

If We Could Write for the Symphony, or, We Are All Mozart

Dennis Báthory-Kitsz

What, you say? There are no living Mozarts? So the wisdom goes. But the wisdom is wrong. There *are* Mozarts. There are *thousands* of Mozarts. We are *all* Mozart, or might be.

If we aren't, it's not because we're creatively empty shells. Rather, it's that we composers don't have an opportunity to *be* Mozart—a *requirement* to be Mozart.

Indeed, none of us (absolutely *none* of us!) has the chance to “be Bach” or “be Mozart” because we're not writing new tunes every day, most of the day—even if we could find the time as fully dedicated composers.

With little opportunity for intense practice, some composers grow more expert in ‘day jobs’ than in the art of composition. Their expertise comes by virtue of simple, insistent daily practice with feedback from knowledgeable co-workers and supervisors.

Consider our friend Mozart. Historians might finesse what I have to say, but he toiled as a employed craftsperson, to be sure. He had students, and had to write for every occasion. His 626 numbered pieces consisted of a more than a thousand individual movements of symphonies, concertos, serenades, Masses, string quartets, and of course operas. He wrote for the available musicians, on deadline, and with strictures of ability and ceremony and religion and taste. The genius we hear is not an artist free to be himself, but an artist as a necessary part of the social and economic fabric.

The elder Bach wrote thousands of pieces, including a multi-movement church cantata for choir and ensemble and organ for *every single Sunday*. Thousands of pieces fill the Bach catalog, some stolen from himself and reworked over and over. He was working to meet the requirements of his royal and ecclesiastical clients, while maintaining an original voice.

And the rest? Vivaldi and Telemann were virtual music factories. They worked under demand, pressure, deadlines, with insistent daily practice and feedback—as do the composers today in their non-musical employment.

Beethoven's concerts featured him and his contemporaries. He didn't have to share a bill, sandwiched before intermission between Dufay and Bach and Monteverdi.

And what about genius? Which of us is a Mozartean genius? Who can know? Perhaps Mozart really was the compositional equivalent of a 500-year flood. Or maybe the time was right, or circumstances conspired to create Mozart from an ordinary composer. Nevertheless, genius did not die in 1791. Or 1827. Or even with Stravinsky in 1971. It is here, alive, healthy, and waiting to be called upon for service.

Over the years, I've thought about what might have happened to the necessary composer. They still exist in the film industry, meeting deadlines and writing to requirements, but these are not the all-purpose, ubiquitous composers of church and court and concert hall. And no, it wasn't that suddenly composers were writing unlistenable music, that the pall of Schoenberg descended like the erstwhile Iron Curtain over concert halls from New York to Santiago on the Pacific, St. Petersburg to Amsterdam on the Atlantic.

No, something else was at work that reduced Stravinsky and Copland and Harris and Bartok to mass cultural insignificance.

That something else was the recording. Simultaneous with the mass production of recordings came a decline of participation in music-making, the growth of a mass-market audience, and a financial and psychological investment in an *object* rather than an *event*.

In just a few years, the artform was no longer economically driven by a combination of private and public events and the one-time experience of live concerts, but rather driven by a quasi-random consumption process—irrespective of musical experience, and cutting deep into middle-class society.

This democratization of consumption has totally changed the economic landscape, with music along with it. Whence the three-minute song? Not from history, where the short song was almost unknown—but from the length of a record side (and, during its brief but intense popularity, the piano roll). In the space of a few decades, songs with multiple verses and even spoken content withered ... as did the amateur singers, who also moved from participant to consumer. In effect, karaoke was born early in the 20th century as people sang to fixed, manufactured music.

Society became louder, too. The subtleties of *pianississimo* were lost in the rising acoustic noise floor. Recordings had squashed dynamics, and piped music—literally piped through tubes—had compressed dynamic and instrumental ranges and altered tone colors. The flat dynamics continue to this day in studio recordings and especially in recorded background music, whose dynamic range is almost completely flat.

Such losses are not new. Harmony pushed aside subtle tuning systems for two centuries, as modulation did to the delicate differences in modes. Something was lost, something gained as the democratization effect brought more music to more people than any time in history. The fruit seller in Manhattan could cry to Puccini with his counterpart in Milan, as could the Texas rancher or the Soviet apparatchik.

But there was another cost aside from length—\$1.25 *per side* for early single-sided platters. Those recordings were cherished, played again and again and again until they were unlistenable round tablets of scratches. They were an *investment*, no longer an event to be held in the memory. And, as if to justify the psychological and economic investment, those consumers would buy more of the same.

And so there was the hidden cost. An investment cycle was born, a conservative cycle by nature, with occasional booms and busts. Composers no longer led; to be economically successful, they would have to follow. But they did not know that, and continued on their way, leaving behind the mass audience that now controlled a market once nurtured by the nobility and the church.

Photography, now the people's artwork, replaced the unpredictable portrait painter with the Kodak Brownie in 1900. The Victor Company began replacing the erratic musician with flat-platter records in 1901. The Horn & Hardart automat began replacing the unpredictable home stove with nickel-slot meals in 1902. The great people-moving subway replaced the unreliability of walking in New York in 1904. Lines of stamped-out Model T automobiles replaced the unpredictable personalities of horses in 1908.

In this new milieu, there was no difference in economic significance to the composer, just a difference in clientele. This clientele loved novelty, but was decreasingly interested in the erratic, unpredictable, confusing *new*. The Great War then changed Europe, source of artistic and musical history for the technologically advancing West, with its destruction of a generation. As they reflected the social stresses, artists exploded into abstraction, composers into dissonance. Or so it seemed. And the public would have less and less of it—the public that now dominated economics, that is.

And so began the century-long downward slide of art music, classical music, concert music—or whatever definition suits—into oblivion.

Instead of seeking positions, composers were seeking performances. Instead of rivalry for top billing, there was rivalry for *any* billing at all. An increasingly distant public had no means to grasp what they were hearing, much less be part of a historical process. And America, never a bastion of concert music itself, saw its European immigrants—the last generation to carry classical music in their daily lives—age and die. Economic forces changed music in America, while those same times saw the Soviet Communist system wrecking innovation by fiat.

