How Kendrick Lamar’s Pulitzer win blurs lines between classical music and pop

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Author

Piano tutor and Lecturer, Sydney Conservatorium Music, University of Sydney

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Partners

The awarding of the 2018 Pulitzer Music Prize to Kendrick Lamar for his album DAMN. has attracted considerable controversy. The American rapper edged out the young Michael Gilbertson, who wrote a string quartet in a traditional format, and Ted Hearne, who created a modernist setting of a contemporary text for voices, electric guitars and percussion.

Some have read the decision as a sign of low art (music designed for popular consumption, often with an eye on financial reward) vanquishing high art (esoteric music of transcendent purpose.) Yet to argue this is to prejudice Lamar on the basis of the style of his music.

Like Lamar’s previous albums, the music of DAMN. is effortlessly creative, with constant attention to shadings of mood and beat. There are many contributors, in the fields of production, vocals and sampling, and the
timing throughout is both artful and innovative. As a personally-lived document of life for black Americans today, DAMN. is unique.

Yet to some critics, the decision elevates a form of music that has no place among the esteemed offerings of past recipients (which historically has included some of America’s pre-eminent composers in the European art-music tradition). What is it about hip-hop music, and rapping in particular, that so offends?

From its roots as a black American sub-culture, rap music has been a music of defiance. Think of Public Enemy’s Fight the Power (1989), or N.W.A.’s Fuck tha Police (1988). It is a style of music that is powerful through its minimal drum machine/beatbox accompaniment and rhythmically-intoned verse. In the art-music tradition, however, strongly held political views are seldom expressed and, moreover, the forms are often instrumental and wordless. Unlike notes, words have meanings which, typically, can be defined. Some argue music is of a higher form when abstracted from such simple correspondences.

Music imperceptibly exposes our prejudices. This is evident in popular mischaracterisations, such as the idea that all young people avoid the orchestra, or generations of older people’s intolerance of popular forms. Rap music can be deliberately uncongenial: it is often intentionally abrasive, and its singular focus on expressing its message has frequently paralleled an almost pathological aversion to melody.

We all listen to music differently. When discussing music, one can be swamped by subjectivity; with beauty being in the eye (or ear) of the beholder, argument can seem futile. While we may never completely overcome our biases, I believe that there are some universal terms that we should be able to make use of when we’re assessing music - whether it is art or pop, high or low - such as creativity, authenticity, innovation and uniqueness. DAMN. scores powerfully on all of these.

The brilliance of DAMN.

The lyrics of DAMN., despite frequent swearing (a vernacular trait common to hip hop), attest to Lamar’s sincerity and faith in music as a path to social healing. In this way, they are straightforwardly authentic. An example of Lamar’s philosophy can be found in these lines from the song Pride:

See, in a perfect world, I’ll choose faith over riches/I’ll choose work over bitches, I’ll make schools out of prison/I’ll take all the religions and put ‘em all in one service/Just to tell ‘em we ain’t shit, but He’s been perfect, world. Given the powerful way DAMN.’s lyrics portray societal issues, it may be that politics shaped the awarding of this year’s prize at least as much as the
musical accomplishments. (A performance of Lamar’s 2015 single, Alright, from his previous album, To Pimp a Butterfly, created controversy when staged on the roof of a police car. The song, which includes the words “and we hate the po-po [police]/Wanna kill us dead in the street fo sho” was described by Lamar as one of hope. F fittingly, it became an anthem for the Black Lives Matter movement.)

Arguably, to Pimp a Butterfly, with its recurrence of a progressively revealed poem outlining the rationale of the rapper’s life-view, might constitute a more conceptually unified artwork than DAMN. Yet DAMN. rewards repeated listening – another element for assessing artistic validity. The album works on many levels, alternating songs that focus on notions of “weakness” and “wickedness”, and it also can be listened to in a reversed track-order (as acknowledged by the composer as an intentional element of its design).

Righting a wrong

The first Pulitzer Prize for Music was awarded in 1943. Its early recipients included the composers Howard Hanson, Virgil Thomson, Walter Piston and William Schumann. The initial beneficiaries were conservative in their style, and their winning works were typically in abstract instrumental forms, such as the symphony and the concerto, devoid of textual elements which can complicate the evaluation of music.

Without a centuries-long European heritage on which to draw, America (much like Australia) was late to develop a “national” musical style of its own; yet as it did, composers such as Aaron Copland and Samuel Barber were duly recognised.

During this time, American music dominated the world through jazz and Broadway musicals, yet absent from the winner’s list are names such as Jerome Kern, George Gershwin and Cole Porter. Apparently, in the eyes of the judging panel, popular music was made of inferior stuff. It took decades for jazz to be recognised with a Pulitzer Music Prize, and it was not awarded to an African American until 1996.

Despite recent efforts to address these issues through posthumous citations to black and popular-leaning musicians, the list of Pulitzer winners has remained a roll-call of composers in what one might call the “university” tradition of art-music. Some forms, such as rock, have never been recognised. More positively, female composers have increasingly featured since 2010.

Importantly, though, the award to DAMN. rights another wrong. Ragtime music, pioneered by black Americans such as Scott Joplin, gained first
recognition in the works of the white Irving Berlin. Jazz, an African American music beyond question, achieved national acceptance under Paul Whiteman (also white).

Later, “swing” would rise to its greatest popularity through the recordings of Benny Goodman. With the 2014 award of a Grammy to white rapper Macklemore, it may have seemed this trend was continuing. Fittingly, then, the Pulitzer board has given its first music prize for rap to a black American.