

Occupy Wall Street, Composers and the Plutocracy:
Some Variations on an Ancient Theme

John Halle
Bard College Conservatory
halle@bard.edu

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In the six month since its difficult birth in mid September, Occupy Wall Street has attracted a widespread and largely favorable reaction among the public with a recent poll indicating 46% support, far higher than most political institutions, established parties and elected officials. Of course, the reaction has not been universally favorable. The political right wing has been withering in its criticism, but they have not had a monopoly on their viewing Occupy as a alarming, corrosive and even sinister development in political consciousness. Indeed, some of the most brutal and violent assaults against Occupy encampments have been undertaken by municipal governments in Oakland, Albany, Portland, and Chicago having the reputation as at least liberal, and even on the radical left.

So the question of who supports Occupy is by no means as unproblematically aligned on the left/right spectrum as it initially appears. As for specific social classes and professional categories, matters are just as confused, with supporters claiming a broad representation from all walks of life and critics of Occupy denigrating participants as trust fund babies or slacker college grads who need to “get a job”. When it comes to artists generally and composers in particular the question of how involved we are is more problematic still, and is likely to remain unanswerable for the foreseeable future.

But that doesn't mean that composers can't usefully discuss the question with an eye to learning more about who we are and what makes us tick. And it is with that in mind that I will offer the following short answer: based on my experience as a relatively active participant in the movement and my having attempted to organize support for it among composers [here](#), I don't think that we have been well represented in the Occupy Movement. This, however, needs to be accompanied by a disclaimer; more than most professional categories, composers are profoundly committed to what we do. Keeping our distance from OWS prevents us from getting mired in the swamps of politics something which we would avoid as we would anything else which takes us away from our work.

That said, we know this cannot be the entire explanation. For example, many of us will recall having devoted considerable energy to the Obama campaign, demonstrating that composers can be highly political when we want to be. With this in mind, we can return to the original question: why have we not been involved in a movement whose stated objective is advancing economic justice for the 99%?

Now a somewhat more problematic answer suggests itself: for centuries, composers were beholden to the one percenters of their day, the feudal aristocracy. And while aristocratic patronage would decline during the 19th century, the traditions and political

allegiances inherited from this golden age live on. While we are not, like Haydn, required to wear powdered wigs and military uniforms, the barriers separating us from the plutocracy are significantly less pronounced than those obtaining in other professions. And as the degrees of separation diminish, we are more likely to view economic elites as individuals who, like any others, deserve our respect rather than as a class that has earned our contempt.

That we are in relatively close proximity to them can be seen in the following tour of some of the premier arts institutions with which we are associated or at least hope to gain favor. Having familiarized ourselves with these surroundings, I will continue with some reflections on the broader picture which emerges, and conclude with some thoughts on how composers who choose to become active in the OWS movement can most usefully direct their energies.

A good place to begin is with the winner of this year's Alice Ditson Prize for the promotion of American music, the New York Philharmonic. Much of the credit for this programming goes to the recently appointed music director, Alan Gilbert. But the financial wherewithal for these programming decisions is provided by the NY Philharmonic board and its chairman, Gary S. Parr. Mr. Parr is currently CEO of Lazard, his bio on the NY Phil website informs us, in which capacity he [“has recently advised on transactions such as the sale of Lehman's North American investment banking business to Barclay's; the sale of Bear Stearns to JPMorgan; he served in numerous capacities at Morgan Stanley, including as vice-chairman — Institutional Securities and Investment Banking.”](#)

Accepting a commission from or performance by the New York Phil in no way implies that we are sympathetic with these activities—for example, the "sales" of Lehman and Bear Stearns¹ underwritten by the extortion of hundreds of billions of taxpayer dollars. But it does mean that we have an indirect financial stake in concentrating wealth in the hands of one percenters like Mr. Parr who provide the ultimate financial basis for our work.

