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Review

Is Marcus Schmickler's *Palace of Marvels (Queered Pitch)* a Radical Political Album?

by *Robin Buckley*

Palace of Marvels [Queered Pitch] (2010) [1] (which will be referenced in this essay as PM[QP]) by Marcus Schmickler is in many ways a political album [2]. German artist Marcus Schmickler released the album in 2010 on the Austrian label Editions Mego. Boomkat, a niche online retailer of physical and digital music, described the record as 'Marcus Schmickler's quest to explore the outer reaches of extreme computer music' [3]. Similarly, from an academic context, Haworth describes Schmickler's recent work in the current trend of 'extreme computer music', alongside artists such as Hecker and Roc Jiménez de Cisneros [(one half of EVOL)] [4]. A performance of the album at Unsound Festival in 2015 was described as:

Markus Schmickler...took a mischievous, brute-force approach to EDM's shock-and-awe tactics, rerouting rave's adrenalized energy through a maddening succession of Shepard tones accompanied by sweeping strobes. It went on like that for 45 elastic minutes

more—all tension, no release, as exhilarating as it was exhausting.' [5]

This essay will investigate the different ways in which the album can be described as political, radical or extreme. It will look at how the aesthetics of academic and non-academic music are embedded in the album and how these canons are challenged. It will also reflect upon its conceptual themes of politics and nature, and how they are used to further political ideas. The music will also be examined through its use of 'queer time' through its compositional structure, in the context of a larger queer ideology. It will also consider its shortcomings and how these might have been overcome, and consider alternative methods to creating political music within this genre. Is Schmickler's PM[QP] a radical, political work?

As outlined in his lecture *Marcus Schmickler Ueber Elektronische Musik / Marcus Schmickler On Electronic Music* [6], Schmickler takes a stance for his new electronic music as one which seeks to engage with both low and high music culture. In doing so, he poses a new canon made up of:

'...Ligeti, Kagel, Lachenmann, Beuys, Cage, Dieter Roth, as well as Black Metal, Aphex Twin, Venetian Snares and The Beach Boys or David Bowie, as well as electroacoustic music artists Pierre Henry or Parmegiani, noise artists

noise artists like Merzbow or the often cited Iannis Xenakis’.

This new canon is also referred to in the festival *Between Two Deaths*, for which Schmickler curated the music programme in 2007: ‘However, we cannot forget those who came before, Cage, Varèse, Xenakis or Throbbing Gristle’ [7]. Haworth draws similar aesthetic comparisons between high and low music in Hecker’s work, whom he places alongside Schmickler as part of the extreme computer music canon, and whom Schmickler invited to perform at *Between Two Deaths*. Furthermore, Hecker’s work *Acid in the Style of David Tudor* (2009) [8] and Schmickler’s *PM[QP]* were both created using a set of tools designed for them by De Campo [9]. Haworth describes *Acid in the Style of David Tudor* as ‘David Tudor’s neural network research ‘becoming’ acid techno in the journey from the ivory towers to the bedroom studio’ and in doing so ‘Acid voices the very real connections between the ostensibly disparate domains of ‘institutional’ and ‘amateur’ electronic music’. In this way both Schmickler and Hecker are successful in disrupting the separations that are often placed between high and low or academic and non-academic music. However, even very simply through Schmickler’s new canon, as well as the two styles cited by Hecker, it is made up exclusively of European and American male artists.

They both seem to ignore the possibility of a radical canon, one which seeks to decolonize and deconstruct the white-supremacist-capitalist-patriarchy [10]. Instead, they merely replace the academic canon that they work against with more white, Western men, albeit ones that are not creating work directly within the parameters of academic music or high culture.

Outside of these aesthetic sensibilities, *PM[QP]* takes a look at the socio-economic implications of music [] and of nature itself. Referring to *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (1977), Schmickler looks towards the ‘The Palace of Marvels’, a concept created by Leibniz that is the ‘idealization of a perfect political organisation, which is built in such a way that the master of the house is able to hear and see everything that is being said and done in the premises without himself being perceived by his subjects’ (Editions Mego, 2010). Despite having this conceptual framework, there are no comments or actions, negative or positive, about a politics that function in this way. Listening to the album, Schmickler seems to have merely built his music around this theory, and created a musical description of these politics, without making any kind of political statement about it. Similarly, for the other conceptual framework of *PM[QP]*, that of nature, he takes the same approach. Schmickler says in an interview that ‘...it is

also a completely different and simplistic approach to a self-similar structure, that is also to be found in nature and that for itself is an interesting subject to be translated into sound’ [12]. This is referring to the Shepard tone, which is how the musical pitches of the record are ‘Queered’. Again, political discussion on the epistemology of this nature or of the Shepard tone are ignored in favour of experimenting with the sound itself. This leads to comparisons to a very modernist approach to working with electronic music, one ideologically related to that of Elmer in the late 50s, searching for ‘a real musical control of Nature’ [13]. Schmickler draws upon the natural sciences, not in a political way, but because the field itself is ‘an interesting subject’ (Schmickler, 2010). Drawing on different concepts, but only describing or reenacting them - rather than interrogating them or questioning the politics embedded in these topics - leads the album to a lack of political radicality, at least in relation to these subjects.