Innovation did not die, but the means of accessing it were damaged. The stock-in-trade colors and harmonies of the contemporary classical stage only inhabited genre films such as science fiction. The revolution in music making promised by Lev Termin's electronic instrument instead became associated with mystery and alien creatures. The ethereal harmonies of Ligeti's voices followed a spacecraft on its departure from Earth.

The concert hall returned to Tchaikovsky, then Beethoven, and eventually settled on Mozart as the pinnacle of musical art, notwithstanding its absolute alienness to everything else contemporary. It became not only a respite, a time out, but a way in which otherwise adept modern concert-goers could become part of the listening and the discussion. There were no awkward moments of uncertainty—if not every note, at least every pattern was known and knowable. The senses could be on holiday.

There is no blame here. It was an accident of commerce and society, technology and warfare. Had every composer written like Rachmaninoff or Sibelius, the results would not have changed—only the excuses for steadily scrapping contemporary programming. Had Schoenberg and his successors never existed, the finger would have turned toward the sameness of new music to the past, and that the old works were better. Speculative history in any case.

If there's something to be learned from the triumph of capitalism, it's that anything can be bought and sold. If third-rate singers and pianists can be trumpeted in late-night infomercials, then first-rate composers can do no worse. It takes marketing, visibility, publicity, and chutzpah.

De Facto

The de facto way of hearing music today is on recording. I'm not going to try to convince you that's good, but likely I'll never hear most living composers in concert, except by accident. Most composers whose work I've come to know and love has been via CD or downloads.

Going to a concert means getting ready, dealing with getting there, paying a hefty ticket price for one play and all its mistakes, listening through the music you don't want to hear, probably getting bad seats since so few are really good, being around noisy people, and worst of all—having no reverse-scan button.

Frequent performances are still valuable. They serve as rehearsals for a potentially good performance and recording. But in the concert hall, the important element is what the listener brings to a performance. The right partner, the right beverage, the right moment in one's life, and a mediocre performance blooms into a work of genius.

But performances are so full of quirks that it's sometimes a struggle to hear through the performance to the music. As a composer, I don't welcome layers of performer quirks being interposed, whether they are considered deep, rich, emotional, vivid, lustrous, personal, or powerful. Plain is good, clean is good, nicely recorded is good. Correct is best. Those who bring an emotional susceptibility to a performance will find it, no matter who is playing.

You see, getting a composition ‘right’ is not commonplace for new work. The amount of time, energy, knowledge, dedication and money given to newer pieces remains small—in large part because orchestras and other costly ensembles choose to rework existing repertoire in their own image. Conductors build their international cachet on Mozart, not Adams.

I think the nonpop world has made a big mistake—practically and psychologically—in dedicating itself to museum culture, the dominance by people who prefer the music of the Dead White Europeans. I call these listeners “necrosones.” I think the museum culture has accepted the performer cult, the classical performer who travels the *Gradus ad Parnassum* with the same old music, thus becoming ritualistically disinclined to embrace newer sounds and technologies.

I don’t mean to say that performance itself is meaningless, and that electronic music or renderings will take over—though they have, actually, in the sense that, as brilliantly set out by Canadian composer Kevin Austin, any music that comes out of a speaker or similar transducer is electroacoustic, even if it originated with Mozart or Josquin.

For those musicians whose instrument is indeed the virtual orchestra, the results are brilliant already. Not only can’t you tell them from the “real thing” (if that’s the guessing game), they also open up possibilities that human players don’t allow—for lack of interest, money, practice, etc., or simply because an orchestral effect (such as a true morph) might be impossible.

Some experiences with performances are positive, revealing and glorious. Many of mine are as well. But the performances don’t always represent what I wrote. Performers work enormously hard to research, learn and present Beethoven, say, in a way that they want to believe is representative of his intent—plus they have a century of record and two centuries of experience to build upon. That’s not true with new compositions. So is there any reason we *wouldn’t* be anxious to have our work heard correctly? And feel that more recordings to supplement the thousands of recordings of past music are superfluous, and drain attention from new work? Why do programmers choose the same names of Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, Mozart, Vivaldi, and Dvořák? The audience could still have an exciting, immersive, subjective, emotional experience with newer creations rather than being doomed to relive the past like some exterminating angel had come to visit the concert hall.

Here are two examples of the dilemma of wonderful performances. The first involves a 25-minute piano piece written on commission. The player is extraordinarily gifted in musicality, technique, and analysis. This was a tough piece, and challenged those abilities. He worked diligently on it, and gave it quite a few performances, one of which actually converted this state’s major classical music critic into a committed new music lover—a critic will no longer miss a concert that has a premiere, unless there are *two* premieres that night! The audience jumped to its feet and cheered. Other performers heard the piece. Those hearings, together with collaborative promotional work by a composers group, got our rural state to be one of the places where new music is heard on nearly every program of every ensemble. Players greet new nonpop with enthusiasm. And by 2005, the Vermont Youth Orchestra under composer-conductor Troy Peters dared to perform an all-new, all-Vermont music program at Carnegie Hall to considerable acclaim.

But back to the pianist. His interpretation, however hailed by everyone (including me for its spirit and musicality), was so at variance with my music itself that it was simply *not* the piece I wrote in all but the order of pitches. Naturally, when I’d like to encourage a pianist to play it, or when I want a layperson to be interested, I share a recording of his brilliant and pianistically exciting performance. But when I play it for other composers, I play my sample version to lay the actual piece bare. Because the performed version obscures its workings, should there ever be a future performer doing research on it, they will find my sample version as the document of record.

The second performance was a solo string bass composition. Here was a piece of extraordinary difficulty that required that the performer—one of the best in the country—make revisions to it. It wasn't impossible to play, but it could not be learned in order to give it a full expression without too much rehearsal time, to the exclusion of other works. His performance was an edited version—brilliant, musical, and compelling. On the other hand, in an imagined world where a hundred or a thousand players work on a piece over time, in practice rooms and green rooms, that dilemma of success vs. accuracy would fall away.

