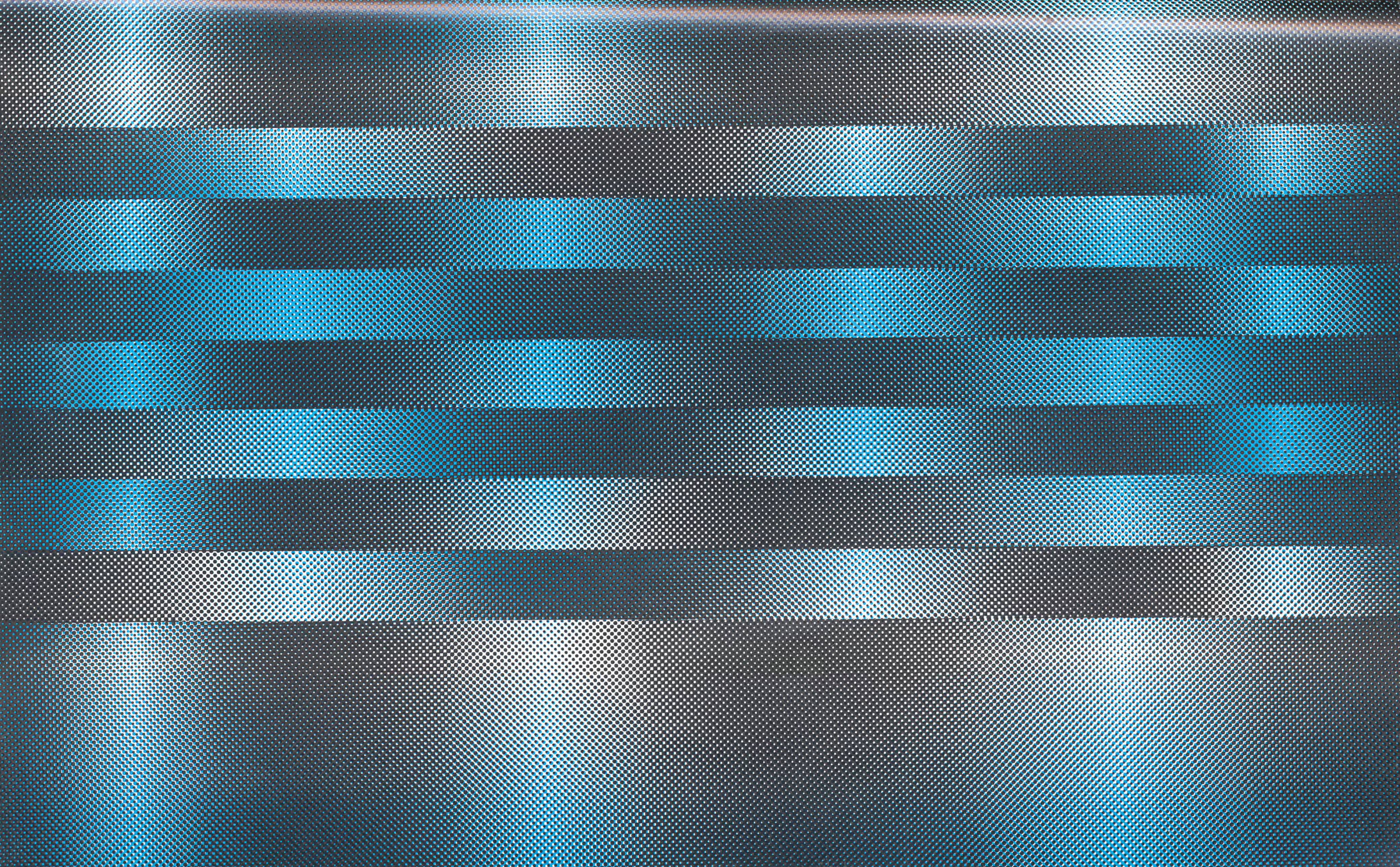

Does Avant Garde Mean Anything?

Dick Higgins

The only dictionary on my favorite desk is Barlow's *The Complete English Dictionary*, which I like for the conciseness and ingenuity of its definitions. It's a pity it's been out of print since 1772. The only meaning it gives of "avant garde" is "the first division of an army in battle array." Granted this isn't a sample of Mr. Barlow's charm (one might try his definitions of "art" and "artist" for instance), it still makes clear the precise military metaphor involved in describing an artist as avant-garde.

