

## **Music and Boredom** by Thomas W. Patteson

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Once the basic challenges of survival have been surmounted, humanity confronts the question of what to do with itself. Boredom may constitute the central existential dilemma faced by members of affluent society—the "first world problem" *par excellence*. The entire techno-social apparatus of late modernity constitutes an elaborate system of defenses against being alone with oneself in silence. What is the ubiquitous smartphone, after all, but a high-tech talisman for the protection from boredom? In the glow of the Retina screen, the once hallowed distinction between work and play pales before the opposition of stimulation and boredom.

Among the many fortifications against boredom, humankind has created art. According to John Dewey's seminal book *Art as Experience*, aesthetic perception is a state of heightened attentiveness in which all human faculties are brought for a moment into felicitous concert. Boredom, as the diffusion of attention, consciousness without object, is the inverse of that quickened sense of life that Dewey defined as the essence of the aesthetic. Intuitively, boredom represents everything to which art—whether conceived as high culture or mass entertainment—is opposed.

Intuitively, then, boredom is nothing more than a sign of failure in the attempt to engage the audience. But many works of art, especially in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, seem to deliberately flirt with boredom, to challenge our ability to pay attention. What would

happen if we tried to see boredom not simply as a symptom of artistic failure, but rather as an aesthetic intention in its own right?

Such investigations into the dark side of the aesthetic are not without precedent. In 1853, the German philosopher Karl Rosenkranz published a book entitled *Ästhetik des Häßlichen* (Aesthetics of Ugliness), the first study of its kind. Rosenkranz's argument was that ugliness can't simply be understood as a negative state (the absence of beauty), but as an aesthetic quality that may possess its own peculiar charm. To study art without ugliness was tantamount to practicing medicine without knowledge of illness or pondering ethics without confronting the problem of evil. Rosenkranz's book presents a remarkable taxonomy of ugliness in its myriad forms: the vulgar, the common, the capricious, the unrefined, the disgusting, and the diabolical. Each manifestation of ugliness has its own flavor, its own logic, which it is the task of aesthetics to understand.

Imagine, if you will, a catalog of musical boredom *à la* Rosenkranz. Examples would include the boredom of indifference—perhaps better called *ennui*—in which there may be much going on, but there is no apparent logic governing the relationships between events. Then there is the boredom of “too-muchness,” when the perceptual density of the work overwhelms our ability to make sense of it. And finally, there is the boredom of familiarity, where even a structurally complex work can become tedious through overexposure.

However, for the sake of simplicity, I'm concerned here only with a particular form of boredom in music. I mean the boredom that is experienced in response to a perceived dearth of stimuli, the boredom of “nothing happening.” In slightly more technical terms, I'm talking about work characterized by features such as intensive repetition, structural homogeneity, and extended duration.

The French composer Erik Satie is typically credited with the invention of deliberately boring music. In the preface to his 1914 collection of piano miniatures entitled *Sports et divertissements*, Satie wrote,

For those who are dried up and stultified, I have written a Choral which is serious and respectable. This Choral is a sort of bitter preamble, a kind of austere and unfrivolous introduction. I have put into it everything I know about Boredom. I dedicate this Choral to those who do not like me—and withdraw.

Here we have an example of what might be called satirical boredom: Satie's choral embodies the bloodless conventionality that he despised in the respectable, conservatory-trained music of his time. Satie's most famous contribution to the boredom genre, however, is the piano piece *Vexations*, composed in 1893, which consists of a few short musical phrases to be repeated, according to a note on the score, 840 times in succession.

Unpublished in Satie's lifetime, *Vexations* was unearthed by John Cage in 1949. First performed by a rotating cast of pianists in an 18-hour concert in New York in 1963, the work became a touchstone for the heterodox interests of the musical avant-garde. In the late 1940s, around the same time that Cage discovered Satie's *Vexations*, the French painter Yves Klein composed his *Monotone Symphony*, a work consisting of a single tone sustained for 20 minutes, followed by a pause of equal length. Klein said the piece had "neither beginning nor end, which creates a dizzying feeling, a sense of aspiration, of a sensibility outside and beyond time."

While *Vexations* could be heard as a proto-minimalist ode to repetition, Klein's *Monotone Symphony* is one of the earliest works of what would come to be known as drone music. The distinction between these two approaches illuminates an important point: all music is repetition. A sustained tone, after all, is nothing more than the recurrence of a

particular pattern of the condensation and rarefaction of acoustic waves, just as *Vexations* is the iteration of a musical phrase. Along the same lines, it is the incessant reproduction of entire works (such as the aforementioned Beethoven symphony) that allows them to be quite literally “played to death.” Repetition can occur at any level of temporal attention, giving rise to a scalability of monotony that might be called “fractal boredom.”

