

Occupy Wall Street, Composers and the Plutocracy:
Some Variations on an Ancient Theme
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The tendency of composers to throw in our lot with those Theodore Roosevelt called "economic royalists" will not come as a surprise to some in that it amounts to another form of what the Marxists call false consciousness. Another probably more familiar variant of this minor pathology was personified by the brief celebrity of Joe the Plumber during the 2008 campaign who, it will be recalled, was concerned that Obama's economic policies would place an excessive burden on him, as a prospective owner of the firm he worked for.

Of course, the difference here is that, unlike Joe, few composers imagine ascending to an economic status where we would benefit from policies designed to enrich the 1%. Rather, our tendency to do so has at least a superficially rational basis: while we will not be the recipients of the flood of cash precipitated by upper-income tax cuts, "right to work" legislation, the repeal of the Glass-Steagal act and the bail out of financial institutions, our close proximity and historical ties to the elites- so the thinking goes- will insure that we will be first in line to collect the scraps from their table. Even if we don't believe in trickle down economics providing broad social and economic benefits, our narrow interests might be served by the making the richest still richer.

But while we might (as do many others) adopt this morally questionable posture, there are reasons for believing it is shortsighted purely on self-interested grounds. While the initial discussion above focused on the ties between classical music institutions and economic elites, zooming in on the picture a bit reveals that composers are rarely the beneficiaries of plutocratic largesse to the degree many of us would hope.

The reasons for this have to do, first, with the reduced status of classical music relative to other musical genres. A generation or more back, classical music had an effective monopoly on elite philanthropy, as can be seen, for example, in the names attached to the major halls for classical music in New York- e.g. Avery Fisher, Morgan, Frick, Carnegie etc. In recent years, elite philanthropy has tended to balance their support in the direction of diversity, with jazz having been a particular beneficiary. Some have gone even further in their support of what had been, in prior generations, denigrated as "commercial" musical genres. A good example is the former Microsoft billionaire Paul Allen whose [major contributions](#) in his hometown of Seattle have gone towards the construction of the rock and roll museum and the purchasing of fan memorabilia associated with icons of rock history. Providing financial support to an enterprise which has shown itself capable of competing most effectively within the marketplace would seem to constitute a kind of

coals to New Castle philanthropy. Despite, or maybe because of this fact, it has become increasingly routine among the new generation of financial elites.

Secondly, even within the world of classical music proper, composers tend to be viewed somewhat more ambivalently than instrumentalists. While the latter might be regarded as (at worst) mere technicians, few would question the competence of a violinist able to dispatch a Tschaikovsky Concerto or a pianist able to rip through Rachmaninov Etudes. As I discuss [here](#), composers have had to contend for at least two generations with the charge of charlatanism, emanating not just from philistines but from credible, sensitive and even eminent cultural and intellectual figures, and that our claims for expert status are an elaborate scam to our essential artistic incompetence.

This widely shared, if infrequently expressed, perception of contemporary music as an intellectually and artistically bankrupt enterprise began to take hold in the sixties, and would become increasingly widespread to the extent that it has had a clear influence on the perspective and priorities of economic elites. One consequence is not only are legendary patrons on the model of Madame von Meck, Baron von Swieten, or Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge absent from premiers of significant pieces of contemporary music, they are conspicuously absent from the title pages of contemporary scores. In their place are the names of a hodge podge of foundations whose surprisingly paltry awards often require a "consortium" to be formed to insure anything like a reasonable fee for the composer.

Interestingly, in recent years, composer advocacy groups have tried to resuscitate the tradition of individual patronage by matching donors with composers and ensembles with a personally inscribed final score and an invitation to the gala premier performance. The first and most conspicuous success of this approach was the Daniel Variations, funded by an Oakland lawyer by the name of Richard Goodman.

