

## **The magic of the live performance – myth or reality.**

(Oct.2004)

The point of departure for my presentation is the famous and often quoted essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” by Walter Benjamin. Although Benjamin does not mention the concert and its performers specifically there are some thoughts in his essay that are highly relevant also for music. His aim is to investigate and discuss what is happening to the genuine and original artwork when it becomes a subject for a mechanical mass reproduction, a process that started already when the first primitive woodcut emerged during the Middle Ages. As far as I can tell it is reasonable to extend his approach to comprise also the industrial/electronic means of mass reproduction such as CD-ROM and DVD.

When reading his essay for the first time Benjamin seems to regret what the irrevocable forces of reproduction have done to the art forms, but a second reading shows that Benjamin is not very engaged emotionally in this development. He has in fact a cool, scientific approach to his subject.

Benjamin uses a terminological foundation of his own, which is not always easy to grasp because his notions often lack a clear definition. The reader has to put together various descriptive statements in his essay to get an understanding of the basic concepts. Central concepts in Benjamin’s discussion are:

**The Aura of the original artwork**

**The Ritual value**

**The Cult value**

**The Authenticity and the uniqueness of the artwork**

**The Exhibition-value**

Benjamin examines two art forms and their reproduction counterparts – painting versus photography and theatre versus cinema. Benjamin has only a few references to music and they are of marginal importance. My discussion is therefore based on an extrapolation of Benjamin’s thoughts and an attempt to apply and further develop his ideas when it comes to music. Thus, I will above all discuss his thoughts about the live performance, with emphasis on the role of the musical interpreters and the problems connected with recordings of live performances.

When writing his essay, Benjamin did not seem to be aware of the difference between *Fine Arts* and *Performance Arts* or, for some reason, he purposely neglected such a division of the art forms as insignificant. (It may not be fair to judge him too hard for not understanding that a new medium also after some time creates new art forms with their own aesthetics . Such an understanding of new media may have been difficult to acquire during in the middle of the 1930s.)

The temporal aspect of art forms, like music, film, dance and theatre is of course of paramount importance compared with the steady state nature of art forms that are based on physical objects like paintings, sculptures and photographs. This difference makes it

problematic in reaching an understanding of the notion of the *aura*. The *ritual value* is somewhat easier to grasp, since both types of art forms may occur in a ritual context. However, I would think that performing arts are of greater importance in this context, since a ritual is something that definitely takes place in time. On the other hand one cannot deny that the contemplation over a painting or a sculpture also include a temporal dimension.

In any case it makes it somewhat problematic to understand how these two pairs of art forms mentioned above may have any characteristics in common.

The above listed concepts are to some extent interdependent. The *aura* is therefore connected with both the ritual and the cult, but is not interchangeable with these two notions. According to Benjamin the ritual comes first, even from a historic point of view. Benjamin also points out that “ it is significant that the existence of the work of art with reference to its *aura* is never entirely separated from its ritual function. In other words, **the unique value of the “authentic” work of art has its basis in the ritual.**”

He also writes: “We know that the earliest art works originated in the service of a ritual – first the magical then the religious kind.” He continues his discussion by observing that “This ritualistic basis, however remote, is still recognizable as secularized ritual even in the most profane forms of the cult of beauty”. I am convinced that the “ritualistic” elements are still very relevant also in contemporary live music performances of all genres, not the least, within the popular music realm. I just like to present one little example of ritualistic behavior out of many and that is when the audience at some rock-music concerts start using their cigarette lighters to achieve a kind of mystical illumination.

A profound understanding of the concept of the *aura* is most essential in order to grasp Benjamin’s essay. However, I am not sure that I have obtained such a complete understanding, but my interpretation of the *aura* is the following: embedded in the notion of the *aura* are the ideas of authenticity, cult, presence and uniqueness – a truly complex concept. If an artwork lacks an *aura* it is really crippled and probably irretrievably lost from an artistic point of view. The *aura* can not be scaled or measured, an artwork has this quality or not. Perhaps it could also be used as a dividing line between art and non-art?

**“The “*aura*” is the uniqueness of the artwork and its *aura* is never entirely separated from its ritual function.”**

For a person of today a term like *aura* could have a certain twang of occult radiation or some sort of esoteric quality that could be found in New Age circles. It was probably not Benjamin’s intention that the *aura* concept should achieve some overtones of mysticism. On the other hand there were contemporaries to Benjamin, like Marcel Duchamp, who thought that an artwork actually could have a kind of esoteric radiation and that the artist should be regarded as a medium for channeling such powers.

