

A Challenge to Monolithic Elitism: Eclecticism in Rock Music

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Abstract: This project aims to explore how eclecticism reflected in rock music as a sign of postmodern culture, explain the cultural background and expression intention of it by musical analysis, then apply the relative theory of Jonathan Kramer in his *Postmodern Music, Postmodern Listening*. As a characteristic of musical postmodernism, eclecticism changed the original features of rock music and led it to a fresh style which broke through its own performance category, to show new connotations and values. By elucidating how rock musicians use eclecticism to deny the authoritative value represented by traditional classical music, it can be seen that in a specific historical context, an anti authority voice sounded outside the traditional historical line of music, which has changed the single line historical narrative. Through the acceptance of music style that were considered noble in the past, rock music became a powerful force to challenge the value made by monolithic elitism, and successfully created an environment in which multiple voices can exist.

Keywords: Rock Music, Eclecticism, Musical Postmodernism.

1. Introduction

In his book *Postmodern Music, Postmodern Listening*, Jonathan Kramer defining “musical postmodernism” as characterized by “discontinuity, eclecticism, quotation, pastiche, disunity, focus on the surface more than on deep structure, lack of concern for personal communication, and juxtaposition of vernacular and high-art styles”[1]. To study post-modern eclectic music further as a type of lifestyle, he demonstrates that the appreciation of post-modern music is a process of perceptual experience and non-rational cognition. Eclecticism is frequently mentioned among a number of music works and is regarded as breaking the inherent creative thinking of composition.

Unlike eclecticism, which is subordinate to personal creative style in classical music, it is used to erase the imprint of personal style in postmodern music. It shows that postmodern eclecticism dissolves the boundary of high and low values in appreciation value of musical works. Jonathan Kramer's overview and explanation of postmodern eclecticism in music has reached a comparatively perfect degree, but his explanation of postmodern eclecticism in rock music is minimal. Although rock music was born in the 20th century with a distinctive musical style, after the 1970s, a series of

music works revealed that eclecticism also invaded this music category which represents rebellious and self. Consequently, the style shift of rock music is an important supplement to Kramer's argument. This essay will apply Kramer's theory about postmodern music to argue that eclecticism also brought changes to rock music, it made rock music as an external challenge to monolithic challenge represented by classical music.

In order to take into account rock music itself and its social and cultural perspectives, this essay will be structured into 3 separate sections. Section 1 will make a review of Kramer's theory about postmodern eclecticism as well as the cultural background of rock music. Then this section will extend his theory to the context of rock music. Section 2 will be a more specific analysis. By analyzing *Madame Butterfly* of Malcolm McLaren and *Bohemian Rhapsody* of Queen, it can be found that eclecticism appears in rock music with an entirely different look from traditional music works. Furthermore, the concepts behind rock music shows virtually the opposite path of the professional composers illustrated by Kramer, which show a great challenge to traditional music culture, as a monolithic elitism. The third part will look at elitism from a broader perspective, discussing where it comes from, how it behaves now, and how it will evolve in the future.

2. Means to Rebel: Eclecticism in Rock Music

As one of the characteristics of postmodernism discussed by Kramer, eclecticism appeared increasingly frequently in a series of music works around the 1970s, and also appeared in rock music. Unlike academic music that introduces pop elements, rock music, as a kind of popular music (for the minority sometimes), despises the elitist position of classical music from another perspective by introducing music that is considered to be high-value and elite in traditional cognition. By analyzing Malcolm McLaren's *Madame Butterfly* and Queen's *Bohemian Rhapsody*, the views of rock musicians on eclecticism and the effects of music will be presented more concretely.

2.1. Rock Music in the Context of History

Rock and roll, as a particular category of pop music, the development has several stages after it first appeared in the 1960s[2]. In the development of rock music, the spirit of rebels has become increasingly distinctive, and gradually become the spiritual core of a generation of rock music. The vocal aesthetic orientation of rock music is likewise intuitively different from preceding music - it does not deliberately pursue a mellow and full voice. Although rock music in the early 1950s has the name of rock, it is more like a sort of music type that is not intense and rebellious after the fusion of country blues and white music, which is different from the rock in our impression now. Therefore, early rock music still utilizes true voice in singing, and musicians who inherit swing music and gospel music, such as Chuck Berry, Ray Charles, Elvis Presley and so on, use true voice singing to convey their feelings. A large number of works by the Beatles also use this singing method. After the Beatles and other "British invasion" since the 1960s, rock music requires that the voice not only contends with the instruments, but also demonstrate the outrage and madness in the song. Singers should include singing methods such as shouting, screaming, screaming, etc. to perform their works on the basis of the true voice. When performing on site, it is also easier to stimulate the audience's enthusiasm for the performance and increase the on-site interaction effect. For example, Eric Burdon, the lead singer of the animal band, has tremendous lung capacity and impressive singing momentum. As eclecticism appeared in rock music evidently in the 1970s, the consistent aesthetic standard, authenticity, seems to be hidden again. But again, this can be seen as a new challenge to tradition, whether classical music or rock music itself, in another special way. The use of classical music elements makes rock music break the old value through parody to a certain extent, but at the same

time, through the use of traditional style and the reference of structure, they gradually converge their spirit to the tradition.