Aside from obvious, namely, to applaud Mr. Goodman and those who facilitated the commission, two aspects of this initiative are worth noting. First, the sum of \$70,000, while certainly generous in terms of the usual fees composers tend to receive, is, in fact, quite small when one considers that the recipient is Steve Reich, perhaps America's most eminent and widely acclaimed composer. A striking comparison is with paintings produced by equally well-established contemporary visual artists. These routinely sell in the high six figure range-with [a solo show](#) by artist Damien Hirst netting the controversial British installation artist over \$150 million-far more than most composers, even those of Reich's stature-receive in a lifetime of work. Even within the concert music world, this fee suffers considerably in comparison to the high five figures which top level soloists and conductors command for a single night's work. In any case, one trusts that Mr. Goodman recognized his having gotten an extraordinary bargain.

Furthermore, although a partner in a successful and thriving real estate practice, Mr. Goodman does not appear to issue from upper ranges of the 1%, those whose accumulated fees, bonuses and salaries land their incomes in the eight or even nine figure range. For them, such a sum would represent only a tiny fraction of their disposable

income, in the same order of magnitude of what they would dole out for a dinner at an East Side restaurant-two orders of magnitude below what they earmark for [a child's bat mitzvah](#) or [sixtieth birthday party](#).

This raises the question of how our world would be different had the traditional sources of elite patronage, namely the highest levels of the plutocracy, decided to make a serious commitment to composers, say to the tune of eight or nine figures. This would not be unprecedented. To take a couple of examples, in donating [\\$200 million to Poetry Magazine](#) Ruth Lilly, an heir to the Eli Lilly fortune, single-handedly greatly expanded the opportunities for the creation, appreciation and dissemination of the work of contemporary poets. Also in this category, colleges and universities are reliable recipients of elite philanthropy with even relatively small schools now able to engage in nine figure capital campaigns. Meeting this goal, as a college development director once observed to me, requires a million dollars a day coming in over the transom. Reich's entire commissioning fee would therefore require diverting a mere twenty minutes from the firehose of cash which many college and universities take for granted as available to them.

That said, by now we should be sufficiently aware that, barring a freak event- an eccentric billionaire taking an interest in contemporary music- no large increase in philanthropic support is likely to be in the cards. Rather what we know is almost certain to materialize is more of the same. The rich will continue to consolidate their wealth, extracting it ever more effectively from the ninety nine percent, keeping most for themselves and their heirs. A few approved, uncontroversial charities will benefit from the many trillions of dollars controlled by the upper 1%, many of the most deserving of these (as pointed out above) made necessary by policies which the 1% themselves had strongly supported and lobbied for. The arts will remain a low priority for most of the rich, except when, as is sometimes the case in the visual arts, investing in it offers the potential for significant returns.

The impoverished world which composers must now negotiate is, of course, only a small piece of the broader neo-liberal reality which has obtained for most of our adult lives-one where the victors have hoarded the spoils of a successfully waged class war reducing much of social, cultural and artistic life to rubble. So complete has been their victory that we now see it not as a product of human agency but as the natural environment which we must acclimate ourselves to as best we can. There is, according to Margaret Thatcher's phrase "no alternative", all those who believing otherwise being hopeless romantics at best or merely ridiculous. At least, so the story has gone for some years and there is little reason to believe that composers have been any less accepting of it (or at least resigned to it) than anyone else.

There was, of course, a shining moment when it seemed that cracks were becoming visible in the edifice of neo-liberalism. This occurred with the financial collapse of 2008 and the subsequent election of an African American president running on a platform of

hope and change. But these prospects for hope were shown to be a chimera and by now few see any prospect for reversing the ever intensifying domination of our society by money and those obsessed with accumulating it.

Furthermore, artists and musicians had an early preview of the disillusionment with the Obama administration which is by now widespread. These came in the form of indications that, despite the hopes of many, the administration would do little to improve on the starvation regimes imposed on federal arts agencies by Republican and Democratic administrations for two decades. The background can be seen in [a Nov. 21, 2008 letter](#) sent to the Obama transition team from a collection of arts advocacy organizations containing detailed proposals for a significant reorientation of federal arts priorities. Central among these was a request for significantly greater federal support for the arts, with the recommendation that the budget for the NEA be increased to attain the real dollar peak reached in 1992.

