Weber’s Enchanted Melody: the irrationality of modern music

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INTRODUCTION

Though it may seem like a daunting task to provide semblances between Richard Wagner’s opera “The Flying Dutchman” and Ke$ha’s chart topping hit “Don’t Stop” other than their tonality, Max Weber saw a fundamental—and ultimately destructive—similarity between these two seemingly distinct art forms. Weber’s breadth of analysis on the rationalization of the west has led to many debates regarding capitalism, bureaucracy, and the disenchantment of the world. Weber’s focusses on the discreet use of the 12-tonal system of music notation during the Victorian era to suggest that the disenchantment of music through rationalized notation would lead to the disenchantment of the art form. Applying his model of modern rationalization to music, weber illustrates that standardized and mathematical rules of notation are being used to interpret otherwise free flowing tonality, and that this trend in musical form has mirrored the manifestation of large scale bureaucracy and industry in western society. However many ethnomusicologists and sociologists would suggest that the increased application of scientific rationality has freed composers from almost all pre-existing boundaries and restrictions (Malhorta 1979:109). Weber’s theory neglects to account for the irrationality of the musician as the generator of musical products and that the fundamental expressive element of music will prevent the disenchantment of the discipline. Adorno (1976) and Malhorta (1979), among others, find this to be true and suggest that no matter the standardization in place, musicians know that “there are numerous and delicate expressive possibilities in the way a tone comes and goes which cannot be mathematically expressed” (113).

WEBERIAN BASE

Weber believed that the West was entering an era characterised by intensive rationalization. He saw the rationalization of the west as the characteristic which would lead to the rise of global capitalism. and the disenchantment of the world (Feher 1987:148). Weber saw that the rationalization of society could be measured in two ways: by “the degree to which magical elements of thought are displaced, or positively by the extent to which ideas gain in systematic coherence and naturalistic consistency” (Weber
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1946:51). Coming from a liberal enlightened background, Weber saw this as the disenchantment of cultural life. This theoretical approach is influenced by a sense of unilineal development, where society’s trajectory is placed ahead in a fictive future of total disenchantment and rationality, and the past in a magical spiritual world of irrationality. Weber’s framework regarding the rationalization of society should not be used to predict any future; rather his ideas regarding the disenchantment of the rational world should be understood as an ideal type concept, which can illustrate to what degree society has rationalized, and whether or not this trend of rationality is a pervasive element of human consciousness (Weber 1946; Feher 1987).

With this in mind, the rationalization process could be applied to the standardization and popular transformation of Western music in Europe. In Weber’s Economy and Society, he studied the history of bureaucratization in the Church and the effects that this had on the music it produced (1921). First he noted that the church standardized acceptable musical practices and rules for music writing and performance. Instances of this standardized form were manifest in the structured harmony, organized choirs, orchestras, and conventional designs for instruments which were already in practice in enlightenment era churches (Turley 2001:634). These standards which developed in the church found their way into mainstream music. Weber found that sects of monks dating back to c. 2000BCE were the primary catalysts of today’s standardized systems of music notation. Standardizing music notation would enable them to catalogue music in order to preserve and pass down the legacy to future generations (Weber 1958). The construction of instruments was also standardized so that music could be easily reproduced in different churches. Eventually these instruments, such as the piano, would become a commodity for European households and world markets (Turley 2001:638).

PIANO MAN

The global demand for the piano became a major factor in influencing the standardized construction of musical instruments. The piano became extremely popular in northern Europe, but failed
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to achieve the same popularity in southern Europe in the early 19th century. Weber studied this pattern and explained the phenomenon as a result of the larger cultural system. Those living in northern Europe were fairly housebound and religiously devout. The piano thus became a centerpiece of middle class culture and a fairly poignant status symbol. The demand for these instruments gained momentum during the 19th century, which led to demand throughout the colonies and the rest of Europe (Turley 2001:638). Pianos became commodities under trademarks such as Steinway, new standard indicators of quality and prestige. This commodification of instruments according to their name brands standardized methods of construction. Wooden frames for example had a tendency to warp in the more humid southern climates, and due to a developing global market a uniform shift in construction toward metal frames occurred. These seemingly innocuous factors lead to the use of metal frames for all pianos in all manufacturing markets and demonstrate the effect that capitalism has in structuring aspects of social life in the West. Catering to a global market created a need for a reliable standardized form.

