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PERFORMING THE PATRON: BETTY FREEMAN AND THE AVANT-GARDE

Jake Johnson

Abstract: Little can be said about music during the last century without encountering the men and women who supported it financially. Pierre Bourdieu's impression that the services rendered freely for the good of society reinforce a symbolic debt between giver and recipient complicates motivations behind patronage. Indeed, applying Bourdieu's theory to altruism in general – here, patronage in particular – highlights what could be thought of as a performance of futility: both giver and receiver understand the tenacious terms yet agree nonetheless to act out the process of reaching equilibrium. In the case of iconic music patron Betty Freeman (1921–2009), her support of the avant-garde seems, at times, to call into question on what side of this 'performed futility' she existed. This article considers ways in which Freeman's work as patron of the musical avant-garde allowed her to perform her identity as a woman and mother among a community on the fringe.

'Every writer', sighs Virginia Woolf in her essay 'The Patron and the Crocus' (1924), 'has some public or other at the end of his pen'.¹ Such a wonderfully begrudging statement on readership reminds us of the confluence of the uneasy, the fruitful and, in most cases, the inevitable collaboration between creator and benefactor that is the practice of patronage. Indeed, little can be said about composition (music or otherwise) during the last century without encountering the men and women who supported it financially – the established foundations or institutions of patronage that ensured a legacy of support capable of extending beyond the benefactor's lifetime. The reciprocal benefits for such acts of patronage – aside from the creation of works of art previously non-existent – appear to be prestige and awe garnered from the sheer amount of money the patrons were willing to donate. During the last century, some of these patrons turned their fortunes into a power strong enough to direct which cultural artefacts were produced, and, conversely, which ones were not. Patrons, then, have been able to use acute economic mobility to encourage a certain deification of their cultural institutions.

As Pierre Bourdieu argues, these public images of goodwill disguise the fact that the services rendered freely for the good of society indeed

¹ Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader: First Series* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co, 1953), p. 212.

serve to reinforce the symbolic debt placed upon others. According to Bourdieu, these ‘artificially maintained structures’ of debt and capital create systems of power because they disguise their roots in economic capital: ‘Symbolic capital, a transformed and thereby disguised form of physical “economic” capital, produces its proper effect inasmuch, and only inasmuch, as it conceals the fact that it originates in “material” forms of capital which are also, in the last analysis, the source of its effects’.² Since this ‘symbolic debt’ represents a monetary contribution too significant for most people to match or repay, a patron’s generosity empowers her with symbolic capital sufficient to warrant devotion and awe from her cultural constituents as futile acts of repayment.

Indeed, applying Bourdieu’s theory to altruism in general – here, patronage in particular – highlights what could be thought of as a performance of futility: both giver and receiver understand the tenacious terms yet agree nonetheless to act out the process of reaching equilibrium. Banquet dinners and parties, opening night receptions, meet-and-greets, letters, and obligatory telephone calls all serve as arenas for these performed futilities. (As composer Virgil Thomson once quipped in response to a patron’s dinner invitation, ‘The problem with patrons is they give you a bit of money, then expect you to earn it at the dinner table’.³) In the case of iconic music patron Betty Freeman, her support of the avant-garde seems, at times, to call into question on what side of this ‘performed futility’ she existed. In this article, I consider ways in which Freeman’s work as patron allowed her to perform her identity as a woman and mother among a community on the fringe. I also examine the ‘performativity’ of patronage and explore how Freeman’s identity in particular led to the support of and direction for new music.

Born in Chicago in 1921, Freeman was raised in an upper-middle-class home. A pianist, she majored in music and English at Wellesley College in Massachusetts before pursuing further musical training at Julliard and the New England Conservatory.⁴ Although she later discovered a great love for contemporary music, her initial repertoire centred on the major piano works of the Romantic era – Brahms, Chopin, and Beethoven. At one time she seriously considered pursuing a career as a performer, often practicing eight hours a day, but the demands of a performer’s life were such that ultimately she found other venues to express her love for music. Working diligently as an art patron and collector, Freeman befriended several major artists and even wrote books on Clyfford Still and Sam Francis. Her failure to get either book published seems to have set a pattern for the rest of her life: there are at least four manuscripts of unpublished books to her name, including one on composer Harry Partch and another detailing the many musicales she hosted in her home during the 1980s and 1990s.⁵ Indeed, the only publications she ever pursued to completion are her *Music People* books – a series featuring her

² Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 183.