No, correct isn't everything, even if it seems like I'm saying that. It just tends to be an either-or choice. Recently, a fellow composer told me about one of his pieces that was commissioned and performed here a decade ago—an acceptable, well-received, flawed performance. Some years later, he used his savings to hire one of the pay-for-play orchestras in eastern Europe to record it. He said it was correct, a good example of his composition, but he was disappointed it didn't have the life and enthusiasm and raw musicality of the local performance.

I love having my music played in the 'real air', but I love even more having it played well—and well starts with right. And right tends to be recorded. And, as the museum culture continues, 'right' will be virtual.

The Museum Culture

There is an assumption in this discourse of *performance*, an event controlled by a composer by means of an intermediary. Sound art and sound installations have a different meaning, even if they come from the same composer-as-source model.

Installations have since the 1960s become a secure part of the new nonpop realm, but one which for the most part has not involved conservatory musicians, and has often been considered the vanguard of innovative nonpop musical expression. As such, one would expect constant forward 'progress' with ideas and presentations, particularly because some performance events involve destruction—such as Annea Lockwood's *Burning Piano* or Bill Thompson's *Burning Harpsichord* or even my own *Detonacy* (a term invented by Zoogz Rift), which saw the destruction of forty of my works.

The first questions are philosophical, regarding the significance and symbolism of the destruction. Is something destroyed, lost beyond its worth before destruction? Or is it a transformation, for object and audience?

If it's about the conservation of matter and energy, then Lockwood's piano probably contributes only to entropy. Nothing is lost. The material is transformed. The sound and sight that exist are transformed to heat and motion and the subsequent shifts in physical matter, including change of state or maybe catalyzing a reaction.

But perhaps this transformation is really about how big a hole it leaves afterwards. A very different matter. What is the hole in their lives? How long did they live with the physical objects? The destruction of my pieces left a very big hole in me, until it healed over. The hole is a 'something' created from the destruction, if you're an optimist about it. The experience, the transformation of material and life.

The experience may be different in destroying one's own work as opposed to destroying another's. In the 1976 *Detonacy*, the tape pieces were snipped into bits as they played through the tape machine. As co-founder of the (only partly) tongue-in-cheek Laszlo Toth School of Art back in the 1970s, I wanted to make the point that destruction was essential to escaping from an imminent museum culture. We are increasingly a museum culture, though, not only in the preservation of the distant past, but also in the preservation of the recent past and near-present.

The space in the room for the innovative is less and less because the sensory opportunities are recycled. Even the avant-garde is museumworthy, including the Ubuweb—a perfect example of online museum culture, this reclaiming and recycling of materials of the recent past. Arguments over vocabulary and claims of origination of terms and activities arise. Old works are re-mounted. Artistic time stutters as arts-ologists claw at a fading present. My own history as a composer/sound artist stretches back over 40 years, but I try to move onward except when I wonder what I've done, for moments like these. The time will probably come for another *Detonacy* to relieve the weight of my own past on me.

Back to destructive/transformational installations. When Fernanda D'Agostino and I created *In Bocca at Lupo* in 1986, it became an arch of creation, interactivity, destruction, and history—an arch that became visible only in retrospect. We were creating the framework for the experience, assembling the organization of materials out of which would come an environment of sound, light, and texture that would change for and be changed by every person coming into its space. There was a year of work preceding, as well as the ties to earlier pieces (in both style and technology), all heading toward a month or so in which the environment would evolve with the space and the visitors (it was adaptive software controlling the sound environment). It would grow and learn. But then would come the stages of destruction ... first, the off switch (no HAL, this). Then the dismantling. Then the separating and packing and shipping to different coasts (to her in Oregon, to me in Vermont). Then the aging of the technology and the aging of the concepts. And finally, the self-erasure over time of the memory chips that contained the entire record of the use of the space, the life gone to death of the micro-civilization that we had panspermiaed and which grew and learned over its short span. All that remains are fading documents and broken technology—and the transformations in the lives of people who experienced the installation.

Destruction has played a role in my own work for 30 years. Naturally, all soundscape pieces are destroyed by schedules or time or nature, but that dismantling is long-term. Sound art (in which I include sound sculpture, environmental sound, and sound installations) is always finite, even if in its grand scope it is long or even constantly evolving. Electroacoustic music with algorithmic or random elements, or with interaction from an audience, can be considered endless, but eventually time destroys them.

I've destroyed several of my hand-built instruments, a few times dismantling them to build others, or just burning them for heat in the woodstove. Not a performance event, and alas not documented. A 1993 piece calls for the lead player (a clarinetist) to dismantle and burn the instrument. The piece has never been played (though the clarinetist for whom it was written keeps promising me he'll do it.)

For me, the most thrilling part of these destructions is not necessarily the event alone, but certainly includes the progression of creation, anticipation, action, elation, deflation, and regret.

My first self-standing non-performance sound installation was in the spring of 1973, which means I've had enough of an arch of experience to feel the pain of repeated holes continually left by destruction (from abandoned and lost and destroyed creations to the self-inflicted deaths of friends), and to see that not merely as some sort of philosophical transformation, but as a real and sometimes bleeding experience. I just can't get far enough away for it to be merely a matter of the mind. I sometimes wonder if sound artists make their works fairly simple and minimal because they can't bear the pain of those holes.

Irrespective of the philosophy or the emotion or the importance on the extended perception abilities of its audience, sound art offered the possibility of dismantling the museum psychology. But, like all invested art forms, its practitioners have taken the other path.

