Political Forces in the Compositional Process

- Mtafiti K. Imara, Ph.D
“the desire for a conscious control of the new means and forms
will arise in every artist’s mind; and he will wish to know consciously the
laws and rules which govern the forms which he has conceived as in a dream.”
(A. Schoenberg)

I. The Basic Inquiries
Whether we are talking about chemical and atomic processes on a microscopic level, or
individuals and societies on a macroscopic level, change occurs as a result of a “plenum
of forces in tension” (Nkrumah); a particular combination of intersecting internal and
external forces. For example, in chemistry, variations in pressure and heat will act upon
specific quantities of hydrogen and oxygen to produce a solid, liquid, or vapor state. The
measure of inherent or internal qualities of each element along with contextual or
external parameters can then serve as indicators of potential for the resultant compound.
Rules describing this process are subsequently derived and codified to project future
outcomes and/or possibilities. In a broader and inverse reading of this concept, the
acquisition of musical knowledge and the subsequent creation of musical works can
indicate or signify the result of intersecting musical and extra musical forces upon an
individual. Given that music derives its meaning primarily from sociological contexts,
i.e. relationships between people, these “rules” can be deemed political; in as much as
they govern and/or assert a template for human activity. The basic inquiries and
implications of this discussion are therefore:

- Education: how does one become competent at balancing or situating the
elements within music that cultivate aptitude and projects one’s own
creativity?
- Ethnomusicology: How can this model be used to critique the
transformations that occur within specific music cultures?
- Theory: can this paradigm serve as an adequate theoretical model, capable
of describing, signifying, and projecting meaning to musical works and
performance practice?
- Aesthetics: what is the correlation between theory and standards of
beauty? How does one balance the political forces that are operating in
one’s life so as not to be driven disproportionately by one type of impulse?

Musical aptitude, the potential to learn music, can be distinguished from musical
achievement, i.e. “what a child has learned relative to his/her music aptitude.” (Gordon
1990). Taken together, they can also be read as evidence of intersecting forces. Aptitude
represents the “inner possibilities”, whereas achievement is the “outer actuality”; which
suggests a functional relationship between the microscopic and macroscopic domains of
musical perception and composition-performance, respectively. The phenomenon of
audiation, for example, (Gordon 1986) not only assumes change in relationships
between a musician’s inner world and his/her environment, but can also be viewed
inversely, as a way to describe this dynamism. In this paper I describe ethnicity,
economics, eroticism, and essence as political forces that act upon a musician; and
signify or create a correspondence between these forces and changes in the musical
domain.

1 Includes, but is not limited to compounding factors such as: ethnic identity, socio-economic class,
nutrition, physiology, and genetics.
2 Gordon describes audiation as “when one “hears” and comprehends music for which the sound is no
longer or never has been physically present. [10]
Changes occur as a young musician develops skills and knowledge that facilitate his/her perception of nuances in rhythm, tonal simultaneities (harmony), thematic/sonic narratives (melody), and sound concept. How might these changes occur in relation to the manifestation of specific forces in a young musician’s life? How can we assess and teach motivational tendencies of a music student? The underlying assumptions of the need to determine proclivities regarding an individua's’ motivation are three fold: (1) that which moves us can be articulated within the domain of specific forces; (2) a relevant delineation of these attitudinal qualities in conjunction with skills assessment can guide us in our pedagogical choices, i.e. curriculum, technique, and repertoire; and most importantly; (3) how can a musician internalize this awareness and subsequent praxis of what moves him/her?

II. Description of Forces
Forces are generally defined in terms of their effects. Political forces within compositional processes can also be situated within a matrix that implies cause-effect [see table 1].

Ethnicity
Ethnicity is both a sociological and anthropological concept that refers to the originality and uniqueness of a people, particularly in regard to traditions; people accepted as belonging together as determined by specific shared cultural traits. It is not a static notion given that people hood may vary and be redefined over time and place. It is the disposition of the other expressed in terms of hegemonic relationships between dominant and marginal cultures. In other words, the act of naming can assert and reinforce political relationships among different people. Timbre, “that property which permits it (a tone) to be distinguished from another sound of the same pitch and loudness” (Campbell) can be viewed as a psychoacoustic mapping of ethnicity, whereas specificity of tone color is mainly determined by the relative strength of the harmonic/overtone structure of an instrument. Secondary references to timbre also infer a historical link between contrafactum and processes of transmitting music from oral traditions to written music cultures. Within the broader musical domain we have both theme and melody, (or “the line”) which can be defined as a coherent succession of pitches (or words) accepted as belonging together. Melodies, like people, migrate from place to place. The coherency and significance, reflecting various ethnic aspects, of our songs are in large part, determined through these dynamics. E.g. “What Child is this”, a sacred English tune, is derived from “Greensleeves”, a decidedly secular musical expression. Pizmonim, the songs of Syrian Jews, are derived from Arab folk melodies.

