

The Authenticity Paradigm

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Abstract

The concept of authenticity pertaining to music is the source of many deliberations and even arguments amongst musicians and listeners of music. What one person believes to be authentic will almost certainly be what another considers to be inauthentic. This article explores a number of these different descriptions of authenticity, and examines some of the underlying causes for these alternating opinions. This is done through the examination of the important styles of Western Cannon music, rock 'n' roll, and electronic music - a process that reveals some interesting findings about the perception of music authenticity.

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Introduction: The Problem of Defining Authenticity

The concept of authenticity is deeply rooted within cultures, customs, histories, and beliefs with which we base everyday decisions upon. In some ways, authenticity is a “moving target” (Vannini & Williams, 2009, p. 2) that is both a result of, and a reason for, these cultures and customs etc. to exist in their current form. Despite the ‘living’, or continually adapting nature of the concept, many cultures have attempted to develop rigid definitions of authenticity in music. When diverse cultural backgrounds are compared, many of the preconceptions and prejudices within these definitions become challenged. Potential aspects of music authenticity such as tradition, context, and aesthetics, due to their objective pedigree, expose contradictions and ambiguities within these mono-cultural (and often genre specific) definitions (Schippers, 2006, p. 333). For this reason, this article will not attempt to define the concept of authenticity, because, “A literal interpretation of the term ‘authenticity’ [is] impracticable” (White, 2010). Rather, opposing versions of the concept of authenticity will be compared through the perspectives of Western Cannon, Rock ‘n’ Roll, and Electronic music styles, where factors that influence these ideas of authenticity and importance of authenticity are discussed. While it has been said that an explicit definition of authenticity is unobtainable, it is important to first examine existing opinions on the concept to uncover some important aspects within.

Explanations of Authenticity

Vannini and Williams interpret authenticity in a fairly contentious manner, stating, “Authenticity is to be understood as an inherent quality”, and therefore, “The, object, person, or process in question is authentic or is not, period” (2009, p. 2). While an inherent quality could be said to be necessary for authenticity to exist, there would be no debate whatsoever on the topic if the answer were so simple. The justification for this debate probably derives from disagreement on what this so-called ‘inherent quality’ may be. This is where said elements of tradition, context, and aesthetics may divide the various schools of thought. The notion of aesthetics can be used to explain how this ‘inherent quality’ may be viewed two-dimensionally in relation to authenticity. Von Appen illustrates two ways of perception due to aesthetics saying, “We inspect the stain on the carpet carefully in order to find a way to remove it... unless we yield to the temptation, forget our original intention for a moment and contemplate the colourful scenario of the Bordeaux oozing slowly

through the white woollen carpet” (2007, p. 8). Here it is highlighted that one person’s idea of beauty may be another person’s ‘stain on the carpet’, ultimately summarizing the problem of defining authenticity.

When bringing the concept of authenticity back into a musical framework, the problem is much the same. One author gives musical authenticity guidelines being, (paraphrased) ‘Faithfulness to: the composer’s performance intentions, the performance practise of the composers lifetime, the sound of a performance during the composer’s lifetime, the performers own self’ (Kivy, 1995, p. 4).

Another author provides a similar set of criterion: “Following ancient scores or the canon; using period instruments and ensembles; recreating the original setting or context; obedience to rules and the approach to playing defined by the tradition; or aiming at vitality of expression, meaning, the essence of a musical style” (Schippers, 2006, p. 339). Both of these examples are suited to, or possibly directed toward the music of the Western Canon.

The bias toward Western tradition a common theme in much of the writing about music authenticity, partly due to the established and widely respected state of this ‘musical museum’. As such, there is a preconceived notion amongst many that the music of the Western Canon is disreputably authentic. Kivy elaborates on this point saying, “If you like the way authenticity [of Western Canon music] sounds, that may be a reason in its favour; but if you don’t, or if you like something else better, that is, from the critical point of view, no reason at all [against its authenticity]” (1995, p. x). A possible consequence of this situation is underlined by this very different approach to the subject, “Authenticity is usually a story about origins, a genealogical narrative, but here at the origin of rock ‘n’ roll as culture, we find no concern whatsoever with the genuine or authentic” (Dettmar & Richey, 1999, p. 26). This statement also highlights how the above guidelines such as, ‘obedience to rules and the approach to playing defined by the tradition’ are highly subjective when compared to a genre such as rock ‘n’ roll, where opposite ‘rules’ are applied to create something that is contextually authentic. It is now quite clear that multiple versions of authenticity are possible, so the importance of the unique and common aspects to these differing versions can be investigated.

Authenticity and the Western Cannon

The authenticity of music of the Western Cannon is largely based around the preservation of historical developments, and the positive connotations that evolved with these (Schippers, 2006, p. 337). Butt explains this desire for preservation with, “In an age that has experienced both the catastrophic destruction of cultural artefacts and a phenomenal expansion of technological production and reproduction, there is a definite craving for the ‘original’ and ‘authentic’ in many areas of Western Society” (2010). This is reinforced by Schippers’ authenticity sentiments of, “Recreating the original feel or context” (2006, p. 339). Here it must be noted that this ‘recreation’ of music from the past is a common element in what is often seen as important to authenticity not only in music of the Western Cannon, but in many music’s from various cultures. Chavez provides insight to the philosophy behind such thinking, announcing, “The composers of yesterday are the recognised artists of today, those of today are the artists of tomorrow” (1937, p. 14).

