

CONTEMPORARY MUSICS AND THE “NEW SINCERITY”

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ABSTRACT

The irony in postmodern art has lost relevance. Postwar composers often drew on ironic narratives or parodied other composers or genres. The post-postmodern movement that began in the last decade of the twentieth century reacted against this non-redemptive irony; it is only recently established enough to be understood contextually, making the present ideal to study how post-postmodernism, or the “New Sincerity,” has emerged as an artistic movement. While the narrative nature of literature lends itself to easily recognizable post-postmodern trends, the translation to music becomes predictably thorny. I will analyze musical works by Eric Wubbels, Battle Trance, and Future Islands that react against or reject postmodern philosophy to denote traits essential to post-postmodern music. How does this music sound, what does it accomplish or attempt, and how? This research will aid in understanding the music, composers, audiences, and ideologies that emerge from the “New Sincerity.”

INTRODUCTION

Even eight decades later, the effects of the Second World War are among us. Western art, literature, and philosophy are molded by postmodernism, a movement that began in the minds of European thinkers such as Albert Camus and Jacques Derrida and has since trickled down into nearly every aspect of Western society and culture. And despite the complexity of postmodernism, those who subscribed to this movement seem to have shared a few foundational beliefs: that we had to reject the Grand Narratives of universal morality and truth, that the subjectivity of our experiences was the most certainty that we could have of reality, and that our previous ways of life had brought us, as a global species, to worldwide war and its indescribable horrors. In the years following 1945, many authors, composers, and other artists attempted to pick up the pieces of what constituted European culture through radically different ways. Americans soon followed suit, which led some to believe that large parts of American postwar art were founded less on lived experiences and thus somewhat incorrectly contextualized. American composer Steve Reich claimed, “Stockhausen, Berio, and Boulez were portraying in very honest terms what it was like to pick up the pieces after World War II. But for some American in 1948 or 1958 or 1968 – in the real context of tailfins, Chuck Berry and millions of burgers sold – to pretend that instead we’re really going to have the darkbrown Angst of Vienna is a lie, a musical lie.”¹ The question, then, is why another fifty years after even 1968, American art still seems, in some respect, to focus on said Angst. Recently, however, many American authors and musicians have begun to search for new approaches to writing and composing that reflects more sincerely what post-post-1945 art might look and sound like. This new shift, variably labelled “post-postmodernism,” “meta-modernism,” or the “New Sincerity,” has been a movement largely grounded in literature, though its impact has reached other artistic media. Indeed, there have also been significant musical contributions in this vein that have gone relatively unexplored. In this paper, I consider music by a few of these contemporary musical artists to help shed light on what post-postmodern music is about, what it sounds like, and what it attempts and accomplishes. New York composer Eric Wubbels, Brooklyn tenor saxophone quartet Battle Trance, and Baltimore-based synthpop group Future Islands provide a diverse array of music for this study. While many obvious traits separate each group musically, there are some important aspects that unite them ideologically. By studying these groups, I will document what American music of the “New Sincerity” has to offer and what separates it

R. GALIK: CONTEMPORARY MUSICS AND THE “NEW SINCERITY”

from its postmodern predecessors, as well as identify the unifying factors among them that help define the movement as it relates to music.

THE “NEW SINCERITY”

The earliest mention of the “New Sincerity” movement reveals that it actually had its roots in music. A group of bands emerged in Austin, Texas in the second half of the 1980s with a radically changed sound and image that began a movement that would last for a handful of years before dying away. Bands such as Zeitgeist, True Believers, Doctors Mob, and Glass Eye found their way to stages in front of intimate crowds and performing original songs that were different from just about anything on the radio, mainstream or otherwise. The members of these bands rarely, if ever, were full-time musicians; many of them comprised groups of close friends looking to have fun together after work. Their production was often unpolished and the visual effects, in stark contrast with many of the top performing artists at the time, was minimal if existent at all. In fact, documentation of the movement is almost as modest as its production.

The most substantive information about Austin’s “New Sincerity” movement comes from an episode of MTV’s *The Cutting Edge* from the summer of 1985.² A clip from YouTube features the band Zeitgeist who, when not performing in the video, are hosting a barbeque in one of the member’s backyards. The clip alternates between these scenes, with the members eating tacos and talking about difficulties making enough money to quit their day jobs, and includes scenes of them at night, performing at small venues for groups of twenty to thirty people. One scene back at the barbeque features Daniel Johnston, a friend of the band and probably the most famous name in the “New Sincerity” scene. Johnston, born in 1961, is perhaps best known for handing out cassettes of his first album, *Hi, How are You?* at concerts, refusing payment and encores at shows, regardless of how much an audience cheered him on.³ Johnston had a consistent output of acoustic originals, singing to his own guitar accompaniment about issues that were anything but original: love, loss, and belonging. But Johnston pioneered more than most the attitude behind the “New Sincerity” movement with heartfelt and vulnerable lyrics, modest song structures, and even more humbled production. Arguably the most fame that came Johnston’s way was Kurt Cobain’s T-shirt of the *Hi, How are You?* album cover he was known to wear frequently. In all, the “New Sincerity” movement in Texas during the late 1980s was small, short-lived, and modest. Many of the musicians that were associated with the movement are still performing, though only a small handful of them have even toured outside of Texas.

LITERATURE AND THE “NEW SINCERITY”

Despite the contributions made by these Austin musicians, the medium in which the “New Sincerity” made its first broader and lasting impressions was literature. Through a number of works, primarily non-fiction, over the past few decades, a diverse group of authors tackled the topics of postmodern irony and other recent trends head-on. This approach was instigated in essays by American author David Foster Wallace.

“Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young” was Wallace’s first published essay in the 1988 edition of the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*. In this essay, Wallace set out to label and criticize the trends of a group of budding authors he referred to as the “Conspicuously Young.”⁴ Categorized into groups like “Neiman-Marcus Nihilists” and “Catatonic Realists,” Wallace leveled criticism at authors in a post-Watergate society who turned toward substanceless attacks at society and minimalism in a time in which the bare minimum was easy. In 1990, Wallace wrote a second essay, “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” which was later published in a set of his non-fiction works titled *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again* arguably with a much less accusatory tone.⁵ This time around, Wallace claimed that television’s role in U.S. society was beginning to have negative impacts on culture, and thus the fiction writers within it. More specifically, he claimed that twenty-minute bursts of cynical, ironic, and self-aware television programming were detrimental to our need for genuine human connection and sincerity. That literature was beginning to follow in these dangerous footsteps encompassed most of Wallace’s argument. Wallace concluded with the prediction that:

The next literary “rebels” in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of *anti-rebels*....Who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction....The old postmodern insurgents risked the gasp and squeal: shock, disgust, outrage, censorship, accusations of socialism, anarchism, nihilism....Today’s rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the “Oh how *banal*.”⁶

Wallace, who felt that trying times necessitated humanity in art more than anything else, believed that the tropes of postmodernism had run their course. And, in line with his concerns about the trickling down of these postmodern pitfalls from literature to TV to U.S. culture more broadly, Wallace encouraged writers to reject the temptation of shock and outrage and instead risk reminding a society that needed it most what it was to be really human, even at the cost of vulnerability, parody, and banality.

And while Wallace’s own 1996 novel *Infinite Jest* was the most notable contribution to this new movement, he was by no means alone. Shortly after, Dave Eggers’s 2000 *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, Zadie Smith’s 2000 *White Teeth*, and Jonathan Franzen’s 2001 *The Corrections* proved that Wallace not only had a following, but a significant and critically acclaimed one at that. Since Wallace’s death in 2008, though, this literary movement has certainly lost some of its steam. Wallace’s final novel, *The Pale King*, was published posthumously in 2012, and while Eggers, Franzen, and Smith have continued to produce new works, none have been met with the success of their predecessors. In fact, even saying the oeuvre of Wallace’s targeted “Conspicuously Young” is on its way down may be too presumptuous. Most notably, American author Bret Easton Ellis has continued to enjoy a level of success after his 1991 novel *American Psycho* with works such as *Lunar Park* (2005) and *Imperial Bedrooms* (2010). Ellis, a known critic of Wallace, even took it upon himself to compose a series of tweets upon finishing D.T. Max’s biography of Wallace, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story* (2012). Among these were, “Saint David Foster Wallace: a generation trying to read him feels smart about themselves which is part of the whole bullshit package. Fools,”⁷ and “The fake-earnest Midwestern ‘sincerity’ of David Foster Wallace that a generation of babies relates to is the thing I hate most as a writer.”⁸ To say the least, literary “New Sincerity” is by no means thriving, and its future, despite a solid establishment, offers little promise.

Nevertheless, even after his death, Wallace and his followers continued to have some impact on the artistic world. In addition to a small collection of twenty-first-century authors who have followed in his footsteps, some composers have also been moved to write pieces about quotes from his novels or general ideas from his works. Looking at the latter, *This is This is This is* by contemporary composer Eric Wubbels is a fitting piece to study the sounds of the “New Sincerity.”

ERIC WUBBELS

Eric Wubbels, best known for his involvement in the New York-based composer-performer ensemble Wet Ink, is an American composer and pianist with a significant body of works for saxophone. Wubbels majored in music at Amherst College after deciding to abandon an English degree early on in his studies upon meeting with composition professor Lewis Spratlin. Eventually, Wubbels pursued a graduate composition degree at Columbia University, studying with Tristan Murail and Fred Lerdahl.⁹ It was also during his time at Columbia that Wubbels came to meet colleague and saxophonist Alex Mincek, who would go on to become a fellow founder of the Wet Ink ensemble and teach composition at Northwestern University. As far as *This is This is This is* is concerned, Wubbels owes much of his saxophone writing skills to Mincek, who is an accomplished performer and composer of contemporary saxophone music. In addition, much of Lerdahl’s composition focus certainly played a role in Wubbels’s development as well. As quoted by Matthew Younglove, Wubbels described this influence:

Fred [Lerdahl] is really engaged with cognition and hearing, asking what sorts of things are audible and what things are not audible in music. He has a systematic mind, but he is also mistrustful of certain compositional systems, because he went through the whole

R. GALIK: CONTEMPORARY MUSICS AND THE "NEW SINCERITY"

serial era in academia in the United States, which was an era of over-generalizing systems without attention to what is possible to be heard.... As a composer, how are you aiming your projects at hearing? What is your understanding of hearing, and is it as multivalent and open as it could be? Are you asking something of a listener that you would need two years to be able to perceive in a piece?¹⁰

As will be made evident in my analysis of *This is This is This is*, Lerdahl's approach to composition is manifested in Wubbels's aims with the piece and serves as a guiding principle towards achieving his goal of creating a piece that captures the "ecstasy of physical gesture, ecstasy of sound, ecstasy of repetition"¹¹ in Wubbels's words, as well as about "what it is to be a fucking human being"¹² in the words of David Foster Wallace. And if art that sincerely addresses the human condition has a significant role in the response to postmodernism, Wubbels's focus on audibility over "over-generalizing systems" certainly lends itself favorably to considering him as a post-postmodern composer, with *This is This is This is* serving as a prime example of his participation in this movement.