As said above, it is peculiar that Benjamin uses the term *aura* as a descriptive characteristic for both art objects and art performances and it is somewhat difficult to

comprehend Benjamin's idea that art forms, which are based on original physical objects, like paintings and sculptures, would have something in common with art forms that are dependant on actors, music performers and dancers for their manifestations and existence. If I understand Benjamin correctly it is the uniqueness that brings them together. The original art object is unique and can not be reproduced without losing its "aura" e.g. its uniqueness.

The performance – which lacks a physical object for its existence - is compensated by the performers, who add a specific quality of uniqueness and presence. Benjamin said about the actor/performer that “...the *aura* is tied to his presence; there can be no replica of it.” In this context I would like to add two more factors that I think are pertinent – the entertainment value that is related to the performance ritual and the body language of the performer, which is –in my opinion – vital to the creation of the *aura*.

Every music performer and experienced listener know that this is the case, one performance is always unique compared with all other performances of the same music and a new performance can never be exactly the same next time it is performed. Therefore one may be allowed to elaborate a little John Cage's statement about recordings of experimental music concerts, and say that **any recording of a live concert** “has no more value than a postcard”.

Benjamin is writing in his essay “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be”

A recording of a performance of any musical genre will always create a mimetic relation to the music heard in the concert locality. No one will be fooled, when it comes to the authenticity of a live concert vis a vis a recording. Benjamin put it this way “...that which withers in the age of the mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art.”

In Benjamin's first category the aura is attached to the art object, while in the second category it is linked to the performer, not to the theatre play or to the musical score. Thus it is the performer who put the music or the play into a live manifestation. Without these individuals a composition has no value. However, is the labor of the composers and the authors without any significance and their work without any value?

The answer is yes if you fully accept the aura concept. Benjamin probably did not think much of composers and playwrights and in a way he was right. Nowadays art music composers most often dwell in the shadows. Focus is on the performer. One indication of this situation is that the advertisements in newspapers and elsewhere most often never mentioned what music the performer intend to play. What is important is the fact that he or she are going to perform somewhere - what is performed seems to have less relevance.

It may be a provocative thought to some composers and other persons belonging to the music “art-world”, that the era for the creation of great music masterpieces is gone and so is the prestige and status that were attached to the ingenious composers. Composers these days have lost their role as the number one maestro and have to accept that they have been reduced to music-makers or song-writers. (Ironically they go back to the role they had before the 19<sup>th</sup> century of being artisans rather than artists). Younger composers seem to be more realistic and are therefore interested and motivated to become performers as

well as composers like their colleagues in popular music. I think we witness a transition to a new role for the composers of art music.

However, it is likely that a residue of contemporary art music will remain also in the future. The traditional composers of art music, who have gained their main skills in writing scores for traditional instruments, will be greatly reduced in number and will be considered as a group of marginal specialists like the interpreters of Renaissance music. As a matter of fact I think we already see the advent of a new type of artists and composers– the *art engineer*, who will often combine their profession with performing activities.

The technological demands are so great today that it is necessary to spend much more time in studying engineering subjects than counterpoint and orchestration. On the other hand a great deal of common technological knowledge could probably constitute a mutual basis for many artistic directions and further specializing. The borderlines between various art forms seem to be more and more blurred. The number of persons who have the competence to “compose” in many art domains will considerably increase. Today we can see “cross-over” artists/composers who have the ability to work with video installations as well as music, all included in one project.

---

Benjamin points out the relation between the aura and the cult value in the final notes of his essay by stating: “The definition of the aura as a unique phenomenon of a distance however close it may be` represents nothing but the formulation of the cult value of the work of art in categories of space and time perception.”

In rock music performances with “mega-stars” like Bruce Springsteen and Madonna the ritual value is great, but the cult value is gigantic. Benjamin has some important remarks about the performance versus political factors. He is stating the following: “The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life The violation of the masses, whom Fascism, with its *Führer* cult, forces to their knees, has its counterpart in the violation of an apparatus which is pressed into the production of ritual values”. Also Wolfgang Welsch has pointed out, 50 years later, that we witness an increasing aestheticization of political life.