The Glacier and the Chasm

Throughout this essay, I tend to expand *I* into *we* very casually. Who is “we”? My manifesto in which I coin the term “necrosone” is about the need to destroy musical museum culture, and comes out of the Laszlo Toth School of Art, an organization several of us founded in honor of the Hungarian who smashed Michelangelo’s *Pietà* with a hammer. There is a time when the only way to address severe imbalance is by some sort of provocative, even revolutionary, behavior. That’s not very popular at the moment, unless it’s the U.S. invading some small country that can’t defend itself. But “we” originated as a small, dedicated and fanatic group—most of whose members are still working as alternative artists.

In that essay, I emphasized that “the ignorance of all precedent work” is entirely valid from both a revolutionary standpoint for today, and from a standpoint of bringing new audiences to the artform. I continue to rail against the museum culture, a culture in which classical nonpop suffers worst of all. It’s the mistaken idea that somehow knowing what came before is valuable for the uninitiated, the lay nonpop and potential nonpop listener ... as opposed to a slow drag that pulls them increasingly into the past with no hope of recovering the present again.

Let me talk about that drag. When music was essentially a live event, it proceeded through and ended. Repetition was needed, and pieces could grow in length to support increasingly intricate ideas as well as additional inclusions, such as picture-painting and calculated emotional content. And right then—right then!—recording technology appeared. And you can draw graphs of some interesting consequences.

One might be a reduction in attention span to music with the promotion of the single-side song. That’s not the graph that interests me, although it has significance.

What I’m more interested in are the investment consequences—*audience* consequences. To review a point made earlier, significant mass market was born, and along with it, a distribution of music to the home where before it was dependent on concerts or sheet music (or for a while, piano rolls). The ease and relatively low cost of hearing and *having* ‘real’ music (professional, not homemade) was a social shift. The relatively low cost was nevertheless still a cost, for if there’s anything entertainment marketers learned over the years, it was that people like what they know. Consumers are not risk takers, which is why reviews and word of mouth and advertising are important. Offer people more of what they know and like, and they’ll continue to buy it until the sameness (and reviews and word of mouth and advertising) encourages a change.

It doesn’t mean that change is ended. It means that it is slowed, and occurs in kind of quantum jumps when a new idea fires. Some composers also worked in quantum jumps and many others progressed steadily with their work. But with few exceptions, they were not on the parallel track of the audiences. What once was done by temporally evanescent offering (the concert: here now & gone) was remade as a consumer product with replicability. (Composers also used it as a technology inside their work, but that is another discussion.)

A continuing-past/continuing-present crack opened between flowing, muddy composer and glaciating audience, with the presenter straddling both sides. For a while, the straddling was comfortable, but at some point—most notably at the Great End of Tonality—the presenters had to step to one side or the other. They went with the glacial stability and the money (whether from audiences or record companies) and stayed on the slowly moving side. The composers, particularly since the increasing ego-fication of artists, did what they did and kept moving ahead in their big muddy mess.

That was the slow drag ... more of a continental movement: One mass moving faster than the other, audiences investing in more recordings that they had enjoyed and listened to over and over before buying another similar one; presenters feeding that expectation as marketing rose on a mass scale; composers responding to the world around with its chaos in ways artists often respond; listeners increasingly interested in solace in the storm of 20th century history. It was a geography of separation, continental movement apart.

So now that brings it back to the question of “we”, as in, “we *must* throw out everyone and everything which has come before us”. “We” is not just that original group of friends, but is all of us—the musicians who have the tools *because it is our field*. We are the only ones capable of initiating that change. The layperson has neither *ab initio* need nor interest in the past of a given artform, but that’s what they are given, so that is what they learn. As laypeople are increasingly educated, they may by themselves make discoveries from the past. That self-directed behavior can depend on an extant body of recordings.

Now another prose swerve. I write that last sentence by extrapolating outward from my own self. As a child, I lived in a music-less household without radio or record player. My introduction to classical nonpop was a mix of Wagner, Stravinsky, Bach, etc., none of which I had any auditory tools to separate as a young teenager with a single Reader’s Digest record set put in his hands. Stravinsky’s *Rite* was the thing that captured my interest first as a 12-year-old. And when I heard jazz two years later, it was Coltrane’s *Ascension*, not historical jazz. The point I’m making is that I had a completely scattershot introduction, and settled immediately on the most *recent* sounds as the most interesting, the closest to my life. I was your classic lay listener, unwashed and just plain surprised by what I heard. Extrapolating from the specific to the general is a nasty business, but short of studies that couldn’t have a big enough control group, it’s what I’ve done in my own presentation of the ideas.

That is, I have believed that the uninitiated have *no* preference for the historical over the present. I spent six years teaching elementary school specifically to test my hypothesis, and the results bore it out. I had kids for whom Bartók and Crumb and Reich and performance-art style music were as natural as pop (and more natural than pop, in many cases, except for those with traditional music lessons outside of school) and Beethoven. I watched the kids in rapt attention during the video recreation of the *Rite* ballet, and was stunned by my third- and fourth-graders shushing the school classes around them because they wanted to *hear* and *watch* that live performance of *Soldier’s Tale*.

Now you may be thinking “hey, that is old stuff” and you would be right—but unfortunately, it was the only material and concert work I had available in rural Vermont. We listened to recordings of newer music, but even more importantly, we played around. We performed music (from Cage’s great *Notations* collection, for example) and created music (whether for pianos or vacuum cleaners or farm animals) and recorded it.

Yes, Mozart was included, but as historical content like George Washington or Washington Irving or Irving Berlin or the Berlin Airlift. And Mozart was at the time cool, because we could all sit around and hoot together watching *Amadeus*, where this “classical music” they had heard with little enthusiasm took on some extra-musical life as a kid their age had been composing some of it, and grew up to be socially embarrassing.

And so, to wrap up the first question of “we,” I mean those of us responsible in any way for education or presentation or performance—we need to be educated in our profession, and like all professions, that includes a knowledge of history ... as composers, an excellent knowledge of history, for that is how we can make our references. But we do *not* have to use the *history itself* as our body of offered material. The collective, ubiquitous “we” of the audience is different, and is

fully capable of grasping the wonders of new work without being dragged slowly through the swamp of history as if discovery were not by itself enough!

