a specific outcome, or a specific object. As such, *‘process’ in art-making today gathers its normative force or critical power from its relation to the form of productivity, not the form of product (i.e. the commodity-form).*⁵² I am interested here in the way in which (artistic) process plays with or off the idea of (everyday) productivity. This might seem at first to be a strange pairing. However, maximising productivity *through the (self-)managing of labour processes* is central to practices of neoliberal work – and indeed of subjectivity more generally. This moment in my argument is, then, ultimately a proposition: that given the centrality of processes and productivity – and their management – in everyday life, it should come as no surprise that productivity and process are thematised and/or problematised in creative practices of the neoliberal age. These practices, similarly, draw attention to or experiment with processes of making, of processes of artistic labours that are productive or ‘unproductive’ by measures that overlap with yet differ from productivity as is dominantly conceived. Or, put more succinctly (and holding on to some of the utopianism of Adorno’s conception of art): art practices mime logics of the neoliberal economy, but (can) do so for different ends. They work through (or ‘work-through’, with all the psychoanalytic resonances of this phrase) these logics as a kind of problem, enabling an imagining or doing of them differently. Three initial, very different examples help clarify this proposition, from, first, Peter Schmidt and Brian Eno, second, John Zorn, and third, Johannes Kreidler.

⁵² Žižek also considers an additional formulation: processes become sold as products. For him, this is a quintessentially postmodern form of production and consumption. The musical implications of this are explored in Samuel Wilson, ‘Cage, Reich, and Morris: Process and Sonic Fetishism’, in *The Sound of Žižek: Musicological Perspectives on Slavoj Žižek*, ed. Mauro Fosco Bertola, 139–62 (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 2023).

Schmidt and Eno's *Oblique Strategies* – originally published in 1975 and periodically updated since – provides an interesting example to unpack the relation between productivity and self-management in art-making. *Oblique Strategies* is a series of cards, each printed with a short message. These messages are prompts that help the reader overcome a creative decision or dilemma. Examples include: 'Change instrument roles'; 'Do nothing for as long as possible'; 'Ask your body'; and, 'Cascades.' I find this interesting, as these messages do not specify exact processes or ways of making, nor a particular kind of object made – instead they are open-ended stimuli for further activity. Putting this another way, they are a resource that can be called on in the *self-managing of one's open-ended productivity*. They enable diverse outputs, with the focus being on the mode of productivity – not the 'mode of production' – itself. In this diverse application, they are also a resource that is highly flexible. A general point is worth reiterating: this is not me 'calling out' Schmidt and Eno as neoliberals. In fact, I am instead saying there is a positive repurposing of productivity here, an aesthetic echoing of the privileged status of a productivity that is primarily determined economically under neoliberalism more generally. Indeed, I should add that the cards appeared in the mid-70s, in a time of transition between the mass culture of high capitalism and the emergence of neoliberalism, and so should not be read only in terms of the logic of the latter.

Nonetheless, it is worth noting that such critical strategies can be easily coopted back into the dominant economic regime of production. *Oblique Strategies* is open to repurposing for creative and 'innovative' thinking in both the workplace and in personal life (under neoliberalism, the latter also connotes the quasi-economic field in which exists the 'subject of interests'). A business-oriented article from 2020, for example, argues that the 'whimsical and playful optimism that permeates almost all of Brian Eno's work', provides a model we should 'incorporate into our personal challenges and

pursuits.⁵³ This phrase is also indicative of neoliberal rationality's affective dimension – not only should one be productive, but one should ideally do so joyfully, passionately.⁵⁴ It should also come as no surprise that a 'special edition' is now available as an iPhone app that is unambiguously labelled under tools for 'productivity'.⁵⁵ Additionally, sets of online prompts for tangential thinking in business have also been modelled on Schmidt and Eno's cards.⁵⁶

These developments help illustrate a broader point. Given the notion that neoliberalism engages what Yann Moulier-Boutang calls a 'cognitive capitalism', a post-Fordist condition that values mental and creative labour, this raises an additional problem for artistic practices in terms of their criticality.⁵⁷ Because artistic processes are conventionally aligned closely with conceptual and abstract labour, this opens them up to easy cooption by neoliberal forces. So, this expresses one aspect of the proximity (as Bojana Kunst puts it) between artistic process and processes of production under contemporary capitalism.⁵⁸ This proximity can form the basis for critical actions – where the problematic of productivity is taken up for aesthetic exploration. At the same time, however, this proximity could very easily afford a reinscription in art-making of normative expectations around productivity, where the artist is taken as a worker who is always productive and self-managing of the maximisation and open-endedness of their

⁵³ This appears on the CRM website ('an online resource for business growth'). Nick Williams, 'Brian Eno's Oblique Strategies for Tangential Thinking' (31 July 2020), <https://crm.org/articles/brian-eno-oblique-strategies> (accessed 13 April 2022).

⁵⁴ On 'passion' in the musical workplace, see Bennett, 'Essential – Passion for Music': Affirming, Critiquing and Practicing Passionate Work in Creative Industries'.

⁵⁵ 'Oblique Strategies SE' iOS app, developed by Nicolae Gherasim, © 2016 Mindeon Software.

⁵⁶ See Matt Ballantine, 'Why Not Shift Strategies for Better Creative Thinking?', *Forbes* 23 October 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/mattballantine/2018/10/23/why-not-shift-strategies-for-better-creative-thinking/?sh=7f86cb82529d> (accessed 14 June 2022).

⁵⁷ Yann Moulier-Boutang, *Cognitive Capitalism*, trans. Ed Emery (Cambridge and Malden: Polity, 2011).

⁵⁸ Bojana Kunst, *Artist at Work: Proximity of Art and Capitalism* (Winchester and Washington: Zero Books, 2015).

production. (One muses if generative music, also associated with Eno, might also fit well this logic of maximising diverse outputs from minimally invested inputs.) *Oblique Strategies*, and its afterlife, crystallises both aspects: a critical self-managing of one's processes of creative making and a later cooption in line with the normative rationality of neoliberalism.

While *Oblique Strategies* echoes the dynamics of self-management under late capitalism, other practices of music-making also connote the management of others. John Zorn's file card method is one such strategy, constituting a creative process that nonetheless affords diverse outcomes. Zorn has developed numerous works through this method, the earliest being *Godard* (1985) and *Spillane* (1986). Maurice Windburn provides a helpful summary of this process of making:

[Zorn begins by] researching the life and work of a chosen dedicatee, who is generally an artistic figure [i.e. *Godard* being director Jean-Luc Godard, and *Spillane* after writer Mickey Spillane]. Zorn draws from the work and aesthetics of this dedicatee to frame his composition, annotating impressions, instructions or quotations related to the dedicatee onto a series of file cards (i.e. index cards). These file cards are then arranged in a specific order by Zorn, who realises them only once, as a recording (these works are almost never performed live), in collaboration with hand-picked improvising musicians. [The results...] are generally imprecise in nature, including only vague musical instructions or allusions to the work's dedicatee. This allows the musicians who work with Zorn creative input in what is a collaborative process.⁵⁹

As the ensemble moves through the cards (sometimes but not always with reference to fragments of traditionally notated music), the sonic result is one of distinct 'sound

⁵⁹ Windburn, 'Formulating a "Cinematic Listener" for John Zorn's File Card Compositions', *Sound Effects: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Sound and Sound Experience* 8/1 (2019), 144.

blocks', a quick cutting between different moods or styles – or 'scenes'. Indeed, in line with Zorn's own conception (and often his filmic or popular media dedicatees), these works are generally held as exemplifying a response, or contribution to, the heterogeneous imagery and visual stimuli one experienced under late twentieth-century American postmodernity.