But is art like a military situation? Is there one movement to a given day, and one objective to be achieved? In the Romantic period it may have been that there would be considerable agreement that the expression of greater depths of feeling through music constituted an advance, to be explored by an avant garde and followed up by the more conservative or, eventually, most popular composers. A similar consensus might have been possible in the 1920's or, later, again in the 1950's, with respect to the "liberation of the dissonance" or the "rediscovery of music as sound (or noise) in time and space" as clichés of their times.

But any concept of a steady progression with its avant garde and its main force following along behind implies a linear (or, at most, polylinear) concept of progress. On the one hand the question can be raised whether there exists any progress in any art, since the new ground one reaches is not necessarily demonstrably better than the ground one has left — it is merely newer, which may provide motivation for the artist to explore and achieve freshness. Or it may not. But then, on the other hand, if there is any relatively consistent line of development in the music or other arts of one's own time, it would be hard to spot since neither is all the important material available to us, nor have we the wisdom of hindsight to guide us. So now let us look at a few fairly recent developments and try to put them into context, so that later we can pick up the line along which we have started.

One of the more obvious changes in all the arts in the last decade has been the move away from the Neo-Primitivism that characterized much of the arts of the 1950's, when Kline and De Kooning ground their own pigments and sized their own canvases; some composers rejected, in quite a number of their works, conventional instrumental machinery in favor of radios, toys, guns, etc. Cage and others rejected the acoustical substance altogether in favor of the most bland and traditional kind of instrumental language combined with highly abstract allusions to 19th-century mathematics (Babbitt, Boulez, and the Cologne School). This last approach had the double distinction of being artistically primitive (since it raised no questions outside of the stock mathematical metaphor) and mathematically primitive (since it never dealt with the theory of sets, on which the more modern mathematics is based), and in fact two composers who have moved the farthest from mathematical allusionism are former lights of the Cologne school, Stockhausen and Kagel.

The more mechanical Neo-Primitivism, however, led to a number of developments in the early and middle 1960's which were considerably less primitive. On the one hand there were experiments by artists and students of John Cage, such as George Brecht, Al Hansen, and myself. Brecht pushed the extremes of minimal experience. One piece was played in the dark (to avoid visual excitement) by one performer on a comb. Another (also from 1958) used three light bulbs blinking in the dark, each only once. By testing these extremes, Brecht raised philosophical issues that were very interesting, and which later led to Minimal Art. Hansen and myself, on the other hand, started from toys and unorthodox objects, and developed from collages and action music made with this into Happenings based on sound-producing actions (the best publicized Happenings were essentially visual) and in this way we began to do the kind of pieces which were

later associated with Fluxus. Another kind of Fluxus piece had its origin in these extremely exaggerated simplicity studies: the kind of piece in which the body was the only allowed instrument. Quite a number of people made pieces of this sort, sometimes quite long ones. One particularly good series of performances was given in 1964 by Jackson Mac Low, who wired his body for sound. Most of the people who composed these Fluxus-related pieces continue to do so, though there is a recent tendency for the pieces to become larger, more complex, and more obviously art works.

A second point of departure took place around 1962, when La Monte Young (who had been doing Fluxus-type pieces) began with his various "Tortoise" pieces, improvisations in complex modes, evocative of Ragas and Iranian classical styles, in which isorhythmic phrases moved in and out of synchronization. This style has been developed (with some differences, of course) by Steve Reich, independently, and by Terry Riley, whose extremely coloristic ostinato structures have very clear parallels to psychedelic art, and whose work appears therefore to be in the process of becoming *de rigeur* for the Brotherhood of the Beaded Beard. This will be, perhaps, the first time since the 1930's that a popular movement (hippy, yippy or post-whatever) has had its own classically-based music. But one of the most significant developments socially and culturally during the sixties has been the breaking down of the basically 19th-century distinction between popular culture and so-called "serious culture." It would be surprising if Pop Art did not have its musical cognates (unfortunately the term Pop Music has already been pre-empted, so a slogan-type label is needed) in a time when the Beatle George Harrison is moving from the world of commercial music into more classically-oriented styles, as on his album *Wonderwall,* where he uses a huge array of oriental styles juxtaposed with normal electronic techniques. Or when Joseph Byrd, a former student of Stockhausen and whose graduate work was done in Ethnomusicology, turns up with The United States of America, a straight rock group which, however, used substantial quotes from Charles Ives in its album (Columbia CS 9614). Or when Frank Zappa of the Mothers of Invention becomes increasingly unwilling even to identify himself specifically as a rock and roll musician or his music even as popular music.