2.2. Pastiche in McLaren's *Madame Butterfly*

British rock in the 1960s had a great force of meeting blow and deep power over on the earth quick sharp sound music circle, and made come into existence the basic scaled-copy of rock music in terms of verses of a song, work of art and operation polished and tasteful form. When rock music evolved to the mid-1970s, punk was born on its foundation, and gradually became independent music after evolution. Punk music does not pay much attention to musical skills and is more inclined to the sharp position of ideological liberation and anti-mainstream. This original intention was actively followed in Britain and the United States under the specific historical background of the 1970s, and eventually formed the punk movement. At the same time, punk music is very popular among young people and is appreciated by young people in many parts of the world. Malcolm McLaren was one of the founders of the punk rock era, who made a major contribution to the formation of the British punk rock genre. *Madame Butterfly* on the album *Fans* is a pop version he made of extracts from Puccini's opera of the same name. The song used the most famous aria in the opera called *A Sunny Day*, which condenses the tragic core of the entire opera, but only reduced to a swirl of background, serve as a foil to a pop female voice. Such a ploy created a strange auditory sensation that embodied eclecticism and at the same time retold the story of the opera. The aria is sung by the protagonist Chocho, who is an image of Oriental women under patriarchy. It is generally believed that before the 1990s, rock music was a music culture dominated by men. But in McLaren's punk creations, a female's voice had appeared once. Traditional rock music, which lacked women and full of self-proclaimed male power, was also reflected at that time. So women played an important role in the trend of punk rock because their own characteristics were very consistent with the punk spirit. From this point of view, although this song only repeats the story of the opera, here's still a voice against power by embedding past thinking in today's context, as well as closing the gap between composer and audience.

Through the video of this song, we can more clearly perceive McLaren's intention to present history in today's context. In the video, the lonely image of Chocho, a weak Oriental woman, is replaced by a group of emotionless, white naked women in the bathroom. Both of them show the state under the examination of male power. McLaren found the common ground between the rock music state and Chocho's state with insight, and tried to arouse people's reflection by reintroducing the situation of traditional women under patriarchy into his song. In McLaren's memoir, he mentioned that the style he focused on is about ruins, objects of commemorative value, old-fashioned articles for daily use. So in his opinion, the postmodern culture is a karaoke culture, with false promises of instant success, and that messiness and failure are the key to true learning. Under such a concept, the high-low relationship between values, the boundary between history and present, can be broken. The self-examination in the past can also be completely appropriated to exam the present. And in the process of diverting existing works that can show these values, as Kramer mentioned, breaks the boundary between styles and dispels the sublimity.

2.3. Fusion Style in Queen's *Bohemian Rhapsody*

Likewise a rock song that embodies eclecticism, instead of direct collage selected by McLaren, the music components of different styles are combined in a more integrated way to achieve the purpose of narration in Queen's *Bohemian Rhapsody*. The song was created in 1975. Freddie Mercury's original creative idea was to create a large-scale album with classical opera style. In the final version of the song, he added a cantata harmony, a soothing ballad, a sonorous heavy metal and a transitional opera style aria. In the post production of the song, 180 tracks were used to achieve the desired effect.

As a result, a variety of styles in this song show a unique multi-dimensional effect on modern pop music.

