

Happy Hardcore and How to Deal With Chaos

Bearing in mind either of the World Wars, it is clear that chaos is a part of our world, and that it is not in recession. There is much suffering which is inevitable for all people, and additional suffering which is gratuitously applied to those exceptionally unfortunate. This state of affairs demands a response, either to accept the chaos of a seemingly meaningless world, or to find some meaning that can coexist with the terrible condition so many of us endure. Freud noted this human condition, and diagrams what suffering everyone faces on a personal level,

We are threatened with suffering from three directions: from our own body, which is doomed to decay and dissolution and which cannot even do without pain and anxiety as warning signals; from the external world, which may rage against us with overwhelming and merciless forces of destruction; and finally from our relations to other men. (26)

The decay is a metaphor for the entirety of existence, and is the basis of life— a brief flourishing at the peak of living, and then an inescapably painful decline (which seems at times arbitrary and random) into non-existence. And yet, we all continue to live. Life is like a sand castle built below the tide line – it will be effaced from all memory, and yet it still gets built. Inevitability must be yielded to chaos, for I must bow to the observable evidence, but I should take care not to ignore the beauty of the sandcastle. This conflicted state of being reminds me of a story about the gods:

It was said in the old days that every year Thor made a circle around Middle-earth, beating back the enemies of order. Thor got older every year, and the circle occupied by gods and men grew smaller. The wisdom god, Woden, went out to the king of the trolls, got him in an armlock, and demanded to know of him how order might triumph over chaos.

"Give me your left eye," said the king of trolls, "and I'll tell you."

Without hesitation, Woden gave up his left eye. "Now tell me."

The troll said, "The secret is, *Watch with both eyes!*" (Gardner 3)

Woden's two eyes were the last hope of gods and men, and with his loss chaos was assured victory in the distant future.

Woden's is an old story.

How do we deal with this world, where the sandcastle of life is continually washed away? Jonathan Glover, in *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century*, notes that leading into “the start of the century, there was optimism, coming from the Enlightenment, that the spread of a humane and scientific outlook would lead to a fading away, not only of war, but also of other forms of cruelty and barbarism” (6). In the beginning of the twentieth century, it had been over a hundred years since Napoleon's defeat, over a hundred years since the last war. There was great optimism for humanity and the advances of order, but as Glover enumerates, that glowing optimism was irrevocably dashed by “... Hitler ... Stalin ... Pol Pot ... Saddam Hussein,” and “now we tend to see the Enlightenment view of human psychology as thin and mechanical, ... naïve” (6-7). The optimistic view that all is well and that everything serves a greater order is impossible to hold in good faith in light of history and contemporary events.

But the bursting of the Enlightenment era's naïve optimism does not preclude any optimism from existing. Glover opens his book by saying its aim,

is to replace the thin, mechanical psychology of the Enlightenment with something more complex, something closer to reality. A consequence of this is to produce a darker account,(7)

but one which is nevertheless optimistic and hopeful! An optimism founded in reality, not fantasy.

So what is this darker but still-hopeful account? Throughout the centuries, philosophy has offered many possibilities, and just as moral discussion has developed in the wake of each new era of mankind, so too has music. However, the philosophy of our times has not fixed upon an exact answer, but I think one can be found in our music.

Classical music (and indeed, most any music) follows a form of establishing a simple melodic pattern and then developing it, increasing its complexity and depth until a climax is reached. Classical music is a genre which embraces this form and elevates it to its highest levels. Mozart's songs serve as clear examples. His Symphony No. 40 in particular demonstrates this method of building upon a theme and layering it with gradually increased complexity, and I won't bore the reader with any further explanation of this concept.¹

Mozart and other classical composers employ melodies, develop increasing harmonies, and add layer upon layer of delicately woven webworks of sound, achieving, in Mozart's case, musical perfection. Not a single note is out of place, and not one tone could be shifted without ruining the tapestry. Everything is in harmony with everything else, and serves only to build to greater beauty. It is no accident that Mozart's philosophical contemporaries are the optimistic Enlightenment thinkers. Mozart's music allows no room for a victory of chaos on any scale, just as Enlightenment thinking views mankind as advancing brilliantly along the path of moral perfection, with everything serving a greater good.