This is This is This is was composed in 2010 for saxophonists Eliot Gattegno and Alex Mincek, with Wubbels on piano. As originally conceived, the piece features two saxophones playing in unison for the entirety of the work, though this was not always the case. Earlier in its genesis, the piece was for solo saxophone with piano accompaniment, though this idea was quickly questioned: "We decided to do it as a trio with two saxophonists playing in unison as a result of a conversation that went something like 'Wouldn't it be ridiculous if _____?'," said Gattegno, who added, "We filled in the blank with the unison idea."¹³ However, very few recordings of the piece feature the work in its originally intended trio format. The piece becomes significantly more difficult to execute with two saxophones in true unison and a majority of performers have chosen to reduce the instrumentation to only one saxophone. Wubbels, despite these practical reasons for promoting the work as a duo, has stood by his original conception of the work as a trio: "The doubled line is really important to this; the conception of the saxophone as its own voice compounded by seeing two people playing unison with no difference between the two for the entirety of the work, not even writing it on two lines, but on one line and trying to play it together." He continues, "It is the feeling of the sound of chorus that comes from unison doubling.... It is both unison and difference, because the slight discrepancy, the slight difference between that and true unison is audible, as the sound of that round resonance with a slightly fuzzy pitch."¹⁴ *This is This is This is* is based on a series of repetitive phrases, each of varying complexity, duration, intensity, and even number of repetitions, and typically lasts approximately twenty minutes. Wubbels himself has, in a number of interviews, commented on and emphasized the importance of the repetitions and, influenced by Lewis Spratlan's teachings, the audience's perception of experiencing these cycles. Speaking specifically about the exact number of repetitions of phrases, Wubbels commented:

4- and 8-bar units feel "square" in Western music. Once you've been enculturated to that unit as a default, it's very easy to feel. So multiples of 8 form the basic structure against which numbers of repeats are decided. Then a basic duration is chosen (long, short, extremely long) based on a negotiation with the material in the loop and where the loop falls in the overall form. The first loop is quite long (39x), as this helps "train" you as a listener to expect extended repetition as a primary feature in the piece. 39x is felt as 4x 8-bars, plus 7. Once you pass repeat 32 (with its large-scale unit of 4x8), you almost feel like it could go on forever. Then stopping just short of completing the next 8-bar unit produces a sense of surprise or incompleteness that propels the music forward into the next series of loops.¹⁵

In fact, nearly all of the material that comprises *This is This is This is* is a series of repetitive gestures that reflect this idea. More specifically, Wubbels's focus on the distortion of squareness throughout ties directly to a key trait of the music: maintaining thoughtful consciousness in a trance-like, often repetitive state. Thus, Wubbels's compositional attention to audience, to perception and reception, becomes wholly evident. A deeper understanding of what these repetitions are intended to accomplish and how requires

contextualization of *This is*'s dedication and inspiration: that is, to David Foster Wallace and his 2005 graduation speech at Kenyon College in Ohio, "This is Water."

Transcribed and posthumously published, Wallace's commencement address "This is Water" has become one of his best-known works. Perhaps more than anything else in his oeuvre, the speech succinctly captures nearly everything the author had been promoting post-*Infinite Jest*. As Wubbels writes in his program notes for *This is This is This is*,

In his later writings, Wallace outlines the struggle for a type of consciousness, a moment-to-moment vigilance of mind that transforms the repetitious business of daily life into something sacred. He describes this kind of attention as both a path outward from habitual self-focused thought patterns, and a stay against "the constant gnawing sense of having had and lost some infinite thing" that those patterns eventually produce.¹⁶

Indeed, the focus of Wallace's speech was on the value of a liberal arts education and the truth behind the cliché that there is value in learning how to think. Wallace advocated in his speech for a sort of consciousness that refused egocentrism and selfishness, and instead emphasized the importance of policing one's own mind to be fair both for its own sake, but also for maintaining sanity in a frustratingly repetitive and banal world that could eat one alive. Graduates were warned of the "parts of adult American life that nobody talks about in commencement speeches."¹⁷ He spoke of getting cut off in rush hour traffic, of watching parents yell at their children in the grocery store and, most importantly, of having to do these kinds of tasks day-in and day-out. Wallace believed these repetitive parts of life could become overwhelmingly frustrating and that maintaining this special kind of consciousness was not only a way to endure, but to be free. "The really important kind of freedom," said Wallace, "involves attention and awareness, and discipline and effort and being able to truly care about other people and to sacrifice for them over and over in myriad, petty little unsexy ways, every day."¹⁸ And, as Wallace would go on to live for only three more years, these philosophies went on to become some of his final words of warning. In fact, *The Pale King* (2012), Wallace's unfinished, posthumously published novel about day-to-day life at an IRS tax agency, reflected many of the same ideals.

Thus, there are intentional and perceptible connections between Wallace's and Wubbels's views on repetition and, by extension, post-postmodernism and the "New Sincerity." What remains unanswered, then, is if Wubbels's method and approach effectively translate post-postmodern values into music and, as Wallace emphasized in "E Pluribus Unam," if his work can transcend irony and be both bold and vulnerable enough to suggest solutions. Wallace's view of serious art prioritized challenging the audience, making them uncomfortable, and forcing readers to construct meaningful connections with the art with which they were engaging. When asked about his consideration of these ideas while composing *This is This is This is*, Wubbels said:

I sympathize with those feelings, for sure, but in writing the piece I was thinking more inwardly about those issues, trying to create a "practice" for myself and my collaborators that was focused on concentration and attention. I guess the idea was that if we were able to present a strong image of that kind of engagement, that it would be powerful, and probably more powerful than scolding or exhorting an audience to "pay attention." ... But yes, I agree, and I respond most strongly to art that has these kinds of projects or ambitions that are aimed directly at the foundation of human life and our experience of reality. And in the end I do think one of the most important things that you could [do] as an artist is to help people refresh their experience of the world, to enable or remind of or point towards "seeing" and "listening" directly and with awareness.¹⁹

Clearly, these ideas reaffirm a connection between Wallace and Wubbels as he was composing his piece. *This is This is This is* is a work intended as a "practice piece" to allow both performers and audience alike to focus and concentrate. What remains problematic, however, is the translation of Wallace's ideas into

R. GALIK: CONTEMPORARY MUSICS AND THE “NEW SINCERITY”

music and to musical performance. On a foundational level, Wubbels’s music fails to capture the message of “This is Water” because of the inherently subjective nature of music, which in turn might make an attempted translation ironically postmodern. Moreover, there is a disconnect between Wubbels’s piece, which addresses a process, and Wallace’s actual speech, which addresses an aesthetic. Thus, there is little room to suggest that Wubbels has composed a work that is a direct translation of “This is Water”; the processes achieve their shared goals differently. And yet, dealing with ideological symmetries, there also remain some key differences between Wallace’s rejection of postmodern and *This is This is This is*: the fact is that a great majority of Wubbels’s piece is especially dissonant and, despite moments of introspection and beauty, still presents the audience with a set of “problems” that becomes their responsibility to solve.

Again, there is no question that Wubbels intended to capture the content and spirit of Wallace’s speech, but the method and effects of doing so seems to defy any neat translation, and perhaps even contradict Wallace’s proposed antidotes. Assuming that Wallace, despite his significant writings on the topic, holds any sort of authority on defining or labeling post-postmodern art or music is misguided, though in the case of Wubbels, whose piece is intended to reflect the writings and ideas of Wallace directly, perhaps an allowance should be made for medium transfer. Clearly, there is a parallel between *This is This is This is* and the “Conspicuously Young” generation of authors with whom Wallace had no truck. Speaking about Bret Easton Ellis, Wallace offered, “Look man, we’d probably most of us agree that these are dark times, and stupid ones, but do we need fiction that does nothing but dramatize how dark and stupid everything is? In dark times, the definition of good art would seem to be the art that locates and applies CPR to those elements of what’s human and magical that still live and glow despite the times’ darkness.”²⁰ Certainly, connecting the dissonance in Wubbels’s piece with less-than-optimistic views on the repetitive nature of life is too simple. On the other hand, *This is This is This is* clearly dramatizes what Wallace describes in his speech as an “unimaginably hard” part of life.²¹ In this context, *This is This is This is* shares with its postmodern predecessors exactly what similar contemporary art is attempting to combat: irresolute critique, or more seriously, a lack of shared human experience expressed with the intent of celebrating “what’s human and magical that still live[s] and glow[s] despite the times’ darkness.” Eric Wubbels has in *This is This is This is* a composition for saxophone and piano that provides more thoughtful consideration toward issues of humanity than most works. However, the fact remains that, despite being completely emerged in the discussion, *This is This is This is* is unable to embody flawlessly the extra-musical subject with which it engages.

Wubbels is part of a small group of art music composers writing specifically about David Foster Wallace and his ideas, especially from such a literal and direct perspective. Considered through a broader lens, ensembles and performers from outside the institutions of art music have also been writing and playing music that deals with the “New Sincerity” movement less directly, and perhaps offer more nuanced insights how music participates in this movement.

BATTLE TRANCE

Battle Trance is a New York-based tenor saxophone quartet that first came together in 2012.²² It is led by Travis Laplante and has maintained its original line-up of Patrick Breiner, Matt Nelson, and Jeremy Viner.²³ Since their formation, Battle Trance have released two albums, *Palace of Wind* (2014) and *Blade of Love* (2016). Each album thus far has consisted of one large work broken into three movements, each sharing the title of the album, i.e., “Blade of Love I,” “Blade of Love II,” etc. Battle Trance performs in a variety of spaces and almost exclusively plays acoustically. Laplante, the composer for all of the group’s projects, discussed in an interview with VandorenTV his method of transmitting new music to his group:

The pieces are, generally speaking, transmitted orally because they incorporate a lot of extended techniques...it would just be more tedious to write them out in traditional notation with diagrams, so I find it more seamless just to bring in particular material and demonstrate the parts to everyone, so it’s transmitted through the oral tradition which is how music has been predominately transmitted over the years.²⁴

Not surprisingly, the group spends much time learning its music by ear, exploring sections only partially developed or finessing some finicky sound sets to blend and collaborate together the way Laplante envisioned. Shortly after the previous comment, Laplante commented on the group's rehearsal schedule which, for *Blade of Love*, averaged three or four times a week for roughly a year before they gave their project its first performance.²⁵

Speaking about the group's goals, Patrick Breiner offered insight into their synthesis and first meeting. Laplante had reached out to the group who, apart from Breiner, he then knew only through reputation. He had communicated the idea of a tenor saxophone quartet project, which all three other members agreed to join. The group's first meeting consisted of all four players holding a low B-flat, the saxophone's lowest fundamental, for around forty-five minutes, exploring timbres, resonance, and blend. Breiner discussed the conversation that pre-empted the group's first session, wherein Laplante explained what he felt the goals of the group should be:

One thing that Travis said was that ... he mentioned the disconnect between humans and specifically music, but even beyond that just the disconnect and how everyone's interface with reality is through a screen and you go to concerts and no one's listening. They're all on their phones or, if they're paying attention, they're doing this [pretending to hold up a phone] and I remember Travis basically saying, "I want to play music that people won't even think to pick up their phones." ... He said, "I want to play music that will open a portal," and that sounds really abstract but I think, for me, it actually feels quite specific and feels like actually music's purpose.²⁶

This emphasis on connecting to the audience is, without a doubt, one of Battle Trance's most important goals. And for a group that puts such heavy emphasis on live performance and consideration toward the acoustical properties of their venue, a goal like keeping an audience off their phones almost seems modest. Clearly, then, Battle Trance's insistence on human connection, on opening musical portals and reaching people with their music, links these artists to the "New Sincerity" ethos. *Blade of Love*, the group's most recently finished project, epitomizes these values and further analysis of the piece specifically will lend itself to a better understanding of the group and its relationship to post-postmodernism.

