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Engaging the Public with New Music: The Roles of the Public, the Composer, and the Educator

By Maria Confer

Concerning new music, when educators inform and engage the public about it, composers are open to dialogue regarding their works, and the public knows what to listen for, there is a higher chance of active public acceptance of new music. The tripartite relationship between the public, composers, and educators benefits from open communication and community education, in addition to each participant knowing their responsibility and contribution in the relationship. An international history of this relationship since 1900, a delineation of who and what qualifies as an “educator,” leads into a brief discussion about the future of new music in the world.

The responsibility of the public

It is the responsibility of those with a serious interest in music to know what to listen for in new music, and to support the arts in general. While the public in its entirety might not regularly listen to (new and old) classical music, those who are committed to music or wish to be culturally aware and involved would greatly benefit by following current events, composers, and musical ideas. An effort should be made to understand new music in its cultural and musical contexts, in order to make an informed evaluation. An awareness of current general approaches to musical communication prevents the listener from asking or expecting something from the music that it did not intend to give in the first place.

Shortly after the turn of the century, Debussy's music began to spread throughout Hungary. Still steeped in the Romantic and late Romantic tradition, the Hungarian public and the music critics grasped for new ways to describe his modern music. Two polarized camps emerged. His main criticisms can be summarized as being difficult to understand, and for lacking distinguishable form and significant content. The subsequent three quotations are found in Gergely Fazekas' paper "'Unhealthy' and 'Ugly' Music or a 'Compass Pointing towards a Purer Art of Superior Quality'? The Early Reception of Debussy in Hungary (1900-1918)," which discusses a wide spectrum of reactions to Debussy's music after the turn of the century. Following the 1906 premiere of his *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*, the journal *Zenevilág* published an article condemning the work:

It is impossible to find any form or content in this work. The whole thing is nothing other than a series of peculiar, oddish and almost always meaningless moods with not even original effects of orchestration. [...] The work is full of preposterous harmonies and cacophonies; it is unoriginal, even ugly. In general there is no properly so-called music in the whole work. The public received it very coldly, i.e. it was not received at all, but not because it was hard to understand, since there was nothing to understand in this music, but because this whole music is unhealthy. Nevertheless the performance was not wasted: at least with this (and with the string quartet we heard at the Kemenys') we have had enough of Mr. Debussy.¹

Both the reviewer and the public mentioned in the article appear to regard Debussy's music as insignificant. Telling phrases include "In general there is no properly so-called music" and "it was not received at all." For the reviewer, oddity and lack of immediate accessibility are not included in his schemata of music, because he refuses to call *Prelude* "music" for these reasons, and states that the public did not receive it as such. However, the main accolades for his music

¹ Gergely Fazekas. "'Unhealthy' and 'Ugly' Music or a 'Compass Pointing towards a Purer Art of Superior Quality'? The Early Reception of Debussy in Hungary (1900-1918)." *Studia Musicologica* 49, no. 3/4 (2008): 322. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25598327>.

include his ability to create musical colors, and his unusual and unique use of forms. After the Brussels String Quartet's 1907 performance of Debussy's String Quartet, Géza Csáth acclaims the work in *Budapesti Napló*: "The great Claude Debussy's String Quartet was brought here tonight by the Brussels String Quartet. Inexpressibly refined lacework dominated by discreet but unusual colours. [...] Short melodies running into one another have the same particular effect on us as for example the prose of Nietzsche..."² Debussy's music is not formless. Csáth recognizes that instead of employing old forms, Debussy creates a new one in his quartet, one that flows from idea to idea. The new form, though unusual, still communicates to Csáth, as seen when he compares it to Nietzsche's prose. Musical colors also have a more prominent place in his musical schemata. Géza Vilmos Zágón, a music critic and composer, most clearly interprets Debussy's music and aesthetics. He is clearly aware of the current artistic movements of his day, and recognizes that Debussy is using a different techniques and means to communicate. In his analysis of Debussy's works, published in *Zenekozlony* in 1910, he points listeners to Picasso's paintings in order to explain what Debussy is doing in his music:

If someone is still puzzled by some works by Debussy, there is a last experiment to try out: to look at a painting by Picasso (he is not to be taken for Pissarro). The angularities of Picasso's figures are not distortions but fixings: the fixing of the mood of an atom moment. [...] Its musical analogy is in most of the Debussy that seems mysterious. [...] It is natural that for the majority of the public this music will seem distorted and only for the minority will it seem angular, which surely represents something more valuable than an empty rotundity.³

Zágón serves Debussy well by not confining him to the box of previous composers. Debussy did not intend to write music in the same style or to use the same means as his predecessors. When evaluating new music, listeners today should understand that musical means differ between

² Ibid. 324.