We'll lose some of them, those for whom Handel and Dvořák are already old friends, their only friends. But we'll also gain those who, like my own wife, loathed the orchestral concerts on which my piece was played because she had to sit through Handel to get to my piece and sit through Dvořák afterwards to be polite to the musicians who had worked hard on my music.

This is the fact: *We cannot 'catch up' audiences by working historically.* We have to go through a revolutionary period that cuts that music out of the programming (and the lay education, but that's already happening, unfortunately not replaced with any new nonpop) because museum-culture programming is a consequence of marketing behavior that has had an ultimately damaging effect on the artform which, for the first time since probably the Council of Trent that outlawed troping, is being consciously and deliberately defaced by outside forces.

Who Reads Proust?

But history includes the beloved Bach, Shakespeare, da Vinci, Wagner, Ibsen, Monet, Dostoyevsky, Proust, Mozart, the two Marlowes, and Groucho. Assuming we're talking about people with an interest in the arts and literature, how often do they re-read those works or keep copies of the sculpture handy? See the plays? How many actually got through the novels in the first place? Isn't it one of the supposed 'private shames' that few people actually read Dostoyevsky or Proust, or care to see Ibsen and or more than a very few re-re-re-performed plays of Shakespeare? How many have DaVinci prints hanging? Okay, maybe a pretty Monet or two (or likely Manet) as decoration. And Marlowe the first?

What do people, intelligent people, really read? They read books in their field, books on the best-seller list, contemporary fiction. They watch the new plays (unless Ibsen's all they get). Assuming they don't hang big-eyed puppies or Elvis-on-velvet, then chances are it's work of friends, their own work, with the occasional classic prints.

The people *in* these fields, however, have (one hopes) a greater scope of reading and performance and art that informs what they do. There is a great deal to be said for scope, whether a novelist or playwright or composer. And for history—John Ciardi talked marvelously about the “ghosts of words” and how a knowledge of etymology and orthographic history (whether studied or intuited) was the sign of a truly remarkable poet. It's not the existence of history that's the problem (at least for me).

However—and I sometimes wish I could wear a sandwich board outside of concert halls—music is exceptional in having made during the 20th century a *nearly complete capitulation to the museum model*, a model that gives little evidence of change when we run up into the first years of the 21st century. Remember that I mentioned Groucho. You need not give up Groucho, Chico, Harpo or Zeppo, nor Moe, Larry and Curly, nor Manny, Moe and Jack because *no cultural shift is required* in comedy, as contemporary comedy is not continually marginalized in the way new nonpop is cubesteaked into a tiny unpalatable slime stuck to the otherwise luscious but traditional musical menus we're presented with at the concert hall door.

Remember that I'm proposing a proportional answer—a mirror of the situation in the early 1990s, *before* the new Golden Age of Music began. And so it's a harsh answer.

My Personal Fiefdom, Part I

Consider what a “present day music only” approach would mean in application. The complaint is often made that new nonpop has not enough precedent to judge it well, and we may find ourselves listening to work of lower quality. “How can I know,” asks the typical presenter, “if this music is any good, or I have simply wasted everyone’s time and cluttered the concerts with trivia? Isn’t time better spent on the classics?”

But that is the precisely the dilemma that we have in practice today—and worse.

At this moment across the nonpop world, concert programmers are rooting down through the literature for third- and fourth-string composers to rehabilitate, and forgotten minor manuscripts of major composers. How is that different from suggesting that the quality of the work is irrelevant? It *is* irrelevant already! Almost all the Great Music of the past has been rehabilitated. What remains is average or worse. Just because it was written for *concerto & ripieno* doesn’t deify the music. Just because it came from Beethoven’s hand doesn’t deify it (*Choral Fantasy* begone!)—and he’s one composer who could hardly write a tune. A whole religion has been built out of Beethoven’s overcoming an incredible compositional deficiency through his motivic development. It has me thinking, “*Eroica Symphony*, my buttocks! You wanna go around whistling *that*, um, melody?”

Okay, okay, I have a big ol’ burdock under my saddle over this. But do you really think it’s unjustified? With the nonpop concert field flooded with new scores that run from good to brilliant, we’re digging up more Baroque *dinner twaddle à la muzacque*, finishing pieces the composers didn’t care enough to finish themselves, and playing Beethoven and Mozart like their work really matters in addressing a contemporary musical world. You don’t think we’re awash in marvelous scores by those who live among us? It’s a cornucopia! The American Music Center isn’t even taking printed scores anymore, as their library became an enormous burden, too much for the expensive Manhattan space they were leasing.

So years ago I called for a moratorium on the past to right the downward course, and, by presenting the New and the Exciting *all the time*, we can cut the anchor buried under a seaslide of historical music, and prevent the ship from being pulled under. But it takes, as Star Trek’s Naussicans might say, some grombah.

The Quandary

But what a quandary, to evaluate the good only based upon its age relative to that of the consumer. But oooo, oooo, oooo, my little TS Eliot, that’s already how it’s done in other fields! It’s called style. It’s why Silent Generation was washed over by Baby Boomers who gave way to Gen X and now are grayingly signing off to *Time*’s ugly eponym, Twixters. Is that any way to work in the arts? Of course it is! What it does not do—and here comes museum culture again—is evaluate work for the ages. If J.S. Bach’s kids were alive today, they’d be packing him off to a nursing home.

Yet, yet, yet... some classical-era doodling is elevated to a masterpiece, so that doesn’t work either, and endless papers are written by theoreticians on obscure compositions that are then, of course, played (my own theory teacher said that all theorists were really failed composers, and that theory was the closest they could get to the real thing, and went to bed every night crying; I liked him). And so the waters in which we’re sinking are even polluted by rotting musical effluent. You wanna sink the ship in *that*?

