Doing It Wrong (*)

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Culture is cumulative and expansive; creative communities are in constant flux as their members build on the past, do experiments, and fuse bits and pieces of the local and the exotic, the old and the new. Even ancient traditions, seemingly eternal, had precursors. Culture never simply appears whole, finished; it is always the work of communities, who, consciously or not, shape their culture to fit their own contemporary environment.

It can be tempting to frame conversations about art and music in terms of masterpieces, greatest hits, stars, creative genius, and so on. Artworks as singular objects, the result of exceptional actions by heroic individuals. Masterpieces as somehow definitive, answering questions or offering lessons about creative activity. But this is generally an inaccurate and non-productive way to think about what it means to be creative, and it's a clear path to creative paralysis.

The movement of creative culture, especially on long time scales, is unpredictable. Looking backwards, it's temping to draw curves connecting artists or movements to one another, to see particular works or traditions as signposts indicating what was to come or the last gasp of what was on the way out. But these are at best approximations, hindsight providing the illusion of purposeful movement, of considered progress towards a desired result. Renown or endurance are mistaken for markers of creative fitness, But consider this: in what way does the ubiquitous presence of Mozart in elevators and dentists's offices provide meaningful guidance to a contemporary human embarking on a creative life? This is not to deny that Mozart reached a pinnacle of creative achievement; but to say that Mozart created works of musical genius says nothing about what we should do today, what music is or how it can be made.

I take it as axiomatic that the value of a creative work is only partly determined by its material and perceptual qualities. Our physiological response to a work is one part of the equation, our cultural, social, and intellectual responses are others. To paraphrase Brian Whitman of The Echo Nest, to say that a computational analysis of acoustic musical features leads to an understanding of the music sets the bar for "understanding" extremely low (1). Examples abound: limited editions are more highly valued than unlimited; the paintings of Jackson Pollack-like painting robots are not acclaimed or collected by museums (2); note-perfect Led Zeppelin cover bands do not fill Madison Square Garden with screaming fans; high-tech forensics techniques and boatloads of cash are dispatched in an attempt to determine whether or not Leonardo drew a small, pretty sketch of a

young girl (3). "Value" in these cases can usually be read, at least in part, as monetary value, but to focus exclusively on monetary value misses the point. We can't know how a work will be valued in the future, what effect, if any, it will have on its own culture or the culture that follows it.

Although they would certainly have articulated them differently, I believe that historically, musical innovators have shared the central ideas implied by the above: that creative acts require deviations from the norm, and that creative progress is born not of optimization, but of variance. More explicit contemporary engagement with these ideas leads to the concept of creative research, of music making with goals and priorities that are different from those traditionally posited: maybe sonic friction in addition to ear-pleasing consonances, for example, or "let's see what happens" rather than "I'm going to tell you a story."

The spirit of "let's see what happens" pervades much contemporary experimental music-making. I'd like to finish with a very small, personal sample of works that I find compelling in the context of musical research, of deviating from the norm, of "doing it wrong."

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Alvin Lucier: "I am sitting in a room" (4)

This is a work on tape from 1969 that has been very influential for the last couple generations of experimental musicians and composers. Lucier records himself reading a text describing what he's doing and why. He then plays that recording into the room and re-records it, after which he plays that re-recording into the room and re-re-records it, and so on, for many iterations. A simple, elegant idea with a surprisingly rich, lovely outcome. And for the romantics a little poignancy given the relationship between the reading and the effect (Lucier has a slight stutter):

"I am sitting in a room different from the one you are in now. I am recording the sound of my speaking voice and I am going to play it back into the room again and again until the resonant frequencies of the room reinforce themselves so that any semblance of my speech, with perhaps the exception of rhythm, is destroyed. What you will hear, then, are the natural resonant frequencies of the room articulated by speech. I regard this activity not so much as a demonstration of a physical fact, but, more as a way to smooth out any irregularities my speech might have."

Stina Hasse: "I Am Sitting in a Different Room" (5)

Stina Hasse, a Danish student in one of my classes last year, had access to an anechoic chamber (that's a room that's been treated so that there is almost no echo or resonance) and decided to do a sort of inverted version of Lucier's piece -- she translated and expanded the text in Danish and then did the re-re-recording process using her own voice. She expected the process to reveal flaws in the anechoic chamber's design: small resonances that the room's creators were not able to extinguish. But what she got was unexpected and wonderful. Instead of bringing out the resonant frequencies of the room (of which there are almost none) it instead brings out the technological resonances of the equipment she used: the electronic noise of the digital recorder, the acoustic coloration of the microphones, the inevitable hisses and clicks of the physical world.

Larry Polansky: "51 melodies" (6)

Polansky has been playing with the idea of "morphological mutation functions," techniques for smoothly changing musical parameters over time, for almost 30 years. In "51 Melodies", a twelve-minute composition for two guitars and rhythm section, various flavors of mutation have been applied to the two guitar melodies to bring them in and out of harmonic and rhythmic sync as they move from a unison source melody at the beginning of the piece to a unison target melody at the very end. One of the things I like most about this piece is that the guitar parts are very difficult, and the guitarists work hard to play them exactly as notated. They're putting a lot of hard work into playing precisely notated music that's completely bonkers and nearly incoherent. A work like "51 Melodies" is a classic target for "my six year old could do that" type derision: its surface features are not particularly "pretty," and appreciation of the music is aided by an interest in the conceptual process behind its creation.

Nick Didkovsky: "Zero Waste" (7)

This is a work for solo piano that is created on the fly, as the pianist plays. It starts by presenting two algorithmically generated measures of music to the pianist, who then proceeds to play the rather difficult music as accurately as possible. A computer system records the pianist's performance, translates it, as best as it can, into rational musical notation, and presents that new notation as the next two measures to be played. It's similar to a live performance version of the Lucier piece: it's a feedback loop that brings out the resonances in a system. In this case, the system is the physiological makeup and sight-reading skills of the performer coupled with the performance capture and analysis capabilities of the computer. In performance the developing score is often projected behind the performer, allowing the audience the audience to track the process via visual as well as sonic experience.

Daito Manabe: "face shock/face copy" (8)

Manabe has been exploring the direct use of electrical musical signals to stimulate facial muscles, facial muscle signals to create musical signals, and the transfer of facial gestures between performers via electrical stimulation. If your six year old is doing this, you are one lucky parent!

* Although this paper focuses on experimental music making, the ideas are equally applicable to other creative pursuits like visual art, dance, and writing. I believe there are useful analogies and metaphors that link experiments in the arts with topics in science and engineering, but I'm not going to try to make those links explicit. Hopefully something here will be compelling to the reader in the context of her own work.

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References

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