Another style of music is found in the modernist genre. Modernist composers approach the nature of music from another angle altogether. In the twentieth century we have seen musicians such as Arnold Schoenberg develop renegade forms of music based on atonality, a deliberate and distinct separation from carefully structured harmonies. I find atonal music such as Schoenberg's to be nothing more than noise, and not rightfully music at all.² Mozart is the

¹ I will, however, urge the reader to find a performance of Mozart's variations on *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star* for a truly brilliant exemplification of how a simple theme can be built and developed.

² "Atonality describes music that does not conform to the system of tonal hierarchies, which characterizes the sound of classical European music between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Not only does it not conform to the common practice of this particular period, but it is noticeably divorced from the acoustical underpinnings of music going back as far as the scale systems of ancient Greece. This separation of traditional meaning to be found in melodic motifs throughout history, have left purely atonal music generally bereft of common emotional and spiritual meaning." (Wikipedia)

trumpet of order, and Schoenberg is the mouth of chaos. Again, it is not by mere chance that Schoenberg's philosophical contemporaries are Freud and the pessimistic modernist thinkers who reacted to the objective realities of modern atrocity with a rejection of Enlightenment ideals.

I find Mozart's music to be very beautiful and life-affirming, but it falls short as a serious answer to the question of what to do with life. Much like Enlightenment era optimism, it is very nice and pleasing, but ultimately must be seen as "thin and mechanical, ... naïve," because of its inability to either account for or accurately grasp the darkness of the human condition.

Perfection and absolute order are beautiful things, but simply don't line up with reality. The lesson of the twentieth century is that true suffering exists, and ignoring it will not make it go away. To show no shadows is to admit no depth.

Modernist music fails in the same manner, though for the opposite reason. The abnegation of order, and the accurate representation of chaos are compelling and remarkable feats. They should be respected for the daring ability to go into the darkest corners of music and there visit death. And yet, it too is "thin and mechanical ... naïve," because of its inability to either account for or accurately grasp the lightness of the human condition. Chaos is not all there is – we do have moments of beauty, and periods of grace. No matter how many atrocities weigh down upon the collective conscience of mankind, there will always be those unlooked for kindnesses, those heroes and saints, our Mozarts and Martin Luther King Juniors. To show only the shadow is to miss the substance.

The monolithic natures of both classical music and modernist music are their faults, faults shared by their philosophical counterparts. The answers they offer are too shallow. Naturally, it

I find the description of atonal music as being bereft of emotional and spiritual meaning to be particularly compelling, for it strengthens the parallel between atonal music and atheistic thinkers of the time such as Freud, whose writings can likewise be described as bereft of spiritual meaning.

is a musical style descended from the first two that breaks free from their simplistic views and incorporates both life and death in its structure. The philosophy is still catching up, and has not fully coagulated around the new answer, and so I must continue with my musical analyses. This best, most hopeful answer is illustrated by a sub-genre of music which belongs to a larger family known as electronic music or techno.

I am referring to happy hardcore, a genre which juxtaposes chaotic noises with abrupt harmonies, and is quite manic in tone. It takes the classical style of the harmonious and life-affirming melody, and complicates it with the modernist style of atonal chaos. The way happy hardcore deals with these two elements represents a response to the human condition which surpasses that of both classical music and modernist music, as it accounts for the objective reality of our flawed existence of suffering and grace (not just one or the other!). Whether this is an intentional declaration made by happy hardcore's composers and mixers is irrelevant to my analysis – it is enough that it is.

The juxtaposition of chaos with order most accurately reflects the human condition. Freud remarks that, “happiness ... is from its nature only possible as an episodic phenomenon” (25). With a little thought, this statement can be verified – eternally sustained happiness does not exist; life is a rollercoaster of highs and lows.

A concrete example can be seen in the film *Changing Lanes*. Ben Affleck's character starts the day by receiving a 20 foot pleasure boat as a gift from his boss, who is also his father-in-law. A relatively short while later, Affleck is in a car wreck where he loses a file folder, which he later realizes will land himself and his father-in-law in jail for fraud if he fails to recover it by the end of the day. The stakes are exaggerated, but that basic kind of structure (a

happy good morning followed by an unrelated car-wreck of an afternoon) is common for the average person.

Happy hardcore reflects this state by opening with a piece of music classically crafted (*i.e.* it is tonally pleasing and has true melodies), but there is an ominous foreshadowing as the tune is sporadically marred by digital scratching. This is the introduction of both the simple melody and the chaos.

Following the slightly distorted introduction, the melody is allowed to play without any disruption, a moment of grace, developing and rising to a crescendo where it is abruptly cut off by digital interference, more severe than before. This is an unpredictable chaos of sound, an electronic jaggling of order.