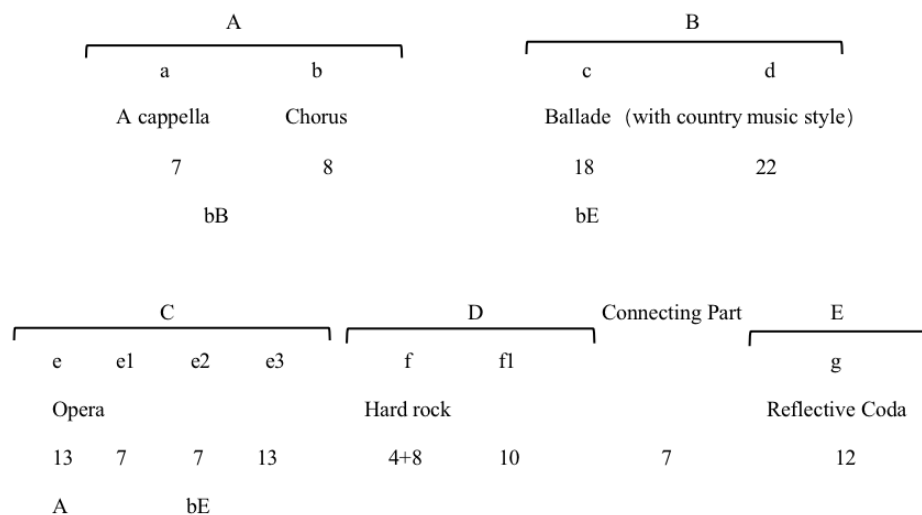


Figure 1: Musical Structure of Queen, *Bohemian Rhapsody*, with style of each period.

As the Musical Structure demonstrated, the song can be separated into five different sections: an a-cappella introduction (introduce instrumental part in the second half), a country music style ballade, an opera period, hard rock and finally a reflective coda. Different music styles and lyrics merge into a cohesive whole, which shows a mind-blowing genre bender and gives the musical work an epic experience. *Bohemian Rhapsody* advanced a tradition of suits in pop music, which means that it is not continuous by alternate verse and chorus. In the continuous style alternation, the behavior and movement of the protagonist of the lyrics becomes ambiguous. It is precisely because of eclecticism that this song is so unique in the field of rock music and even pop music in the past 40 years. *Bohemian Rhapsody* also shows that eclecticism, or parody of old elements, does not mean simply playing with history, but expanding the possibilities of rock music in a more inclusive way.

3. Rock Music in Postmodern Culture

In fact, whether as an art type or a popular commodity, rock music demonstrates its connection with postmodern culture more directly than academic music. Therefore, many ideas and perspectives on the study of academic music are also shown in rock music works. Eclecticism showed different ideas and orientations in the reactions of rock musicians and their listeners. From these different thoughts, how to continue a new path opened up by eclecticism in the inherent culture of rock music needs to be considered.

3.1. How to Realize Eclecticism

When rock music facing the question “what is rock music?”, the answer is still vague. This is precisely because rock music in the process of production and development continues to absorb various musical elements and keep producing new forms and content. As it develops, the classic rock era gradually dispelled by different styles invaded. A rock discourse came into being in the late 1960s, in association with a changing musical audience (more educated and middle-class). Also, emergent interests in

counter-cultural community, radical politics and a more theorized aesthetic. According to which cultural privilege would no longer be characterized by an exclusive taste for highbrow culture, but rather by “the appreciation of all distinctive leisure activities and creative forms along with the appreciation of classic fine arts”[3], rock musicians started to integrated elements of classical music into their works. The heavy and progressive styles of that period, linked to these ideological and social interests, generated a rock lineage, which can be followed through such performers as Led Zeppelin, Rod Stewart, Phil Collins, Peter Gabriel, Neil Young, Bruce Springsteen, Nirvana and the many heavy metal bands. From the 1970s, though, rock was only part of the pop music field and was distinguished tententially from pop in programme and audience.

Furthermore, from the 1970s on, the pop-rock distinction came under attack from several directions[4]. Punk's commonly parodic use of rock conventions implied that rock, no less than pop, was knowingly constructed and, moreover, was frequently the vehicle of commercial calculation and manipulation. Feminists criticized the masculinist assumptions of rock self-expression. Under the multi-directional guidance, rock music increasingly reflects the tendency of eclecticism. In the academia of rock music, the term "authenticity" often appears, which reveals the aesthetic characteristics of rock music different from pop music. However, the integration of eclecticism makes the authenticity more obscure for the audience to find. From McLaren's *Madame Butterfly* and *Queen's Bohemian Rhapsody*, it can be seen that how to realize eclecticism is a free choice for rock musicians, McLaren chose a more direct method to make the music that was originally in a different direction collide with a new musical effect, while Queen chose a more complex method in *Bohemian Rhapsody* to make the music more integrated in the narrative line. The two eclectic entry methods have made rock music produce new sound and sound effects, thus shaking the consistent narration of rock music and avoiding the solidification of value orientation.

3.2. Different Reflections of Eclecticism

Many scholars believe that the challenge that postmodernism brings to music is not happy and beauty, but a dangerous and confused attitude. Ironically, like Brendan Taylor, he believed that art critics only focus on new works while the isolation of music is taken for granted. Not only do musicians and critics rarely consider post-modernism and do not include music in their descriptions of post-modernism[1]. Music theory, music analysis and musicology make musicians less able than ever to correctly analyze postmodern eclecticism. For rock music, a music category that once outside academic research, the relevant research is more biased and has a critical and hesitant attitude towards the emergence of eclecticism.