I would like to emphasise a specific dynamic of production, that dovetails neoliberal political economy with these established readings of postmodern 'style'. Zorn's management of the creative process is multifaceted. The cards – when ordered – provide a management of the events of indeterminate performance. Further, the hand-picking of collaborators enacts a managerial function that resonates with post-Fordist economy, in which specialists are 'subcontracted' as necessary from project to project.⁶⁰ In line with this, collaborators are credited, but the works nonetheless bear Zorn's name as composer. At a higher level of organisation, the 'file card method' – as a reified manner of working – provides the means for creating multiple musical works, each of which potentially could be realised differently (although each of which is actually only realised once). Additionally, Zorn, in a telling statement, said of his process that his use of 'disparate sound blocks' means he finds it 'convenient to *store* these "events" on filing cards so they can be sorted and ordered *with minimum effort*.'⁶¹ In this latter aspect, there is an efficiency of practice, a Foucauldian 'conduct of conduct', of the management of these musical materials; a considered expenditure of energy in service of the 'surplus value' to be returned by the end results. There is also, in the 'storing' of events, an allusion to accumulation of his creative labour, which as such becomes resources to be

⁶⁰ Grant and Bishop have written extensively on the related issues: Grant, in *All About Process*, on artists' extensive uses of assistants; Bishop on the outsourcing of artistic labour in 'Delegated Performance: Outsourcing Authenticity', in *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (New York and London: Verso, 2012).

⁶¹ Zorn cited in Kenneth Gloag, *Postmodernism in Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 102. My emphasis.

made use of in the labours of the collaborative performers who realise the file cards. As such, Zorn seems to repurpose or rehearse the working practices of the neoliberal subject, but in the critical terms of the aesthetic sphere.

Whereas the Eno and Zorn examples implicate or reflect rationalities of production implicitly, more recently, Johannes Kreidler's *Fremdarbeit* (2009) (which the composer renders as 'Outsourcing' in English) explicitly thematises compositional labour under globalised capitalism.⁶² In the narrative presented by Kreidler, the composer was commissioned to write a work, and outsourced this to Xia Non Xiang, a Chinese composer. Kreidler provided Xiang with examples of his own work, along with other material such as pop music, as a basis for the new piece. He also claimed to provide Ramesh Murraybay, an Indian programmer who had experience of working with sound, with the same examples – subcontracting Murraybay to design a programme to analyse the parameters of Kreidler's own music (types of materials, sonic properties, volumes) music, and to generate a new 'Kreidler' piece from this data. A third piece was (purportedly) a collaboration between the two outsourced workers – Xiang composing with Murraybay's programme. Kreidler, contractually owning the three pieces, then presents this work as 'his own' in concert. In addition to 'the pieces' themselves, any performance of *Fremdarbeit* requires another element: a speaking 'moderator' alongside the instrumentalists. The role of the moderator is to explain to the audience the context of the pieces and the creative processes behind them.⁶³

A good deal of commentary, both supportive and critical, has surrounded *Fremdarbeit* – and indeed has been focused on Kreidler himself. This controversy is in part owed to the work offering a 'self-implicating entanglement', as Max Erwin puts it,

⁶² On translation of the title into English, see Martin Iddon, 'Outsourcing Progress', *Tempo* 70/275 (2016), 39, footnote 7.

⁶³ Iddon outlines the role of the moderator in more detail in his 'Outsourcing Progress'.

between the composer and his music, rather than a detached presentation of political issues.⁶⁴ Martin Iddon has suggested, similarly, that ‘it is so often so challenging to separate Kreidler from his output’.⁶⁵ It is clear that the discourse of controversy generated by the work is part of its conception. (Kreidler has in other works paired the compositional concept with actions such as giving related interviews and holding a press conference, as in the case of *Product Placements* [2008].) In one performance of *Fremdarbeit*, a heckler interrupts the moderator – in this case played by Kreidler himself – to insist that the work is both exploitative and, due to its outsourcing, not Kreidler’s own. I am sympathetic to Iddon’s suspicion that the interruption is planned, with the answers given by Kreidler sounding prepared in advance.⁶⁶ At the very least, Kreidler’s articulate responses suggest he rehearsed answers for delivery in the event of a hostile reception.

Even more fundamentally, Iddon questions – convincingly, in my view – Kreidler’s narrative of the work’s formation. Iddon makes the case that the outsourced workers are fictitious, as their names do not make sense as Chinese or Indian names. Furthermore, while Kreidler supplies photographs of the two workers, one image is in fact the picture of a Stanford University Professor of Physics, and the other ‘bears a striking resemblance’ to a US-based engineer.⁶⁷ While this fiction might tenably absolve Kreidler of the exploitative labour practices he could be said to reenact, in Iddon’s view Kreidler ‘still produce[s] colonial stereotypes’ in order to enact this fiction.⁶⁸ Iddon

⁶⁴ Max Erwin, ‘Here Comes the Newer Despair’, *Tempo* 70/278 (2016), 10.

⁶⁵ Iddon, ‘Outsourcing Progress’, 38.

⁶⁶ Iddon, ‘Outsourcing Progress’, 41. Erwin, notes slightly more cautiously the ‘hostile but perhaps not unstaged interruption of a performance of *Fremdarbeit*’. Erwin, ‘Here Comes the Newer Despair’, 11–12. This interruption appears during a short documentary on the piece, which the composer has shared on Youtube. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L72d_0zIT0c (accessed 10 November 2023).

⁶⁷ Iddon, ‘Outsourcing Progress’, 45–46.

⁶⁸ Iddon, ‘Outsourcing Progress’, 48.

argues that while Kreidler does make visible conditions of exploitation, this nonetheless is premised on the (fictional) exploited Other – in China and India – adopting the terms of the European (coloniser) in order that this might become visible. Importantly, Kreidler’s moderator makes comments about the *failure* of the Chinese and Indian worker to fully realise the techniques of European New Music; in Iddon’s view, this reinscribes the idea of the colonised’s mimicry as inferior to the language of European music.⁶⁹ Whatever its political successes or failures, it is undeniable that *Fremdarbeit* directly thematises working practices and conditions of production as the content of the piece, with Kreidler’s compositional owner/authorship (ironically) asserted through his managerial role over the production process, and his legal ownership of ‘the work’. What was observed implicitly in Eno’s and Zorn’s processes is, in Kreidler’s, emphasised explicitly.

More generally, it is worth considering the rather mundane fact that ‘this-is-how-the-piece-was-made’ is often a point of emphasis with contemporary composition (in everything from specialist talks to concert programme notes). Why this emphasis on the manner of production? There are at least two reasons I see. First, because it relates to the normative emphases on productivity, which under neoliberalism becomes foregrounded in acts of production and consumption. Casting music/art in these terms of their productive processes also makes them understandable at a historical moment when symbolic forms of authority are not assumed (more on this below), and so the interpretational frame through which the (artistic) ‘product’ is experienced cannot be taken for granted. Therefore, one is referred to the modalities of the ‘product’s’ genesis, the means of productivity that brought it to be what it is. Second, technical explication enables a quantification of composition, in line with the demands of instrumental reason

⁶⁹ Iddon, ‘Outsourcing Progress’, 42–43.

