

MORAL CONFLICT AND AESTHETIC FREEDOM: A STUDY OF CONTEMPORARY MUSIC PHILOSOPHY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF IMMANUEL KANT AND FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

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Abstract

The evolution of contemporary music has created a tension between universal moral demands and artistic expressive freedom. This study analyzes this dialectic through the philosophical lenses of Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Nietzsche. Kant emphasizes aesthetics as a universal experience bound by morality, while Nietzsche liberates art from traditional conventions in favor of transgressive creative expression. The research examines radical works such as 4'33" (John Cage) and atonal music (Schoenberg) as rejections of classical aesthetic norms. The findings demonstrate that contemporary music becomes an arena for clashing values between Kantian moral order and Nietzschean deconstruction of traditional values. This conflict reflects the modern cultural dilemma of either maintaining universal principles or embracing boundless creative freedom. Using a qualitative philosophical approach, this study highlights contemporary music's dual role as both social critique and aesthetic experiment that transforms artistic paradigms.

Keywords: Aesthetic, Philosophy, Moral, and Contemporary Music.

INTRODUCTION

Since its inception, music has been constantly evolving. The evolution of music has consistently mirrored the shifts and transformations in human preferences. Fitri (2024) states that the defining elements of music, including melody, harmony, and lyrics, play a crucial role in shaping its emotional impact. According to Hurlock (1953:3), humans are never static. This indicates that humans are perpetually dynamic and will continually undergo changes, both in physiological and psychological aspects. This outlines the factors that drive transformations in music. Music consistently evolves in response to the developments and transformations initiated by its audience.

Etymologically, music comes from the Greek word "Mousikos," which represents the goddesses who play a role in the arts and beauty. According to Hugh Miller (1958), music embodies the essence of time, utilizing sound as its medium, which is inherently physical and dynamic, flowing through the continuum of time.

Miller states that the components of time serve as the fundamental basis of music. Avandra et al. (2023) highlight that the reception of sound by the human ear is primarily influenced by factors such as history, place of residence, habits, and individual tastes.

During previous periods, tonal music, such as that of Bach, Mozart, or Beethoven, was characterized by its orderly and harmonious structures. However, contemporary music has emerged with a spirit of liberation from convention (Arifin et al., 2022). This transition is not simply a change in musical style, but rather reflects a paradigm shift in viewing the relationship between art, morality, and freedom of expression—a dialectic that has long been the subject of philosophical debate. This question is becoming more pertinent as the evolution of contemporary music frequently generates controversy, both in terms of its expressive content and its atonal musical structure, which are perceived to challenge conventional aesthetic and moral standards. This study aims to explore the intricate relationship between morality and freedom in contemporary

music, focusing on a critical examination of the ideas presented by Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Nietzsche.

The conflict between ethical considerations and artistic expression is growing more intricate in contemporary music, as conventional limits are frequently set aside in pursuit of innovation. Numerous contemporary composers confront societal conventions in their creations, igniting discussions regarding the degree to which artistic expression ought to be influenced by ethical standards or rise above them (Hamilton, 2007). This study aims to analyze the dialectic between morality and artistic freedom in contemporary music by referring to the perspectives of Kant and Nietzsche. By comparing these two philosophers, this study seeks to reveal how contemporary music can become a battleground between universal values and creative individuality.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Innovations in human life are frequently referred to as modern, particularly within the realms of culture and art. The term "modern," originating from "modernus," which signifies the present, frequently denotes a distinction from what is perceived as an outdated reality. According to Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia, the term "modern" (used as an adjective) refers to something that is new or current. In the meantime, the term "modern" (used as a noun) refers to a mindset, conduct, or actions that align with or resonate with the expectations of contemporary society.

Modernity is not only restricted to the confines of culture, but it also reaches the realm of art, including music. Subiyakto (2006) defines modern music as music that has evolved and endured a sophisticated process through technology. Modern music, as defined by Dieter Mack (1995), encompasses all genres of music that are evolving concurrently with the advancement of audio-visual media, thereby serving as an entertainment medium. According to an article from Liberty Park Music, the term "modernism" was initially used by critics to characterize musical expressions that resulted from the profound changes that took place at the conclusion of the 19th century and into the 20th century.

Modern music developed through a series of systematic movements following the Romantic period. The systematic movements, including

impressionism, primitivism, and neoclassicism, led to the emergence of a new movement referred to as modern music. Contemporary composers aimed to explore innovative pathways for musical expression. Figures such as Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971), Béla Bartók (1881-1945), and Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951) are important composers whose contributions to modern music remain indelible in the discourse surrounding the genre.