The essential difference still remains between a Terry Riley and a Harrison, Byrd, or Zappa: these last are essentially entertainers, while Riley's music raises a broader scope of issues; but it is interesting and even raises hopes for our society to see the gulf narrowing between our gigantic popular audience and the more experimental of our musical artists.

Of course the main course away from Neo-Primitivism I have deliberately avoided mentioning till now, and this is tape recorder music and its fast-growing relative, computer music. Not being primarily concerned here to make a survey of this field even during the 1960's, I'll try to steer clear of major names and works and to keep my discussion theoretical. First, during the experimental phase of tape recorder music, the work reflected Neo-Primitivism quite thoroughly. The French had a school using collaged recorded sounds from nature. The Germans had a school which used only generated sounds. The former was labelled "musique concrète" and the latter "electronic music." On the supposed profundities of these approaches many fearful battles were fought throughout the world, resulting in the demolition of many a tea-cup. But given the American reluctance at that time to use a complex scientific tool, the tape recorder music was left in the hands of those who were very *pre-fried* in their approach, and who needed grants for survival in order to construct elaborate studios. Which was done. And presto, the cave dwellers cruised around in rocket ships. One concert in Max Pollifkoff's mostly very memorable Music in Our Time series featured a work (this was circa 1957) called "A Walk Through Outer Space," and you could really hear the big thumping steps. And all that white noise! While the Cologne School, naturally, applied very handsome charts to construct mathematical poems about Godel's Theorem (a diagram for which even appeared on the jacket of an early Cologne School phonograph record), but which still sounded like very imaginative Hammond Organ playing.

What these early experimenters did not seem to grasp (with the exception of Cage, whose early tape pieces still are

electrifying in their impact, perhaps more than his other work of the 1953-59 period) was the essential uniquenesses of tape recorder music. One might draw a cartoon of a patient being wheeled into an absolutely cosmic operating room with an infinity of little tools all over the place, and the surgeon saying to him, "Yes, if I'm clever enough about it, maybe I can figure out a way to use every one of them in the course of removing that tooth of yours."

Meanwhile back at the ranch there were composers making music that was not hyphenated, electronic-music, but simply music, as always music was, with a sense of necessity about its presence, an impact of one sort or another — perhaps evocative of something (an idea maybe), perhaps simply an ear feast, something that had to do with sound which one person had noticed and wanted to share. One of them was Richard Maxfield. His musical training was excellent. But he also was well trained as an engineer, and there was no question of having to explain his mis-conceptions of what electronics might do to a technician who didn't speak the same language or have the same artistic standards. He found the perfect collaborator in himself. So on rather modest earnings he built an electronic studio the equal of those which others had to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to acquire. And then, since his incredibly complex circuits were second nature to him, he attributed no undue importance to them, and simply concentrated on the unique things about electronic music, which others seemed consciously to be ignoring: (1) the tape was a notation, and any tape machine only an instrument, on each of which the piece would sound differently; (2) in making the tape, the nature of all performances was pre-determined, and therefore one must plan in such work not to suit the needs of some live performance, but to develop the potential from the fact of working with tape; and (3) since one was working with a recorded medium, repetition within a work and even from work to work of materials and even whole fragments was natural to it (as opposed to using the ambiguity implicit in different performances, different performers and different performance situations, which usually leads to a reluctance to repeat oneself in any way, within a work or from work to work). The results were, among others, *Stacked Deck*, *Cough Music*, the *Pastoral Symphony*, and the various versions of *Steam* and *Night Music*. It is unfortunate that so few of these works have been made available to the large public.