(Adorno and Horkheimer) and the neoliberal economisation of the once-noneconomic (Foucault). I wish to be clear that this is not my out-of-hand dismissal of any possible description of a composition's making. Such technical discourse can be valuable. Rather, this is to suggest that, without critical reflection, such technical discourses can go hand-in-hand with a naturalised mode of quantifying rationality, aligning with institutional demands for the articulation of artistic knowledges in particular, limited forms, themselves derived from predominant social and economic logics – an example being artistic experimentation, and its value, couched primarily in the terms of 'innovation' or 'research and development'.

Practicing flexibility and mobility

These quantifying tendencies and dispersal of established forms of the authority/authorship, exhibited in a number of discourses surrounding compositional production, can be understood as expressive of neoliberal conditions; a range of theorists have argued, in different ways, that neoliberalism shatters traditionally asserted structures of authority and normativity, and the terms of the 'solid' modernity to which Adorno's critique responded. The postmodern age, in Jean-François Lyotard's famous formulation, ushers in incredulity towards metanarratives, an inability to subscribe wholly to a singular framework that makes navigable one's own place in the world.⁷⁰ Zygmunt Bauman wrote extensively of an individualised society in which individuals are divested from common strands of social relation.⁷¹ For Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, capitalism dizzyingly deterritorialises and reterritorializes. Not only is there change, but this change, they argue, is self-negating; capitalism results in destabilising the

⁷⁰ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), xxiv.

⁷¹ Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*; Zygmunt Bauman, *The Individualized Society* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001).

subjects that it constitutes yet relies on for its reproduction, degrading the very foundations on which capitalistic structures are themselves built. Darrow Schecter writes of their view that ‘The system has a dynamic of de-territorialization in motion that will eventually elude its normalising control – it will be unable to produce the subjects it needs to sustain capital-labour whilst [reining] it in and commodifying the desires of the multitude.’⁷² Indeed, Chapman has argued that, paradoxically, the image of deterritorialisation that is associated with transnational finance is sometimes proactively countered by the agents of this deterritorialisation. He uses the example of Goldman Sach’s investment in a New Orleans jazz centre, which is undertaken in an ‘intensively *localized*’ manner. This Chapman reads as an effort by the bank to ‘harness jazz as a powerful conduit of community building . . . as a particular sophisticated attempt . . . to reposition itself as *grounded*, as tangibly invested in the fates of ordinary urbanites’, in the contrast with ‘the optics of [investment banks] hegemonic position within the global economy, particular in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis.’⁷³

Winnubst provides a helpful synthesis of various recent contributions to debates around neoliberalism’s reformulation of authority and normativity. Drawing on the work of Jodi Dean and Slavoj Žižek, she develops a broadly neo-Lacanian diagnosis of this situation. Winnubst ultimately argues that the neoliberal subject divests from a shared symbolic.⁷⁴ She draws on the work of Dean, writing in summary of the latter’s view that ‘neoliberalism . . . evacuates previous social scripts and the identities they spawn.’ This challenges the possibility of interpellation into the symbolic sphere. Dean herself makes use of Hardt and Negri’s ‘account of the crisis of institutions such as the

⁷² Schecter as cited in Berry, *Critical Theory and the Digital*, 11.

⁷³ Chapman, *The Jazz Bubble*, 5, emphases in the original.

⁷⁴ Following this Winnubst concludes that the subject no-longer one of Althusserian ‘interpellation’. See Chapter 2 of *Way too Cool* in particular.

nuclear family, the school, the neighbourhood, the church, and so on. We no longer have any clear models of authority.⁷⁵ Social controls take place ‘through the endlessly comparative process of idealization, not authority.’⁷⁶ And, in this view, the experience of neoliberal consumer society is one of fungible identities offered up and sold, endless ‘purely social (not moral or epistemological) . . . ideals to simulate’.⁷⁷ Again, one can observe the economisation of the noneconomic, where identities are conceptualised as fungible units in ‘circulation’, rather than anchored materially or historically. Indeed, the role of the state under neoliberalism becomes one of facilitating this economisation. As Wendy Brown writes of Foucault’s analysis, neoliberalism is understood to activate ‘the state on behalf of the economy, *not* to undertake economic functions or to intervene in economic *effects*, but rather to facilitate economic competition and growth and to economize the social, or, as Foucault puts it, to “regulate society by the market”.’ The economy is a ‘model, object, and project’ for the state under neoliberalism.⁷⁸ Or to summarise: even the authority of the state is undertaken through dispersed institutions and networks. Under these conditions the preferred language for characterisation of self, society, and its institutions – even state functions themselves – are terms such as ‘flows’ and ‘flexibility’ (in contrast with the supposed solidity and inflexibility of ‘old’ society prior to neoliberalism).

The neoliberal subject is similarly demanded to be flexible, ready and able to undertake different skills, a composite or portfolio of different working practices. Above, we already noted the principle of ‘flexible specialisation’. Marianna Ritchey has explored this with particular regard to ‘indie classical’ musicians – one example of a condition under which a regime of flexibility ‘naturalizes constant work and self-management as a

⁷⁵ Winnubst, *Way Too Cool*, 64.

⁷⁶ Winnubst, *Way Too Cool*, 87.

⁷⁷ Winnubst, *Way Too Cool*, 65.

⁷⁸ Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 62. Brown’s quotation is from Foucault.

necessary condition of making great art.’⁷⁹ She also identifies a tension in this notion of the neoliberal worker: the ideal worker is a specialist without a specialism. This is something achievable only with ‘a supremely personalized musical education’.⁸⁰ Indie classical exemplifies this paradox, with its proponents often possessing a high degree of training and specialised skill sets, while simultaneously embracing ‘career flexibility and stylistic eclecticism, which represents the diffusion of specialization that survival within neoliberalism requires.’⁸¹ It should go without saying Ritchey’s points, argued so well in relation to indie classical, are not limited only to that kind of music. Looking at patterns of contemporary training in conservatoire and art school settings, one is struck by the presence of language around the teaching of flexibility, the embrace of multiple methods, and the learning of professional standards and practices suited to a portfolio career.⁸² Additionally, it is not only that subjects are ideally flexible under neoliberalism in terms of their potential productivity. As Eric Drott has shown, this also occurs within the sphere of consumption, wherein streaming services undertake a process of subjectification that produces a listening subject who is flexible in the music they consume. Or as Drott puts it, ‘To the extent that these technologies [such as algorithmic recommendation] are construed as a dynamic and adaptive, modulating in tandem with users’ fluctuating needs, dispositions, and desires, they demand users who are no less dynamic and adaptable, and who imagine themselves in analogous terms: less as

⁷⁹ Ritchey, *Composing Capital*, 76.

⁸⁰ Ritchey, *Composing Capital*, 70.

⁸¹ Ritchey, *Composing Capital*, 66–7.