In the program notes for *Blade of Love*, Laplante writes, "Blade of Love's central focus is on the physical and spiritual intersection of the saxophone and the human body." He continues: "The saxophone is one of the few instruments that literally enters the body of the person playing it, and Blade of Love is a medium for this sacred meeting place, with each member of Battle Trance using the saxophone as a vessel for the human spirit."²⁷ This in mind, it deserves mention that Laplante is a *qigong* (pronounced "chee-gong") healer, along with his wife, and founder of Sword Hands, a *qigong* and acupuncture practice with locations in Brooklyn and Putney, Vermont.²⁸ A student of Master Robert Peng, Laplante provides a brief summary of the art of *qigong* healing on his practice's website:

Qigong is a health art and science that originated in China approximately 5,000 years ago.... Qigong originated with the belief that humans have an unfathomable amount of unrealized potential. We are all, for example, capable of self-healing heavy-duty disease and illness, yet our ability to do this has been "blocked" over generations due to both the lack of attention we give our Qi and an inattentiveness to our natural dynamic relationship with the rest of the universe. This lost balance most commonly manifests as physical unhealthiness, stress, loneliness, anger, unhappiness, and a lack of fulfillment.... Qigong's aim is to transform these energetic imbalances and restore one's natural state of being.²⁹

Returning to Laplante as a musician, it is no surprise that the biography on his website emphasizes that, "Laplante is passionate about the intersection of music and medicine."³⁰ Laplante's focus on connecting

R. GALIK: CONTEMPORARY MUSICS AND THE “NEW SINCERITY”

through music, both with fellow members of the quartet and his audiences, put in clear focus the vitalness of sincerity in his music. And even if evidence of Laplante actively combatting postmodern irony is scarce, his sincere priorities are amplified through his music – further study into the actual sounds of *Blade of Love* verifies this.

Blade of Love is separated into three movements of roughly sixteen, fifteen, and ten minutes, respectively. Like Battle Trance’s other works, *Blade of Love* features many aleatoric sections that often go on for multiple minutes, indicating that durations could potentially change significantly depending on certain factors, like a venue’s conduciveness to specific effects or even the commitment of the musicians during any given performance. The piece utilizes an extremely diverse array of extended techniques for saxophone, like multi-phonics, slap tonguing, and singing through the instrument. In an interview conducted by John R. Hylkema for Vandoren, Laplante spoke about his methods of incorporating extended techniques into his compositions:

Many people use extended techniques merely as effects or novelties, but like other aspects of music there are never-ending layers to what can be created. I am interested in cultivating the intricacies of extended techniques and orchestrating them for multiple instruments. It's also important to me to portray something that's deeply musical and not just a “cool sound.” I've been working on multi-phonics for many years and love composing multi-phonetic parts for saxophones.³¹

In fact, reflecting on Breiner’s previous comment of holding a low B-flat for forty-five minutes, it is important to consider that, as the lowest note on the instrument, the low B-flat holds the most potential for exploring overtones, harmonics, and other multi-phonetic possibilities. In addition, even on similar instruments and/or accessories, the variation of negotiating these extended techniques from horn to horn is significant and suggests that, more than just for saxophone quartet, Battle Trance’s music is written for specific musicians holding specific hardware. Even more than this, Laplante has discussed the goals of *Blade of Love* and the inadequacy of traditional sounds in achieving them:

There were certain specific sounds that I imagined being in *Blade of Love*, but I couldn't get close enough to them using traditional saxophone tone – sounds like arrows flying through the air, birds singing or flying overhead, bombs, water running, the wind, campfires, singing in church, making love, killing, waves crashing, fighting for your life, thunder, the sound of rage, howling, crying, laughing, the sound of my last breath... So I began working on different ways for the saxophone to get closer to these sounds, and the resulting techniques became part of the fabric of *Blade of Love*.³²

The “fabric” of *Blade of Love*, then, comprises the sounds of passion, intensity, and emotion. The piece is an attempt to capture a large variety of sounds that weave together a powerful catharsis of experiences and sensations over the course of forty minutes. Laplante writes, “It's painful for me to try to explain what this music ‘means,’ because in a sense it has no meaning – and at the same time, it means everything. I just hope *Blade of Love* will release something in both the listener and the performer's hearts. It doesn't ask for anything in return.”³³ Indeed, listening to *Blade of Love*, especially live, only further displays the group’s priority of process and experience, and their concomitant ambivalence to meaning. The aleatoric elements especially, which are present throughout the entire piece, highlight gesture over idea, and thus sensation over plot.

