Bourdieu’s musical ignorance

escrito por Ramón Flecha | 26 de junio de 2023



Bourdieu cites Bach’s «The Well-Tempered Clavier» as an example of distinction compared to other works, such as «The Sabre Dance,» which he describes as music devalued either due to its association with a lower genre like «light music» or its popularization. Bourdieu’s argument revolves around the devaluation of «middle-brow» art, which refers to legitimate works that become popularized.

Many experts I consulted, specifically regarding the music section of «The Distinction,» were shocked and found it amusing. They couldn’t comprehend how Bourdieu had the audacity to write and publish such ignorant statements. What they don’t know is that in certain educational and social environments, a significant portion of Bourdieu’s followers are enthusiasts who display unwavering loyalty to their own preferences, regardless of how obvious the evidence may be. These enthusiasts even believe that the revered author possesses more knowledge about music than their own friends who have studied music extensively, some of whom hold degrees from prestigious conservatories.

Bourdieu had countless examples in music that would have been more suitable for supporting his argument. Choosing Bach’s work as an example of his distinction criterion is just one of many indications that Bourdieu wrote about

topics in which he lacked expertise, without bothering to consult knowledgeable individuals or the general public, which could have exposed the fallacy of his claims. Bourdieu believes that «The Well-Tempered Clavier» is exclusively appreciated by the distinguished public to whom he attributes «habitus,» cultural capital, and scholarly capital. However, a minimal amount of research would have revealed that this music is well-known and enjoyed by diverse audiences, not just those he considers distinguished. But Bourdieu didn’t bother to investigate; instead, he sought to impose his own assertions and sometimes prejudices as if they were theories. Even so, it would have been sufficient to ask people from lower socio-economic backgrounds to discover that a significant number of them are familiar with «The Well-Tempered Clavier.» For instance, its Prelude in C major, which can be heard at this link.

Some argue, upon realizing that Bourdieu wrote about music without possessing the necessary knowledge to avoid exposing his ignorance, that he was primarily a great sociologist of education. However, any teacher reading these lines knows that students who have been exposed to «The Well-Tempered Clavier» during their education are familiar with it, regardless of their family’s socio-economic, academic, and cultural backgrounds. As educators, we have the power not only to transform education and society but also to provide evidence in our conversations that disproves the erroneous publications of authors who have never improved the results of any school and who disregard the knowledge possessed by teachers in early childhood, primary, and secondary education.

To Bourdieu’s dismay, «The Well-Tempered Clavier» is so popular that even its first prelude has been featured in commercial films such as «The Iron Lady,» which portrays

the life of Margaret Thatcher.