

Contemporary Music and the Defence of the West

Contemporary or New Music, which in the following essay refers to music placing itself in the tradition of the European avant-gardes of the twentieth century, finds itself in a peculiar position these days. What originated as a radical force of renewal, reflection and extension of musical practice, today - while persisting in revolutionary attitudes - has developed into a stronghold of defensive structures in the vicinity of concert halls and conservatories. How can it be that music, which sees newness as one of its core values, still evolves for the most part in the 19th century concert hall?

All those who, willing to surrender themselves to the big experience, engaged with the worldly communion of the classical musical concert - perhaps at the Viennese Musikverein - know about its role in society. No matter how rare and expensive the tickets to comeback concerts of a rock legend, there is no other institution that allows its well-dressed audience, in co-celebration with other beautiful members of society, to solemnise human, and with it, personal beauty. In central Europe classical music, with its insignia and institutions, is truly a pillar of society and state. If as a contemporary composer one stands close enough to this pillar, it is possible, with some luck and dexterity, to produce the impression of shouldering a share of the load oneself.

In this self-styling as the only rightful beneficiary of the past century's estates of musical genius, Contemporary Music also lays claim to the symbolic capital attached. This symbolic capital of European classical music, with its institutions of symphony orchestras, concert halls and academies, can in the system of public arts funding be transmuted into a more tangible form of capital, namely cash – something of existential importance for New Music, because only paid experts play it. The fact that composers, instrumentalists and academics from the area of institutionalised Contemporary Music populate the juries and commissions in charge of distributing funding is not detrimental to the prospects of this maneuvering.

Contemporary Music is not the cause of or driving force behind the institutions within which it evolves, but is rather a profiteer. In this respect it does not simply as a parasite, it also relates to its hosts in a symbiotic fashion by providing these institutions with a faint shimmer of contemporary artistic relevance. Given that New Music is the primary beneficiary, it wields no power over its host-institutions and is thusly obliged to adapt. As a consequence of this, Contemporary Music today is defined less by specific musical structures in its scores, more by its determination to provide backwards compatible music for these existing structures like concert halls, opera houses, orchestras and sheet music publishers.

To sum things up aided by slight exaggeration, Contemporary Music is a truly revolutionary force that - due to its own founding principles and the requirements of those institutions to which it has attached itself - feels obliged to recruit its revolutionaries exclusively from within the Vienna Boy's Choir to then fight its battles in the Kapuzinergruft¹. For the performative experiments of the 1950s and '60s, as well as any attempt to question the social structure of the orchestra or the score's position, there is no longer any room. Not that these artistic endeavours have ceased to be, but they have been marginalised and are now situated in contexts outside of institutionalised Contemporary Music, which leaves no room for deviation.

¹ The imperial crypt in Vienna.

The Conservatory and its surroundings

The academy, originally the mortal enemy of New Music is now its backbone and most vital support structure. The fact that New Music today evolves mainly in close proximity to academia amplifies the circularity of these tendencies. The conservatory with its auditions and associated competitions acts as a controlling agent and filter for youth development. Only those most eager to please and to meet the required high standards are allowed to study, further encouraging perfect alignment. By populating the funding bodies' and competitions' juries, the lecturers and professors extend their influence far beyond the class rooms, brokering commissions and jobs. This is of course only for those in greatest synchronicity with the system's workings, ensuring that already established composers yield utmost control over what is to follow them. Given that these mechanisms have been in place for several decades it is no wonder that New Music has turned from a music of revolutionaries into what it is today, a music of apprentices and their masters, mainly already in third generation. 'Being good' became the central criterion and only the ones willing to adhere to proper standards and requirements make New Music; everybody else does something else, without entitlement to the estates of the compositional heroes, who quite unfortunately - given that they all died quite some time ago - are unable to comment on the situation.

Repetitive Structures

All in all the situation of New Music today might be interpreted as a peer-review system spun out of control. What has great merits as an instrument of quality control for scientific publications (even though it might always have somewhat conservative tendencies) has, in the case of New Music, where it was applied implicitly and without reflection on method, in combination with the existence of only one single source of funding, served as the guarantor for the implementation of a highly repetitive and ever more constricting system.

Contemporary Music has turned into an environment exclusively populated by experts. Its composers and instrumentalists are experts in new music, as are the few journalists and curators involved. Since there are no independent sources of funding there also exists no way around these established experts and they elevate only the 'best' of the young composers into the system. Only those compatible can be elected and this compatibility is always the result of a corresponding will to be. Add to this a kind of deafness to any disdain for those rhythms and some characteristically repetitive structures are the result, both in funding and education. Regardless of any adjustments for context, just the notion of young techno producers in the late 1980s being obliged to ask Sir Mick Jagger or Sir Elton John for permission to produce and distribute their music clearly demonstrates the bizarre repercussions these structures necessarily have on the reality of Contemporary Music. It is for good reason then that New Music, with its aging rites and gestures, today sounds thoroughly out of time and that in the Contemporary Music world as it actually exists today there is at least an equal amount of pressure to provide pure forms of affirmation of the existent as there might be found in commercial format radio contexts.

The score

One more key factor in the definition of what Contemporary Music is is the score, the position of which can be viewed from different angles. On the one hand it has become quite a unique feature in itself. No other form of music today uses the score as its primary form of publication and distribution. But the historically charged codes distributed in these scores to today's recipients, who are themselves ever less actively involved in music making based on sheet music, appear mysterious in themselves. As a relic of 1950s musicology it still

seems widely accepted that without a score there cannot possibly exist a full and autonomous work of music, this echoing the traditional faith in the primacy of symbolic representation, which it is hoped increases universality in ways that purely concrete sound cannot.

Crucial though is the fact that the score is contemporary music's interface with the historically developed institutions of state and high culture. Given new music's market place, the arena in which public arts' funding is re-distributed to opera houses, concert halls and orchestras still being dominated by sheet music publishers and their rental departments, the score is the sine qua non for those determined to participate. The workings of the accounting systems in this re-distribution of public funding and their need for scores reveals a certain naive faith in the possibility of objectively defining artistic value, and in relation to this attributing monetary value to individual artists' works.

Central to the bizarre, but nevertheless institutionalized distinction between E- and U- music is the existence of a score to a piece submitted to the artists' rights societies in Central Europe. In Austria for example the collecting society (AKM) has a dedicated rating commission in charge of defining the artistic value of a composer's new piece by attributing to it a multiplication factor for the royalties payable per minute of radio broadcast or concert presentation. Music of a serious character (ernste Musik, E-Musik) for ensembles of 10 players or more gets attributed the highest multiplier, namely 3. On-going practice has it that under the critical eye of such juries no composition existing on recording media alone, regardless of how reflective, revolutionary, even downright ugly it might sound, can ever reach the artistic levels of score-based music, and this certainly leads to some rather peculiar situations. A composer of Contemporary Music might, unprejudiced as she is, venture out to explore the compositional technique - ubiquitous in e.g. hiphop - of looping in her new work for orchestra. Should she do this on her computer not on the level of symbolic representation of notes but rather of symbolic representation of sound, it is likely that in accordance with findings of the rating commission it will not be classified as art. This is because while looping might make things rather contemporary, the score and the orchestra contribute noblesse. And along with this noblesse, the symbolic capital of the Western music traditions, comes funding money.

Symbolic worlds

Working in an environment of symbol representation like the score, always introduces the danger of - for the sake of simplifying things - reducing the compositional work to the managing of tasks in symbolic systems. In doing so musical worlds easily collapse into rule systems on paper. In this, one composer's act of liberation can quickly and efficiently be distilled into another composer's corset, a fact that has been highly influential in shaping New Music. It is also in these assumed symbolic systems that levels of complexity are easily confused with levels of meaning. In the age of digital computation and the technical possibilities it brings along, Bach's Fugues, to name an example, can hardly be thought of as highly complex in a mathematical sense. The mathematical model of two liquids mixing is complex and in line with this my pouring of milk into coffee would be dramatically more expressive and meaningful than the Baroque master's complete oeuvre. A statement that would be somewhat difficult to verify through listening experience.

Always within the frame

In its time the music which today is referred to as 'classical' was not the individually selected playground but the horizon of musical thinking. The laws and media of classical music were the laws of reality at large, the

ends of all possibilities and in no way the freely chosen rules of a game. Musical practice in this field no longer works in this way and many of the stylistic musical descriptions and rules are now third person, outside views onto worlds long gone by. Much of what started as attempts to extend the horizon of music making has slowly descended into quasi-folkloristic traditions, seeking its motivation for keeping up a specific practice in the cultivation of traditions. As an example, the role of the 'extended playing techniques' of traditional musical instruments of the symphony orchestra might be named. What pioneers of New Music found on their quest for new sounds might seem unnecessary today, from a media-technology standpoint, whilst being indispensable as a sign of belonging to a certain group. "To re-negotiate the possibilities of the flute", "to question its limits again and again"; why would one not simply enjoy the flute while playing it? And, if one should really feel restricted by the flute's limitations, why not simply put it aside? But without proper instruments there can be no contemporary music, for which the concepts of 'craftsmanship' and 'virtuosity' are of such central importance. It is the notion of 'craftsmanship' that reveals itself under close examination as a strategy of immunizing implicitly presupposed fundamentals. And without their conventional instruments the virtuosos, in whose romantic lee contemporary composers navigate, would be left to waft the thin air in silence.

Contemporary music, this joyous heir to the treasures of European musical history, is unwilling to see that the instruments and techniques with which, and the institutions like concert halls in which it acts are contingent and not simply given. New Music consequently concentrates on an ever more expert and virtuoso handling of defined production methods and media in a world it implicitly conceptualises as finite.

Commandos and Codes

In the history of art music after World War II music as a medium for the (self-)synchronisation of people for the purpose of dance, lock- or cross-step has not been looked upon favourably. Synchronisation of human beings to the end of producing non-synchronising music on the other hand is widely accepted and the condition sine qua non for Contemporary Music today. That's because with the musical score comes the accompanying tone in which the majority of those works are composed, the tone of abrasive commandeering. The score contains lists of orders to be duly executed by paid specialists. The complete codes detailing the sequences of orders are available only to the general, the conductor, all other musicians being used more as oscillators and sound emitting devices rather than fellow artists. Their attributed role is to follow unquestioningly the command and to produce the required sounds at the times indicated. Orchestra musicians, in exchange for money, let themselves be remote-controlled by their parts, which - akin to a conveyor belt - determine those sequences of movement necessary for the production of the sounds required. In the context of classical music this may not be entirely dissimilar, musicians there also having to execute what is written in their parts, in an exact and stylistically appropriate manner. In doing so, however, musicians know very well what position in the whole of the piece their voice takes, making it much easier for them to perform as individuals in concert with a group of others. In many ways Contemporary Music exchanges money gained from funding bodies for power over musicians in the societal context of the concert hall, and in doing so is able to borrow their regular audience. Given that the public finances most of this, the composer acts in these contexts as a subordinate body for the symbolisation of state power. Proper hierarchical structures are - along with position in society - another important aspect of Contemporary Music's borrowing from the historic high art of music to achieve its clichéd sounds of resistance.

Contemporary Music and the loudspeaker

Contemporary Music is more often than not score-based music for instruments of the (late-)romantic symphony orchestra. Due to this New Music is, from the point of view of media technology, backwards compatible with the institutions central to European art music established in the 19th century, like the symphony orchestra and the music market prior to the invention of sound recording and, above all, it is 100% compatible with the opera houses and concert halls with their Mozart-Sälen and Purcell Rooms. Which, as was shown above, it has to be. Contemporary Music is the part of musical life that is least influenced by the technological advances of the last century. This is ever more astonishing as many of the innovations in the area of music originated from and were driven by the musical avant-gardes. While at the major contemporary New Music festivals there are performed compositions for instruments and live electronics, at the focal points there still lie unchanged - bar a couple of extensions, e.g. in the percussion section - the instruments of the European symphony orchestra.

The loudspeaker and its related media technologies such as sound recording, sound processing and transmission are in this context viewed as extensions of the canonical, classical instruments. The fact that the advent of these technologies and the mediatisation of sound and music changed music production and reception in fundamental ways does not receive proper attention. This mediatisation, itself a foundation of continuous change, does not only alter the roles traditional musical instruments play in concert situations, but - much rather - it changes the roles music takes on in everyday life, it influences how music is made, how it is learned, used and conceptualised. It changes, what music is.

Contemporary Music and its other

Contemporary Music sees itself as the opposite of a presumed phantom, that of a completely uncritical, manipulative, self-repetitive popular music, concerned exclusively with financial gain. This self-designed caricature substitutes reality. It is all forms of music today outside of the classical concert hall and opera house that cannot be subsumed under the label 'contemporary' music, regardless of what they actually sound like. It is the backwards compatibility in terms of media and social context that really is the central distinguishing feature.

Continental New Music has also to be seen as a counter movement against what is perceived as colonisation of the musical vernacular through popular music traditions emanating from the English-speaking world. But since it is predominantly these traditions that also shape the musical popular culture in continental Europe, it is this stance that further inhibits dialogue and cross-pollination between the concert hall with its art music contexts and the musical vernacular. The (pejoratively defined) opposite for composers of New Music still seems to be shaped mostly by the operetta and other 'light' forms of classical instrumental music practice. Something that in today's world is hardly an influential factor. Whilst for the professor of musical composition it is in a light-hearted moment perfectly conceivable to pen a short waltz (maybe in D), a catchy pop-song, a successful one even, would have to be looked down upon as a bit proletarian.

Contemporary Music and its relation to audible reality

Quite a substantial share of the compositions (even by rather young colleagues) heard in Contemporary Music concerts today bring to mind competitions for highly expressive poetry in Volapük or Klingon. Which of course, especially in its complete lack of reference to the world most others refer and listen to as reality, might be rather charming. Until it emerges that nobody involved seems aware of this parenthesis 'Volapük'.

While everybody involved constantly strikes the pose 'determined and without fear we march into the future', it is taken as a given that on this march it is possible to relate only to the musical vernacular, social order, media technologies and concert situations from ages long bygone. In doing so New Music, trying to look ever so contemporary, insists on its clichés of resistance with their implicit laws (ban of rhythm and tonality, imperative use of scores and concert halls) and standardised models of transgression, while whiningly clinging on to the Mozart Saal and those remainders of eternity still to be found in the classical music circuit.

In its will to have its everyday existence 'in succession to' dominated by rules, the origins of which are shrouded in history, New Music is not dissimilar to faith-based communities. These fundamental rules might hem in, but in doing so they also provide extra security and 'in remembrance of' they lay ground to the elevating feeling of superiority against the others, the non-believers. While the original motivations fade from memory what remains are sedimented, implicit laws that are viewed as indispensable to an extent that in everyday practice they are completely pushed out of view. It is because of this that New Music's true opus magnum, the tips of which protrude into this reality in the form of ensemble and orchestra pieces, needs to be seen in parallel with something that was the mission most sublime to many a European faith group under siege, namely the defence of the West.

Volkmar Klien, 2012