More and more British and American people display the tendency of post-modernism to imitate, parody and quote. Nevertheless, like the reactionary modernists, the aesthetic implications of their music are often misunderstood. The reference technique is often a rejection of tradition and insistence on innovation: respected composers such as Robin Holloway speak of their associative works as an escape from stylistic constraints, the subversive origins of these boundaries, and the ethical implications of realism. However, for rock musicians, such as McLaren who has shown the eclecticism tendency in *Madame Butterfly*, the significance still stays at playing on the value of classical music without the attention of researchers, which is not enough for rock music. On the other hand, rock music, which accounts for a large proportion of today's music, achieves its purpose of challenging the past through eclecticism.

For Peter Anthony Munch, the difficulty of dealing with the transition of postmodern music is also a major problem. He turned to postmodern style in the late 1990s with a work named *I Met on Forgotten Street*, and his music firmly adheres to postmodern principles in the use of references.

Postmodernist scholars have yet to find parallels with the multilayered reflection of popular music in western classical music. Rock music is generally more closely associated with postmodernism than

classical music, making it more likely than classical music to benefit from the most radical schools of thought.

Although Kramer's literary works have become an important reference in the field of postmodern music research, the postmodern eclecticism frequently discussed in his articles has not attracted much attention. In the limited study of eclecticism in postmodern music, almost all the discussion has been about the evolution of styles since the development of traditional music, turning a blind eye to another important contemporary musical trend, including rock and pop.

Some researchers have analyzed rock music from the perspective of eclecticism that it is opposed to musicality, which is considered as part of the characteristics of classical music. Like Adorno, the scholar of Frankfurt school, believed that the most basic feature of popular music is standardization, which, going against the in-depth thought of culture, has lost the originality of artistic music. On the other hand, some researchers believe that rock music is a form of music that decomposes the rigid hierarchy. According to sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, the basic characteristics of modern life are fluid and light, which is exactly the opposite of classical music's long, solid form of expression.

4. Conclusion

As a common and noticeable phenomenon in postmodern culture, eclecticism points a new way for the development of rock music after the 1970s. As an important representation of postmodern culture, eclecticism can enter rock music in various of ways, and the diversification presented by eclecticism reflects the attitude of breaking the old and solidifying music aesthetics. The more energetic and muscular reflection aroused by rock and roll exposes the fundamental passive type of the traditional aesthetic attitude of disinterested and distant meditation - a meditative attitude, which stems from the pursuit of philosophy and theology but not pleasure, only for personal enlightenment, not for the purpose of public interaction or social change.

Through the analysis of music and the review of that period of history, it can be seen that eclecticism makes rock music absorb the music style that is diametrically opposed to its own temperament, so as to dispel the solidified elite value represented by classical music. At the same time, it also broke some norms formed by rock music itself since its emergence. Through the changes in the way of sound production, musical form and the integration of a variety of different sounds, rock music first successfully broke through its own musical expression, and rebelled against the rock music spirit tradition under the initial patriarchy-dominated cultural model. Through the exploration of eclecticism style in rock music, a clear aesthetic turn can be told: In a multi-cultural environment, rock music became more willing to absorb a variety of style elements. The way of looking at this cultural product can also be diverse, as some researchers believed that under the capitalist mass production system, culture had lost its dignity and became another thing, "cultural industry", which caused the spread unchecked and vulgarization of popular culture. But on the other hand, through the fusion of various elements, eclecticism makes rock music think again about historical issues and express them in its own language, also, shows the attitude that refuses to accept the distinction between elitist and populist values.

As a development path that cannot be ignored, eclecticism in rock music shows not only an open attitude of challenge, but also contains thoughts in a specific historical context. Historical eclecticism cannot be regarded as nostalgia for the past, which is an important feature of postmodernism. Intelligent eclecticism can encompass the deconstruction of the empirical and the abandonment of the objective fallacy, but must remain open to using far more elaborate means of processing of historical data, not least to avoid these being subverted by an apparently enhanced capacity for objectivity. Eclecticism endows rock music with distinctive characteristics of multiculturalism by dissolving the boundaries of history and style. For a specific creator, excessive attachment to a theme will limit the diversity of his own expression. Talking too much around a specific topic will inevitably

make a musical work become a cliché, form the solidification of the theme, and lose its original vitality. Therefore, how to accommodate different voices, integrate different styles, and ensure that the characteristics of the style itself do not disappear is a problem that requires rock music to continue to think on the road of eclecticism.

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