⁸² As a teacher, I see this myself, where students are trained as dynamically responsive individuals with broad skillsets replies necessarily to the demands of the industries they aim to enter – effecting a kind of ‘flexible specialisation’. Andrea Moore focuses on this in more detail in her ‘Neoliberalism and the Musical Entrepreneur’, 40–1. For the exploration of related issues in musicology and university music programmes, see Blake’s ‘Musicological Omnivory in the Neoliberal University’, *The Journal of Musicology* 34/3 (2017), 319–53 and William Robin, ‘Balance Problems: Neoliberalism and New Music in the American University and Ensemble’, *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 71/3, 749–93.

individuals having cohesive identities, and more as a diffuse set of fluctuating needs, dispositions, and drives, whose only constant is their inconstancy.’⁸³

This flexibility also manifests in mobility, in a subject – or aspects of a subject – that circulate in a wider (again, expanded) ‘economy’, and across spheres of its institutional superstructure.⁸⁴ This contrasts with the modern institutions – of the schools, hospitals, and barracks – that were analysed by Foucault. These effected distinct spaces in which different forms of training and/or labour would take place; indeed, these separations were defined through this spatial (as well as temporal) separation. Deleuze argued that Foucault’s modern institutions were superseded and fragmented by what he called a ‘society of control’ that was, contrarily, not defined by such distinctness. The subject of this latter society – which became dominant under neoliberal information society – was defined by a motion and circulation between multiple spaces and practices; ‘The disciplinary man [Foucault’s modern subject] was in a discontinuous producer of energy, but the man of control is undulatory, in orbit, in a continuous network.’⁸⁵ This characteristic mobility is a feature not just of neoliberal society, but of the contemporary, globalised world more generally. As Rosi Braidotti – herself a close reader of Foucault and Deleuze – has noted more recently, the nomadism of subjects is multifaceted.⁸⁶ This is the difference between the transnational mobility of the executive on the charter jet and the refugee on the life raft. Yet, both are facts of the contemporary global mobilities. The nomad can thus assert a radical challenge to neoliberal rationality. At the same

⁸³ Eric Drott, ‘Why the Next Song Matters: Streaming, Recommendation, Scarcity’, *Twentieth-Century Music* 15/3 (2018), 330.

⁸⁴ Note that Rutherford-Johnson discusses numerous works themising mobility and flexibility in Chapters 4 and 5 of *Music After the Fall*.

⁸⁵ Deleuze, ‘Postscript on the Societies of Control’, 6.

⁸⁶ Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 7. In particular, Braidotti draws on Vandana Shiva’s work to develop this point.

time, in its association with the flexible and mobile subject, it can reinscribe something core to the neoliberal project.

This principle of flexibility – and forms of mobility associated with it – manifests in contemporary musical materials. Or, put in the language of ‘maximising interests’, one could say instead that materials are *leveraged* in compositional work such as to performatively enact and/or subvert the constitutive conditions of the flexible and mobile contemporary subject. There are a number of ways this is achieved, and I explore this in relation to some more musical examples below. But what we see and hear in all of these compositional techniques are features of contemporary music-making that nonetheless profess truths beyond their ‘technical’ features. By way of a quick example of what I mean here: I very like much like Tim Rutherford-Johnson’s comment on compositional decoupling (a process in which, for example, the hand with the violin bow is notated separately from the hand on the fingerboard): ‘Many younger composers have found the logic and practice of [instrumental] decoupling useful not only as a source of new instrumental sound . . . but also as a means of expression that coincides with the deconstructionist philosophies and aesthetics of the time and as a way of capturing and expressing the moment-by-moment contingency of identity that is a reality for millennials.’⁸⁷ This articulation is so productive as it cements features of music’s *techné* as always already suggestive of historical and social truths beyond the technicalities of ‘the music itself’. Music in this manner gives sensible form to the shape and experience of social and economic formulations.

⁸⁷ Rutherford-Johnson, *Music After the Fall*, 108. I also focus on this phrase in my review of Rutherford-Johnson’s book. See Samuel Wilson ‘[Review of] Tim Rutherford-Johnson, *Music After the Fall: Modern Composition and Culture Since 1989*’, *Twentieth-Century Music* 15/1 (2017), 131–6.

The notion of neoliberalism's characteristic productivity (as we saw with Eno, Zorn, and Kreidler) resonates not just in the creation of single (musical, sonic) artworks, but also in the relation between artworks. One observes this in what one might term *iterative form*. In using the word 'iterative', I am describing a reworking of artistic materials, over and again – adapting these to new ends – in a way that draws coherence yet differs from previous concretisations of these materials into specific works. This is *formal* in so far as the works shaping and structure is bound up with or determined by this iterative quality. One can observe this dynamic in a range of work, from notated music of the concert hall to transmedial work situated across concert halls and gallery spaces.

Wolfgang Rihm's reworking of materials is a well-known example of the former. Alastair Williams, among others, has charted how works such as *Vers une symphonie fleuve I* (1992/1995) and *Jagden und Formen* (2001) make use of materials from earlier pieces by the composer.⁸⁸ Works such as the *fleuve* series exemplify an iterative approach, through taking materials of earlier pieces and reworking these through the overwriting, negation, or addition of new elements. This accords with the title of the series, which denotes *flowing*. Rihm himself has written of thinking here of 'music in the shape [of] a river'.⁸⁹ This notion of symphony-as-flow differs from normative expectations of a symphony as a solid, bounded entity – this symphony flows across multiple iterations. A liquidity of forms here echoes the characteristic liquidity of late modernity. Barbara Zuber has explored Rihm's compositional process in relation to his *Verwandlung* ('Transformation') series. As Zuber demonstrates, this series – she focuses in detail on *Verwandlung 1* and *6* – share common musical materials and focus on processes of

⁸⁸ Alastair Williams, 'Swaying with Schumann: Subjectivity and Tradition in Wolfgang Rihm's "Fremde Szenen" I-III and Related Scores', *Music & Letters* 87/3 (2006), 383. Also see Wilson, *New Music and the Crises of Materiality*, Chapter 4.

⁸⁹ Wolfgang Rihm, '[Programme note to *Vers Une symphonie fleuve*]', Universal Edition website, <https://www.universaledition.com/wolfgang-rihm-599/works/vers-une-symphonie-fleuve-5628> (accessed 15 November 2023).

developing difference from the same. Indeed, this self-critically becomes the focus of the compositional process. Or as Zuber puts it,

What is particular about the group of works *Verwandlung* 1–6 is their specific intention to develop a generative musical morphology. All of these orchestral works, their titles give it away, were composed under the sign of an explicit thematic musical morphogenesis, understood as the creation of open, mutable gestalts, which are transformed and remodelled, revised, and re-established.⁹⁰

It is worth clarifying something here: it is not just the production of heterogeneity from unity that characterises Rihm's process. If this were the case, his compositional dynamic would be shared with music from at least Beethoven's late quartets to Schoenberg's twelve-tone method, which similarly develops the whole from a set of limited materials (such as small motivic-harmonic cells or a tone-row). What distinguishes Rihm's process from these precursors, and what relates it in some way to contemporary rationalities, is the open-endedness of this process: that there is no allusion to wholeness, instead an always-spiralling outward of possibilities. Forms becomes mobile – always de- and reterritorialising, if one were to apply those Deleuzian labels – pushing beyond demarcated boundaries of a single composition, and indeed enabling the production of new works. Furthermore, Rihm incorporates a wealth of additional materials alongside the iterated elements that thread from work to work.