³ Ibid. 333.

composers, which would include attitudes towards tonality, form, aesthetics, venue, and performing forces. This is distinctively different from subjectively “liking” the music. It is an effort to understand the music that is circulating around them, an effort to be able to describe it in positive terms, not solely in terms of what it is not, or what it does not do.

The responsibility of educators

It is the responsibility of educators to inform and engage the public concerning new music. An educator, for the purposes of this paper, is anyone or anything that provides the listeners with information. Educators include magazines, teachers, schools, music societies and festivals, and orchestras.

Magazines such as *Modern Music* and *New Music* served their readers by initiating conversation about current musical topics and circulating scores. *Modern Music* began in 1924 as *The League of Composers Review*. When it first appeared, composers as well as music critics and historians contributed to the magazine, writing articles and remarking on current musical developments. The relationship between contemporary music and society, a focal interest, generated articles and discussions about new techniques and how to assimilate them, the utility and purpose of music, the individual’s and the nation’s relationship to music, and the means of making and producing music--such as new instruments, electronic music, musique concrète, and the medium of records, radios, and movies. However, during the 1930s and 40s, interest in novel musical developments waned, in favor of discussions of the utilitarian role of music and creating an American sound. The relationship between composer and public became a central topic, along with the perspectives of the public themselves, and the United States’ role in entering the contemporary music sphere. Topics included music for school, public and common man appeal, and folk music. Yet some composers were dissatisfied. Musical novelty and development, they

felt, should remain at the forefront of discussion, not left behind in favor of public utility and the new wave of American nationalism. Eric Salzman, in his article “Modern Music in Retrospect”, summarizes how the latter composers responded to the change of topic: “There is a notable piece on the subject by Sessions and a series of eloquent pleas by Einstein, who goes so far in denying the populist, nationalist, and Marxist clichés as to argue that the great national styles have been determined by the character of the creative imaginations of composers rather than the other way round.”⁴ Populism remained a debated topic until the last issue of *Modern Music*, around the end of WWII. Although the end of *Modern Music* disappointed those composers against the rise of musical populism, *Modern Music* remained an outlet for composers to share with their readership the current issues and developments in the musical world.

In addition to the printed word, music festivals fulfill the role of educators through the live performance of music. Although not dedicated solely to new music, the BBC Proms have successfully expanded the audience base for old and new classical music, whose narrowing demographics concern music educators and orchestras alike. The strategies that the Proms implement in reaching their audiences could be applied by new music festivals in reaching a greater audience.

The Proms began with Robert Newman and Sir Henry Wood. Newman’s goal of facilitating an appreciation of “serious music” within the public, and Henry Wood’s willingness to take up the baton for the first time on Saturday, August 10, 1895, began what would continue to be one of the most successful ventures in actively involving the public with music.⁵ Bonita Kolb, in her article “Classical Music Concerts Can Be Fun: The Success of BBC Proms,”

⁴ Eric Salzman, “Modern Music in Retrospect,” *Perspectives of New Music* 2, no. 2 (1964): 19.

⁵ “Proms Facts,” *BBC*, April 23, 2015,

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/mediapacks/proms2015/promsfacts/promsfacts>.

describes the Proms' success as follows: "The Proms and their audience have redefined the ritual of attending a classical music concert to be a shared social event that happens among an equal community of music lovers."⁶ By reconstructing the social experience of the classical concert, the Proms audiences now include an increasing number of younger people, from teenagers to young adults. In 2014, 33,000 people bought tickets for the first time, 9,400 18-year-olds and under bought tickets, and the average attendance for the main evening Proms at Royal Albert Hall was 88%.⁷ Like the Gershwin of music festivals, the Proms have straddled the divide between new, old, and popular music. An article from a 2017 issue of the Chicago Tribune announces that year's Proms broad musical program:

Today's BBC Proms bestrides tradition and modernity. ...This year's smart, eclectic programming includes a generous array of new works (many of them BBC commissions), anniversary celebrations (Pierre Boulez, Henri Dutilleux, Alberto Ginastera and David Bowie all are commemorated this year) and major orchestras (the Berlin Philharmonic, Staatskapelle Berlin, Staatskapelle Dresden and Leipzig Gewandhaus orchestras are the German imports), along with the various London and BBC orchestras.⁸

The combination of casual and inclusive atmosphere, variety of music, and musical quality attribute to the Proms attractiveness. The price is also inclusive. The standing room immediately in front of the orchestra, originally some of the more expensive seats in a typical classical concert, sell for as little as six pounds. The low prices actively invert the feeling of exclusiveness commonly claimed to be felt at classical concerts.

New music conferences provide their audiences the opportunity to discuss as well as to

⁶ Bonita M. Kolb, "Classical Music Concerts Can Be Fun: The Success of BBC Proms," *International Journal of Arts Management* 1, no. 1 (1998): 23.

⁷ "Proms Facts," *BBC*, April 23, 2015.

⁸ John von Rhein, "A week of high musical adventure at London's BBC Proms," *Chicago Tribune*, Mar. 16, 2017, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/music/vonrhein/ct-classical-london-proms-ent-0831-20160830-column.html>.

listen to new music with others. The University of New York held a conference in 2011 dedicated to the discussion and performance of Milton Babbitt's works. Of main concern was developing an approach to his music, in order to strengthen the relationship between the public and his music in practical ways.

During the conference, two positions concerning approaching his use of serialism surfaced, with most taking moderate stance.⁹ The first approach states that one must study Babbitt's compositional procedures and techniques, such as his use of twelve-tone serialism and pitch classes. The second approach states that one should emphasize immediate perception of the music. Hearing patterns or form from listening alone is more important than understanding where a tone row begins and ends. The discussion did not arrive at a clear solution to approaching his music, however:

It was felt to be peremptory to reject [studying Babbitt's use of serialism], even if it fails the tribunal of sensory experience. But an even deeper source of this hesitancy, I believe, was our recognition of the intriguing cluster of issues bound up in this problem. Is the analyst responsible to the listener, the composer, the performer, all three, or none of the above? To what extent should we favor a first listening? If an observation can only be made by score study, is it admissible? What do we want out of the analysis of a piece? Needless to say, the seminar ended with more questions than answers.¹⁰

Yet clarinetist Charles Neidich, who performed *My Ends Are My Beginnings*, pointed out that this piece has a basically Romantic structure. It builds up to and then recedes from a climax that is placed near the end of the piece. He made sense of it by taking a rhetorical approach, an approach that studies a piece's form and use of rhetorical devices, such as expository sections, transitions, developmental sections (not strictly in the sense of developing previously stated material), climaxes or anticlimaxes, and concluding sections. Neidich suggests that rhetorical

⁹ Zachary Bernstein. "Hearing, Studying, and Remembering Milton Babbitt at the CUNY Graduate Center." *Theory and Practice* 37/38 (2012): 291-294. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43864915>.

¹⁰ Ibid. 294.

devices appear to inform Babbitt's use of the twelve-tone system, rather than vice versa, where the system would dictate the rhetoric¹¹. Because they relate more directly to listening and perception, examining overall progression and emphases of the piece could be more helpful to performers and listeners.

Another potential educator: The responsibility of composers

A composer's primary responsibility is improving their craft. Yet for those who wish to more directly involve the public with new music, they may consider taking on educational roles.

American composer Henry Cowell created *New Music* in 1927, facilitating the circulation of many new American scores. Publishers discouraged composers such as Charles Ives, Carl Ruggles, Dane Rudhyar, and Ruth Crawford, who composed new music in the classical vein, from publishing their works. These compositions rarely accrued a substantial profit. Ives had to print his compositions himself, and Cowell turned to European publishers. Through the vision of Henry Cowell, *New Music* gave these composers the opportunity to have their "unsaleable scores" published in the States.

Yet *New Music* could not stand on its own. Without the financial support of Charles Ives, *New Music* would not have survived long after its conception. Ives sent Cowell money for the publication on more than one occasion, often saving the periodical from discontinuing. He helped Cowell by buying stock, directing them to important people, and among all his financial receivers, he supported Cowell the most. He later sent \$1000 to cover another expense. He paid for his own publications of his music, saving the periodical money. Ives was ill, however, so while his financial support was on time, his pieces were often late and without the conductor's note.

¹¹ Ibid. 295.

Because of publishing costs and various fees, Cowell repeatedly found himself turning to Ives for money. Ives donated much of his money to the cause, adding up to about 1/3 of the total costs. New ideas, such as the orchestra series and the recording series, by default met his ears before Cowell began the project. The “magazine of unsaleable scores”¹² returned the favor to Ives by becoming the main publishing source for his own scores, such as the second movement of his Fourth Symphony, *Nineteen Songs*, and *Washington’s Birthday*. By the last published issue, *New Music* had “served its public for over thirty years, bringing forth score after score in an amazing variety of styles by every major American composer of the twentieth century.”¹³ Cowell realized his vision of reaching a larger audience for contemporary music through the medium of print, while also serving new American composers by providing them with an outlet through which to publish their music.