The most immediate consideration regarding the work’s relation to postmodernism, then, is its unabashed sincerity. Both *Blade of Love* and *Battle Trance* are emblems of, and practically defined by, a devotion to passionate connection with an audience by creating music that puts so much on the line. There is no room in such expression for irony. In fact, a great deal of the process that *Blade of Love* demands requires a level of openness and commitment that cannot coexist in tandem with what David Foster Wallace targeted as the “contemporary mood of jaded weltanschmerz, self-mocking materialism, blank indifference, and the delusion that cynicism and naïveté are mutually exclusive.”³⁴ The music of

Battle Trance, in other words, makes no attempt at a “transcendence of sentiment.”³⁵ Quite to the contrary, the news feed on Travis Laplante’s website announcing the release of *Blade of Love* on August 26, 2016 reads: “It is with joy and intense vulnerability that I announce that Battle Trance’s *Blade of Love* is now available. . . . *Blade of Love* is the culmination of 2+ years of writing, rigorous rehearsals, many tears, and a little laughter.”³⁶ One only needs to watch Laplante perform to witness the kind of vulnerability to which he is referring. Laplante moves with a level of expression that could almost only be feigned, mocking, or parodic, but is, in fact, the movement of sincerity, vulnerability, and designed to keep an audience away from their phones. Laplante’s movements seem to be the only source of amplified visuals within the group, but even so remain unlike any gesture in saxophone music outside of 1980s pop music videos. The perceived exaggeration and unnecessary of Laplante’s extreme gestures dare to be perceived as ironic but offer no justification to be observed as such. It is no coincidence that when I met with Eric Wubbels and discussed David Foster Wallace and how sincerity and irony show themselves in contemporary music, his most insistent advice regarding Battle Trance was, “You must see them live!”³⁷

Whether or not Battle Trance and *Blade of Love* are intentional reactions against the postmodern condition is an entirely separate question, however. It is unlikely that Battle Trance is engaging in a conscious, systematic acknowledgment and refusal of the tropes of postmodernism. Wallace himself pointed out, despite speaking specifically about television, that the problem with reacting against the concerns of postmodernism was that the critique, by definition, becomes the affair. That is, the meta-referential nature of postmodernism lends itself to being first in line to criticize its own faults. And, in this sense, Wallace’s prediction may be true: “Today’s rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the ‘Oh how *banal*.’”³⁸ Battle Trance would be simple to parody and in that there is great vulnerability. *Blade of Love* is sincere though not defined by its rejection of irony, and therein lies its success. If there is a movement to give postmodernism a run for its money, this is what it will sound like.

Returning to the roots of the “New Sincerity,” vernacular musical groups based more in rock than avant-garde art demand attention. And while the original “New Sincerity” movement in Austin, Texas is long gone, there are plenty of bands across the U.S. still promoting similar images, if with more modern sounds and production values. Future Islands is a fitting example.

FUTURE ISLANDS

Future Islands is a Baltimore-based synthpop band that formed in 2006 after the disbandment of Art Lord & the Self-Portraits. The group is currently made up of lead singer Samuel Herring, keyboardist Gerrit Welmers, and bassist William Cashion, all of whom were members of Art Lord and decided to create a new group with drummer Erick Murillo, who has since left the band.³⁹ While resembling traits of 1980s synthpop groups, the band prefers the term “postwave” instead. William Cashion commented on this classification in an interview with Gareth Moore for byt.com:

We came up with that when we were all eighteen, nineteen years old. It was like seven, or eight years ago when we came up with it. Sam was really into post-rock at the time and I was really into post-punk, and our music was really in the vein of new wave but we couldn’t really call ourselves new wave. We just thought it would be cool to call it post-wave and it just kind of stuck. We played a show and it said we were “post-wave pioneers” on the flyer. And we thought, “Wow, this is cool.” We thought it was an honour. We just ran with it. It’s not quite new wave, but the influences. . . . you can definitely hear the influences of new wave and post punk.⁴⁰

The *Oxford Companion to Music* offers context, clarifying that “new wave” is a term from 1975 that, while initially synonymous with punk, eventually came to describe bands playing varieties of post-punk music.⁴¹ And the *New Oxford American Dictionary* describes post-punk as “denoting a style of rock music inspired by punk but less aggressive in performance and musically more experimental.”⁴² What holds importance when considering Future Islands’s multifaceted sources for inspiration, then, is their delivery

R. GALIK: CONTEMPORARY MUSICS AND THE “NEW SINCERITY”

of expression. Indeed, the band is well-known for maintaining a level of sincerity in their output, both musically and performatively. Later in his interview, Moore commented on the “emotional blast” present in a great deal of Future Islands’s songs, to which Herring responded:

I think it’s kind of intuitive. I’ve probably said this before in interviews but, if you’re not going to sing a song you believe in then why sing a song at all? Why write a song at all if it doesn’t affect you or mean something to you? Passion has to be there. I don’t know if it’s important but it’s definitely something I’ve learned about working between those albums.⁴³

As analysis of one specific Future Islands performance will illustrate, it is exactly this kind of belief and passion that the band signifies.

“Seasons (Waiting on You)” is a single by Future Islands that was released from their 2014 album *Singles*. It quickly became the best-selling track on the album and one of Future Islands’s seminal songs. Future Islands was asked to perform “Seasons (Waiting on You)” in March of 2014 on David Letterman’s *Late Show* and their noteworthy performance boosted their musical career. The song’s narrative tells of someone who has grown tired waiting for a romantic interest. The song draws parallels between people and seasons changing, returning to the chorus, “As it breaks, the summer awaits / but the winter washed what’s left of the taste/ As it breaks, the summer awaits / but the winter craved what’s lost / craved what’s all gone away.”⁴⁴ The lyrics often comprise simple sentences that relay metaphorical images and do not offer much more in terms of a linear narrative. Much of the text repeats or varies slightly. Beyond this, the music video produced by 4AD, the band’s label, consists mostly of shots in what appears to be the rural United States, with glimpses of rodeo scenes, camp fires, and horseback riding. Even in the video, there is little narrative substance or recurring actors; rather, the video is more appropriately seen as an atmospheric setting to accompany the music. Thus, what is striking is the contrast between the produced image of this song through their label on the one hand, and the expression Future Islands holds during live performances of the song, specifically their March 2014 performance on Letterman’s *Late Show*.