Marina Rosenfeld's transmedial series *Deathstar* (2017-), while outwardly very different from Rihm's music, also manifests this iterative dynamic. This series includes site-specific sound installation, visual works, music for piano, for orchestra, and for

⁹⁰ Barbara Zuber, "Nulli sua forma manebat": Wolfgang Rihm's Orchestral Pieces *Verwandlung* 1 and 6', *Contemporary Music Review* 36/4 (2017), 312.

percussion, and internet-based video performance.⁹¹ The name of the project derives from an experimental recording technique from the late 1990s, which inspired the series' first iteration. Each work draws on, combines, or remediates materials from the others. To give the example of one the simpler reworkings: one of the visual pieces that comprises *Deathstar (Notation)* (chronologically the second piece in the series), doubles as a work for solo piano; more complexly, *Deathstar (Orchestration)* 'combines the piano score of *Deathstar (Notation)* with a more detailed, this time fully orchestrated transcription of audio fragments harvested from *Deathstar (Installation)* [the first piece in the series].'⁹²

My suggestion is that Rihm's and Rosenfeld's iterative strategies are technical processes undertaken in an aesthetic register, but which nonetheless play with dominant social logics. These logics – often in a disguised way – structure the manner of approaching and working with Rihm's and Rosenfeld's (and others') materials. Here, these strategies are suggestive of a concept of material as flexible and plastic – potentially valuable in contributing to the production of diverse compositional outcomes. Further, iterative strategies resonate with a society that demands one maximise the extraction of (surplus) value from one's resources. As we have seen, under neoliberalism, this logic extends to once-noneconomic spheres. Additionally, the iterative strategy is not construed as a search for some inner qualities of the materials, but as a spiralling outward. This echoes a feature of the neoliberal subject itself, who, as noted already, locates veridiction not in reference to an internal truth – be this the soul or a primal unconscious – but in the circulation of outward markers within an external social field that is conceived quasi-economically. In Rihm's and Rosenfeld's ongoing series, one

⁹¹ Christine Dysers, 'Wild Inside Itself: Repetition and Resistance in Marina Rosenfeld's "Deathstar" Series' (prepublication draft).

⁹² Dysers, 'Wild Inside Itself'.

finds no guiding principle, neither in an transcend principle (the ‘organic whole’, reference to a metaphysical truth or transcendental signifier), nor can one locate this in the needs of a subjective interior (expressed latterly through the artwork). Productive ‘development’ is instead compelled by the circulation of mobile and flexible sonic (and other) materials.

This produces a strange effect for the observer or listener of each artwork. There is an object or artistic ‘product’ before us – this or that orchestral work by Rihm, or *Deathstar (Notation)* as opposed to *Deathstar (Orchestration)* – but, at the same time, this comes with the knowledge that every work is also a moment of an ongoing process of making. Each artistic object becomes a specific point in a continual line of practice, and as such emphasises the ongoingness of production. As such, one experiences antagonisms that express a double vision of the object: the object’s presence is undercut by the very processes that constituted it, that remind us that things could have been and in fact will be otherwise, in future iterations; flipping this around, the processes nonetheless do not seem to fully capture the singularity of *this* specific object that stands before us as an audience, which – perhaps owing to its determination as artwork – exceeds a status as mere epiphenomenon of the processes of production. Drawing inspiration from Adorno’s notion that artistic forms embody concealed connections with the social conditions contemporary to them, I would go a step further: the antagonisms just identified recall the strange phenomenology of production and consumption under neoliberal capitalism – that in daily life one is to face a world of products yet also knows that the same objects coveted will soon become outdated or obsolete. Indeed, I propose that the transitoriness that accompanies the iterative quality of the ever-changing object has a spatial parallel in the characteristic rootlessness of the mobile, nomadic subject (a theme picked up below). As such, iterative forms constitute a critical negotiation of

logics derived from life under neoliberalism, and the latter's concomitant processes of production and consumption.

A musical dialectic of inflexibility presents another response to the celebrated flexibility of the subject and its productive processes under neoliberalism. One hears this in Sarah Hennies's *Orienting Response* (2015-2016), for solo guitar. Put in the simplest terms, *Orienting Response* consists of ten very short phrases that are incessantly repeated (with the exception of one phrase, that includes internal repetition but which crescendos over a 7-minute period). The score includes these phrases, in standard notation, with timings in minutes and seconds denoting when to move from one phrase to the next. The piece lasts 45 minutes in total. There is, on the face of it, an inflexibility to the musical materials, a compulsive repetition of the same. For example, the fourth phrase is repeated from 15'00" to 22'00", with a very slow tempo of $\text{crochet} = 35$. This phrase consists of a single two-beat bar with a simple rhythm made up from quavers and semiquavers; the only pitches included are *a*, *b*, and *c*, with *a* appearing rooted at the bottom of the phrase, every quaver. Hennies adds some – relatively speaking – complexity, through asking the performer to switch their sounding of this pitch between the sixth and fifth strings, and adds an *a* harmonic on the fourth string on the final semiquaver of the bar.

The dialectic arises in that this emphasis on the same nonetheless courts a multiplicity of diverse outcomes – if a diversity that is, it should be said, generally attended to self-consciously, at the scale of microscopic difference. The guitarist performs actions such as sounding the same pitch on different strings, and additional, awkward techniques, like simultaneously plucking on both sides of the fretting finger. 'Errors' result. Often these constitute only very minor imperfections or deviations of tone. However, these are welcomed by the composer. 'Allow "mistakes" to occur, do not attempt to

correct them,' writes Hennies in the prefatory instructions to the score. Clearly, this is not the repetition of Reich's 'repetitive music'. It does not assert, as Reich does, a process of transformation, in which put in Reich's terms, 'compositional process and a sounding music that are the same thing.'⁹³

Bryn Harrison's music – I am thinking in particular of his *Dead Time* (2019) – shares some commonalities with Hennie's strategy in *Orienteering Response*, and it is worth outlining features of this, before going on to consider some critical implications of Hennies' and Harrison's music together. Harrison himself considers *Dead Time* to be an exploration of what repetition means in live music in an age of digital reproduction and looping. One hears different forms of repetition in the piece. Most prominently, the acoustic instrumentalists (alto flute, tenor sax, violin, piano, percussion) snag on phrases that will repeat over and over; then later, phrases are similarly repeated, although with the crucial difference that now these are recorded and looped digitally (using electronics). This looping imposes itself into the development of the musical material; this is especially the case with the digital loops, which – unlike the minute fluctuations in the humanly produced repetitions – repeat absolutely.

Rather than 'repetitive music' (Reich), I am tempted to call pieces like *Orienteering Response* and *Dead Time* 'reiterative', in that front and centre is a focus on difference's emergence through failed repetition. While connected, I would also distinguish this from the 'iterative' strategies mentioned above (the Rihm and Rosenfeld examples), as Hennies and Harrison situate their approaches within the boundaries of single works; this bounding, as such, provides an overarching organisational principle – one that, nonetheless, is exceeded by its realisation in performance. Additionally, the principle of performance 'failure' that is in-built into these pieces – that the performers will not

⁹³ Reich, 'Music as Gradual Process', 305.

realise repetitions exactly – emphasises the presence of the performer and their instrument beyond the realisation of the composition. The score in Hennie's piece is posed as an instructional set of actions, from which interest arises in the failure to render the scored repetitions exactly. There's an emphasis on the *practice* of performance, in both this and Harrison's work. Indeed, in the minuteness of the sonic differences that emerge, these composers play with the notion of diversified production: they emphasise the production of multiplicity but in a manner that, at the same time, constrains what comprises that multiplicity. This demands of the listener's close and attentive listening, rather than – as is more customary under neoliberal consumption – the consumer's dropping of that which has become similar and ultimately boring, taking in place of this yet another product.