But this sudden violence done to melody has its purpose, and through the genius of the mixer, the sonic disarray grows and develops like a thundercloud, periodically lined by flashes of light, by bolts of white melody lancing the nimbostratus, reminding the listener that order persists even in the chaos. The crescendo builds, the battle of order and entropy is played out before the listener's ears, and (as always in happy hardcore), it resolves with the clarion call of melody cutting aside the clouds, stripping back the darkness and baring the melody unfettered by base interference. It then returns to a state of mild disruption, with distortion and melody being given equal footing, continuing their combat, until the song's end.

This is the basic musical cycle of happy hardcore. It is a battle of chaos against order, entropy against design, played out in an endless cycle a dozen times an hour.³ This, I feel, corresponds more directly with the human condition than either the flawless beauty of Mozart or the reckless chaos of Schoenberg.

³ See "I Feel On Fire" in the attachment.

Thus, the classical era has its music of pure order and melody. The modern era has its brief upsurge of pure chaos, unfettered by order. And that gives way to our post-modern era, where the traditional order of melody does battle with the brute force of chaos, a battle which will one day end, but not, I'm afraid, in the hopeful way classical music would have.

This brings me to my secondary attraction to happy hardcore: its manic optimism, tempered by a tragic reality. I have shown that happy hardcore has an optimistic sonic structure, but it also has optimistic lyrics. For example,

I'll be happy till the day I die
I smile each day and I don't ever cry
Feeling sad is such a waste of time
So just be happy

are naive and unrealistic lyrics, and yet they are sung with utmost conviction, and the music which accompanies the words testifies to their sincerity. The message is one of happiness till the day of death, of smiling forever and *never* crying. Being sad is a waste of time, so be happy.

The words are so overblown, the singer so sincere, that this must be a classic example of protesting too much. Their meaning is not merely the face value of the words. The very sincerity, the strength of the desire for the lyrics to be true, is testament to their ultimate falsehood. These are not the words of someone who is always happy and never cries – these are the words of someone who just spent a lonely night with a broken heart sobbing in the dark, but who has decided to go on building those sandcastles.

The excessive nature of the declarations of happiness implicitly points to the opposite conclusion about life. This, coupled with the ever-present chaos and ultimate inability of the melody to fully triumph, leads to an underlying acknowledgment of the darkness of reality, giving happy hardcore a depth which makes it great.

Experience and life itself shows that the battle of entropy against order can only end one way – in chaos. Temporary gains may be made, brief moments of melody and meaning, but they are always buried beneath the decay of forgotten memories and repeated tragedies. This never varies.

Happy hardcore, however, has risen to the challenge of exemplifying a part of what makes humanity worthwhile. It has not turned a blind eye to the reality of suffering, as classical music does, nor has it given in to despair, as modernist music has. Instead it is offering an upfront acknowledgment of the bleakness and futility of the human condition, while yet retaining a persistent desire to bring what grace it can to the world, in what moments it can find. To give up is to become chaos – to persist in your melody is to make your own meaning.

This is, perhaps, the final answer. One day, chaos will overtake us all, but that does not mean life must be riven of meaning. That does not mean the melody is false, it does not render the beauty imperfect, and it does not transform the power and the glory into worthless illusions.

It simply brings tragedy to the table.

The philosophy of today is still catching up to happy hardcore, and Glover is paving the way for a new moral outlook on humanity. Glover uses the works of one philosopher, Nietzsche, whose conclusions can be set with the modernist composers, but whose observations may fit more with happy hardcore and ultimate hope. Glover tells us that Nietzsche,

saw that the idea of a moral law external to us is in deep trouble. He wrote of the death of God, and took for granted that religious belief was no longer a serious intellectual option. (11)

In the classical era, and before then, morality was dictated by an outside source – religion. The vast majority of people accepted and obeyed these precepts as well as they could. If someone asked “why is the king King?” the answer “Because God ordained it,” was enough. If anyone

wondered why you should not kill, the answer “Because God forbids it,” was enough. But through Nietzsche’s time, and blossoming into the twentieth century, those answers stopped being sufficient. With the atrocities of the twentieth century, as well as with the globalization of information and travel, religion ceased to be a ubiquitous moral glue which held society together. Increasingly large numbers of people did not accept God’s will *ipso facto*.