Economics
Economics encompasses the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services or commodities. It is primarily viewed as a social science in which the management and ordering of our material world is the focus. A cursory look at music history reveals numerous parallels between the development of music and the concurrent or subsequent development of technology and changes in relations societies have had to labor and the means of production. (Attali) Music has changed as our means of emission, transmission, and reception have evolved. The psychoacoustic analogy is that the mind perceives sound within a continuum or envelope. Musically, we can speak of harmony

3 The NH dictionary of Music defines timbre as: a melody, especially an anonymous or popular one that is used for different texts.
4 i.e. attack, steady state or duration, and decay of a sound
as: the relationship of tones as they sound simultaneously; the distribution of these simultaneities in time (harmonic rhythm), and the overall function and goal of harmonic structures, i.e. tonality (or atonality as may be the case). Economics is perhaps the most quantifiable of the four forces, yet it yields only to ethnicity as being highly variable and thus lends its description to statistical methods. Within the musical domain the evolution of the recognition and practice of scales, intervals, sequences, etc. have, at minimum, reflected economic changes. But aleatoric and stochastic music notwithstanding, historical economic forces have not entirely been left to chance. Economics, as a viable force and tool in human society, is usually highly determined, e.g. capitalism vs. socialism. It is important therefore, to recognize and equip musicians accordingly to, at least, be cognizant of this force within their own music-culture.

**Eroticism**

Just the mere mention of eroticism can evoke a visceral response, given the dramatic expressions of some of its proponents, and the historical relationships between its (minority) advocates and dominant society. To speak of it in regard to music education and the cultivation of young minds may also be considered risqué. With this being said, the phenomenon of human sexuality as a compulsion in human beings is an indisputable fact, regardless of how we may situate it morally, socially, and politically. Eroticism embodies the paradox of how the self is defined in relation to the other. And as Octavio Paz suggests, “there is nothing more natural than sexual desire; there is nothing less natural than the forms in which it is made manifest and satisfied.” (Paz) Therefore, whether we are describing a child’s discovery of the world through touching and feeling objects in his/her environment, explaining the seemingly complex interaction of mind-body between two mature lovers, or illustrating the tactile refinement of a great musician – we are embracing the erotic. Broadly speaking, eroticism is the sensual force. It is a primordial wantonness; a defining and differentiating disposition of humanness that “cannot be reduced to pure animal sexuality”. (Paz) It is therefore meta-sexual, an interstice of the social and affective domains.

Inclusive of, yet beyond the notion of a “pleasure principle”, eroticism strongly references audition, the power or sense of hearing. And not just the microscopic oscillations found in the mechanism of the ear, but (also) the macroscopic interaction between the self and the other. “Hearing” presupposes rhythm (vibrations, natural, flow, pattern) and physical movement. And rhythm, more than any other element, establishes pattern and expectation. It is a widely accepted fact that self-knowledge acquired through movement is a precursor to the acquisition of musical ability. (See Christianson, Jersild, and Bienstock) Erotic awareness, like learning to move, also involves a process of maturation of sensuality. It is an awareness that can both inform the learning process and direct us toward specific outcomes within that process. Additionally, eroticism as a force begs the question of a traditionally preferred paradigm: i.e. masculine and feminine, versus a de-gendered model of “agency and communion”. (Feurstein) In other words, there may be some correlation between the degree in which a child learns to express him/herself musically, and the type of enculturation he/she experiences in relation to gender identification.

**Essence**

Essence is spirit, the sum and substance of nature. It is energy in flux; moving from form to form: electromagnetic, light, heat, atomic, sound, and as potential. Acoustically, the primary referent is intensity, the energy of a sound - or loudness. But this definition, as

