

Applebaum: *Aesthetic Dichotomy*

Artistic prolificacy is unfashionable. Many composers celebrate the idea of making a few masterpieces rather than an array of diverse works. By contrast, I feel that being prolific is a virtue. One can't count on making masterpieces anyway, so I'd rather compose many pieces, each an artifact of inquiry documenting a discrete artistic experience.

For decades my musical output has been abundant, seemingly inexhaustible. So in 2013 I decided to do something different. The sensible project—the special, contrasting thing for me to do—was *not to compose*. This deliberate occasion of “non-enterprise” was planned more than one year in advance. In preparation I completed all of my compositional obligations—concluding with the massive *Rabbit Hole* for the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players, itself a problematically terminal aesthetic expression—and took on no new commissions. The idea was to reconsider my work with a free mind, to do some artistic stocktaking in that liberated context, and to pursue only the most sensible and compelling agenda that arose spontaneously.

Unintentionally, I set the bar too high. I began to wonder why I should compose a new piece of music at all. There seemed to be no convincing necessity to litter the world (whether my mind or the concert culture) with more pieces. It was a distressing and prolonged moment: Was I done as a composer?

The breakthrough was my piece *Composition Machine #1*, a work that needed to be written. It was followed immediately by *Speed Dating*, a work that didn't need to be written. The former represents what I've come to identify as *experimentation*, the latter as *consumption*.

Let me explain the dichotomy. It is a framework that helps me organize the vast terrain of my music. It describes my outlook. It is personal; it applies only to me. It is also a useful form of self-deception. I can't defend it. But I don't need to. I find it helpful, and that is enough. I'm still composing, and a lot.

In retrospect I came to see that many of my works represent vociferous forays into unusual areas of artistic concern. They self-consciously explore new ground, often putting pressure on the ontological circumscription of music itself. Pieces for three conductors and no players, concerti for florists, a 72-ft. pictographic score with no directions for its interpretation, hand gestures synchronized to prerecorded sound, notations appearing on the faces of custom-made wristwatches, and pieces based on page turns represent this sort of artistic inclination. (Pejoratively they might be pronounced “tricks and gimmicks”—which they are, albeit assiduously constructed and deeply considered ones.) These are pieces that, if I don't make them, will probably never be composed. I call this body of work *experimentation*.

On the other hand, I see that some of my works commune firmly with extant forms and genres. They are original works, but they don't self-consciously explore new ground. Or rather, the new ground is not, to my mind, an especially radical, progressive one. These pieces are merely unique instances of a thing that our culture has already discovered. My work in vernacular musics—as a jazz pianist playing standards and 12-bar blues, and more recently as a composer of pop songs—most clearly represents this kind of orientation. But many of my non-vernacular chamber works also represent this orientation, pieces that fall into a familiar lineage of customary modernist thought. (I say *customary* because they more clearly invoke *customs*.) These are pieces that would never be made exactly the same way by another composer, but some other composer would probably make pieces a bit like them. And not only might future composers make similar work, past composers—multitudes of them—already have. I call this kind of composition *consumption*.

Experimentation might be further characterized in the following ways:

- It comprises a genuinely new contribution to a discourse.
- If I don't make these works, no one will.
- The risk of failure is acute. (Moreover the ability to assess success is opaque—e.g.,
What constitutes a good concerto for florist?)
- It is a culturally marginal expression: I am misunderstood (or ignored).
- It represents a personal, invented discipline in service of “progress” or iconoclasm.

Consumption might be further characterized in the following ways:

- It comprises creativity as a guilty pleasure. It is hedonic because it is unnecessary.
- The world is already lousy with this kind of art by composers with greater faith and fealty (and probably prowess) than I.
- I experience the pleasure and cachet of communing with functional (proven) culture.
- It is mainstream expression: I am understood.
- It represents a traditional discipline in service of conservation or yeoman evolution.

I imagine a two-dimensional map of musical culture, a kind of infinite chessboard or grid structure. I look at a particular space—a box on the map—and examine what it represents. This box, for example, represents lyrical melodies...I then ask “are there any extant examples”...I see that there are many...and I wonder instinctively why I should bother to contribute another. The stack of pieces with lyrical melodies in that box is so vast I can't fathom its height. This box represents consumption. Another box contains pieces that feature syncopations; there seems to be no shortage of examples in it either. Another box contains quarter-tone pieces; another one spectral harmonies; another one extended violin techniques. There are comparatively fewer pieces in these boxes than the one with lyrical melodies or the one with syncopations, but, to a composer concerned about this sort of thing, they are effectively full. To contribute another example would be an act of musical consumption.

