

The Apex Axiom: Why Rarity (Not Popularity) Signals Musical Genius

Sebastian Lopez

In my explorations of music, I have begun to revise some assumptions about what constitutes greatness. How fine, truly, is the music of the canonical masters—Bach, Mozart, Beethoven—whose talent has been enshrined as a truism? This reverence owes as much to establishment influence as to merit. Art movements and seminal artists are often supported by institutions that shape public opinion, musicologists, and critics. All humans, including myself, are prone to bias—awarding accolades or withholding them as we see fit. This tendency is mortal, subjective, and endlessly interesting. The ideas expressed here are fluid, yet I will write boldly, guided by contemplation and credible criteria.

Turning points in intellectual and artistic history often ossify as new standards emerge. When I entered Cornell University in the mid-nineties, Hemingway's stark, simple prose was the ideal; florid expression was considered a distraction from clarity. Years later, minimalism in poetry dominated as a backlash against the visionary and esoteric. Such trends illustrate how human-enforced subjective taste can shape our perception of greatness. The same applies to music. Beethoven, Bach, and Mozart were once rebellious tykes, snubbed by the standards of their day. Today, questioning them would invite scorn from the educated.

The Case for Musical Anomalies

I am fairly certain there are lesser-known musicians whose intensity and sensitivity rival or surpass the canonical giants. By sensitivity, I mean an ability to convey subtle emotion; intensity arises from this sensitivity. Lesser art can be superficially impressive, but that brightness fades quickly. Most popular music is “in one ear and out the other.” The Beatles, Rolling Stones, Queen, Prince, Michael Jackson, and Elvis—while undeniably influential—do not approach the raw, poignant sensitivity of certain rarer talents. They were innovators who captured the cultural moment, expanding musical discourse. Elvis, for instance, translated Afro-American music into the broader population, shocking prim audiences while establishing a new style. Yet his contributions, however transformative, belong more to cultural influence than to delicate, sublime musical expression.

In contrast, some artists operate on an ineffable plane. Their music resonates as raw, unprocessed, sacred sound—an exposed nerve along the limb of some divine body. David Lynch described creativity as fishing: one can find minor forms in shallow waters, or rare specimens from the deep. I have found one

artist whose work consistently plumbs these depths: Richard D. James, better known as Aphex Twin. Seventeen years after first hearing his music, it remains as compelling as ever.

The Aphex Twin Anomaly

While I enjoy the Beatles and their enduring classics, they pale beside the intensity of Aphex Twin. Neither their psychedelic explorations nor the Rolling Stones' hedonistic energy reaches the profound sensitivity of his work. Aphex Twin is known among serious listeners as one of the main influencers of electronic music, a genre that dominates much of popular music today. Yet he is not a household name. Unlike the canonical masters, his recognition comes from insight and study rather than mass promotion.

Rarity of Genius

Mozart and Bach are among my great loves. I have rewatched *Amadeus* countless times and revisited Bach's work, still dazzled by his complexity and mastery. Yet their melodies fade compared to the piercing intensity of Aphex Twin. True genius lies in the channelling of sound untainted by artifice. Complexity indicates intelligence; the pure melody communicates directly to the soul.

Bach's *Air* evokes reverence with dulcet violin phrases, yet under the weight of pathos, it becomes somewhat clumsy and redundant. In contrast, Aphex Twin's *Early Morning Clissold* slices through with searing precision. Its strings fragment like shards of light, emotionally immediate, fragile yet indestructible. *Clissold* is a musical intrusion where form and content are inseparable. *Z Twig*, similarly, borders on the numinous and *other*, evoking a presence that transcends conventional labels: spiritual, psychedelic, or romantic. It is raw and immediate, touching an intensity most listeners are unwilling or unable to experience.

At the Edge of Musical Language

Great musicians do not create art to deliver explicit messages but to channel experiences beyond words. Tartini, who dreamt the *Devil's Trill Sonata*, was consumed with frustration at his inability to capture the sublimity of his vision. Similarly, Aphex Twin is devoted to the inner ear, to the untranslatable perfection it conveys. Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*, while grand, can feel outward-facing and accessible, whereas Aphex Twin creates music unidentifiable, independent of scene or canon.

Soft-spoken and introverted, Richard composes for himself, often avoiding audience expectation. His *Selected Ambient Works*, despite the title, defy the traditional ambient genre. Tracks range from melodic gems to atonal or unsettling pieces, reflecting a scientific, exploratory approach to sound. He challenges convention, composing without reference to rhythm or fan expectation, privileging pure sonic discovery over popularity.

Music Beyond Message

Great music, in my view, does not impose meaning but opens an undefined space for the listener. Richard once remarked that electronic music aims to get something human out of machines. Yet in his compositions, sound enters a space bordering the non-human. *Blue Calx*, for instance, simultaneously conveys warmth and coldness, comfort and estrangement. *Rhubarb* expresses tender, cosmic detachment. Listeners dismiss such tracks as “dreary,” revealing their inability to inhabit deep emotional landscapes. Aphex Twin’s music touches uncertainty, the liminal threshold between human and non-human perception.

The Lonely Apex

Music remains one of the arts with the fewest true geniuses. Many musicians are brilliant, but only a handful achieve imperishable intensity. I have outgrown Mozart, rock heroes, and even Radiohead—who themselves cite Aphex Twin as an influence. Björk, fiercely original, declared, “Aphex Twin is King!” and I agree. DJs and experienced listeners often confess that hearing Aphex Twin spoils all other music; nothing else compares. Tracks like *Bucephalus Bouncing Ball* illustrate the enormity of his contribution: everything else seems superficial in comparison.

Richard may compose some music that is unfetching or difficult to listen to, yet nothing is without purpose. Each note is part of a conversation with the void. Tracks such as *To Cure a Weakling Child* reveal profound human sentiment, touching the fragile, the tender, the deeply other. Aphex Twin’s compositions are chaste, restrained, and eternal, unlike much of commercial music, which is ephemeral and fleeting. They demand no applause—they exist in the quiet apex where art and infinite possibility converge.

In all the music I have encountered—from classical to rock, jazz, and electronic—the enduring intensity and abstraction of Aphex Twin stand peerless. His work is a testament to rarity, sensitivity, and unflinching honesty. Popularity alone does not indicate genius; it is the rare, unseen, uncelebrated artistry that signals true musical transcendence.