Oliver (2008) suggests that Stravinsky is frequently regarded as the pioneer of modern music. According to Schwarm (2023), Stravinsky's compositions, including "The Rite of Spring" (1913), have significantly impacted modern and contemporary music. This phenomenal and controversial work, inspired by Russian culture, uncharacteristically challenges audiences with its chaotic percussive momentum.

Similarly, Bartók's Concerto for Orchestra (1943) demonstrates his integration of modern techniques with traditional folk influences (Hall, 2015). This piece was composed during his time as a refugee in America amidst the turmoil of World War II. The fourth movement of this work, titled "Intermezzo interrotto," contains a captivating element. In alignment with its title, "disturbing interlude," this movement presents sounds from the clarinet and tuba, evoking a sense of "laughing while mocking."

Arnold Schoenberg remains an unforgettable figure when exploring his impact on modern and contemporary music. Numerous critics have characterized Schoenberg as a composer frequently mocked and derided. His reputation was at stake in his "Five Pieces for Orchestra" (1909). The atonal composition was perceived as peculiar, even less valuable, due to its absence of the distinct structure found in the works of preceding composers.

During the pre-modern period, enthusiasts of music were familiar with structured compositions, exemplified by the works of notable composers such as Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven. The prevalent musical framework of this era was tonal. As noted by Arifin et al. (2022), tonal music is frequently linked to Western musical traditions, with a systematic progression from the Middle Ages through the Romantic period. Bigand et al. (2016) contend that tonal music is characterized by a rotation of chromatic and diatonic tones that revolve around the tonic. This form of music has undergone significant evolution over time. In contemporary society, numerous

musical styles, including pop and jazz, continue to embrace the tonal principles in their expressions.

The evolution from traditional tonal music to contemporary experimentation signifies more than just a technical change; it also embodies a transformation in the underlying philosophical frameworks within the realm of music. If classical tonal music represents order and harmony aligned with universal moral principles, akin to Kant's philosophy, then the deconstruction of tonal rules in contemporary music echoes Nietzsche's spirit of freeing art from the shackles of convention. This development of music from hierarchical and normative structures to more experimental forms essentially reflect the eternal dialectic between tradition and innovation, between moral order and freedom of artistic expression.

Modern music's evolution not only represents artistic innovation but also poses significant philosophical inquiries regarding aesthetic freedom and morality. In this research, the perspectives of two distinguished philosophers, Friedrich Nietzsche and Immanuel Kant, provide distinct yet relevant viewpoints on the conflict between creative freedom and moral principles in music. Through his work, *Critique of Judgment* (1790), Kant highlighted the universality of aesthetic experience and its adherence to rational moral principles (Guyer, 2006). Meanwhile, Nietzsche liberated art from the limitations of conventional morality in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) and positioned creativity as a manifestation of the will to power (Young, 1992).

METHOD

This research applies a qualitative philosophical framework alongside a comparative textual analysis method to explore the interplay between moral conflict and aesthetic freedom in contemporary musical works. Data were gathered through an in-depth analysis of the philosophical writings of Kant and Nietzsche, alongside a thorough critique of secondary literature pertaining to modern and contemporary musical aesthetics.

This research project applies musicological analysis to analyze the contributions of pioneers like Stravinsky, Schoenberg, John Cage, and others, aiming to uncover the relationship between the deconstruction of tonal norms and the liberation of artistic expression.

A comparative method is used to analyze the differences between Kant's concept of moral universality and Nietzsche's perspective on creative transgression, with case studies of contentious works providing tangible examples of the tension between morality and aesthetics. The analysis of data is approached through philosophical hermeneutics, focusing on textual interpretation and contextual examination to bridge the gap between theory and musical practice. This involves a triangulation of philosophical sources, music criticism, and compositional analysis. This research focuses on theoretical analysis without involving empirical data, with the approach used allowing for an in-depth exploration of the struggle of values in contemporary music from the perspective of the philosophy of art.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

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The development of music from the modern to the contemporary era represents a complex journey. This was caused by the numerous changes that emerged from the global conflicts of the early to mid-20th century. The transformations that occurred after the war, encompassing social, technological, and political aspects, profoundly influenced the world of music. Innovations arose from the creative efforts of composers, particularly during the 20th century.

Contemporary music is a genre that prioritizes freedom to create innovation. Contemporary music is a field that emphasizes freedom in order to foster innovation and originality. Therefore, this term is frequently characterized as contemporary music because of its ongoing evolution. The evolution of contemporary music has been recognized within the music community since the late 19th century. Suhertin (2020; 40) states that the emergence of contemporary music took place primarily in mainland Europe. Prinada (2022) contends that the emergence of new music does not imply that it can or should be produced carelessly. Music is intrinsically linked to one of its fundamental roles: providing entertainment. Nevertheless, in addition to providing entertainment, it should also embody aesthetic appeal. This allows contemporary artists and musicians the opportunity to integrate components that have not previously been utilized in their music.

Philosophy in Contemporary Music

During the mid-18th century, a German philosopher by the name of Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten introduced a novel term that significantly impacted the fields of art and philosophy. In 1750, Baumgarten first introduced the term Aesthetics in his publication. The term aesthetics has its roots in the Greek word, αισθητική, pronounced "aisthetike". Hammermeister (2002:7) notes that Baumgarten defined aesthetics as 'the science of senses with the object of beauty'. Baumgarten refers to this phenomenon of sense recognition as Clear and Confused Cognition. Clear because there are things that can be explained from our sense experiences. Confused because not all details can be explained.

Humans articulate aesthetics as a process of decision-making rooted in the experience and enjoyment of beauty. The concept of aesthetics can be briefly articulated as the enjoyment derived from sensory experiences, which are subsequently analyzed through logical thought. An evaluation of an artistic piece grounded in aesthetic principles can lead to two potential results. If the work is beautiful, then it contains aesthetics. If beauty is absent from a work of art, then aesthetics is absent.

According to Kant (Sumardjo, 2000: 289), the concept of 'aesthetics' has a very broad scope, not only related to beauty and majesty, but also includes all forms of pleasure in general. The focus of aesthetics lies in the personal experience of pleasure, prioritizing individual feelings over the characteristics of the object in question. Kant stated that the evaluation of beauty is permanent, as it is fundamental and universal, in contrast to other forms of pleasure that fall outside of the category of beauty.

Contemporary music, as a continuously evolving form of artistic expression, embodies not just technical advancements but also deep philosophical insights. The exploration of philosophy within contemporary music raises inquiries regarding the essence of sound, the significance of musical expression, the connection between the composer and the audience, and the function of music in today's culture. Within the philosophical perspectives on contemporary music, there is an aesthetic decadence inherent in the creation of contemporary music.

In contemporary musical landscape, comprehending music necessitates a theoretical framework, extending beyond mere auditory or visual experiences. Kostelanetz (2003:157) notes that composers such as John Cage, through his piece 4'33" (1952), encourage listeners to contemplate the ambient sounds surrounding them as an integral

aspect of the musical journey. This perspective relates with the phenomenological philosophy of Edmund Husserl, highlighting the importance of subjective experience in comprehending reality.

Theodor W. Adorno, in his *Philosophy of New Music* (2006), contended that contemporary music ought to dismiss commercial benchmarks and focus on genuine artistic expression. Adorno perceived Schoenberg's serial music as a form of resistance to cultural standardization. Contemporary music will persist as a convergence point for artistic expression and philosophical inquiry.

Descartes' Freedom of Thought

In his book, *Discourse on the Method* (1637), René Descartes (1596–1650), a French philosopher, uttered the phrase "cogito ergo sum," which translates to "I think therefore I am." Descartes underscored the significance of self-awareness and subjectivity as the foundation of knowledge in this statement. According to Cartesian dualism, subjectivity and self-awareness are a dichotomy (severe division) that is challenging to comprehend. Cartesian dualism does, in fact, establish a dichotomy between the mind (*res cogitans*) and the body (*res extensa*). Specifically, this dichotomy generates numerous philosophical implications and complications, as Descartes believed that the two substances were equally actual but entirely distinct.

As Descartes's ideas imply, modern music seems to provide a place for freedom. Additionally, there are disagreements regarding the preservation of music within conventional perspectives. Descartes, through the dogma of "cogito ergo sum," permits the freedom of reason. This was the course of action taken by John Cage. He not only challenged conventional musical perspectives in his works, such as 4'33", but also demonstrated to the audience that music is not solely derived from physical sounds. This was also the case with Karlheinz Stockhausen. Stockhausen composed *Gesang der Jünglinge* (1955–56) amid significant reservations regarding Western music's significance. Stockhausen subsequently developed a composition that transcended the distinction between synthetic and vocal sounds by integrating the human voice (a children's choir) with pure electronics. This work represents the concept of the divine and the human in one by exploring the boundaries of music.

Kant's Moral Conflict and Nietzsche's Nihilism

The traditional musical culture has undergone substantial transformations in the contemporary music era. These reforms are frequently perceived as

a departure from human morality in the context of music. The moral concept of music is not solely concerned with the preservation of musical triangulation in order to demonstrate reverence for music. It is also concerned with the respect of sound as its fundamental component. Music has also witnessed a transformation in its meaning in contemporary times, as it is now utilized as a means of expressing one's freedom of expression through sound. Afterwards, sound is no longer the primary component of enjoyment.

Humans have started using new terminology as a protective measure for maintaining their own works, citing the notion that "times have changed," despite the fact that freedom of expression in music frequently violates morality. In the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, the most appropriate method of sustaining a civilization is the ability to uphold morality as a universal value. Contemporary music itself offers a wide range of aural exploration and freedom. However, contemporary music actually deviates from music itself when viewed through Kant's perspective, as it does not adhere to traditional musical principles.

Kant would have likely issued a severe critique of John Cage's 4'33" for its failure to achieve the universal purpose of music. For instance, the inability to accomplish emotional communication or harmony through the use of vacant notes. Kant would have also harshly criticized Cage's other work, *Music of Change*, which includes sound. This work embodies the fundamental definition of music, as defined by Hugh Miller (1958), which is that music is a medium of sound that represents time. However, the irregularity and disorder of cadence and harmony render Cage's compositions indistinguishable from music.

Humans should live autonomously by producing works that are founded on rational principles, rather than merely adhering to market demands or trends, according to Immanuel Kant's philosophy. Kant's principle, which asserts that idealism in music will perpetually be present in all creators, is actually fulfilled by contemporary music. However, as the era of music commercialization develops, idealism will be shattered if the stomach sounds of composers and musicians are louder than the distortion of electronic music on stage. In the end, composers and musicians in the contemporary music era become heteronomous workers.

According to Kant, contemporary and modern music are a means for composers to articulate current

realities when contrasted with the ideas of 20th-century philosophers such as Adorno. Adorno focused on the works of composers like Arnold Schoenberg and Igor Stravinsky, who represent the two poles of modern music. He applauded Schoenberg's atonal and twelve-tone techniques for their revolutionary departure from conventional forms, which he perceived as a reflection of the fragmentation and alienation found in contemporary society. In contrast, he criticized Stravinsky's neoclassicism for its return to older forms, which he perceived as a retreat from the challenges of modernity.

Adorno perceived composers as critical intellectuals who were required to navigate the conflict between tradition and innovation. Composers such as Schoenberg, who challenged the traditional boundaries of musical language, were perceived as more authentic and socially significant than those who adhered to them. He believed that music should serve as a form of social critique. Modern music exposed the contradictions and tensions within society by refusing conventional harmony and structure. The commodification and standardization of culture under capitalism were rejected by modern music.

Adorno's views resonated with those of the renowned German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900). Nietzsche regarded music as a Dionysian force (a symbol of irrationality and chaos) in his book, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1886). From this perspective, he contended that exceptional art is art that circumvents limitations. He believed that music should convey the tragic aspects of life, even if it challenges or disrupts traditional values.

Nietzsche is recognized for his philosophical school of nihilism. Nihilism is the conviction that all values are meaningless, as per Setiawan (2020). To be more precise, there is no genuine significance or value in existence that exists for all individuals. According to Nietzsche, nihilism is perceived as a liberation from the shackles of age-old dogmas. In the contemporary music era, if contemporary music dismantles traditional meanings in order to establish new values, it will introduce new dogmas and replace the old ones.

Nietzsche's demeanor would have been well-suited to contemporary music, in contrast to Immanuel Kant. This is evident in his numerous writings, which assert that current dogmas are outdated and require replacement. Contemporary music, similar to Schoenberg's, deconstructs

dissonant tones as a means of expressing honesty in the face of existential absurdity. Nietzsche might have doubted the legitimacy of musical traditions such as the works of Bach or Mozart, as they symbolize the artist's "will to power."

CONCLUSIONS

The philosophical conflict between moral order (Kant) and freedom of expression (Nietzsche) is represented by contemporary music. According to Adorno, contemporary music opposes conventional aesthetic standards by turning to sound experiments that prioritize subjective experience and social critique, as evidenced by radical works like Schoenberg's atonal music or John Cage's 4'33". This progression demonstrates that music is no longer merely a medium of beauty; it is also a platform for the contemporary values debate.

The dilemma of modern humanity is ultimately reflected in the conflict between tradition and innovation in contemporary music: whether to uphold universal principles or embrace limitless creative freedom. Contemporary music, with all its controversies, mirrors the dynamics of culture that constantly shift between the destruction and creation of new values, as anticipated by Nietzsche in his concept of creative nihilism.

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