

GRAFFITI AND ENVIRONMENT OF THE FOLK GROUP:
UNIVERSITY MUSIC MAJORS

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In an article entitled "Social Analysis of Graffiti," the authors note that "graffiti are an accurate indicator of the social attitudes of a community and their thematic content will discriminate similar communities with different sociopolitical ideation."¹ This observation may be taken to refer to all types of graffiti, and yet the most noteworthy studies of graffiti that have appeared to date have focused primarily upon latrinalia.² These studies have aptly demonstrated that graffiti is a legitimate topic for the folklore scholar, but they seem to have been unnecessarily restricted to one environment. Graffiti do express themselves beyond the bounds of the bathroom, and it would be to the advantage of the folklorist to follow that graffitist into other environments.

As is evident in the study of latrinalia, the immediate environment may to a large extent govern the content of the graffiti; we have, for example, the well-known: "Here I sit all broken-hearted. Tried to shit and only farted!" The nature of the population that frequents an area also determines the graffiti to be found there. As one changes environments (e.g., bathroom to classroom) and populations (e.g., heterogeneous males in a public restroom to a particularized folk group--musicians in a university practice room), the content of the graffiti will change accordingly. Graffiti in a public place to which a large population has access will include many general topics of immediate public interest, while graffiti in an exclusive environment frequented by a particular folk group will feature particular topics of special interest.

Graffiti of the folk group may be found sometimes in a very public place, of course, and graffiti of general political, social, and sexual interest can be found in the exclusive environment of a particular folk group. I suggest that as we move from the public to the more private environment, the number of graffiti reflecting the worldview of the particular folk group in the private environment increases significantly in proportion to the number of those graffiti expressing general political, social, and sexual concerns.

As one instance of this, between November 1973 and November 1975 I collected graffiti written by music majors and non-major musicians in the basement practice rooms of Beall Music Hall at the University of Oregon. I discovered these graffiti while practicing the piano in one of these basement rooms and looking up during a rest to see the handwriting on the wall. As I read the graffiti (it was more fun than practicing scales), I noticed that a good number of them expressed feelings with which, as a musician, I particularly empathized. Many of the graffiti were of the political, social, and sexual types which may be found in any lavatory or public wall, but many of them were so obviously for, by, and about musicians that I began an attempt to define those characteristics which denoted them as productions of one particular, highly specialized folk group.

From these graffiti I hypothesize at least five characteristics that the members of this folk group need to share in order to express those particular experiences and attitudes relevant to them as musicians. Most of the music majors who use these rooms are white middle-class Americans studying the traditional curriculum of European-American "classical" music.

1. a shared vocabulary of technical terminology (for example, sonata, andante, chromaticism);
2. a shared semiotic system (in this case, musical notation, which can be used to form parts of speech or musical jokes);
3. a shared knowledge of the standard repertoire of European and American "classical" music;
4. a shared knowledge of "classical" musical jokes in various compositions, like the famous "Knock of Fate" in the opening bars of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony; and
5. shared feelings of frustration about experiences common to musicians: rehearsals; performances; lonely practice periods; the inability to reach that ultimate perfection of musical expression; confinement to small, dirty, airless, windowless basement rooms with poor acoustics, no soundproofing, and out-of-tune pianos.

The practice room environment, which I believe to be one of the strongest determining factors in the content of the graffiti, is not at all artistically stimulating. It has not even the morbid charm of a 19th-century garret on the Left Bank of Paris. The rooms are littered with cigarette butts, candy bar wrappers, and old reeds--and each is equipped with one ancient, battered, upright piano. The door to each practice room is of heavy wood with one small, high window. With the door shut, there is complete visual and psychological isolation, though there is always plenty of aural communication with every other practice room--a musician's nightmare. Some of the rooms (all with plaster walls) have no graffiti; some have walls almost completely covered with writing. The practice environment is totally depressing and artistically frustrating. These characteristics themselves may provide an impetus for the production of musically-oriented graffiti.

In ten rooms, I located 123 examples of graffiti, including dialogue chains. Twenty-nine of these referred to music and musicians, forty were sexual and scatological, seven were political, and forty-seven fell into various other categories. Musically-oriented graffiti accounted for about one-fourth of the total number of graffiti and included the longest of the dialogue chains.