Rock music has in my opinion some strong resemblance of Fascism inherent and it has definitely a hidden potential of being used for political purposes. Already the massive sound level could be employed for an intimidation and submission of a mass-audience and the “mega-star” could easily be replaced or appear as “ein Führer” if the circumstances are right. In fact there are Swedish examples of such a development in the so called VAM rock-music. VAM stands for White Arian Power. It is hard to believe that the same thing would occur in jazz-music.

Benjamin’s thoughts about art forms that are aimed from the very beginning for mass reproduction, or have the great potential for such purposes, could give rise to an interesting philosophical and aesthetic discussion. Are art forms like film, video, EAM,

etc. completely worthless or could we find something that compensates their shortcomings when it comes to their lack of performance values?

How important is the word “mechanical” in the title of his essay. In addition, what do we know about his thoughts concerning *mechanical reproduction* vis a vis mass dissemination in radio-and TV-media.

What happens - from an aesthetic/social aspect - when the seats in the concert hall are replaced by the armchairs in our living rooms? Are we in a completely new situation, that will fundamentally change our music experience while listening to radio or a CD? A curious problem may even emerge when we listen to a direct broadcast of a concert performance. Obviously the listener will be present in time but not in space. On the other hand, how could the listener tell that he or she is not tricked, that the broadcast is really direct? It could still be a recording they are listening to.

Benjamin would probably argue that the aura, cult- and ritual-values would anyway be lost. The magic of the live performance is missing, but maybe music itself would come into focus instead, a more concentrated listening could emerge. A horrible thought is that the magic *aura* of the live performance takes up so much of our mental ability and creates such a level of distraction, that we cannot enjoy our full listening capacity.

Electro-acoustic Music (EAM) in its fixed, recorded manifestations is one of the art forms above mentioned that should suffer greatly of the missing aura. If we apply Benjamin’s concepts on EAM it is manifold handicapped. First it lacks an aura because it does not appear as an original art object and is mainly produced for mass reproduction purposes, secondly - when EAM is performed over the loudspeaker system of a concert space there is no performer who can add the essential *aura* effects, thirdly the ritual value is close to nil because the visual stimuli usually are weak and dull. In addition the entertainment value is very low.

It is not surprising that concert-organizers try to avoid programming EAM for their performances, as often they can. Desperately, as it seems, some organizers and producers try to artificially add a minimum of ritual value to the presented compositions by using stage lighting on the loudspeakers or by having the composer diffuse the sound over the loudspeaker-system. While taking such measures they hope that the audience will be fooled to think there is a performer involved, who can create an *aura*, but in most cases they only see the back of the composer/diffuser or the composer/diffuser is placed behind the audience barely visible. In addition the actions of the diffuser on the mixing-desk doesn’t make much sense to the audience even if they could see the motions of the diffuser, since there are very seldom a *one to one* relationship between the motions of the diffuser and the resulting sounds.

Naturally many composers are aware of this predicament and it may be one explanation why quite a number of composers avoid working with EAM in fixed forms. However, there could be other reasons for this attitude as well; like a close encounter with an audience (a way of breaking away from the anonymity and the isolation in the “ivory tower”), the chance of becoming a star, the excitement of performing, etc.

A peculiar problem ironically emerges in Electro-acoustic Music (EAM) with the so called *mixed category*, in which traditional instrumentalists are performing along with prerecorded Electro-Acoustic sound structures. It is the “Music Minus One” version of

the Electro-Acoustic Music. As I have already mentioned Benjamin's theory states that the "aura" is created by the performer, while the recorded sound from the loudspeaker has no aura at all because a recording lacks uniqueness and authenticity. When such a composition is recorded during a "live" performance the prerecorded EAM sound structures will in a paradoxical way lose its uniqueness twice. Could it be one reason why a recording of mixed EAM compositions often sounds "out of place" or artificial?

---

Finally, my conclusion is that the live performance has definite qualities that makes every such an event unique and creates a specific radiance to a degree that these non-musical factors are almost as important as the music itself. Whether we like to call these characteristics aura or magic is perhaps a matter of taste, but I am convinced that a recording of a concert performance will always be a kind of substitute, "ein ersatz". At best such a recording will be regarded as an imitation of mimetic nature.