The same can be said about our relations with Sanford Weill, the chairman of the board of another pre-eminent uptown musical institution, Carnegie Hall. In this capacity, composers are grateful to Mr. Weill for helping to foot the bill for the impressive range of contemporary music under Carnegie's auspices.² This Mr. Hyde is complemented by the Dr. Jekyll who was the former CEO of Citibank, the company perhaps most responsible for the marketing of subprime loans which were to blow up the economy, immiserating hundreds of millions, while helping itself to hundreds of billions of dollars in bailout funds.

Returning to Lincoln Center, we find ourselves truly in the belly of the beast upon entering the David Koch Theater, named after the notorious sponsor of far right initiatives, and home to the New York City Ballet, a frequent and consistent advocate for American composers. Also in this category is the New York City Opera, whose orchestra

is now being subject to a vicious union busting campaign by its director, George Steel, which Mr. Koch and others of his ilk would undoubtedly heartily approve of. A few lateral steps will land us in the Metropolitan Opera, whose \$300 million budget is underwritten by a board including billionaire heiresses from the publishing and oil industries, a managing director of Goldman Sachs, and former CEO of Texaco. Among the more problematic features of the Met in recent years has been the Alberto Vilar Grand Tier, the name having been removed following the donor's conviction on multiple counts of defrauding investors.

Mr. Vilar reminds us that not all of the crimes on which were constructed the great fortunes we benefit from went unprosecuted. Moving a couple of blocks uptown from Lincoln Center provides us with more evidence: Merkin Hall was presided over for many years by Ezra Merkin, the chief marketer of the Bernard Madoff line of investment products, whose once eager purchasers are now required to subsist on Social Security, having lost their life savings to the smooth talking Talmudic scholar, White Shoe lawyer, and music lover. Some of the programs at Merkin have been sponsored by the Milken Center for Jewish Music and here we are submerged in the previous wave of financial crime presided over by the Milken brothers, the notorious junk bond kings.

Major artistic institutions such as these are, of course, well known for their longstanding connections to financial elites, so the above list could be continued almost indefinitely. Given that the latter has become a de facto criminal class, we shouldn't be surprised that our tour has by now degenerated into a kind of perp walk—albeit perps attired in Brooks Brothers suits with refined musical tastes.

It was at least partly in reaction to the stifling artistic climate created by these stuffed-shirt connections that the downtown school of composition would arise in the sixties and seventies, though it was probably inevitable that, as it became established, downtown institutions would be underwritten by similarly problematic sources. This became apparent in the nineties when numerous downtown events received sponsorship provided by the pre-eminent rogue corporation of its day, Philip Morris, including a major gift to the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Another source was the DIA foundation, established by the heiress of the Schlumberger oil services fortune and most notable for its sponsorship of a six-year residency of the iconic minimalist composer La Monte Young.

Another pole of downtown, the Bang on a Can Festival has now been held for some years at the Winter Garden of the World Financial Center. This merits comment since, as I write this, OWS demonstrators are being violently dispersed by the police at the behest of the Winter Garden's owners, Brookfield Properties. This dichotomy provides a renewed demonstration that elites have little difficulty countenancing expressions of artistic radicalism. Indeed, they will open their doors to it and—quite literally—invite us in. But when radical style turns into radical substance—that is, when it challenges the economic basis of elite prerogatives and privilege—the one per centers of today, as of generations past, are ready, willing, and able to replace the proverbial velvet glove of acceptance with an iron fist of repression. This is the logic through which the Winter Garden, formerly

the site of many years of the classical music world's version of Woodstock, has just now become a war zone.

