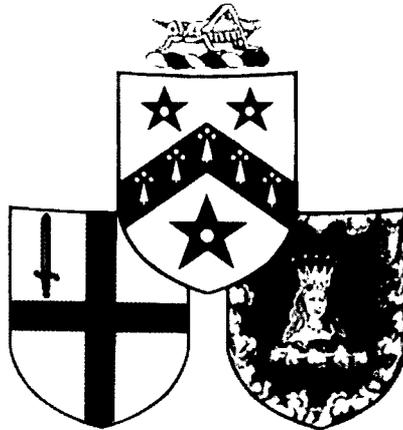


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MUSIC

Lecture 5

SHOULD WE CALL THE TUNE? ISSUES OF ARTISTIC PATRONAGE

by

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Should We Call the Tune? Issues of Artistic Patronage

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In my last talk I argued for the commission as a godparent to new work, giving that work a solid start when it has yet to impress the world – or the market - with what it has to say. History has taught us again and again to be grateful for whatever enlightened circumstances left the works of the past to enrich us.

Today we turn to the demands of those who commission. It might seem reasonable that the act of paying for an artefact give the commissioner a right to lay down its specifications. Yet to assert this is to ignore the distinction between art and product (1): a work of music is not like a work of joinery: when we ask a craftsman to execute a project, it already exists in our mind's eye. In my view of things, an artefact that we have already determined conceptually is a product, and not to be confused with a work of art, which takes us somewhere personal.

An interesting border-line case here may be architecture: the architect designing flats for a development is in a real sense working to a brief, while Frank Lloyd Wright's *Falling Water*, or public buildings by Frank Gehry or Paolo Soleri, make a statement about the creative concerns of their individual maker, though this is inseparable from their functional role. At that end of the spectrum, surely, the commissioner chooses their practitioner and then stands back to see what happens.

Ceramics offers a comparable case: I have often envied the reception accorded the work of a potter of my acquaintance, because his inspiring art-works are at the same time in everyday use on peoples' tables, out earning their living. Sometimes the sublime uselessness of music can give one something of an inferiority complex.

An interesting question about commissions in any era, therefore, is how the composer integrates the legitimate needs of a commission into his concerns - and where the legitimacy of such demands ends. I have twice in the past accepted the request for 'something suitable to open a concert', as being sufficiently imprecise to allow me to work within it with a sense of personal pride. On the other side of the track, though, are requests to write 'something Christmas-y', for to me this strays from the terrain of individual expression into laying down previously conceived dimensions, which I believe makes it something else - a product.

In one of these cases, however, there were further danger signals implicit in the Christmas request: the expectations extended, it became apparent, to that of straightforwardness - with the result that my piece, while not in any way experimental, could not be prepared in the one brief rehearsal fixed for the day of the concert - and was not performed. This rehearsal shortage had never been made clear to me. Now this isolated experience has something to tell us about the deal between commissioner and commissioned: blatant inadequacies of rehearsal time put my work well outside the frame, but were not made clear to me when I was approached. Yet the commissioner knows well what sort of thing I do, and presumably chose me because of it, so they should have been able to foretell the mismatch.

Anyway, the distinction between the totally 'free hand' and the request for something 'to open a concert', or other stipulation, reflects a far greater imponderable - society's view of the artist. Various views of the creator, whether as artisan pursuing a craft or genius transmitting revelation, have been held in different ages and places (2). How widely opposed are the demands of the 'now' and of the hereafter is often disguised by the transcendent achievements of great composers - so we overlook the essential drudgery of providing over 200 church cantatas on a weekly basis, because Bach's sublime execution of the task left its temporal circumstances so far behind.

Some of our most treasured artefacts in fact come from the scandalous flouting, never mind transcending, of their commission frameworks – surely an argument against the dirigiste approach to new work. Thus we may be glad that Beethoven ignored Diabelli's original request for a variation on his waltz for a novelty collection, only to provide an hour of his own peerless inventions some time later. My favourite story about such disparities relates to Ligeti's *Poeme Symphonique*. Commissioned by the respectable Town Council of Hilversum for a civic occasion in 1963 Ligeti produced his most radical exploration of the boundary between texture and pulse - a work for 100 metronomes, to be released simultaneously then allowed to run down at 100 different rates. The theatricality of this as an event - the ten executants, each in concert dress, unveiling ten tables with ten metronomes each - heightens the outlandish contrast with the frankly bourgeois setting and, presumably, audience; Ligeti was too busy unpacking metronomes to try his tails, which turned out to be appropriately ill-fitting. If the result had been trite, then the act would have seemed inexcusably rude and boorish - but the *Poeme* is a central expression of Ligeti's concerns, and clearly lies within his canon. It would have made waves at a new music festival, but it really stands out against its origins.