³ Quoted in Anthony Tommasini, *Virgil Thomson: Composer on the Aisle* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), p. 520.

⁴ Freeman’s primary teachers during these years were David Barnett, Beveridge Webster and Johana Harris, according to an interview with Frank Oteri in 2000. See ‘The Many Views of Betty Freeman’, <http://www.newmusicbox.org/articles/the-many-views-of-betty-freeman/> (accessed 3 January 2014).

⁵ Freeman was still working on the Partch book up to her death; the manuscript for the book on her musicales is held at the Los Angeles Philharmonic Archives in Los Angeles, California. Manuscripts for the Still and Francis books are housed within the Smithsonian Archives of American Art in Washington, DC.

prize-winning photographs of composers, stage directors and musicians – of which she was known to be very proud.

It was not until 1961 that Freeman began supporting composers. Her first contribution was 100 dollars to help the young composer La Monte Young post bail on a drug possession charge in Connecticut. She had never met Young, but had heard and liked some of his music performed in art museums and exhibitions, so she decided to send a small amount of monetary assistance.⁶ Since that first, rather modest, contribution, Freeman supported over 60 prominent composers, ensembles and organizations. Indeed, the list of composers she supported and befriended reads like a veritable Who's Who of contemporary music: Harry Partch, Lou Harrison, John Cage, Philip Glass, Steve Reich, John Adams, Harrison Birtwistle, Frederic Rzewski, Morton Feldman and Kaija Saariaho are only a few. In return, several pieces have been dedicated to her, including Partch's *The Dreamer That Remains*, Cage's *Freeman Etudes*, Adams's *Nixon in China* and Reich's *Different Trains*. A gamelan built by Lou Harrison also bears the dedicatory name 'Si Betty'. Even with these outward appreciations of her support, however, the extent of Freeman's contributions is difficult to measure. Without her support, many composers and their subsequent works may never have come to fruition. Conversely, it was her work on their behalf that came to define and constitute her life and the meaning she derived from it. Speaking of a time Freeman offered to rent Harry Partch a space to house his instruments, Partch's friend and fellow composer Emil Richards said, 'When Betty came aboard I was blessed. And we blessed her for being there for all of us'.⁷

This mutual exchange of blessings highlights an intriguing aspect of Freeman's work as patron. Throughout her career, Freeman provided both a literal and figurative safe space for composers to create; over time, the community she supported became for her a surrogate family. In several instances, she expressed a maternal attachment to the works she commissioned. After receiving the dedication of John Adams's opera *Nixon in China*, Freeman wrote to Adams, 'I consider myself its godmother and am puffed up with godmotherly pride and joy to be related to such a beautiful new offspring'.⁸ In another letter to Adams, Freeman writes of an overwhelming satisfaction with the celebrated reception of Christopher Rouse's *Cello Concerto*: 'Chris Rouse was just here this week, [David] Zinman conducting his new violoncello [concerto] for Yo-Yo Ma – it's wonderful, I went 3 times [and] I think it's a masterwork. I'm proud that it's my commission – I feel to be a proud mama'.⁹ After first hearing a tape of Steve Reich's *Different Trains*, Freeman ended an enthusiastic letter to the

⁶ See Ralph Locke and Cyrilla Barr, eds., *Cultivating Music in America: Women Patrons and Activists since 1860* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 61–2. During a radio interview in 2006, Freeman spoke of her initial support of Young: 'So I sent a hundred dollars and I didn't get anything in return. When he got out, he sent me a collection of his records which I listened to and was fascinated. He's somebody who can play one note for four hours, but it's what he does with this one note, with the overtones and the undertones and how he combines it. I became a fan and I'm still a fan [after] all these years'. (Betty Freeman, interview by Vicki Curry, Segment 3: A Patron of Composers, *Life and Times*, KCET, aired 14 July 2006).

⁷ Emil Richards, telephone interview with the author, 5 October 2008.

⁸ Freeman to John Adams, 25 January 1988. Betty Freeman Papers, University of California, San Diego, Mandeville Special Collections.