Mention the word "technology" to an artist today. It usually will stir up images of banks of computers, looking like endless aisles of huge tape recorders, tended by white smocked technicians mysteriously coaxing visionary results out of endless supplies of oscilliscopes and analog devices. Actually, of course, computers are simply overgrown adding machines which can handle verbal results* or a variety of printouts and formats of printouts, these last of which might power television screens, scanners of all kinds, and even tapes playable on ordinary tape recorders, rough ("hairy" seems to be the word that is often used for low numbers of scanned outputs per second) or fine and slick (for more rapid outputs) as any tape-recorded signal could be. Even speech has been synthesized, using the SNØBØL computer language, though this is, as yet, hard to deal with for aesthetic purposes, thanks to the high cost of computer time. But such pieces as James Tenney's *Homage to Che Guevara* (1967) could not have been achieved by any other means, and therefore justify their medium. Furthermore, they have impact, and could become quite popular for home playing, even though they are not designed for concert hall use particularly.

Finally, among the kinds of electronic music there are works of the less identifiable sort, such as Gordon Mumma's *Mesa* or Max Neuhaus's *Maxfeed*, the notation for each of which is simply an electronic circuit, and any use of which machine, when it is constructed, is a performance of the work. Each is capable of producing only one kind of result, as are most machines. But the machines are devised with the concept of the result in mind, which is the act of composition in this case.

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*Several specimens of computer poetry will be included in the forthcoming (late, 1969) Simon and Schuster book, ***Expanded Poetry***, being edited by Ronald Gross with (for their Concrete Poetry and Intermedia sections) the collaboration of Emmett Williams.*

The *Maxfeed* is a collaging device, which structures whatever radio signals happen to be in the air at the time it is switched on, according to feedback principles. The results of each, the Mumma *Mesa* and the Neuhaus *Maxfeed*, are exciting to hear and interesting to think about. Both are the result of anticipating probable sounds. Are they not therefore art works, even musical works, even though the material is filled in by simply playing the given material (just as one might do with Mozart)?

And at the same time as all these technological pieces, we are as rich as ever in work which is even less classifiable. For instance there are Philip Corner's pieces, elusive to define except as metaphors of one or another heard or experienced found situation. Though he is still best known for his piano performances of Ives and Satie, Corner's own compositions are perhaps the more poetic and performance-oriented parallels to Duchamp's Ready-Mades. And what about the puristic works in a traditionally musical sense of Michael Sahl and Lou Harrison, which seem, somehow, to aim for us to experience a major third more deeply than ever before?

Now perhaps we can begin to answer the question which is the title of this writing: Does the avant-garde mean anything?
My answer has to be that it means as much and as little as it ever did.
True, we are experiencing a time, in these late 1960's and early 1970's, in which the variety of the intended musical result is staggering. It is not easy for us to apply to our present moment a simple conflict between classicism and romanticism, Apollonian and Dionysian, logic versus anarchism, as we could — **perhaps,** if we deluded ourselves enough — even as late as the 1950's. Sometimes it seems as if we are watching, in the musical world, not even a three-ring but a six-ring circus. Still, I think music has always been like that. And the 1970's may find important, above all others, many of the marvelous composers I haven't even mentioned — such as the composers around the magazine *Source*, in Davis, California, or Harry Partch or David Reck (both of whose work I feel the poorer for not knowing better), or the various composers trying, here and abroad, to work out new logically structural metaphors to replace the naïve mathematical approaches used in the heyday of the Cologne and Princeton schools.

No, avant garde does not mean anything if one is to start by saying "so and so is 'avant-garde' while so and so is not, because the first so and so is doing **this** while the second is not." That may be all well and good to say about our time, the 1980's, or in the 1990's. But until we have isolated what the common denominator is among those who are achieving a composer's role of adding to our experience and richness of life, culturally, it is premature and stultifying.

Yes, to say that any given composer is adding to this experience in his own way by pushing the frontiers, technically and in terms of impact, and that he is therefore avant-garde — this is meaningful, because then, if one is told one is about to hear an avant-garde work, one need simply expect that it will not duplicate his past experiences.

There is an avant garde. It does not consist of those who simply are content to attack the past: these are the victims of the past. The avant-garde consists of those who feel sufficiently at ease with the past not to have to compete with it or to duplicate it. What has been done need not necessarily be done again. Now that we have conquered all the earth by beginning to know it and understand our neighbors, now that we are on the verge of adding the moon to the known world, the last frontier is the frontier of our experience, in all our communications including the cultural ones. Better to think of avant garde as an inevitable and wonderful kind of pioneering.

Source: Music of the Avant-Garde with permission of the editors.