But my logic collapses there, because there’s really no way of evaluation—even among us composers and performers and musicologists there are the purity theorists, the if-it-sounds-good-it-is-good evangelists, and composers with an inflated sense of judgment. Though some may

invent objective musical evaluations tools, in practice it really is all fashion and style. Nobody *really* played that much Mozart before *Amadeus* appeared in theaters, the Baroque was nigh forgotten before Musical Heritage Society and parallel resurgences found it cute (blast that Pachelbel exercise book!), and even Mahler was resurrected in the public musical image by Bernstein. Where's Gossec in all this?

But it's not gonna happen anyway, my Machiavellian proposal. Too many interests are involved, not least of which are organizations like major orchestras and opera companies and public broadcasting who believe adventure means economic collapse. But if in some hermetically sealed state it were possible, or at least if there were such positions advanced, what would it sound like? Or if there were analysis done of that culture, what would it say?

Now it gets hard.

Above I recounted my continental-shift idea—that composers kept moving along in their self-absorbed creative state in making new music, while marketers sought to maximize return, and their audiences unknowingly became part of a psych-cash investment recovery pattern unusual to the musical arts. I suggested why it happened. But in an information-rich culture, why hasn't it changed?

Music is problematic because only one piece can be heard at a time with our current biology—a serial artform—limiting by waking hours the maximum possible choices. If a museum culture is adopted by the purveyors of any serial artform, then the past (well known and cheap to replicate) crowds out the present. The physical constraints are not unique to music nor even the performance arts (reading is serial), but in those arts where the language is not shared (that is, where the consumer is no longer literate), *it increases the perceived value of easy consumption*.

This is arguably the case in all creative endeavors (or even hamburgers), but if we have a look at education, we find a real distinction. Children and older students are taught to read, write, look, speak, draw, cipher, dance, sing, play, build, cook... but in music, what we call “reading” is dominated by eye-to-hand mapping rather than the cognitive process of sight reading (as if one were taught to read words only by sounding them out aloud—and never silently to oneself—and listening to one's own voice for meaning, as some aphasia sufferers must do), and worst of all, there is almost no writing of any kind. This is compounded by the advanced education of professionals, where the closest activity to writing might be arranging—still largely one of the reproductive arts—rather than composition. Writing is exceptional rather than quotidian.

When the musical culture (amateur and professional) is one of *received information*, and when the culture at large is afflicted with high-consumption behavior, then it is almost inevitable that the psychologic-economic investment cycle will be rewarded by more of the same material drawn from a body of familiar, practiced, exchangeable, inexpensive and field-tested components.

Concert programmers often talk about the laudable goal of having their audience be able to distinguish Mozart from Vivaldi (or any two other given composers). Is this a meaningful artistic distinction, or just an ear-training guessing game, a *Wheel of Fortune* for notes? If the educated, intelligent audience has no way to replicate this knowledge (as it might be drawing or writing or singing or sculpting) and then expand upon it (through the addition of ideas and experiments) and no encouragement to do so (by mounting those results in a public forum), then a resistance to new material becomes a psychologically essential self-protective mechanism. In practical terms, the field-tested components gain marketable value at low cost. (Challenge in general might become alien in a society where artificially induced self-esteem is a requisite component of education. But that's substance for a different discussion.)

Look at what's going on, then: exposure is limited and adaptive tools are withheld, leading to new music being felt as *culturally toxic*, an invader of the cultural body. To many listeners and even

musicians who have been culturally abused in education, the reaction is exactly that—as if their body were producing antibodies in response to these invasive sonic antigens (against which there are no earflaps to begin with, inviting their entrance). If you observed audience reaction during the worst years of new nonpop's rejection, you could see it was almost biological reaction, a sonically induced physical illness. This museum culture of music that we have fashioned is almost as fragile as the Martians in *War of the Worlds*.

So now the new nonpop problem is intertwined in history, economics, culture and biology. But fortunately, some musicians have begun an allergy desensitization program. They program new nonpop on their concert schedules with some regularity. That's but one step.

Who will begin the programs of economic change, taking the marketing risk? How about Richard Branson? But I already asked him in 1998, and his corporate bureaucracy rejected the notion. A brave, visionary, enthusiastic mogul could increase visibility. I still pursue that goal with regular letters to the incomprehensibly wealthy. My personal note to Bill Gates (whom I knew in the early computer days) was intercepted by Microsoft Corporate, which said it was not a program of interest to them. Letters to George Soros, Andy Grove, and many other remain unanswered. But I continue, knowing that a well-funded marketing campaign can sell anything or elect anyone. For that there is precedent. Can they market something worth marketing, that is, new nonpop?

Next component, then: Who will begin the educational change? This is very tough. We've lost an entire generation of educators, now unfamiliar with nonpop (whether new or old, classical or electroacoustic or performance-art based or any other kind, or even jazz, which has collapsed toward history and commerce, save for artists like David Ware). Even those who were and are conversant with nonpop have not enabled students with the bundle of tools for writing, for making their own mark on musical history, for inventing their own ideas, for even knowing what a new idea might be.

Personal diversion: In the latter regard I was lucky, having had a high school band director who encouraged my composition (for I started to compose within months of learning notation by applying for my first instrument in the school band, a bass clarinet) by treating it as a *normal behavior*, and giving me opportunities to conduct snippets in rehearsal during band time (he taught me the basics of conducting during those bass clarinet lessons, too). The very normalcy of writing that he presented—for as a child who moved from school to school, I could not know that composing was abnormal—encouraged me to continue until I entered college, where the department chairman (forever curse your memory, Henry Kaufmann!) said to me “Our undergraduates do not compose,” thus shutting down any opportunity for me to show my work to the faculty for feedback, to work daily out of need. My desire was almost killed, for as a poor boy working full time, I could not afford to transfer from this state school to what I guessed might be a more receptive environment. Fortunately, my stubbornness quotient has always exceeded my intelligence quotient, and so I continued with my work.

But in the subsequent years, I learned that creating music is one of the most suppressed endeavors in the entire spectrum of general liberal arts education. It is too time-consuming to encourage, the teachers are not themselves given the tools to do it much less teach it (and I earned a parallel music education certification and minored in psychology, so learned that first hand), and composition is thus left to specialists who work with specialists in a culture that—you see where I am going—simply does not value their specialty.

