Engaging the Public with New Music

The Roles of the Public, the Composer, and the Educator

Maria Confer
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.
“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.”

The Responsibility of the Public

Main Criticisms of Debussy’s Music

1. Difficult to understand
2. Lacking distinguishable form
3. Lacking significant content
"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…"

-- Geza Csath, *Budapesti Naplo*, 1907

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.

--Geza Vilmos Zagon, *Zenekozlony*, 1910
The Responsibility of the Public

Main accolades for his music

1. Creating musical “colors”

2. Unusual and unique use of form
The Responsibility of Educators

It is the responsibility of educators to inform and engage the public concerning new music.

It is the responsibility of composers who wish to more directly involve the public with new music to remain open to dialogue about it.
The Responsibility of Educators

Who Is an Educator?

An educator is anyone or anything that provides the listeners with information. Educators include:

- teachers
- schools
- magazines
- music societies and festivals
- orchestras
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Print

*Modern Music* (1924-1947)

*New Music* (1927-1936)
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Teachers

Arnold Schoenberg: Worker’s choruses and the Society

Society for Private Musical Performances

Festivals and Conferences

BBC Proms

CUNY 2011 Conference: Milton Babbitt
New Music in the Community

- MusicNOW with the Cincinnati Orchestra
  - 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.

- 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.

- BBC Proms

- BGSU New Music Festival
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A: 0:00--Theme 1

Transition: 3:57--Theme 2

B: 5:21--Theme 3

A': 7:30--Theme 1

Coda: 10:32--Theme 1

Formal Analysis of Debussy's Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EvnRC7sX39