The following examples illustrate some typical expressions of this particular folk group:

1. Am Fm G F C

Am 6 Fm Am C F G Am

This is a mnemonic device in musical shorthand for a common chord progression in the key of A minor.

2. I think I'm in love with my French horn

It's the only thing worth being in love with! (signature omitted)

Horns are as fickle as any woman or man. (another hand)

This graffito and comment express one of the most common feelings of any dedicated instrumentalist: a love/hate relationship with the instrument, which may be regarded either as an extension of the musician's ego (esthetically, of course, the instrument during performance does become an extension of the musician's physical self) or else as an entirely separate personality. During periods of personal loneliness, isolation, and depression (as this graffito indicates), it becomes easy and "natural" for a musician to form an imaginary relationship with his instrument for lack of meaningful human companionship and to project attitudes onto it and act out responses to it as one would to an intimate friend.

3. Hindemith sucks eggs

Only fertile ones (another hand)

As I interpret this graffito, "sucking eggs" is an expression of contempt, but "fertile" eggs would seem to imply praise by its associations with "natural," "organic," and life-stimulating as opposed to sterile. The music of the 20th-century composer, Hindemith, is notoriously difficult to play and is theoretically complicated. Most musicians, as this graffito would seem to indicate, either like or hate Hindemith's sound.

4. Charles Ives sucks

only if you take him seriously (another hand)

That's OK (another hand)

I just can't take him (another hand)

Ives, a contemporary American composer, is also difficult to perform. He often plays intentional games and jokes in passages of such intricacy that the performer (or listener) struggling through them might miss the joke.

5. Do you Offenbach!

No, mostly Mozart. (another hand)

This could be interpreted at least in two ways: "Do you often play Bach? No, mostly Mozart," as an instance of the long-standing ideological division between those musicians who believe Bach was the greatest composer of European art

music and those who believe Mozart was; and "Do you play Offenbach (a minor opera composer)? No, mostly Mozart (who wrote better operas)."

6. My horn gets me high!

Pot helps me along (another hand)

Clean the floor when you're done (another hand)

This graffito and two responses are a play on the musical/sexual double meaning of "horn."

7. Misery is spending half a quarter in Mus 507 & discovering you are
a STONED WINO DOPER.

or finding out the music history teacher is! (another hand)

(Misery loves company) (another hand)

This is the worst wall I've ever read! (another hand)

Expletive deleted

Fuck (Crossed out in original) you whoever pee's on the wall
(another hand)

I'd love to (another hand)

Misery is where the heart isn't (another hand)

Misery is Eugene Oregon Right! (another hand)

RIGHT!!! (another hand)

You're all wrong! (another hand)

Misery is an old oboe reed.

Right on! (another hand)

here, here! (another hand)

where, where? (another hand)

Rm. 16, dolt! (another hand)

P.S. The graffiti is better in 10. (another hand)

la misère, c'est comme une onion. (another hand)

It makes you cry.

Misery is a break in a brank new pair of Hungarian [sic] shoelaces.
(another hand)

Misery is reading dumb graffiti like that. (another hand)

Right! (another hand)

Do you think I give a shit what you think? (another hand)

All right, knock it off, you guys!! (another hand)

Crud! (another hand)

aw, ma . . !! (another hand)

Misery is finding out maybe you'd be better off as a wino bum.
(another hand)

Misery is knowing you've got a concert in 5 hrs but can't practice

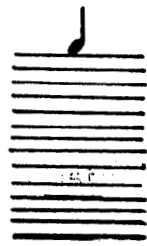
because you're hooked on graffiti! (another hand)

This is a beautiful example of an extended dialogue chain in the form of the Theme and Variations as it is used in music--possibly this is an unconscious surfacing of one of the learned structural units of the musician's worldview. The theme (misery) is stated in the first graffito of the chain and then explored, varied, and responded to in each succeeding graffito. The penultimate graffito recapitulates the statement of the first graffito, and the final graffito provides a brilliant coda to the entire chain.

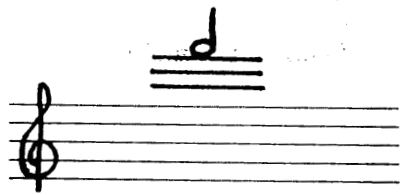
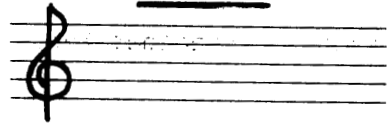
8. You fucking dumb shit you should be practicing not reading this wall

This graffito may have been written to the person practicing or by the person practicing, and remains to the benefit of both. At least it attests to the addictive qualities of graffiti.