⁹ Freeman to Adams, 1 February 1994. Betty Freeman Papers, University of California, San Diego, Mandeville Special Collections.

composer with 'Love from a proud mother of a bright new baby'.¹⁰ Writing to Adams and stage director Peter Sellars, she expresses her satisfaction with Adams's new opera *The Death of Klinghoffer*: 'In a way I regard myself sort of as its mother, having assisted way back at its birth'.¹¹ This motherly pride is an intriguing quality of Freeman's personality and patronage. To feel an emotional attachment to a commissioned work is imaginable; to attach maternal sentiments to the composers (she once referred to Adams as her 'golden boy')¹² and their subsequent compositions, however, is less expected and necessitates a deeper reading of Freeman's identity and work as a patron.¹³

Freeman's identifying herself maternally is only one of the ways she developed an attachment to the avant-garde. Her portrayal in David Hockney's grand 1966 painting *Beverly Hills Housewife* (Figure 1) seems to have been of such importance to her that she thereafter modelled a patronage built on the relationship of a housewife to the composers she financed.¹⁴ In the painting, the angular and linear qualities of Freeman's home are offset by her striking figure, dressed in a softly flowing pink gown. Hockney's depiction of Freeman does not resemble her particularly, apart from the slender figure and blonde hair. His detailing of the face is sparse, leaving the impression of distance and anonymity rather than intimacy. According to one analysis, Freeman, as represented in the image,

is defined less by the details of her appearance than by her taste: by the sleek modern architecture, by her art collection (represented here by a totemic sculpture by the Scottish artist William Turnbull), by the well-tended garden and by the hint of exoticism afforded by the leopardskin [sic] recliner and the mounted trophy head. More than a portrait, this is a brilliant piece of social observation, the modern equivalent of the eighteenth-century English 'conversation piece'.¹⁵

By arguing that *Beverly Hills Housewife* depicts Freeman 'less by the details of her appearance than by her taste', her home – by definition, the dominant aesthetic within a housewife's control – is privileged over Freeman herself. Here, Hockney shows Freeman posed in her environment, confirmed by her aesthetic choices, yet also appearing stiff and uncomfortable within it. That this enormous painting hung proudly on her dining room wall until her death in 2009, suggests that this identity wore well with Freeman, and, at least with the composers with whom she chose to associate, being a figurative housewife to them suited her just fine.¹⁶

¹⁰ Freeman to Steve Reich, 9 March 1989. Betty Freeman Papers, University of California, San Diego, Mandeville Special Collections. Freeman later confessed her dislike of *Different Trains* to composer George Benjamin, saying 'I don't like Reich's "Different Trains" even though I commissioned it – I find it pompous, banal and also profane' (Freeman to George Benjamin, 8 May 1991).

¹¹ Freeman to John Adams and Peter Sellars, 7 November 1992. Betty Freeman Papers, University of California, San Diego, Mandeville Special Collections.

¹² Freeman to John Adams, 14 February 1997. Betty Freeman Papers, University of California, San Diego, Mandeville Special Collections.

¹³ Although Freeman's maternal attachment to those she supported is a distinctive quality, she is not unique in her outlook. Marjorie Garber relates that Charlotte van de Veer Quick Mason, the wealthy white patron of literature from the Harlem Renaissance, preferred to be called 'Godmother'. See Garber, *Patronizing the Arts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 12.

¹⁴ In an article from *Connoisseur*, February 1987, Barbara Jepson revealed that although 'Freeman did not commission [*Beverly Hills Housewife*] ... she claims to have suggested the impish title'. See Barbara Jepson, 'A Cultivated Ear: Betty Freeman's Living Room is the West Coast's Center for New Music', *Connoisseur*, February 1987.

¹⁵ Marco Livingstone and Kay Heymer, *Hockney's People* (Boston: Bulfinch Press, 2003), p. 78.

¹⁶ Within her home, Freeman encouraged the proliferation of cutting-edge developments in contemporary music. From 1981 to 1991 she hosted a series of musicales, inviting two

Figure 1:
David Hockney, *Beverly Hills Housewife* (1966–67). Acrylic on canvas, 72 × 144". © David Hockney. Photo credit: Richard Schmidt. Reproduced by permission.

