

Classical Music

Contemporary Perspectives and Challenges



Edited by

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5. A Report on New Music

Alex Ross

The state of new music in the classical-music sphere can only be described as lively. It is difficult to guess how many composers might be active around the world, but the number surely runs into the tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands. The sheer quantity of music being produced from year to year defeats any attempt to encompass it. For example, one can go to the website of the Australian Music Centre and see listings for some 700 “composers, sound artists and improviser performers”. Although few of those untold thousands of composers make a living entirely from their music, the productivity is astounding, and encouraging, to behold. It is difficult to make generalizations about the stylistic profile of such a geographically and culturally diverse community of creators. In the twentieth century, clear divisions existed between composers of “progressive” reputation—modernist, avant-garde, experimental—and those who hewed to more traditional harmonic languages and forms. Such divisions still exist, but polemics are no longer so heated on either side. Furthermore, the definition of composition has steadily expanded to include improvisation, performance art, sound art, and myriad technologies (Rutherford-Johnson, 2017).

All this activity occurs in the face of a mainstream classical-music public that continues to resist new work, particularly work that fails to resemble music of the past. Our discussions of this hostility to contemporary music have made clear that it is a problem of long standing, reaching back to the nineteenth century. The scholar William Weber has established that the increasing veneration of Bach, Handel, Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven in nineteenth-century concert culture

began to crowd out the work of living composers. As early as 1861, organizers of a Paris series were observing that their subscribers “get upset when they see the name of a single contemporary composer on the programs” (Weber, 2008: 259). Concertgoers sometimes blame composers for the overrepresentation of the past on programs. It is often assumed that in the twentieth century composers alienated audiences to the point where they were driven back to the classics. But the research of Weber and others shows that new work had diminished in importance—and aroused suspicion in audiences—well before Arnold Schoenberg and allied thinkers adopted non-tonal languages. The intensity of this obsession of the past is an issue peculiar to classical music. In the visual-arts world, contemporary artists dominate the marketplace, and exhibitions of abstract painters continue to draw huge crowds.

The resistance to new music seems largely confined to the established institutions of symphony orchestras, opera houses, and long-standing chamber-music series. Elsewhere, we have seen the emergence of a thriving culture of new-music performance, one that is distinct from mainstream classical music. Forty or fifty years ago, the phenomenon of the new-music ensemble was relatively limited, and was often confined to university campuses. In the 1970s and 1980s, the emergence of dedicated new-music groups—such as the Kronos Quartet, Tashi, Bang on a Can, the Ensemble Intercontemporain, the London Sinfonietta, and such composer-led groups as the Fires of London, Steve Reich and Musicians, the Philip Glass Ensemble, and Meredith Monk’s Vocal Ensemble—changed the landscape (Robin, 2018). In Europe, large-scale festivals of new music—such as the Donaueschingen Festival in Germany, Warsaw Autumn in Poland, and Big Ears in Knoxville, Tennessee—draw thousands of loyal listeners each year. The spectacle of new-music enthusiasts driving to Donaueschingen in campervans, or long lines of listeners waiting to hear, say, Anthony Braxton at Big Ears, is one that the wider community of classical music should take into account (Ross, 2012, 2016).

The role of composers in creating their own ensembles and concert series is especially significant. Given the paltry representation of new music at most larger institutions, composers realized that they would have to create their infrastructure for performance, and, to a great extent, their own audience. While both Reich and Monk have dabbled

in orchestral writing, their main vehicle for realizing work has been their own ensembles. Begun largely out of necessity, this path has sustained careers across many decades. Alongside these self-sufficient composers, we have seen a huge growth in the number of musicians specializing in contemporary music. As opportunities in the classical world diminish, some young players see new music as a viable career path. Composers, performers, and institutions have together developed an audience that hardly resembles the traditional “classical music” audience, with its preponderance of older people. The new-music audience is much younger, and tends to come from a cohort of intellectually curious people who are receptive to current trends in various art forms.

At an NYU Global Institute for Advanced Study (GIAS) meeting in Florence, Claire Chase reported on the activities of the International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE), which she founded in 2001. Chase points out that many of the struggles reported in the orchestra and opera world—declining audiences, ageing audiences, poor representation of women and minorities—do not exist in her sphere. ICE has steadily expanded its performances to more than a hundred concerts a year. The audience is dominated by people under thirty-five (low ticket prices and free concerts have played a significant role). Of ninety-one world premières, thirty-five have been by women. The path is not an economically easy one: it took thirteen years before ICE’s principals were able to make a living, and, even then, financial challenges remain. It will be crucial to cultivate models of patronage for new music. At the same meeting in Florence, Julia Wolfe, one of the founders of *Bang on a Can*, spoke about the importance of flexibility in the profile of a new-music group. *Bang on a Can* has found great success presenting concerts in non-traditional spaces—clubs, galleries, public areas—and, at the same, raised its profile by associating itself with Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. She also highlighted the importance of forging links with other art forms, in which audiences are more responsive to the new. For fifteen years *Bang on a Can* has had a summer residence at Mass MoCA, the contemporary museum in western Massachusetts. Crucial to such efforts is the cultivation of an enduring space for new music within institutions. An audience comes to expect new work within a given space, rather than a fixed repertory.