Another political function of *PM[QP]* would be its relationship to queer theories of time and ideology. In addition to the pitch being queered through the use of the Shepard tone, the album is made up of works that move away from the normative linear time of dance culture, by creating music made up of ‘queer time’ [14]. As outlined by Iadarola, electronic dance music normally uses a ‘narrative [that] is established by linear enticement

and suspense’ and ‘typically appear without tons of variation’ [15]. The end result is a process ‘where the ebbs and flows of stimulation in a huge crowd are homogenized to follow just one timeline—as prescribed by the DJ—in hypnotised ecstasy’ (Iadarola, 2016). Referring to *EVOL*’s work, Iadarola’s descriptions can also be used to describe the queer time that is also embedded within *Palace of Marvels* [*Queered Pitch*]:

EVOL tracks, though they use dance music as the host to their contagion, never have that host’s dramatic build-up; their sounds only come in floods. Their work delivers pleasure in a form you simply didn’t ask for—too much at once, too much for your own good (Iadarola, 2016).

Sherburne describes this effect in a performance of the work as ‘all tension, no release’ (Sherburne, 2015). An example of this from *PM[QP]* would be the eleventh track *Mass Ornament*. It fits both descriptions, as it is made up of an arpeggiated Shepard tones, punctuated by stabs of tones using non-Western harmonic scales; at around one minute in the piece increases the arpeggiator speed while the stabs continue to chaotically position themselves around the stereo field. The end, similarly again to *Acid in the Style of David Tudor*, ‘is more humorous, at most a nod to the excessive, punishing tendencies of some Japanese

noise music... [rather than the]... softer, more subtle mimetic quality' (Haworth, 2013: p. 9) found in electroacoustic music. Therefore, this piece, and the album as a whole, aligns itself with the intent of seeking to escape the ideologies of 'bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance' [] through working against the aesthetics traditionally found in the normative time structures of electronic dance music. By doing so, it becomes '...a blackhole which contrasts against the light of this subject' (Schmickler, 2011; translated by author). This leads to the album sitting alongside a greater queer negative ideology, one fighting against any kind of future as represented by the child and society. This stance is described in *No Future* (2004) by Edelman: 'the queer must insist on disturbing, on queering, social organization as such -on disturbing, therefore, and on queering ourselves and our investment in such organization. For queerness can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one' (Edelman, 2004: p.17). This ideology can also be seen in Schmickler's program notes for *Between Two Deaths*:

'The manifestations of the radically subjective positions presented in this festival, however, are a statement against the predominant, moral, and material mainstream. In these pieces a multi-layered critique against *Gebrauchsmusik* (useful music) through the immediacy

of desire is perceptible as time. The music presented here displays ... (political) failure, and (symbolic) death' (Schmickler, 2007).

Specifically these statements against the moral mainstream, through a (political) failure and (symbolic) death, sound very similar to Edelman's queer politics 'that takes both the value and the burden of that failure itself' [] and seeks 'the place of the social order's death drive' (Edelman, 2004: p.3). By working with the aesthetic functions of queer time and by positioning itself alongside a queer negative ideology, PM[QP] fits well into a larger radical queer narrative.

Whether, radical, working with politics or nihilistic, what are the alternatives for a version of PM[QP] that could be truly radical, political and extreme? One of the serious problems with the radicalness of the album is that, despite comparisons to a queer negativity, this 'negativity might well constitute an anti-politics but it should not register as apolitical' (Halberstam, 2008: p.148). This is where the album falters, for despite hints of specific kinds of politics – such as an alternative canon or queer time - it never really distances itself enough from an apolitical message, reproducing white, masculine and capitalist models. Mattin critiques such an approach and insists that:

being aware that culture, creativity

communication are becoming the tools of the "factory without walls," we need to be suspicious of ways in which cultural practices can be exploited by capital. Because of this we must constantly question our motives, our modus operandi and its relation to the conditions that we are embedded in, to avoid recuperation by a system that is going to produce ideological walls for us [18]

This is what the album needed more of: despite engaging with certain ideas and politics, it doesn't seek to profoundly disrupt or even be aware of these many different ideologies, and thereby ends up reproducing them. In their critique of *No Future* (2004), Halberstam points to other alternative models that seek to escape an apolitical nihilism with a truly queer canon, and leave behind a white supremacist, patriarchal and capitalist one: 'The anti-social archive must also be an archive of alternatives, however, and it must mix high and low, known and unknown, popular and obscure; and this archive where the promise of self-shattering, loss of mastery and meaning, unregulated speech and desire are unloosed' (Halberstam, 2008, p.153). This must be created alongside 'a queer agenda that works cooperatively with the many other heads of the monstrous entity that opposes global capitalism... but a queer politics which is also not tied to a nihilism which always lines up against women, domesticity and reproduction' (Halberstam, 2008, p.154). What PM[QP]

would require in order to qualify as a radical political work is a more thorough investigation of the way it reproduces white supremacist, patriarchal and capitalist models, and a realignment with an anti-social canon of the kind described by Halberstam, that would truly disrupt these power structures.

PM[QP] does succeed in disrupting the academic canon, by drawing upon a varied group of musicians and artists outside and within the academy. This is a political action, but falls short of radicalness due to its reproduction of hegemony. The album draws upon the politics of surveillance and nature but fails to address or discuss any political contexts for these concepts. It succeeds in queering time and producing alternative compositional structures working against the normative ones within electronic dance music. It also succeeds in aligning itself against these same social contexts, with a queer negative ideology. However, the radicalness of such a negativity is disputed. PM[QP] by Marcus Schmickler is therefore not a radical political work, nor does it take an extreme political stance. However, there are politics and political ways of thinking embedded in the music, which if engaged with further, more deeply - and most importantly, with more self-awareness - do have the potential for creating a radical, political album.

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