5 Affect = the conscious subjective aspect of an emotion considered apart from bodily changes.
well as the description of this mode of perception, is a complex one, given the myriad variations in our physiological and psychological receivers, i.e. the ear and brain. In the musical domain essence is a projected sound ideal or concept from which one derives inspiration. It is the resultant force of a musical composition as defined by the sum of its elements (pitches, rhythms, dynamics, timbres, etc.), and overall form, e.g. sonata-allegro form, twelve-bar blues. Historically, sociologically, or on a macroscopic level, this spirit or essence, is generally referred to as religion; a personal or institutionalized set of attitudes, beliefs, and practices of devotion and faith that are shaped by cultural specificity, hence linking essence and ethnicity. The ritual within religion is intended to aid the practitioner in binding one to that which one believes. Many musicians have articulated this essence as a form of compulsion, such as with Puccini, “The music of this opera was dictated to me by God. I was merely instrumental in putting it on paper and communicating it to the public.” Or with Brahms: “I felt that I was in tune with the Infinite, and there is no thrill like it.” (Jourdain) Divine inspiration notwithstanding, the energy derived from the practice and intent of musiking\(^6\) warrants our attention as educators. Moreover, if we are to successfully respond to the world’s growing cultural diversity, then we must situate and cultivate this force within the broadest possible context of human endeavors, not one that is singular, mythical, or ordered by cultural specificity, in order to access a child’s musical potential. According to Stravinsky, “ideas usually occur to me while I am composing...the uninitiated imagine that one must await inspiration in order to create. That is a mistake.” Underscoring the universality of this notion, he states that inspiration “is a driving force found in every kind of human activity, and is in no wise peculiar to artists. But that force is only brought into action by an effort, and that effort is work.” – A universal notion indeed. (Jourdain).

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\(^6\) Small uses this term as a verb: ‘to music’ (as dance is to dancing); “to express the act of taking part in a musical performance” (inclusive of performing and compositing).
III. Signification of Forces

“The substance lies in the intent, which is revealed in the message. Not in the form... if you’ve ever driven a nail with a shoe cause you didn’t have a hammer, or turned a screw with a knife cause the knife is what you had at the time, then you know what I’m saying. We use what we have to do what needs to be done. This may also involve creating new tools altogether. Rarely do we sit back and marvel at the tools we use to do a job. It’s the job we are most proud of.”

- Rachelle Ferrell

The act of assigning meaning to a given phenomena/association is an empowering act. Much of the power and effectiveness of a musical composition/performance is determined not only by a control over specific elements of the music, but also in how the composer/performer assigns meaning based upon the critical arrangement of those elements. [Table 2] This is true regardless of whether the listeners can perceive and/or articulate those connections (or the composer’s intent). This may also be valid regardless of the completeness and degree of consistency of those significations. Assuming that “balance” is a desired goal, or at minimum, a point of departure for transgression, seeking it consciously through signification invariably involves the need to attend to multiple forces and the manner/possibilities in which those forces combine and/or intersect. A corollary to this is the old (American) saying about internalized knowledge, “…teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.”

Ethnicity

When and how does a thing become useful as a tool? Is it when necessity dictates creative expansion of its function? An understanding of ethnicity can be a tool in as much as it points to uniqueness much in the same way we define timbre as a unique psychoacoustic quality of and within a sound source. This recognition of ethnicity as a valid cultural difference, without judging its worth relative to other ethnicities (or timbres), allows a composer the freedom to expand the function of such. For example, the juxtaposition of one bassoon with a group of strings playing the same melody in Stravinsky’s Le Sacre du Printemps serves to underscore or frame that melody in a way that directs or redirects the listeners’ attenuation. Ravel’s Bolero is another example of how musical mileage or interest can be achieved and maintained simply by the migration of the same theme/motivic elements through the orchestral terrain. The compositional examples are numerous. Whether we are listening to Beethoven’s Fifth, Dvorak’s New World, or Count Basie’s One O’clock Jump – the manipulation of timbral shift, without regard to what Placide Tempels refers to as “primogeniture” (Eze) describes, if not also informs, these compositional processes. In other words, a given theme is not the exclusive right of a specific instrument in the same sense that a given melody is not the exclusive domain of a given music-culture, although born of that culture.

