

Tradition in Sour Times

By Martin Dornis & Micha Böhme

Brass music is regarded as alternatively innocuous or intrusive entertainment music, as meaningless droning; it evokes a sense of community by referring to so-called traditions and, above all, by inviting collective marching and clapping. In doing so, it only creates the illusion of bonds between people. In her video piece *Postmen's Orchestra*, the Swedish artist Annika Eriksson transforms brass music into a medium of a critical exploration of art and society, precisely by working with the “folk” character of this music.

At the beginning of both presentations, an empty, undefined room of a museum is visible, set up for a concert. Slowly, heavy footsteps approach from a distance. In both videos, members of the post orchestras, dressed in their festive red and white Danish uniforms or the blue and yellow attire of the Swedish post office, enter the space one after another with heads bowed. With instruments in hand, they take their places, one after the other.

Instead of playing what might be expected, they perform the song “Sour Times” by the trip-hop band Portishead. The Swedish postmen make it sound like a funeral march. The Danes, on the other hand, clearly make an effort to present brass music with an entertaining character. It seems as though the same loop is being played over and over, like a broken record. Finally, the musicians rise from their seats and leave the room, as scattered as they came. The entering and exiting of the musicians takes just as long as the actual performance. In the end, the camera once again shows the desolate room with the now abandoned seats.

The song presented instrumentally in the video is from 1994, and Eriksson’s art installation was produced two years later. At the time, the song was contemporary pop music. Along with bands like Massive Attack, Portishead is considered a pioneer of trip-hop, a genre drawing from hip-hop traditions.

The effect of the video is unsettling, almost unbearable due to the monotonous droning; it creates the impression that something is stuck, unable to progress.

The musicians’ interpretation of the song seems to combine tradition and modernity, with the brass band itself representing tradition and the adapted song representing the modern, contemporary. However, the brass orchestras appear oddly out of time, unintentionally comical. They seem to be enacting the funeral of what they represent—the postal service as a state enterprise, tradition, and society before globalization. Yet, for centuries, the postal service symbolized progress, innovation, and renewal. It brought distant places closer together, eventually even crossing the Atlantic. Its tradition, therefore, already contains the modern within itself.

The symbol of the post office, the post horn, which is only capable of producing natural tones, was long regarded as an instrument of the declassed and was frowned upon in “high music”. When the composer Gustav Mahler brought it into the concert hall for the first time around 1900 in his 3rd Symphony (in the “post horn episode” of the third movement), it sparked outrage. Military bands used the instrument as a wake-up call. It trumpeted progress to the world. Historically, the instrument can be traced back to the Old Testament: the Jewish *shofar*, a ram’s horn, was already used as a military rallying cry. According to the biblical account, it even brought down fortress walls. Its piercing, bone-chilling tone is a staged natural sound—still nature, but already processed, existing right on the boundary between these two opposites. Through its connection to the ancient ram’s horn, the post horn stands at the beginning of tradition, understood as humanity's engagement with nature, marking the onset of progress.

Meanwhile, Portishead's song, which represents the modern in this case, also makes recourse to tradition: the scratching of records that have gone out of fashion is sampled into the electronically produced music of trip-hop. Its protagonists thus place themselves in the more recent tradition of hip-hop from the Bronx in the 1970s, which itself aimed at the appropriation of tradition and its radically altered continuation, particularly in the attempt to connect people through music and dance. Here too, modernity is based on tradition.

The attempts by the two post orchestras to incorporate the contemporary musical developments of their time become trapped in what seems like an endlessly repeating loop. This articulates a kind of standstill despite movement: the automatic repetition that characterizes the capitalist mode of production. In this society, all traditions and conventional ties are gradually but irrevocably broken down and replaced by naked economic interest. But exchange value alone cannot create a living connection between people. As a result, communal life progressively loses its stability. Without a living connection to history, humanity comes to a frantic standstill, increasingly revolving around itself and hardening into a static, point-like form. Eriksson highlights the failure to mediate these opposites by presenting them as a mere addition.

Portishead, in their original “Sour Times,” borrow the beats from hip-hop but do not use rap; instead, they revert to the archaic form of the song. The lyrics themselves express a longing for the past: *‘Cause nobody loves me, it’s true – Not like you do – ‘Cause all I have left is my memories of yesterday – Oh, these sour times*. This also alludes to the fact that the connection between people through music that hip-hop originally aimed for has failed, not least due to commercial sell out. The post orchestras, however, perform the song purely instrumentally, using instruments that hark back to the oldest traditions. In doing so, they reduce the piece to its beat. But without the vocal line, the song stagnates, starting to circle endlessly.

In this way, the orchestras impress upon the listener the fact that the connection between tradition and modernity is failing—not only because the connection is purely additive, but also

because both aspects seem to have lost their relevance. Thus, the videos both reinforce and undermine Portishead's message.

Tradition has historically established itself through repetition and in order to mitigate the horror and superiority of nature. Tradition in a revolutionary sense would mean: not worshipping the ashes, but keeping the flame alive (Jean Jauret, also attributed to Gustav Mahler). True tradition is inherently contradictory, as it both preserves and revolutionizes knowledge and skill. Ultimately, it aims to overturn itself, to abolish itself as the remaining horror of nature. Tradition is itself the root from which possible progress springs, progress that then turns against itself.

Music has always been intended to create community. Brass band music in particular demands marching together in step, where the individual loses themselves in the collective. Music becomes a means of liquidating the individual. Hence the preference of political reactionaries for brass bands. The connection with the pop song exposes this as empty droning that demonstrates a false sense of community. Making music together stands for social behavior: individuals act, yet together they form a whole. The grief and isolation embodied by the musicians suggests that this external form of community building is based on violence. Only in a real, non-additive combination of tradition and modernity could a community be formed that is based on solidarity and voluntariness. This is Marx's vision of an "union of free people."

The question of how to achieve this remains unanswered in the video. The musicians only reveal how it doesn't work. They show what is missing and respond with a kind of mourning. Today, this would be the remedy for numbness and depression. But grief is staged here in an unintentionally comical way. In the "sour times" we live in, there is no longer any room for this feeling. But its effect would be almost disruptive. As a hindrance to the socially enforced demand for optimism and positive thinking, grief is frowned upon. Mourning would be the emergency brake to stop the endless loop in which humanity is currently trapped.

Eriksson shows that the rigid and at the same time frenzied relationships are produced by the actors themselves, taking place behind their backs and at the same time through their heads¹—since as the relations are performed as collective music-making. The frantic standstill might be transformed back into movement. For this to happen, as the two orchestras demonstrate, the social order must be confronted with its own melody.

¹Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, *Zur Lehre von der Geschichte und von der Freiheit*, Frankfurt am Main 2006, p. 39.