While the uniformity of construction methods of instruments indicated a sort of standardizing trend in the west, Weber’s theory of the rationalization of music focussed on the development of a uniform 12 tonal system (Feher 1987; Turley 2001; Malhotra 1979). Weber saw that the distance between tones played or sung by a musician was organized according to chordal harmony, and explained that “rational harmonic music, both counterpoint and harmony and the formation of tone materials on the basis of three triads with the harmonic third, are peculiar to the West” (Feher 1987:148). The tonal system relies on a twelve note chromatic scale (see figure 1 and 2 in appendix) established by monks who participated in Gregorian Chant (Turley 2001:639). For Weber, this peculiarity demonstrated the Western tendency to submit all areas of human behaviour and experience into calculable rules. The system of notation used in western society revolved around the octave and its divisions into the fifth and fourth and their “successive subdivisions” (Feher 1987:149). Weber saw this ultimately mathematical system as the differentiating factor between ‘modern’ (western) and ‘pre-modern’ music.
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In pre-modern music, tones were not restricted to the contemporary 12-scale system of notation. Weber saw that as society rationalized, the distances between notes became more formalized. Though Weber never made deliberate mention of the final outcome of the rationalization process, it is clear that the result of the total disenchantment of musical irrationality would lead to an anti-pragmatic outcome. One of the major purposes music serves in society is to evoke emotional response through its aesthetic and magical qualities. Becoming fully rationalized would lead to a predictable and disenchanted musical existence.

TRAP MUSIC

Though there have been many criticisms of this theory of Western rationalized music, Weber believed that rebellion against the 12-tonal system is futile. Music which deliberately works against the 12-tone system, such as the work of Stravinsky, is much less restricted but is still influenced by tonality (Feher 1987:152). Having contextual understanding is a pillar of Weberian analysis regarding social action. Much the same way that acting outside of the reality one creates based on a lifetime of personal experiences (i.e. objectively) is nearly impossible, so too would be the act of creating music separate from the tonal system which initially articulated the musician’s frame of understanding. Though various modern movements have established that it is possible to work outside of the Western tonal patterns established by the Church, German Opera, and classical predecessors, Weber asserts that,

These modern movements which are at least in part products of the characteristic, intellectualized romantic turn of our search for the effects of the ‘interesting,’ cannot get rid of some residual relations to these fundaments, even if in the form of developing contrasts to them.

(Weber 1958:102)

Weber suggests that although music and art are characteristically based in irrationality, there are no irrational elements which can transcend the rationality of the organizational system in use. The relationship between the irrational and rational elements of music is dialectical and will ultimately result in enchainment even through liberating practices (Feher 1987:157). Therefore Weber’s theoretical stance
would see the rationalization process of music as eternal, resulting in the disenchantment of musical ingenuity, and a homogenization of musical genres into predictable rational forms following the system of tonalities established by the Church and early Gregorian chant (Feher 1987; Weber 1958).

This theoretical assertion suggests that the development of music is somewhat autonomous, extrinsic to the creator—the musician (Feher 1987:154; DaSilva 1984:99). While Turley (2001) agrees that musical notation did begin in the church and was the initiator of commodifying music in the form of publication, he believes that Weber’s decision to use Church documents was the result of Weber’s own strong feelings toward music and culture and their importance in society. Though Weber does identify a truly rational process—that of standardizing a notation system of tonality—Turley cites an element of single mindedness to Weber’s approach to “discovering” the rationalization process in the irrational elements of society, such as in culture and art. Using church documents would showcase a bureaucratic style of notation due to its pre-existing bureaucratic structure. Analysing travelling musicians may have allowed Weber a conflicting data set. The rationalizing of musical tonality did not occur in a vacuum. Furthermore, the church would have the written records necessary to prove such a theory, whereas the less bureaucratic venues for transmission (such as travelling artists, and master-apprentice learning) would not provide written records of their transmission of musical notation and practice (Turley 2001:640; Humphreys 2011).

Additionally, Feher illustrates how Weber’s ideas regarding tonality are Eurocentric and ultimately products of a nationalist viewpoint which privileges the western model of organizing over models such as India’s equally stratified system of musical organization and transmission. India’s organization structure illustrates that the rationalization process in music is not unique to the west. The works of Adorno (1976), Feher (1987), and Turley (2001), as well as the work of Georg Simmel edited by Etzkorn (1964), question Weber’s lack of regard for the actor in the process of musical development. Finally contemporary arguments, such as those made by Malhotra (1979), demonstrate how the “rationality of western music” actually plays a part in a larger process of creativity seen in the
development of electronic music. Malhotra sees this “Iron Cage” of tonality as a spring board for
development and experimentation in electronic music.