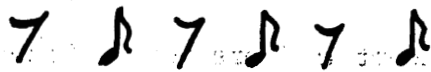
9.



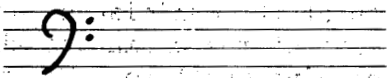
Anybody's nightmare



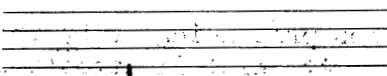
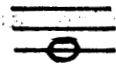
Oboe's nightmare



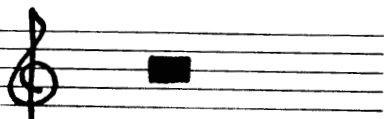
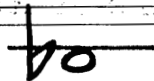
French horn's delight



Bassoon player's dream



Bari's best



Piano's pleasure

"Anybody's nightmare" is a note in the range of the piccolo and violin, and not usually played by anyone else. Also, no one enjoys counting ledger lines (extra lines above or below the five-line staff). This note would be a "nightmare" to play. The examples for oboe, French horn, bassoon, and baritone horn ("bari") are notes which no one enjoys playing because execution is difficult and the sound is usually not good. The comments by the examples for French horn, bassoon, and baritone are meant in humor. "Piano's pleasure" is a whole rest--the pianist doesn't have to do anything, so the example really is a pleasure to play.

10. Trum-peters such trom-boners³

This is a play on the musical/sexual double meaning of "peter" and "bone" for "Penis."

As a musician, I could understand the musical jokes, puns, and technical references in the graffiti. My responses to the graffiti as a member of the folk group producing them made me wonder why musicians--or any other folk group--choose to express their anxieties and other shared idiosyncracies in the form of graffiti which more than likely is intelligible only to other members of that folk group. That it provides a release for feelings and is a means of communication are characteristics these graffiti share with latrinalia and other more public expressions of graffiti. Unlike these more public graffiti, however, there is here the possibility of semi-anonymous communication within a narrow, definable circle of people. The graffitist who writes on music practice room walls may be reasonably sure that his graffito will be read by someone of the same folk group who more than likely will be sympathetic. A musician who writes "Charles Ives sucks" may incur violent disagreement from the next reader of the graffito, but at least both reader and writer will know who Ives was and why his music provokes controversy, and both reader and writer will undoubtedly be able to cite compositions and musical technicalities to support his own view.

It seems that it would be important to the writer of musically-oriented graffiti that he express those feelings which identify him as a member of this particular folk group--to which admittance must be gained by years of study, practice, and the acquisition of a skill not possessed by the general public. At the same time that the graffito serves to express frustration and to establish a kind of communicating link, it also makes a statement of the graffitist's identity, while protecting his individuality. It attests to the knowledge and skill he has laboriously acquired and ensures that only someone with similar knowledge and skills will appreciate the graffito and, as in the dialogue chains, make an appropriate response.

The content of these graffiti of music majors, then, does "discriminate similar communities with different sociopolitical ideation," in that the thematic content of these graffiti serves to discriminate this particular folk group from all other folk groups within a given community by virtue of its own particular worldview, and that this discrimination serves to separate, enclose,

and identify the members of the folk group to a degree that disguises individual identity while still establishing the individual's membership within an "elite" section of the total community.

NOTES

1. Terrance L. Stocker, Linda W. Dutcher, Stephen M. Hargrove, and Edwin A. Cook, "Social Analysis of Graffiti," Journal of American Folklore 85 (1972): 358.
2. For example: George Gonos, Virginia Mulkern, and Nicholas Poushinsky, "Anonymous Expression: A Structural View of Graffiti," Journal of American Folklore 89 (1976): 40-48; and Alan Dundes, "Here I Sit: A Study of American Latrinalia," in The Kroeber Anthropological Society Papers (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), no. 34, pp. 91-105.
3. These ten examples of graffiti are taken from my own collection, "Graffiti of Music Majors," [Spring 1975] in the Randall V. Mills Archive of Northwest Folklore, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon.