

NOT EVERYBODY'S GOAL

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I. What just happened

The percussionist, composer, and ensemble-leader-ish Owen Davis recently made a chart showing what he considered to be the major developments of music from 1900 until today. He then posted it on facebook and asked for feedback. The feedback he got was voluminous; the originally posted chart is no doubt radically changed by now. As it appeared, it was a series of boxes and arrows, with stylistic movements/"schools" in large bold print and composers in smaller print. What became apparent towards the 2000-2010 range of the chart was that this version of history leads directly to Owen's own practice, with his ensemble and his collaborators occupying prominent boxes that numerous arrows feed into.

There were many reactions, which boiled down to about three general outlooks:

- 1) this was a very good chart;
- 2) this was a deeply flawed chart, but an engagement with history is necessarily personal to a degree, and in making the chart, Owen was commendably forthright in revealing how he saw his own (again deeply flawed) relationship to tradition;
- 3) this was a deeply flawed chart, and Owen should not have bothered.

2) is the most fleshed out, because that's what I thought. Let me explain why.

II. Roadmap to total control

A large part of my musicological research has recently focused on the Belgian composer Herman Van San (1929–1975), who went further than anyone else towards a truly "total" serialism; in the process he algorithmically determined the parameters of pitch, duration, articulation, dynamics (incl. cresc and decresc), timbre, glissandi, sound projection, spatialisation, bow pressure, bow length, bowing location, bowstroke (upbow/downbow), pizzicati (plectrum/finger/fingernail/etc), and others that I'm forgetting at the moment because I'm writing this quickly. This is all wildly eccentric and counterintuitive (Van San literally described his goal as "the removal of intuitive processes from increasingly mathematical models"), and his music was only performed once in his lifetime, at Darmstadt (natch).

The point where this ties back into Owen is that, in the extensive notes that Van San left behind (housed at the Universiteit Gent), there is also a chart of music history since 1900. Not having recourse to adobe illustrator, Van San's is a bit rougher than Owen's, but in scope and purpose they are remarkably similar. Here is what Van San's looks like:

[VAN SAN'S CHART]

(courtesy of Herman Van San Nalatenschep, IPEM, Universiteit Gent)

It's in Dutch, and the handwriting is really bad, but basically Van San has outlined the developments in what he calls "pioneermuziek", which is his ultra-progressive analogue for new music. What this chart provides, as I describe elsewhere with academic flourish, is "a teleology that leads, ineluctably, to Van San himself."

This chart is fascinating, and, like Owen's, it is ultimately neither accurate nor wrong, but, simply and deeply, flawed. Like Owen's, it's primarily concerned with Important Developments - historical trends that yielded results. But Van San's idea of progress is different than mainstream historians, which is why Pousseur, Goeyvaerts, Leibowitz, and Van San himself show up a lot while Britten, Copland, Bernstein, et al, don't. Van San even has a secondary column for the "syntheses" of his teleology, including a lil corner for the "freedom serialism" of Boulez. It doesn't tell us nearly as much about music history (although one hopes "freedom serialism" is a term that might catch on) as it does about Herman Van San. Likewise Owen's chart: it's a pretty limited historical primer, but it's a great, even invaluable resource for figuring out where he's coming from.

III. Not everybody's goal

The problem with personal goals is that they risk becoming more than personal. As it was presented, Owen's chart was modest in purpose (if not in scope). This is a boring thing to say, but it's true: a personal, and necessarily selective relationship to tradition is more or less a prerequisite for composers to teach other composers. From Messiaen to CalArts to people who self-taught through last.fm forums or /mu/ or alex ross' blog or whatever, there's exclusionary value-judgement hardwired to the basic unit of music pedagogy: "listen to this". The hope is that you frame that value judgment honestly, that the student knows there's more to listen to, that this is a beginning and not an endpoint, and it's just your personal beginning anyway.

The problem is when your personal teleology, your lil headcanon chart, becomes a bargaining chip for legitimisation. That's when Boulez turns Messiaen's personal canon into a repertoire, when Taruskin turns his Stravinsky fandom into a 6-volume pseudohistorical bludgeon, and, in our case, when the people at the payoff end of Owen's chart start promoting it without context. Some of them are about Owen's age and most likely they're sharing it because they feel the same way that he does, they recognize their personal connection to history. Others are older and creepier, and they're promoting it because they have a vested interest in legitimising their own atrophied practice.

I realise now why people were so angry, and why my defence, however qualified, was naive. One particular person with a vested interest in legitimising precisely the creative discourse that Owen sees himself a part of suggested that Owen make the chart some sort of open source web page for people to edit. Of course, even a moment's reflection casts doubts on the usefulness of a chart whose primary flaw is a disproportionate emphasis on anglophone music and Owen's buddies being subject to endless revision by anglophone musicians and Owen's buddies. The more likely reason that this person (it's Peter Meanwell, he sucks) made such a proposal is that Owen's subjectivity would be erased while the chart would remain.

If this is the ultimate fate of Owen's chart, and it ends up making claims towards anything

other than Owen's private take on his relation to music history, then his detractors are right. He shouldn't have bothered. This isn't just a mundanely defeatist position. It's a response to a particular sort of new music hegemony, where the most entrenched use the creative practice of younger generations as a crutch.

But thankfully, their problems don't have to be ours. One commentator taking the "owen shouldn't have bothered position" stance gave very helpful advice: "just make music in your scene(s) and chill the f out". This is a corrective not only to the venom of the last paragraph but to the entire enterprise of writing these couple thousand words about a picture a friend of mine posted on his facebook. It's fun and feels kind of cool to fight about this stuff, to feel like we're somehow wrestling for our legacies in History. It's also an amazing feeling to find people who feel the same way you do, who are doing what you never realised was exactly what you wanted to do. That's why we're all doing this in the first place. The goals we make, and the flowcharts that illustrate them, are of a great personal importance. But they're not everybody's, and they can never be. That's what makes them worthwhile.