As for the larger institutions, they have made some progress in bringing new music to reluctant audiences. One outstanding example is the Los Angeles Philharmonic, which has made an international calling card of its devotion to new and recent music. Esa-Pekka Salonen, during his tenure at the orchestra (1992 to 2009), demonstrated to a skeptical American-orchestra community that regular programming of modern music need not be a disadvantage at the box office; indeed, it assisted in the orchestra's rise to the international first rank. At another GIAS meeting, Salonen noted that he had the advantage of administrators—first Ernest Fleischmann, then Deborah Borda—who supported him, especially in the early years of his tenure, when he encountered skepticism from audiences and performers. Too often, poor box-office and audience complaints lead to the premature cancellation of such efforts. Another example is the Seoul Philharmonic's *Ars Nova* series, founded by Unsuik Chin a decade ago (see Chapter 14 in this volume). Addressing the fact that progressive twentieth-century music had been greatly neglected in Korean concert culture, she has programmed more than 170 Korean premieres, both of contemporary and "classic" modern work. In order to forge links between leading international figures and younger Korean composers, there are composition master classes twice a year, with selected composition students given the rare opportunity to have their rehearsed and read through by the Seoul Philharmonic under such guest conductors as Susanna Mälkki, François-Xavier Roth, and Stefan Asbury. The series has brought in a new and younger public and held the interest of more tradition-minded listeners. One other notable trend is that a number of high-profile instrumental soloists have seen new music as a way of furthering their careers. Yo-Yo Ma, Hilary Hahn, Johannes Moser, and Leila Josefowicz, among others, have broken the stereotype of the "new-music specialist" (i.e., one lacking in box-office appeal).

In stylistic terms, new music seems more diverse than it was several decades ago. As recently as the 1970s and 1980s, contemporary music was often seen as a closed, constricted world, defined by fierce polemics. In New York, for example, the compositional world was said to be split between the "uptown" school, which carried on the legacy of Schoenberg's twelve-tone method of composition, and the "downtown" school, which followed the avant-garde precepts of John Cage and

his followers (Gann, 2006). In fact, these divisions were somewhat exaggerated: composers of many other persuasions were active throughout that period. All the same, one often encountered a clubbish dogmatism, and the discourse tended to be highly technical. Composers acquired the reputation of being disdainful of the ordinary listener. A series of developments at the end of the twentieth century shook up the existing order of new music and brought new perspectives to the fore. Until around 1950, composers were almost always of European or American origin. The ascendancy of composers from the Middle East, Asia, and Australia—the likes of Toru Takemitsu, Isang Yun, Yoji Yuasa, Franghiz Ali-Zadeh, Chou Wen-chung, and Liza Lim—permanently changed the complexion of so-called classical music. Furthermore, composition has ceased to be an almost exclusively all-male preserve, although one would not necessarily know this from some major orchestra seasons (several leading ensembles announced all-male seasons for 2018–2019 period). That said, there is still a great deal of work to be done in bringing more diversity to new-music programs, especially in terms of ethnic background. The extraordinary array of composer-musicians around the collective AACM, straddling African-American and European traditions, deserves more notice in the classical field. The work of the younger composer Tyshawn Sorey demonstrates the degree to which the jazz-classical divide is fictitious.

In American music, the signal event of the late twentieth century was the phenomenon of minimalism. Terry Riley, Steve Reich, and Philip Glass reasserted fundamental tonal harmonies and regular rhythmic patterns without displaying nostalgia for a bygone age. This was a fresh, modern tonality, often inflected by South Asian, African, and African-American. György Ligeti, in his late period, made his own rapprochement with tonality, employing a fragmented, kaleidoscopic version of the familiar harmonic language. In Europe, the Spectralist composers dealt with the question of tonality in a quite different way. They used advanced computer software to analyze the spectra of overtones that accompany any resonating tone, and then they extrapolated a new kind of music from the complex patterns that they found. Familiar intervals such as fifth and the major third can be heard alongside harmonies of much greater density, including microtones outside of the standard twelve-note chromatic scale. The modernist cult of complexity has, however, by

no means abated. Many younger composers have avidly embraced the legacies of Stockhausen, Xenakis, Cage, or the great German avant-gardist Helmut Lachenmann. Yet these next-generation modernists seem less fixated on process, on the working out of an inflexible system. Instead, they are often drawn to a raw intensity of sound, and are not immune to influences from popular music—less in terms of melody or harmony than with regard to instrumental timbre. Thus, one finds electric guitars and a guttural vocal manner in the work of Olga Neuwirth, or a sound evocative of black-metal bands in the music of Raphaël Cendo. At another extreme, the Wandelweiser group of composers, who take inspiration from Cage, exudes a withdrawn, otherworldly quality, cultivating quiet, sparse sounds and meditative silences (Rutherford-Johnson, 2017).

The variegated world of new music can baffle first-time listeners. The challenge of coming years will be to make sense of the present-day explosion of compositional activity: there will be a need for curatorial voices guiding audiences through the field. Perhaps the most significant question is whether we can bring about a deeper integration between these distinct worlds of new music and mainstream classical music, so that traditional classical audiences open their ears to new work, and, likewise, so that new-music listeners can become part of the cohort supporting the older institutions. Our wider discussions of concert venues, formats, and protocols can readily be linked to the phenomenon of separate audiences for new and older music. The architecture of so many concert halls seems to militate against contemporary works, which feel out of place amid Gilded Age décor. Latter-day spaces like Disney Hall in Los Angeles, the Philharmonie de Paris (see Chapter 15 in this volume), and the Elbphilharmonie in Hamburg have proved more hospitable to contemporary voices. Marketing campaigns at mainstream institutions often fail to give attention to premières, and, indeed, often conceal their existence, for fear of alienating subscribers. New-music ensembles can seek out more opportunities to incorporate older works into their programs and collaborate with established institutions. Collaborations with museums have proved particularly fruitful for ICE and Bang on a Can.

In all, the historic split between old and new in the classical-music sphere seems one of the most important questions—possibly the most

important question—confronting us as we move forward in the twenty-first century.

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