From the first few seconds of their live television debut, it is clear that Future Islands’s performance on the *Late Show* is going to be a visual performance as much as it is an audio performance. While Cashion and Gerrit are almost out of sight playing the bass and keys, respectively, Herring is up front moving along to the introduction. And while Herring is by no means the first lead singer to move along to the rhythm, there seems to be a mismatch between his movements and the style of music. In fact, throughout the entire performance, according to Craig Pollard, Herring displays, “the Tom Waits growl; the twisted re-imagining of The Temptations’ dance moves; Danzig’s crooning; the theatricality of Morrissey, Kate Bush, or even Meatloaf; the glimpse of a guttural Doom Metal bellow.”⁴⁵ Pollard goes on to comment further:

It is not traditionally “sincere” in any sense – it is not coming out raw and unmediated – but nor does it, really, claim to be doing so. It is obviously consciously shaped, and there is a separation between the emotion and the performer, or the performance of the emotion. It *performs* sincerity, essentially continuing this postmodern critique, but does so in a way that simultaneously evokes traits of sincerity in the process – the vulnerability of the performer, for example.⁴⁶

That there is vulnerability on Herring’s part is without question. Herring, who discussed the symbiotic relationship he has with his audiences, said during an interview at Coachella 2017, “We give everything, and then the audience, hopefully – they give it back, even if they give you half of their energy, then you can, once again, reflect that energy and then it becomes this push and pull thing – this bouncing energy back and forth, and that’s when you transcend within a live space.”⁴⁷ The vulnerability evident in the Letterman performance, then, draws much from the fact that Herring is giving energy to a crowd, the large majority of which he cannot see in person. Reminiscent of Travis Laplante’s interview with

VandorenTV, Herring commented, “[The record is] also about this distance, you know, how you can be face to face with people and still feel a great distance, which I think speaks more to the human condition, these days, with the way we stare at our phones.”⁴⁸ Again, the vulnerability, and perhaps a shade of irony, lies in Future Islands’s attempt to reach people and keep them from their screens through performing into a lens to televisions across the country, some of which may be left facing an empty room while dinner is made across the hall.

Herring’s live routine is surprisingly consistent across different performances. At the 2014 Primavera Sound Festival, the group performed “Seasons (Waiting on You)” in a remarkably similar fashion.⁴⁹ What are some of Herring’s routine performative trademarks? For one, Herring consistently fills space between verses with a deep, wide slide back and forth on stage. He dips exaggeratedly low and moves his entire body to the rhythm. Herring also pounds his chest whenever he seems moved by a particularly emotional line. It also deserves notice, in both live performances, that every time the B-section arrives, Herring takes a few quick steps toward the front of the stage, swinging out an arm like a professional baseball player watching his ball sail into the seats across the field. What is particularly interesting about this movement is that, musically, the transition into the B-section is not very significant in terms of the auditory. The band maintains a similar groove from before and simply moves to a new chord. Herring’s choreography, however, seems to make an event out of this otherwise uneventful transition. In fact, despite (or perhaps *because of*) a perfectly well-produced music video, one cannot help but notice a significant dip in energy in the song compared to live performances. Herring offers, and quite vulnerably so, his energy to the crowd with a hope of reciprocation that ideally provides a feedback loop for the rest of the song.

Whether or not the Future Islands performance exemplifies the “New Sincerity” is not merely a matter of vulnerability. Of course, the ironic and cynical tropes of postmodernism rarely if ever admit vulnerability, but such a descriptor is too simple. What takes precedence is the message and its authenticity to the performing group. Ben Gaffin, an A&R rep from 4AD, told *Under the Radar* magazine, “I think that Sam’s themes are very universal. They’re very broad. Good or bad. Love, love lost, life, death. Basic themes that resonate with all of us. Sam is just being himself. They’re all just being themselves. They’re being completely honest, and they’re wide open for people to say, ‘Wait, this isn’t cool.’ But it’s honest, and that’s one of the things that make them so great.”⁵⁰ More concisely, the “New Sincerity” is not defined by any inherent “un-coolness,” but rather the utilization of a process that dares to risk coolness at the cost of expressing genuine and sincere messages to one’s audience. In the context of the New Sincerity’s roots, the Austin, Texas bands who, “You almost ha[d] to be one of the last guys in P.E. to get hair on your balls to really appreciate,”⁵¹ it is important to remember that this music is not grounded in embracing the vulnerable or pathetic or uncool, but instead prioritizing one’s message, one’s exclamation of humanity and, most importantly, continuing to express it even when it requires some candidness or reveals some weakness. Put another way, Future Islands’s music exemplifies art that captures “what it is to be a fucking human being.”⁵²

Among this array of musical artists, there are some obvious differences between them and their respective outputs. Eric Wubbels is a classically trained composer and Columbia graduate whose music comes from an academic context and is the only example under consideration here that was written and performed from printed music. Travis Laplante and Battle Trance are also avant-garde, but not as grounded in formal training and conventions. At the same time, neither Wubbels nor Battle Trance are in the larger vernacular rock tradition as the synthpop of Future Islands. That two of the examples prominently feature saxophone may just be a side product of the instrument’s growing role in contemporary avant-garde art music, especially with a recent focus on aleatory and improvisation, in which the saxophone has strong roots. Despite these differences in background and genre, all three groups are linked by a common value that is fundamental to music and related to post-postmodernist values: live performance. The trance-like properties of *This is This is This is*, the aleatoric character and venue specificity of *Blade of Love*, and the emoting – choreographically and vocally – of Future Island’s Samuel Herring are traits of their respective musics that owe their efficacy to live musical experience. That both Laplante and Herring move in extremely exaggerated motions that might seem to create a