While the dialectics of (in)flexibility and (im)mobility manifest implicitly in iterative and reiterative forms, these ideas are elsewhere thematised more explicitly. One can hear this in the work of Chino Amobi. Marie Thompson has discussed this with respect to his *Airport Music for Black Folk* (2016), an album that explores the airport as a racialised space – one that expresses exclusions and barriers, a place of being stopped at, as much as symbolising a sphere of travel, one of passing through. Or as Thompson puts it, airports are 'not just sites of banal indifference; rather they are heavily securitized and often hostile spaces of racialization, surveillance and borders'.⁹⁴ Thompson reads this against an interpretation of Lawrence English's *Airport Symphony* (2007), a homage to Eno's *Music for Airports* (1978), which she argues repeats an unproblematised version of the airport's ambience. For Thompson, Amobi's work, by contrast, denaturalises claims to sound's political and cultural neutrality – as one meets in claims about sound's

⁹⁴ Marie Thompson, 'Whiteness and the Ontological Turn in Sound Studies', *Parallax* 23/3 (2017), 276.

ontology ‘as such’, beyond any positionality of perception.⁹⁵ Or, put in terms pertaining more directly to the thematic of mobility, mobility is not ‘just’ a feature that is ‘stylised’ in music and art; mobility is one aspect of the politics of spatiality, as this encompasses and enacts differences, including racialisation.

Amobi’s 2017 album, *PARADISO* builds further on this theme, though does so quite differently: it develops a quasi-cinematic dystopian soundscape blending acoustic and synthesised instruments, looped and broken beats, recordings of organic life, outdoor ambiences, and machines, along with a range of voices that sing – with lesser or greater degrees of processing – as well as recite poetry, speak, and scream. Militarised and state powers are sonically present. We hear helicopters, machine guns, police sirens, and two-way radios. Chal Ravens’s *Pitchfork* review effectively summaries the effect of this heterogeneity:

The hour-long album hurtles forwards, zig-zagging from blasted noise collages to lilting Latin rhythms, noisy ’80s industrial to thrashing surf rock, and even sun-kissed pop on “The Floating World Pt 1,” a dazzling break in the clouds provided by [musician] Benja SL. But the sounds of our already-existing hellscape are a constant intrusion. Amobi pummels us with the sonic detritus of urban life: demonic radio jingles, malfunctioning gadgets, and fried car alarms. Are we circling the inferno, or is this real life? Can we speed our way through purgatory?⁹⁶

The listener journeys through an otherworldly aural-cinematic landscape, one that is nonetheless, in some ways, uncannily familiar – and ultimately reaches the limits of the

⁹⁵ Thompson, ‘Whiteness and the Ontological Turn in Sound Studies’, 278.

⁹⁶ Chal Ravens, ‘[Review of] *Paradiso* – Chino Amobi’, <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/23270-paradiso/> (accessed 5 November 2023). Emile Frankel suggests that the album is a culmination of a trajectory over 5 or 6 years of ‘dystopian excitement on the dance floor’. Frankel, *Hearing the Cloud* (Winchester and Washington: Zero Books, 2019), ‘Chapter 3: Revenant Speed: Spirits of the Singularity’ (unpaginated).

city that is pronounced periodically across the album. This arrival is marked by the sudden appearance of military brass. Its presence is imposed, surprising (if foreshadowed earlier in the album, for example ‘imperfectly’ as synthesised brass that appears at the opening of the title track.) However, this arrival is itself quickly undercut by the sound of a revving motorbike engine. I suggest it is not incidental that this final gesture towards mobility references a vehicle associated with travelling alone, an itinerant subject.

As Ravens writes in his review, ‘You can’t comprehend it as a whole; you merely exist in it from one moment to the next.’⁹⁷ I agree, but would go further: the listener’s position is actively confused, one listens *to* this music while also adopting the role of the rootless subject *within* it. ‘Welcome to Paradiso. You are now listening to NON Worldwide Radio... with Chino Amobi’, says a female voice on ‘BLOOD OF THE COVENANT’, the third of the twenty tracks on the album. (All track titles on *PARADISO* are rendered uppercase.) We were listening to the music, but suddenly this is framed diegetically – we are suddenly inside the quasi-cinematic world that Amobi creates, listening to a broadcast within it. At the same time, the reference to Amobi’s – real – name flags his authorship of this space, breaking our immersion in this ‘fiction’. (NON is an African and Afro-diasporic collective of artists working principally with sound, which was co-founded by Amobi.⁹⁸ The album’s title – *PARADISO* – is named after the Amsterdam club where the collective was first conceived.⁹⁹) Or, perhaps reading this in a more Baudrillardian manner, Amobi’s name becomes just another signifier within the fiction, untethered from himself as ‘real’ person – something that again confuses the fiction/real distinction that would be necessary to retain the clarity of our

⁹⁷ Ravens, ‘[Review of] *Paradiso* – Chino Amobi’.

⁹⁸ Further information can be found on the NON website, <http://non.com.co/>.

⁹⁹ Alastair Cameron and Eleni Ikoniadou, ““Specific Dissonances”: A Geopolitics of Frequency’, in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Sound Art*, ed. Sanne Krogh Groth and Holger Schulze, e-book edition (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

position as a listener ‘outside’ the drama. His name becomes just another element circulating within a larger economy of sonic materials – and a field into which we are also conscripted. To repeat a phrase quoted from the *Pitchfork* review, ‘Are we circling the inferno, or is this real life?’¹⁰⁰ This blurring of real and unreal accords with Amobi’s comment referencing *The Matrix*, that ‘I think it’s important to take the red pill and the blue pill at the same time.’ Indeed, for Amobi, it is the creating of a paradoxical space that enables the reconception of established associations and trajectories: ‘within that fractured and destabilised field there’s an ability to rewrite prescriptive narratives and assumptions about those [marginalised or disenfranchised] voices and ideas.’¹⁰¹

The sheer abundance of materials that face the listener reinforces this bewilderment (listen, for example, to the track ‘NEGATIVE FIRE III’). Adam Harper has characterised Amobi’s music as a key example of what he calls ‘Epic Collage’, a strain of music that weaves together a great deal of material including ‘fragments of pop and violent sound effects’.¹⁰² Harper, writing three years before *PARADISO*’s release, notes of Amobi’s earlier music that the artist (then releasing under the alias, Diamond Black Hearted Boy) ‘mixes together the sweetness and violence of the modern soundscape (music and non-music) in ways that play on the mind and are often frankly distressing. Tracks like “formulation of the higher p” [on the 2013 album *Father, Protect Me*] sound like a euphoric but terrifying journey through the claustrophobic sewers of contemporary information.’¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Ravens, ‘[Review of] *Paradiso* – Chino Amobi’.