It was no coincidence that boredom and the limits of attention became objects of artistic interest in the 1950s and 60s, a time when economic prosperity and technological progress seemed to point toward a future of automated labor and unlimited leisure. In 1966, Dick Higgins, an artist and composer associated with the Fluxus movement, took note of the new tendency in an essay called “Danger and Boredom.” “Boredom was, until recently, one of the qualities an artist tried most to avoid,” Higgins wrote. “Today it appears that artists are deliberately trying to make their work boring. Is this true, or is it only an illusion? In either case, what is the explanation?”

He describes a work by George Brecht in which the score instructed the performers, seated in a darkened room, to each perform two actions of their choosing. When all the actions had been taken, the piece was done. He recounts:

The result was fascinating, both for its own sake and for the extraordinary intensity that appeared in waves, as we wondered whether the piece was over or not, what the next thing to happen would be, etc. Afterwards we were asked to guess how long we had been in the dark. The guesses ranged from four minutes to 25. The actual duration was nine minutes. The boredom played a comparable role, in relation to intensity, that silence plays with sound, where each one heightens the other and frames it.

Boredom distends time, pulls us out of the clocklike rhythms of everyday temporality. Could music, through the extreme dilation of temporal experience, guide listeners to a glimpse of eternity, the literally “timeless”? The almost metaphysical concern with what lies

“beyond time” hinted at by Yves Klein would become a central problem for composers such as Eliane Radigue and Morton Feldman.

In the 1970s and 80s, Radigue composed a number of large-scale electronic works based on the ultra-slow drift of oscillators in and out of tune with each other. Radigue’s music is perhaps the *ne plus ultra* of the drone aesthetic: as you listen, the sound seems to stand still, and you become aware of shifts in the texture only once they have already taken place, provoking a curious sort of retroactive perception.

Feldman, who was deeply influenced by the painters of the New York School such as Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, stated that his “primary concern was to sustain a ‘flat surface’ with a minimum of contrast.” Instead of controlling time, he wanted to create “time canvases” which he “primes...with an overall hue of the music.” In this way he hoped to provide an experience of “time in its unstructured existence.” Feldman’s 1981 piano composition *Triadic Memories* demonstrates the delicate sense of mobile equilibrium typical of his music, which might be compared to the “all-over” painting of Pollock and other abstract expressionists.

As I hope these examples have shown, boredom in music is never quite what it seems. Like other emotions, it becomes something else when transfigured to the domain of aesthetic experience. What we feel when we listen to a sad song is not simply a reproduction of quotidian sorrow, but a “virtual emotion” that is governed by the peculiar logic of artistic form. Thus the paradox, peculiar to art, that we can take delight in deliberately making ourselves feel bad.

Boredom works similarly. In the music I have been speaking of, boredom is a sort of threshold experience intended to ease the listener through the passage to something else. It is not an end unto itself, but a liminal state in which perceptual habits are cleared away and the unexpected is made welcome.

Boring music seeks to recalibrate our sensorium and force us to perceive reality anew. It does this not with a typically modernist assault on the senses, but through radical understatement. An apparently simple phenomenon—a monochromatic canvas, a single repeated tone or melody—is dissolved through overexposure to reveal an unsuspected wealth of nuance and detail. Anything can be beautiful (or at least interesting) if you look or listen close enough.

Art in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has pursued two outwardly distinct paths: on the one hand, toward ever greater density of information, on the other hand, toward radical reduction and formal simplification. Each is a way of differentiating art from entertainment by framing aesthetic experience as an act of labor.

The first kind of difficulty mirrors the vertiginous complexification of contemporary life. Multifarious and cerebral, it makes imperious demands on its audience. In its perceptual intensity and hermeneutic richness, it parallels the bewildering mindscape we all inhabit as creatures of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

However, boring art—boring in the sense that I have been explaining—asks the audience not to solve a puzzle or deduce a meaning, but to undergo an experience. It seeks to upend the conventional economy of attention in order to attune us to what Higgins calls

“the new mentality of our time...one in which total success is impossible, total victory inconceivable, and relativism axiomatic.”

Boredom tests what John Keats called the “negative capability” in each of us: our willingness to “be in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” In a world in which our perceptual bandwidth is constantly stretched to new limits, where information technologies turn us into cybernetic monsters of knowledge and productivity, boring art poses us with a peculiar and unwelcome challenge: to quiet our minds, confront the void, and simply look and listen.



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