

Good morning, headmaster, masters and boys. Now boys, you may have crossed paths with me in Form I and/or Form II Non-Elective Music. So many beautiful memories... A lot of interesting things came up during those classes, and perhaps the most striking is how few of you actually like modern music.

By modern music, I don't mean the last, defiant gasps of the Western classical and jazz traditions; you're not familiar with those anyway, outside of underscore for TV, film and games. Rather, I am referring to today's mainstream popular muzak: Ed Sheeran, Taylor Swift, BTS. This is music which has been designed specifically for teenagers, i.e. you lot. Don't get me wrong, there are certainly die-hard fans among you - you know who you are, please seek help - but it is always surprising how few Sydneians even know, let alone like Ed Sheeran, Taylor Swift, BTS.

One reason for this may be your parents. Some mums and dads have fed you the lie that music, REAL music stopped when they hit their twenties. Hence the phenomenon of Grammar boys who know more '80s hits than many of us who were actually around then. (I mean, really, Rick Astley, of all people...)

Another group of you - and again this may be due to parental influence - bypass the mainstream altogether, scaling instead the dizzying heights of classical music, '70s prog rock or Lamar-esque hip-hop. As a former child snob myself, I applaud your taste and dogged denial of your own sociopolitical reality.

Yet another demographic, well, you really couldn't give a flying fruit loop about music. Personally I would never judge you, but, in the words of your best friend from English class, "the man that hath no music in himself, Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds, Is fit for treasons, stratagem, and spoils."

That said, apathy, nostalgia and prestige signalling can't explain everything: there is just something inherent to modern popular music which leaves many of us cold. The long-running magazine Scientific American began its 2012 expose of contemporaneous pop with "Music just ain't what it used to be." There followed a discussion around declining diversity of pitch and tone colour (YES, well remembered, two of the six concepts of music), as well as how ever-increasing loudness was compensating for ever-decreasing musical interest. These trends continue today, with no sign of abating.

But wait, I hear you cry, that might make modern pop less 'good', but does it make it less likeable? Despacito is terrible and it has 7.2 billion views on YouTube! Well, maybe people really do love it, or maybe, like countless Grammar boys, they thought it just too awful to miss out on. Either way, the viral nature of Despacito epitomises the train-wreck theory: the more you know you shouldn't watch, the harder it is to look away. [Incidentally, YouTube viewings of literal train-wrecks only number in the millions, but the point still holds: it is quite possible to like/'like' something super bad.]

So back to the original question: what does make modern popular music less likeable, less genuinely and intrinsically compelling? This brings us to Form V Academic Extension. In our course "The Western Arc", Dr Allen and I have been exploring Western culture, focusing on Europe and North America from the Renaissance to the end of the 20th century. Six action-packed centuries, a tall order in just three terms. To facilitate this, we are grounding our discussions in grand themes which elucidate the timeline.

Chief among these is the idea of vector. From the 1400s all the way through to the 1990s, Western culture has been centrally concerned with purpose, progress, moving forward. This stems largely from a desire to reconstruct, relive and perhaps even eclipse the glories of Ancient Greece and Rome (Dr Allen will say more on that next week).

The West's massive historical vectors came to a head - several heads really - in the 19th and 20th century. Our extension course begins with two significant figures in that process: Karl Marx and Francis Fukuyama. In the mid 19th century, Marx imagined the West to be on a trajectory, from a hodge-podge of feudalism, capitalism and republicanism to the ultimate and glorious endpoint of Communism. In the late 20th century, as the USSR and its empire crumbled, Fukuyama saw the West, indeed much of the world as having already arrived at 'The End of History', which of course for him was not Communism, but liberal democracy. Ironically, both these figures were devotees of the same early 19th century German philosopher - Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel - who believed history to be a rational unfolding towards some great transcendental Absolute.

And you boys, you too love you some vector. That's how our school lives work: we strive towards deadlines, assessments, examinations. And that's how our university degrees, careers, indeed much of Western existence works as well. Now, I'm not saying the 2021 Sydney Grammar School Half-Yearly Examinations, towards which we're all presently heading, are some great transcendent Absolute - that would be truly sad - but it does mean whether we like vector or not, we are used to it, and we expect it.

And yet, over the last two or three decades, the West's attitude to vector has cooled. In Europe at least, communism had lost, capitalism had won: what more was there to be done? It's true technological development has been going great guns - wireless internet, smart phones, clean energy, rovers on Mars - and if anything, our everyday lives are more competitive, more goal-orientated than ever before. But that's six centuries of industrial momentum coupled with an ambitious, modernising Asia, not a burning desire to reinstate the Holy Roman Empire. Socially and culturally speaking, the white hot velocity of previous centuries has very much been lost.

Of course, from a social perspective, a flatline is really quite a good thing: after all, it's harder to be sexist, racist, classist, religist or orientationist when ambition is dead. An artistic flatline, on the other hand, well, that's just really, really dull... Boys, be grateful most of you weren't sentient when reality TV was all the rage. And be thankful, during the darkest years, Harry Potter and

Game of Thrones - both products of the '90s which outlived their use-by dates - kept old-school, vectored story-telling alive.

But here's the clincher: mainstream popular muzak doesn't have a Game of Thrones, it's still stuck in a vectorless paradigm. Think about Ed Sheeran, Taylor Swift, BTS, the endless reams of low-grade hip hop. Musically, these songs are like flatlines, never venturing outside modest structural, textural, timbral, registral and tonal limits. And unsurprisingly, many of you, being unwitting inheritors of centuries-old vector, are unimpressed by this pale sonic wallpaper: you yearn for tension, excitement, if not blood, guts and religious wars. And that's why, in my opinion, contemporary pop music is such a turn-off for many of you.

So boys, perhaps we've solved a mystery today, or perhaps you're still wondering what the word 'vector' actually means. Either way, do be aware of the intellectual artifacts you're carrying around with you and how they affect the way you view the world. As the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius almost said, "A man's worth is no greater than the worth of his vectors." Thank you.

* * * * *