But then I find a box that describes pieces for florist and orchestra. That one is empty. (I concede, probably for a good reason.) It seems that I am the only one noticing that space as a realm of artistic opportunity. So I fill it with a virgin piece—an admittedly colonial impulse of sorts. This kind of contribution feels like an act of experimentation. Another box represents pieces for three conductors and no players; one contains pieces in which musical notations appear on the faces of custom wristwatches; still another represents pieces based on page turns and the silent counterpoint of players picking up instruments but not playing them. These boxes all seem to be empty, realms of new possibility. Moreover they are unnoticed, and so I feel compelled to supply examples. It is a dirty job, but I seem to be the composer for it. And by “dirty job” I mean artistically dubious, culturally ignorable, and critically opaque.

Conceiving of my work as falling into these two categories has been enormously liberating for me. The dichotomy may seem like a facile heuristic. But for me the exercise goes beyond surveillance and even therapy; I find it motivating. At risk of complicating matters with a new metaphor, I maintain that the mere recognition of these formerly invisible artistic food groups frees me to revel in a richer diet.

Concurrent with my crisis was the feeling that I am no longer artistically needy. Sure, the Berlin Philharmonic and Lincoln Center have not called. But I have come to feel that I do possess considerable artistic agency. As such, my attention in recent years has turned to asking how I might increase the creative capacity of others. The idea of devotion to other artists (whether Stanford students or beyond) parallels a larger, non-musical concern that is increasingly on my mind: *What is for me versus what is for others?* This is a question of ethics. Unwittingly, the two imagined sides of my artistry map onto a more significant human duality:

Philanthropy, characterized by:

- Altruism which may be guided by an aspiration to moral decency.
- Action often typified by sacrifice.
- The statement: “I don’t need a *second kidney*.”

Consumption (again), characterized by:

- Leisure and recreation motivated by hedonism.
- Enterprise often typified by self-interest, self-indulgence.
- The statement: “I would enjoy a *second flat screen television*.”

The resources I might share or conserve include *time*. On the philanthropic side I wonder: *How much of my time is for others?* On the consumptive side I wonder: *How of much of my time is for me?*

As such, my work suggests an emergent kind of moral valence. Experimentation is an intrinsic “good I can do.” Consumption, like a new television screen, is not evil, it is just “hedonism I can enjoy.” I feel an instinctive need to write experimental works. But I am entitled to write consumptive ones too. I am not an ascetic; I have no plans to deprive myself of lyrical melodies, 12-bar blues, sound mass textures, or crunchy contrapuntal passages. But I notice that there is a fuzzy metabolism at work: I write *Composition Machine #1* (a very unusual, experimental piece that creates its own score), and then it feels rational to write *Speed Dating* (an octet in which pairs of instruments continually regroup, a comparatively consumptive musical concern). This is likely a ridiculous mental construct, and one that suggests unsavory mental health problems: self-loathing, narcissism, grandiosity.... But it works for me. Its very pretense is probably fundamentally consonant with my personality.

So experimentation feels like giving. Consumption feels like taking. Of course, the irony is that the common listener probably wants more 12-bar blues, lyrical melodies, and reliably pulsating rhythms. That listener finds my “gifts”—unsolicited pieces that make no sound, degenerate sound-sculpture timbres, and strange compositions that make their own scores—alienating, self-indulgent, and unwanted. (And the educated listener notes that my brand of experimentation has a kinship with a solidly historical—which is to say *past* (or *passed?*)—era of so-called *American Experimentalism*.) But in my heart I know that it is blues and lyricism that are self-indulgent *for me*. I know in my heart that I’m uniquely calibrated to notice esoteric spaces of artistic inquiry for which there is little or no precedent, and then articulate them in the form of musical works. Consumption is an occupation. Experimentation is a calling.

I also do not claim that my experimental works are masterpieces (they may represent the sole example of a genus but, despite their aspirations, they are not necessarily *exemplars*), or that they are culturally important to anyone else, or that anyone other than my mother is listening. And, furthermore, I do not wish to imply that consumption is an easy path: to make high quality consumptive art one must interface skillfully with a well-developed, culturally-accreted critical apparatus, something ostensibly absent (or at least mercifully ill-defined) when exploring fresh territory. Indeed, both experimentation and consumption have their unique modes of “resistance.” I only claim that this framework is useful to me, that it somehow allows me to be an experimental and a consumptive composer, sometimes at once.

Of the works in my promotion portfolio, about half represent *Experimentation* and half represent *Consumption*. The delineation is imperfect: the unconventional works are tempered by abundant conventions, and vice versa. So their assignation is a common sense one, a feeling that a work is *mostly experimental* or *mostly consumptive*. Furthermore, the definition of a piece may be dynamic. For example, the experimental hand gestures I used for the first time in the *Isopangram* movement of

Straitjacket and then more elaborately in *Aphasia*, have since appeared in many subsequent pieces. In those later contexts, the use of hand gestures is—*for me*—no longer quite so experimental, it has become part of my personal lingua franca. And, conversely, there are things that I do which are progressive *for me*, but which may be conventional for others, or part of a historical precedent of which I'm ignorant. So in the same way that this entire construct may not apply to another composer—for whom the composition of a lyrical melody or the interpretation of a jazz standard may be an act of experimentation not derivation—my own sense of what represents experimentation and consumption, of the good and the hedonic, are deeply personal.