Glover notes that Nietzsche was not merely anti-religious, and that with Nietzsche, “the death of God can be interpreted in a wider sense, to include the death of scientific or metaphysical ‘religions’ as well” (13). This is because Nietzsche “believed the world has no intrinsic meaning” (13). He saw the chaos and its inevitable victory, and knew that no external order existed which could ever again hold mankind as Enlightenment thinking had held mankind. These are Nietzsche’s observations, and his conclusions for the future, in Glover’s words, are as follows:

Struggle, egoism, dominance, slavery, the majority having no right to existence, peoples that are failures, hardness, the festival of cruelty, the replacement of compassion for the weak by their destruction. If such a world is really the result of Nietzsche’s thought, it seems a nightmare. (17)

That nightmare world is Schoenberg’s atonal music, bereft of emotion or spirit. But just as Schoenberg’s music is not the necessary response to classical composition, nor is Nietzsche’s conclusion the necessary response to Enlightenment thinking. Glover remarks that, “these chilling Nietzschean conclusions do not follow from his premises about ... the absence of an external moral law. ... Some of us do not want to be all dominance and assertion” (17). Lacking an external law, some of may choose an internal law.

Glover puts it simply,

The austere universe left when religious metaphysics is stripped away still allows us to lead rich and satisfying lives. This satisfaction is often linked to the Nietzschean idea of creating ourselves according to our own values. (17)

There is however an “image of a constant struggle at all levels of existence” (13), which is reflected in happy hardcore, but missing from classical and modernist music. It is no longer possible to rely upon God to bring harmony to the world. Thor’s hammer is fallen, and he no longer beats back chaos for us. Too few believe, and too many facts have destroyed the illusion of a perfect webwork of music. If there is to be order and harmony in the world it must come from each individual, on an *ad hoc* basis, and each inch gained in the battle against chaos will be a personal struggle.

We live not in a time of divine order and meaning where everything is for the best, but neither do we live in a world where every action is arbitrary and all meaning hollow. Glover observes that, “we can either live with meaninglessness or we can try to create our own meaning and impose it on the world” (13). Order and melody can be loved and perpetuated for their own sake, independent of an external authority. Creating internal authority is a difficult task, and one with its own set of problems, but nevertheless it is the best, most hopeful answer to the question.

Bibliography

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CD Attachment -- Musical Selections

I've included a CD with some musical selections (all songs which I reference in the paper) to help illustrate my points.

Mozart's *Symphony No. 40*, and *Variations on Twinkle Twinkle Little Star* are included to provide examples of the classical melodic structure referenced on page 3. In these songs, every note is in its place and everything contributes to a greater harmony.

Shoenburg's *Mondestruken* is an atonal work. I can't really say much more than that about it. At best it is inoffensive background noise, but it's more like mildly annoying sounds.

Sy and Unknown's *I Feel on Fire* remixed by Stu Allan is included as an example of the basic structure of happy hardcore, referenced on page 6. Following is a quote from the above essay diagrammed to the song:

From 0:00 to 1:08: Happy hardcore opens with a piece of music classically crafted (*i.e.* it is tonally pleasing and has true melodies), but it is marred by digital scratching. The singer and the instruments are stuttered and distorted by deliberate electronic intervention. This is the introduction of the simple melody, already set in a struggle against chaos.

Starting at 1:09 and running to 2:02: Following the distorted introduction, the melody is allowed to play without any disruption, developing and rising to a crescendo.

Starting at 2:03 and running to 3:23: At the crescendo it is abruptly cut off by digital interference, more severe than before. This is a chaos of sound, an electronic jaggling of order, a stark contrast to anything sonically beautiful.

But this sudden violence done to melody has its purpose, and through the genius of the mixer, the sonic disarray grows and develops like a thundercloud, periodically lined by flashes of light, by bolts of pure white melody lancing the nimbostratus with electric energy, and reminding the listener that order persists even in the chaos. The crescendo builds, the battle of order and entropy is played out before the listener's ears, and (as always in happy hardcore), it ends with the clarion call of melody and beauty cutting aside the clouds, stripping back the darkness and baring the beauty and the glory of the introduced melody unfettered by base interference. ***This first occurs at 3:24. Rewind a few seconds and hear the contrast between 3:20-3:24 and 3:24-3:30. This pattern is repeated once more in this track, with the music descending into chaos again at 3:55 and briefly returning to melody at 4:21, and then ending with a level of mild distortion identical to the opening from 4:46 to the end.***

This is the basic musical cycle of happy hardcore. It is a battle of chaos against order, entropy against design, played out in an endless cycle a dozen times an hour.