When instructing a student on a given instrument a teacher may consider the value in demonstrating as wide a range of possibilities in tonal color and melodic variation on that instrument as he/she can achieve – including that ethnicity or tone color the student brings to the initial lessons without assigning a value judgment. This approach not only serves to expose the student to timbral possibilities, but validates his/her own musical identity and organically opens the door for a discussion of the technique needed to achieve variations in timbre and melodic variation. This is not only analogous to bridging a cultural gap (but) more importantly increases the students’ understanding of both the depth of his/her musical identity and its interconnectedness to the “other” as well.
Historically, we can see the creation and/or categorization of musical genres has been in accord with racial/ethnic differences. An acknowledgement of this fact is (however) neither an indictment nor tacit support of social and political forces informing this process. Jazz, for example, is one of the many music-cultures that are largely explicable, appreciated, and learned by situating it within the African Diaspora cultural milieu of America. African musical sensibility and propensity toward timbral variety, i.e. microcosm (Floyd) were expressed within the domain of European instruments and hegemonic cultural space, i.e. macrocosm. As the cultural space changed so did aesthetic sensibilities of the dominant culture — that began to tolerate, if not later accept and promote, the singularity of voices as a shared aesthetic. So today we can not only identify and distinguish Coltrane’s sound from Rollins’ sound from Getz – all masters of the tenor saxophone...we can celebrate each as well. Moreover, we regard jazz as America’s classical music – a valid expression of its national/ethnic identity. Perhaps an indication of ying forces of individual expression of freedom and democracy?

**Economics**

“Music is more than an object of study: it is a way of Perceiving the world. A tool of understanding.”
- J. Attali

Economics as a viable force and tool in human society is usually highly determined. Attali’s discussion of the historical signification of economics as a force for musical discovery informs my own, but falls short inasmuch as it does not accommodate the unique, yet universally applicable, contributions to world culture of non-western European music practices, particularly in regard to rhythmic structures (Anku) He describes four stages or “networks” in which “noise” is transformed into music: sacrifice, representation, repetition, and composition, and also states that music “is a herald, for change is inscribed in noise faster than it transforms society”. (Attali) Attali’s examples, like many narratives of western musical history-criticism, asserts macroscopic harmonic development as its central organizing principal, e.g. the evolution from ecclesiastical modes to chromaticism, serialism, and beyond. I contend that an expansion of the notion and significance of harmony might include all sonic simultaneities, as well as viewing it as a metaphor, embracing a broader notion of music as culture, e.g. abakwa, nyabinghi drumming traditions, of Cuba and Jamaica, respectively - encode messages and narratives, within rhythmic structures, the subaltern. Additionally, the interstices of harmony and rhythm signify and situate historical-economic moment. In other words, just as harmony functions in the context of rhythm viewed and subsequently taught as complimentary elements of social forces of production.
"The dichotomy between the spiritual and the political is also false, Resulting from an incomplete attention to our erotic knowledge. For the bridge which connects them is formed by the erotic - The sensual." (Lourde)

**Eroticism**

The erotic approach to music making involves, in part, an understanding of the variety of sensual properties and subsequent responses a musician has toward his/her instrument. As stated above, sensuality is cultivated by paying attention to the rhythmic interplay [the dance] between the mind and body. Playing an instrument (including singing) requires the control of a range of fine to gross motor responses, as well as their cognitive correlatives. It is an athletic process that we engage in, not unlike those of a ballplayer, gymnast, or dancer. However, much too often musicians fail to see it that way and subsequently fail to attend and care for our bodies the way a serious athlete would. In this way we neglect or truncate our development.7 According to Hazrat Inayat Khan, "there exists in all people, either consciously or unconsciously, a tendency toward rhythm. Rhythm in every guise be it called game, play, amusement, poetry, music or dance is the very nature of a man's whole constitution... the whole mechanism of the universe is based on rhythm". The erotic nature, not mere sexuality, may be more pronounced, if not innocuously untainted, in children than in adults, given the dearth of enculturation to sexual taboos and mores in particular, and body concept in general. They (children) are in discovery mode until someone “finds” and/or dictates sensual parameters to them.

Why do children (and people in general) gravitate toward certain instruments and musical timbres? Left to your own devices (and given choices) what instrument or mode of musiking8 (Small) would you choose? Would it be the instrument you currently play? Macroscopically speaking, the ergonomic properties of an instrument are certainly a major concern for instrument manufacturers as well as for serious musicians. On a technical level, i.e. timbre quality, harmonics, variation in dimensions of an instrument intonation related to precision of fingering, embouchure, and breathing, tonal sense related to bowing (grip, proper hand placement, and is posture; are we any less concerned? Appreciating and/or creating great music, however defined, is about attending to nuances; the formation of attenuating skills that begin in infancy (Gordon).

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7 This attitude and practice is changing however, – e.g. yoga for musicians, technological/ergonomic improvement of instruments, etc.
The idea that production of sound is the most profound aspect of musical expression has roots deep in some fundamental concepts of human spirituality. According to an Eastern tradition, everything that exists comes from the utterance of “Om”. In the Bible, the physical inverse is born after the utterance of “the word”.