Arnold Schoenberg, in addition to composing with new, trailblazing techniques, conducted a workers’ choir and established the Society for Private Musical Performances. He began conducting workers’ choruses when he was twenty-five. These choruses were especially popular in Germany and Britain, where governments perceived the choruses as an opportunity for workers to become more cultured and unified, and the workers joined for solidarity, learning, and a break from work environment. Some musicians saw this as an opportunity to introduce art music to the public, including Schoenberg:

Schoenberg had, of course, conducted workers’ choruses in his youth and had friends on the political left who were closely involved in the movement, such as David Bach. While he had nothing but contempt for the idea of art for ‘the masses,’ he did care considerably that his music might be appreciated by ordinary people who approached it individually and thought about it for themselves, unaffected by the largely hostile views of ‘cultured’ critics.¹⁴

¹² Rita H. Mead, "Cowell, Ives, and "New Music,'" *The Musical Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (1980): 559.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Malcolm MacDonald, *Schoenberg* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 16.

When conducting a workers chorus in Vienna around the turn of the century, he was noted for introducing the workers to the chorale works of Brahms. Gradually, he developed the abilities of his chorus to be able to sing increasingly difficult and novel pieces. Eventually, the chorus became skilled enough to sing his own modern compositions!¹⁵

Modern compositions gained another opportunity to be heard when Schoenberg developed the Society for Private Musical Performances in 1918. He sought to provide those of the public who supported the arts a place where they could hear and learn about modern music in a more private setting. The main goal was an understanding of the music. Pieces ranging from piano pieces to orchestral pieces were carefully chosen, studied, and rehearsed for the best possible performance for audiences. Often, pieces were played again later in the week, to increase understanding through repetition. Applauding, cheering, booing alike were strictly prohibited, to prevent popular opinion from influencing the listener. Schoenberg spells out the underlying reason for this etiquette and for the whole Society itself: The only success that the composer can have is the one that ought to be the most important for him: that he can make himself understood.¹⁶ After its short three-season span, audiences had experienced the works of composers such as Mahler, Scriabin, Berg, and Webern, in a space where they could listen and learn peacefully, without outside criticism and commercial interests, and alongside others who wished to do the same.

¹⁵ David Joseph Bach, "A Note on Arnold Schoenberg," *The Musical Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (1936): 13.

¹⁶ Kenneth Slowik. "In the shadow of Schönberg's *Verein*." *Smithsonian*. 2007.
<http://smithsonianchambermusic.org/education/program-notes>.

Conclusion

Staying up-to-date about new music should be included in the various musical activities of one who wishes to be involved with music. Music educators, to increase the understanding of and involvement in new music, should continue to discuss current musical events and ideas. Composers could be a great asset to involving the public with new music, either by engaging the public directly through teaching or indirectly through publication. Below, the appendix lists currently running new music festivals. These festivals provide a way to become involved with new music in the community.

Appendix

Current New Music Festivals, Societies, Events

- Bangor Music Festival
 - Located in Bangor, Gwynedd, UK. Bangor Music Festival is a charitable organization that presents workshops and performances of newly commissioned works.
- BBC Proms
 - Located in London, England. Eight weeks of concerts during the summer. Old and new classical, pop, and non-Western music are presented. Most concerts are held in the Royal Albert Hall. Pre-prom talks were incorporated starting from the 1970s.
- BGSU New Music Festival
 - Located in Bowling Green, Ohio. Home of the MidAmerican Center for Contemporary Music. Features newly commissioned works and discussion sessions. The university also runs a radio station, *New Music from Bowling Green*, that presents a variety of works from contemporary composers.
- Charlotte New Music Festival
 - The Charlotte New Music Festival brings composers, choreographers, musicians, and dancers together for a unique opportunity to collaborate and perform new music in fresh ways. Workshops, rehearsals, and concerts are featured throughout the week.
- Chicago's New Music Orchestra
 - Located in Chicago, Illinois. The orchestra regularly commissions orchestral works from contemporary composers of all stylistic backgrounds. It especially reaches out to local composers, while also seeking to bring home fresh works from outside Chicago.
- MusicNOW with the Cincinnati Orchestra
 - Located in Cincinnati, Ohio. MusicNOW regularly commissions new work and collaborates with contemporary composers. The festival features the product of these collaborations, encourages composers to take venture into new musical territory, and gives audiences the opportunity to hear this carefully-prepared music performed live. The festival was founded in April 2006 by Bryce Dessner, a member of The National.
- Vancouver New Music
 - Located in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Vancouver New Music holds an annual festival centered on a theme, such as mechanical music (2016). VNC commissions and features works from Canadian and international composers. Workshops, community events, and interdisciplinary collaborations with theatre, art, and dance provide the community with an opportunity to be engaged with new music as well as other arts.

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