In the same way, the music of today is often the authentic music of tomorrow, as such is the case of the Western Cannon, where the music of Beethoven for example was once considered ludicrous by some. While this may be true, the ‘preservation of the old’ ideal remains within many people’s beliefs of authenticity. Leopard (1988) is perhaps among the most extreme in this category with statements such as, “Our grandparents and great-grandparents were deprived of the enormous wealth of pre-1800 music so readily available now for daily listening” (p. 7) and, “The future is no longer something of promise” (p. 21). The ethos mentioned by Kivy and Schippers is again supported here, where the faithfulness to what were the original intentions of the music is considered fundamental to the meaning of authenticity.

Authenticity and Rock ‘n’ Roll

The genre of rock ‘n’ roll and the attitudes of authenticity within clearly juxtapose those of the Western Cannon. While many supporters of the Western Cannon may reject the idea of rock ‘n’ roll as an authentic source of music, many people born in the ‘baby boomer’ era “experienced rock ‘n’ roll as a master script for life” (Vannini & Williams, 2009, p. 158). The emphasis placed on tradition in the Western Cannon is set aside in rock ‘n’ roll where tradition is considered to be merely another marketing strategy (Dettmar & Richey, 1999, p. 19). Instead, critics announced that because rock ‘n’

roll is, “Aesthetically, socially, and culturally important, [it] therefore deserves to be taken seriously” (Weisethaunet & Lindberg, 2010, p. 5). Weisethaunet & Lindberg also note that the “pursuit of self realisation” (p. 18) and emphasis on self expression played a key role in authenticity’s construction in rock ‘n’ roll. The importance of self expression by the performer provided the audience with a sense of self-identity and connection to the artist through music, harping on the proverb, “Know thyself”, as Kirk stresses (1995, xiii).

The desire to disobey convention, and proclaim individualism not only shaped the popular opinion on authenticity, but worked to define the genre of rock ‘n’ roll. The punk and grunge movements beginning in the 1970’s were so transfixed with avoiding authenticity - or perhaps being culturally inauthentic - that the ‘anti-everything’ attitude actually became a *symbol* of authenticity in the ever-changing environment of rock ‘n’ roll music. The most extreme example of this is the story of the legendary grunge band ‘Nirvana’ and front man Curt Cobain, who paid the ultimate price serving his antidisestablishmentarianism beliefs. Cobain’s suicide fore-fronted what Dettmar & Richey call “an impossible double bind”, where, “If they win big... they lose credibility in Coolsville; on the other hand, to maintain their alternative status... means that ultimately they will never escape the alterna-ghetto” (1999, p. 20). This concept indicates the complexity of evolving representations of authenticity, and also validates the immense breadth possible between aspects of authentic performance in different times and cultures.

Authenticity and Electronic Music

Electronic music also holds unique cultural and musical characteristics that have evolved the important attributes of authenticity the style holds. To clarify, the term ‘electronic’ in this circumstance will be defined as any music where sound is electronically manipulated, either physically or with computer assistance. In this sense, electronic music is older than (and related to) the previously discussed rock ‘n’ roll style, but many of the values derived from electronic music are particularly pertinent, and thriving at the present time. One of the most discerning features of electronic evolution has been the ability to record and duplicate sound, a development that has brought with it a new discussion of authenticity. This technology has meant that, “The original/copy dichotomy is losing value” (Weisethaunet & Lindberg, 2010, p. 17). When taken to the extreme, this has meant that, “The recording and not the performance is the ‘real thing’” (Dettmar & Richey, 1999,

p. 18). This new version of authenticity completely contradicts the traditional view upheld by supporters of the Western Canon. Where it was once imperative that a performer be consistent with the composer's performance intent (Kivy, 1995, p. 6), the performer is now stripped of importance, with the attention being placed on how the recording sounds, whether it is thanks to a musician *or* a computer.

Interestingly, this view of authenticity can probably be explained by the stress Vannini and Williams place on maintaining self-identity through a connection to experiences from one's upbringing. They say, "Keeping up with the music and culture that were so important to [us] when growing up helps [us] to maintain continuity with the past and, thus, to solidify the sense of self security" (2009, p. 157). In this way, the 'computer culture' that has developed within the most recent generation has caused musical styles to mirror these changes - a theme that will probably continue as this generation maintains the authenticity that electronic music has created in their lives.

Schippers (2006), while providing strict guidelines for authenticity in the Western Canon earlier, does pledge support for these most recent changes in authenticity beliefs. He says, "The canon [is] a major obstacle for looking at music from a wider perspective" (p. 2), and that pop music (a playground for electronic music), "Generates a refreshing new setting for thinking on authenticity" (p. 7). Vannini & Williams also make an interesting point on the matter, saying that *inauthenticity* is part of a healthy life, and that the overwhelming struggle to be considered authentic is unnecessary (2009, p. 5). These statements bring forward the situation where in the present day, the concept of authenticity is not only particularly malleable and ever-changing, but also is arguably non-compulsory and non-beneficial. To summarize, the important values held in electronic music - and much of today's music - are reflective of the culture we live in and the technology that is available at our disposal. Further, the developing nature of this heavily globalizing global climate will likely bring further changes in thinking about authenticity in the near future.

Concluding Remarks

This discussion has explored, through examples, a number of alternative versions of authenticity, a process which elucidates the fact that authenticity is merely a *concept* rather than a clearly definable expression. It has been discovered that contradicting values such as preserving tradition, rebelling against conformity, and embracing new technologies can evoke alternative notions of authenticity for a generation or an individual. These values are products of cultural and societal pressures, creating a situation that results in an ever-changing perception of authenticity relative to changes in the said cultures and societies. The lucrative nature of the concept of authenticity does not detract from its importance in an academic sense. The past has shown that a civilisation will move toward the popular opinion of authenticity – a trend that is not necessarily healthy when the term authenticity is mistaken for ‘good’. Overall, this commentary has provided insight into versions of authenticity from the past, factors that contribute to these versions, and has outlined the role of authenticity in a global culture that will inevitably continue to change in the time to come.

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