Education, Redux

The education issue is especially difficult, which may be solved in no way other than re-introducing music as if it were an entirely new process. But with the dominance of performance-

based high-sales-value programs like Orff, Kodaly, Suzuki, etc., I have little hope that such re-introduction can be done directly. Institutional education has a symbiotic relationship with its suppliers of books and instruments, and professional education of educators remains staggeringly conservative—even moreso as the classroom teacher is drafted into teaching political codes regarding drugs, sex, politics, and science. The music teacher with the rolling cart of pitiful musical trinkets, or the band or choral director coping with a frills-based budgetary psychology is not going to be adding to the daily workload by teaching writing. There's no support—not from administrators, nor educational suppliers, nor parents, nor those who believe the first duty of music is to create little annual stage spectacles or jack up the football team's testosterone level (how well I remember being a cannon wheel spoke in the Rutgers Marching 100's *1812 Overture* performed during a rainstorm that had up clambering through a sea of mud!).

So that takes care of biology, culture and economics, and leaves only the topic at hand—history.

Premise: History is easy. That doesn't mean it's correct history, but anybody can plumb history because either (1) they're historically minded and it challenges their interest—hence the treatises and reconstructions and restorations and orchestrations and notational modernizations—or (2) somebody else did it and it's there for the using.

Musical historians are the microscopic minority, so it's received musical material that is at the heart of my complaint. Because the received repertoire is available, it is familiar, we re-use it, inventing along the way a “crawl before you walk” (crabyow) theory to support our behavior. If crabyow were true, though, we'd be starting off our concerts with monody, working through organum, motets, tropes, *virelais* and Ars Nova counterpoint, training theorbists, setting up antiphonal spectacles, and chewing through sacks of bizarre early baroque kibble long before we began tuning up for our classical boy-toy and his tragically hip pneumococcus.

But the crawling has never really been done, and the process—whatever it really is—has utterly failed, hardly resulting in any walking at all. In truth, crabyow is classical nonpop's Official Urban Legend (or worse, it's Big Lie), a kind of accidental classical-music eugenics theory that eliminates diverse contemporary culture from the concert hall.

To this, cutoff dates are a solution, but require a cooperative rethinking among professionals, and taking a lesson from out-of-work family farmers and how their imagination can teach us a great deal. Still a hard row to hoe.

The Hermetically Sealed State: My Personal Fiefdom, Part II

I set up a question above that I haven't answered yet: “But if in some hermetically sealed state it were possible, or at least if there were such positions advanced, what would it sound like?”

For ten years, I created my own “hermetically sealed state.” Being a composer, doing a radio show, and attending concerts of music by colleagues have all conspired to have me listen to thousands of hours of new nonpop—and almost exclusively new nonpop as time constraints have squeezed out the older pieces.

Rather than wear me out or trouble me, it's instead given me a hunger for more, increased my critical skills, expanded the scope of my listening facility, opened my mind to new ideas, and warmed my heart with the power and beauty that composers bring to bear upon their work (keep in mind, of course, that I cried when I first heard Stockhausen's *Gesang der Jünglinge* as a teenager).

And at the same time, it dramatically lowered my tolerance for older classical nonpop to the point that for the most part I listen to it with impatience (even the music of my own earlier days!), chafing at its reek of the past—a past that I would not want to live in. Walking into Jack Finney's

“The Third Level” holds no enticement for me. I *like* the modern world. I *hunger* for the future and, to my wife’s continued chagrin, still look longingly at the sky in hopes that one day I might be able to travel out of the atmosphere, even just for a few moments. (Just to set aside an objection, let me say that I don’t believe in some value-laden concept of musical *progress*, but merely the inherent wonder of musical change.)

Some might insist they would never close themselves off to art or music or literature based strictly upon its age, but rather would base programming choices on ‘aesthetic, cost-responsible and practical’ characteristics.

These guidelines are all legitimate, and with them I have no surface argument. But let’s say my proposed international fascisto-musical state was founded in 1980 and required that all music be composed within the time of its existence; as of this writing, that’s a little over 25 years. Accept that as your reality for a moment, and consider what kind of situation you’d find yourself in, and how you’d deal with it imaginatively and in ways that would satisfy you and your audience.

I’ll address this to the “you”—a composer, conductor, performer or promoter who is aware of the style, length, quality and difficulty level of the myriad pieces being written for orchestra today. Not even including the diversity of the few living famous within our niche (Torke, Tower, Glass, Dun, Del Tredici, Higdon, Adams-the-both, Reich...), you’d have a choice that would be enormously variegated and, for purposes of even a part-time semi-professional orchestra’s programming, virtually unlimited.

What would be lost in the sort of programming? You and your musicians would naturally be familiar with the musical history as students of the artform. Scores and recordings would be available from the historical library, and you’d have sufficient musical imagination that the interposition of a playback format would be merely an ephemeral challenge. You’d work directly with composers. You’d encourage your own musicians and audiences to create new work, and they’d participate with the enthusiasm of any community that hangs its own art, reads its own poetry, sings its own songs, acts its own plays, sews its own clothes, or cooks its own meals. Indeed, *nothing* would be lost but the occasional old chestnut—and you could beg the authorities to permit you the occasional old piece! That would be your challenge instead!

Surely this is some sort of odd & twisted mirror image of recent orchestral history. But were I an active conductor/programmer in today’s real world, for each concert I would imagine myself living in that imaginary totalitarian state, having to work creatively under the oppressive “yoke of the present,” and with no choice but to do it or be sent to the gulag. And suddenly those pieces that once seemed of marginal interest would become the centerpieces of my presentation, the core of my daily work. Music that before opened a program or closed the first half, or perhaps fanfared in the second half, would be the closing masterpiece. It would be surrounded by more pieces in many diverse styles—yet *all* plucked from the present and near-present.