EX Ligeti: *Poeme Symphonique*

My judgement of the appropriateness of *Poeme* reveals a wider double standard, I think: we excuse the inappropriate masterpiece that transcends its commission, while an inappropriate and feeble novelty would be excoriated. My own view is, I think, a middle ground, though I subscribe more than most to the artisan outlook. I do not think it is professional to fulfil a commission for a work of 15' with a 2'- or 35'-piece; either way it severely disrupts your commissioners, and may discourage them from future forays into new work. Yet I am, as already stated, a tigress defending her cubs if I feel I am being told what to write. 'Commission me if you want what I want', is my position, 'but not if you only want what YOU want'. This is not the arrogant position it may sound, for there is a market: do your market research, it says, and choose your composer for what (s)he produces. Do not choose a composer without doing homework, and then expect the composer to write to your requirements. Again - the polarity is that of art versus product; the composer will assume your approach is an endorsement.

The status of composer as lightning-conductor for the unknown, rather than craftsman working to order, is a legacy of European Romanticism, and therefore rests on the quite recent notion that art is a form of self-revelation. The despotic view of the pre-Romantic patron, that the court composer was a craftsman and an employee, is probably by far the more widespread in our civilization as a whole.

It does not indicate any less regard for his skill, judging by the favourable conditions with which the most musical princelings sought to retain a resident 'genius'. However, attempts to revive this state of affairs after Romanticism, such as Hindemith's *Gebrauchsmusik* doctrine of 'music for people to play', have tended to underline the adage that you cannot put the clock back. EX Hindemith – *Kammermusik*. Perhaps self-conscious functionalism is no substitute for individuality! It seems to me that the social shift that saw the abrupt promotion of the artist's stock, in such contexts as the salon of the 1820s, must also reflect the change in the patrons themselves: it is one thing to value an employee and quite another to be in awe of them. For the new rich of the industrial revolution were not supporting art automatically, out of court tradition, but from choice - they opted to spend their money on artists, and were thus according some status to their practitioners, rather than surrounding themselves with court musicians as part of what we would now call a 'lifestyle'. I think this represented a boost for the cult of the 'artist'.

What we have today, meanwhile, is a third state, at least in the English-speaking nations: while the composer retains some mystery as a figure, none of the sense of ownership for the work itself survives. The idea and the idea alone of the artist as great figure remains in the public conscience, an after-image of that artistic ownership. Everyone likes the idea of having a composer around; fewer want to pay to listen to our music. Such a loss of ownership, runs the counter-argument, is clearly the composer's fault, and only by giving the public 'what it wants' (as if that is one thing) will the composer regain market share. In earlier talks about cultural ownership I have already accepted the role of aspects of European modernism in this, but I believe that reducing the composer to a purveyor of platitudes is no way in which to redress this. Art is not a 'download' from parent bird to open-mouthed chick (that's product, again) - it is an exchange, in which the receiver only benefits to the extent that (s)he invests effort. So the modern British problem is that the audience, as I noted in my third talk, is so detached from the context of art music as to be hearing a foreign language. What it needs is to have some cultural context restored - but it has to work too! Art is not a passive experience.

The Guardian recently reported some committee's claim that music teachers were 'out of touch' with the childrens' musical lives, and should be 'brought up to date'. The notion that education means feeding back to children what they already consume elsewhere drew furious responses from me and others: children already immersed in their own pop hardly need further access to it. None of them, though, is going to discover any other musical horizons without being given access to what they do not know. I thought that was the function of education. The same, therefore, is true of the adult audience: I believe that to avoid leading them into new territory (*educare* and all that) is a terrible restriction of cultural horizons; what they need is cultural context. If this is not forthcoming from musical upbringing, we have to deliver it as best we can on the spot, through introduction, preferably by the composer and preferably within, not before, the concert. Without some cultural context, no art can deliver: I can enjoy an African sculpture, or an Inuit song, at the level of sensation, of surface attraction, but I cannot receive a message from the culture that produced it without the right tools. But we can learn to listen to Boulez, perhaps by listening to Messiaen, and can learn to listen to Messiaen by listening to Debussy or Ravel. Then we could approach from Saint-Saens, so that a link could usefully be explored between this EX Saint-Saens and this EX Boulez. If it opens doors, it is worth trying. In 1983 I was talking to a distant acquaintance who had some involvement with a glamorous corner of the rock music scene. He wanted to involve me in 'a new music, something classical yet widely accessible'. I was intrigued, not least because it was sounding a lot more commercial than anything in my own sphere. When I asked him if there was any pointer he could give to what he meant, he said 'I don't know what I want, but it's something like that Albinoni's Adagio'.

That was the end of it for me, because he was asking me to be someone else, though he did not understand that. He had, in fact, conceptualised the outcome in advance, so was seeking a product, which is fair enough - but strikingly he did not see this distinction. A colleague later told me 'you should have done it in an evening and taken the money!' I have often wondered if he was right.

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(1) I dealt in my second talk with the distinction between the musical product and the musical work of art, and with the frequent disregard of this distinction in the modern age.

(2) Outlooks also vary between disciplines at one time, as we heard in my last talk when Lou Stein told how a playwright may be commissioned on a topic, or within other clear 'outcome boundaries' such as no established composer would accept.

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