[Nisenson]

**Essence**

The primary significance of essence is how music itself translates into directed energy or motivation. B.F. Skinner summed up motivation or creative inspiration by stating: “The artist puts paint on a canvas and is or is not reinforced by the results. If he is reinforced, he goes on painting.” (Jourdain) Such a behavioral model has merit and is understandably contingent upon variable internal and external factors. Teaching a canonic or “standard” (such as the Suzuki Method) is thought by many to be one of the keys to motivation; to turning children on to making music. This notion may be challenged by the preponderance and accessibility of popular music, which by many indications is deconstructing, if not only disregarding the significances of musical canons and hierarchal notions of formal structures in music. The teacher’s desire to influence a student toward mastery learning for example, is also challenged by competitive pressures beyond his/her purview. However, as a professional musician, many, if not most of these competitive pressures (forces) are economic in nature; foreboding responsibilities for the young musician.

Facilitating the student’s creation of his/her own musical rituals, expands the potential to acquire the capacity to understand the processes involved in creating music, take ownership of his/her musical creations, and thereby be empowered. “In attempts to achieve coherency and comprehensibility, one must be convinced of the infallibility of one’s own fantasy and one must believe in one’s own inspiration.” (Morgenstern) However, that inspiration need not be solely from without and arbitrary. It may be as a result of the individual’s action (agency), experience, and/or reflections upon the world; a natural response to the life force.
IV. Intersecting Forces and Movement Toward a Praxis
The process of intersecting forces can inform compositional process, as Leibnitz suggests: “Great composers very often mix dissonance with harmonious chords to stimulate the hearer and to sting him, as it were, so that he becomes concerned about the outcome and is all the more pleased when everything is restored to order. (Attali 27) The art and science of balancing political forces is not only based upon developing an awareness of those forces and their [assumed] correspondences with musical elements, but it also requires an assessment of where one stands in relation to these forces. [Table 2] The assertion of formalist aesthetics throughout Western music history has not only focused upon economics-harmony as the central organizing principle, but has attempted “to expunge all traces of music’s involvement with a world outside its own self-enclosed, ontologically privileged domain.” (Norris) This, of course, is antithetical to most non-Western music-cultures and is an increasingly problematic issue for the academy – which is often a step behind developments in popular and world musics - struggling for relevancy. The continued merge of east-west, as well as the process of decolonization underscores this issue.

Attali refers to “noise” as violence; “a resonance that interferes with the audition of a message in the process of emission.” But noise is often the result of intersecting and vying forces. The onsets of any new form of music both reflect and project a new social order. Even though it is potentially a disruption of musical/social hierarchies, once “channeled” or ordered it becomes music. “Its order simulates the social order, and its dissonances express marginalities. The code of music simulates the accepted rules of society.” (Attali 29) Transgression of those rules is an inevitable by-product of seeking balance, especially when we consider that different cultures (as well as different individuals) have affinities and/or propensities toward negotiating one particular force or a combination of forces. Do we, as music educators, teach to transgress?

The underlying goal of this inquiry has been to promote a dialogue and concern for the potential of transgressed teaching and music-making. If we assume that the forces that govern musical creation are in many ways parallel to those that govern societies as a whole, then this would be the inevitable result of a conscious collusion of forces. In order to facilitate the broadest possible education of our students we must cultivate an environment of balance. A context of critical thinking in which he/she can began to link or make connections between elements within music and music and the world, if only to see himself/herself as an integral part of the world – not just as an entertainer or myth driven artist. It is in fact critical thinking that will lead to a greater tolerance within and between different groups of people (ethnicity). The ability to read economic structures and processes will allow us to project an order to our world, not just reflect and react, and ultimately abdicate artistic sensibilities for the sake of either market economies or totalitarian administrations. It is critical thought that allows us to see the benefit, moral precepts, notwithstanding, of natural probing and discovery that a child has in regard to his/her body; a force that can open the doors to boundless creativity (eroticism). It is critical thought that will allow us to see the easy transition of energy between the sacred and the secular (essence). And finally, it is critical thought, predicated upon a principal of balance that will promote musicians and music as a political force itself.

9 Such as in Stravinsky’s Poetics of Music
10 Note the evolution of jazz, rock, and hip hop.
V. Bibliography

Political Forces  Psychoacoustic Properties  Musical Element
Ethnicity  Timbre  Theme/Melody
Economics  Envelope  Harmony/
Erotic  Pitch  Simultaneities
Essence  Intensity  Rhythm

Sound Concept
### Sound Concept

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<th>Rhythm</th>
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