¹⁰¹ Amobi in Ryce, ‘Chino Amobi’.

¹⁰² Harper, ‘System Focus: Adam Harper on the Divine Surrealism of Epic Collage Producers E+E, Total Freedom and Diamond Black Hearted Boy’. Retrieved from <http://www.thefader.com/2014/05/07/system-focus-adam-harper-on-the-divine-surrealism-of-epic-collage-producers-ee-total-freedom-and-diamond-black-hearted-boy> (accessed 1 July 2022).

¹⁰³ Harper, ‘System Focus’.

I think that the terms of Harper's characterisation are helpful here, as these crystallise some key differences between Amobi's approach and the overabundance of sonic materials one encounters in earlier sample-based composition. I am thinking here of John Oswald's influential 'plunderphonics', which is in many ways comparable, and which for some is paradigmatic of a postmodern attitude to the plentiful media and images of that late twentieth-century context – the 1993 album *Plexure* provides the best example. In comparison with Oswald's work, first, what strikes me most immediately is the pessimism, the embrace of the grotesque, that one hears in the treatment of material in *PARADISO*. The sonic rootlessness of *PARADISO* is one marked by difficulty. Following my point above about the listener's 'confused' position, this difficulty also derives from an oscillation between immersion and exclusion – that we are 'in' the soundscape, yet also adopt a marginalised presence, owing to its unhomeliness. Dancers at NON Worldwide club nights were positioned similarly – again through reference to a problematised mobility. As Emile Frankel notes, 'Past dancers to Chino Amobi's "NON Worldwide" club nights received physical passports granting them entry into this speculative city [connoted in *PARADISO*]. When you entered the venue a slip of paper announced your new visa: you became a medic in the dystopian club, a doctor, a saviour in the imaged future city of a hyper-capitalist tech supported nightmare.'¹⁰⁴

Second, Harper's reference to 'contemporary information' is helpful. It is worth emphasising here that contemporary imaginaries of information often overlap with some more recent manifestations of neoliberal rationality – in so far as information is invested (economically, symbolically) with the characteristic flexibility, liquidity, and responsiveness that are so closely associated with the neoliberal project. That is, while they are by no

¹⁰⁴ Frankel, *Hearing the Cloud*, 'Chapter 3 – Revenant Speed: Spirits of the Singularity', (unpaginated).

means identical, in this conception, information's characteristic features afford its readiness to be put to work in line with neoliberal logics. In Bauman's terms, an information society is in-keeping with the mobile and transitory quality of liquid modernity, in contrast with the 'heavy', 'solid' qualities of the physical media that characterised modernity's preceding formulation. As Rutherford-Johnson notes, the apparent dematerialization of electronic music in formats such as MP3s enables both mobility and inter-medial translation and transformation of sonic material. Information travels easily across media through 'increasing commercialization, miniaturization, speed, and networking capabilities', effecting a deemphasising of the materiality of cultural objects (songs, books, films, etc.).¹⁰⁵ This is comparable to N. Katherine Hayles's suggestion in *How We Became Posthuman*, that related information technologies obscure their own materiality: solid objects (computer terminals, ATMs, and now smart phones, etc.) become conceived as secondary, as merely transitory points of access to the 'real' that is flows of nonmaterial information.¹⁰⁶

Amobi's 'Epic Collage' encompasses a range of sonic material made possible through becoming information, a digitised mediatiation of diverse sound materials – a remediation of recording and sound-synthesis technologies that affords flexible incorporation of the sounds of diverse media. We seem to have moved beyond the singular media that forms the material of Oswald's *Plexure* – which reflects on and responds to the CD as format. Through use of techniques such as the inclusion of a variety of media-specific noises (vinyl noise, overdriven vocals, white noise in sound-synthesis), nostalgic synthesised sounds, and autotuned and other vocal processing, the material included by Amobi emphasises its contingency on a range of (outdated, degraded) media technologies. Put another way, if the plunderphonic project was

¹⁰⁵ Rutherford-Johnson, *After the Fall*, 88.

¹⁰⁶ N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

intertextual – a postmodern reading across CDs as ‘texts’ – Amobi’s collage is *intertextural*, marking out the degraded textures and contingencies of its constitutive media. Yet, crucially, this is dialectically undertaken through all medias’ rendering as digital information during the compositional process (this is also in line with contemporary listeners’ experiences of different musics as a continuous digital stream).¹⁰⁷ Amobi’s intertextuality plays in this gap of (in)flexibility and (im)materiality. The flexible and mobile qualities of the neoliberal subject are overt in an unhomey rootlessness, but also inverted – in materials that present us a dystopian wake, an accumulation of outdated technologies left over from the rampant and violent capitalism of now and our near future.

Proximal critique

As a closing gesture, I would like to tie together some of the key threads of the argument made in this article, as doing so clarifies larger questions about the critical possibilities of music and art in the twenty-first century.

On one side, I began the article by following Adorno’s suggestion that music is mediated by the social logic of its time, and that it can embody critical reflection on this logic. On the other, I borrow from post-Foucauldian readings of neoliberalism to suggest that this term be best understood as a mode of reason (rather than, say, only a set of economic or social policies). Taken together, these two claims point to recent music’s embodiment and contestation of neoliberal rationality. I outline some particularities of this proposition, through tracing, primarily, compositional logics related to the characteristic flexibility and productivity of the neoliberal ‘subject of interests’. More

¹⁰⁷ See Drott, ‘Why the Next Song Matters’, and David Arditi (2017), ‘Digital Subscriptions: The Unending Consumption of Music in the Digital Era’, *Popular Music and Society* 41/3, 302–18.

specifically, I consider how explorations of artistic process can act as aesthetic counterpart – critical and/or normative – to the productivity expected of the neoliberal subject in day-to-day life; I find terms including *iterative* and *reiterative* useful in thinking through some strategies regarding this process-productivity interconnection. I also suggest that the diversified production and consumption met under neoliberalism constitutes practices for exploration in the artistic sphere, but that these can raise issues for the critical efficacy of art – something no-longer conceived to hold a privileged standing as excess or outlier from social-economic process (I expand on this point below). This relates to another claim I have made, with respect to the Adornian thinking with which the article began: that Adorno’s critical theory of art remains useful in its linking of music and social conditions, but needs recontextualising in light of neoliberalism’s characteristic differences from the conditions of early-to-mid-twentieth-century modernity. This derives in large part from the situation that the dialectical liquification of the reified forms of mass society was a core strategy of critical art before neoliberalism. But today, liquification is itself a dominant characteristic of neoliberal society – so, accordingly, the critical terms of art need reformulating.

Borrowing from Adorno, I am of the view that music and sonic arts still enact a mimetic function – that is, they make use of, negotiate, or reiterate the dominant logic of society. Owing to the neoliberalism’s characteristic rationality and its concomitant economisation of the noneconomic, this takes on certain forms. As we have observed, neoliberalism entails ‘an unwavering commitment to economic productivity, writ across all registers of life as we increasingly judge our lives through financial barometers and metaphors; and an undying desire to make and remake one’s self as an alluring image that intensifies and entices further image-creativity, preferably through a market of some

sort.¹⁰⁸ Note here that Winnubst emphasises the commitment to *economic* productivity. I note this because this economic aspect is not assured by the artist's productivity. The artist's work can – though need not necessarily – pervert the productive processes of capitalist economy.