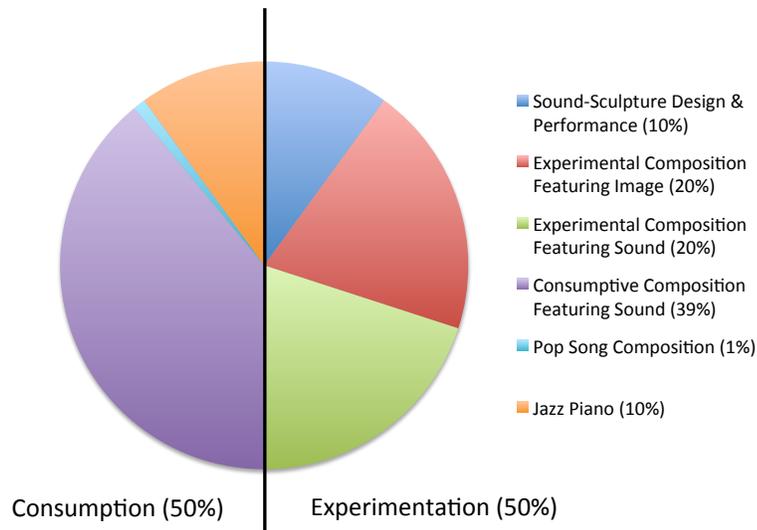
The following are my works composed since the assembly of my tenure portfolio divided accordingly. Works with an asterisk strike me as especially important representations of my thought; these are the works with which I would hope a reviewer would become most familiar.

Experimentation:

- **Aphasia*
- **Rabbit Hole*
- **Straitjacket*
- **The Metaphysics of Notation*
- **Composition Machine #1*
- **Mouseketier Praxis*
- **Concerto for Florist*
- Wristwatch Pieces*
- Gone, Dog, Gone!*
- Darmstadt Kindergarten*
- Medium*
- Clicktrack*
- 40 Cryptograms*
- Variations on Variations on a Theme by Mozart*

Consumption:

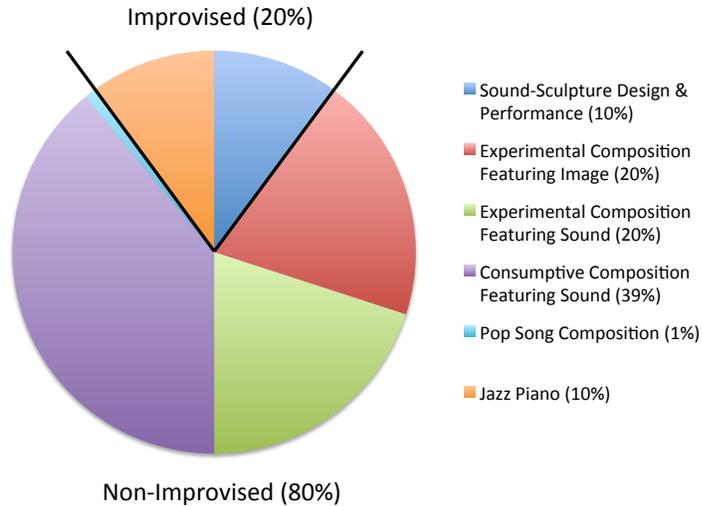
- **The Composer's Middle Period*
- **30*
- **Sock Monkey*
- **Speed Dating*
- **Theme in Search of Variations III*
- Theme in Search of Variations II*
- Curb Weight Surgical Field*
- Coat Room*
- Pause*
- Skeletons in the Closet*
- The Applebaum Jazz Piano Duo*



Epilogue.

Having suggested a division—a roughly equal one—in my work between experimental and consumptive impulses, I'll add two more statistical observations.

About 80% of my work is non-improvised and 20% improvised. The former includes the vast majority of non-vernacular compositions (there are actually a few that feature improvisation) and pop songs; the latter is characterized principally by jazz piano and electroacoustic sound-sculpture performance.



About 70% of my work is non-visual in nature and 30% has a significant visual component, particularly much of the recent work. The former includes my jazz playing, pop songs, and about three-quarters of my non-vernacular compositions; the latter includes my electroacoustic sound-sculptures and one-quarter of my non-vernacular compositions (such as *Aphasia*, *The Metaphysics of Notation*, *Rabbit Hole*, *Concerto for Florist*, *Composition Machine #1*, *Gone, Dog, Gone!*, *Darmstadt Kindergarten*, *Medium*, and *Straitjacket*). Although only one-quarter of my overall composed non-vernacular musical output, one can see that the visual component (anticipated by earlier pieces such as *Tlön* for three conductors and *Echolalia* for amplified Dadaist rituals) has become an increasingly central concern in my recent work.