In many ways, Freeman's understanding of her role as a young housewife and mother carried through in many of her dealings with those she supported. In a letter to composer Harry Partch, in 1972, during the shooting of the film *The Dreamer That Remains*, Freeman encouraged Partch not to 'pretty up the workshop' where a particular scene was to be shot. Instead, she and director Stephen Pouliot wanted a more honest depiction of his workspace. In a most telling turn of phrase, she reveals an ingrained perception of herself that reflects her patron-identity: 'You are you and that is what we want ... not a Beverly Hills housekeeper like me'.¹⁷ Danlee Mitchell, Partch's assistant during the last years of his life, paints an image of Freeman that is in keeping with this self-ascribed description, saying Freeman 'was a good disciple' and 'she didn't argue because if Harry said "It's got to be this certain way", she would kowtow to it'.¹⁸ Perhaps Freeman understood her role as patron as doubly socially bound: being a woman – in many ways subversive to a patriarchal society – who supported the avant-garde, which is in many ways a subversive force in traditional musical society. In this light, Freeman's support of contemporary music seems an attempt to attach her identity as a housewife – faced with a life filled with constraints and limitations – to rogue composers who created a music socially on the fringe. A close analysis of Freeman's maternal and marital self-image thus provides an even greater understanding of her motivations for choosing composers to support and for determining her intuitive taste for music.

The cultural environment Freeman created for herself brings into relief an intriguing dichotomy. On one hand, Freeman very much was shaping the culture around her through the music she supported; on the other hand, it appears that same culture simultaneously was

composers each month to present his or her music before an elite audience of southern California's contemporary music cognoscenti: critics, composers, performers, and other interested patrons. In a sense, these events provided Freeman a way to perform her aesthetic preferences by 'decorating' her house with composers she admired and music she supported. The domestic realm of Freeman's world acted as a canvas on which she could project her inner predilections in art and music, as well as her intuitive feelings about the importance of specific composers.

¹⁷ Freeman to Harry Partch, 29 March 1972, Harry Partch Collection, Music and Performing Arts Library Special Collections, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

¹⁸ Danlee Mitchell, interview by the author, San Diego, CA, 25 September 2008.

shaping her self-image and identity, which then affected her aesthetic choices, and so on. This paradox problematizes notions of agency or self-determination. Roland Barthes's contention that the Self is 'condemned to the repertoire of its images' breaches this paradox as well, for if self-perception is prohibited by a constantly shifting relationship with the Other, the Self can only be understood as an effect of the Other.¹⁹ In other words, Freeman's sense of patronage was not entirely her own, but rather emerged from cultural experiences shared with and through others.

Freeman's work as a patron then could be interpreted as simply extending the reach of cultural ideology and aesthetics. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer contend that social structures promote a culture of 'sameness'.²⁰ Because those living roughly in the same area and time experience similar cultural influences, often the individual's thoughts serve only to reinforce the thoughts or beliefs of the collective, or those expressed by the cultural influences that work to uphold a collective identity. Even Hockney's painting, which favours the generic image of what a wealthy housewife should look like over the actual features of his model, appears to promote this image of individuality yielding to a cultural reference of identity. The sameness of individuality created its own institution, an amalgamation of cultural influences as expressed through popular culture media.

Although her patronage had unique qualities, Freeman's attraction to the avant-garde was not one of them. Carol Oja has noted that throughout the twentieth century women were the strongest advocates for music, particularly new music. Given this association between women and the avant-garde, Oja argues, masculine concern over a future of music threatened by such a feminine influence reveals a subtextual apprehension over the growing strength of the avant-garde. Increased visibility and involvement of women in the arts – most notably those in the contemporary arts – was perceived as an impediment and a real threat to the integrity and survival of American 'culture'. Much of the concern about the encroachment of women in the classical music world was thus misplaced masculine anxiety over what Oja calls 'a disturbing whiff of effeminacy' brought about by the avant-garde.²¹

As Lawrence Rainey claims, fear of the avant-garde may stem from a discomfort with the repressed or censored reality which contemporary art, literature and music more vividly depict:

Like an antique mirror from which the mercury has seeped and faded, the avant-garde has become the ambiguous glass in which we seem to scrutinize a perplexing image of ourselves, an image that is haunting precisely because it is simultaneously so alike and unlike, because it bears so many of the features by which we recognize ourselves and the contemporary cultural milieu, even as it also evokes a world that is already feathered at the edges, already remote.²²

So to experience the avant-garde is to see one's own condition reflected back, if only distorted, as in a fun-house mirror. If the avant-garde's strange familiarity undermines social and cultural

¹⁹ Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p. 36.

²⁰ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 94.

²¹ Carol Oja, *Making Music Modern: New York in the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 223.

²² Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 10.

establishments, Freeman's support of the avant-garde aggravated concerns over emasculation. Just as women threatened the delicate balance of patriarchal integrity, the momentum-gaining modernist and avant-garde movements threatened the sanctity (and heteromascularity) of the concert hall.

