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Musical Life and Commodity Relations*

Introduction (Prelude)

In modern societies listening to music occurs within a complex network of exchange relations that convert cultural values into money. These exchange relations are of course transaction relations, yet not every transaction constitutes a commodity relation. Only profitable transactions (in the economic sense of the term “profit”) constitute commodity relations.

Nowadays, the set of commodity relations does not concern only listening to music. It also concerns the conditions that make listening possible as a subjective experience and as a social phenomenon as well. The conditions for listening to music include: the manufacture and supply of musical instruments, the recording and availability of printed music, the production and distribution of musical recordings (on vinyl, magnetic or optical material), the manufacture and availability of technical means for reproduction and listening to music and the mass media (also the channels for music dissemination). In addition, the provision of musical education and the formation of musical culture as well as the various musical structures, such as orchestras and concert halls as institutions for collective musical communication, are also included in the set of conditions necessary for listening to music.

From this point of view, commodity relations function at various levels of musical life. To be more precise, musical life in modern societies is constructed on the basis of commodity relations, regardless of the musical genre, the social status of listeners and musicians or their value orientation, i.e. their musical preferences. This fact is of special importance for the social functions of music. Moreover, it is of special importance for perceiving the social relations and processes that underlie musical communication and finally make music meaningful either as a type of social activity or as a final sound product.

This is why a sociological approach to music could hardly overlook the changes that occur

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in commodity relations, which have a strong impact on every sector of musical life, especially in a globalized economic environment.

From Personal Relations to the Modern Market (Exposition)

The domination of commodity relations and the construction of musical life on this basis is the outcome of an age-long process that demonstrates more profound social transformations. Until the appearance of printed sheet music in 16th century (Attali, 1991: 100; Supičić, 1987: 161), commodity relations in the context of musical life were not wide-spread and appeared on a limited scale. Sheet music had already made possible – for the first time in the history of music – the full distinction and separation of creation from performance and dissemination of music. However, only printed sheet music could create the conditions for the development of a market, thus accelerating the process of the division of the various activities that constitute musical life. It is not by chance then, that the first phase in the history of music industry is signified by the appearance of music printing and the development of the appropriate and relevant organizational, legal and economic institutions (Garofalo, 1999: 319).

Apart from music printing, the development of instrumental music during the 17th century and especially the wide popularization of amateur occupation with music among the bourgeois strata during the 18th and the 19th century, formulated together the particularly musical as well as the broader social conditions for the development of commodity relations in musical life.

Amateurs constituted a wide and profitable market for musical education (Weber, 1994: 178). On the other hand, the evolution of instrumental music contributed to the development of demand for musical instruments, since it led to the role distinction between the various musical instruments and to the development of the interest in timbre, dynamics and sound volume. At the same time, the evolution of musical instruments contributed to further development of instrumental music. However, only in industrial societies – that is during the 19th century – did the manufacture of musical instruments become a clearly distinct set of operations and was finally undertaken by special firms (Supičić, 1987: 263). This fact indicates that the formation of a market for musical instruments was accomplished by that time. On the whole, the particularly late development of musical instruments manufacturing into a modern industry (Théberge, 1997: 21-22) corresponds to the particularly slow process of their market formation.

The appearance of public concerts since the 17th century and especially the development

of this institution during the 18th century, contributed also to the formation of a market for music. At the same time it created the need for bigger and better concert halls. The public concert accelerated the domination of commodity relations in musical life. Addressed to a continuously growing public and separating completely reception from creation and performance, the public concert created a need for the emergence of a new – completely commodified – type of structure for organizing collective musical communication.

Despite being commercial actions, the manufacture of musical instruments, music education and finally concert organizing and concert performance were mainly based on and narrowed by personal relations – at least until the middle of the 19th century (Théberge, 1997: 22; Weber, 1994: 179). For this reason, they could not – objectively – be addressed to a large, unknown public, where impersonal relations were dominant. It was due to the domination of personal relations in musical life that large-scale production for profitable exchange was unthinkable. It was unthinkable for the musician of the 18th century to make an effort to attract unknown listeners in a concert (Weber, 1994: 179). Besides, roughly by the end of the 18th century, musical compositions were not addressed to an unknown public, but were mainly circumstantial and functional, i.e. they were created for certain social circumstances (Michel de Coster, 1975: 257) or for educational purposes. In this context, the musician did not make exchanges for profit.