The practical problem (other than budgets, as the pieces could be chosen to match the ensembles technical abilities) would be finding the larger works, those which could span half a concert—if we could *truly* write for the symphony. Because of the effective ban on longer symphonic work for several generations (the “American Commissions”: 10 minutes, low-cost, audience-friendly), the number of such compositions written commonly as Haydn might have done is reduced. Few composers even write the Beethoven/Dvořák/Mahler nine anymore (yes, there is Hovhaness), much less multi-movement symphonies. So you’d have that problem of continuity and judgment, investing in music without a nest of critical understanding. If everyone were doing this, however, that critical word-of-mouth professionally evaluated support structure would inform you. The market would be there, too.

The second question is, why should you do this? And the answer is easier, even simple: Because you must. I have sat across the microphone from 250 composers and played their music for our audiences. You can imagine that it is clearly impossible for the work of 250 composers to be coincident with one other composer's taste. Yet I will advocate for (and seek commissions and performances for) almost every one of them at some musical level. I say 'almost' because we had some guests whose music is weakly conceived or poorly wrought (by measure of craft alone), and the marketing work must be their own.

Among the rest, however, is a panoply of musical style from noise/quasipop artists (Pritsker, Schrock) through tough electroacousticians (Szymanski, Duckworth-the-younger) through orchestral professionals (Hagen, Del Tredici) through romantics (Deussen, Torke) and political composers (Ho, Weinbaum), soundscape artists (Radigue, Borghi), avant-gardists (Appleton, Hutchinson), post-classicists (Garland, Reynolds), to international groundbreakers (Saariaho, Behrman), and on and on.

As I write each name, I remember their music, and however I find it appealing or not to my taste, it still enriches my experience and challenges my intellect.

Music also grows, sometimes quickly, sometimes over the years. It is style, taste, technique and the ephemeral judgment. Here is a story: In the early 1990s, I heard in concert a piece for two high clarinets. I couldn't remember the name of the piece, but it enraged me. I paced around and mumbled about it, endlessly annoying my wife. The next day I woke up and thought, "It was brilliant!" I had hated it because I had not opened up to its own world. Placed as it was on the concert among lush pieces, it seemed alien to head, heart and taste. But I grew. It forced me to grow. Overnight. And then I set out to find the composer, and finally, 13 years later she too sat across the microphone in her Amsterdam flat: the toweringly intense Margriet Hoenderdos.

I have an abiding trust in composers. Do I like their all their work? Certainly not. But I take seriously the work of presenting what they do in their own sounds and in their own words. And I have an abiding trust in the listening public. Presented with conviction, composers and their works will be accepted, respected, adopted, and ultimately loved.

Moving On

The conviction to presentation is work. And for me, it's even more difficult to make a case because I don't believe that we have any real ability to receive communication from a composer through music—just more luck with it if we are living in the same time and culture as the composer. I believe that the further we move from a composer's time and society and mores and techniques, the more we invest of our own acculturation into what we hear. It's an argument I'm not going to take on—the universal-language, objective-standards, nature-not-nurture point of view. I have no sympathy with it because my experience tells me that such "communication" from past to present is entirely fiction. I'm far from alone in the point of view, but it is unprovable (from both sides) and the "communication" standpoint has a warmth of inclusivity going for it in our society, a society that I feel is desperately searching for a belief system which it has not been able to maintain in the face of human and natural disaster.

One conductor wrote to me, "When Beethoven gives out angst, I still feel it. When Mozart radiates joy, I get happy. When Shakespeare kills off someone he's made me care about, I am upset. When Molière makes a *bon mot*, I get it! I don't care when it was created; good art is timeless and communicates just as well today as it did no matter when it was initially created."

Beethoven and Mozart are working in abstract languages. What you gather may or may not be there, even despite what words they might have written. As for Shakespeare, it was you who

cared; his part in it was vehicular, although a nicely outfitted vehicle it is. And Molière? Even if you don't speak French? How about Chekov? In the original, I mean. Chinese opera? Javanese gamelan—the real stuff, not the popularized excerpts and culturally appropriated sort. Yes, this is all too mixed up in our peculiar modern human inconsequence that breeds the desire to validate ourselves by applying what we feel as a kind of plastic veneer on a decaying elm. And we are in a postmodernist time that further weakens the ability of a composer to speak with a strong and audible voice.

The Point

If we could write for the symphony, on deadline, every day, with simple, insistent daily practice, and with feedback from knowledgeable co-workers and supervisors, then we could be understood for our ability to reach the hearts and souls of our listeners with the same expressive richness as our compositional forebears. Today's average composers for film and concert hall have done it, but there are few of them.

I offer no answer to the mechanics of increasing audiences and increasing the commitment of presenters and performers. But I do have one way of increasing visibility, and I ask that other musicians begin the process of creating new works for every occasion, every day, every minute.

And so now to the personal point. *We Are All Mozart* is my project to create new works and change the perception of the music of our time. It is a project that demands that I complete the composition of a piece every day during 2007. It has all the gimmickry one can ask for a modern audience. (And a good composer, too.)

So *why* me? Me, just because I thought it was time to make this point. Me, because over the years I've completed some 720 compositions, and I am practicing mightily for next year's work-by-deadline. Though this may feel like a gimmick, it isn't. I may fail at this project. I may not be able to dip deeply into the well for fresh water every day. We shall see. But realizing how many compositions were possible in the past for composers who had the chance to do it—the insistent daily practice, demand, pressure and deadlines—I thought the time was now.

Composing is full-time work, so I intend to have each piece paid for by people who actually want the music for themselves or friends—just as any composer of the past. No self-inspired, volunteer, for the résumé, pen-to-shelf writing allowed. No 365 pieces because I feel like writing a song or making a scrap of media art each day. No, instead, I've come up with a 'measure-part' formula that breaks out into typical low-tier commission amounts in America, which should do just fine as a starting point for restoring the composer to the role of a true cultural player. Buy low, sell high! Make me do it!

If this inspires readers to commission their own local composers, so much the better. That is its ultimate point—though I'd like to get my own project finished first.

Northfield, Vermont

March 19, 2006