VALUE NEUTRALITY AND THE INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

Turley and Malhotra find that Weber’s tactics of data collection were not objective. Rather his
data served his theoretical framework in a deliberate manner. Weber’s primary passion was Wagner’s
opera. Opera is extremely stratified and hierarchical, resembling a bureaucracy (Adorno 1976).
Furthermore, Weber believed that this style of orchestral music was the final product of musical evolution
and this caused him to fixate on its rational processes. In Weber’s time, Orchestras were downsizing,
ragtime and vaudeville acts were following the same pattern. This trend has continued to develop over the
years, and as artistic industries grow, such as art galleries and music clubs, research finds that these larger
cultural institutions are becoming less bureaucratic (Turley 2001:642). Fixating on pre-existing
bureaucratic systems to prove a theory of rationality would inevitably generate the results which Weber
desired to achieve.

Weber’s focus on notation of music and its relation to bureaucracy should also bring him into an
analysis of similar systems, such as those of Japan, Egypt and India (Turley 2001:644). However,
Weber’s bias is clear through his neglect to provide a framework which includes competing systems of
organization. Indian music notation and production predates European development by nearly 2000 years,
and though it embodies similar systems of notation involving rhythm and melody, its core principles
(parallel but fundamentally different to Weber’s tonal base) are Rag and Tal. Rag is the melody and Tal is
the rhythm or form (Turley2001:648). In Western style notation, a piece may center one of the twelve
notes in the chromatic scale (See figure 1 and 2 in appendix) this note becomes the tonal center of the
key. Within this key a musician constructs a melody through a subjective (or what Weber would call
irrational) ear—based on the preferences of the musician. Complimentary notes are played over top of a
melody (such as a vocal track, baseline, or harmonies therein), and are dependent on that melody (Phillips
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2013). The Rag and Tal, though structured in a similarly stratified way, also have a system of tonality known as ragas which is larger than the Western 12-scale form. Indian music is also based on rhythm, but the rhythm is recognized in cycles of 7, 8, 10, 12, 14, or 16 beats, while the Western method is organized according to the number of beats per measure and can be expressed as 4/4, 3/4, or in odd meters such as 7/8, 9/8, and 5/4 (Turley 2001:648). The Indian music system also centers around 3 instruments, the most striking of which is the Sitar:

“The Tambura (whose function is the drone), the Tabla (a pair of drums, which actually perform an expressive function more often than a strict rhythmic one), and the Sitar (a truly unique instrument of three to four main strings with three to four drone strings, plus a dozen sympathetic strings that vibrate when the other strings are struck; its function is melody, rhythm, and drone combined.)”

(Turley 2001:648)

Though all instruments are intended to be played at the same time, the Sitar embodies the purpose of all other instruments and can be played by itself. Once one has an understanding of both organizational systems, it becomes unclear which is more rational than the other, and for that matter, how does one characterize rationality?

The major difference between these two parallel systems is the method of transmission. Whereas Weber saw the use of a common style of notation and standardization of instruments as the most “rational” means of translating and disseminating information—therefore making it exemplary of the rationalization and capitalism of the West above all other civilizations—the descriptions above demonstrate that the Indian system of notation and musical understanding is equally stratified. However it would seem that perhaps the existence of the Sitar, an instrument which can embody both rag and tal, is a more efficient and rational means of transmission. The instrument becomes the device which communicates the organization of music as rhythm, drone and melody, while also functioning as the instrument. Turley concludes that the western tonal system is designed more for commodity than rationalization (2001:649). Where the Indian Musical system has existed for thousands of years without a
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formal notation system, unlike the Western tradition, it would lead a rational mind to consider that perhaps the more efficient system is the one which requires less institutionalized learning. Weber characterizes rationality as “behaviour which is calculated as means to an end” (Malhorta 1979:102). The Indian model allows music to be understood regionally through master-apprentice relationships and supersedes the western model where one must learn the system of notation before making music. The Indian system accomplishes the ends—of transmitting music to a new generation—through simpler means than the western model. Given this statement, the western model of musical transmission is not uniquely rational, but perhaps uniquely designed to function as a commodity. Mostly, Weber’s neglect for this musical tradition illuminates the absence of value neutrality in his sociology of music.

ELECTRIC FEEL

Malhorta illustrates how modern revolutions in the musical realm have led to creativity spurred by the existing “rational” tonal system through the use of electronic music. Here the musician comes in to play as the driving force behind innovation, something that Weber largely neglected.