Interestingly, one of the board members having signed off on Brookfield's actions is Diana Taylor, the live-in companion of the Pontius Pilate of OWS, Mayor Bloomberg. The billionaire Mayor himself is also a strong supporter of the arts although, in another indication of the entanglement of the public and private, his contributions frequently compensate for budget cuts enacted in his executive capacity. That there are strings attached to these donations became clear when *The New York Times* reported that the beneficiaries were expected to enlist in support of the mayor's controversial ballot initiative to revoke term limits.³

It should be recognized that attempts at advancing a political agenda through pulling artists' purse strings are uncommon. In the concert music world they are rarer still, the only recent instances which come to mind involving donors pressuring the Boston Symphony to rescind an invitation to Palestinian rights supporter Vanessa Redgrave and subsequently to cancel a concert staging of John Adams' opera *The Death of Klinghoffer*. That these instances are so rare might be taken to be indicative of orchestra boards' tendency to maintain a hands-off policy with respect to artistic decisions. But it would be a mistake to claim that they do not exercise significant influence, albeit in an indirect fashion. As elites have understood for generations, their simple presence at the upper levels tends to insure that they will not have to exercise direct veto on forms of expression of which they would disapprove.

Rather, a climate is created in which artistic decisions are made with an awareness of the location of certain political boundaries, and those at all levels of the organization choose not to transgress them. These decisions don't need to be conscious as those making them have often, to cite a remark by Noam Chomsky, "internalized the values of the elites themselves" to the degree that they do not require guidance or discipline. The extent to which we do so will be the last subject I will address.

The claim just made is a slightly more pointed formulation of the suggestion made previously that our long history of aristocratic patronage may offer an explanation for our inherent tendency to throw in our lot with the one percent. But there is more to our identification and affinity with elites than shared history and economic self-interest. First, as composers we function in an executive capacity, one which involves, to cite a pointed remark of John Cage, "telling other people what to do." Just as the CEO dictates the precise specifications of a product and the conditions under which his labor force produces it, composers, if anything, go a step beyond the most repressive corporate executive, dictating every gesture by a workforce which is almost totally under the control of the choreography we produce for them in our scores. The megalomania of a composer like Wagner and that of a CEO like Rupert Murdoch may not be so different after all, and it should come as no surprise that the Met, a three ring circus of gesamtkunstwerkliche activity, is the most generously endowed of all art institutions.

Second, just as CEOs define themselves according to an intensely structured and rigid hierarchy which they have succeeded in ascending, so too do classical musicians take for granted something roughly equivalent. Our training as performers or composers is founded on the notion of the transcendent musical masterpiece—those works whose inherent excellence and structural sophistication have allowed them to survive the Darwinian competition for survival in the musical marketplace of the concert hall. Our own work, insofar as it is successful, also manages to survive and thrive within its own place and time. In accepting this hierarchy, and the basis on which it rests, we recapitulate what are by now familiar arguments of corporate executives in the top 1% as to their own fitness and legitimacy. Given this shared set of attitudes, the mutual affinity of composers and plutocrats probably shouldn't come as a surprise. And, to return to the original observation, it is more or less natural that we would view with suspicion a movement whose commitment to radical democracy seeks to challenge not just the basis of the social hierarchy, but the notion of hierarchy itself.

Finally, there is the matter of the highly controlled, quasi police-state atmosphere of the concert hall, one which forces audiences to submit passively to the experience imposed on them by the composer. As pointed out by Lawrence Levine in his much discussed 1988 book *Highbrow Lowbrow*, it is no coincidence that domestic classical music institutions were created by industrialists at the turn of the century confronted with mass popular uprisings. The codes of conduct attached to classical music were seen by them as a means to impose discipline on what they regarded as a dangerous mob and their support for it can be seen as another front in the war waged by elites against “the rabble” That we might not perceive ourselves as having allied ourselves with them does not mean that we are not objectively supporting their broader agenda.

At this point, it should be recalled that what I have laid out here are my opinions, which I have reached in the absence of rigorous studies relating to the representation of musicians within OWS, none of which, to my knowledge exist. That said, there are two pieces of hard evidence, albeit limited and circumstantial, worth mentioning here. The first is the Occupy Musicians website alluded to previously, and the mixture of negative responses and non-responses I received in my attempts to organize for it. Compounding this with the relative absence of names of well-known composers, many of whom were contacted for inclusion and chose not to sign on, provides one general indication that composers have kept their distance from OWS.