When examining Freeman's patronage, of particular interest is the scale of her contributions, not only in terms of dollars or time, but also in relation to one individual's ability to fill a void in the production of contemporary music, despite the presence of more established patronage institutions such as universities. Jann Pasler notes that 'although it represents a relatively small and often marginalized aspect of our music culture, academia has been the largest context for serious contemporary music in the United States'.²³ Boundaries between what Pasler calls three 'socioeconomic art worlds' – commercial, academic, and independent networks – have become increasingly blurred during the last half of the century, creating a financial mobility for composers associated in all three art worlds to interact more freely with one another. Still, Pasler concedes that universities have provided resources more comprehensive than any other cultural institution. She continues:

In reality, the academic institution is as much a patron of the composer as an employer. Research universities, in particular, provide sabbaticals, and large, research-oriented libraries purchase costly scores and records so that composers may keep abreast of musical developments globally ... Institutions with electronic music and computer music studios provide expensive equipment to which composers might otherwise not have had access. Academic institutions of all kinds also furnish concert halls for performances, sponsor festivals for new music, and advertise to attract an audience. Research grants may even defray the cost of copying parts and publishing music, paying musicians to rehearse, making recordings, attending conferences, and traveling to hear one's music performed out of town or attending conferences.²⁴

Even with Freeman's impressive reach and targeted influence as a patron, her financial efforts and impact could never match the reach of large institutions invested in cultural patronage. In an interview with *New York Times* critic Anthony Tommasini, Freeman stated that her choice regarding which composers to support is 'purely arbitrary and based solely on my response to their music', adding, 'My choices are also not a matter of being right because I've sometimes been disappointed in the results'.²⁵ It seems safe to presume that Freeman believed that her position as a patron – governed by no bureaucracy, committee, ideology or principle – permitted her a certain autonomy unique in postmodern society.

It also seems possible that Freeman's 'purely arbitrary' choice in music was the result of institutional and cultural influences; Freeman acting as patron lifts the veil on the grand performance of cultural machinations at work on her. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler classifies the verbal and physical gestures intended to convey a person's identity as 'performative'. The intended expressions of interiority or identity are merely 'fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means'. Butler's concept of performativity calls into question traditional understanding

²³ Jann Pasler, *Writing Through Music: Essays on Music, Culture, and Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 320.

²⁴ Pasler, *Writing Through Music*, p. 344.

²⁵ Anthony Tommasini, 'A Medici of Modern Arts in Tune With Composers: Betty Freeman, Long a Patron of Americans, Shifts Her Maverick Focus to Europeans', *New York Times*, 19 March 1998.

of agency, by viewing it as 'an effect and function of a decidedly public and social discourse'.²⁶ That is, the way Freeman speaks and acts about her identity actually creates – or performs – her identity, and the manner of influence that external voices and relationships had on Freeman performed the patron herself. Talk of musical offspring or housewifery, then, doesn't describe her identity any more than it actually performs her identity.

Regardless of the extent of influence, Freeman's identity as a patron was affected – perhaps even created – by her work with the avant-garde. And as identity goes, so does aesthetic taste. That the reach and susceptibility of Freeman's identity both enhanced and borrowed from the burgeoning avant-garde community suggests that her taste for new music was created, at least in part, by the community itself. Out of this most perplexing creative relationship – where a patron's taste in music is supplanted by music's taste in patron – emerges the confluence of identity, artistic creation and social structures necessarily engaged when performing the patron.

Virginia Woolf expressly cautioned against a patron–artist relationship modelled on a 'maternal tie', proposing instead 'that they are twins indeed, one dying if the other dies, one flourishing if the other flourishes; that the fate of literature depends upon their happy alliance'.²⁷ Although Freeman's identity as patron of the avant-garde was moulded around this 'maternal tie', in her case such a relationship transformed the traditional patron–artist power hierarchy into one that afforded Woolf's ideal 'happy alliance'. Freeman's work as patron allowed her to perform her identity as a woman and mother among a community on the fringe. Her financial support created a symbolic debt-to-debtor scenario that offered her a constant place within that community. Despite increased funding for the arts, Freeman's patronage filled a niche that countered commercial patronage while firmly situating her within it. As suggested earlier, Bourdieu's problematizing of altruism brings into question the futility of trusting the benefactor's goodwill in patronage scenarios. In cases like that of Betty Freeman, however, those most feeling the exactness of futility are the patrons themselves.

²⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, Tenth Anniversary Edition (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 173.

²⁷ Woolf, *The Common Reader*, p. 215.