The growth of sheet music publishing at first and later the public concert (as developed by the middle of the 19th century) led commodity relations in musical life to acquire the mass and impersonal qualities that distinguish any market in the modern sense of this term. (Weber, 1994: 180). By organizing mass scale production and the market on the basis of impersonal relations, the industrial society organized the reproduction and distribution of music on the same grounds, thus developing to their utmost limits the possibilities created by the appearance of sheet music and public concerts.

By the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century – when it became technically possible to store, reproduce and transmit music – the dominance of commodity relations in musical life became universal and absolute. Actually, this development signified the commercialization of musical sound itself – the last component of musical life excluded until then from this type of social interaction.

Structural Changes and Cultural Consequences (Development)

The Musicians

Obviously, the complex and multifunctional character of commodity relations exceeds the commercialization of music sound, even though this development has by itself very important consequences for 20th century musical life. Whenever a musical instrument, a piece of recorded or sheet music or the right to attend a concert are exchanged for money, a manifold system of social relations, institutions and values is activated and reproduced.

This system has changed the social status of composers and interpreters in a radical way, modulating the conditions for music creation, distribution and listening. Personal independence and the commitments imposed by impersonal market rules and competition have replaced personal dependence on the local sovereign, church or guild.

These rules generate the proper conditions for the virtuoso soloist and the orchestra director to emerge as “stars” of the stage and for an immanent and solid relationship between theatricality and performance skills to be established (Attali, 1991: 127-143; Ringer, 1994: 82; Weber, 1994: 181-182, 188). In this way, music performance becomes a spectacle and – as Adorno would probably put it – musical life turns into “a world full of fetish” (Adorno, 2000: 79). On the other hand, suitable conditions are also created for the wide range development of respect and admiration for great artists. This respect and admiration are – of course – commercially exploitable too (Weber, 1994: 176, 188).

Listening and Musical Taste

The predominance of commodity relations in musical life stabilized the disjunction between musicians and the audience. Henceforth, the relationship between them could only function through a system of institutions, such as music publishers and press, concert organizing firms, the music industry, music distribution and promotion networks, the mass media, contemporary global multimedia conglomerates and finally through the system for control and management of intellectual property rights (Kretschmer, Klimis and Wallis, 2000: 2). The functions of the commodity relations in the realm of these institutions are not less contradictory than the outcome for the social status of the musicians.

However, the trend towards the democratization of musical life is reinforced, since it is through the market mechanism that more and more people get access to music. Occupation with music and especially listening to music no longer signify some sort of social differentiation. This trend towards a broader democratization appeared by the end of the 18th century and

developed mainly during the 19th century, primarily in music education (Supičić, 1987: 171-172; Weber, 1994: 178). The appearance of the public music concert and especially the consequent development of the modern music industry consolidated this tendency that has finally been repositioned in the sphere of listening. At the same time, the symbolic functions of music for identity structuring and for signifying social status have been relocated in the sphere of musical taste. The peak of this development may be observed during the 20th century, when listening to music moved from the concert hall and the middle class living room to the most unusual physical and social locations.

On the other hand, another function of the market – as a set of institutions that make musical communication possible – is that it constitutes a mechanism for filtering, controlling and managing music. A printed sheet of music, a music concert and particularly the mass production of a music recording are – *inter alia* – the outcome of a decision chain concerning the choice of music itself. These are ventures that – from the economics point of view – cannot rely upon the unpredictable fluctuation of musical taste. This is the reason for which efforts to influence musical taste have been made since the contemporary music industry was taking its first steps (Ringer, 1994: 80-81; Martin, 1999: 242-244).

Therefore, this is not an unconditional democratization: anyone is free to purchase the right to listen to the music that he or she has been taught to like, provided that he or she can pay for it. The analysis of the standardization of music products and the fetish character of music (Adorno, 1991 and Adorno, 2000), as well as the analysis of the oligopoly ruled by the “majors” in music industry (Hull, 2000; Peterson & Berger, 1975) actually point out the formal character of democratization in musical life.

The Music

The functions of commodity relations in musical life are not restricted to the structural transformations that determine the status of music, ways of listening or the configuration of musical taste. They are extended to the symbolic character of music as a cultural product and in the ways people evaluate it.

It is possible to make cost estimation for manufacturing a musical recording, for organizing a concert or for manufacturing a musical instrument and then to fix a price with absolute precision, since the required work, the required material and technical infrastructure can be measured. It is obvious that these goods incorporate values that exist before the exchange takes place. The peculiarities however of music itself in this respect are important, because they have aesthetic, methodological and pedagogic implications.

The act of purchasing and selling music equates it with a universal and abstract exchange value – that is with money. This equation shows that music incorporates a value prior to its exchange. Besides, this is valid for all goods. This value is extraneous to the public presentation of the music, since the music itself is created and exists prior to its presentation and recording. Consequently, this value is not related to the labor, the material and technical infrastructure or the means required for presentation or recording. It belongs exclusively to the music itself (Attali, 1991: 110). That is why only when commodity relations – with the structural changes they entailed – dominated musical life (from the middle of the 19th century), could the notion of music as something independent from its social context become dominant too. Therefore, it is not by accident that during that period Eduard Hanslick's formalism emerged along with the romantic ideal about the composer as a *sui generis* genius, as well as with the belief that music does/should not have anything to do with social reality (Supičić, 1987: 178-179).

Romanticism expressed in a specifically artistic and aesthetic way the disappointment caused by circumstances and the conditions created by a society constructed on the principles of the bourgeois rationality. Romanticism did not emanate, therefore, only from the internal development of the art in general and/or of the music in particular. It mainly emanated from a state of things, where the preponderance of impersonal relations finally led to a social reality that could be described only as a caricature of the Enlightenment project and the demands of the French revolution. The formalist notion about the autonomy of music could never have been taken seriously and become widely accepted if music had not been shown to be a value in itself through the predominance of impersonal commodity relations, that is, if the abstract exchange value of music had not prevailed in everyday social practice.

This is where the social roots of a deep and heavy musicological and music educational tradition are situated. This tradition is so deep that even by the end of the 20th century musicology and music education were still not emancipated from it. There is no doubt that the concept of the autonomy of music has been a cornerstone for the development of musicology as a discipline. However, the concept concurrently favored some of the most extreme forms of positivism, thus entailing a methodological split which to the present day has not ceased to cause conflicts and controversies not only on the theoretical, but also on the institutional, academic and even political levels. Actually, positivistic musicology is a form of alienation resulting from the dominance of impersonal commodity relations in musical life. From this point of view, there is a sociological explanation as to why there are so many musicologists, music educators and musicians convicted that the bourgeois society and its aesthetic ideals

have nothing to do, for example, with the sonata form, with the development of the symphony or with the way Beethoven developed his structural principles.

This conviction however also has certain pedagogic implications, since it determines the way music is taught and consequently – much more importantly – the reproduction and internalization of the concept that music has a set of rules on its own, hence it is irrelevant to the social reality it emanates from. Finally, this belief has serious methodological implications, since it constitutes a criterion according to which certain types of historical and psychological approach are legitimized while other types of approach – such as the sociological one – are either marginalized or seriously questioned. This is a clear form of “renouncing the social” from music and art in general – as Pierre Bourdieu has pointed out (Bourdieu, 54-55). It is a renunciation that concerns not only music itself, but also its aesthetic evaluation.

The Dynamics of Contemporary Changes (Recapitulation)

Commodity Relations

By the end of the 20th century social, economic and technological developments resulted in the fundamental and radical transformation of commodity relations:

The storage and processing of the data required for a commercial transaction to take place have been automated and organized using computers. Henceforth, a considerably larger volume of transactions can take place in minimum time, while at the same time the space needed has almost been nullified and the necessary material and technical infrastructure has largely been suppressed. From now on commercial transaction consists of a digital picture on the computer screen and the commodity relations are virtual.