What made the letter more likely to be taken seriously was the widespread recognition at the time that a large increase in federal government spending was required to compensate for the multi-trillion dollar loss in demand resulting from the financial crisis. Arts institutions had a particularly strong case to make as recipients of these funds on two grounds. First, as has been shown in numerous studies, arts spending, in comparison to other forms of stimulus have a very high multiplier effect. That is, a dollar which is spent on the arts remains in circulation within the consumer economy, producing other forms of economic activity, amounting to, [according to studies](#), six to eight dollars generated for every dollar spend, considerably more than other forms of stimulus, most notably tax cuts for middle and high income earners. Secondly, the projects funded by arts agencies tend to be, to appeal to a phrase briefly in circulation, “shovel ready” which is to say that the infrastructure necessary for the project is already in place such that the funds will be put into circulation in relatively short order-- months as opposed to years in the future. For example, across the country numerous presenting organizations are already in place, as are the halls and staff necessary to accommodate the events they book. While they have suffered year after year of budget cuts, most could easily ramp up their activity from two, three or four concerts a year to eight nine or ten, and they could do so within the current fiscal year. This contrasts with, for example, expenditures on the federal highway program requiring years of advanced planning before ground is broken on many projects.

These and other arguments for increased funding were advanced at a meeting with transition team officials in December of 2008. According to those present, the proposal received a respectful hearing with arts advocates coming away encouraged that, if not the whole, at least a reasonable fraction of their \$392.2 million request would materialize. Follow up discussions seemed to be favorable and the group made plans accordingly. When the administration released its budget, the proposed figure was \$155 million, reflecting no increase over previous years. Subsequent budgets have included not increases but cuts to the NEA. The additional proposals outlined in the letter, including the appointment of a senior and increased cultural exchange, have, like so many of the hopes invested in the administration, withered on the vine.

One the one hand, this is just another instance of a constituency discovering what turned out to be their bankrupt investment in the Obama brand. But more significant than this is to notice the extent to which the consortium's proposal was itself indicative of the same neo-liberal mindset dominant in the administration: the proposal, after all, called for an increase in the NEA budget to 1992 levels of funding-namely, those which were obtaining at the height of the neo-liberal era, following three administrations committed to fiscal austerity. What arts advocates should have recognized was that the relevant comparison was not to 1992, a period of comparative economic health but to 1932 when the entire nation was in the first throes of a full-blown depression.

Then, as the legend goes, in a few weeks, the Roosevelt administration created the alphabet soup of federal agencies which began to lift the nation out of the depression. Embedded among these were substantial funds for the arts, most notably through the WPA which sponsored numerous free concerts of new and traditional music, including premiers of works by Aaron Copland, Virgil Thomson, and Elliott Carter among many others. For us, the lesson of this history should be that robust and enthusiastic, as opposed to grudging and paltry support for the arts existed, and not so long ago, taken for granted within, indeed, defining the lives of our parents and grandparents generation. There is no reason, aside from a mere failure of imagination that we should be limiting our demands to the worm's eye horizons imposed on us by neo-liberalism. It is not only in our self-interest to recognize that there are enormous concentrations of wealth which could and should be tapped via taxation to support composers of new music and the ensembles performing it, it is our civic duty to demand that our maximal, and not just minimal needs are met.

For what might seem to be extravagance, not just in the arts, but in all areas of government's public function, is the bare minimum of what is necessary to prime the pump and return the economy to normal levels of growth and employment. The broader principle, which has been common knowledge among economists for years, has now been again demonstrated through the vindication of the predictions of Paul Krugman and others that President Obama's \$700 billion stimulus would only be sufficient to staunch the hemorrhaging of jobs following the credit crisis and would not make a dent in a 9% unemployment rate. Rather, what was required went far beyond not only what those schooled in the Washington/Wall Street Consensus were recommending but what they could imagine as within the realm of possibility.

As a professional class whose business involves constructing worlds of our own imagination, we are among the best able to recognize the truth of the saying that not only is another world possible but also that it is now absolutely necessary. If it appears not to be so, within the stunted imaginative world of corporate bean counters and Washington technocrats, that is all the more for reason for why we should be demanding the impossible. It is to the great credit of the occupy movement that we are now asking the right questions on these and related subjects and to increasingly able to see what have always been the fairly obvious answers.