The disenchantment of the tonal system has led to a multitude of artists rebelling against the given confines of the 12-tonal system (Feher 1987:152). Malhorta cites two different musical revolutions which have occurred since Weber’s time. First was Stravinsky’s rejection of the use of a tonal base. Music prior to Stravinsky was dependent on a tonal center—songs featured a series of notes which complemented each other in a mathematically and sonically predictable manner. Stravinsky leapt back and forth between keys regardless of a tonal center and demonstrated that the tonal structure was not completely rigid and confining. The second revolution occurred post WWII, where artists began to question the difference (if there was any at all) between music and noise. This second revolution came as a response to the electronic age of a consumer music industry where albums were recorded and distributed as household commodities (Malharta 1979:101). The questions became: is this recorded sound music? If the act of creating music is not physically occurring in front of you, is it still music? If so, then
what differentiates sound from music? These questions led to the rejection of traditional harmonic structures as well as traditional rhythmic forms. Artists played with the distinction between music and noise, as is still apparent in contemporary music through the use of sound effects and similar technologies in place of traditional instrumentation.

Malhorta further demonstrates her rejection of Weber’s theory of rationalization of music through her description of the ability to alter pitch and sound waves in electronic music. Weber suggested that through the use of a 12-tonal system, emotive elements, such as expression through sliding and gliding between notes, would be eliminated (Weber 1958:92). However, electronic music makes use of synthesizers which Malhorta says can create “virtually any type of sound wave. This means the composer is liberated from the restricting timbers possible on existing instruments” (1979:109). Lopes found that contemporary popular music coming from western capitalist nations, such as the United States, is largely electronic. He also found that the method of production and distribution of popular music is fairly systematic, bureaucratic and rational and yet there is a large degree of heterogeneity and experimentation within the genre (Lopes 1992:70). The use of a synthesizer does not eliminate the 12-tonal structure, it further subdivides it, which is characteristic of a further rationalizing of sound on the part of the West. However, this extreme rationality has actually enchanted audiences. There is a vibrant consumptive audience for modern music, demonstrating that the use of the 12-tonal scale, and the existence of a capitalist market, is not causal in the development of the disenchantment of music. We also see that the development of computer technologies, which is something often associated with bureaucracy, has actually enchanted musical audiences consistently which is evident in Lopes’ study of the popular music industry (Lopes 1992).

THE IRRATIONAL VIRTUOSO

After an analysis of the contemporary application of Weber’s theory of rationalization to music as social action, it seems as though Weber’s understanding of rationality has manifested itself in the
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contemporary musical landscape. However, because of the presence of the musician or *virtuoso*, which was largely neglected by Weber, that rationalization will not lead to the disenchantment of the musical world. The melody of any piece of music is developed through “intervallic distance and tone proximity” which are developed by the *virtuoso*. Weber believed that “without the tensions motivated by the irrationality of melody, no modern music could exist… Chordal rationalization lived only in continuous tension with melodicism which it can never completely devour” (Feher 1987:151). This aspect of Weber’s theory demonstrates the space left for creative enterprise on the part of the musician. The creation of melody is imaginative and is based on the artist’s previous knowledge of sounds, notes and, their own preferences of note interaction and harmony. Since the enlightenment (when dissonant chords were seen as unresolved and incomplete), dissonant chords have become more familiar and are considered stable, demonstrating how the selection of melody depends on the artist and their history of musical socializing.

Since melody is developed by the irrational *virtuoso*, whose melody comes from a subjective understanding of the way notes will sound together, there are no rules for the development of a melody. The rules of tonality are only applied after a melody is established. Therefore Weber’s assertion disproves his own theory, perhaps indirectly, in that “a deviation from the rule (the irrational virtuoso) was necessary simply for the rationalized work of art to exist” (Feher 1987:152). This irrational aspect of music making would seem to offer a sense of liberation from the inevitability of total disenchantment through rationality. Though Weber largely ignores the influence of the musician on the development of music, he identifies melody as the irrational factor that keeps music developing into modern times.

Weber’s love for opera is revealed in his ideas regarding the disenchantment of music. He imagined that the capacities of music would follow suit with other ever rationalizing arenas of social life; becoming disenchanted through capitalism and bureaucracy much like markets such as food production, and international trade. Ultimately, Weber feared that “because of increased rationalization, such emotive devices [such as religion, and art] would be increasingly routinized, and hence made ineffective”
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(Malhorta 1979:105). However, it would seem that had Weber accounted for the effects of the actor as a driving force behind musical development, he may have had a more enchanted outlook on the future of music. Contemporary popular music may ascribe to a strict formula and appear to exemplify Weber’s rationalizing process and subsequent disenchantment of the medium, but its dominant presence in our cultural landscape does make it the penultimate form of contemporary and future musical development and ingenuity. Experimental and foreign music doesn’t achieve the same mass exposure that popular music does in the west, which skews the true variety of genres and use of tone and sound.
Appendix

Figure 1
The 12-tone Chromatic Scale of Western Musical Notation

Figure 2
Chromatic Scale Beginning on “C”
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Bibliography