The second piece of evidence implicating the unexpressed attitudes towards OWS comes in the form of the numerous comments attached to the viral Facebook posting created by Los Angeles-based composer Eric Guinivan:



While it is always a dicey business to excavate the foundations of a joke, in this instance it is revealing that the majority of the respondents simply register agreement with the proposition, making note of the disproportionate representation of a small number of elite composers in the world's concert halls, "Sooooo true. Ha, ha!" says one.

But these comments beg the question: why does pointing out this self-evident truth seem funny to us? What appears to be operative here is humor of the classic Freudian type: the joke masks the introduction of a taboo topic, namely that the Darwinian world of the concert hall is a brutal one in which very few of us can be expected to survive either in the here and now or in the future. And so we tend to broach the subject in jest or after a few beers.

Another possibility is that the humor resides in the Pythonesque absurdity of the premise: that programming decisions should be, like the OWS general assembly, radically democratic, granting all composers, living or dead, equal access to public performances. The logical consequence of this philosophy, for example, that the Wagenseil Piano Concerti should be programmed with the same regularity as those of Mozart would strike many as coming close to a dystopia, of course. One commenter's avowal that "he's with the 1% on this one" seems to be a recognition that this scenario, equivalent to imaging a hospital intensive care unit staffed by chimps, is perhaps better left to the imagination.

In either case, whatever is the basis of the joke, which I found as amusing as everyone else, the reactions to it are entirely self-referential at best or merely self-absorbed. They give no indication of any particular sympathy or, for that matter, even any understanding of the basic issues which have motivated OWS and its supporters.

In laying out some of the reasons for our not having done so, I don't mean to suggest that composers can't be active participants in OWS. If there are any doubts of our potential, they will be removed by viewing Alex Ross's extraordinary video taken on Lincoln Center Plaza following the final performance of *Satyagraha* at the Met on Dec 1. In what is by now a minor legend, Phillip Glass decided against taking his curtain call on stage and to stand with occupiers on Broadway across the plaza requesting that the Met audience exiting the theatre join them. Police barricades had been erected to prevent precisely this—a demonstration in support of Occupy in Lincoln Center—but Glass's presence, the message of the opera, and occupiers' repeated reminder that “the opera is your life,” proved so compelling that hundreds ignored the police orders.

It needs to be well understood that these actions were illegal—indeed textbook cases of civil disobedience; had typical OWS demonstrators disobeyed police orders would have subjected them—possibly hundreds of them—to arrest at least, violent assaults at worst. Indeed, Glass himself could have reasonably been charged with incitement, a serious felony. But, even in the nascent police state into which New York City has devolved under the current administration, such a response would have been unthinkable. The opera audiences engaged in the act are one of the few constituencies which Bloomberg must treat with deference. And Glass himself has by now become an iconic figure, one of the very few classical composers who can legitimately stake a claim to real cultural and even moral authority.

That Glass's protest appeared in the pages of *The New York Times* speaks to the unique power which classical music and classical musicians still command. Resting on top of the pinnacle of elite artistic culture, constructed on generations of aristocratic patronage, our work provides us an entry into in the inner sanctum of the one percent. Few of us will ever achieve the status as composers which will allow us this access. And, it could reasonably be argued that Glass, a member of the composerly one percent, knowing that he is immune from retaliation, can exercise his rights to protest in a way which composers of the 99% cannot. Some of Glass's numerous detractors may see his activism as nothing more or less than another public relations stunt profiting from the “buzz” surrounding the now fashionable OWS movement. But that is too cynical. All that needs to be said is that Glass stepped up to the plate. It remains to be seen how many of the rest of us will.

¹ For a detailed examination of these cases see, for example, recent books by [William](#)

² <http://www.carnegiehall.org/About-the-Music/Commissions/>

³ http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/18/nyregion/18termlimits.html?_r=2&oref=slogin&oref=slogin