Combining digital technology with telecommunications has led to networking and particularly to the inter-netting of commodity relations, thus creating new channels for product distribution, nullifying the physical distance between consumers and producers and finally resulting in an unprecedented condensation of the time required for the transactions to take place.

In several sectors – and mainly in the cultural industry – a series of mergers and takeovers has led to the creation of giant multimedia conglomerates. These conglomerates do not only accumulate a large – if not the largest – part of the world production of certain goods, but they also control the various production stages, as well as the distribution networks for these products. That is to say, the virtualization and inter-netting of commodity relations are accompanied by rearrangements that lead to their higher concentration and stronger integration, both

vertical and horizontal.

These transformations of commodity relations do not constitute a local or regional phenomenon with a narrow impact, concerning only a few countries. They do not constitute a purely economic phenomenon, restricted to a market place that is interesting solely to economists. These are changes that have a worldwide impact, regardless of the particular stage of local development. Moreover, they constitute a social phenomenon of utmost complexity, since it has political, legal, moral, aesthetic, scientific and cultural dimensions and consequences (Kotzias, 2000: 29-52).

Musical Life

The virtualization and inter-netting of commodity relations deregulate – along with other factors – the traditional distribution systems, particularly those for intangible goods such as music. In Greece this type of deregulation can be seen in the dramatic decline of “traditional” music stores and their gradual elimination (Elliniades, 2001). It can also be seen in the appearance of large multimedia distribution firms that actually constitute an extension of the major international recording industry.

Nullifying space and condensing time, virtualization and inter-netting turn upside down the entire system of institutions that ensured relations between musicians and their audience. On the one hand, the music industry acquires the capability to communicate directly with consumers and to carry out transactions on an individual basis, thus eliminating the cost of maintaining traditional distribution networks. On the other hand, musicians also acquire this capability, as they learn to use the new technology. Theoretically, it is possible for musicians to reach their audience through the Internet, bypassing the entire system of intermediary institutions (Yakhlef, 1998: 613; Garofalo, 1999: 349). At the same time, musicians have more possibilities to make use of material that comes from the entire world, past and present (Smiers, 2001: 34).

In reality however, the situation is somehow different. The processes of consolidation and integration of the cultural industry, along with the virtualization and inter-netting of commodity relations, have led to the formation of new opaque control and management mechanisms for musical culture worldwide. Let’s consider for example that the rights to the works and records accounting for 80% of music sales worldwide are appropriated by only five conglomerates (Kretschmer, Klimis and Wallis, 2000: 8). These are EMI, Bertelsmann, Sony, Universal and AOL Time Warner.

Universal owns or administers over 800,000 copyrights in about 63 countries. AOL Time

Warner controls over 1,000,000 copyrights in 68 countries, the same as EMI in roughly 30 countries. For the year 2000 these five corporations had a total income of 22.3 billion dollars, that is roughly 61% of the total revenues from the global music recordings market.

At the same time, the structural changes caused by vertical integration are so important that today it sounds quite reasonable to talk about transnational multimedia conglomerates, not about the music industry (Garofalo, 1999: 319). These conglomerates control almost every information channel and practice a particularly aggressive marketing policy. In this respect it is noteworthy that AOL Time Warner brands “touch consumers more than 2.5 billion times each month” (AOL Time Warner, 2001: 3). The group ensures this type of marketing policy through a vast number of companies that it controls or owns.

Moreover, it should be added that by the end of the 20th century the global multimedia industry turned from the production of new content to the exploitation of the rights it already administers or owns. It has turned mainly to the reproduction of old content in new forms and formats and to the distribution of the least possible quantity of music with the widest acceptance worldwide (Garofalo, 1999: 343-344; Hesmondhalgh, 1996: 483; Martin, 1999: 259). It is obvious, that – as Garofalo has pointed out – since a single musician can move 40 million units (for example Michael Jackson’s *Thriller*), it is not reasonable to accept the extra production, administrative and marketing costs of 80 artists moving half a million units each (Garofalo, 1999: 343).

On the other hand, the virtualization and inter-netting of commodity relations are very important as a means of resistance. They may be used to resist a narrow and standardized repertory, since they offer the possibility either to independent companies or to individual musicians to distribute their work and access audiences, bypassing a whole system of intermediaries. This does not seem unrealistic or utopian considering that according to some estimation for the year 1999 concerning the North American market, while in 1998 about 846 million new CDs were sold, at least 17 million MP3 files were downloaded from the Internet **each day** (Garofalo, 1999: 349).

In this way, not only are the traditional music distribution networks deregulated, but also the whole system for managing and protecting intellectual rights. Some people think that this system is outdated, since its social and cultural context has been transformed (e.g. Peraino, 1999 and Smiers, 2001). At the same time this system has been changing into a means for the unequal distribution of income from cultural goods to the benefit of a small number of artists and companies in a few developed countries (Smiers, 2001: 36). Besides, this seems to be the real meaning of the Secure Digital Music Initiative (SDMI), an organization founded in 1998

by the five “majors”, the International Federation of Phonographic Industry (IFPI), the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) and the Recording Industry Association of Japan (RIAJ). Incorporating a digital watermark in the musical product not only prevents piracy, but also ensures the control over the production and distribution of certain cultural goods that – as already mentioned – meet certain prerequisites, mainly economic. Of course, not all artists comply with these prerequisites, nor do these prerequisites concern for example the African musicians from whom on a regular basis the artists of the developed countries “borrow” material.

The New Condition (Coda)

The transformation of commodity relations outlines new types of musical culture in the 21st century, as it refers to the transformation of the conditions for music creation, distribution and reception. On the one hand, there is a strong tendency towards a higher concentration and closer control of music. That is, there is a higher risk for further expansion of cultural hegemony and manipulation. On the other hand, better conditions for the democratization of musical life are created. This development involves new opportunities. However, the coexistence of risks and opportunities delineates a situation with a high degree of uncertainty and this is precisely the content of the term “crisis” (Morin, 1998: 207-224). In this sense, contemporary musical culture is in crisis.

Until the present day, the traditional commodity relations system has demonstrated an astonishing attribute. It has managed to incorporate and assimilate contradictory tendencies, turning them into sources of profit. Even the most radical artists have had to be included – in some way – in this system of relations in order to communicate with the audience. The new situation that is emerging, as a result of the deregulation of the traditional distribution networks and institutions that ensure musical communication, can turn this fact upside down. Involving the risk of higher concentration and closer control however, it is likely to intensify cultural inequalities and to consolidate new forms of cultural hegemony.

The tendency that will finally prevail will certainly be the result of many factors. In these circumstances musical education acquires a particular significance, since opportunities are created for it to function not only – and perhaps not mainly – as an autonomous form of education, but as an integral part of a larger aesthetic and artistic education system. Its importance becomes clearer considering that all forms of education are necessary for the democratic society to function.

On the whole, musical culture is introduced autonomously and separately from the general education system. It is considered to be a type of luxury and some kind of personal affair. This is why in many countries – including Greece – music education is not (neither pedagogically, nor educationally) an integral part of the necessary corpus of knowledge and skills provided by the public education system.

Some of the innate causes for this state of affairs reside in the disengagement of music from its social context and in the entailed ideological heritage from the 19th century. Other causes should be sought in the social circumstances that dictate an education system interested not in developing a culture of critical orientation in social reality, but in implanting the culture of consensus in order to achieve the best possible conformity (Baltzis and Kelesidis, 1999: 90-91 and 98-99).

A meticulous and elaborate revision of the total education system and institutions is a prerequisite in order to develop music education as an integral part of a larger aesthetic and artistic education system. Such a transformation presupposes the treatment of music (and art in general) in a completely different way from that in which it is treated by cigarette, beverage or insurance companies, banks and aspiring patrons of the arts (Halaris and Plios, 1996: 170 and 172-176). Inevitably, such types of transformation are associated with political decisions. Besides, the exit from the crisis of musical culture either way is generally related to political decision-making (or failing to make). In this sense, the crisis does not only involve the coexistence of risks and opportunities for the development of music education, but also for cultural policy in general.

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