I choose this word carefully. Perversion is classically understood as a deviation from 'normal' sexual life; the concept expands sexual life beyond the genital zones, and a focus on coitus.¹⁰⁹ It connotes nonreproductive (sexually pleasurable) acts that nonetheless relate to reproductive (sexual) drives – even a kiss is perverse, in this sense. Shifting emphases from reproduction to production, from sexuality to economy, in artistic making one finds pleasure in acts that are nonproductive but which nonetheless derive from productive drives. The artists' work displaces energy from the field of (economic) production to reconstrue production outside of economy proper. Adding to this, one can note here a classic critical manoeuvre in artistry, a gesture of inverting dominant social forms. Under neoliberalism – as we have seen already – the previously noneconomic becomes regarded economically. Inversely, in artistry, forms and practices that are economic can become noneconomic. This is a voicing of neoliberal logic though such as to say something very different.

It is in relation to some of the particularities of artistry under neoliberalism that I think we need further clarify the efficacy of its criticality under these conditions. While I do maintain that music and art can pose genuinely critical interventions into life under neoliberalism – as can be observed in the 'perverse' practice of artistic production, in relation to economic production as norm – there are also aspects of music and art today

¹⁰⁸ Winnubst, *Way Too Cool*, 159.

¹⁰⁹ Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 2000). Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, 'Perversion', in *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (London: Karnac Books, 1973), 306–9.

that suggest a closeness of criticality and normativity. And this diverges from the relation between critical art and social normativity as explored by Adorno.

If the multiplicitous presence of critical artistic works could once distinguish them from the everyday dynamics of a then-standardised and reifying mass culture, the neoliberal regime of production produces diversity and multiplicity as a mundane fact of everyday consumer life. The variability that art and music – even experimental and critical art and music – provide is *to be expected* in relation to the norms of a neoliberal condition that produces difference and undertakes flexible specialisation. Under this condition, reiteration is not a repetition of the same, standardised units of a Fordist production line, but encompasses a range of possibilities to be modelled as more or less frequent.¹¹⁰ The once-liberatory promise of casting off mass industries and embracing something different is now the very thing that this new economy is based on. Brian Massumi captures this well when he states:

Normalcy starts to lose its hold. The regularities start to loosen. This loosening of normalcy is part of capitalism's dynamic. It's not simply about liberation. It's capitalism's own form of power. It's no longer a disciplinary institutional power that defines everything, it's capitalism's power to produce diversity – because markets get saturated. . . . The oddest of affective tendencies are okay – as long as they pay. . . . It's very troubling and confusing, because it seems to me that there's been a certain kind of convergence between the dynamic of capitalist power and the dynamic of resistance.¹¹¹

Helpfully, his mention of the push against 'normalcy' again links this economic process with the dissolution of traditional forms of symbolic authority. And we can also note here that even the so-called 'High Priest' of neoliberalism, Milton Friedman, himself

¹¹⁰ Here I echo James's reading of neoliberal rationality (in *The Sonic Episteme*), with James herself drawing on Mary Beth Mader's 'statistical' framing of neoliberal rationality.

¹¹¹ Massumi, 'Navigating Movements', in *Hope: New Philosophies for Change*, ed. Mary Zournazi (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 224.

argued that nonconformity be valued, as an expression of freedom that enables innovation.¹¹² It is from this that ‘new products emerge and old ones disappear, demand shifts from one product to another, innovation alters methods of production, and so on without end.’¹¹³

In short, the disruptive is *expected* to exist under neoliberalism. ‘Neoliberalism has no problem with excess. Far from being subversive, transgression today is entirely normative’, notes Steven Shapiro.¹¹⁴ Indeed, James characterises the social under neoliberalism as predominantly understood to encompass scalar possibilities, with a range of activities distributed at lesser or greater frequencies. Writing of ‘noisy’ women’s voices, she points out that these are now allowed – indeed women are encouraged to ‘speak up’ – although this is permitted *on the condition that* this audible presence is subordinate to the norm (an unspoken patriarchy).¹¹⁵ Hence, to call normality into question, is not to say that normativity is abandoned entirely – that ‘anything goes’ under neoliberalism. Rather, it is instead to consider normativity re-formed, as dispersed and distributed throughout a range of practices that cohere into a regulatory effect *at the level of the social, despite (and in fact because of) individual instances that seemingly contravene this social regulation*. And this condition might go for many radical utterances more broadly; statements and actions that assert the questioning of or pose challenge to normative social conditions might, paradoxically, also be considered part of a neoliberal condition that encompasses a distribution of minority practices. Indeed, these

¹¹² See Winnubst’s discussion of Friedman in her *Way Too Cool*, 119–21.

¹¹³ Friedman cited in Ritchey, *Composing Capital*, 27. David Harvey calls innovation a ‘fetish belief’ of contemporary culture (notes Ritchey, p. 27)

¹¹⁴ Steven Shapiro, ‘Accelerationist Aesthetics: Necessary Inefficiency in Times of Real Subsumption’, *e-Flux Journal* 46 (2013), see <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/46/60070/accelerationist-aesthetics-necessary-inefficiency-in-times-of-real-subsumption/> (accessed 15 November 2023)

¹¹⁵ James, *Sonic Episteme*, 146

‘disruptions’ to the norm might also be the seeds of something ‘innovative’ – which is of course a celebrated quality, in no way contrary to the values of neoliberal economy.

While it still maintains some function, given this increased proximity between the logics of life and art, the mimetic function of art is no longer sufficient to explain its critical relation to society. A mirroring of society in art would imply distance – maintained through the boundary that is the glass of the mirror – rather than proximity. A consequence of this proximal quality of contemporary musical critique is an ever-present danger: that artistic work can easily flit back into uncritically reproducing dominant cultural logics. The subversive ‘new’ of new music can be cast as disruptive ‘innovation’ of neoliberal economy. The possibilities of creativity and collaboration can quickly become productive actions of ‘creatives’. The self-conscious management of artistic working practices can become merely the self-managing of the artist as worker; in the latter, they forget to take – or are structurally denied the possibility of taking – pleasure in a ‘perverted’ practice of production. More fundamentally, because the normative practices of neoliberalism are always dispersed and distributed, and encompassing of disruption, one might always suspect apparently subverting or excessive practices – such as critical artworks or experimental musics – to be just further iterations of this social dynamic.

That said, I suggested above that the dominant cultural logic has necessitated musicians and artists increasingly frame their work as an ongoing ‘practice’ (and I’m by no means the first to say this). Revisiting this idea here, this is also to imply the ongoingness of critique – that artistry as ‘practice’ is not just a reproduction of neoliberal working, but can constitute a genuinely sustained response to the form of today’s social problematic. We may no longer rely – if we ever could – on the artistic object itself as the crux of critical insight. To regard such objects today, to consider works of music and art

– such as I have done so above – necessitates a consideration of their relation to practices of working and the circulation within an expanded ‘economy’. The artwork is no longer a mirror of social relations, at least not in the manner that it was for Adorno. To think otherwise is to look anachronistically at a world of artistic objects, when the world today is one that emphasises processes and practices. Today’s compositional critique is *proximal* to its target.

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