R. GALIK: CONTEMPORARY MUSICS AND THE "NEW SINCERITY"

significant divide between the audio and visual qualities of their pieces' performances, then, is certainly no coincidence. And despite *This is This is This is* serving as a complicated example for the kind of art Wallace predicted in "E Unibus Pluram," the fact stands that all three of these musical works put great emphasis on gesture or process (i.e.: real-time, human action, reaction, and interaction), as opposed to pre-programmed meaning or plot.

Vulnerability, too, plays a key role in this music and its correlation to the "New Sincerity" movement. Samuel Herring gives an extraordinarily high level of energy to a camera and viewers he has no way of knowing if he is reaching. He moves in a way that dares to be out-of-date or mocked at the risk of creating that extra layer of human experience and emotion that the music video does not provide. When Battle Trance perform, they demonstrate the connectivity between the body and emotion, and their physical gestures run the risk of being parodied and/or questioned for their authenticity. The fact that Wubbels and his work display no characterizing vulnerability is possibly noteworthy, but also potentially coincidental. The reason being that there is a great distinction in understanding the next group of rebels, who by Wallace's account "treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction" and are "willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the 'Oh how *banal*.'"⁵³ The distinction lies in the difference between artists defined by the "yawn," and artists defined by the "risk." To be defined by the yawn or vulnerability alone provides no evidence of good art. And perhaps, this is the mistake of many contemporary Indie bands, movie directors, and other artists. That is to say, showing vulnerability for its own sake does not supply sufficient evidence for good art, let alone anything capable of dethroning the postmodern condition. Rather, this new art, if it hopes to be successful, must not be defined by anything but its own message, and thus run the risk of being so sincere in its endeavor that it becomes banal. Wubbels's work effectively discusses postmodern art and life rather than facing head-on the challenges from Wallace's speech: of finding meaning in and taking charge of one's own life. In an important way, then, a piece's self-awareness of its role in this dialogue is almost a hindrance to its classification as "Newly" sincere, if only because it distracts from the main goal of discussing "what it is to be a fucking human being."⁵⁴

That this movement got its start in backyard barbeques in Austin, Texas among musicians who did not dare quit their day jobs is no surprise. Also noteworthy is that this movement did not begin as any sort of conscious reaction against postmodern irony. The examples provided herein that best describe the "New Sincerity" tend to react weakly if at all to the ideological discussion, and instead simply focus on their own, respective processes. And while this may seem simple, David Foster Wallace discussed in his magnum opus *Infinite Jest* why sincerity has not remained status quo:

It's of some interest that the lively arts of the millennial U.S.A. treat anhedonia and internal emptiness as hip and cool. It's maybe the vestiges of the Romantic glorification of Weltschmerz, which means world-weariness or hip ennui. Maybe it's the fact that most of the arts here are produced by world-weary and sophisticated older people and then consumed by younger people who not only consume art but study it for clues on how to be cool, hip – and keep in mind that, for kids and younger people, to be hip and cool is the same as to be admired and accepted and included and so Unalone.... And then it's stuck there, the weary cynicism that saves us from gooey sentiment and unsophisticated naïveté. Sentiment equals naïveté on this continent.⁵⁵

In addition, Wallace continues with his critique of this perspective when the novel's protagonist, "theorizes privately that what passes for hip cynical transcendence of sentiment is really some kind of fear of being really human, since to be really human (at least as he conceptualizes it) is probably to be unavoidably sentimental and naïve and goo-prone and generally pathetic..."⁵⁶ In this vein, it may be that Wallace would agree with Reich's argument that the U.S. adapting the "darkbrown Angst of Vienna is a musical lie." That, in studying postmodern art, this miscontextualization of World War II's role in American art and music is only perpetuated into further generations of U.S. composers and performers.

The immediacy of such concerns about fear of sentimentality within U.S. culture speak for themselves and many, Wallace included, would say the side effects are already present.

Of course, it is difficult to say with any certainty what lies ahead. The literary “New Sincerity” seems to have already experienced its peak around a decade ago. Still, output of music in the same vein has both been successful and quite recent. What does remain certain is that this emphasis on sincerity, on process and experience, on risking the yawn is no trend, and its reaches expand from academic art music to vernacular synthpop. That these artists might be pioneers toward a new cultural shift, then, may be a sound prediction. It is apt to apply what Wallace writes in his “Fictional Futures of the Conspicuously Young” to these artists:

...it’s art, and art is meaning, and meaning is power.... The best “Voices of a Generation” surely know this already; more, they let it inform them.... A couple might even be ... *autodidacts*. But, especially now, none of them need worry. If fashion, flux, and academy make for thin milk, at least that means the good stuff can’t help but rise. I’d get ready.⁵⁷

Thirty years now separate Wallace’s prediction from the present, and perhaps the ubiquitous effects of postmodernism – irony, skepticism, jaded *Weltzschmerz* – trademarks of a post-WWII world’s art, may never fully be erased. However, there is no question that some promising music from recent years are sharing the values Wallace urged young authors, and all artists, to consider. And while, barely past its infancy, the “New Sincerity” and post-postmodern art currently offer little promise at remodeling a global ethos, it may be important to ask: what budding movement hasn’t?

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